

A close-up portrait of a young Black girl with short hair, wearing black-rimmed glasses and a bright yellow shirt. She is smiling slightly and looking towards the camera. The background is a textured brown surface, possibly a chair or sofa, against a teal wall. The image is overlaid with decorative orange and purple wavy patterns in the top-left and bottom-right corners.

Adolescents in crisis: unheard voices

Episode 5: 'To realise my dreams I need a new wheelchair': adolescent refugees and intersectionality

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'To realise my dreams I need a new wheelchair': adolescent refugees and intersectionality

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refugees, Rwanda, camp, GAGE, Christophe, disability, adolescents, wheelchair, community, people, intersectionality, life, refugee camp, difficult, family, living, support, born, problems, Maryam

SPEAKERS

Kifah Banioweda: GAGE Senior Qualitative Researcher (Jordan)

Maryam:¹ 17-year-old Palestinian girl living in Gaza

Disanka:² 17-year-old Congolese refugee living in Rwanda

Martha Dixon: Journalist

Dr Nicola Jones: Director of GAGE

Christophe:³ 13-year-old Congolese refugee living in Rwanda

Roberte Isimbi: GAGE Research Uptake and Impact Coordinator, and Qualitative Research Co-Lead (Rwanda)

Dr Ola Abualghaib: UN Partnership on the Rights of People with Disabilities (UNPRPD)

00:00

The world's fastest growing humanitarian crisis as 1000s of Rohingya refugees...

00:07

It's estimated that 10,000 Palestinians have had to leave their homes to flee the Israeli...

00:12

For almost as far as the eye could see, left and right, a tide of humanity...

Martha Dixon: Journalist 00:19

Welcome to Episode 5 of the GAGE Podcast series – Adolescents in crisis: unheard voices. I'm your host – journalist Martha Dixon. In this landmark series, we ask, How can we help create a better future for the millions of young people who've been caught up in the increasing tide of global displacement? In this episode, we talk about how young refugees cope when multiple problems or sets of

1 Pseudonym used to protect the identity of interviewees.

2 Pseudonym used to protect the identity of interviewees.

3 Pseudonym used to protect the identity of interviewees.

needs collide, or intersectionality. What if you're 13 and in a wheelchair in a refugee camp in Rwanda, that has no paved roads?

Christophe: 13-year-old Congolese refugee living in Rwanda 01:00

To realise my dreams, I need the support of a new wheelchair, which will help me to move around comfortably.

Martha Dixon: Journalist 01:11

What if you're a 14-year-old refugee from Palestine, and you dream of going to university but your community doesn't want girls to leave the camp?

Maryam: 17-year-old Palestinian girl living in Gaza Camp 01:23

My family fear for me to go outside, the customs and traditions in our family mean that the girl is taboo to go out without any supervision.

Martha Dixon: Journalist 01:34

We look at what works and what doesn't work to support adolescents who are living in refugee camps, or a new unfamiliar host communities.

Roberte Isimbi: GAGE Researcher in Rwanda 01:44

The female refugee adolescents in Rwanda, especially those living in refugee camps, they face extra vulnerabilities.

Martha Dixon: Journalist 01:53

We hear from GAGE's researchers on the ground, who are speaking in depth to adolescents who've had to leave everything they know behind in events.

Kifah Banioweda: GAGE (Jordan) 02:01

It's terrible if you have more memberships in many groups. So you are disabled, you are gay, you are poor, you are refugee.

Martha Dixon: Journalist 02:02

And from external stakeholders who are using the evidence from GAGE to reframe policy that supports adolescents.

Dr Ola Abualghaib: UN Partnership on the Rights of People with Disabilities (UNPRPD) 02:20

The good thing about GAGE is, first of all, it looks at the intersectionalities which are in many cases missed. It really brings up the realities of a part of the world where little attention is.

