

## Art as refuge

**Art can help us all see past labels like 'refugee' and 'asylum seeker' - and see 'human beings' instead.**

*What happens if a child or a teenager suddenly loses home, family, schoolmates – everything that he or she is about? A multi-faceted identity is replaced by one word: refugee. Here, two young journalists from Children's Express report on how art can help people to see past the word to the rich human reality beyond.*

Refugee? What does the word mean to you? Fellow-humans who need aid to take refuge from war, persecution and disaster? Or lazy freeloaders who come to England simply for a more comfortable life?

Last month we spent a week at the London International Festival of Theatre (LIFT) to report on an event bringing together young people from all over the world who have an interest in the arts. Not just any young people, but those from war-torn countries such as Palestine and Sierra Leone – places we have only read about in the news. They gave us their honest stories of the struggles of survival everyday, and how art can make a difference in the most difficult circumstances.

From our point of view the fact that these young people even managed to participate in LIFT was itself an astonishing achievement. However, for these unfazed teenagers it was not so much an achievement as simply an imperative, allowing them to express themselves through their love of art.

Listening to story after story of loss and bereavement we suddenly felt so rich, and realised that the tantrums we have over wanting the latest pair of Nike trainers, or our anger over a little comment someone has made to us was nothing compared to what they had been through. "I was a child soldier", 17-year-old Osman told us. It home that, compared to most of the people we met, our lives were so safe, something we had never thought about before.

Throughout the week we realised that it wasn't because these young people had tough lives that they came to LIFT, but their shared love of the arts. This love helped bring together cultures and countries that in the past have directly faced each other in conflict, or been torn apart by civil war, sometimes from places where Britain has some responsibility in causing the strife. These young people came together not to talk about trauma, but to perform together as one arts-loving community.

Some of the friends we made were refugees, and meeting them helped us to understand what this word means in a fresh way. However, when we tried to explain an experience that affected us so much to someone who wasn't there, we found it hard - harder even than listening to some of the stories about war and conflict from young people who have experienced it at first hand.

We asked young people from London, an area with a high population of refugees what they think and know about them. 18-year-old Tarina said: "I don't really know a lot about refugees but I hear about how too many of them are coming into this country illegally. I don't always think it's their fault though because some of them have to escape their own countries."

Victoria, 17, said: "I think it's OK if they came to this country for the right reasons, but I don't think just anybody should be allowed to call themselves a refugee and be allowed into this country."

But what are the 'right' reasons? Are young people today being fully educated about the reasons why families would leave their homes and land for a country where their key identity and their name becomes reduced to the single word, 'refugee'?

According to the BBC, in the year 2000 more than 97,000 people applied for asylum in the UK, the largest number of any EU country. This is an awful lot of people – but young people can't be expected to understand their situation if nobody is there to be a true representation of their stories.

So whose responsibility is it to educate young people about the reality that people face in their countries before they become refugees? The media, which seems to fluctuate between a positive and negative light in the depiction of refugees and asylum-seekers? Parents, whose own views and ideals may colour the facts? Or all these people combined, in order to present the truth to young people? Maybe if we all knew a little more about the human stories from all sides, we could come to our own conclusions.

Having had time to reflect on our unique and moving week we now see that the only way people will come to understand the real reasons why people become refugees is by giving them the opportunity to hear real stories and see performances like the LIFT debate. Young people have a right to create art, and we were lucky to be there to listen and respond in our turn.

These stories cannot be ignored by young people in Britain. If they are, ignorance and prejudice will simply grow among British children in direct proportion to the problems of repression, subjugation and political conflict faced by our peers all over the world.

### About the team

This story was produced by Jenny Roe Stanton and Diana Tabriz. It was published on the [Open Democracy](#) website..

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IT WAS VEREY INTRESTING AND GOOD I AGREE ABOUT IT.  
KRISTI , 30 December 1899 00:00

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