

Disability Visibility Podcast
Episode 97: Disabled Refugees

Guest: Mustafa Rfat

Host: Alice Wong

Transcript by [Cheryl Green](#)

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Introduction

[radio static, voices singing with hip-hop beat]

LATEEF MCLEOD: This is the *Disability Visibility Podcast* with your host, Alice Wong.

ALICE WONG: Hello, my friends! Welcome to the *Disability Visibility Podcast*, conversations on disability politics, culture, and media. I'm your host, Alice Wong. Today I'm in conversation with Mustafa Rfat. Mustafa is a graduate student in the Public Administration Program at West Virginia University. He's also a trainee at the Leadership Education in Neurodevelopmental Disabilities (LEND) at the university. Mustafa came to the U.S. as a refugee from Iraq in 2011. You'll hear Mustafa talk about his experience as a refugee and his adjustment to life here in the United States. Mustafa will also describe the unique challenges and needs of refugees with disabilities. For more, you may want to check out Episode 32 of this podcast with [Dr. Mansha Mirza](#) who talked about a project in Illinois that helps refugees with disabilities access employment and career opportunities. Are you ready? [electronic beeping] Away we goooooo!

ELECTRONIC VOICE: 5, 4, 3, 2, 1.

ALICE: So, Mustafa, thank you so much for being on my podcast today!

MUSTAFA RFAT: Oh, you're more than welcome. Thank you for having me.

ALICE: So, Mustafa, why don't you first introduce yourself and share anything about your background, if you like.

MUSTAFA: So, my name is Mustafa Rfat. I am originally from Iraq. I came here as a refugee in 2011. I am also a person with disabilities. Currently, I am a graduate student at West Virginia University. I am also a LEND trainee at the Center for Excellence in Disabilities. And I am also a father of beautiful daughter named Daphne.

ALICE: Oh, wow. Congratulations. How old is Daphne?

MUSTAFA: Daphne is almost one year and four months.

ALICE: Wow! So, this is pretty new. Congratulations.

MUSTAFA: Thank you. Thank you.

[mellow ambient music break]

Life in Iraq and what led Mustafa to leave his country

ALICE: So, today's episode is about refugees with disabilities. And could you share a little bit about what life was like for you in Iraq and what led you to leave your country?

MUSTAFA: Before I left Iraq, I just graduated from college. I got my teaching degree, which I was very passionate about. So, I got my first job, and I had my first car. So, it was very, a very exciting time. Although I wanna say that the war of 2003 really never ended in Iraq, and still it's happening in different forms. So, we were living in war. At the beginning of 2010, you know, we experienced an event, and we had no choice except either die or leave our country. And I started this journey alone. I had to leave everything that I painstakingly built behind. And I left and became a refugee in Turkey.

ALICE: Yeah, that must've been really difficult. You know, emotionally, how did that impact your mental health and just missing your friends and your family and your culture? That must've been quite a shock.

MUSTAFA: Absolutely, absolutely. And living with disabilities was extra hard on me because I relied on the people around me in Iraq. When I left home, this was not a journey like you go and travel, and you come back home. This was one way out. And I still remember those painful moments where I hugged my family, and I, you know, I knew I'm going to unknown future. And it was very, very difficult mentally to accept, to accept this reality. This journey is very different for refugees with disabilities, because we start this journey with significant health issues, with significant financial issues, and we lose all the support. So, it makes it very, very hard.

[mellow ambient music break]

First arriving as a refugee

ALICE: When you arrived in Turkey, which was where you first arrived as a refugee before you came to the United States, how did you kind of start over? And really, regarding your disability, how did you kind of get your needs met? 'Cause that must've been incredibly scary to be in a new place and to really get the help you need just to live every day.

