Down to the Struts

Season 6, Episode 3: Empowering Disabled Refugees with Mustafa Rfat

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Guest: Mustafa Rfat

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**Introduction**

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[jazzy piano chords, bass strumming with smooth R&B]

Qudsiya Naqui:

Hi, this is Qudsiya Naqui, and welcome to Down to the Struts—The podcast about disability, design, and intersectionality. Today, we’ll listen in on my conversation with Mustafa Rfat. Mustafa is a PhD candidate at Washington University in St. Louis. He came to the United States as a refugee in 2011

In 2022, Mustafa and his colleagues published an article entitled, “A Scoping Review of Needs and Barriers to Achieving a Livable Life Among Refugees with Disabilities: Implications for Future Research, Practice, and Policy.” A link to the article is available in the show notes. Mustafa and I talked about his experiences navigating the refugee resettlement process as a disabled refugee, and his concrete recommendations for resettlement agencies, disability services organizations, and policymakers for designing services that meet the intersectional needs of this population. I learned so much from this episode, and I think you will, too. Ok, let’s get down to it.

[jazzy piano chords, bass strumming with smooth R&B]

Qudsiya Naqui:

Thank you so much, Mustapha, for being with me today. It's such a pleasure to have you.

Mustafa Rfat:

Well, thank you very much for inviting me. I am very excited for this conversation.

Qudsiya Naqui:

Wonderful. I'd love to start off, if you could share a little bit about your story and your experience coming to the US as a refugee.

Mustafa Rfat:

I mean, unfortunately, as we are seeing currently on the news, from Ukraine, Afghanistan, and, and from other countries around the world, the agonizing stories of refugees. And one of the consequences of war and violence is people leaving their homeland. And this may sound easy, but it is very, very painful. getting prepared to leave, like things you built for years. In a matter of days, I think there is no word that can describe the situation. So for me, I became a refugee in in Turkey, in 2010. However, things were very, very difficult because I was I am a refugee with disabilities. So I had a lot of health issues. So I had to deal with, like navigating this refugee process in Turkey, and on top of it, trying to find medications, trying to find doctors, you know, trying to deal with the pain I have. So it was very, very difficult. what the process is really you're entering in a system like, you don't know when you will be getting resettled to a third country. That process can take a year, five years, 10 years, 15 years. So and that unknown part is so difficult to digest. Because you can't you don't know. It's so hard to like, get used to, to your community, there are a camp you're living. And there's a lot of disruptions for refugees with disabilities. For example, I remember how my health condition got exacerbated, and I remember how, how painful it was because of lack of access to health care. So but I was lucky that I got resettled within a year to United States. And I got resettled in Mobile, Alabama. So that was the first place I arrived. For me I was alone. My family did not want to leave Iraq. So I came to United States alone. And that was very, very difficult because I did not have anyone to rely on. And after resettling in Mobile, Alabama, you know, I got my basic needs—they gave me a shelter, they gave me food. And you know, the process started where applying for Social Security in other things. However, after about a month or two months, I noticed things were a little bit different for those who have disabilities. So if you are a refugee without disabilities, you have I don't want to say like smooth but it's like things are set up for you like you get to into some quick trainings you apply for jobs and the refugee resettlement agencies are there to help you with that. But if you are a refugee with disabilities, that's a different stories. There is a pause for you where the refugee agency is like, while we are going to help you find a doctor and probably help you apply for SSI. But after that, there is not much things that they can do for you. That's the moment where refugees with disabilities kind of fell in the crack and fell through the crack. And it's, it's almost impossible to leave and continue your journey. And for me, it was very, very challenging. I was very ambitious. I wanted to go back to school, I wanted to work, I wanted to contribute, contribute back to my community. However, in many, many occasions, I was like, you know, even within refugee agencies are like, Well, I'm sorry, it's not easy to go back to school, it's not easy to work for someone in your situation. And in some situations, yes, they were right. You know, I even when I applied, I got denied many, many times trying to find employment. When I tried to apply for school, I was bombarded with many bureaucratic processes that I had to go through applying for financial aid or finding college finding programs. And there is no one can help you through this process. Because of the unique identities you come when you are a refugee, you are the person with disabilities. So you are more likely to experience discrimination experience exclusion stigma, and more importantly, you are more likely to experience to be bombarded with these false informations that all while if you are receiving public assistance, you shouldn't be working, you shouldn't be going to school, because if you go, then you are more likely to lose your benefit. And I think that was one of the most difficult thing that I had to overcome. So I was I was able to finish my bachelor's and my master's.

