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“I’m the Everything”: The Overlooked Heroism of Refugee Youth in the United States

My manager at Starbucks would get frustrated with me. I missed work quite a lot. See, my mom was having health issues and needed to go to the hospital. Her arm was not moving. I don’t know what happened. My manager told me that I’m an adult and not responsible for her. He didn’t understand. Yes, actually, I am responsible for her. I am the one who speaks English. I am not afraid to talk to people. I am not afraid to call the police. I am not afraid to talk to the manger. My siblings, my parents, they just can’t do that. I am the one who can manage things. In this family, I am the driver, I’m the shopper, I’m the breadwinner, I’m the everything!

—Lana¹, resettled Iraqi refugee, 20 years old

Nine voluntary agencies have the official responsibility for resettling refugees into communities throughout the United States. They find their clients new housing, schools, and jobs. They help them get social security numbers and open bank accounts. They play an indispensable role in helping refugees settle into their new homes. But the work of integration, of truly building a life in a new country with a new language, new transportation system, new labor market, and a whole new set of social norms is a much bigger job, one that in many families is being done stoically, even heroically, by young refugees in their teens and early twenties.

In July 2018, my colleagues and I interviewed 29 refugees resettled by the International Rescue Committee (IRC) in 2015 and 2016 in Dallas, Texas. Our respondents were primarily from Afghanistan and Iraq, with smaller numbers from the Democratic Republic of Congo and Syria. Our aim was to understand how refugees transition financially. We wanted to understand how their financial tasks and money management strategies shifted over time and whether and how refugees were able to find their financial footing.

¹ All of these young people have been given pseudonyms to protect their privacy.

We talked to women and men, the old and the young (as young as 18 years old). We expected their stories to be different. But I, for one, was surprised at just how different, at the critical role young people were playing in supporting their families, taking on levels of responsibility that would be rare among their American peers, and doing so without complaint and with pride in their contribution, even as the burdens they bore left them exhausted and worried about their own futures. This brief note summarizes key insights from our conversations with those young people—only four of them—and, in some cases, one of their parents, shining a light on the unique role they play in the process of integration.

Meet our respondents

Lana is a 20 year-old Iraqi young woman. She lives with her parents and three siblings in a rented house in the Dallas suburbs. Her first job in the US was as a Starbucks barista, but she now works as a cashier at a nearby grocery store.

Raha is 18, finishing her final year of high school and living at home with her parents and four younger siblings. Her family fled from Afghanistan to Sri Lanka and were eventually resettled in Dallas. In the summer and on weekends during the school year she works at a Latin grocery store.

Mohammad, 22, lives with his parents and two of his younger siblings. During much of the war, Mohammad's father worked for the American military making and repairing guns, skills he learned in a family metal factory throughout his adult life. Mohammad has dabbled in a number of jobs, but currently works packaging networking equipment and driving for Lyft part time.

Tony, 25, lives with his mother and sister and works as a salesman at Men's Warehouse. He was born in the Democratic Republic of Congo, but his family fled to Rwanda when he was six. Only a few years ago, the family—including other siblings and their spouses—was able to resettle in Dallas, but they have been unable to live all in one home, which has been a key source of financial strain in Tony's view.

Learning from violence and exile

Our young respondents grew up under violent and difficult circumstances, three of them forced into exile as refugees at a very young age and one trapped at home from violence, as characterized by Mohammad: "My story was the story of a guy who grew up in a messy country and graduated from high school to become nothing."

Those years seem to have imparted a few important skills: how to learn languages, how to navigate the world as an outsider, how to creatively solve problems, and how to overcome fear in dealing with extremely challenging circumstances. Such skills may be part of the reason these young people have been so adept at integrating into the United States.

Raha's family fled Afghanistan to Sri Lanka. There, her parents were unable to work and faced a hostile reception from the government. The Sri Lankan government arrested her father in a mass roundup of male asylum seekers and sent him to a camp, where he stayed for seven months. Raha went to school, where she started learning English. Her mother mostly stayed at home with the smaller children, in the tiny apartment they shared with two other families. Raha helped the family survive, bringing food from one of her teachers. After her father's arrest, the family was forced to move into a half-finished room, where neighborhood children watched them through the unfinished walls and threw stones at her small siblings. Raha, then about 14 years old, took it upon herself to find the family a new home and move them there. Reflecting on these experiences, Raha said,

I feel proud of overcoming so many things. When they arrested my father, I helped take care of the family. It was so hard. I found another place to live. I found this other family that couldn't afford their apartment on their own. They said we could come in and share the apartment and pay half. I moved us. I did that.

Tony's family fled from the Democratic Republic of Congo to Rwanda when he was only six. When he was 14, his father was killed in a car accident, and suddenly he had to grow up quickly. He started a business with friends, reselling pre-paid electricity tokens, while he hustled to help the family and attend university part-time.

