

UNESCO RILA: The sounds of integration

Episode 12: Interview with Nazek Ramadan (05/07/2021)

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Gameli Tordzro

Welcome to the podcast series of the UNESCO Chair in Refugee Integration through Languages and the Arts. We bring you sounds to engage with you and invite you to think with us.

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Ken Gordon

Hi, my name is Ken Gordon from the Refugee Voices Scotland podcast. From the 17th until the 28th of May this year, 2021, the UNESCO RILA team organized their annual Spring School, the Arts of Integrating. I was there and interviewed Nazek Ramadan on Zoom in front of a live virtual audience. We're now releasing this interview as a joint episode on both the Refugee Voices Scotland podcast and the UNESCO RILA podcast. Enjoy!

[JINGLE]

Lauren Roberts

Good afternoon, everybody. Thank you for joining us. That was just again the dulcet tones of the Ha Orchestra in the cloisters at the University of Glasgow. And I just want to also welcome everybody here to our Refugee Voices Scotland live podcast interview. I'm Lauren Roberts, I'm one of the Secretariat Co-Ordinators at UNESCO RILA, and it's my pleasure to introduce you to another session on day eight of our Spring School.

So, the live podcast interview is going to be with Ken Gordon of Refugee Voices Scotland and Nazek Ramadan of Migrant Voice. So, a little bit of background about our guests today: Refugee Voices Scotland is a podcast about refugees and refugee support organisations in Scotland which is recorded by Ken. It's an attempt to correct the imbalance of the information available through the media. The goal of the Refugee Voices Scotland podcast is to make a difference in public attitudes to refugees in Scotland and in the UK and to help in efforts to make refugees feel safe and secure in Scotland to increase the confidence of the refugees to tell their stories and to help integrate them further into their Scottish communities and community groups. Ken and Sadie Ryan of the Accentricity podcast produce a guest series and you'll find this on our website, and we'll also pop a link to this in

our chat.

So, now on to our interviewee which is Nazek Ramadan, who is the Director of Migrant Voice. Migrant Voice is a migrant-led organisation working to amplify migrant voices in the media and public life, to counteract xenophobia, and to build support for their rights and their communities. So, migration builds, brings a wealth of benefits to Britain, and Migrant Voice believes that the best antidote to divisive rhetoric is real stories told by real people. Migrant Voice brings migrants from all backgrounds together, discusses their concerns, and translates them into innovative campaigns or research projects to ensure these important issues are not forgotten. Migrant Voice offers professional media training, support, and connections with media. Their work makes national headlines on TV, local radio, and in the newspapers and magazines, and they have branched out also into digital media. Migrant Voice has regional hubs in London, Birmingham, and Glasgow, and membership is open to all migrants and non-migrants wanting to engage in creative and positive change. And we'll also pop Migrant Voice's website details into the chat. Nazek is a migrant herself and has been in the UK for 35 years. Nazek is originally from the Lebanon, was born and lived in the capital Beirut before she left the war-torn country and moved with her young family to London.

So, if you have any questions or comments, please pop them in the chat and we'll address them at the Q&A at the end of the session. So, now I'm going to pass over to Ken. Thank you.

Ken Gordon

Thank you very much, Lauren. That was a lovely intro. Welcome, good morning, good evening, good afternoon, wherever you all are in the world. So, my name's Ken Gordon, I work-- I make Refugee Voices Scotland podcast. I'm delighted to be talking to Nasek Ramadan, the Director at Migrant Voice, and also a migrant. Nazek, hi. Let's wave. [Laughs]

Nazek Ramadan

Hi, hello, hi, thank you for having me.

Ken Gordon

You're down in London, aren't you?

Nazek Ramadan

Yes, I am, yes, but I do visit Glasgow regularly.

Ken Gordon

Just so you know, and I know you've been to Glasgow, the weather's fantastic as it always is in Scotland. Nazek, can you tell me a bit about yourself and how you came to be in the UK?

Nazek Ramadan

Wow, this was a long time ago. So, I'm-- as Lauren introduced me, so I'm originally from the Lebanon. And yes, I came in the middle of the civil war, we had lots of civil wars in Lebanon. I came in the middle of the last one and joined my husband who was in the UK. So, I had my two kids, they were three and four at the time. And we decided, you know, it was no longer safe to stay in Lebanon, even though, I mean, I lived throughout most of the war. And you know, you keep hoping that situation will change, it will improve, you can live your life. And I am one of those people who never thought I would leave my country, or I would live anywhere else, but then it becomes impossible to live really, to have a normal life. And if you have a young family you need to think of the future, so it felt to us at that time that you had no future back there and we need to move elsewhere. Yeah, thank you. This is how we ended up in the UK.

Ken Gordon

And what's led you to think about and to set up Migrant Voice?

Nasek Ramadan

Well, Migrant Voice came after years and years of thinking really. So, since I came to the UK, I engaged with lots of migrant communities and migrant organisations, volunteered with lots of organisations and then worked also in that sector for many years. And it became clear to me over the years that migrants didn't have a voice and that everyone's talking about them, and they are not really engaged, and, you know, they are like in two parallel worlds if you want. And we felt that, you know, we need to engage, migrants need to engage, in order to change things, in order to improve our lives, in order to actually to feel that we truly belong to these communities where we now call home, we need to engage more, we need to make our voices heard.

