

SEEK REFUGE



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Lesson Summary

In this session, students will be asked to consider the factors which influence people to cross borders, with a particular focus on why people have had to leave Syria in recent years. It further introduces them to two examples of young people campaigning to prevent the deportation of refugees, namely the Viraj Mendis Defence Campaign, and Elin Ersson's refusal to sit down on a plane, preventing the deportation of an Afghani man.

Learning Objectives

- To look at some of the reasons behind why different people have had to cross borders and leave their homes.
- To learn about young campaigners who have tried to support refugees and reflect on their tactics and aims
- To assess what makes a campaign successful.

United Nations Sustainable Development Links

- No Poverty
- Decent Work and Economic Growth
- Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions

British Council Core Skills

- Critical Thinking and Problem Solving
- Student Leadership
- Citizenship

Curriculum Links

- KS 3-4 Citizenship

Note

In some cases the group you may be leading may include refugees, migrants, and/or asylum seekers. The United Nations Refugee Agency website contains guidance for working with these groups in a learning context, as well as guides to terminology and further resources on teaching about the topic. <https://www.unhcr.org/teaching-about-refugees.html>



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Activity one: Refugees' Stories

Requires: Slide 2, Worksheet Source 1 ('One Sad Dark Night') and Activity 1 questions.

Preparation: Print out Worksheet source 1 and Activity 1 questions, have the slideshow ready, ensure that students have pens to write down answers.

- Show students the infographic from slide 2. Explain that the Syrian Civil War, which began in 2011, has increased the number of refugees travelling across borders. Over 7 million people have been displaced within Syria, while over 6 million have fled the country. While many of these refugees have stayed in countries close to Syria, such as Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon, nearly 1 million have come to seek safety in Europe.
- Ask them to read source 1 from the worksheet, where Walaa, a 17 year old Syrian refugee living in Jordan, has shared her story.
- Ask students to get into small groups of 3-4. Ask them to answer the questions from the worksheet (Activity 1 questions) in their groups. After 5-10 minutes, bring them back together to compare and discuss as a group.

Activity Two: Elin Ersson's protest on a plane

Requires: Slide 3, Worksheet Source 2

Preparation: Ensure that you can play the video on slide 3, and have printed out copies of source 2 for your students.

- Ask students to watch the video hosted on the Guardian's website from slide 3.
- Explain that Elin Ersson was a 21 year old student at Gothenburg University, Sweden, when she decided to take this stand. Her and fellow activists had heard that a man was going to be deported to Afghanistan on the flight, so she bought a ticket planning to stop the flight. The man they were looking for wasn't on the plane, but another Afghani asylum seeker facing deportation was. Elin refused to sit down on the plane until he was removed from the flight, livestreaming the events on facebook. Some other passengers stood up to help her, while others tried to make her sit down. While she stopped the deportation, he was later deported on a private flight.



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Activity two cont.

- Once students have watched the video, ask them to read source 2 from the worksheet (the extracts from The Guardian article). Pose the following questions to the group:
 1. Why did Elin stand up? Why did she want to stop the deportation?
 2. Some people on the plane didn't like what Elin was doing. Why do you think that was?
 3. How do you think you would react if you were on the plane?
 4. Do you think the protest was the right thing to do, even if it makes people upset/angry/late?
 5. Why do you think Elin livestreamed her protest? Do you think this was the right thing to do?
 6. Elin now faces prosecution for her protest and the Afghani man was deported. Does that mean her protest was wrong to do? Where there any positives that came from this protest?

Activity Three: Research Task

Requires: Slides 4 and 5, access to computers for the students, A3 paper and pens

Preparation: Ensure that there are enough computers and pieces of paper so that each small group of students can share 1 between them.

- Inform the group that there are many different organisations that aim to help refugees and asylum seekers, and do this in different ways. Some help provide legal support for people's claims, others help with housing and ensuring that people have food, some focus on political lobbying on behalf of border-crossing populations.
- Split your students into small groups, and ask them to search online for organisations that support refugees, either at the local, national, or international level. Give each group a large piece of A3 paper, and inform the students that each member of the groups should do a brief write-up of an organisation they find online on the group's paper. This should include one or two sentences about the organisation, which state what their mission is, who's involved in it, etc. They should also try to find two or three examples of activities that the group do- these could be campaigns they are involved in, or examples of volunteering that the group run, or scholarships that they offer, for example.
- Show the students the example on slide 4 about Student Action for Refugees.
- Once each group have completed their organisation's profiles, display the questions on slide 5, and allow the students some time to discuss their answers to the questions.
- Have students stand up and show off the groups that they have discovered, and give their answers to the questions, inviting comments and discussion from the rest of the group.



