



**SEEKING REFUGE:
FAITH-BASED APPROACHES
TO FORCED MIGRATION**

Poverty and Peacemaking II
March 3–4, 2017 at Princeton University

Children, Religion, and Refugees

Liza Barrie, UNICEF (Moderator)
William Vendley, Religions for Peace
Paola Stevens, Interfaith-RISE
Ayman Mansour, Syrian American Medical Society
Daniel Perell, Baha'i International Community
Mariachiara Ficarelli, Princeton University (Student Rapporteur)

Barrie opened the afternoon panel by stating that children are at the heart of the refugee migrant crisis. The images of Syrian children Aylan Kurdi and Oram Kandish capitulated the refugee crisis to the forefront of international media, with these pictures representing the violence experienced by refugee children worldwide. Currently there are 50 million children around the world on the move. 28 million of these children are driven from their homes by conflict. More than half of refugees worldwide are children. Refugee and migrant children not only face xenophobia and discrimination but also are the most common victims of trafficking, malnourishment, rape, and severe trauma.

Barrie continued by describing the specific goals of UNICEF in ensuring that children do not fall through the cracks. The main aims of UNICEF are protecting child refugees and migrants, especially those unaccompanied, keeping families together, helping uprooted children to stay in school and stay healthy and combatting the experiences of xenophobia and discrimination.

The panelists then gave their opening remarks. Vendley works to establish and promote dialogue between religions for peace. His organization Religions for Peace coordinates international activities and projects in 90 countries. Vendley describes how through Religions for Peace, close to 900 religious leaders have convened around the deeply held and widely shared concern within their religions' duties is to protect and work with refugees. Referring to a PEW study, which has documented a rise in social hostility in which there is an erosion of social trust across different groups, Vendley calls for a movement in understanding the current environment and how religion can be a positive force and driver to ensure that refugees are no longer viewed with fear. Vendley states that religious communities need to mobilize their assets (social, moral, spiritual) and work together in order to reverse this reaction of fear.

Stevens works in helping refugees resettle in New Jersey as a social worker and director of Interfaith-RISE. Interfaith-RISE was started in response to the Syrian Refugee Crisis and is composed of all religions. Stevens states that at Interfaith-RISE one does not "say that you are here as a Jew or Christian but [you are] here as a human being." Her remarks were



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centered on the practical issues of refugee resettlement. The governor of New Jersey has closed government refugee resettlement and has reduced the help refugees have received. Stevens describes the approach of resettlement as a movement from the unfamiliar to the familiar. She gives various examples of American standards, which are different from the standards that most refugees are used. One such example is how most refugee families are accustomed to sleeping in the same room as their children instead of having their children in separate rooms. Steven's agency makes sure to ease these cultural differences, by ensuring families have access to culturally appropriate food, so that refugee children do not refuse to eat food which they are unaccustomed to. Steven's stresses the importance that a refugee family gets the support of the religious group they belong to, as religion is a key way, which helps make the unfamiliar familiar. Stevens highlights that children are the members in a refugee family that will assimilate to change faster and become the interpreters for the family.

Mansour is a pediatrician who traveled with the Syrian American Medical Society to work as a volunteer doctor for a week in Jordan. He worked in Za'atari Refugee Camp and in clinics in Irbid and other areas of Jordan. He states, "We were not just there to treat but to alleviate the atmosphere." He describes one of the most poignant moments being seeing the signs in roads in Jordan saying "Syria this way." Mansour stresses the importance for doctors to get out of their comfort zones and to work in refugee camps where assistance is needed.

Perell who is UN Representative for the Baha'i International Community, opens with a quote from the Baha'i World Centre, "Through shared discoveries and shared travails, peoples of diverse cultures are brought face to face with the common humanity lying just beneath the surface of imagined differences of identity." He goes on to say that people in positions of privilege need to consider the power and necessity of sacrifice, adding that sacrifice is not just about charity but also about learning. Perell says that children offer the greatest sense of hope and optimism and that we have a lot to learn from refugee children who are symbols of resilience. He gives an example of resilience among youth during a storm which hit Vanuatu. The youth said, "We do not need the authorities to tell us what to do... we know." The youth then continued on in rebuilding homes in their communities, ensuring that the elderly and children were cared for, etc. Perell closed by stating that of course while the numbers are important instead of just saying 20 million children are displaced, we could say "and here are the stories of those helping"... "you can help too". So, look for optimism, because otherwise we run the risk of being paralyzed by the overwhelming nature of what stands before us.

The floor was then opened for questions. Vendley closed the session by reminding that while we have to work endlessly for the system, we as people need to bring whatever the foundations of our care might be; through this, there will be hope.