

Noura Ismail: Creating Opportunities for Refugees

NOURA ISMAIL: What we're doing, it really is systems change, right? Like this is not just a project, this is a genuine solution and something that we're proposing that needs to be implemented for years and years to come.

RAMA CHAKAKI: This is Noura Ismail, our guest on the show today. Noura is the Middle East director of Talent Beyond Boundaries, an organization that connects skilled refugees with international employment opportunities.

NOURA ISMAIL: We're asking for full immigration systems to change. We're asking for employers and communities to change their perspective on refugees and the skills and the talents that they have to offer.

It's not easy to tell a government, you need to change your immigration, you know, you can tell them, but to actually have them do it, took quite a bit of time.

RAMA CHAKAKI: Stay tuned to hear more. I'm Rama Chakaki, and you're listening to Innovate with Purpose, the official podcast of Expo Live, an innovation programme by Expo 2020 Dubai.

[INTRO STING]

RAMA CHAKAKI: Talent Beyond Boundaries kicked off in 2014 as a US-based organization. Since then, it has expanded operations to Australia, Canada, Jordan,

Lebanon and the United Kingdom. It also has projects planned for Iraq, Turkey and across Latin America.

As the Middle East director, what does a typical day look like for you, Noura?

NOURA ISMAIL: There is no typical day. Like, just to give you an example, two weeks ago I was in Turkey working with some of our major partners, creating our program there. I was then in Lebanon working with our staff, which is really in the thick of job matching for thousands of refugees. Yesterday I was in Fort Lee military base in the US working with Afghan refugees.

But I've never stopped learning and it's exciting work.

RAMA CHAKAKI: And... how did you end up in this field?

NOURA ISMAIL: When I was in, I believe it was my junior year of my undergraduate studies, that was actually the start of the Syrian war. My family's originally Syrian. I grew up in the US, but we'd spend all of our summers between Damascus and Aleppo.

I think just the events of that war and especially in the way that it began, it really was a big shock. I was seeing directly my family members, our friends, who were so well-educated, so ambitious, like incredible human beings, put in these situations where they no longer had any form of ability to create any sort of solution for themselves.

It was just barrier after barrier and amongst the most traumatizing things for them was just the fact that they couldn't work. It was incredibly devastating.

And so it wasn't really even a choice. I just kind of went into it or started wanting to get involved. And then, you know, 10 years later here we are.

RAMA CHAKAKI: In its seven years of operating, Talent Beyond Boundaries has made a number of breakthroughs.

NOURA ISMAIL: When we first got started our first task was let's collect the data of as many refugees as we can regarding their skills, their education, their professional experience, which sadly is very rarely ever done. And when we did that we showed, you know, there are thousands of doctors, engineers, specialized, skilled trades workers, teachers.

It took us about three and a half years to be able to collect all the data, show it to companies and then show it to governments and get governments, again, to change their whole systems and then get companies to be, you know, to get on board as well.

So we didn't actually begin our official job matching program until 2019.

Getting to that point was a big challenge and really in the last year and a half, we've seen the fruit of that labor come, which has been exciting. Right now, we have a full program, the economic mobility pathways pilot with the Canadian government. We have the displaced talent visa in the UK, we have another one in Australia.

RAMA CHAKAKI: And with its job matching programs, Talent Beyond Boundaries is making an important intervention in our global response to refugees.

NOURA ISMAIL: Right now, once a person becomes a refugee, there are three solutions for them to access quote unquote, secure future.

One of those solutions is that they repatriate back to their home countries. Obviously that is not a viable solution for millions of refugees right now so that's off the plate.

The second solution is that they integrate fully in the country that they went and claimed asylum in.

The problem is that we have millions of refugees in countries like Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, where the countries themselves are overwhelmed and refugees don't have access to rights that would allow them to fully integrate, you know, they don't have access to full work rights, they can't, in many cases, legally send their children to school. So that's again, then not an option for so many.

The final third option is resettlement.

RAMA CHAKAKI: But the problem here is that less than 1% of refugees are resettled each year and at present, there are approximately 82 million displaced people across the world.

NOURA ISMAIL: So then with those three options, what option is left for all of these millions of people?

So Talent Beyond Boundaries what we're doing is saying we are going to create a new, durable option. We're going to create a fourth and what we call kind of a complementary pathway to this resettlement option that can serve millions of people by focusing on refugee skills and allowing them rather than the system to provide a solution for them, we're allowing them to take hold of it and be able to move forward based on their professional experiences and educational backgrounds.

RAMA CHAKAKI: Noura shared some examples with us.

I believe we have officially had close to 400 people access now a durable solution, which again, I know, in this world, we're all looking for crazy big numbers, but you have to again realize that every single one of those 400 people is in a way making history because these are people that traditionally would never be allowed to access any type of pathway.

The candidates that we're sending, their lives are changing. Their family's lives are changing and also their extended family's lives are changing. We have a candidate who traveled to the United Kingdom and is now paying for his brother in Syria to be able to go and complete his medical school studies. We have other candidates who are now sending their children to school for the first time. So when you put it in that perspective, impact becomes more clear.

RAMA CHAKAKI: What about the challenges you've had to mitigate? Can you tell us about those?

NOURA ISMAIL: COVID presented a number of challenges. The economic situation across the region has been really devastating. In Lebanon it's been a horrible situation. So many of our candidates, they were struggling before and now they're struggling so much more. Access to Internet, if they have an employer that's interested, but they just need to do the interview can be a challenge. Many of them are living in remote places in group homes. You know, just accessing them, being able to communicate with them regularly. We've been doing some intakes all through WhatsApp voice notes at times, we've had to be very creative.

But our team is so determined and so ruthless. Whatever it takes, we will do it. And so far, thankfully, we've been able to continue moving forward.

RAMA CHAKAKI: And with the Expo Live grant, Talent Beyond Boundaries has been able to continue making those strides.

NOURA ISMAIL: Expo Live has been an incredible experience and honestly, one that was surprising. I had no expectations going in. I mean, it was wonderful to get the recognition and that initial funding. And it was really critical funding because it came right in the middle of COVID when, when funding was generally quite slim everywhere.

When I attended the event, just the caliber of people that I was surrounded by and all the other innovators, we kept in touch with many, we're on active WhatsApp groups with all and sharing tips with each other and, leads in different places. And it's just been, incredibly valuable and just an experience that I'm very grateful for.

RAMA CHAKAKI: “Innovate with Purpose” is the official podcast of Expo Live, an innovation programme by Expo 2020 Dubai. Innovation can come from anywhere, to everyone.

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