

REFUGEES

## As refugee crisis grows, women turn to artisanal skills for a chance to rebuild their lives

Initiatives like the Pin Project and Turquoise Mountain are giving displaced women across the world an opportunity to learn while restoring dignity and confidence, Sydney Loney writes



Refugees around the world are being trained to make pins for The Pin Project in workshops like this one in Amman, Jordan.

NADIA BSEISO

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**SYDNEY LONEY**  
AMMAN, JORDAN  
SPECIAL TO THE GLOBE AND MAIL  
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When Ahmad, Muna and their four small children arrived at the Zaatari refugee

camp in Jordan after fleeing Homs, Syria, under gunfire in 2013, Muna wept at the sight of the sprawling yet crowded community of makeshift tents.

"When I saw the camp, my heart ached," Muna says. The family spent 11 days in Zaatari before a relative found them a two-room apartment up a set of crumbling stairs in a back alley on the edge of Amman.

Since arriving in Jordan, Ahmad and Muna have relied on monthly cash assistance from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees to pay their rent and feed their family. Muna says that while she's grateful, she'd rather be working.

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"My husband is ill and we couldn't survive without this help. But I would like to earn money."



**WATCH** Listen to the dreams of Syrian kids living in the Zaatari refugee camp

1:21

It's for women like Muna that Hedvig Alexander launched the Pin Project, a new campaign that will give refugees in seven countries job skills, income and independence.

The founder of Far & Wide Collective, a Toronto-based business that sells locally sourced fair-trade goods from the developing world, believes we've approached the refugee crisis all wrong, focusing too much on providing humanitarian aid and not enough on thinking creatively about long-term solutions. Giving people a means of employment should be paramount, she says, rather than forcing them to rely on handouts indefinitely. "If you're not connected to the global economy, you don't have a chance – and neither do your children."

She enlisted the help of Canadian jewellery designer Jenny Bird to design a pin that

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starting Nov. 15, with all the proceeds going to the refugees.

"My vision is to connect the goodwill of people leading countable lives with this vast, anonymous population that often gets forgotten," Ms. Alexander says. "I thought that a visible symbol of hope, something beautiful and well-designed, might be the way to get people interested, while also making it easy for them to make a difference."

It's an important consideration, given that the world is facing the highest levels of displacement ever recorded – there are more than 16 million refugees worldwide, 20 people are forced from their homes every minute and stays in refugee camps can last more than a generation.

The backstreets of Amman have become home to 80 per cent of the 738,000 Syrian refugees in Jordan who left their homes to escape six – and counting – years of conflict.

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Among them, Muna and Ahmad are relieved that their children are finally out of harm's way and, thanks to the humanitarian agencies that arrived on the scene with food, shelter and emergency health care, their basic needs have been met. (The UNHCR supported more than 39,000 families last year, providing \$21-million U.S. in total.)

"We lost everything, but every night that I put my head on my pillow and know my children are safe is a happy moment for me," Muna says.



Ahmad, Muna and their five children in an apartment in Amman. The family escaped the conflict in Syria in 2013 and currently rely on monthly cash assistance.

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Still, she worries about what comes next. Despite the aid, Muna can't afford extra clothing for the children, or medication for her daughter's skin condition. She muses about what she could do, maybe cooking kibbeh (Middle Eastern meatballs in bulgur shells) and selling them on the street. "But it isn't possible here, where no one has money to buy them."

The UN has identified textiles, artisan work and the food industries as key areas of employment opportunity for women. But so far, the number of jobs created for refugees has been a trickle.

Ms. Alexander is confident the Pin Project will lead to other, more large-scale efforts and has partnered with Turquoise Mountain, a non-governmental agency founded at the behest of the Prince of Wales that preserves historical areas and revives traditional crafts, to oversee production. "I know one little pin isn't going to fix everything," says Ms. Alexander. "But it's time we started looking for new solutions to a problem that's only getting bigger."

While the Pin Project gives refugees new skills and earning opportunities, Turquoise Mountain just launched an initiative in September that will tap into the existing talents of displaced artisans.

Artisanal skills are mobile; people carry those skills with them when they're displaced, says Scott Liddle, the organization's regional director for the Middle East and Afghanistan. "As the Syrian crisis continues, it's crucial that the international response move beyond emergency humanitarian assistance," he says. "It's essential for people's sense of self that they not be reliant on handouts, but rather be able to earn an income for their families."



The Pin Project is a new campaign that will give refugees in seven countries job skills, income and independence.

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Mr. Liddle has seen firsthand the impact this approach can have. Saeeda Etebari, a refugee from Afghanistan, lost her hearing when she contracted meningitis as a child in a refugee camp in Pakistan. In 2010, she joined Turquoise Mountain's Institute for Afghan Arts and Architecture and launched her own business after graduating. Ms. Etebari specializes in intricate filigree work – a piece she

collaborated on with designer Pippa Small was recently showcased at a Smithsonian gallery in Washington. "A remarkable journey from the refugee camps of Pakistan," Mr. Liddle says.

International trade in artisan crafts is valued at \$32-billion (U.S.) a year, with 65 per cent of handcrafted exports coming from developing countries. In Jordan, Mr. Liddle and his team are connecting with displaced artisans and developing an initial range of seven products, featuring everything from mother-of-pearl inlay to beaten copper and brass, designed for the luxury hotel market. "Over the next two years, we'll work with 500 Syrian and Jordanian artisans, and export over \$500,000 worth of handmade products," Mr. Liddle says.

Meanwhile, the UNHCR is also taking steps toward finding innovative ways to employ refugees although some, such as senior livelihoods officer Laura Buffoni, find progress frustratingly slow. "I'm considered an outlaw for thinking we shouldn't be treating refugees like recipients of assistance only," she says. "But I believe people who were working the day before leaving their countries *should* be able to join the community and work again – it's incredible to think that in the space of 24 hours, hundreds of people suddenly can't work, can't make their own decisions, can't feed their families."

It's not that humanitarian aid isn't important, she's quick to add, it's just that it's time to take a step beyond that. "My ideal would be to have refugees engaged in working from the beginning of an emergency," she says. "I believe you can transform the refugee crisis into an opportunity to push development, create jobs and attract investment."

Ms. Buffoni says that having economic value not only creates income for refugees, it also restores dignity and confidence. Maison, a 45-year-old former nurse from Darayya, Syria, agrees. She crossed the Jordanian border on foot with her five children in 2013, when bombs began dropping too close to home. "It was like the end of the world," she says. Maison spent her first weeks in Jordan patching up the wounded, and now works as a mentor at a local organization, helping women who lost their husbands in the war. "We have to keep on going, we can't sit down and do nothing."



Maison looks out at the rooftops in Mafraq. She hopes to return to nursing in Syria once the conflict has ended.

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Although she plans to return to nursing, she says that until that's possible, she's working not only to get her children through school, but also to inspire other refugee women to do the same. "It's especially important for women to have opportunities to work because so many of us are here alone, we're the only ones left to take care of our families," Maison says. "All refugee women need to be empowered through work."

*The last names of the refugee families interviewed have been withheld to protect their identities at the request of the UNHCR.*

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**Betari Prakoso**  
24 days ago

Finding employment in the hosting country (Canada in this case) is difficult for people arriving in to the country, even after several years of staying.

I am working for minimum wage job for the moment to fill my time, and I met many co workers who had good jobs and high education degrees in their previous country, but could not find a similar job in Canada. What a waste of human resource.

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