Martha Dixon: Journalist 02:38

Intersectionality, what does it mean? There is seldom one factor in a person's life that makes us who we are and how we react to situations. Being a refugee brings with it many challenges. But what if the web is even more complicated, and the combinations thrown at you mean you need more resources to turn things around and have a promising life path? Let's go to Rwanda to see this in reality. We're at Kigeme refugee camp in the south of Rwanda. It's a sea of small shacks, housing over 20,000 Congolese people who fled conflict back home. We're talking with Christophe, a participant of GAGE's study of adolescent refugees. Christophe arrived in the camp 10 years ago. He's now a sweet natured 13-year-old boy. He also has a physical disability and can't walk. Christophe first got hold of a wheelchair only three years ago. He says living in this crowded refugee camp is hard.

Christophe: 13-year-old Congolese refugee living in Rwanda 04:03

Before living in the refugee camp and before having the wheelchair I was not able to even stand up so I used to spend all my days inside the house. But at least with the wheelchair, they can take me out and I can sit in the sun. But still it's a challenge for me to move like the other kids, I don't play with other kids. Sometimes when I see them playing I may want to and feel like I need to go to play with them. But you know, we live in our camp and it's located in a hilly region. So there might be some landslides. And all the roads are not good. The pathways are not good and my wheelchair can't pass there. And I only see kids playing and I'm like, Oh, I can't get to reach those kids so that I can play like them. And that sometimes causes me to hate myself.

Martha Dixon: Journalist 05:01

Christophe's disability has never been diagnosed. His is an important voice in GAGE or Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence, led by the Overseas Development Institute. It follows the lives of teenage refugees like Christophe over a period of nine years. Life is challenging in Christophe's two-room house in the camp. His father isn't around and his

mother has died in our lives with his grandmother, and six sisters and three brothers.

Christophe: 13-year-old Congolese refugee living in Rwanda 05:35

So our house is very small. And we are many people in the house, which makes it difficult to use the wheelchair in the house. So when I get home, I only use the wheelchair when I want to sit outside of the house for the sun when I want to sit outside of the house, so I can't if I try to use the wheelchair in the house, it will be small and we can't fit in. And there are roads in the camp, but there are no good roads. So I don't use the wheelchair in the camp. When for instance, I want to go to shave my hair. They put me on their back and they carry the wheelchair to the asphalt (the tarmac roads). Then when you get there, that's when they put me in the wheelchair. But from the camp to the tarmac road. We don't use the wheelchair, so it's difficult to use the wheelchair in the camp.

Martha Dixon: Journalist 06:37

It's not just his disability that's causing problems. No one works in Christophe's family, so there's no money for the materials needed to send him to school. Today, Rwanda, a tiny land area in East Africa hosts more than 170,000 refugees in six camps scattered across the country. Congolese and Burundian people came here because of conflict at home. Rwanda does offer integration and national school and health systems for refugees. But public money is scarce. And there are costs to be born. Christophe has clear aims in his life, and he knows what he needs. That's why his voice is so important to GAGE research and for the world to hear.

Christophe: 13-year-old Congolese refugee living in Rwanda 07:31

I got the chance to receive this wheelchair when I was in kindergarten, but currently I'm now in a primary three. So it has helped me to study but still it's a challenge at the school where I go to study because they ask me for school materials and other equipments that are difficult for my family to afford those materials. When others are going to school, I stay at home. And I join the others late due to my family spending a lot of time searching for the needed materials because if you go without the required materials, you will not be accepted at the school. So that's a challenge. And also currently my wheelchair is broken and I'm not even able to repair it. And I remember it was broken and I fell down that caused me to break my arm. So I can't do anything for me to fix it. So I'm waiting for any support because when you know it's not safe to do what you need to do you wait for support. So that's my current situation now with the wheelchair.

Martha Dixon: Journalist 08:53

The problems Christophe is facing are challenging. He has an uphill struggle without serious support, including stigma and discrimination in the community. It's clear in his voice that Christophe has strong agency and resilience but he needs the tools to make his dreams happen.

Christophe: 13-year-old Congolese refugee living in Rwanda 09:22

So to realise my dreams, to achieve my dreams I need the support of a new wheelchair which will help me to move around comfortably. I also want to live closer to my school because it's hard for me to get to the school as well and also want my family and I to leave the camp because the area is not comfortable for me with the hilly side it's not easy. My dreams are to finish my studies then that will help my family to be able to afford needs without necessarily taking debts. I sometimes feel like my future is not good. Due to the way the other children treated me. Sometimes they are bullying me. Sometimes they even beating me and they run away. And that makes me feel like oh, I don't see a bright future for me. But then at the end, I'm like, I pray God, so God can make my life better in the future.