MUSTAFA: Most definitely. So, first, we need to register in a police station in a city that we arrive. So, I was waiting in a long line, because at that time, the war of Syria also started. So, there were a lot of Syrian refugees in Turkey. There was an older guy in front of me, and he was trying to explain his situation in English. And the police officer couldn't speak any English. And so, he understood something that he thought this guy was saying something bad to him. And the police officer got angry, and he threw his papers. And then he said, "I will deport you. You have no rights to say something bad to me." Because I am ethnically Turkmen, and I speak Turkish language, so even though I was very, very vulnerable, and I just jumped in. And I interrupted their argument, and I said, "Please, you know, you understood the situation differently. This guy did not mean to say things bad to you." And so, I calmed the situation, and I saved the man from deportation. And the police officer was like, you know, "God send you to me. Now you speak Arabic, and you speak Turkish. So, you are going to be my interpreter." And I became an interpreter in a northern city.

And that experience really changed my entire life because I was exposed to these agonizing stories of other refugees. And like hearing refugees where their first word was crying for hours, trying to explain these painful moments where they lost their homes, they lost their family members. Even though I myself experienced so many traumas, I was very empowered with this experience. At the same time, I also was in a very unique position

because I observed how children are being forced into child labor. You know, many refugees, like women being forced to prostitutions and all these issues that refugees faced. And I was there to help refugees access healthcare. I was there to help them in legal issues. I was there to help them when they did their interviews in the police station. So, that was like an eye-opening for me.

I also observed the process of refugees with disabilities trying to navigate this difficult process. Because like first of all, to be considered a refugee, you have to meet the definition of refugee status, which says that a person must have a well-founded fear of being prosecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationalities, and membership of a particular social or political opinion. I noticed that it was very difficult for refugees with intellectual disabilities, refugees with mental issues to explain their situation very well to the police officers who were trying to conduct their first interviews. It was heartbreaking at the end of the interview, like the police saying, like, "I can't help this guy because I don't know their stories. I have to document that this person is in danger." You know, that was very difficult, difficult time for refugees with disabilities.

[mellow ambient music break]

Discrimination, xenophobia, and the medical model of disability

ALICE: I imagine it's still the case all over the world, as there are refugees coming from all different places and fleeing persecution for all kinds of reasons, including, let's face it, discrimination and persecution for being disabled as well. 'Cause I think there's a lot of, in a lot of countries, really negative attitudes and discrimination towards refugees. As you mentioned earlier, people can't find work. People are forced to do a lot of things to survive because, you know, the societies that they're part of don't want them there. Did you experience any of that while you were in Turkey, in terms of, or even here in the United States, xenophobic kind of attitudes?

MUSTAFA: So, there is an idea called "medical model," and many nations that accept refugees and they welcome refugees, they use the medical model, which is unfortunately, very discriminatory model for refugees with disabilities. Because this model says that disabilities is a medical issues. And there's not much that the society can do about. And many nations wanna accept refugees who can work and contribute back to their society. But in reality, if we see especially like refugees with disabilities, you know, when they get the chance to be resettled, they do everything in their power to get education, to go back to work, and contribute back to their communities. But unfortunately, most of the time, it's overlooked and ignored and not, we don't hear about it. That is the beginning, when you are trying to get the resettlement, trying to get your case be accepted.

However, it's also important to recognize that, right now there are almost 80 million refugees where people are forced out of their country. So, and only a very, very small portion of this group get a chance to resettle. So, it's very, very difficult to get resettlement. It's a very long process. Unfortunately, during this process, refugees with disabilities, especially their health issues, get worse and worse and worse.

I remember when I came to the U.S, and I got my first health checkup, my doctor was shocked. And he was like, "We have to stop your medications because you are about to lose your kidneys and your liver." And I was like, you know, "I'm sorry, but I did not have any access to healthcare during my refugee time. And I was just taking these medication to calm my pain." But I really hope the UN and World Health Organization and other international organization recognize that, you know, there is a big disparities among refugees with disabilities. At least for them to have their case being viewed equally

because the UN, they believe that it's good to send refugees with disabilities back home because their home is the best place for them to live. However, the refugee crisis that we are seeing right now, like Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Libya, almost the entire cities are wiped out! There is no community to go back to. So, this is very different situation than it was in the past.

