

**FACE
TO
FACE**

REFUGEE TEENAGE GIRLS

by Mira Lemberg

Lana

AGE 15

Hi. My name is Lana. I'm fifteen years old. I was born in Baghdad, Iraq, on 29 July and I had a great childhood with my family and friends. It was a really nice childhood. Then the situation in Baghdad got worse and worse so my dad decided to move us to Syria.

It was a nice life in Syria. I met many people and I had my best friends there. I still talk to them every day. But we're separated now. In Syria, the first two years were perfect, then we had to wait for travel documents to the United States, but it took a lot of time. I loved going to church and going out with my friends and going to school. Then the war started and the situation in Syria got worse and worse. We were still waiting for our travel documents and there was one question always on our minds. What would our ending be – would we die in Syria or travel to the USA? Then we had a new problem. My mum was pregnant. And we had to wait for the baby's birth. When my brother was born we went to the American Embassy and we told them that we were seven now: my father, mother, my two sisters, brothers and me.

The war was getting closer and closer. The day the war came to our place I was in school and it was a Thursday. We were in a maths class. I still remember all the moments – my friends crying, shouting and running to the gate so they could get out and save their lives. I was so sad and afraid of dying. It was the worst day of my life.

Then, after that, the UN told us that they had to change the country that we were going to travel to and that it would be Australia. I was so happy and excited; it was like I was blind and saw the light. They gave us the date for travel. Everything moved so fast. The last six months before we came we had hope that we were going to live.

Finally we were able to travel. It was so hard for me to leave my best friends. I cried so much because I loved and had got used to my friends. But my dreams had come true; I could finally travel.

In Australia I've met many new friends and lovely people. I sometimes feel like I'm Aussie, and that's funny 'cause I'm not, but it's just a feeling I have. I love my new country. I feel like I have to be a good person. I have to be a positive person. I want to get a job and buy a car in the future so I can live like any Aussie girl here.

Thanks, Australia!



Viniththa

AGE 15

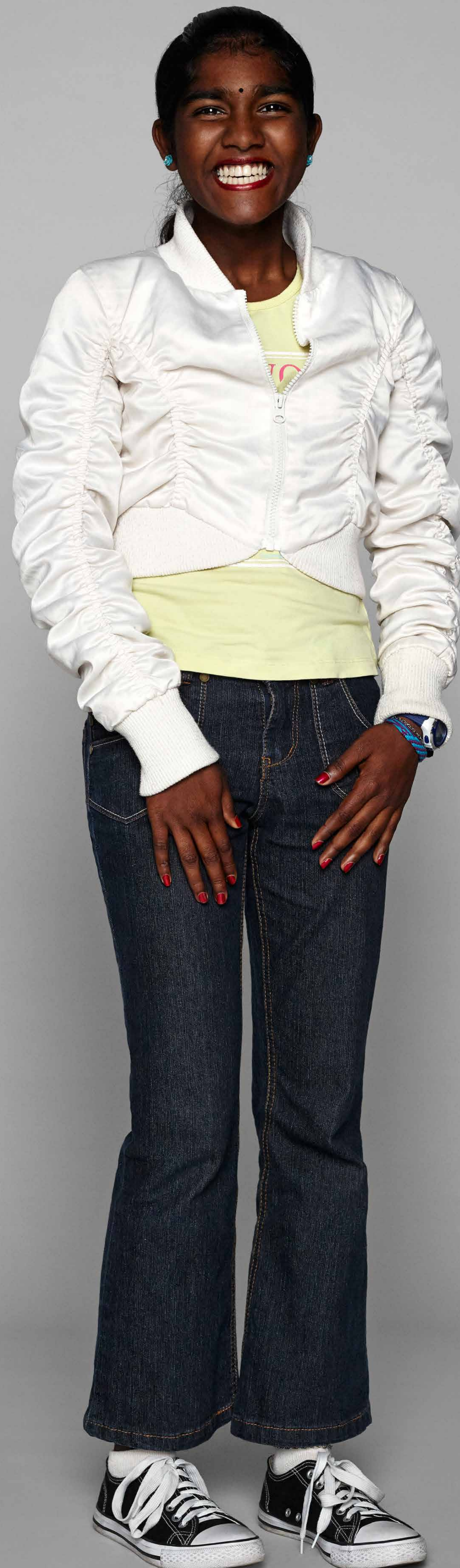
My name is Viniththa and this is the story of my journey to Australia. I was born in Valaichchenai, Sri Lanka. Our house had three rooms, a kitchen, a living room and a bedroom where my parents, my five sisters and I slept. My mother stayed at home, working hard for the family. My dad was a fisherman. One night, while my dad was fishing, army soldiers arrested him and tortured him. When they let him go he fled Sri Lanka. The soldiers came to our home looking for him but Mum didn't know where he was. After that, they left us alone. When my dad returned, the soldiers were still looking for him so he had to hide. Eventually they captured my dad again and tortured him. Dad went to hospital and was advised not to say that the soldiers tortured him. After this my dad disappeared for several years. Once again, he returned home, this time for about six months and, once again, the army came for him. Dad went into hiding once more before escaping again.