Dr Ola Abualghaib: UN Partnership on the Rights of People with Disabilities (UNPRPD) 10:49

Intersectionality on disability is very important for me. I did experience it personally, myself.

Martha Dixon: Journalist 10:57

Dr Ola Abualghaib is from the UN partnership on the Rights of People with Disabilities. It's an initiative that aims to coordinate efforts for persons with disabilities, across multiple UN organizations to strengthen inclusive services and investments. She explains how being disabled and a refugee is so difficult.

Dr Ola Abualghaib: UN Partnership on the Rights of People with Disabilities (UNPRPD) 11:20

I am a Palestinian, I was not born with a disability, I got my disability at the age of 12. And we used to be living in West Bank, where there was of course, a lot of even the time I got the disability, it was the time where there was the first and second intifada. So there was a peak of the conflict between the Palestinians and the Israelis. And that was really a difficult time to even be able to safely access services. But also on the onset of disability, I could see the difference that made on you know, the perceptions around myself and future. And so the intersection between gender and disability was very clearly stated from my own experience. And I could see the challenge of working out what the ambitions are for me, but also what is expected from me from family and community.

And that's continued actually along the way of my future, whether in terms of seeking education, higher education, work, advancement in the future, being a mother being married. So all of these things were not so straightforward. The complications are multiplied 200 times more, the struggle of I have worked with children with disabilities in refugee camps. And they so for example, how difficult it is for families striving to meet their basic needs. And I'm talking about basic daily living stuff. You know, when you have a disability, you would need reasonable accommodation, you need electricity, you need sometimes certain nutrition, you need medication, so expenses are higher. And for families living in refugee camps, that's not always possible.

Martha Dixon: Journalist 13:17

Dr Ola says listening to people like 13-year-old Christophe in Rwanda, and understanding his needs, is key to working out a way forward. She welcomes the GAGE research that follows his life path and listens to his story.

Dr Ola Abualghaib: UN Partnership on the Rights of People with Disabilities (UNPRPD) 13:33

Evidence is still lacking. You know, there is this ad hoc anecdotal evidence about what does that mean? What are the implications of what I have mentioned, on the real lives of people on a daily basis? That were a, you know, an initiative like GAGE is really, really needed because the more we get evidence, the more we can bring forward the discussion of advocating for better realities. Still disabilities seen on the margin of development thinking? We don't see yet that proper common mainstreaming of the issue within broader discussions, you know, you need the services around you in the community, and in this case, the camps but that doesn't exist, because they in many cases, they're either offered with fees that families can't afford or the individual themselves or they are not presenting the quality of services needed, specifically rehabilitation, assistive devices, etc. Additional to that, living in camps as we know, infrastructure usually is very, very weak and that and when you talk about accessibility when you talk about a accessible transport, that is not the present. So in combination of all of that, it's really, really difficult. And, you know, one key thing I remember in Gaza when we used to work with refugees with disabilities, you know, like, even when the international development world or humanitarian world comes in and intervenes in emergency situations, you know, even the tents they would provide, or the when they would use schools for temporary accommodation that was not accessible at all, there has no further thinking to such community members. And that adds on their burden that puts them at risk of health and community, you know, psychological issues that takes them far away from where they should be. The good thing about GAGE is it looks at them. First of all, it looks at the

intersectionality elements, which are in many cases missed. It really brings up the realities of part of the world where little attention is there.

Martha Dixon: Journalist 16:13

Dr Ola says the international community is headed in the right direction when it comes to disability and aid, but there's still a long way to go.

Dr Ola Abualghaib: UN Partnership on the Rights of People with Disabilities (UNPRPD) 16:21

The Convention on Rights of Persons with Disabilities brought more attention. It's 14 years now. It's slow, but it is moving. I mean, we can see, as I said, more commitments, we can see the disability movement globally, is also picking up its pieces and trying to have a seat around the table. I think that's also positive. Also, we can see that academia is also interested in disability more, so there are like, glimpses of hope, in terms of that governments also are slowly stepping up their game on disability, we can see some baby steps but changes on those policies in terms of access to education, health, social protection. So as I said, it's not completely dark, but it is far more slower than we would want it to be. Because we need a quick change because people on the ground or not, can't wait for much longer, especially those who are struggling on daily basis.

