

The “Refugee”: A changed perception

I’m beginning to rather dislike the term ‘refugee’. This brief internship to India has made me realise with more clarity than ever before, the problematic nature of this word, this term, this title, this identity. When someone becomes a refugee, whoever they were in the past seems to disappear, at least in the eyes of the vast majority of the outside world. Now they are “Refugees” above all else. They are not seen as men, women, families, teenagers, doctors, marine biologists, aspiring social workers - when you are a refugee there is apparently little room to be anything else. No matter that a refugee is someone fleeing persecution in their own country - and fearful enough to leave everything behind and cross a border into another country to find safety - this real meaning of what it is to be a refugee is almost unknown to anyone outside the development field. I myself had no idea until I started my Masters.

So to the outside world, these people who once upon a time had their own rich, fulfilling lives, are now just part of a growing nameless, faceless crowd of Desperation. “Refugee” is synonymous with loss. They have lost homes, sometimes family members, sometimes limbs. They have lost their identity. They have lost their names. They have lost the papers that tell the world who they are and why they have the right to live where they live, the right to work and support their families. They are now a helpless mass, at the mercy of governments impersonal at best, unrelenting at worst.

Even as a student of development, I must - however reluctantly - admit that this was largely my view of refugees also. It was never something I voiced, never something I was immediately conscious of, but looking back on the internship and my experiences in India, I’ve realised this to be true. To be honest, I think it’s quite difficult to see refugees as anything else, and often there is little malice and a lot of good-hearted, well-intentioned pity behind this view. But this sort of pity, however well meaning, is a disservice. Each and every refugee is an individual with their own personality, their own frustrations, their own skills, their own weaknesses, and have the

right to be recognised as such. And despite sounding glaringly obvious as I write this, I think this is what struck me the most during this internship, as well as the realisation that I was not as forward thinking and progressive as I thought. I couldn't help but be surprised by some of the things I learned about them - and I was ashamed at that feeling of surprise. Why shouldn't somebody have been a health professional in her country before she had to leave to India where she now cannot find work? Why shouldn't teenage girls shyly ask me if I had a boyfriend and giggle while admitting they had a crush on somebody in their school? What was I expecting? To find a crowd of people whose entire existence revolved around loss and hardship?

It is easy to point fingers at the media for this. Images of starving thousands, fleeing or stuck in the midst of wars, living on handouts. Appeals to help refugees from this country and that - in urgent need of just about everything. But the media cannot be the only guilty party. I have met and worked with journalists who are working hard to reverse this image of the helpless, nameless, identity-less refugee and portray them as the incredibly capable, resilient individuals that they are, constantly pushing to improve their lives and those of their families against overwhelming odds. I think the blame lies with us - those who are too lazy to see beyond immediate connotations, or to question how we would cope under similar circumstances.

The moment that really hit it home for me was on our last working day in Delhi, where we once more went around the room telling everybody who we were and how we had contributed or participated in the two weeks worth of training. One young girl got up and said her name and then simply, "I am a refugee", and sat down again. It wasn't meant to be a sombre statement and was said without a trace of self-pity, but the moment really made an impact on me. It made me realise how the world's view of you, no matter how flawed, could eventually become your reality.

It's quite difficult to put into words how eye-opening this internship was for me. I think I learned as much about myself as I did about

the communities involved in the trainings, and I struggled a lot with that self-knowledge. I met some truly amazing men and women who absolutely stunned me with their courage, eloquence and strength. I also saw their frustration and anger and desire to be somewhere where life and living was just *easier*. I saw them as humans. As individuals. As mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters. As friends. As students. As communities. As young people and old. As so much more than that incredibly limiting word which, unfortunately, has become the banner placed upon them by the rest of the world.

I see now that I needed to go on this internship. I needed to experience and learn first hand the complexities of living the life of a refugee. I hope that I can now urge those around me to not be as lazy as I have been - to see beyond this word to the actual people, faces and lives behind it. I learned so much in those two weeks in Delhi, but even if that had been the one thing I took away from the internship, it would have been worth it a hundred times over.

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