

Basford: Whose crisis is it? Reconsidering the "migrant crisis"

GLCER'21

VOLUME 4

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ADVANCES IN GLOBAL EDUCATION AND RESEARCH: VOLUME 4

ISBN 978-1-955833-04-2

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ISBN 978-1-955833-04-2

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Whose Crisis Is It? Reconsidering the “Migrant Crisis”

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Abstract

In 2015, the world witnessed a “refugee crisis” when millions of Syrians, but also Afghans, Iraqis, Somalis, and others, fled their countries for Europe. That exodus continues today. A similar “migrant crisis” is happening in North and Central America, where thousands of Central Americans are fleeing their countries for the United States. The response by Europe and the United States has been dominated by fear. Instead of looking at this crisis as a humanitarian one--as a global issue that needs collaboration and forward-thinking-- we are responding with knee-jerk, defensive measures like building higher walls and detention centers that resemble prisons. The paper begins with a description of why people must flee. I describe the multiple factors at play that cause people to flee from violence (that often is tied to the U.S. or other global powers and their interventions) to persecution to civil war. Sharing three stories of refugees, I highlight why it is critical to see these situations not as a “migrant or refugee crisis” but as a “humanitarian crisis.” Finally, I discuss smarter solutions than walls, sharing both micro and macro-level solutions for the world over.

Keywords: migrant, refugee, humanitarian crisis

Recommended Citation: Basford, L. (2021). Whose crisis is it? Reconsidering the “migrant crisis”. In W. B. James, C. Cobanoglu, & M. Cavusoglu (Eds.), *Advances in global education and research* (Vol. 4, pp. 1–7). USF M3 Publishing.
<https://www.doi.org/10.5038/9781955833042>

Introduction

*illegal aliens, terrorists, hardened criminals,
cockroaches, gang members, “very bad people”
swarms of migrants, an invasion,
threats to our national security
“our military is waiting for you”*

These are the words that surround what the world has deemed a global “migrant crisis.” These words are as dehumanizing as they are fear-inducing. They place blame squarely on the shoulders of migrants: It is the migrant causing this crisis. It is the migrant that is to be feared.

Today there are 79 million people displaced around the world (The UNHCR, (2020) --more than the size of the United Kingdom. This is the largest number of displaced people in recorded history. But rather than call this a “migrant crisis,” it should be called a crisis of humanity. It is a crisis rooted in geopolitics, not random, isolated incidents. The global response has lacked self-reflection, empathy, and sustainable solutions. Instead, it has focused on walls, borders, and ways of keeping people out.

During the fall of 2018, I had the privilege of taking a group of undergraduate students to Europe to study how the continent was responding to the millions of Syrians, but also Afghanis, Iraqis, Somalis, and others, who fled their countries for Europe after war erupted in Syria in 2011. We also studied how the U.S. was responding to the thousands of Central Americans who are and continue to be seeking refuge in the United States-- fleeing countries that are riddled with gang violence, drug wars, and corruption. Instead of looking at these crises as a global issue that desperately needs conversation, collaboration and forward thinking-- the western world is responding with knee-jerk, defensive measures like building higher walls and detention centers that resemble prisons, Brexiting from the EU, and supporting the rise of populist anti-immigrant parties and leaders across Europe, Australia and the United States. The response by the west has been dominated by fear. In this paper, I will discuss why the crisis is occurring and what can be done to re-instill humanity to the situation.

Background

What is going on in the world to cause so much displacement? Why so much fragility? To unpack these questions, I share three true stories that highlight the geopolitical nature of the crisis we see today.

Gulwali

The first story, captured in the book *The Lightless Sky* (Passarlay & Ghouri, 2016), is about a little boy named Gulwali, a boy who fled Afghanistan for England at just twelve years old. Between the Cold War and 9-11, his country, Afghanistan, has been inundated with weapons and war as the USSR and the US propagated their political agendas. And when things didn't go as planned, these countries retreated, leaving Afghanistan loaded with weapons and a power vacuum that would ultimately be filled by the Taliban. After Gulwali's father and grandfather were killed, his mother realized that her twelve-year old son would be next. Leaving everything he knew behind, Gulwali was forced to go with a smuggler on a treacherous yearlong journey to find refuge in England. Repeated in his mind was his mother's voice, saying, "However bad it gets, don't come back."

Enrique

In a similar situation is sixteen-year old Enrique from Central America, whose story was captured by reporter Sonia Nazario in 2007. He was not alive during the 1980's when the US sent military advisors and hundreds of millions of dollars to help right-wing dictators overthrow left-wing governments (Bonner, 2016). However, the geopolitical consequences of that intervention impact his life today, where his country's government is weak, drug cartels are strong, and corruption and gang violence are rampant. In El Salvador today, half a million people are involved with gangs-- many born out of the streets of Los Angeles-- contributing to what is now the world's highest murder rate for people under the age of nineteen. Enrique strove to escape the violence that surrounded him.