Martha Dixon: Journalist 17:37

Nicola Jones is the director of GAGE. She says understanding the intersections that adolescents face in these difficult surroundings is key to helping communities move forward. This means training on the ground to reduce stigma and increase resources. She's encouraged by recent moves.

Nicola Jones: Director of GAGE 17:59

I think in this regard, the UN High Commission for Refugees age, gender and diversity policy is a very promising development. The agency is now increasingly providing training not only to its staff, but also to the NGOs and community-based organisations that it works with on how to appropriately interact and engage with persons with disabilities and also persons who identify as LGBTQI. However, it's important to emphasise that these types of initiatives that simultaneously tackle multiple and intersecting disadvantages that young people might face a resource intensive, so they require investments and training, assigning dedicated staff who have these responsibilities as part of their their core mandate, but also ensuring that all staff have the awareness to mainstream these principles within their daily jobs, and then also having sufficient resources to be able to adapt to the specific needs that young people have. For example, ensuring that there are sign

language interpreters when refugees are interviewed about resettlement, for example.

Roberte Isimbi: GAGE (Rwanda) 19:38

Here in Rwanda, they leave no one behind the agenda is is considered by different actors.

Martha Dixon: Journalist 19:48

GAGE researcher in Rwanda, Roberte Isimbi, says often the reality on the ground tells a less positive story. She says the UN goal to Leave No One Behind is not happening across all regions of Rwanda.

Roberte Isimbi: GAGE (Rwanda) 20:04

However, the scale is still the issue. The systems, the mechanisms are put in place at national level. But in terms of actual implementation, only piloted schools have benefited from that holistic, inclusive model that can benefit children with special needs for education, including those with disability. So if two schools are selected in a sector, neighbouring ethnic community with the refugee adolescent children will also go, it's not enough just considering the number that is in need. So I would say scale is still issue in terms of leaving no one behind, especially leaving no adolescents with disabilities behind in terms of accessing education.

Martha Dixon: Journalist 21:05

Many of the refugees in Rwanda have been there for over two decades. Roberte says that means less aid and less support, despite a serious lack of job prospects.

Roberte Isimbi: GAGE (Rwanda) 21:17

For the refugees who came from the Democratic Republic of Congo, especially those who came a long time ago like those who came in 1997 as children. Today's adolescents, they were born in Rwanda, and they were born while the parents had already exceeded the time they are considered in a humanitarian context. Now, the initiative to integrate the integration of refugees, as per the Convention on refugees, they should consider that long term effect of being born a refugee and being brought up a refugee. After two years, you are no longer considered in a humanitarian crisis. The countries have to think about your development in the integration. So the aid reduces and you have to find some livelihoods.

Martha Dixon: Journalist 22:25

Intersectionality comes in many forms. Refugee adolescent girls, in some of the Rwanda camps are facing high levels of teenage pregnancy, due to limited access to sexual and reproductive health information and services. They also face

pressures to engage in transactional sex. Being a refugee is challenging, but add on being a teenage mother and existing problems are compounded. Disanka is 17. She's living with her baby in Gihimbe refugee camp in the north of Rwanda. GAGE researchers have been interviewing her about her life as a single mom. Disanka's family is originally from the Democratic Republic of Congo. But she was born in this crowded camp of 10,000 people. Most families have been here since the late 90s, fleeing violence and massacres by armed Congolese groups back home. Disanka says being a young single mom in a refugee camp is very difficult.

Disanka: 17-year-old Congolese refugee living in Rwanda 23:42

It's not easy because I am a kid too. I am a child. So raising a child when you are one too is not easy, because sometimes I don't have something to give her I don't have that ability to fulfill her needs. What I know is that my parents came from Congo seeking for peace because they were being killed. And then they ran here into Rwanda to seek for that peace. So that's how they became refugees. And yeah, I was born just like that. The thing is we live by help if we are no help we can we can even die because we just sit and wait for them to give us the money. There is no job there is no opportunities. It's just sitting and waiting for help. If it wasn't for that help, we can even die.