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Activity Four: The Viraj Mendis Defence Campaign

Requires: Slides 6 to 9, Worksheet Source 3, A3 pieces of paper

Preparation: Ensure that there are enough copies of worksheet source 3 printed for the entire group, and enough copies of A3 paper for each small group

- Run through slides 6 to 9, which give context and an account of the Viraj Mendis Defence Campaign, using the notes below.
- After you have run through the slideshow, ask your students to read aloud the extracts from the interview with Louise Wallwein (source 3 on the worksheet), with students taking it in turns to read one of her answers each.
- Break the students up into small groups and give each a large sheet of paper. Ask each group to think about and come to a decision about whether the campaign had a positive impact, and to write down their answer at the top of the paper, with the reasons below.
- After the students have done this, place the large pieces of paper up around the room and ask the group to walk around and look at the different answers people have come up with before sitting down again.
- When the students have sat back down again, ask them whether any of the other arguments they read changed their minds, or whether they think that they are still right. Encourage students to respond to one another throughout this process.

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Activity four cont.

Slideshow Notes

Slide 6

- In Sri Lanka there are two main ethnic groups – the Sinhalese and the Tamils. There are many more Sinhalese people than Tamils.
- Sri Lanka left the British Empire and became an independent country in 1948. Since then Tamils have faced discrimination. Hundreds of thousands of Tamils were declared to not be real Sri Lankan citizens and were deported. The use of the Tamil language was banned in official business, leading many Tamils to lose their jobs. There were even attacks on Tamils by large Sinhalese mobs, with the police doing nothing to help.
- Protesting this discrimination could land people in trouble. Many were arrested, beaten, tortured, killed, or 'disappeared' after publicly stating that this was wrong. Many Tamils decided that they wanted to have their own state, and not have to deal with the Sri Lankan government any more.
- Eventually this conflict developed into a civil war, with Tamil guerrillas fighting the Sri Lankan government from 1983 to 2009. Voicing your support for the Tamils was very dangerous to do in Sri Lanka during this time.

Slide 7

- Viraj Mendis was born and raised in Sri Lanka. In 1973, aged just 17, he moved to Britain to study.
- While in Britain Viraj joined the Revolutionary Communist Group, which supported the Tamils fighting for independence. Viraj spoke in public about his beliefs and wrote articles about them for left-wing newspapers. He opposed discrimination against the Tamils and thought that they should have their own state.
- In 1984, The Conservative government led by Margaret Thatcher decided that Viraj should be deported as he was no longer a student. They had introduced new laws regarding visas which made it easier to deport people, and had said in the previous elections that they would reduce the numbers of immigrants and refugees in the country.
- Viraj said that if he went back to Sri Lanka both he and his family would be in danger because of his political beliefs. He wanted to be legally recognised as a refugee and allowed to stay in Britain.
- As well as arguing his case in the courts, he and his friends organised a campaign to try to convince the government to let him stay.



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Activity four cont.

Slideshow Notes

Slide 8

- After a protest march on 20 December, 1986, he ran into the Church of the Ascension in Hulme, Manchester. He claimed the right of 'sanctuary'- an old tradition which allowed people to stay in churches to avoid arrest by the authorities. The church rector, John Methuen, was very supportive of Viraj.
- Viraj stayed there for two years. During this time a large coalition of political, religious, and charity groups came together and campaigned for his right to stay. People would stay in the church every day, and would phone up supporters to come down if it looked like the police might try to arrest him so that he could be deported. Many of the people involved in this campaign were young people, particularly students.
- The campaign's lawyers were unsuccessful in persuading the courts that he had a legal right to stay, and in January 1989 one hundred police raided the church. Viraj was taken to Pentonville Prison and then put on a plane to Sri Lanka within a few days. The German government offered to let him stay there, but they were ignored.

Slide 9

- Viraj spent a year hiding in Sri Lanka, before managing to get a plane to Germany. He is convinced that the publicity of the campaign made him too famous to be killed or arrested by the Sri Lankan government. He now works for the International Human Rights Association, which supports refugees who face being deported to dangerous places.



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Source 1:

'One Sad Dark Night'

By Walaa - a 17-year-old Syrian refugee living in East Amman, Jordan. She learned English at school and wrote this article in English to mark the 1000th day of the Syrian conflict.

One sad dark night, a night without a moon, I was with my family at my home in Syria and we were preparing a dinner to have a nice meal together. Suddenly the power goes off and darkness prevails, a moment later the sky lights up, but not by the moon but from an explosion.

Then all light is gone and all we can hear is screaming. Another explosion goes off and the screaming gets louder and louder. Death was around us, between us and we were waiting for our turn. My little brothers started to cry and I had to be strong for them, although I was afraid too.

The night of April 24th 2011, we left our house to find safety at our grandparents' house. On our journey, all we could see was death, all we could hear was screaming, and all we could smell was blood. Our house had gone and we were homeless.

After that night, for a year and a half, all nine of us lived in one room. Even that room they took from us, in a big explosion on a night like that night. And we left our grandparents' house for the same reason and came to Jordan. We left our schools, our education, our friends and we lost everything.