Lana's education was interrupted more dramatically by her exile. In fourth grade, one of her classmates was shot and killed at school by an errant bullet during the American invasion of Iraq. Shortly after, her family fled from Baghdad to Syria, then to the United Arab Emirates, then to Erbil, and—after her youngest brother was kidnapped there—to Turkey. All of those years taught her how to be an outsider, how to start over, how to bring your life with you to a new place:

Living [in Dallas] was not hard for me. Also in Turkey, I didn't know the people, or in Syria or Erbil or UAE. I am used to not knowing people. I'm not scared of having to learn a new language. I learned Turkish and Kurdish. Now, I'm learning English. The situation is no different. The truth is I am not homesick. I don't feel like I miss my country and my family. None of them are in one place anymore.

Among the most important skills she learned was getting over fear, of engaging with people who were different, of learning to ask for help, of getting out in the world even when it seemed hostile. This appeared to be true for all of the four young refugees we met, from the most naturally outgoing to the most shy.

Living with gratitude

The four of them also in their own ways demonstrated a tremendous appreciation for safety and stability. They found themselves surprised at the remarkable things that young Americans took for granted.

Raha, for example, was incredibly grateful for the well-resourced school she was assigned to in Dallas:

Everything is so nice, all the supplies are there, the teachers are good. The students are crazy! They have all these nice things: the school, the teachers, everything, but some of them just come and waste their time playing around. . . . One nice thing about school here is that students can be in lots of different things, like music class. When I started, they put me in a music class. I never had anything like that. I'm still in the band. I really like it. I play the flute. In band we have really nice, experienced teachers.

Lana was eager to get out into the community in Dallas and to learn how everything worked. She appreciated IRC's help in getting her a job at Starbucks, which she talks about in glowing terms, with lots of hand gestures:

Among the most important skills she learned was getting over fear, of engaging with people who were different, of learning to ask for help, of getting out in the world even when it seemed hostile.

I saw the area and the shop, and it was good! I was like, "Wow, this is a nice place!" . . . It was my first job ever. I was at zero when I started, and I'm grateful for my manager, because he taught me so much. He taught me how to be friendly, how to smile, how to be respectful of customers. I was still new to English, so he gave me these very useful phrases I could say to be polite to customers, like "I'll be right with you" and "Thank you for your patience." I would talk to old people. They like to talk. They need to talk too much. It was good for my English practice. That made me feel so good. . . . The customers were always smiling, they were happy. They would say, "You are so beautiful" or "You are okay." You felt good. No one was ever cruel.

Many of our respondents from Iraq and Afghanistan were solidly middle class before either conflict upended their lives. They are still working on rebuilding their lives two or three years after arriving in the US and have not yet achieved the same level of economic well-being they felt at home. But that was very different for Tony, whose family was just getting by in exile in Kigali. For him, life in the US meant the possibility to dream:

Life in the US is so much better; here at least I am guaranteed that I will make some money. There wasn't enough food in Rwanda. We didn't have a car there; we used motorcycles. You don't think about how you'll survive here, you get to be preoccupied by your future.

Driving and translation

One surprise for many of our respondents, regardless of age, was how necessary it is to be able to drive in Dallas. The city is sprawling, and public transportation isn't efficient. But driving can also be intimidating for those who have never driven

before. It seemed that women in particular were quite nervous about taking this on, even when their daughters were willing to learn. Typically, the eldest male in the family learned first; but, if this person was the most important breadwinner, someone else also had to learn so that the family could do things like buy groceries, get to doctors' appointments, and accomplish other errands without interrupting the father's work schedule. As a result, all of the young people we met learned to drive soon after arriving in the US and have assumed some responsibility for driving their families. They also learned English quickly, often starting to pick up some skills in exile and then, largely by virtue of working and being social, learned ever more quickly. This has made their families, especially their mothers, quite dependent on their help. They ensured their mothers got everywhere they needed to go and understood important systems—including banking, paying bills, and applying for Medicaid or housing assistance. Raha summed up their situation:

My parents need my help, because I speak better English. Even in Sri Lanka, they needed my help. My dad is better now with English. Mom still needs me if she wants to go somewhere. . . . I got my driver's license in January. My father taught me. It was a little scary in the beginning. I was so nervous taking the test, but I passed! We have a family car and that's what I drive. For the family, I am the driver and the translator and one of the breadwinners.

The necessity to contribute

Not only did all four respondents work, but also, for the most part, transferred their pay in whole or in large part to their parents to spend. Some handed over their debit cards to their parent to access their earnings directly. This was not something their parents had requested; the young people just felt obliged when observing the needs of the family. This was particularly true of the eldest children in the family.

Mohammad, for example, knew exactly when the cash assistance to his family had stopped. That is when he started giving his parents \$600 per month from his earnings to help make up for the gap:

I was happy to do it. My dad never asked me for money, but I could see he appreciated my gesture.

. . . Sometimes I give an extra 100 bucks to my dad; I just feel when he needs it.

