



SARAH YAHYA, a Mandaean refugee living in Australia, travelled to Geneva as a delegate representing young refugees in Australia and globally. This is her story.

Young Refugee Rises to Geneva Challenge

How much do you value a plastic bag? An odd question, I know – but for me, a particular plastic bag set the course of my life and led me here to Australia. It contained my future.

I remember carrying that bag, clutching it tightly, when I first arrived.

I didn't speak or read English, but I could make out the letters that were written in my favourite colour, blue. I spelt it out: "UNHCR", which stands for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. I made up my mind then that this was the place I wanted to work. I was 13, had so many dreams, and working at the UNHCR was one. So when the UNHCR announced the theme of Youth for the 2016 NGO Consultations, I was thrilled.

Little did I know I would be one of the delegates representing young refugees in Australia, and worldwide,

at the UNHCR headquarters in Geneva.

I already knew that, in my capacity as a volunteer assisting resettlement services, I would be part of a team holding consultations with young people across the state. The outcomes of those consultations would be drafted into a report to be presented in Geneva.

For the first time the Australian team's report would not be presented by senior employees working in the refugee sector, because this year the UNHCR had specifically requested the contribution and participation of young people from a refugee and asylum-seeker background – a rare event.

So the Refugee Council of Australia (RCOA) and the Multicultural Youth Advocacy Network (MYAN) called for young people to apply to participate as delegates. I thought I would simply apply and get accepted, but it didn't work out that way: while I made

it to the interview stage I was not accepted. I was upset, but I didn't waver.

During the years I had been giving so much of myself to the community and young people, I had learned something very valuable: to never give up when you have come so far. When I applied it was not only for me. I did so because I believed I was ready to represent young people. I am passionate about them, so I continued to lobby.

I was getting ready to conduct the consultations and travelled to regional NSW to make sure every young person stood a chance to be heard, meeting three delegates, Elizabeth Lang, Arif Hazara and Arash Bordbar. Arif and Arash were selected to attend the Global Refugee Youth Consultations (GRYC), while Elizabeth was to attend the NGO Consultations.

While I thought it was fantastic for young people to be offered this opportunity, I was upset when I realised no young women would be at the GRYC meetings, not because it was not offered to me but because I had thought gender balance would have played a part in the selection process.

Female representation matters, because exclusion may discourage other young women from applying. Coming from an ethnic minority from the Middle East, I am all too familiar with the lack of female representation in institutions.

How can you encourage young women when they look around them and see no female representation? How can you motivate young women to participate when they face prejudice and bigotry? Gender equity matters because it inspires, motivates and encourages young women.

A few months later I was in a lecture room when my phone started vibrating. I was already crippled by stress about my studies, so didn't return the call until later. Nadine Liddy, the national youth coordinator of MYAN, had called to tell me a spot had opened up for a young representative to go to the GRYC and offered it to me. I was stunned. I accepted in a heartbeat.

Everything happened very fast. I had frequent teleconferences in preparation for meetings. I was asked to sit on panels and connect with young people from all over the world.

The truth is, I had no idea what to expect. An academic who had worked for UNHCR told me: "It's a good thing you're going, but you're going to be bitterly disappointed." He had quashed my hopes before I went! Little did I know he was right.

When I arrived in Geneva, I barely had a rest before starting work on the GRYC with participants from all parts of the world. Some had been resettled, others

were still living in refugee camps and the rest had just made their journey to Europe by boat.

All of us worked tirelessly to help refugees and asylum seekers, but no one at the GRYC meetings seemed to care about that. We, the young participants, appeared to be defined largely by our personal stories – stories we had to repeat over and over at every panel we sat on and every event we attended.

Everyone wore a name tag, I did not. I carried one with the word "youth" on it. Every time I was asked to tell my story there would be an expert who would deconstruct it. I absolutely hated it. My main concern was for those young participants who had to share their painful experiences about living in refugee camps or those who had just travelled across the seas.

The organisers seemed to have forgotten that sharing such traumatic experiences repeatedly can trigger negative feelings and, in some cases, that is what happened. There was no one on-site to offer support. I was lucky because I had the Australian delegation continually checking up on me and ensuring I had the support I needed.

My enthusiasm plummeted within the first week. I felt patronised, but most of all I felt worthless. I had the opportunity of a lifetime to be part of the work carried out by the biggest refugee organisation in the world that I had admired for as long as I could remember: but none of that mattered. What was I doing there?

Arif and Arash, the other young Australian representatives were perhaps stronger than me. They kept going despite the disappointments. I could not do that, and had a breakdown I kept secret.

In Australia I have met refugees and asylum seekers who have been through hell. All of them are trying to recover, to move forward. But the situation in their war-torn countries – where many of their family members, including my own, are stuck in limbo – leaves us constantly worried. And those I've met in detention centres are struggling to live each day.

I was representing all of them but all I was asked to do was to share my story in front of people who worked in the field and knew all too well what it is like.

So, what did we accomplish? I posed that question to others who attended and they admitted they found the whole exercise pointless. That is when I came to realise and appreciate the type of grassroots advocacy and activism we do in Australia. Real change, I learnt, does not take place in such formal conferences. It happens in communities at a local level and it is driven by passionate people.

I felt a bit rebellious when it was my turn to speak

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to one last panel. Again I was asked to tell my personal story and gave an example from it, but before I ended it I decided to explain to all the NGOs present about best and worst practice in helping young refugees and the practical, useful ways in which they can assist young people move from opportunities to solutions.

This time my talk sparked some interest and I was asked many questions. Many people asked for a copy of my suggestions, so I was glad that I took that approach. I realised that this is what should have been happening.

As a result of my talk I went to Malaysia to make presentations at workshops for young people at the Dignity for Children Foundation, which provides education to refugees and young people seeking asylum. It was that particular panel that led me here. The workshops aimed to empower young people, whose resilience I would like others to see and appreciate.

I have been harassed in social media for my work with refugees. But when you come face-to-face with young people who, through no fault of their own, are displaced, stateless and living in difficult conditions, you start to think about how to change people's views.

Last December I travelled again to Geneva to attend the UNHCR Annual Dialogue on Protection Challenges. This year's focus is on children on the move.

In spite of the initial disappointment, my experience at the NGO Consultations ended up being crucial and enlightening and I intend to use of what I learnt there to do better next time. This Dialogue is one of them. I have no intention of being a storyteller. This time, I

will take the initiative and I will say what I want to say.

I once told an Australian delegate that after what happened at the consultations I was ready to let the dream go, but she said to me that my unhappiness should be the ultimate motivation to improve the process. And you know what? It has.

When I returned to Australia, young women were thrilled. They asked me how I got there and told me they aspire to do the same. This was perhaps the highlight of my trip to Geneva, to demonstrate that young women can go places and achieve things when we put our minds to it.

As a result of this experience I have met many people around the world and gained a new perspective. I learnt how international advocacy works and had a chance to co-present at the UN in Geneva for diplomats and officials, which was exhilarating – and very rare for non-diplomats. It was there that Arash, Arif and I called for the international body to address the issues young people face and the human rights abuses occurring in Australia. It was received warmly (except by the Australian officials).

In 2017 the theme "Youth" may be over for the UNHCR, but for us it has only just begun. It's time we participate in the talks to find solutions to the problems.

The rising xenophobia the world faces, coupled with the biggest refugee crisis since World War II, has only made us determined not to be the leaders of tomorrow but the leaders of today. We are more than storytellers, we are change-makers and have no time to waste. R