But the situation of course became worse just before the 2010 General Election. I think it was at that time when it was, you know, we felt that we as migrants, actually we need to step up and we need to come forward and we need to engage in debate. The 2010 General Election, everyone was talking about migrants except migrants. Almost all political parties were describing migrants as one of the main concerns for the UK alongside the NHS and the financial crisis. So you just, you know, imagine yourself on the other side of the screen and you're a migrant and you're watching the news and you're watching politicians, not just ordinary people or people who don't know migrants, you watch-- really those are the future leaders of the country, using migrants to gain votes and describing us as a challenge, as a problem to the country when we know as migrants, we're not a problem actually, we contribute to the country, we keep the NHS healthy, we keep the education sector running, we keep the agriculture sector running, we have we keep so many sectors running. I mean, we are the reason maybe that you can't do as badly in the financial crisis. We are aware of that, but then this is what we get on TV, and this is what we hear, and this is how we've been

used in the media by politicians. And everyone, as I said, talking about us without us and we thought, you know what, I think we need to do something to stop this, because at the end of the day, we as migrants, this is going to affect us.

And at the time when we set up Migrant Voice – I gave this example before but I'm happy to give it again – even in one London borough there were on average three to four or five daily attacks, physical or verbal attacks on migrants or people who looked like migrants. So, we know on the street how-- we know what politicians say, how this is interpreted on the ground against us and against our children, against our families. But of course, before that I worked with other organisations where we used to meet as migrants and talk about how we feel about the media coverage. I think on many occasions where we sat together and you know, many of us felt we are helpless. We read this story about us. We know it's not accurate, it's not true, it's very damaging. And some people were telling us, some migrants were telling us how upset and angry they felt, but how helpless they felt, and how they just went home and closed the door and felt sorry for themselves and miserable, and not knowing what to do about it.

So, as I said before that, we were thinking about it. This was an issue for us. It was a problem, and we didn't know how to address it. But as I said before, the General Election, when the situation really became too bad, we felt now it's time. Actually, we need to come forward now. And this is so important that we migrants, we need to decide, we need to speak for ourselves. We need to come forward and challenge politicians and tell them what you're saying isn't accurate and challenge the media. Because the media at that time, I mean, still till now – it's much better now – but before, the stories about migration, they don't go to migrants, only a tiny percentage of them go to migrants. So, it's a very important issue, it's all over the news, but they're not the migrants who are talking about migrants. They are politicians or a shopkeeper or a so-called expert. So, we felt, you know, now it's time, let's engage with the media, let's talk, let's speak for ourselves, let's go to the media and tell the journalists, if you want to write about migrants or migration, come and talk to us, hear it from us. Because you wouldn't get away with it as a journalist. If you're talking about women's issues and involving only men, you won't see a group of men talking about women's issues. Or if you're talking about disability, you won't see a group of healthy people talking about disability. So why do you do that for migrants?

So, I mean, this is when all this started. And we came as, I mean, it was a group of us as migrants. We felt it's the time now we set up our own movement. We started as a movement. And we linked up, and this is why we're a national organisation, because we wanted to connect to migrants across the UK. So, this is why it was the London, the West Midlands, and the Scottish regions, where we migrants are also talking to each other, supporting each other, developing our skills and confidence, and building a relationship with journalists, understanding how the public receive, you know, and perceive information etc,

how do they respond and how the best way to address... Because as a migrant, when you come to this country you don't have in your mind that, "Oh, I need to know how to talk to the media, how to engage with the media," this is not something you think about. You're just coming here for a new life but then you discover that, "Oh, well, I need to say something in order for me to integrate, to settle down, to have stability and safety," so this is... Maybe I spoke a lot. This is where it all started from, Migrant Voice.

Ken Gordon

One of the things-- So you're taking on the existing British media in its might and in its biases. What-- How long did it take you to feel that you were actually making a difference, and that you were getting traction, and people were beginning to consult you from when you started with this challenge? How long did it take before you began to feel that you are making a difference?

Nazek Ramadan

I mean, we were pleasantly surprised with the-- How ready the media was to talk to us. And there was one conference at the time when we set up the organisation, around that time, where some journalists were challenged about their coverage of migration. This was a conference about the coverage of the charity sector. And journalists said, "Well, we have nothing against migrants, we would like to talk to them. Where are they?" So, when we actually set up, actually journalists were very pleased, actually delighted to see, "Oh wow great, yes we'll talk to you." What we needed to do is to just tell them we're here, to build a relationship with them, to understand how they work, and how the British media works, and how the British public respond to the stories, so we know how to engage. So, it took us some time maybe to learn these skills and to have this knowledge. But then when we started to approach the journalists, they were very open to us and some of them were very supportive. I mean, our first few meetings took place in... I mean, we were meeting in newspapers and TV stations because the journalists were giving them their venues to come and meet, and to develop our skills and confidence because they were pleased to see the migrants: now they know where to go.

I mean, also this is the same story, it's not just the journalists who didn't know how to engage with the migrants. As I said, we didn't know how to engage with journalists. But also... I mean, once at one of our meetings, as I said, we were discussing the media coverage and how we felt about it, and one of our members said once, "How do they hate us so much when they don't even know us?" I mean, this was this is how strong the feelings were amongst migrants. And I said, "Because they don't know us, because they don't know us and you know, we need to engage with them." So, I think for us this experiment worked really well because we found that journalists were very open to listen to us. They even-- They still today come train us and respond to us. They call us now when they are working on a story, they call us for court or for person. So I think our, you know, strategy worked well and this--

as I said, they were surprisingly pleasant, that actually journalists do want to talk to us and they were happy to see us, and they were supportive.