For him, this is a point of pride and something he feels shows his parents his commitment to preserving his Iraqi culture in the US:

My American friends don't understand why I give my dad money. They don't understand that I still want to live with my family, that I don't just want to get my own place. My dad is sick, and I still have my tradition and culture. I'll never change that.

Lana echoes similar sentiments. She is proud of working, proud of helping her family navigate their new lives. She has a deep appreciation for everything her entire family is doing to make this transition work. Her father, too, has recently begun a new job, truck driving. She calls him and sings to him to help him pass the long, lonely hours on the road. While he was training for that job, money was particularly tight. Lana felt overwhelmed by her responsibilities:

I don't have health insurance. My parents have health care through Medicaid, but I don't have children, so I can't have Medicaid. Healthcare is so expensive here. I need to just die at home, because healthcare is way too expensive! I can't go to the hospital, but I keep getting these issues, especially when my dad wasn't working and the family was really depending on me. I had ear infections and panic attacks. It feels like I can't breathe. I can't get air.

Rather than feel pity for herself, she felt sad for her father and the shame he must have felt not being able to take care of the family:

That time was really hard. Dad had to train for like five months, and there wasn't much money. My work at Starbucks was really helping. It was hard watching my dad at that time. He really felt bad that he couldn't take care of everything. It doesn't feel good as a man to see your family that way. It feels like you failed.

Though still in high school, Raha works two part-time jobs. Her mother has her debit card and uses Raha's earnings to cover the family's basic needs. "My friends ask what I do with my money, but I never touch it," she says. Raha does not complain about all the work she has to do. She has several siblings, some of them

quite young, and her mother stays home to watch them. Her father didn't work for some time while he trained to become a truck driver, a job he started only two weeks before our interview. But, the stress she feels for her family's economic situation takes a toll. She is exhausted. She dreams of going to college far away. "I would like to go somewhere where I can be more free. I'm tired of my siblings," she says, when I ask whether she means she is tired of being needed quite so much. She continues:

I wish my mom would work, but I also understand that she has a lot of responsibility and that she doesn't speak much English. She has to run the home. She cooks and cleans and takes care of the kids. She doesn't tell me how she feels. Maybe she feels a little tired, tired of depending on other people.

I'm not happy in the US; I'm just okay. But I think everywhere life is like this. Money is a struggle. It's not like life would be better somewhere else. I don't want counseling. I just want life to get better. I want us to have enough.

These young people's parents are full of pride and gratitude for what their children have done, while also being somewhat ashamed that they need so much help and about the toll that these kinds of responsibilities may be taking on their children. Lana's mother confides, with some sadness:

We rely on our daughter a lot. She has helped us with money as I told you, and she drives me anywhere I need to go to. She did not study much, but she has learned English really fast. She knows how to use the GPS. She speaks to Americans. We are like very close friends, and I'm very proud of her. But, I would like her to study. Her brother and sisters are in school, but she has been deprived. She would like to study computer engineering. But she needs her green card and a lot of money for that.

Dreams deferred

Lana herself did not talk much about studying. She, like Tony and Mohammad, has largely given up on her education dreams. It just doesn't seem realistic to pay for the kind of education they hoped for or to cut back on working to make time for school. All three of them are much more focused on achieving other goals right now, which require significant financial outlays. Lana is trying to save to hire an

"I don't want counseling. I just want life to get better. I want us to have enough." –Raha, 18

immigration lawyer to help her fiancé join her in the US. Mohammad is hoping to buy an investment property in Turkey. Tony is working to put a down payment on a family house in the Dallas suburbs. While all three of them hoped to go to college when they came to the US, the imperative of working put those plans on hold. Going back now would require enormous investments in money and time, investments that would take a toll on both themselves and their families.

It is only Raha who still hopes that she will be able to go to college. She was set to enter her final year of high school when we interviewed her in July 2018. She hadn't thought much about college yet, but was hoping to go away to study, hoping her father's new job would put the family in a position where it wasn't necessary for her to keep working, hoping that she would have a professional career ahead:

My dream is that one day we will not be struggling financially, everybody will go to college and become successful. Success for me would be when my family doesn't need help anymore, and when I have so much power that I can also help others. I would like my family to be in a house. I want to buy them a house one day.

Conclusions

Our interviews suggest that young refugees may find themselves in an awkward position within their families upon arrival in the United States. Their childhoods were often disrupted by violence in their home countries, which may have taught them some resilience but often interrupted their education. If they arrived in the US when they were not yet 18 years old, they were enrolled in school, but found they also needed to work at least part time to help support their families. Often learning English and driving skills more quickly than their parents (and especially their mothers), they were expected to assume a wide range of financial and social respon-

sibilities for their families. If they arrived in the US when they were 18 years old or above, rather than continuing their educations, they were encouraged to work full time. The responsibilities they assumed within the family came at the expense of their own futures. While they supported their families eagerly and without complaint, some confided that they were exhausted and stressed from doing so much heavy lifting on the work of integration.

Might resettlement agencies and communities at large find ways to help these remarkable young people by better sharing the load?

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