After several more years, Dad returned to Sri Lanka with a plan to escape with me. He took me from my mum and my sisters and we moved from house to house so that he could not be traced by the army. Dad eventually arranged for us to get a seat on a boat to Australia. We got on to a small boat that took us to a larger boat that took us all the way to Australia. We were at sea for twenty-one days. There were thirty-one people on the boat and I was the only girl. I slept two nights below the decks and the rest of the time out in the open. As a result I often got wet at night and found it very difficult to sleep. Sometimes it was cold and raining and at other times it was really hot. Even worse, I was seasick for several days. We were always hungry. We had tea to drink in the morning. At four o'clock in the afternoon, we ate rice and fish that we had caught along the way. My dad went without food for five days, and at the end of that he was very tired and weak. We were only allowed a small amount of water each day, so I was always very thirsty. Another problem was with the boat. It leaked. We all used buckets to keep the water level down and the men had to continually plug the leaks. Everyone thought they were going to die.

When we saw an island we were relieved; everyone was happy. The boat crew, however, were crying because they knew that they would be in trouble. A navy boat guided us to an Island. There was also a helicopter flying overhead taking photos. When we got ashore, doctors checked us. We were so dehydrated they couldn't take blood samples.

We were put into a family camp for fourteen days and then we were taken to Adelaide where we lived for two months in a house in a camp. When we first came to Sydney we shared a house with other refugees. My dad and I now live in our own house in Sydney. I talk to my mum once a week by phone. I really miss her. I hope that one day she can come to Australia to be with me.

When I finish school I want to go to university. Australia has given me this opportunity, which I would not have in Sri Lanka. I'm not sure what I want to do; my mum and my sister want me to be a doctor.



Mahgul

AGE 19

Do you know why I left my country? What made my family leave our country? Let me tell you the story of my life.

My name is Mahgul. I was born in Afghanistan. We moved to Pakistan as refugees and lived there for eight years until my dad got us visas to join him in Australia.

I've had a lot of bad times in my life, which I cannot forget, even though I am now living in Australia. Sometimes I get scared at night when I remember them taking my dad to jail in Afghanistan. They tortured him just because he didn't listen to them. When the Taliban came to kill my dad, my mum got so worried that she lost one of her babies in her stomach.

There has been fighting in Afghanistan for thirty-five years. That's a very long time. I feel very, very sad about it. We left our country because of the fighting. We didn't feel safe. We were not safe. They wanted my dad to fight, but he didn't want to fight. One night he ran away to Pakistan. He ran away because of us, so that we could be safe and have a better life. Later, my mother, me and two brothers and one sister followed him. My aunty's family came with us because my uncle had been killed. We ran away at night-time – 2 am – when everyone was sleeping, and we stayed as refugees in Pakistan.

My dad had to leave Pakistan and we had to wait eight years to join him in Australia. Eight years is a very long time. Ask me how hard it was when my dad was not with us! Every time I looked at my mother she seemed to be crying.

When we arrived in Australia it was a very big day for us. I came to Australia in with my family – my mum, my brothers and sisters. We weren't sad anymore because we were all together with my dad again. Finally we'd arrived in a safe country where I could attend school and do things I was not allowed to do in my own country. When I was in Pakistan they wouldn't let us kids go to school because we didn't have a Pakistani passport. I used to say to myself, 'The day will come that I can be a schoolgirl and wake up early in the morning to go to school.' I used to cry I wanted to go to school so much.

My life has changed since I came to Australia. In many ways getting an education and being safe here has made me feel good. I do love Australia because it's the only place I've been able to go to school and be educated.

When I was sent to the Intensive English Centre (IEC) I didn't even know how to write my name. When they gave me a book it made me feel very shy and bad and I said to myself that I'll try so hard that someday everyone in my family will be proud of me.