I mean, and I must say that, maybe 11 and a half years now Migrant Voice has been running, that I don't recall we had a negative story. I mean, because we were about building bridges, we were about talking, we said, you know, "Write about us, come and talk to us, we are happy to engage with you, we are happy to tell you our stories." And so, our approach from the start is about building bridges and connection and communications and engaging, because after all, we said, "Look, this is also our home, and we need to feel this is our home, and we, you know... One of the ways is we need to have a voice. We can't be part of the community, we can't feel integrated in the community, we can't feel we belong to the community, until we know that we have a voice, and our voices are equally heard." So, it was a-- I think it was a positive experience and successful so far.

Ken Gordon

That's really interesting, and also, thinking about the press and how things have moved away from newspapers, do you have-- what have you found about what the most effective way to communicate is now? Has that changed from when you started? The most effective route, if you like?

Nazek Ramadan

I mean, I think now there is more maybe focus on digital media and on TV and radios than on newspapers. When we started, a lot of our work was with the newspapers and magazines, but I think now maybe we're doing more social media stuff, and more maybe TVs and radios. I mean, I don't think there's a lot of difference. I think for us, we needed to learn the right skills. We needed to know how to address the British public, because remember the media is a platform for us, is a tool, is a platform where we reach out to the community, to the British public and tell them who we are and engage with them directly and tell them our stories. And again, it's one of the platforms and tools where we approach politicians, because in the past we didn't have this connection, and everyone was using the media as a platform. Now we do engage directly as well with policymakers, because all this confidence and skills we built over the years, we started to engage more with politicians and policymakers because we know how to talk.

The secret for us is to learn, to understand how the media works because lots of migrants were terrified of engaging with the media. Some of them come from countries where maybe they don't have a democracy and people don't talk. They don't come from a culture where you speak about your life, where you go on TV or radio or paper and tell all. This is not from the culture because they're terrified of speaking. And indeed, some people were still terrified because they were worried if authorities in their countries, they find out they're speaking, they might hurt their families back home. So, we had lots of issues we needed to

overcome. And also, how to-- As I said, because migrants are not experts on talking to the media, it's something new to us. So, we needed to practice, to train, to understand, you know, if we are asked a difficult question, how do you answer it without losing confidence, and how do you respond to that?

But most importantly, it was very important for us to think of the audiences, because you know, the public was in our audiences, and we needed to know what would work with them. How would they respond and react to our story, what is the best tone, the best style, what should we be saying? And I think this actually really worked well, because we are talking to people who... When you speak to the media, we always keep in mind that we are thinking of the audiences or people who are watching us, or listening to us, or reading our story – they are people who may or may not know anything about migrants and migration. And this is the first opportunity for us to address them, in order to bring them on board and to get them to support us. How do we address them? How would we address them? And this is what influenced the way we speak, and we tell the stories, and we build support. As I said, we're about engaging and building connection, building support, because we want to feel-- this is our home after all, and we want to feel we belong here.

Ken Gordon

You've certainly been very successful, going through my research, the number of times you appear on major news websites and in major newspapers. One of the campaigns that really has recently, or in the recent past, has been very prominent is the campaign around students and the international student visa problem, or scandal, whatever-- However you want to describe it. How did you get engaged in that, and how did you manage that as an issue?

Nazek Ramadan

Well, I mean, as a migrant-led organization, so we are almost a platform for any migrant to come and tell their story and to speak and this is why we set up. So, we speak about issues affecting our lives, and we don't train people to become experts on migration. We are all experts in our own experience in our own life and what we face. We don't train people to speak about migration. And we have lots of meetings, network meetings across the regions where we have safe spaces for migrants – and non-migrants, of course everyone is welcome – it's an open space and safe space for people to come and talk about issues affecting their lives, what's happened in their lives, how they feel about the media coverage or certain policies affecting them. So, we provide those spaces and all the issues we raise and try to get out in the media come from those spaces. So, we start from the individual's experience, real life experience, because after all, this is what migrants are experts in.

But we are also approached by other migrants who come to us. So, the students, international students, a group of them came to us, approached us, after trying so many

different places and journals and organisations. And they heard, actually it was a journalist who actually referred them to Migrant Voice and said to them, "Look, you're all over the place. Go and speak to this organisation. They will support you and then come back to me." So, they came to us and said, "We are facing this huge injustice. Can you help us?" Now, before that-- I mean, this campaign transformed the way we work as Migrant Voice, because before that all our campaigns were really media campaigns, trying to raise awareness, start to have a voice to engage in debate. But not too much to push for policy change. And when we saw those group of students who came and met with us, when we heard their story, we felt, you know, if they are coming to us, we can't turn them away. They're migrants as well. And they're facing a huge injustice. And we need to give them a voice and we need to do something about it.

