INTERVIEW WITH
FADAK ALFAYADH
AUSTRALIAN LAWYER AND
PASSIONATE ADVOCATE FOR
REFUGEES, GENDER EQUALITY
AND HUMAN RIGHTS
Forced to flee Iraq with her family in 2003, Fadak’s first-hand experiences as a refugee in Australia have now inspired a nationwide campaign titled ‘Meet Fadak’, which aims to highlight the voices of refugee and migrant communities. In addition to her role as a prominent speaker, writer and commentator, she has worked to ensure access to legal services amongst marginalised communities in her capacity as a community lawyer. Her current work is in the implementation of strategies to prevent violence against women.

Fadak Alfayadh talks with CGHR member, Kiara van Hout, about her experiences as a human rights advocate championing dialogue and change...
You have recently become the leading voice in Australia’s first refugee-led speaking tour. What were the particular concerns and frustrations arising from the public discourse on refugees and asylum seekers which inspired the campaign?

The rising tide of right-wing tendencies and racism in the public discourse in Australia led me to embark on Australia’s first speaking tour so that I could shine a light on the real stories of Australia’s refugees.

This racism was compounded when it came to the lives of already marginalised migrant and refugee communities. These communities were naturally more vulnerable to conservative and punitive policies, due to their visa statuses, and as they were often not born in Australia, they were legally more susceptible to deportations and imprisonment. This type of discourse also created an "us vs. them" narrative, separated families and created a hostile community environment.

It was natural to turn to our leadership for strength on these issues, but what do you do when your leadership is directly complicit in inciting these attitudes? In the media and public conversation, our leadership were using stories of refugees and migrants to alienate us and to justify oppressive laws towards our communities. I wanted to be able to reverse this damage to our narrative by reclaiming it and offering a different narrative, one that is truthful and positive. I wanted to showcase a narrative that actually told the real stories of Australia’s refugees.

Are these deficiencies in the public debate in some way unique to Australia, or do you see any commonalities with discussions on refugees and asylum seekers taking place overseas?

All over the world, people of refugee and asylum seeker background are talked about without being spoken to and without being given the space or the opportunity to speak for themselves.

We remain hidden and we remain mysterious. This further enforces the rhetoric because we should be seen, we should be heard and we should have our stories listened to. Because if people did listen to us, they will know that we are just like them and they are just like us. And that the refugee experience could affect anyone.

Australia leads the way with our cruel policies and we are one of the most conservative countries in the world in how we talk about refugees - whilst doing the very least and contributing the bare minimum.

How has the traditional media helped or hindered the human rights discourse in this area? Does digital media provide solutions in this area of human rights discourse, or its own new problems?

Overall, traditional media has prevented someone like me from being able to have a say. Traditional media, unlike social media, can only accommodate for a particular type of person and a particular narrative. A media outlet that seeks to give a platform to certain people and doesn’t necessarily speak the truth in all of its facets, is a platform that doesn’t favour someone like me. Although I have received significant media attention for my campaign, I have also been the subject of attack by conservative commentators, who do have the platform to attack someone like me, whereas I don’t have the same power to defend myself.

Media in Australia rarely allows for women of colour to be in the public eye, and we have seen examples of how our media has treated these women.

What have been the biggest challenges in engaging with the general public on the topic of refugees?

The biggest challenge I faced in this campaign has been standing up to big power, such as media corporations and those who have been advocating against refugees for a long time. Humanising the refugee experience and encouraging Australia to view refugees as equally human is a mammoth task.
There are those on the other side of the spectrum who would view my work as a challenge because they win when refugees are alienated and dehumanised. They win when the everyday Australian is oblivious to lives of people seeking asylum. That’s because these opportunists can use refugees as scapegoats, and we have seen this sentiment grow consistently. For example, we have seen the recent sentiments against the South Sudanese community in Australia (for more information, see The Guardian: "Racist fearmongering must stop", say Melbourne mayor and Sudanese community) and we have seen the immigration ‘debate’ become more and more about borders and resources. As such, engaging the general public, who are usually not engaged with the issue, required sharing my story. It was an avenue to connect people with me on a human level.

