

DISCOVER

# These Inspiring Teenage Besties Are The New Face Of The Refugee Crisis

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PHOTO: UNICEF/NESBITT

*Minahil Sarfraz, 15, waits to greet world leaders outside the United Nations General Assembly Hall.*

Natasha Maimba, 14, and Minahil Sarfraz, 15, do a lot of the same things any teen girls do. Maimba plays the guitar. Sarfraz likes to mug for the camera. They started a band together, but it fell apart before they could play any music.

But undoubtedly, their favorite thing to do together is try to change the world.

The teens are two of the world's [estimated 11 million child refugees](#) and asylum-seekers. According to UNICEF, children make up approximately half of the world's refugees, even though they constitute only one-third of the world's total population. This week, as world leaders gather at the United Nations General Assembly to address the growing refugee crisis, Sarfraz and Maimba are serving as UNICEF Youth Ambassadors. Their goal is to make sure the needs of children like them are not forgotten.

The girls, who became friends while living in an Irish center for asylum seekers, were asked to be Youth Ambassadors after they told their stories in a [documentary](#) for Irish radio. Over the past few years, they've repeated those stories to world leaders, including United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and numerous Irish national politicians. Now, their voices are reaching the highest levels as they share what young refugees go through.

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I lost a childhood in those years.

MINAHIL SARFRAZ, 15



On Monday, the first day of the General Assembly, the girls are up hours before daybreak so they can greet heads of state as they enter the U.N. Summit for Refugees and Migrants. On either side of the thickly carpeted hallway, a row of middle school aged children in matching T-shirts hold up poster-board signs that show images of young refugees. “Good morning!” they call to the dignitaries as they reach the top of the escalator. The security guards, normally stern, smile and high-five the kids during gaps in the incoming presidents and ministers.

Some of the officials smile and nod as they pass, others come to shake hands and ask questions. Many, however, walk on without acknowledgment. Sarfraz, lively at 8:30 in the morning, is trying to come up with ways to get the group recognized.

“Maybe I should do the dab,” she jokes, dipping her nose towards her inner elbow. She considers stepping into the center of the hallway, where people will have to move around her.

Maimba, at the end of the line, hopes that the president of her native Zimbabwe will show up.

“I want to know what he’s doing to bring back what we want in Zimbabwe, what he’s doing to make sure that people have jobs, that people have money, that our economy is great again,” she says. “That’s what I’d ask him if I had time to sit with him!”

Always side by side, Maimba and Sarfraz each give the other the confidence to approach powerful leaders without fear or intimidation. Sarfraz moves to the front of the line to better snare the incoming politicians with her magnetic enthusiasm. Maimba doesn't even blink at the suggestion that she might be nervous about sharing her opinions with the presidents who just shook her hand. "It's my right to speak to them," she says.

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PHOTO: UNICEF/MARKISZ

*Natasha Maimba, 14, and Minahil Sarfraz, 15, take a moment together in between events at the United Nations General Assembly.*

Exchanging handshakes with world leaders this rainy morning is the latest step in a long journey for the two friends. At 5, Sarfraz left her home country of Pakistan with her mother and siblings, escaping gender discrimination which would have kept her out of school. She spent the next nine years living in a center for asylum-seekers in the town of Athlone, a fenced-in collection of mobile homes at the edge of a two-and-a-half mile span of factories and industrial businesses in central Ireland. Maimba, who fled Zimbabwe by way of Malawi and South Africa after her mother's work for women's rights attracted trouble, arrived at the center a few years later, at age 11. They don't quite remember how they met, but they bonded over their shared desire to speak out about their situations.

“It kind of made us more together in a way,” said Sarfraz.

Both girls have only scattered memories of the circumstances of their flights from Pakistan and Zimbabwe. “What I remember about leaving my country was that I was going to a place that I would be safe and that I would be respected,” Sarfraz said. “And that I, as a female, would be listened to.” But her life in Ireland wasn’t the end-of-the-rainbow fantasy that she had hoped. “When I came — not so much,” she said.

By their accounts, the center where Sarfraz and Maimba spent their childhood and teen years is a bleak place. The pair described flimsily built mobile homes, with only two or three rooms, which shook when the wind blew. The gated trailer park had 100 homes, which the girls, in a light Irish lilt, call “caravans,” arranged in 10 rows of 10. Housing is cramped, resources are sparse, but worst of all was the discrimination.