And the story, briefly, of those students, I mean, the group of them who came to me, they spoke about a... The Panorama programme on TV showed there's some cheating at a couple of testing centres for international students who are meant to do English language tests every time they renew their visa. And one of those companies, agencies, facilities' tests, the Panorama programme discovered they are cheating at a couple of those centres. Now there are of course 97, I think, or 96 centres in UK for this agency. Now, the Government response was, to this programme, to almost criminalise any student who actually took that test, and it was called the TOEIC test at that time. And we're talking about tens of thousands of international students. The initial number was maybe 56,000 students actually who applied for that test. I mean, I'm trying to cut the story short, but you know... So, we have tens of thousands of students, international students, who are accused of cheating in a test without giving them the evidence, without, you know, giving them the evidence that they cheated, and most of them did not cheat. And most of them, a lot of them, did not get the chance to defend themselves. Some of them, many of them, were detained, hundreds of them were detained, hundreds of thousands of them were deported. They were treated like criminals. And we're talking about young men and women who are coming to the UK for the best experience in the world, for one of the best educations in the world. Their families put all their life savings to pay for those students to come to the UK. And then they find themselves trapped in a situation, in an impossible situation, they find themselves accused of a crime they haven't committed, without evidence against them being presented, without them having the opportunity to defend themselves. And they are treated like criminals, some of them detained, some of them deported. They didn't know how to get out of it. And some of them were told you can appeal from abroad; others were told you cannot appeal from abroad. I mean, it was a nightmare.

And this-- They all talk about this, young men and women. Some of them, their families did not believe them. I think they didn't just lose their future and their family's life savings and their reputation. Those people, their families didn't trust them anymore because they said to them, "No, you must be lying. This could not happen in the UK. The UK is a country of the

law,” and whatever, all that. So, their families have high... They see the UK highly differently, and they thought maybe their sons and daughters brought shame on the families, and some families disowned their sons and daughters for bringing shame on them and for wasting their life savings. I mean, these were the students I was talking to, and some of them were on medication to stop them killing themselves. I mean, for us, we just could not sit back and say, “Sorry, we can’t help you.” I mean, this is, you know, they fit, they tick all our boxes if, you know, we have a list of priorities, we’re to prioritise our resources. I mean, they ticked all the boxes. And we took them, we worked with them, because they need to tell their own stories. I think what we helped them with is to understand how the media works, to articulate their story, to tell their story in a simple way that anyone who’s selling foods in the market can understand and support, and we developed a campaign and we worked with MPs.

Now, we’re very proud of this campaign, but you know, as I said, we have hundreds of students who came with us and told their own stories. And this works. I think the most effective story is a story when a person is affected by the issue, he or she, they are talking about their own story. And this has proved to be, I mean, so far, it’s been successful. And we are aware of hundreds of students who are getting their visas as a result, and some of them are having their names cleared. Now, this is not the end of it because the campaign is still ongoing and there are still some issues. And there are still some students who are still fighting to clear their names because remember, if those students, if they went back to the countries without clearing their names-- This is why a few of them stayed here for a few years, destitute, couch surfing, struggling, I mean, living in an impossible situation because they knew if they don’t clear their names here, their future ends here and then. Because if they go back home, they can’t go back to a university because of this record, this accusation hanging over them. They cannot find a job, no one will employ them. They can’t take a visa to travel anywhere. And some of them, we know already, their families disowned them. So, it was really important for them that even if they still don’t see it, they need to clear their names.

So, we really, you know, this is one of our proudest campaigns that many of them now have managed to clear their names. Those who are still in UK, we’re not talking about those who are deported or left. We only work with migrants in UK. So, this is, the campaign is still going until hopefully all or most of the students manage to clear their names and go back to living their lives again. And some of them were really delighted to hear from those who have cleared their names, how they started new businesses, they start to look forward to the future. So, they have the future back and the campaign was called ‘My Future Back’.

Ken Gordon

That’s really good to hear that you’re making that impact and that the level of activation that you managed to-- You’ve managed to achieve results. As you will know, and as we’ve seen in

the press, we are back to having dawn raids up here in Glasgow. And in the recent Queen's Speech, Home Office reform of the asylum system, including taking legal rights away from people who need protection, seems to be unstoppable or progressing, if you like, which is disappointing to everyone. What can we do? And what-- How can-- What, in your opinion, can we do to stop this? And what are Migrant Voice doing?

Nasek Ramadan

I mean, what we are doing is, we are trying to make our views clear on that. I don't know how much we can do, but I guess all of us need to say this is wrong. I think our biggest concern is the idea that those people who make their own way to the UK to claim asylum, they will be penalised, and they will not get protection rights, and they'd be treated differently, and they'd be subject to detention, to deportation. And the Government want to choose who to bring to the UK through these resettlement schemes from refugee camps across the world. I mean, we think this is a big mistake. I've been to some of those refugee camps. I've seen people, the conditions they are living in. And I'm aware of people who spent years, years in horrible conditions and situations, and in very vulnerable and dangerous situations, in those camps. And I don't think a lot of them can wait a number of years for the Government to decide who they're gonna save, who they will give the opportunity to start a new life. And somehow if you have agency and you decide, "I wanna do something, I wanna save my family, I wanna take my children, I wanna get out of here because I want safety." I mean, we would all do that, who wouldn't do this? If you were in their shoes, would you not do this? I would do this if I was, I wouldn't wait in any way. I mean, the Government, the resettlement scheme is great, it's a brilliant scheme by the way, and it's perfect. But the percentage of people who all need protection, who will access this scheme is very minute, is small, is a tiny fraction of the number. We have millions of people around the world who need protection. And the government policy is actually ending protection the way we know it. You cannot penalise someone just because they have agency, just because actually, they made the effort to get their family out of a dangerous situation in search of safety or a new life.