Qudsiya Naqui:

Mustafa, you really very clearly articulated the sort of dual precarity that a disabled refugee in particular finds themselves in and you laid that out really nicely from the time in which you are in a refugee camp in, you know, the second your second country to when you get to a Safe Third Country. And you also really laid out the dual barriers and discrimination you face in your identity as a refugee, but then also in your identity as a disabled person trying to navigate things like education and employment, which are already extremely challenging for disabled people, even disabled people who are US citizens or permanent residents. based on your personal and your professional experiences, What are some of the things that could change in refugee policy resettlement practice that could help address these dual precarities as a person is moving through the refugee process and resettlement process?

Mustafa Rfat:

Yes. Um, so I think there are there are many, many things that needs to happen to make transition and integration of refugees with disabilities into our society. I think the main one here in the United States is we have a we have a Employment First approach. And that is what it means is that when refugees get here, within a couple of months, we need to make them ready. And we make them apply for for employment and these policies sideline the unique needs of refugees with disabilities. As someone who went through the system, it took me almost two years to get access to specialists to get my medication straightened up to just like get to know what, what type of things I can do with my abilities. So and and, and that is something that the refugee agencies currently can't help you with. Because their funding is designed in a way where a person comes in, they need to make that person employable as soon as possible, and then move them out of the system. But refugees with disabilities can can go through this process as the, like the like fast as other refugees. And many European nations and other western countries have realized that and they change their policies. And, for example, if you resettled in Sweden, and if you have special needs, you are more likely to get services, I think up to either two or five years until you get resettled until you have your basic needs. And then you are able to move to have employment, that's like gainful other thing. From what I see is that, unfortunately, within refugee agencies, when they see a refugee with disabilities, I think there is a pause, that Oh, my God, this person has health issues, or some sort of some kind of disabilities, then we shouldn't be dealing with this case, let the doctors deal with this case. So there is a lot of medical model policies left within refugee policies. And so you are at unfortunately, refugee agencies and providers within refugee agencies saying, okay, you know, we need to be aware of the unique needs of refugees with disabilities, in terms of like, how we can empower ourselves understand how we can best help refugees with disabilities, or how we can reach out to disability agencies within our communities and understand how we can make referrals, how we can even like use simple, empowering words, you know, in this simple thing can make a big change for refugees with disabilities. And again, but I think like an inclusive refugee policies is urgently needed, as we are seeing currently the United States, committing to accept thousands of refugees from Ukraine from all over the world. And I think this is a perfect time for us to to see how we can include all the refugees with disabilities and make sure they are not coming to live in poverty instead, how we can like empower them to join the workforce to become a productive member of society.

Qudsiya Naqui:

Those are really concrete pieces of advice. And another area in which you have great expertise is you you thought a lot about and worked really tirelessly inside of institutions of higher education and other types of educational institutions. How does the educational system in particular also play a role in inclusion integration for, disabled refugees in your view?

Mustafa Rfat:

I am very passionate about education. I believe education is the key to empowering refugees with disabilities. I will show you an email that I've just got today. I am a help. I am currently helping a refugee with disabilities access apply for college. However, we are encountering many issues. And one of the issues is that this person applied for rehabilitation services and even current rehabilitation service policies do not recognize that dual identities that we will are going to have individuals who are who might need access to language services first. So for example, I'm currently helping a friend. Like we had a lot of challenges in convincing rehabilitation services that this person needs education training first, yes, this person can speak a little bit of English, but that person needs it pleased a year or two of have like English, learn English language training where they can reach an academic level. But because the current rehabilitation policies do not see that, oh, we are going to have like a refugee with disabilities might need, like language training. And so I when I helped this, this friend we applied for, like state scholarships. And, butt these scholarships are designed for some of them are designed for residents with disabilities. Again, the email I am getting is that we are sorry, our current programs are designed to help someone to apply for four year colleges, and not to help them with language training. But they don't see that language training is a part of that education process. So because of this, you know, many refugees, it's very hard for them to access two years or four years college. And on top of that, and unfortunately, I again, I'm counting going back to that collaboration between refugee agencies and education institutions, because when a refugee with disability apply for for college, that college sees them as a citizen, if they have a permanent residency or they become a citizen. So they seize them as a as a citizen. So it's hard for the college to see, okay, you have a refugee background and you are disabled. So we might need to connect you with some of the resources we have, so that you can have a smooth transition to college.

