Chadian Sister Engages Kansas City Youth about Peace and Justice

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I have been asked to share with you my experience as a refugee. Let me begin with my story of migration to Kansas City. I migrated from where I live in Algeria, in North Africa. I traveled in relative safety, with documentation that allows me to cross borders. I nevertheless left my country to be a migrant\textsuperscript{15} in Kansas City for three months.

This migration is limited in time, but the road to get here is still long. Many people from Africa are afraid of rich countries like yours. You have to “get up early in the morning,” as we say in French, meaning it takes a lot of courage and determination to travel to “developed” countries like yours. Besides willpower, it also requires money, quite a bit of money.

But I’m here to talk with you about my personal story, before I knew about Kansas City.

\textsuperscript{15} In Kansas City, I was a migrant, #iamamigrant, 8000 or even 10,000 kilometers from my home, a migrant, like Seydou is or was in Paris, 3860 kilometers from his home country, https://iamamigrant.org/fr/stories/france/seydou, except that he had a romantic view of Paris and upon arrival was shocked to experience discrimination. I, on the other hand, had imagined a violent America and was surprised during my stay to see so many people exercising their democratic rights and engaging in social action.
Fleeing war

Yes, I was a refugee. And I have worked with refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants. In retrospect, I realize that having lived as a refugee helps me in relating with people who migrate, regardless of the reasons that set them in motion.

When you flee war, you seek shelter. Generally, you flee in the direction opposite gunshots or bombs. In the case of my family in Chad, at first, we did not go far. We hoped things would get resolved and calm down, so we could quickly get back home. We went west from the capital city and crossed the river to seek shelter in Cameroon. The bridge was not impressive like it is today. Many people fled in canoes and unfortunately drowned.

After a week, we returned home, but things did not stay calm for long, and we found ways to live in the midst of
constant shoot-outs and bombings. Before long, however, there was danger all around, all the time. We couldn’t stand it any longer. That is when families flee.

My family fled south this time, toward the Central African Republic, known as CAR, because we have relatives there. Looking back, I realize we were luckier than many others who were fleeing. My mother was a native of CAR, and my father had a house there because of his work as a tradesman. Even if we ran empty-handed, we knew that if we reached the border without being killed, we would not be homeless or in tents for long.

When one flees war, one does not plan. We took things day by day and improvised along the way. Villagers we met soothed our feet, swollen from walking all day, by massaging them with salt and shea butter and burying them in the earth at night. By morning, the swelling had receded, and we could continue our journey through the forest.

At one point in our flight, we lost my mother. We were hungry, and so my mother, with information from others who had food, tried her luck to find us some. While she was away, we heard shooting getting closer and closer. Passersby told us not to stay there. We fled. In the evening, anxiety gripped us. We had no mother, no water, and nothing to eat. We were tired, thirsty, hungry, and worried.

Days later, before we found my mother, we saw a well in a field and stopped to ask for water. We were thirsty and hungry again, and very tired. The man who guarded the field asked who we were. When he heard our names, he took us with him. He gave us food and shelter and looked after us. I learned much later that he had worked with my father and that my father had helped him out.
We went like that from encampment to encampment. Fortunately, my mother caught up with us at some point, and we continued our journey of exile.

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Perceptions of refugees and migrants

People put refugees, asylum seekers, and economic migrants all in the same bag. The words “migration” and “immigration” are suspect, along with the people engaged in those activities. Whether seeking greener pastures or fleeing for our life, we are seen as a menace. Perhaps you will help me find answers to some of my questions about that.

Migrants and refugees are a “problem” for the United Nations, for countries of origin, and for host countries. We talk about a “crisis,” which has become global, and in trying to figure out what to do, we do not ask ourselves about causes. Why do people migrate? If they brave death, there must be reasons!

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What we were told about the war in Chad

We were told that the civil war in my country was a religious war. A war of power between Muslim northerners and Christian and animist southerners.

Today, I know some of the real causes of the war, beyond this simple story of religions. That is why I ask questions today,
about why people are migrating. I invite you to join me in asking questions. And to dig below the surface to seek answers.

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Refugees as both things and people

In fleeing the violence of the civil war in Chad, I sometimes felt like we didn’t exist as people. We were hidden behind labels like “refugees” or “migrants.” These words came from the mouths of those who welcomed us, and the same words were stamped on the things given to us by the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR). When organized into HCR camps, we received canvasses, mosquito nets, basins and jerrycans to store water, cups to drink from, and so forth.

