

Where Are They Now?: Refugee Children in the "See Something, Say Something" Era



Beatrice Beirne
She/Her
Senior
Political Science & American
Studies

A favorite pastime of exploitative tabloids is gawking at the fate of former child stars. From balloon boy to sitcom staples, aisles are bogged down with reminders that the titular character of "Matilda" actually grew up and pays bills now.

Watching children age on the public stage has become somewhat of a national pastime, but there is a particular group that does not get the same treatment. According to the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) in 2019, over 33 million of the world's refugees are children. Making up approximately one-third of the world's minors that live outside their nation of birth, refugees under 18 face sickening patterns and predictable bureaucratic apathy, despite their unique personal lives and differing cultural experiences.

Since 9/11, Brown University counts between 37 and 59 million people who have been displaced from their homes. More than 40% of them are children and, according to UNICEF, approximately 200,000 unaccompanied children applied for asylum in 80 countries in 2016. Survivors of invasion, climate change, war, violence, drone strikes and ethnic cleansing, minors displaced during the post-9/11 era have become the primary victims of the War on Terror.

It did not start like this. Signed into law a little over a month after 9/11, the PATRIOT Act was a bipartisan effort to enable government monitoring of personal interests, by allowing bureaucratic agencies to observe and document the private communication of citizens and suspected terrorists alike, according to the History Channel. Enacting such a law began the U.S.'s culture-encompassing War on Terror, and the subsequent "see something, say something" era was pitched as a community-driven approach to public policing—where everyone who wasn't a terrorist was on the side of justice.

Xenophobic media rhetoric and radical political figures—alongside the increased surveillance—led to domestic neglect and foreign destabilment. Refugee children, who are growing into their shoes as nations grow their arsenals, have unquestionably become targets in the "see something, say something" era.

When understanding the particular challenges that refugee children in this era face, we can examine three geopolitical groups that, according to the United Nations (UN) Refugee Agency, produce the most refugees: Syrian and Yemeni populations, migrants at the U.S. southern border and Uighur Muslim and the Rohingya in East Asia.

Once geopolitically displaced, a refugee child faces a whirlwind of dangers. According to the World Health Organization, the mortality rate of a refugee child is much higher than their non-refugee counterparts, and the most common causes of death include malnutrition, measles, diarrhoeal diseases, respiratory infections and malaria. These children are significantly

more likely to be impoverished and are 62% less likely to attend school as an adolescent, according to the UN Refugee Agency.

Refugee children are also among the most susceptible populations to trafficking, with such a large portion travelling alone. A study by the UN International Organisation for Migration found that 70% of surveyed displaced persons had been sex and organ trafficked.

This is hardly a surprise; poverty promises exploitation when stateless populations have no state to regulate their treatment. This bodes true for labor trafficking where, according to CBS News, refugee children are routinely economically arrested in unhealthy conditions—for exploitative—or no—wages. But statistics have limits; when trafficking and displacement occur simultaneously, babies are born and die undocumented, unsurveyed and without their stories told.

These children are a vulnerable type of vulnerable; the combination of two incredibly innocent identities. The specific ailments of a refugee child are distinguished by their growth during a cultural crisis; they face what their elders might—homelands destroyed from war or natural disaster, imprisonment and internment from imperialist forces, genocide and cultural annihilation, and the deprivation of necessary resources—but during a developmentally significant age. Childhood is delicate, thus destructible.

For instance, Syrian and Yemeni refugees are currently the targets of food limitations, with the latter implemented by American-supported Saudi Arabian blockades. When malnutrition is normalized for a child, according to UNICEF, they face growth stunting, impaired cognitive ability and poorer intellectual performance. Minors detained at the border are facing life-altering separation anxiety that ruptures their relationships with their faultless asylum-seeking parents, as documented by the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (NSCDC). Uighur children, who have been imprisoned by the Chinese government at an alarming rate, are being indoctrinated with anti-Muslim agendas when they are school children. According to the Human Rights Watch and The New York Times, Uighur children are not allowed to be named anything "too Islamic," are barred from participating in religious activities and separated from their families or put in state orphanages. Rohingya minors' lives—and their parents' lives—have been controlled by constant fleeing from persecution since the mid 1900s, according to Vox. These tactics of starvation, separation and severe reeducation allow the erasure of cultures through traumatizing the newest generation.

Adverse childhood experiences, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), are traumatizing events that occur before a person turns 18. These can disrupt the brain function of refugee children and hinder their physical and mental health. Social-emotional learning, diet and exercise all become distinctly more challenging and less attainable for them. This is not at all to say that refugee children are subordinate or incapable, rather that they are being put in situations that guarantee poorer health, financial and social-emotional outcomes.

But the psychological damage does not end when a refugee child finds geographic stability; adverse childhood traumas can persist or be incapable, rather that they are being put in situations that guarantee poorer health, financial and social-

emotional outcomes.

But the psychological damage does not end when a refugee child finds geographic stability; adverse childhood traumas can persist throughout the child's life, according to the CDC. The purposes of childhood—artistic expression, friendships, exploration of one's gender identity—are tabled when survival is the primary purpose. Developmental opportunities, like learning in classrooms, and career steps, including apprentice and internships, are not attainable; religious ceremonies, first dates and movie screenings are all delayed, forgotten or never experienced. Object permanence, family gatherings, routines and regularity are eclipsed by endangerment.