[Jazzy drumbeats]

Mustafa Rfat:

I want to give you an example from my experience. I remember when I first started my college, my my bachelor degree, two weeks into my first semester, I was hospitalized. You know, I was very excited. So I have back problems. I was putting my backpack. And I was putting all these heavy books and I was like walking around the campus and West Virginia University is very steep very hill like so it's hard to walk. And so I got sick, and I was hospitalized. And I was like, oh my god, I this must be true that many people told me I can't go to college, I can do college. And I was I was actually gave up. Then, my supervisor, my advisor reached out to me. I was lucky I was in social work. So she's like, what's going on Mustafa? You haven't been coming to class, like, is everything okay? I was like, you know, I got sick, I don't think I can continue my education. And so she invited me. She said, I was lucky that she had some experience working, working with immigrants. And she really, she recognized some of the challenges that that I am having. One of them was like, not knowing the programs that are available in my community, like disability agencies, like agencies that provide assistive technologies. And then she immediately referred me to a local disability agency. And I went there, they came up with a brilliant ideas, they, they borrowed me a laptop, they put all my books in an inside that iPad, and then and they, they they told me to buy a backpack that has wheels. And I went to school, I had only an iPad in my back. And I had that backpack with wheels that I was just you know, dragging and I was going everywhere on campus. So with a simple solution, I I was able to finish my bachelor's and my master's and I am currently doing my PhD. As you can notice, like we we come into these systems from like, we are not traditional and these policies are kinda like built to to see only like the regular citizen. And unfortunately, like we have policies that do not recognize the diverse population we have

Qudsiya Naqui:

That's such a powerful example. And and I think it really points to a few things. One is just the intersectional nature of people's needs, like the idea that you need. Language Training is foundational if you're if English is not your dominant language, before you can consider University and also, you know that a simple simple solution, like putting books on an iPad can make the difference between staying in school and dropping out, I remember I lost much of my vision in the midst of my first year of law school. And it just started happening very fast and reading became really hard. Having a disability services office and having people who recognize that I needed some help point me to the right technology was the difference between staying or dropping out. I did not have the further precarity of being an immigrant or a refugee, but I really identified with your story, because I too, felt my disability to be this immovable barrier to my education. And I didn't think I could go on. And I wonder also that these solutions you describe, and the flexibility that comes from designing systems that accommodate a diversity of needs, as you said, results in a better system for everybody involved. If everybody had the option of having their books in an iPad, I could see a number of different types of people that might benefit. I really think those examples are very powerful, you know, having had all the experiences that you've had and advocating inside of these educational institutions and all the other wonderful and amazing work that you've done. What advice do you have for other disabled refugees who are going to follow in your footsteps?

Mustafa Rfat:

There are many. So I think the first advice I have, for other refugees with disabilities is do not believe what you hear and make sure about these false about these Miss Information that surrounds around all, please don't work, don't go to school, you are going to lose your benefits. I think these are the main barriers for many, many refugees with disabilities I encountered. And there are many programs that are designed to help refugees or to help people with disabilities in general in the United States Access, education and employment, for example, to get to work, you have stable program, you have Medicaid, buy in, and many, many other state programs that are designed to help you keep your benefits, especially your Medicaid, at the same time work at the same time, go to school, and apply for these scholarships. And please do not let these Miss Information prevent you from from from, like reaching your potential. And another thing is that I think this advice is for, for everyone. And that is it is so essential for refugees with disabilities to get to know their local resources. That includes advocacy groups, Legal Aid, human rights organizations, and most importantly, disability agencies. I think these are these agencies will be the will be essential for a refugee with disabilities in moving from like, from poverty, to accessing employment, education and becoming independent and an even, you know, like giving back to their communities. And finally, please do not give up. There are a lot of stigma, there are a lot of discrimination you're going to be bombarded with because of the unique identities you're carrying. I was like in even in my education, I was getting attacked by because of the refugee background I have or in times because I have disabilities. So you are going to experience a lot of challenges, but it's achievable. You can get your degrees you can get the skills you need, and again reach your potentials.

Qudsiya Naqui:

And Mustafa What would you have to say to those who Set, refugee and resettlement policy, what advice would you have for them?

Mustafa Rfat:

We need to, first of all recognize how our population is becoming diverse. And I think it is so important, moving forward to build policies that are based on social models. And recognizing policies that are based on medical models that are based on that sees refugees with disabilities, or refugees in general, that sees their weakness instead of their strength. And one of the things that simple things I think we can do for education is making sure we recognize some of the previous credential that refugees, especially refugees with disabilities come from, come with, I think like recognizing credential is very, very important. And at the same time, I think we, we need to look at these training programs, and making sure that individuals with these different identities, how they can access our programs,

[Jazzy drumbeats]

Mustafa Rfat:

I want to give you another example. I remember applying for a scholarship, local rehabilitation services. So someone told me, since I have a disabilities, I can qualify it for the scholarship that will help me for my undergrad, they took my information, they told me yes, you are qualified. And I just need to take a test. And if I pass the test, I will be I will get the scholarship. So they set the date for me, I went and I took the test. At that time I was about two or three years in the United States, I was very new to understand, to learn the culture to learn English to see like what's going on. And while I was taking the test that test, I realized that many of the questions I was asked, were questions that are designed for someone who finished high school in the United States who speak fluent English, who is familiar with the culture, and not someone who is like, new to this environment. So I left home, thinking that okay, I failed the test. But how I can tell my caseworker that this test was not fair. This test was not designed for someone like me. So I asked my friend who were at that time at college, and I asked him, like, can you give me a word that someone should know if they went to college here in the US? So he gave me a word. I think it was in biology. And I went I, I learned how to spell it. I learned how to say it, pronounce it. And I went after 10 days to get the result. And I told my caseworker, please before I said, I know I failed the test. But um, but I came here to help you understand the things that I struggled through when I went through your test. And she was surprised. She was like, What are you saying, I was like, I am going to give you a very short test. If you pass my test, then I will just walk out I don't need any scholarship. But if you fail my test, you need to at least give me a chance to, to show to you that I can go to college, I can learn I have the ability to learn. So she was like, okay, and then I gave her that word that I learned. I was like, if you can spell it for me if you can, if you can pronounce it for me, then I don't need and then I told her if you know the meaning, then I don't need anything, then you pass my test. And so my goal was not to embarrass her my goal was like to help her understand that I have the ability to learn. And she couldn't tell me the meaning and she couldn't spell it. And I was like, Listen, you you you have a master degree. And you know, you couldn't answer you couldn't you couldn't pass this simple test. And then how you think I can pass this test that is designed for someone who lived here who speaks the language who is familiar with the culture who went to high school and my caseworkers like Oh, this is this is like I, she was like shocked. And she was like, let me speak with my supervisor and see how we can help you. And you know, they agreed to give me one semester scholarship with a condition that if I pass it, then then you will continue giving me a scholarship. And luckily, I finished my bachelor's, I think my GPA was like 3.8. So this just shows you how like having these different identities like my disability at that time, qualified me for the scholarship, but my refugee background failed me. And I think that these policies need to reflect, need to, like, be very inclusive, to make sure these vulnerable people can go smoothly through this process. The scholarship is designed to help the most marginalized people in the society.

Qudsiya Naqui:

Again, what a powerful example and I really, really enjoyed your gumption with that, caseworker, that's, that's really amazing. So, Mustafa, before we wrap up, I'd love it. If you could share a little bit about the work that you're doing now. You're you're in your PhD program. Can you tell us a little bit about your research?

Mustafa Rfat:

Yes, thank you. Yeah, I am a PhD student at Washington University. I am focusing on refugees with disabilities. I'm hoping to focus on education access employment access. Currently, I am doing a scoping review with my colleagues to explore the knees, barriers to accessing these needs and programs and services for refugees with disabilities. So we are getting ready to submit this article for publications. I'm very excited about it. And so I am also in the process of collaborating with other refugee agencies, disability agencies, and I'm hoping to conduct mixed method research to look deeper into this issue and understand how we can better assist refugees with disabilities, specially women, especially refugees with disabilities who are LGBTQ, or with other identities, and like making sure how how, how we can help them go through this, the process that go through the systems more smoothly.

Qudsiya Naqui:

That's really exciting. Mustapha, congratulations. I'm very excited to read your forthcoming work and to see what you do next. Well, this has been such a wonderful conversation. I personally have learned so much and I know that our listeners have as well. So thank you for taking the time to be with us.

Mustafa Rfat:

Thank you. Thank you very much for having me. I really, really appreciate your time. Thank you very, very much.

[jazzy piano chords, bass strumming with smooth R&B]

Qudsiya Naqui:

This episode was produced by Ilana Nevins and me. Our social media manager is Avery Anapol. Special thanks to Claire Shanley for designing our logo, and to Eiffel Gangsta Beats for our theme music. If you like what you’re hearing and reading, be sure to subscribe or drop us a review on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, Sticher, or wherever you love to listen, follow us on Twitter and Instagram at Down to the Struts, and join our Facebook group, Down to the Struts podcast. If you want a monthly update from me, including news from the disability community, sign up for our newsletter, Getting Down to It on Substack. If you have disability news or thoughts to share, drop us a line at [downtothestruts@gmail.com](mailto:downtothestruts@gmail.com). Thanks for listening, and see you in a couple of weeks so we can get back down to it!