“When I first came, not a lot of people liked refugees, they didn’t think they belonged to be here,” Sarfraz says. She says people treated her like a drain on society.

“I lost a childhood in those years,” she says.

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PHOTO: UNICEF/MARKISZ

*Minahil Sarfraz, 15, listens to U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon speak at the High-level Civil Society Side Event for Refugees and Migrants, where she and Natasha were invited to share their experiences.*

Ireland, where Maimba and Sarfraz settled, is home to about 6,000 refugees, 11% of whom are children, according to [UNICEF](#). In addition, roughly 5,000 asylum-seekers are still awaiting a decision about their status, with the looming [possibility of deportation](#) should they exhaust their appeals. Until recently, Maimba, Sarfraz, and their families were part of the latter category — Maimba received authorization to stay in the country on Christmas Eve 2014 and Sarfraz got her legal status a year later. Both girls spent years in limbo, not knowing if they would be able to stay in the country where they were making a home.

Refugee children have a [specific set of needs](#) — education, for one thing, as well as a stable home life and protection from discrimination. A refugee child is five times more likely to be out of school than a non-refugee child and the older the child, the less likely that he or she is in school. Refugee children are also uniquely vulnerable to discrimination and bullying, something Sarfraz says she experienced when a few elementary school classmates embarked on a campaign to torment her after they found out she lived in the asylum center.

“There’s always some moments when there’s something said or you’re kind of alone,” Maimba says.

When she speaks, she gives the impression that every word is deliberately chosen. “Like recently, my teacher, we were discussing the E.U., and what it means to be a citizen of the E.U. My teacher said, ‘Well, everyone in here is an E.U. citizen, right?’ And I was the only one in the room who said, ‘Well, I’m not.’ It makes you feel a little different.”

In each other, Maimba and Sarfraz found a support system. “It felt relieving,” Sarfraz says, explaining that her friend can understand the struggles she faces in a way that others can’t. Having a friend beside them as they advocate for other refugee kids makes a world of difference. “If [Natasha] has the confidence to tell her story, then I feel that I’m confident as well, because we’re the same age, based in similar situations,” Sarfraz says. “It’s pretty helpful to know that there’s someone [with you] through the journey.”

Adds Maimba, “When you have two stories that come together, it’s just a lot more powerful. That makes it really nice to have someone with you, that it’s not your story alone — it’s your stories combined.”

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PHOTO: UNICEF/MARKISZ

*Natasha Maimba, 14, responds to a question from UNICEF Deputy Executive Director Justin Forsyth.*

When they speak publicly about their situations, that power is visible. Sitting between leaders of UNICEF and UNHCR to speak on a panel, Sarfraz and Maimba are relaxed. They answer the questions addressed to them with a poise that belies their teenage years. “I wasn’t a refugee first and I wasn’t a migrant first. I was a child first,” Maimba says. “I deserve to be treated like a child and I am a child.”

“You’re taking away so much from a child when you label them or when you ignore them for as long as we have been ignored,” Maimba says.

The young activists are done being ignored. They want to see a commitment from leaders to take action, not just make agreements that won’t be followed through. They want stronger action on housing, education, and services like decent food and health care — the basic things that enable refugees to make a life. Their adoptive country of Ireland has made efforts to grant their wish: Ireland played a [key role](#) in drafting this year’s New York Declaration on Refugees and Migrants, which calls on world leaders to develop guidelines on treatment of refugees and create a compact for safe migration.

As the representatives in the General Assembly hall vote to [accept the Declaration](#) on Monday, the girls are hoping that the promises are kept.

“There’s absolutely no point in talking about issues and saying, ‘This is what we need to [do],’ and not doing it,” says Maimba.

Most of all, they want respect and acceptance. “Welcoming refugees, that can be a huge thing,” Sarfraz says. “I know if I was back to the time when I was young and I was all alone, I would have loved if somebody just came up to me and said, ‘Hi, welcome.’”

Maimba agrees. “It’s up to us as young people to make sure we accommodate for change,” she says.



PHOTO: UNICEF/MARKISZ

*Editor's Note: A previous version of this story misstated Minahil Sarfraz's country of origin. Refinery29 regrets the error.*

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