There are particular aggravants that uniquely challenge each geopolitical subgroup of refugee minors. Syrian and Yemeni children, for instance, are targeted by immigrant restrictions birthed by the PATRIOT Act, and face an unfair shot at refuge and asylum according to the Human Rights Watch. For Muslim children, this has been compounded by Christian favoritism in nations who limit their immigrant intake to Mideast Christians. According to CNN, the Trump administration declared in 2017 that the U.S. would prioritize Syrian Christians—an unmistakable Islamophobic signal.

This sentiment stems from stereotypes that flourished after 9/11. Xenophobic attacks rose after the enactment of the PATRIOT Act, with over 800 cases investigated by the U.S. Department of Justice alone. Muslim and Mideast children who were born in 2001 not only recently turned 18; their entire life has been subject to the increasing anti-immigrant, -Muslim and -Mideast notions brought out of the “see something, say something” era. Between the codified racism of the PATRIOT Act and the race-based violence it encouraged, refugee children of the Mideast have been targeted based on their racial, religious and ethnic identities.

The denial of compassion is similar in our nation's Southwest. Due to the advent of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and the expansion of Customs and Border Patrol (CBP) after 9/11, anti-Latin American sentiments have also risen, through stereotypes, hate crimes and inaccurate political rhetoric. During this time, the U.S.-Mexico border has seen an uptick in people asking for entry, with 100,000 unaccompanied children stopped at the border in 2016.

Incarcerated on a mission of survival, these children face horrific conditions, including a lack of food, soap, space and supervision; forced hysterectomies; separations from their parents; sexual assault and abuse; over-crowding and countless other atrocities, according to the New York Times and the BBC. The NSCDC has confirmed that these conditions can release high levels of cortisol that permanently affect the architecture of children's brains. It has been largely argued, but not undeniably proved, that these conditions were an intentional action by the U.S. government to deter future border crossings.

In some cases, asylum-seeking children are put on the bench to represent themselves. The Washington Post documented that Jack H. Weil, former assistant chief immigration judge, claimed that he had “taught immigration law literally to 3-year-olds and 4-year-olds,” and that “it takes a lot of time. It takes a lot of patience. They get it. It's not the most efficient, but it can be done.” Toddlers are simultaneously being treated as terrorists and lawyers.

But the PATRIOT Act has not just shepherded American agendas. The technological tracking, facial recognition and secret surveillance developed by the U.S. government in the post 9/11-era has been incredibly helpful to the Chinese government's monitoring of Uighur populations. Rohingya children, part of a stateless Muslim ethnicity, have been subjected to the rise in

Islamophobia during the “see something, say something” era. Already victimized by decades of Buddhist extremism, Rohingya children additionally face American-influenced Islamophobia.

All of these—resettlement refusal, border camp conditions, ethnic bias and dystopian surveillance—are symptoms of a militaristic “see something, say something” self defense. These are children whose homelands have been destroyed by the search for weapons of mass destruction (read: oil) and whose parents have been shot down by drones. They have seen their South American suburbs mutilated by coups and met with neglect and imprisonment at the internment camps at the border. While, according to the Migration Policy Institute in 2019, the U.S. has historically accepted more refugees in the world than any other country, our nation has also created them under the guise of national security.

You might be saying, “Yes certainly the U.S. is not perfect—but it's a sticky situation.” That is like telling your daycare provider that it is okay if he starves, kills and traumatizes kids, but only one-third of them.

This is a humanitarian crisis that threatens to wipe out the most marginalized members of an entire generation. There needs to be adequate effort, there needs to be empathy, there needs to be a better solution than aluminum blankets behind steel bars.

We need urgency. The protection of children is incumbent on all nations and, especially, the nation that constructs the harm they face. We can educate ourselves by not only consuming the news but doing it appropriately and with the intention to comprehend. You can simultaneously interrupt right wing media's normalization of hate crimes against refugees, migrants, immigrants and asylees. Awareness is the baby step needed to protect babies.

You can promote life-saving technology for refugees and fund sustenance resources. The challenges of refugee children in the “see something, say something” era are particular and different from any other time in history; there are technologies, such as Instant Intel, Finding Family and Identity Protection, that allow navigation and reconnection for refugees.

You can do more. You can stop pretending that taking a picture with a child displaced by a natural disaster does anything besides feed your ego and savior complex. You can canvas for candidates that commit to ending child incarceration at the border, and do not just use it as a photo opportunity. You can fight the exploitation of child laborers by not patronizing H&M, Gap, Nestle, Hershey's, Microsoft and Apple and using safe alternatives. See the pattern here? You have to be more than a presence on social media.

You can vote and campaign against anti-refugee politicians and policies. Abolishing ICE, increasing refugee intake caps, funding DACA, addressing asylees and regulating CBP are good ways to reverse insufficient PATRIOT Act-era solutions. You can oppose borders, whether literal or symbolic, that tell a child to figure out their problems by themselves. To a child, a fence is a wall: it means you are not wanted, not invited and not safe.

We have been far too comfortable being spectators on the side of the culprit. If I say to you, “Remember that viral picture of a dead refugee child that washed up on the shore,” you'd have to ask “which one?” And that is kind of the point. Some work is not enough work when children are on the line.