I mean, I come from Lebanon and two years ago, we have refugees in camps in the mountains freezing to death, children, I'm talking about children, freezing to death in intense-- In the snow. I mean, I think the Government need to go, those politicians need to go to those camps and need to see for themselves the condition and need to see who is there, who are the people who are waiting to be saved? And how long-- If you were there-- I mean, I know of myself, if I was in those camps, I wouldn't want to stay for a day in that camp. And I want to save my family. And I want to do anything I can in my power to save my family, to save my children. We would all do that. And just to say, "No, you wait for us. And we will decide how many we are going to save and who-- The lucky, chosen ones. And the rest of you, we're going to let you rot in those camps." I think it's just, it's not practical, it's not reasonable, it's not humane, it's just against-- It goes against not just our moral values

and who we are as a human being, against all the international protection, you know, laws and treaties that we are signatories of. It just, I mean, I can't see how-- I can't see how it works. And there is a good reason. I think the Government think that this way they can stop people from making their own journeys. And this is not true, because if you live in a dangerous situation, you really need to do anything to save your children in your lives and to go to somewhere safe and to start building your life.

I remember in one of the trips to Calais – I went a few times to Calais a few years ago – and I saw a young mum with a child who was ill with a temperature at the time, and I said to her, “Are you mad? Why do you want to go to the UK? How are you going to jump over the fence?” I mean, we were having this kind of conversations with migrants who were in Calais trying to come to the UK. And she said to me, “Because it's the only way I can go there. My husband is there, and I need to be with him.” I mean, you know, there is a good reason why people want still to come here to join family. And we know how difficult it is and how hard it is for migrants in the UK to have their families. So, I think we need to change the way we look at protection issues, we look at asylum seekers. They're human beings. This could be any one of us. And this is not the way to treat people. We should stop treating them as numbers, we should stop treating them just for votes or for scaremongering. We should really treat-- They are human beings like us. And they are in difficult situation. And we need to treat them differently. And until we change the attitude, we're treating asylum seekers at the moment, we won't move. I mean, all those policies, they are a step, again, we keep going backwards with those policies. And I can't see how it's going to work. I mean, we're all, I'm very concerned because as I say, I know the people who are actually waiting in camps. And recently we spoke to a group of Eritreans in Libya, and some of them were in a detention centre inside the-- In Libya, not for committing any crimes, because they want to flee and come to Europe. And they were forgotten. I mean, some of them were young, young men fleeing persecution and war, and being forgotten for three years, three and a half years, in horrific conditions in the desert and the detention centre. I mean, we're talking about desperate people. Is this the way that we want to treat human beings?

I mean, you know, we have lots of questions Migrant Voice would like politicians to answer, to look at, but I think they're out of touch with the real world. They need to go to see those people, to talk to them, to understand the situation, and then develop their policies accordingly.

Ken Gordon

And do you think, given the point you made earlier about politicians using this as a leverage point – they all know the story, they know that migrants aren't a problem in this country, but they're using it to get votes – do you think that even if presented with the evidence that they would make a-- That would change their minds?

Nasek Ramadan

I guess what would change their mind is the public support. I think if more of the public disagree with the Government, and supporting migrants and refugees and asylum seekers, then the Government probably would feel under pressure to change its policies because the Government is using these tactics to gain votes. But if they think, "Oh, well, this is not going to work because actually the public does not agree with us and they want us to treat people differently," things would change. And this is why Migrant Voice, our audience, the main audience we were reaching out to through the media, is the public, is members of the host community. And this is why it was very important for us to build this connection and to engage in that debate. I think we need to change the whole debate in the country about migration and making sure that migrants are part of that conversation, are part of this debate and we are all talking about it together.

And I think what you've seen in Glasgow recently is a great example. And it's not the first example, actually, you know, Glasgow, Scotland leads in those examples, and how the community step forward to support group of people and to say to the Home Office, "No, we will not agree to that." So, we've seen how, you know, their support coming around those people have temporarily at least stopped. But in the past, we know that dawn raids were stopped because a lot of Scottish people said, "No, we don't agree with this happening." And they stood up and they came forward. So, I think having the public support is really important as well.

Ken Gordon

We'll come back to what people should do having listened to this interview at the end. But what's intriguing me is you've demonstrated such strength, such passion, such sense of right. Where does that come from in your background? Where does your inspiration and your energy come from?

Nasek Ramadan

Right. Well, I mean, I'm someone who lived, as I said, in the war, in the civil-- In the number of wars, and I spent my, you know, young years on and off in war situations. So, I understand. And also, I've seen people coming moving from one part of the Lebanon, depends on where the fighting is taking place, and people move from one area to another. And I've hosted people who fled another part of the country to come to my house. And when I fled my area, I had to go to another part, people welcome me. So, I'm someone who understands what's it like to be in a war zone, what's it like to actually live and not knowing if you're going to survive the day or not. I'm one of those people who I remember having-- I had two young children, I remember having near my door a bag, an underground shelter bag, where I had milk and food and water in case the fighting escalated, I had to take my children and grab them and run to the underground shelter. I wouldn't have time. This bag was ready at the door. I mean, I know what it's like. I know how it feels like, you know, I've been through it, so

this is why this is something I feel passionate about. And I think, you know, you're talking about people who have jobs and families and homes, but, you know, they went through the war and everything changed and we should treat them as the people who they are.