Martha Dixon: Journalist 24:47

GAGE researchers are also following Disanka's story over a period of nine years, finding out what factors would turn her situation around and what she herself was for life, design classes for her, going back to school is the main priority.

Disanka: 17-year-old Congolese refugee living in Rwanda 25:09

It hurts me alone that I am not studying right now because I want to be like other kids and like other students. So I wish if I could get someone who can help me to go back to school, I can do my best. But now I feel so bad that I'm not at school.

Martha Dixon: Journalist 25:27

Disanka says food and clothes are so scarce in the camp, she went looking for help from local boys. And that's when she got pregnant.

Disanka: 17-year-old Congolese refugee living in Rwanda 25:42

Some of the challenges that I face as a refugee is that sometimes we don't have enough food to eat. Because here when you don't have food, you don't have it. You might even go to bed without eating.

Martha Dixon: Journalist 25:55

Disanka feels strongly that she wants to help other teenage refugees understand the difficulties of becoming a mother so young, in a camp. She has powerful voice and agency, a story that's now being told, captured by the GAGE research.

Disanka: 17-year-old Congolese refugee living in Rwanda 26:19

All I can say is to advise my fellow teenagers to never put themselves in such a position because it's hard to be a refugee, and then have a kid because you sometimes most of the time feel depressed, which causes headache and headaches that you feel almost every day. And you sometimes get these feelings of committing suicide so I can advise anybody to not put themselves in such a position to be a refugee and then have a kid in the camp. It's not an easy thing.

Martha Dixon: Journalist 27:08

Overcrowding and the lack of infrastructure, coupled with ongoing threats of violence, have led the UN to now close Disanka's camp. Refugees will be relocated elsewhere in Rwanda. For Palestinian refugees to a lack of resources and ongoing conflict are creating difficult intersections, particularly for girls.

Maryam: 17-year-old Palestinian girl living in Gaza Camp 27:36

Maryam is 17, she's making tea with her mum at her small home in a refugee camp north of Amman in Jordan. They are Palestinian refugees and the camp is Jerash camp, known locally as Gaza camp. Here 30,000 people live on less than half a square mile packed into small shanty town like building. Most families here arrived after the 1967 Arab Israeli war. Maryam was born and grew up here and says this community is now very conservative, something she finds restrictive. My life will this camp is quite different than living outside of the camp. When you live in the camp, everyone is watching you and supervising you. You can't do anything without them watching and they start talking about you and say different things about you. You can't go in or outside without them knowing. And it's also like when I go and meet my best friend. I am followed like I can't stay for a lot everybody tells me why you are with her while you are friends with her why she specifically. My family fear for me to go outside. Because they they fear that some guys might harass me or throw some words about me. And also the customs and traditions in our family that the girl is taboo to go out for only without any supervision.

Martha Dixon: Journalist 29:20

Maryam is really keen to go to university but it's far from the camp, expensive and there are worries from her family about the type of life she'll lead there.

Maryam: 17-year-old Palestinian girl living in Gaza Camp 29:34

I'm planning once I've finished school to study business administration. So living outside of the camp is much better because the universities are so far from my camp. And also my family refused to let me go on my own as they do not know what could happen in the dorm. And they prefer that I do not take it at all. University will be an open community. The camp is quite the opposite, it's closed. And it's going to be so much different. It's not easy. But for my clothes, it wouldn't be a problem because I can wear whatever I want in the university. But in the camp, I have to wear long dresses.

Martha Dixon: Journalist 30:29

The Palestinians who came in the 1960s never received Jordanian citizenship so work and education opportunities are very limited. In Gaza camp, 40% of people are without jobs.

Kifah Banioweda: GAGE (Jordan) 30:43

In Gaza camp especially we noticed there is the high conservative value for especially for the girls.

Martha Dixon: Journalist 30:51

Kifah Banioweda is a GAGE researcher focusing on Palestinian refugees.

Kifah Banioweda: GAGE (Jordan) 30:57

The practice of the conservative value like this, it's terrible. If the girl used if they heard that a girl has a Facebook account, they told her that is a bad girl.