In Jordan we've had to change our house twice in just 3 months, as the houses are too expensive here and my parents cannot afford the rent. There is no school for us anymore, as our parents can't work here, because many Syrians are not allowed. We are not children anymore, we are old people in children's bodies.....

I still cannot believe what has happened. It feels like a nightmare that I cannot wake up from. I wish anyone to wake me up from it. Is it true that I have left my house, my school, my family, my friends, and my country?

Source: Save the Children <https://www.savethechildren.org/us/what-we-do/emergency-response/refugee-children-crisis/refugee-stories>



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Activity 1 Questions

- What difficulties has Walaa faced since leaving Syria?
- Why do you think most Syrian refugees have settled in countries that neighbour Syria?
- Do you think it is fair that Walaa's family are not allowed to work in Jordan? What impact would this have for Walaa and her family?

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Source 2:

Extracts from a Guardian article about Elin Ersson's protest, by journalist David Crouch

Sweden is to prosecute the 21-year-old student who single-handedly grounded an aircraft preparing to deport an Afghan asylum seeker.

Elin Ersson broadcast her one-woman protest on Facebook in July, during which she refused to sit down on the flight from Landvetter airport in Gothenburg, thereby preventing it from taking off. The video has been watched 13m times...

Swedish plane protester Elin Ersson: 'I knew I couldn't back down – I had to do what I could'

On Friday, Swedish prosecutors announced that Ersson would be prosecuted at Gothenburg district court "for crimes against the aviation law" after the incident on 23 July. She had not complied with the captain's request and had refused to sit despite repeated requests from the crew, prosecutors said. She faces a fine and up to six months in jail...

"I did it as an individual, activist and fellow human being," she told Swedish media.

"My point of departure is that he is human and deserves to live. In Sweden we do not have the death penalty, but deportation to a country at war can mean death. If someone has committed a crime, they may be jailed and serve their sentence in Sweden."

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/oct/19/elin-ersson-swedish-student-video-grounded-deportation-flight-prosecution>



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Source 3

An interview with Louise Wallwein.

Louise is a playwright and poet who has won an OBE for her work.

She was only 17 when she got involved in the Viraj Mendis Defence Campaign.

Here are some extracts of interview conducted with her about her involvement.



Q: What did you do in the campaign?

At the time, Viraj was living in the Church of the Ascension in Hulme. He was seeking sanctuary there. He had a small room upstairs which he only left to go into the committee meetings.

We had to be careful about security so we arranged shifts- all day, every day, we had people volunteering to stay in the church and keep watch in case the police came or anyone tried to attack him. Because I was homeless I'd spend a lot of nights there. For two years that was where I slept and how I'd eat - we'd have these community days where we'd all chip in and share food and what little money we had.

The church in Hulme became my home because I met all these extraordinarily kind people, including Viraj, who thought it was amazing that I was into the cause. It became a personal thing for me - it was about my friend, and the fact that I was very worried that he might die if he was deported.

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Source 3 cont.

Q: What kind of people got involved in the campaign?

The majority of people in the campaign were young, middle-class students- they were some great people who've gone on to do amazing things. I got patronised a lot, but I still looked up to them. They were educated people who spoke a language I didn't always understand - I definitely caught up over the two years though!

There were all kinds of people involved, from Communists to vicars... It helped challenge a lot of people and made us all more open-minded. Father John, who ran the church, was very brave- a bunch of us wanted to bring the Lesbian and Gay banners on the demo and that challenged his faith. But he was prepared to be open-minded. I found it hard to be around Christians and the church at first- I had been raised by nuns while in care, and had been rejected by the church when I came out as a lesbian. But most Christians were alright and didn't care - they wanted to give back, help people in poverty and fight social injustice.

Q: How did the campaign impact you?

The campaign cemented for me that there is a real inequality in the world when it comes to freedom of movement. The people that I met that were fighting deportation had clear reasons why they couldn't go back to their country of birth. It broadened my politics and got me involved in other anti-deportation campaigns. My fearlessness had a really good channel through all these campaigns.

It seemed very unfair that these great people were threatened with deportation when they all had their own stories and made a really valuable contribution to this country.

I guess the campaign radicalised me- I was really open to learning about other causes. I was really influenced by groups like Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners. We had a common cause because we were under attack from the same source- the Thatcher government.

Even though I use the term 'radicalised'- it wasn't a bad thing. It was an education... It was amazing. I learned a lot from these older students. I hadn't been in education for a while, I was unemployed. I was constantly getting places to live and then losing places to live. Meeting those people, having conversations with them, learning to argue with them, all of that inspired me to fight to get a degree.

Even though we may have lost, the campaign helped pave the way for changes later on.
We won eventually.



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Written and compiled by Dr Daniel Edmonds, danieledmonds237@gmail.com

