Children and Family

The theme of Refugee Week, which starts tomorrow, is to celebrate the positive contributions made by refugees to the Australian community and to raise awareness about the issues affecting refugees. Caroline Fleay reports

Refugee Week

It costs $100 a year to support the education and associated costs of each child

This year, his bridging visa expired and his case worker told him he no longer had the right to work.

Now, he tells me, he is lost. He cannot return to Afghanistan or he will be killed.

“I want to work,” he says. “I should be supporting my family. They need money.”

His wife, living in the province of Ghanz, is not allowed to work or study. Her four children, aged 6 to 12, cannot have the house because it is too dangerous. They are in fear of the Taliban and are not allowed to go to school. Their life is unspeakably hard.

The man I cannot name has not met his youngest son because his son was born after he fled. He does not know when his claim for asylum will be finalised or when he will see his family again.

He is one of an estimated 200 Afghan men who arrived in Australia by boat four years ago and are now living in the country while their claims for asylum are assessed.

There are another 4708 men, women and children from many war-torn countries in detention in Australia. Nauru and on Christmas and Manus Island. The Federal Government’s Refugee and Humanitarian Program for 2014-15 has 13,750 places, down from 20,458 in 2012-13. Of the 13,750 places, 11,000 have been reserved for refugees who are not already in Australia. Of the 2,472 living in the community, thousands are on bridging visas that have expired. That means they cannot work and they cannot get access to medical care without expensive support. Those who arrived by boat after August 2012 who have been released into the community are on bridging visas but are not allowed to work and cannot afford to study, which would seem at odds with the Government’s earn-or-learn mantra.

These people are all but invisible to the Australian community. There are so few of them, most Australians have never met an asylum seeker living in the community on a bridging visa.

Many asylum seekers are afraid to talk about their situation for fear it will negatively affect their claim.

“Our life is very, very hard,” the man I cannot name says. “I cannot hold a job. I cannot be a bricklayer but my case worker says I can’t work because my visa expired. We can’t go to work. We can’t go to English classes. It’s hard, it’s hard.”

He has to live off a government allowance of $490 a fortnight. He would prefer to work and pay tax.

He has signed the Government’s Code of Behaviour, mandatory for those living in the community who are on bridging visas. If he did not, he would not be eligible for a new visa. If he is deemed to have breached the code, his income support could be reduced. If he had a visa, it could be cancelled.

He does not know when his claim for asylum will be finalised.

“I can’t go back,” he says. “I can’t support my family. I have nothing to do. I can’t help myself. I am lost. I have no medicine for my head, I am so confused. When I speak to my wife, on the phone, she is crying. She is angry.”

He says his wife does not understand his situation.

“Living without my family means there is no meaning,” he says through an interpreter. “At first I wish to have a life in Australia, to have a bright future, to bring my family and have a life together. But now I am beaten, defeated. I would like to ask the Australian Government and the people to allow me to live a life.”

Education program: The Association for Protection of Refugee Women and Children runs schools for Afghan children who do not have registration documents to allow them to attend public schools in Iran. It costs a mere $100 a year to support the education and associated costs of each child in a HAMI school.

I visited one of those schools during my recent visit to Tehran. It was profoundly moving to witness classrooms full of children who have been provided with a chance to move beyond a precarious life. With funding from Unicef, the Iran Ministry of Education and other donations, HAMI educated more than 1300 children last year, including many girls. HAMI meets the health care needs as well as the educational needs of the children and conducts adult literacy classes for their parents. It also provides transport for the children to get to school.

There are civil society agencies in Australia who also work hard to provide compassionate responses to people who seek asylum here. But our Federal and State governments could be doing much more.

Some people who arrived to our shores by boat over the past few years have been sent to Nauru or Manus Island. Others remain locked up in Australia’s own immigration detention centres. More than 20,000 have been released from detention over the past few years and are waiting in the community for their refugee claim to be processed. Some have been waiting nearly two years, forced to survive on about $220 per week and without the right to work. This includes families with children.

While it is certainly a benefit to the only Australian state to deny children who arrived by boat access to government schools unless they pay international student fees, these fees are clearly unaffordable.

There are 150 children now living in the WA community who are on bridging visas and who are being force fed as their claims for asylum are assessed. These people are being force fed because the Government’s Code of Behaviour affects their ability to attend public school.

This is where Australia can make a difference to the lives of Afghan children.

We could also appreciate just how few refugees come to Australia in comparison and care more for those who do.

In WA, this includes caring more for asylum seekers who wait for their refugee claims to be assessed. WA continues to be the only Australian state that refuses to offer access to public education for children who are here seeking asylum.

The number of people who arrived in Australia by boat over the past 40 years is tiny compared with the numbers who have sought refuge elsewhere. Since 1975, Australia has hosted some 60,000 refugees who came by boat. Iran hosts an estimated three million refugees, some officially registered and others unregistered. Most have fled their homes in neighbouring Afghanistan. Pakistan hosts a similar number — an estimated 2.5 million. Further afield, 100,000 Australians have sought refuge there, again most from Afghanistan. Both Iran and Pakistan have had overwhelming numbers that we can hardly imagine. Instability and insecurity in Afghanistan mean that these numbers are unlikely to go down any time soon.

I visited Iran in April. I was part of a collection of civil society groups who met to talk about the challenges of seeking refuge in the south Asian region and the support they can offer to them. During the visit, I learned about the situation of refugees in Iran and the support offered by government and the non-government sector. Iran’s biggest challenge is in responding to the millions of refugees that it hosts in an unprepared society.

Given the crippling economic sanctions imposed on Iran by countries including Australia, Iran’s economy has suffered. Inexplicably, the number of the most vulnerable have had to bear the greatest burden. Among these are including refugees. Iran cannot possibly be expected to deal with so many refugees without outside help. But despite hardships and the weight of numbers, Iran makes services available. This includes education for registered Afghan refugees. Iran hosts more than 300,000 refugee children attend schools in Iran. Only half of them are girls. This is no small feat.

There continue to be great challenges for Afghan refugees to return to their own country, including the precarious security situation. Any repatriation to Afghanistan needs to be gradual. In the meantime, it is important to support the communities in the places that refugees have fled to, including the millions in Iran. This is where Australia can play an important role. We could support Afghan civil society groups who have mobilised to support refugees, such as HAMI, the Association for Protection of Refugee Women and Children. This on-ground Afghan refugee community runs schools for Afghan children who do not have registration documents to attend public schools in Iran. It costs a mere $100 a year to support the education and associated costs of each child in a HAMI school.

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The Department of Immigration has a two-year backlog of tens of thousands of claims to process. It could take years before these children’s claims are finalised. It is likely that a significant number of these children will finally be allowed to resettle in Australia over the coming years while they are waiting, we can be compassionate enough at least to let them attend school.

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