Hasheem

One last story highlights the impact of more contemporary global movement: that of the Arab Spring. While the west was eager to encourage the Middle East to rid themselves of their ruthless dictators, we did little to support true democracies from taking hold. Without strong leadership

that promotes a shared identity between groups, instability and the promotion of extremist ideology can take hold. Hasheem, whose story was captured by Patrick Kingsley in 2017, comes from Syria, a country destroyed by war that was a consequence of this instability. All that is left of his home is the key in his pocket. He has learned that places like Germany will offer refuge to Syrians, but only if they can get there. Desperate to find safety for his family, Hasheem left to seek refuge for them in Europe. His perilous two-year journey motivated only by his desire to save his wife and children.

So, when the west, and Americans in particular, look at what drives a “migrant crisis,” it is critical that we see our role between “their part of the world” and our own. We must subsequently ask: What responsibility do we have to support these migrants to find both refuge and solutions?

While millions of migrants, like Gulwali and Enrique, are fleeing their volatile countries for safer places, only those that qualify as “refugees” receive support and shelter under the 1951 Refugee Convention. Refugees are recognized as people fleeing war or persecution and Syrians, like Hasheem, fall under this category. But only 25 of the more than 79 million displaced people are refugees (Alfred, Howden, & Karas, 2018). Even though Gulwali is from what has been deemed the world’s most dangerous country, and Enrique is fleeing one of the murder capitals of the world, migrants like them do not receive the same protection or resources, which begs us to ask: Do refugees have good reasons to leave, but migrants do not? Do refugees deserve rights, but migrants do not?

It may be surprising to learn that neither the U.S. nor any other European country ranks in the top ten countries hosting the most refugees. Instead, much poorer countries like Jordan, Turkey, and Pakistan host the most. Jordan’s refugees, for example, equal a tenth of their total population. But at a time when there are more displaced people than ever before, financial support for refugees has actually decreased. As a result, these poorer countries have come to feel incredibly burdened.

Hasheem could have brought his family to a refugee camp in Jordan where many Syrians fled. But as these refugees join other refugees in UNHCR camps in places like Jordan, Turkey or Lebanon, they quickly learn that they have no legal right to work, have few educational opportunities, live in inhumane housing, and may be stuck in limbo for up to decades. In fact, it’s been reported that the average length of time a person lives in a refugee camp is seventeen years.

And because there is not enough financial support from the United Nations to support these camps, life in refugee camps can become unbearable. Did you know that for every \$135 spent on an asylum seeker in Europe, only \$1 is spent on a refugee in the developing world (Betts & Collier, 2017)? It’s not surprising that these countries hosting refugees feel overly burdened.

It is not surprising that many refugees decide to leave these camps for what they hope will be better opportunities in the west. Yet in order to get to the west, refugees must join other migrants as they embark on deadly and dangerous routes.

Some migrants cross the “Sea of Sahara.” These migrants face sandstorms, dehydration, human trafficking, rape, corrupt police, imprisonment, and are often left to die in the desert. Over the last two years in Algeria, for example, more than 13,000 people, have been stranded without food or water and forced to walk, sometimes at gunpoint, under temperatures of up to 120 degrees

Fahrenheit (Hinnant, 2018).

Enrique clung to the sides of what's called "the Train of Death" to get to the U.S. He was robbed, threatened, and held for ransom by his smugglers. But he was lucky; he survived. Over the last two decades, it is estimated that more than 10,000 have died trying to cross the U.S./Mexico border (The U.S. Customs and Border Protection, 2019). As many as six in ten migrant women and girls are raped on the journey (Shetty, 2014).

Gulwali and Hasheem nearly drowned taking the Mediterranean route, which has been called "the world's deadliest border" International Organization for Migration (2021). Since 2000, more than 33,000 migrants have died at sea, in flimsy rafts and with fake life vests, trying to enter Europe (Nebehay, Amara, & Scherer, 2017). Only when images were seen, like the one of the young child, Aylan Kurdi, who drowned in efforts to get to Greece, did the world seem to show much empathy.

In total, more than 60,000 migrant deaths have been recorded globally since the year 2000 (Migration Data Portal, 2021). Allow me to repeat: More than 60,000 people have died since 2000. This is a crisis of our humanity.

Global Response

And how has the west responded to this crisis? Thus far, with fear. Across Europe, nationalist and anti-immigrant parties have made significant electoral gains in places like Italy, France, Germany, Sweden, Poland, Austria, and Slovenia (BBC News, 2019). In 2017, the far-right Alternative for Germany entered their federal parliament for the first time. The right-wing, anti-immigration Sweden Democrats became the third-largest party in 2018, leading to political deadlock. Hungary's leader, Viktor Orban, has passed laws that criminalize people who offer to help migrants claim asylum and has built an electric fence along their border to protect what he calls, "a European way of life" (The Guardian, 2018). England voted to Brexit from the European Union.

In Australia, the prime minister began the "Sovereign Frontiers" operation where migrant "boat people" are routinely turned back to sea, and asylum-seekers are taken to remote Pacific island detention centers, which Amnesty International describes as open prisons (Bellamy, 2018).