My dad always does his best for us. He always says, 'Go study. You've got the chance to study, to be something; make your family proud. Help your people.' I want to help all poor people around the world – help them to get an education especially girls. I wouldn't stop helping until every poor child got to go to school. Everyone's dream is to be rich or have money but my dream is to have money to help poor kids and to help my people in many ways.

The Australian people have accepted us, which my family is very thankful for. They always show respect to us, and respect our religion and culture. They're always doing their best for people from different cultures. Thank you, Australia, for all the help you've given us.

My religion is Islam, which respects and accepts all other religions. Islam doesn't say you should fight and kill people. There is nothing in Islam that says this, so I don't know what some Muslims are doing in Islam's name. Our god, who we call Allah, accepts all religions and He said to change the world by your love, and be peaceful and helpful.



Eh Eh

AGE 16

My name is Eh Eh and I was born in Thailand in the Tham Hin refugee camp. From the day I was born I faced poverty along with my family and other Karen people. In the olden days, all the Karen people were living in Myanmar (which is now called Burma) in peace and unity. Everyone was so friendly and caring. There was no war and it was a peaceful world. But as time went on, the Burmese start taking over the land and they kicked us out. We had to flee into the forest, not knowing what was ahead of us and how we were going to survive. They not only kicked us out of our land but they ran after us, torturing and killing us. Some of our people died on the way. But luckily I hadn't been born at that time so I didn't have to go through the pain.

And that's how most of us ended up in the refugee camp. Life in the refugee camp for me was like living in a place with no hope. We lived in a house made of bamboo and had to shower with cold water. If we wanted something we had to literally fight for it. When you wanted access to water, you couldn't just get it. The water didn't come to our house automatically. We had to wait for a particular time to access the water (at 2 pm water was available for twenty minutes). The water also wasn't always clean. Sometimes when it rained the water was quite yellowish brown, and we had to live with that. If we wanted to read at night we couldn't use light bulbs but had to use candles.

In 2005, Australia started sponsoring people from the refugee camp to move to Australia. It was a good opportunity for a lot of the refugees. As a six-year-old kid all I wanted to do was move to Australia. Every time I prayed I would ask God to help my family move to a better place. My family, along with three other families, moved to Sydney, Australia.

At first I was worried that life in Australia would be stressful and scary because we didn't know the language at all and we knew no one. But I felt so blessed when I saw a lot of other Karen people settling in Australia, and as time went on the language wasn't hard to learn.

I started school in Australia in Year 4. When I started I didn't know anything. We were learning ABCs and how they sound. I didn't have any problem with racism but people wouldn't speak to me because I didn't know how to speak English. I tried so hard to communicate with others but they couldn't understand me. I didn't even know how to ask my teacher to go to the toilet. But as time went on I improved.

The difference between Australia and the refugee camp is that we have a lot of freedom and we get to eat all kinds of food. Australia is a multicultural country and I love the fact that everyone gets along really well. But when I look back, my Karen people in Burma are still fleeing into the forest and my only wish is to study hard so that one day I can go back to help my people. What makes me happy is that a lot of Karen people are studying at uni and maybe one day we can use our education to fight to get our land back.

My mum encourages me a lot to go to uni and get a proper job so I can have a good future. My biggest inspiration is my mum due to the fact that she was the one who held me in her tummy for nine months and had to go through all the pain. Sometimes we have family problems and if God hadn't given me a strong mum like her, our family would have fallen apart.

I think I'm a very warm-hearted person. I help people when they need help and I make people feel very welcome. I like to see people living in peace and that's what I want for my country.

My mum is Karen and my dad is Poe Karen. I am half and half, but I only know how to speak my mum's language. Our Karen people love chilli and our everyday food is rice. Every day we eat rice with a different curry. Our traditional clothes are called Say k'nyaw. We wear them when we have celebrations and when we go to church.

God has helped me with many things and the only reason I could escape from the refugee camp and the war was because of God. I truly believe that God has a future in mind for my life and I will live according to His word.



The United Nations defines a refugee as:

“Any person who owing to a well founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his/her nationality and is unable, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself/herself of the protection of that country.”

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Mira Lemberg created Face to Face to tell the stories of teenagers from around the world who have been exposed to war, torture or trauma.

Each Face to Face exhibition is the end product of a program Mira has developed, where she uses creative writing and art workshops to help each teenager give voice to their own story. This program includes photography workshops, where Mira takes portraits of each participant to produce exhibitions like Face to Face – Refugee Teenage Girls.



Face to Face – Refugee Teenage Girls was created in collaboration with STARTTS – The NSW Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors.

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