If you were part of a large family like ours, you could sell an item or two to buy food and vary and improve your diet. Precariousness makes people inventive and creative!

The local people who bought the items we sold called the things we sold “refugees” or “HCR.” So, refugees were both things and people.

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Symbolic violence

Using the same words to refer to both things and people is part of the violence that was inflicted and suffered. It hurt emotionally, and we had to heal ourselves later. We welcomed, traversed, and transcended all of that, because we had fled not for death but for life.
How could we be referred to by the same names used for things? Today I deplore such objectification of people, such stigmatization and even denigration. It makes us less human, when we should strive at every opportunity to be more and more human.

I see some of this in Algiers, the capital of Algeria, where I work now. I see it in myself, and in the local people and in people working for international organizations and local associations.

As a migrant from sub-Saharan Africa arriving in Algeria, it is true that you are happy to find people who are attentive, available, generous, and at your service. It is indeed heartwarming. It puts a little humanity back into the calvary of exile. And we need that.

After a while, you recover some from the shock and fatigue. More than anything else, you aspire to regain a more or less normal life, even in the midst of the abnormality of the situation.

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The reciprocity of giving

A gift is not truly a gift if there is no sense of reciprocity. But often, what happens? People who put themselves at our service do not want to receive our services in return. They do not want to connect with us, as if the label of migrant or refugee makes people incapable of relationship, of reciprocity.

Organizations want people to talk about their lives. It is emotional, and perhaps makes people feel generous when they are able to listen. People relieve their conscience by giving food
or material goods. But we keep the migrants at bay, not mixing with them. We must not receive anything from them.

If allowed to work, they are given degrading tasks (I’ve too much to say about this). If they dare put forward their know-how, then jealousies, prejudices, and unjust accusations arise. (Prisons in North Africa are full of sub-Saharan Africans unjustly accused, and, by the way, I hear you have problems with imprisonment here too.)

Learning to listen and allowing for impotence

What helps someone rebuild themselves and start believing in life again is feeling useful. Participation in community and society is intrinsic to human dignity.

To begin to sum up (afraid of being long), migrants or refugees, no matter their cultures or languages, are people seeking a place to live in peace and security. The best way to be of assistance is to transform our fears and emotions into involvement. This is what I try to do in my peace and justice work. Giving of what you have is good. But giving of yourself, of your time, is what helps someone become more and more themselves. It takes time. It involves loads of listening and of encountering self and other. Sometimes it involves impotence because one does not know what to do to help.

Every person needs help to get by. Each migrant or refugee must also walk their own path to peace and security. Really helping means capacitating people to realize themselves.
The way to peace, according to Pope Francis, has to do with welcoming, protecting, promoting, and integrating migrants and refugees.\(^\text{16}\)

*Welcoming* means offering migrants and refugees broader options for safe and legal entry into host countries.  

*Protecting* has to do with justice and means defending the rights and dignity of migrants and refugees, independent of their legal status.  

*Promoting* means ensuring that migrants and refugees, and people in the communities that welcome them, are empowered to achieve their potential as human beings, in all dimensions of their humanity (including family and broader social relations, gifting, education and learning, work, and leisure).  

*Integrating* means discovering each other and sharing opportunities for cultural enrichment. It is by learning from one another that prejudices and fear dissipate. This lengthy process shapes societies and cultures.

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\(^{16}\) See “Message of His Holiness Pope Francis for the 104\(^{\text{th}}\) World Day of Migrants and Refugees 2018,”
Voilà! There is a saying that your happiness cannot be made without you. When a host country makes it possible for people to be themselves, the host county is enriched with and through newcomers. It is a real challenge and goes beyond national policies. It is a risk that every person who loves their country, and our common humanity, must take.

It is the way to peace! As says Fatou Diome, a writer from Senegal and France, there is much talk about the problems of migration and not enough about its benefits.17

You and your country are the fruit of migration and have a lot to teach the world about integrating newcomers and the benefits that ensue. Successive migrations have forged you and your nation.

If I dare say, I think the current debates are an opportunity for you to show your diversity proudly to the world. Without that diversity, where would you and your country be economically and culturally? You have true wealth in seeking to live together – vivre ensemble.

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We know the painful history of racism in your country. Certainly. Those who meet this challenge can help heal forever these pains of your past and present. I hope you youth are social healers!