

Two Times a Refugee

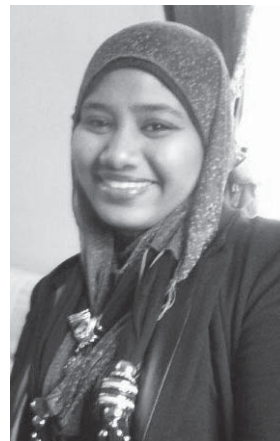
Najirah Arife

Our Country Never Accepted Us

My parents are from Myanmar (formerly called Burma). They had to leave their country. Our ethnicity is Rohingya, and we have lived for generations in Myanmar, but the country has never accepted us as part of their people.

Before I was born, the military government put my father in a “forced labor” program. They forced him to load and unload their ships without paying him. They only gave him a little rice to bring to his family. My mom was pregnant with her second child, and she was very hungry. Sometimes my father could only come home once a month for less than one hour. My father decided to escape. He risked his life and the lives of his

family. He ran away from the labor camp in the middle of the night and picked up my mother and my brother. The family sneaked into Thailand that same night. They went on to Malaysia as soon as possible because the government in Thailand would have allowed the Burmese army to come and kill them.



Finding Refuge in Malaysia

When they finally got to Malaysia, the people there helped with some medical care and shelter, but my parents had to work for any food they needed. They could grow food in the yard and fish in the lakes and from the beach. After arriving in Malaysia, my mother gave birth to me. Malaysia felt like my home. I liked the food and the traditions, but once I got to high school, I began to know that I didn’t really belong there. That is when I became aware that I was a refugee, and I did not have the same rights to go school as the Malaysian people. During all this time, it was important to my family to be able to practice our Muslim faith. There were three main ethnicities in my village, and we worked together to celebrate our faith.

Settling in the U.S.

Finally, after seven years, we were told that we were accepted to have a permanent resettlement in the U.S.A. We were happy and sad at the same time. Now we have been here for one year.

My family faced some of the barriers that all refugee families face. The most difficult barrier is the language. Another barrier is the difference in how you get services in this country. In Malaysia we never made appointments. We just walked into the doctor’s or other offices. Here you have to



make an appointment and be on time.

A third barrier has to do with being Muslim in a place that is mostly Christian. In Malaysia, there were many mosques, and we would hear a loud sound at prayer times to remind us to pray. But when we came to Nashua, NH, there were no sounds to remind us to pray. We then realized that there were no mosques for us to pray together as a community.

A Good, Safe Place

When the Boston Marathon bombing happened, we were afraid that people could hate us because the bombers were Muslim. My mother did not let me out for three days, and my community

was very afraid. Lutheran Social Services came to Nashua and helped us feel safe, and we realized that Nashua was a good and safe place to live.

I was able to learn English before I came here. I started to learn English in Malaysia by watching television. I also had some English classes in school there. I am now in GED classes, and I am helping in my community with all the other Rohingya refugees. I work two jobs to help support my family. Even though it can be very difficult, I am grateful the USA has given me a permanent home and the chance for a promising future.

This is an adaptation of a piece that Najirah Arife wrote for the Embracing Integration Symposium in Nashua, NH. She is a 24-year old student at the Adult Learning Center in Nashua, NH.

Some Terms You Should Know



These Irish people migrated to the U.S. In the U.S., they are known as *immigrants*. In Ireland, they are known as *emigrants*. Based on that information, write a definition of immigrant and emigrant.



An *economic refugee* is a person who has no economic prospects in their country and who seeks to escape oppressive poverty.

Refugees, like these Syrian refugees (right), are people outside of their country who are unable or unwilling to return home because they fear serious harm.

Asylum status is a form of protection available to refugees already in the U.S.

THINK ABOUT IT. Do the terms we use affect how we think and feel about the person we are referring to? If so, how?

MAKE CONNECTIONS. Read the story (p. 52) about Mexican immigrants who came to the U.S. looking for work. Are they *economic refugees*? Why or why not?

RESEARCH: Find out what is going on in Syria. How many Syrian refugees are there, and what is happening to them?

