

Refugee stories:

Syrian refugee children in Lebanon

By Máiréad Collins

'Readings in Nonviolence' in *Nonviolent News* features extracts from our favourite books, pamphlets, articles or other material on nonviolence and related areas, or reviews of important works in the field.

Leading up to our exhibition **War-Torn Children** at the Linen Hall Library 1st March – 15th April 2017, it seemed pertinent to feature in our *Readings* Section background and context articles that complement what will be on display in textile, photographic, poster and memorabilia language.

As the curator of the exhibition it is of great relevance to care not only for the objects that make up the exhibit, but also reach out for sources and background information that widen and deepen the understanding of the topic we approach as a group. So, this is the 1st of a series of 3 articles that will appear around the time of the exhibition. [The author of this piece works](#) in direct connection with refugees. When asked if we could use it she agreed and added, 6 months later, this pertinent comment: "I hope it becomes clear to the public that Aleppo is not the beginning and the end....it was the focal point for much of 2016 and rightly so but also it has tended to make people think that it was the only place affected in Syria, when there are over a million people besieged in other towns and villages in Syria...."

This is just one small piece on one aspect of the current situation. There are thousands more. It has been chosen because the author has been connected to Conflict Textiles from its origins, was a member of the Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel and acted as an observer (known as Ecumenical Accompaniers - EAs) to several Palestinian towns and villages to monitor the interaction between the Palestinian inhabitants and the Israeli military, and because we have as part of the *War-Torn Children* exhibition a piece called Aleppo School; all very relevant to her current job.

Roberta Bacic

http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/dr-mairead-collins/child-refugees-in-lebanon_b_10570384.html

In the context of Refugee Week 2016, on the 26th June 2016, **The Huffington Post** published this article by Dr. Máiréad Collins, Christian Aid's Emergency Programme Officer for the Middle East. *This refugee week Máiréad Collins, Syria Crisis Emergency Programme Manager at Christian Aid, reflects on the heartbreaking reality of life for Syrian refugee children in Lebanon.*

On my first visit to Lebanon in September 2013, I met a family who had fled from Yarmouk Palestinian camp in Syria and had made their temporary home in a rehabilitated mosque on the outskirts of Beirut. Refugees for around a year, the father and teenage son had found occasional work, but none of the children including their five-year-old son, Hamed, were attending school due to the costs associated.

With every visit since I've witnessed the reality for Syrian refugee children has become bleaker. While there have been increased efforts to include both Syrian refugees and poor and marginalised Lebanese children in education vast issues of social exclusion driven by poverty remain.

Almost three years later I do not know whether Hamed ever made it to school or whether his family

remained in Lebanon. While I hope that he is now going to school with a full belly, lives in a warm safe home, and goes to sleep after a good meal, these hopes are overshadowed by what we know to be the dark reality on the ground for children across the region.



Gordon Brown's assertion that by 2017 all children will have a place in Lebanese schools is a hopeful and important goal. And indeed the introduction of second shift schools has increased access to education.

However, emphasising the assurance of places in schools for children runs the risk of ignoring some of the key factors motivating their exclusion.

It is increasingly hard for refugees to get decent jobs. In 2013, men like Hamed's father, who had been skilled workers back in Syria, were lucky to get a day or two of work in a week, now the situation is worse.

Unscrupulous employers recognising the depth of desperation and the opportunity to save money are keen to employ children, vulnerable and desperate they are forced to work long hours in often physically trying jobs, exposed to abuse by employers and customers, including sexual assault. As well as working long hours on farms and in shops including auto repair shops, children also work the streets. Children who should be tucked up in bed are pushing between crowds of revelers in bars holding roses for sale, boys and girls that should be in classrooms or playing with friends are offering shoe-shines or tugging on strangers arms to beg for food and money.

According to a 2015 joint report by IOM, UNICEF and Save the Children, there were over 1500 children working on Lebanon's streets. Most were earning an average of US\$12 per day, heart-breakingly children engaged in prostitution earned an average of three times this amount. For the children involved, there are not many options. As one child responded to the question whether he would like to attend school replied: 'If we go to school, who would help our families?.'

The plight of Lebanese child workers is only one aspect of the impact on children displaced by the Syrian conflict. Across the region, including inside Syria; early marriage of girls is driven to a large extent by family poverty; physically and mentally handicapped children are not only excluded from education but have little or no access to the therapies, medication and operations they need; children and youth are drawn into criminal activity or are criminalised due to their illegal status.

Christian Aid partners are responding to these needs by providing physically and mentally disabled children with therapies and assistive devices, protection for women and girls at risk and

suffering from violence, psycho-social support and non-formal education to marginalised children and psycho-social support to children and their carers in Palestinian camps.

In February, a record sum of more than \$11 billion was pledged at the 'Supporting Syria and the Region' conference where ambitious goals were set on education and economic opportunities to transform the lives of refugees caught up in the Syrian crisis - and to support the countries hosting them. The commitment is there, yet progress is slow, so far less than a quarter of this amount has been disbursed.

The Syrian refugee crisis in Lebanon is now five years old, little boys like Hamed are drifting further and further from hope of a safe childhood with an education and aspirations for a better life. On a recent visit to Beirut I saw a toddler barely walking mimic the actions of her older sibling - a child of maybe only five - as she begged from strangers on the streets of Hamra. This is the pitiful face of the impact of the Syrian refugee crisis on children. Places for children in schools are massively important, but the international community must work harder to turn their plans into action: accelerate the implementation of education and employment initiatives on the ground to make it possible for children to actually go to school. Then children can begin to live the childhood they deserve, and find some hope for their future. ●



Smiling outside, devastated inside.

This Syrian girl, on the Turkey Syria border, at Latakia, has lost all her family and friends, killed in the war. Photo Ann Patterson/Peace People.