I have, well, when I came to the UK, my experience, I mean, in general, my experience is great and I'm really grateful and I'm very happy here and I can call it home. But when I came the first few years, it wasn't easy actually. I just left the war, and I was traumatized by the war, and when I came, I found, well, I found some people who are very welcoming and reassuring and that made a huge difference to me. It really, it has. And this is why I encourage everyone, if you meet someone who newly arrived, please make them feel welcome, just a smile at them, and you know, it makes a huge difference to them. But I've had people who resented me, and I faced racism and discrimination myself and I didn't understand why. And this is a story I've mentioned many times before. I lived for a few months in an area in East London where... Just people, because they didn't have many migrants there, some people resented me and my family there. And really, I mean, they made my life really difficult that year, but I'll just mention one of those examples. An old lady used to send her dog to chase me and my kids. So, I used to take a long detour to go to school to avoid going near her house. And I don't know her, and she doesn't know me. And if she sees me in the shop, local shop, she will start, I mean, insulting me. Luckily at that time, my English wasn't good so I didn't know what she was saying, but I could tell she's shouting at me. [Laughs] And for me that was, you know, traumatising. It was too much. And I just didn't understand what she was saying, I didn't understand, "What does she have against me?" I mean, I haven't done anything to her. She doesn't know me. I mean, many years later, one of our members said, "How can they hate us so much when they don't even know us?" Now, this lady one day before Christmas time, she came towards me, and I was terrified. I mean, I nearly had a heart attack. She came to me and apologised. She came and hugged me and said, "Please forgive me." And this actually had changed the way I see people and I respond to them. And she wished me, "Merry Christmas," because that was near Christmas time. And I don't know what happened to that lady, but she actually one day came and apologised and said, "I'm sorry, please forgive me." And she, you know, she gave me a hug. [Laughs] And now that incident made me think a lot, made me think a lot that, you know, perhaps some people really, they don't mean-- I mean, some people do mean to be racist and nasty, but a lot of people don't know and they just maybe feel threatened somehow. And because maybe I didn't speak language, they don't know you, they don't engage with you. And this is where, actually this was many, many years ago, over 30 years ago [laughs], maybe the first couple of years when I came to the UK. But it changed the way I think about, you know, living in the UK, about how to respond to people. And if people are, you know, horrible to me, I think I need maybe to engage with them. Maybe they don't, you know, they don't know me, and I need to make an effort.

So, this maybe many years back helped me, and I started to engage more with the public.

And I remember I had set up an Arabic language club, a Saturday club, where I brought people to speak about integration, about engaging with the community, about how you can be Lebanese or Muslim or Christian or whatever and British and you can belong here. So actually it did influence this, you know, accident earlier on, incident, influenced the way I work later on in my life in the UK. But these of course don't happen, you know, these incidents don't happen anymore because now I can challenge them. Because I can understand English, I can speak, and I can actually stop someone from doing this because they know I can speak up and I can defend myself and I have a voice, more importantly.

Ken Gordon

Indeed you do. And what a powerful example that is. Before I ask you how people can get engaged and support Migrant Voice and support the kind of things that you are doing, can I just say that if you have a question, you have a chance to drop it the chat and you can also do it live at the end. So, think up those questions. Nazek, so, what's the best way we can help? What do you want people to do now? Having given these examples that they're moving and powerful, what should we do now?

Nazek Ramadan

Well, I think the first thing people can do is to visit our website and read all the stories and activities that we are running, and the campaigns we're running, and come forward and support us. I mean, we have, as I said, we work at the moment in three UK regions and Scotland is one of them. Our office is based in Glasgow, but at the moment we're not working from the office because of the Covid restrictions. Soon hopefully we'll be going back to the office. We have a closed group for each region. So, if people want to join, they can join as a member. I mean, it's free, it's informal, there's no commitment. People can email us and say, I live in Glasgow in Scotland, and I'd like to join this Migrant Voice network there. We have a network that probably have 600 or 700 members in Scotland.

Ken Gordon

Wow.

Nazek Ramadan

And there's a closed Facebook page where people can talk to each other and exchange information and engage together. And then you will find out about-- You can join our mailing list or receive our newsletter. And if you join our mailing list, you'll receive information about our next activities, trainings, campaigns, and you are welcome to join. Our meetings and activities are open to everyone. Everyone is welcome.

Ken Gordon

Thank you Bella for putting up the Migrant Voice website there. And the email address is also on that website. Thank you very much, Nasek.

Nasek Ramadan

Thank you.

Ken Gordon

Well, I always find doing these interviews, I learn so much and I am inspired. We have time for some questions, which I hope you've been popping into the chat, and I'll hand back to Louise to handle the questions. Thank you very much Nasek. It's been a pleasure talking to you today.

Nasek Ramadan

Thank you so much for having me. Thank you.

Ken Gordon

Louise, over to you.

Lauren Roberts

Thank you Ken, thank you. Nasek, thank you for that fantastic overview of what Migrant Voice does and what-- You know, your experiences as well, and I just wanted to just quickly reflect on something else I'd heard earlier on today about not cutting off people when they have a different point of view to you, because they then just retreat into their own echo chamber, or they only speak to other networks or groups that reflect back to them what they already believe, and the importance of kindly challenging so that you can come to some sort of mutual understanding. So, thank you very much for making those points. So, I think Gameli has his hand raised. Gameli, can you come on in?

