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CHIME THROUGH THE YEARS

“THE BIGGEST REFUGEE CRISIS OF ALL TIME” BY TARA TODRAS-WHITEHILL

CHIME FOR CHANGE Through the Years: The Female Fabric is a series curated by CHIME Managing Editor Mariane Pearl featuring stories from the CHIME journalism platform archives by women around the world.



President Trump’s refugee ban seemed based on the assumption that people fleeing war and misery are potential terrorists set on attacking America. There is no truth in this, say experts from around the world nor would the ban prevent terrorists from attacking the United States. Such an approach can only come from someone who has never met a refugee or seen what they have been through. Ignorance only can dehumanize an entire people, deny them their individuality, and question their humanity. This story is about the men and women behind the label. In 2015, I travelled as a photographer to the island of Lesbos in Greece, with my company Vignette Interactive for the International Rescue Committee.

We were possibly documenting the biggest refugee crisis of our time and it was unlike any assignment I have ever had. Hundreds of thousands of individuals mostly fleeing Syria, had crossed the Mediterranean Sea into Europe. **On average, 3,300 people were arriving everyday with next to nothing, tumbling off inflatable boats, hugging their families upon arrival, crying with joy and fear and sadness. Then they would pick up what little possessions they managed to hold onto, something to remind them they are a person not only a refugee.**

When I first arrived in Lesbos, there was a lull in the number of refugees coming in on the boats as the Turkish navy had put up a blockade to try and stop people coming into Greece. Instead, refugees arrived late at night and early in the morning when no one was going to stop them. Now, two years later, the Syrian refugee crisis has 5.6 million displaced people during nine years of war. In the meantime, **residents of Lesbos Island have been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize as recognition of their humanism. An 85-year-old grandmother who fed children on the beach and a local fisherman who rescued scores of refugees from the water were nominated on behalf of the island's collective response to help men, women and children who arrive daily on the island shores as if emerging from the sea itself. The residents helped them keep moving forward, do their laundry, charge their phones, buy ferry tickets and get somewhat ready for the next stop on their journey.**



Refugees on arrival express their joy at having survived the harrowing journey at sea. When so many men jumped off the raft, it was impossible to believe that it had held them all.



The baby on this photograph was one-year-old when he arrived from Turkey with his mother Jihan.



When they arrive, people go through an identification process and are given documents they can also exchange money and buy ferry tickets to get to Athens.



Fayrouz had six children under 18, it was sunrise when we talked. "They suffered a lot on our journey here, and we want to continue to Germany." She said, "I want my children to have a better life."



Khadija, a Syrian refugee from Homs, spends her first night in Europe wrapped in an emergency blanket at a beach makeshift camp in northern Lesbos. Many who arrive during the night from Turkey stay at beach camps like this one and are then moved to a processing center



Refugee life is about waiting, fighting boredom, uncertainty and the chilling winds.



Phones are the lifeline of these men whose families have been scattered by the war, it holds their past as well as their hopes for the future.



Photos courtesy of Tara Todras-Whitehill for the International Rescue Committee. As a photojournalist, Tara is passionate about covering strong women who are changing the world around them and telling in-depth stories. She has over eight years of experience in documentary photography in the MENA region. She also works in radio broadcast and video production, in order to convey an engaging narrative that explores deeper human connections to important stories.