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– ARTICLE –

'WHAT'S WELL BEGUN IS HALF DONE':
SOME CHALLENGES FACED DURING THE FIRST YEAR OF SYRIAN FORMER REFUGEES' RESETTLEMENT

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BACKGROUND

I come from the city of Homs in Syria. As you probably know, my city and our country is experiencing, according to the UNHCR, the worst humanitarian crisis since the Second World War. My family are now settled in Dunedin. We are part of a new former refugee Syrian and Palestinian community of more than 500 people who have considered the city their home since 2016.

Before I talk briefly about the war and its impact, let me tell you something about my country. Syria lies on the eastern coast of the Mediterranean between Europe, Asia and Africa. Our civilisation goes back to 8000 BC. We are proud to have given the world one of its first alphabets and the first music notes.

I grew up in the city of Homs, which is located in the heart of the country and which is the third largest city in Syria. We lived surrounded by parents and the presence of grandparents on both sides of the family. Before the war, we were all enjoying life and family life. We had a good education system, health care and a diverse, tolerant society.

OUR STORY

Before the conflict started we were looking forward to a bright future in good occupations.

After the dreadful and ugly conflict started, everyday life and the things that we took for granted – like going to school, work and shopping – became impossible. The bombing of our area was sudden and unexpected. It was scary because it was very safe prior to the conflict and became tragically unsafe afterwards. It was so difficult trying to find a safe place with thousands trying to leave.

The Syrian War has now been devastating our country for seven years. Recent UNHCR figures report 5.6 million people have fled from the country and more than 6 million people have been internally displaced. Millions of us have become refugees. A majority have gone to neighbouring Lebanon, Turkey and Jordan. More than half are children.

LEAVING HOME

After the bombing, we decided that we needed to leave the country. My partner left in 2014, six months ahead of me, crossing over into Lebanon to seek shelter and work for us.

I followed. After a lot of stress, heartbreak and difficulty, we were able to find a very small apartment with no running water or electricity in a very run-down, crowded and random part of Tripoli, living alongside other Syrians and Lebanese. We could barely afford the rent.

I had never imagined what a refugee's life was like until I had to become one. Staying in Lebanon, already a war-torn country under economic pressure, was terrible. It was not a welcoming environment. Being illegal residents with no legal right to employment made life almost impossible.

I managed to find some charity work and my partner ended up working on a construction site with very bad pay and unfair working conditions. A month after we arrived in Lebanon we registered as refugees with the UNHCR. We were happy to go anywhere they could find for us. We just wanted a place where we were welcome, treated with dignity and given an opportunity.

In 2015, we learned via a phone call that we would go to New Zealand. We didn't know anything about it except I did know 'it was the country next to Australia'. We looked up information on the internet and received more information from Immigration New Zealand when they interviewed us and then we waited for our departure in June 2016.

We spent the first six weeks at the Mangere Resettlement Centre, where people were welcoming and lovely. At Mangere, new arrivals are introduced to the agencies (Housing New Zealand, Work and Income, the Police, Red Cross and so on) who would get in touch with us as soon as we were settled at our designated settlement destinations.

ARRIVING 'HOME'

We were all really happy to be here, although it felt very strange. I remember waking up on the first morning in New Zealand and the air smelled so clean. I wondered where I was and how this had all happened and I realised I was safe!

After six weeks, we set off for our new home in Dunedin. We were in the third group of fifty Syrian former refugees to come to the city in August 2016. The Mayor, Dave Cull, greeted us at the airport and said, 'Welcome Home'. That meant a lot to us; it was really moving. Red Cross volunteers also met us at the airport.

Like all the other former refugee families, we were wonderfully looked after by the Dunedin Red Cross team and our volunteers, who have helped us in so many ways and whom we consider as family. Local residents of Dunedin also took initiatives to help make the settlement process easier. Every day we meet amazing people that want to help. It is that acceptance, safety and welcome that makes us feel home. Both of us were welcomed to the university with open minds, open arms and, most importantly, open hearts.

We love our little house and feel really at home in Dunedin. It often reminds me of home in Syria. Interestingly, many of the buildings are built of the same grey volcanic stone that you can see in Homs. All of the Syrians are grateful to be in a country that celebrates diversity and respects difference, something that has improved even further since the Christchurch terror attacks.

FAMILY FIRST

I have asked a couple of friends who came here in August 2016: "What is the one thing that keeps you from feeling 100 per cent happy?"

They all agreed that they missed their families and most of them had a family member they wanted to be reunited with. Family support is very important and to lose that is hard. I have said goodbye twice to my family (parents), once when leaving Syria and another when leaving Lebanon, and each time I had no idea when I would ever see them again. People also feel responsible to financially support their family back home.

MENTAL HEALTH IS IMPORTANT

Having to become refugees is an indicator of psychological distress (Weinstein,

Khabbaz, and Legate 2016) and Syrians have been through major losses and traumatic experiences such as torture, rape, witnessing the death of family members, as well as the destruction of their homes and livelihoods, and they have undertaken risky and stressful trips to countries they have not chosen for an unknown future.

Stressful circumstances in host countries include separation from families and communities, multiple displacements, and poverty. Civil and employment rights are often limited. Children and women are vulnerable to exploitation, social isolation, gender-based violence or early marriage.

After leaving Syria, further stresses include cultural integration issues, the loss of family and community support, discrimination, long waiting lists for healthcare, loneliness and the disruption of education for children. In addition, the lack of recognition of degrees and other qualifications may increase levels of stress.

Many studies (Correa-Velez, Gifford, and McMichael 2015; Javanbakht, *et al.* 2019; Weinstein, Khabbaz, and Legate 2016) show a high prevalence of post-traumatic stress within refugee populations. Depression, anger, fear, and excessive stress affects both their significant relationships and daily life.

The resettlement process itself is often experienced as stressful. A lack of social integration has been highly correlated with decreased health-related quality of life and severity of depression and anxiety and thus complicates a person's resilience. Feeling safe, being in a safe environment and feeling competent helps with the integration.

There is, however, a shortage of help in the mental health area for former refugees. NGOs could step in and offer coping strategies to get people in control of their lives and thus make the most of the support.

Some of the strategies that are recommended are stress management, problem solving, future planning and skills to strengthen coping.

Also, beautiful natural views are therapeutic especially in New Zealand where you are always fifteen minutes away from a natural view.

That all contributes to overall wellbeing and, eventually, a happy and physically and mentally fit person.

The resettlement process does not have equal outcomes for all former refugees

(Smith 2008). I have noticed that some of the older former refugees (over 60 years of age) would be better adjusted if they were not focussing so much on becoming integrated. They felt better and less lonely when they were more productive and when they felt that they were benefitting their family in chores and, for example, helping with their grand children.

This trend was also noted in other areas of the world (Dubus 2018). The older former refugees need to be looked after in ways that make them feel useful and productive such as arranging venues for them to socialise with other elderly from other ethnicities in order to make friends and learn new skills in a relaxed context.

FINAL THOUGHTS

The last message I would like to convey is that I was given an opportunity to start over and be the person I want to be and, at the same time, so many are waiting for their chance.

We feel lucky to be in Dunedin. This lovely city has one of the greatest universities in the world. The university is now accepting more former refugees – both young and adults – which gives those who have missed out on opportunities of education due to the war and gives them more chances of being a productive citizen. Included in this are also employment, volunteering opportunities and social participation in the wider community.

We are now working hard and doing our very best to get our qualifications and contribute to New Zealand.

My dream is that we can have a normal life, get our qualifications and pay back New Zealand for its goodness.

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