Gameli Tordzro

Yes, thank you, Lauren. Thank you so much, Nasek, for that. I was just super touched by that last example you gave. And I think that we are all capable of embracing each other when we are not afraid. When we are not suspicious. When we are aware that we have the capacity to mutually enrich each other. And I think you've enriched us so much today with your stories. And that's the power of story. You know, we all have stories to tell, but sometimes we don't have the opportunity to tell those stories. Maybe it's, you know, the space is not available, the freedom is not available. And so, if we can create a space and the freedom and the comfortability, then the stories flow, and then we begin to know each other better. And then we begin to move even further from integration to embracing. And when we embrace, all those issues just melt away. So, thank you very much. And--

Nazek Ramadan

Thank you.

Gameli Tordzro

In return, I just want to offer you, just a piece of music.

Nazek Ramadan

Thank you.

[MUSIC]

Gameli Tordzro

Thank you very much.

Nazek Ramadan

Thank you so much. Beautiful, thank you.

Lauren Roberts

Thank you Gameli. If anyone else has anything they might like to say or come in with... Just letting Naa Densua in... Gamali is that your hand up again or are you...

Naa Densua

It's not Gameli, it's Naa Densua. [Laughs]

Lauren Roberts

[Laughs] Hi Naa Densua. Do you have something that you want to say Naa Densua, or will I ask Alison?

Naa Densua

No, no, I was just listening. Sorry.

Lauren Roberts

It's quite okay. Alison?

Alison Phipps

Yeah, I just didn't want to pass up on the opportunity to speak to Nasek. It's just always such a treat to have you in Glasgow, or near Glasgow, or on Zoom in Glasgow. And I know at the start you said that you come to Glasgow quite a lot. And I just want to say for the record, it's not enough. [Laughs] We'd love to have you here more. But yeah, I was just, as I always am when I'm listening to you, just hearing the energy and the speed at which you think and work and act. And I wondered if, over the years, you speak about the way that you know what you're doing these days, you know how to speak to journalists, to migrants, to the media. There's a real confidence that comes through in the way you're talking, and I know—I've been around you almost since the very start of Migrant Voice and just watched this little

acorn grow into this great oak tree, or maybe it should be a cedar cone grow into a great cedar tree to bring it back to Lebanon and your home, your first home. And I just wondered how that confidence now serves you, how it helps you? And I think it'd be great for people to hear about this, because there's an amazing new energy around at the moment, loads of students and young people particularly sensitized to wanting to just make the world a better place, be it in climate change, be it migrant justice, be it in anti-poverty campaigns, just right across the board. I see my students alive with the energy of the possibility and the need, the urgency of making the world a better place. And that, you know, people like you and I, Nazek, who are no longer as young as we were [laughs] and who were very much on our own in a different generation in trying to hold or protect a little candle flame of justice when a lot of people were comfortable and didn't really feel they needed to engage with this. You know, we're now in a position where we've had many years of experience and young people will look to us for advice and support, so I just wondered if you might speak a bit about, you know, that confidence and that process of aging that really leads you to have the sort platform that you have now?

Nazek Ramadan

Yes, I will try to answer that question. I mean, I'm, yeah, I've certainly grown in confidence, because many years back I was terrified because I just didn't know, you know, how people think and why people are reacting towards me the way they are. And, you know, even I remember once watching TV, my earliest memory in getting, you know, curious about politics, Mrs. Thatcher was prime minister, and she was talking about migrants and how they are-- The country is-- Whatever, you know, invade-- I don't know the exact word. And this is what actually made me very worried, it was the first time when I thought, "Oh, this isn't just people on the street. Actually, this is almost institutionalized, it's at a higher level. Even the Prime Minister is actually speaking about us that we've been, whatever, invading the country or..." So, I became worried and at that time we were just terrified. You're always afraid or scared of people you don't know, or the things you don't know, but once you know them, things will become much easier. And I think this is why earlier on we understood the first thing with the Migrant Voice is we must understand how the media works, because it was for us scary, we didn't know how to engage, we didn't know if we could engage, we didn't know how to change. It was for us, you know, a faraway planet. We thought this is where we need to start. This is a starting point. Let's understand, let's learn this, you know, have better knowledge how the media works and also, not just the media. We were also curious to understand how the British public react, what messages, you know, works with them and what they identify with and what they can they relate to and what they don't.

And so, we had had to, you know-- The first, I think when we set up, we just wanted to learn this, we need to, to run because then, you know, a lot of the fear will go and then we become more confident. And then when we started to engage, and we saw this positive reaction, we grew in confidence and we knew this is the right way, the right way is to

engage, is to come forward. And if you, you know, if you contact the journalists, say, “Look, we’d like to talk to you,” I mean, they’ll be open to you. And also, even politicians are happy to listen to you. So, I mean, recently, the past few years, we’ve been engaging more and more with politicians. They’re also happy to listen to us. We didn’t know this before. And I think, as I said, that lady who used to send her dog to chase me and my children, I mean, she’s just maybe, you know, she saw me as a threat because she didn’t know. I think once she knew something, and this must have changed her mind. So, I think we need to... This helped the confidence. We know that if you engage with people, most of the time – not all the time – people do respond, do react, and do support. And as I said, when we set up Migrant Voice, the first year we had no office, we had no venue. We were jumping between the Guardian, the ITV and other, you know, other organisations. They just said, “Welcome, come and use our rooms, our premises.” I mean, we had journalists coming and doing the training for us. They come and we said, we invited them to come train us. They said, “Yes, we’d love to.” They came to train us how to engage with them, how to speak. I think, you know... And everywhere we went, we felt we, you know, people were very welcome and supportive. And I think this is when we discovered, you know, this is the right approach. And this gave us confidence, including universities. I mean, people like yourselves and your colleagues, Alison, when we first set up, we came to Scotland, we met with you and a few colleagues. And Dr Ima Jackson, she’s still actually on our steering group, she’s still supporting us. So, we have people who actually listen to us when we explain to universities, this is what we’re trying to do, they said, “Great, what can we do to support you?” And I think this helped a lot. But if you are on your own, isolated, then you don’t know, I think you are scared. But when you are part of a group of people, you maybe, if you’re not very confident, it gives you more confidence. And this is why if you come to an organisation or a platform or charity and work with other people, you feel more empowered or more relaxed, more confident.