In the U.S., President Trump was elected, vowing to "crackdown" on immigration--a promise he followed through on. He called the border a "national emergency," separated children from their families, sent thousands of National Guard troops to police the border, and dramatically reduced the number of refugees the United States accepts on a yearly basis.

Yet regardless of these responses by the west, the migrants continue to come. Regardless of the life-risking journeys they take to get here, they come. Regardless of the hostile, openly racist, and Islamophobic treatment they face in the west, they come. They may arrive without the legal right to work, and be forced to live in abject poverty. Yet, I ask you, if your village was targeted by the Boko Haram or if your children's lives are threatened by gang members, wouldn't you do the same?

Yes, this is a crisis. But it is a crisis of our humanity. What Pope Francis has called the "globalization of indifference." We must do better. So how *should* we respond?

Solutions

When the world is facing the largest number of displaced people in recorded history, it is critical that we return to discussion about who qualifies for support and who does not. The 1951 Convention was created after WWII and does not adequately address today’s displacement challenges. The Enriques and Gulwalis of the world must be considered.

Furthermore, it is unacceptable that funding for the support of refugees is decreasing and burdening poorer nations that host the majority of refugees (Bellamy, 2018). The world’s more privileged nations must contribute more.

Rather than seeing refugees as a burden, host countries should implement refugee camp policies that economically benefit both refugees and themselves. Take Uganda--a country with a large number of refugees. Unlike most host countries, Uganda gives refugees the right to work, access education, land, capital and banking, as well as freedom of movement. Refugees are faring well, even making jobs for Ugandan citizens.

What if we created public work projects for refugees, similar to the New Deal programs President Roosevelt created for desperate Americans during the Great Depression? One such project is actually being tried in Jordan today, allowing Syrian refugees to work in exchange for much-needed international investment (Betts & Collier, 2017). With financial support from places like the World Bank, and careful assurance that human rights are respected, national development projects could be enormously beneficial to both refugee and host country.

We need to invest in education in refugee camps or along borders where migrants wait to apply for asylum. Currently, just half of the world’s refugee children of primary school age get access to education. Adults also need to develop the skills necessary to rebuild their countries. An investment in education creates a more peaceful future for all of us.

For migrants stuck in limbo, without hope of being able to return to their volatile homelands, it is important that the world takes its fair share of migrants and does so in thoughtful collaboration with one another. Many of us around the world initially saw the Chancellor of Germany, Angela Merkel, as a savior of sorts when she opened the country’s borders to hundreds of thousands of migrants in 2015. However, without collaboration from countries between Germany and the Middle East, thousands of migrants died in the perilous journey to get to Germany. And within months, when Germany remained one of the only countries in Europe accepting migrants, the country became overwhelmed by the numbers and closed the doors to any more. The west needs to create a migrant-sharing system that takes into account a country’s GDP and population size to determine its absorption capacity. We need to create a structured asylum process that allows safe and legal passage. And if countries choose not to accept the asylum seekers, they would contribute financially to those that do. These reforms are currently being discussed in the European Union and could be done on a global scale.

And, importantly, we must look inward. If a country, like ours, made foreign policy errors that contributed to the disorder before us, then our responsibility is greater. We have a duty to help resolve the disorder and support better conditions in these countries so that people can return. Finally, on an individual level, you can:

- Host refugees and asylum seekers in your home
- Volunteer to teach English or work with an organization supporting migrants
- Encourage our universities to offer scholarships for migrants
- Hire refugees
- Address the xenophobic myths that family or friends might espouse
- Donate to organizations like the UNHCR or those that provide legal support to migrants
- Vote for politicians that will put into practice the solutions we've talked about
- And importantly, you can continue to educate yourself.

Conclusions

One of the students that studied with me in Europe was a refugee herself. Her family came from Bosnia--a region scourged by war in the 1990s where more than 200,000 people were killed and around two million were displaced. The Muslim community, in specific, were targeted in an ethnic-cleansing campaign. It was the worst genocide on European soil since the Holocaust. Her grandfather was thrown into a concentration camp and her uncle killed by a bomb. Living in a war-zone, hearing the sound of snipers more times than they could count, my student's mother fled her country with her two children, not knowing what the fate of the people she left behind would be. She was forced to rely on a smuggler to get them to Switzerland, where they were provided food and temporary housing, but not allowed to work. There, my student waited seven years until her family was granted permanent residency in the U.S. to start a new life.

Today, my student's family is able to study, travel, work, and live without the fear of being persecuted for our identity or evicted from their home. They are able to live a safe life, full of promise and opportunity. My student has graduated from university and is now working at an organization that serves refugees. She is trying to make a difference in the world by helping other vulnerable populations.

My student and her family are good people. And so are the 79 million others that are deserving of our compassion and humanity now. They are not terrorists, hardened criminals, gang members, or very bad people. This is not an invasion, nor something to meet with military force. These are people like you or I, but they desperate to escape from war, violence, and destitution. We can help these people. We can do the right thing.

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