Martha Dixon: Journalist 31:09

Kifah says she sees more conservative norms often in the Palestinian refugee communities, both because they're stateless. And because they lack confidence in the rights provided by the Jordanian authorities.

Kifah Banioweda: GAGE (Jordan) 31:23

When you feel that you are different and you are lower than the others you must you come and be close to your identity to protect this identity. If some if any girls experience exposure or violence or face any problem we haven't tried so definitely will. The family is the only one who protect this their child. For that they then get overprotection as the family

feel more responsible to protect their child because the government will not protect them.

Martha Dixon: Journalist 31:54

Kifah says these conservative norms lead to difficult intersections of problems for the girls in Gaza camp. She says many tell her they're cut off from the internet from friends and a given a fear of the outside world.

Kifah Banioweda: GAGE (Jordan) 32:11

According to this kind of practices. The girls feel that they are isolated. Totally. If I asked them any question about some things, they look to me and astonished, What's that? When I told them there is some support, especially for the disabled people, they'd not heard about that. And when I ask about why your parents practices like this they hush you. They told me they feel that it is not polite for the girls to know more. They told me the girls, we all live in a big prison now or big jail. And the war is designed according to parent style, it's not our value.

Martha Dixon: Journalist 32:56

Stories of life here like Maryam's are important. Maryam says she really values talking to GAGE researchers. It means authorities can react to this evidence and act to support people like her with things like extra resources training for her community or financial help to further her education.

Maryam: 17-year-old Palestinian girl living in Gaza Camp 33:24

It's very nice to have your point of view, to be heard. To tell you the problem, and then someone in front of you tries to help you. Working with the researchers keep on GAGE we were telling her about our problems in the camp. And to find the solution for it. It's very nice to have your voice being heard.

Martha Dixon: Journalist 33:52

Hearing about these intersections that life throws at adolescent refugees, it's clear they're all different, but they do have one thing in common. Their voices are starting to be heard. And that's where things can change, where the cycles of poverty, violence and extremism can be broken.

Nicola Jones: Director of GAGE 34:14

Finally as the stories that have been highlighted throughout the podcast series have attested what needs to underpin all of these policy and programming efforts. To tackle intersecting disadvantages that specific groups of young people face is a recognition of young people's agency and voice.

Martha Dixon: Journalist 34:35

Nicola Jones, Director of GAGE says young people who've lost their homes need to be part of the process of finding the right policies that will turn their lives around. She says GAGE's landmark research is helping highlight what's needed to leave not one refugee behind as the UN policy aims for.

Nicola Jones: Director of GAGE 34:58

We know the things that will work to support UN's overall aims to leave no one behind. Social protection to support the most disadvantaged adolescents is key. That means cash for household living expenses and to cover school related costs, such as uniforms, books, and transportation, as well as free health insurance, especially for young people with disabilities who may need access to specialist services. Also, education that's of a good quality is essential. And it needs to be adapted to the specific needs of young people who have suffered from conflict-related trauma or who have a disability. As well as lessons on human rights such as awareness about inclusion and how young people can access their rights in the community and report any violations. Psychosocial support to address violence or

trauma, both for adolescents and their caregivers is also very important. And it needs to be reimagined as a core part of refugees support, not merely a nice to have. Importantly, we know that there's also a much greater chance of success if young people themselves who are affected by force displacement, have a say on any policy designed to support them. And that's why the research with adolescents that we are gathering at GAGE is so important.

Martha Dixon: Journalist 36:26

You've been listening to episode 5 of the GAGE podcast series – Adolescents in crisis: unheard voices, where we shine a light on the stories of young people who've been forced from their homes and look at what's needed to turn their lives around. You can access much more information on all of GAGE's work in their new book, *Adolescents in Humanitarian Crisis*, written by GAGE researchers across East Africa, the Middle East and South Asia. It synthesizes the research to date about adolescent refugees, as well as those who've been internally displaced.



GAGE Programme Office
Overseas Development Institute
203 Blackfriars Road
London SE1 8NJ
United Kingdom
Email: gage@odi.org.uk
Web: www.gage.odi.org

About GAGE

Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE) is a nine-year longitudinal research programme generating evidence on what works to transform the lives of adolescent girls in the Global South. Visit www.gage.odi.org.uk for more information.

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