And this is why recently, in the past few years, a lot of our activities, we bring both, like in Scotland, Scottish people and migrants together to work together on a project. Because this is where we provide the opportunities. I mean, Gameli said, those stories need a platform to be told. So, we try to create those safe spaces and platforms where we bring people together, although they’ll be talking about photography or videos or poetry, but we’re actually providing space for people to meet in a safe, in a way, a non-threatening way. And it’s easy to engage in a conversation, to build a relationship and friendship. And this is one way of actually building the confidence of people to engage. And remember, it’s not just us migrants who are afraid of engaging with other people, but also, you know, the host communities, they want to engage with migrants, they don’t know how to go about it, and they don’t know how to engage. So, this way we facilitate that space. I mean, some of us have different experiences engaging with people. So, I remember the first few years when I came here, I went to see some friend, knocked on the door, she was not there. I knocked on the neighbour’s door thinking it’s like Beirut. You knock on the neighbour, ask them,

"Where's your neighbour? Have you seen her?" And then I had someone giving me a whole lecture that in this country we mind our own business, and we don't do this, we don't do that. And, you know, she terrified me, and I never wanted to speak to any British person after that. But this was earlier on. But I guess when you provide this platform for people to engage, they do engage, they come together. I mean, in Scotland, we have it all from video making, to poetry together, to ceilidh together. And people love it. And they came together, and they engage, and they develop friendships and, you know, and connections. And this is the way forward.

Alison Phipps

And Nazek, I was just remembering that I think the last time I actually saw you in person rather than listening to you or on a digital platform was actually at a ceilidh, and where we were throwing you across the room. [Laughs] Welcome back to Lauren so she can bring a few other people in as well, because I'm seeing some just lovely comments and questions in the chat.

Lauren Roberts

Yes, some very nice comments in the chat as well. Nerea just wanted to say her internet is a bit shaky today, so I'll just read her comment. So, she says she never tires of hearing from you, Nazek. She volunteers with Migrant Voice in almost every event and workshop it has organised, and she thinks what's really important is that although very massive issues are tackled the work is done in a very practical, simple, and accessible way. It's created many networks and friendship groups too. And Tawona also kind of said that it's not just migrants but it's the local folks that you're working with and getting into your organisation as well, which has been one of the main contributors to how much effect and impact that it has.

I'm just having a quick look to see if anyone else has got any other hands up. No. I just wanted to ask really quickly, both of you, both Ken and Nazek, that obviously Migrant Voice has been going for a number of years now. Have you noticed any change in the way that you're having to engage with the media now that the way that people are absorbing and getting their information is changing, you know, the ecology of how the news is distributed and taken up by people? Have you had to change the way that you work?

Nazek Ramadan

I mean, we have to evolve gradually how we work with the media. I think if anything, our, you know, working relationship with the media has strengthened, and we are getting to know more and more journalists and we understand now what they need from us. So, we prepare. So now we prepare, we are able to better prepare to support the journalists in telling our stories as well. So, it is a collaboration, and I think we're getting better at it, but the journalists still need the people affected to tell their own stories. I think you can never replace this. It's not just about the information, it's about actually hearing the story from the

person impacted by an issue. Hearing them telling their own story is very important. But I think, as I said, our relationship became stronger and stronger, and a lot of the journalists now, they trust us and they call us before, when they work on the story, also to run it by us, to ask us what else do we know or how accurate it is and how not. So, I think this is really brilliant. And the past couple of years we moved on. We want to step up our work. And we are now meeting with the editors, not just journalists, because I think we've developed a great relationship with lots of journalists. And now we are trying to change, if you want, the editorial room culture, if possible. Again, by engaging with them, by taking migrants to the editorial room, by even editors to meet migrants themselves. So, in order to influence more and more the media coverage of migration, so now we moved into meeting editors as well in a number of-- In the regions that we are working.

Lauren Roberts

Great. Thank you. Right, well, unfortunately, we're out of time. I think we could just talk to you guys all day long. Thank you both so much for coming and speaking with us and attending, and just the great discussion that we had as well afterwards. So, I just want to say our thanks again for being part of the Spring School and wishing you all and everybody else here a very good rest of the afternoon.

Ken Gordon

Thank you and hoping that we get to do this in person next time.

Lauren Roberts

Absolutely, absolutely.

Nazek Ramadan

Thank you so much, thank you for having me. Thank you.

Ken Gordon

Thank you.

[JINGLE]

Gameli Tordzro

Thank you for listening to the podcast of the UNESCO Chair in Refugee integration through Languages and the Arts, a podcast series to make you think. More information about our work can be found on the website of the University of Glasgow, www.gla.ac.uk. Thank you very much.

[JINGLE]