

The Refugee

“A refugee would like to have your problems”.

What do we really know about the challenges and problems which have forced someone to leave their country, family, home and work to live in a country where they are not wanted?

Issues addressed:

- Problems of refugees and asylum-seekers.
- Empathy towards displaced people.
- Stereotypes, prejudice and xenophobia towards foreigners.

Aims

- To understand the reality faced by refugees and immigrants.
- To generate awareness of the problems they face in the host countries.
- To promote empathy and solidarity towards the situation of refugees and immigrants.
- To look into the issues of exclusion and integration and our perceptions about different people and countries.
- To introduce discussion about North/South imbalances and their relation to people's daily problems.

Time needed: 90 minutes - 2 hours

Group size

Any size, if you are working with large numbers you can sub-divide them into small groups.

Preparation

- The facilitator should have an insight into the reasons that lead people to immigrate or seek asylum. You will find the background information in part A.
- Make copies of the beginning of the story or be prepared to tell it to the participants. (The name, the origin of the refugee or immigrant should be adapted to suit your circumstances).
- If at all possible make contact with someone locally who is a refugee or immigrant or, if this is not possible, with an NGO working with them.
- Board or flip chart and pens.

Instructions

1. Read out aloud, or hand round copies of the following story:

“Miriam is a refugee in our town. She arrived two months ago from her country where she was in fear of her life because of her economic circumstances (or political beliefs).”



2. Ask people to form groups of four to six people to discuss and then to write a short story or news article about how Miriam left her country and what it is like for her living here. Think about:
 - What Miriam's life here is like.
 - What difficulties she faces.
 - How is she being supported (or not)?
 - How does she learn the language?
 - Can she work and in what kind of job?
 - Do you think she is having an easy time?
 - How does she feel about us?
 - What do you think Miriam had to do to get to our town?
 - How did she travel?
 - Where did she find the money?
 - What were the administrative procedures?
 - What did she leave behind?
3. Then ask each group to present its story or answers to the questions. As they do so you should record on a board or flip chart the main points made by each group.

Debriefing and evaluation

Start the discussion by inviting the groups to reflect upon each other's conclusions, namely by asking what were the most “realistic” or “unrealistic” assumptions.

If the discussion gets stuck you can prompt with questions like, “do you think it is fair?”, “do you know anybody who went, or is going, through a similar experience?”, “did you ever imagine this could happen to you?”.

Conclude the discussion by inviting the group to reflect upon what they can do to support refugees or immigrants in their own town or, more generally, what kind of support they need to integrate into their new society.

Tips for the facilitator

This activity is particularly suitable for local groups because it may generate concrete solidarity and action. But it also works well with an international group if emphasis is put on awareness raising, comparing different legal status, etc.

It follows on well from ‘Labels’ (page 108)

It is essential to be well informed and have up to date relevant information. In your role as facilitator you may be asked to give some facts about refugees in your country or town. In this case it may also be useful to be able to hand out copies of figures, graphs or tables relating to refugees in different countries to make comparisons.

Data and information about refugees, or NGOs dealing with them can be easily obtained from the National Campaign Committee or the national offices or contacts of the United Nations’ High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)

or UNICEF, as well as from some humanitarian or development NGOs e.g. Red Cross, Amnesty International, etc.

Variations

1. Rather than writing news stories the groups could “dramatise”, or make a short sketch about, an episode during Miriam’s departure from her country or her arrival in our town.
2. Invite a refugee or immigrant to your plenary discussion. If possible find someone who is living in your town now. Invite them to tell the group briefly why they left their country of origin, how they travelled and what happened to them on the way. Follow up with a longer question and answer session. You will need more time for this option.
3. Read a story. If it is not easy to find a refugee or immigrant who would be able to help, an alternative is to read or distribute a story of a real refugee.

Suggestions for follow up

Schedule time in a forthcoming session to work on the ideas developed in this activity and to decide what realistic, practical action the group could take to support immigrants locally. Be active in promoting good relations in your country.

Sometimes it can be very difficult to know how to react in a situation when you see someone discriminating against someone else. It happens all the time, on buses, in shops and on the street - but how do you react? What should you do? Explore this in ‘Sharing discrimination’ (page 158). Alternatively, if you want to look at how our knowledge of other people is based on often partial and misleading information use ‘Every picture tells a story’ (page 81). From a poster published by the UNHCR