Have you been surprised, positively or otherwise, by the way the dialogue has developed amongst certain audiences as a result of the campaign?

Australians are very angry about the harm our government is causing to refugees. Starting this campaign, I was worried that I had to do a lot of groundwork to get an audience to hear the grievances and to become angry about Australia’s treatment of its refugees. But I slowly found that Australians are fed up with our leadership and their lack of effective leadership in creating safe pathways for people seeking asylum, their failure to provide effective settlement processes and for parroting negative attitudes and scapegoating tactics against people who seek asylum.

As a result, Australians are also looking for appropriate leadership on the issue and it was reassuring that the community saw me, as someone of refugee background, as having authority on the issue and being trusted to offer solutions to the problems that people seeking asylum were experiencing, both here in Australia and abroad.

Fadak Alfayadh rallies outside Parliament House for the immediate evacuation of children in the Australian refugee processing camp on the island of Nauru.
The ‘Meet Fadak’ campaign is about creating opportunities for refugees to share their own stories and experiences. What led campaigners to decide that humanisation was the most effective or necessary strategy to introduce into the debate at the moment? Which audiences does this best resonate with, and did this affect your strategic decisions?

(for more see Fadak Alfayadh's TEDX Talk: Harnessing the power of storytelling) Story-telling is a powerful tool to create change. It is a tool that can reach most people, at all levels of commitment and relevance to any given issue. Telling my story has helped connect me with people from all walks of life, including people whom I didn’t expect would be interested in hearing my story or in hearing about the refugee issue altogether. Telling my story has connected diverse groups of Australians with the issue of people seeking asylum, for them to see it as an issue of how we treat human beings - that is, to depoliticise the narrative and strip it to its bare essentials: humanity, family, safety and home. Telling a personal story is a vital tool to connect people with the issue -- people who are too busy to care enough to act, people who are on the fence or people who have been surrounded by propaganda.

Humanising the refugee issue is essential after decades of the Australian narrative being dominated by negative rhetoric about refugees. Our leadership has painted refugees to be people who ‘throw their children in the water’, people who are ‘languishing in unemployment lines’ and people who ‘commit crime’. Unless we humanise the people behind these headlines, we will lose.

We are at a point where the Australian identity is attached to the issue of how we treat asylum seekers. Unless we change how we treat people asking for our protection, we will always be the nation with a stained past and present.

Story-telling is a powerful tool to create change.

How can individuals be better allies to refugees in our communities, as well as to those who are seeking asylum?

This question makes me think of a time when I was met with the founder of a community group called ‘Welcome to Eltham’, which is based in Melbourne. This group was set up after an unusual and welcomed decision to resettle a small number of displaced Syrian and Iraqi families in a quiet suburb called Eltham in Melbourne.

When I asked the founder why she did what she did and why she and her team went out of their way to welcome refugees to their community, she said that the welcome they are offering to those families is the same welcome that they would offer to anyone who is moving to Eltham, so why should refugees be any different? This interaction taught me that sometimes, you don’t need to do anything out of the ordinary to help refugees feel welcomed into your community. Sometimes, just showing them the community support and spirit is sufficient.

Having said that, I will also encourage people to vote right. Vote for political leaders who will protect the rights of asylum seekers and refugees as they are a vulnerable group in our society, a group that is often scapegoated and hand-balled [to unilaterally give responsibility for a problem to someone else]. It is important to protect their rights because the imposition on the rights of asylum seekers will pave the way for the imposition on all of our rights.
Voices in Human Rights is a publication from the University of Cambridge’s Centre of Governance and Human Rights Student Group based on student-led interviews with those in the human rights field from across the world. These interviews aim to broaden the dialogue around the conceptual and practical uses of the human rights language with the voices of individuals, groups, or organizations seeking social justice. The conversations engage perspectives on the advantages and critiques of the ideas around human rights, insights on the challenges and obstacles in rights-based struggles, and ideas of allyship with the future of human rights. This publication seeks to include more voices in discussion in order to nuance understandings of human rights and justice.

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