ALICE: What kind of protections and, frankly, services do you think agencies like the UN and other bodies really should make available for refugees with disabilities? Because clearly, there are very few choices, and people are in limbo for years in refugee camps, which is not sustainable or safe for many people. So, what do you think is necessary by the groups that are kind of in charge and just part of the resettlement process?

MUSTAFA: I mean, from my experience, I really think accessing basic healthcare is crucial. With people with disabilities, their health is the most important thing. And also, financial issues with people with disabilities is a serious problems because they can't work. They can't do the things that other refugees maybe can do, even if it's legal. And so, like having a very basic income that they can at least buy medications, buy some of the basic, basic things. And I also think making sure that their cases are being viewed equally without thinking that, OK, we need to send this group back home in their country becomes normal. Because as we have seen from the situation of Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Libya and other countries, it's been years that we couldn't see any solution for these countries.

[tender music break]

[The rigorous application process for refugees to enter and reside in a new country](#)

ALICE: I was wondering if you could also share a little bit about your experience in terms of the application process. Because I think most people do not understand how rigorous and difficult this process is for all refugees, but especially refugees with disabilities. You know, what was that like for you in Turkey in the process of getting to enter and reside in the United States?

MUSTAFA: Yes. God, this was the most difficult process in my life. So, there are multiple, multiple interviews from the host countries, which in my situation was the Turkish security. So, you do interviews almost every other weeks. At the same time, if the Turkish government accepts your application, your application gets sent to the UN, and you have to wait until the UN is able to view your application. And the final decision is made by the UN where they either gonna accept you as a refugee, which means that you will have a protection from the UN, or they will deny your case because they don't see a well-founded fear. So, there are multiple interviews by the UN, by the host countries, and these interviews have to match somehow. Your story has to be the same all the time. Any small differences can change your application.

And after you pass all these interviews, your application gets sent to whatever country is accepting refugees at that time, and your case gets reviewed by that country. If that country accepts your application, then the process of interviewing starts with that nation. And obviously, during this process, there are a lot of traveling from one city to another city to while we are getting these interviews done. And sometimes it can be very, very costly because you have to rent a hotel. You have to travel, you know, bus tickets, airplane tickets. So, that's why I was suggesting maybe like a very small income would be very helpful, at least for refugees with disabilities. This can take from one year all the way to 10 years and even 15 years, depending on the situation.

ALICE: And did you ever expect that the United States would be the country that accepted your application? Were you surprised by that?

MUSTAFA: That was very surprising because, you know, as I grew up, I never thought one day I will leave my home, I will leave my community, and travel so far, you know, like coming to the U.S. And I be honest with you, like, I did not watch many U.S. movies, so I never had that dream about coming to New York or like coming to the U.S. So, when I saw that the United States is reviewing my case, and after I conducted my interviews, they told me that they accepted my application, that was a very surprising thing, you know. But I was scared because I don't have anyone in the U.S., and I don't have any friends. So, in the beginning, it was very lonely, very lonely process.

[tender music break]

The transition process into the U.S. and connecting to Iraqi and disability communities

ALICE: I am curious about what your transition process was like when you arrived in the United States. I mean, what were some of the difficulties, and how did you connect with either both Iraqi communities and the disability communities in your area?

MUSTAFA: I got settled in Mobile, Alabama. When I got here, I was physically and mentally exhausted. I was very stressed, very depressed. I could not speak any English. I did not have any financial stability. My health was in a very bad situation. However, I promised myself while I was in the refugee camp that if I ever get a chance to go to a country, I will do everything in my power to get education and spend the rest of my life helping others, like people with disabilities, refugees, and other marginalized communities.

So, I remember I told my interpreter that I wanna go back to school. And she turned and looked at me, and she smiled. And she said, "I'm sorry, Mustafa, to say this, but here in the U.S., not everyone get the chance to go to college. It's very expensive, and it requires you to have very good English." And that was very disappointing respond to me. But because of my experience in a refugee camp that I was interpreting for other refugees, so I was very motivated. So, I said I need to learn English. So, despite my physical disabilities, I attended four schools in a day. So, basically, I was, in my first year, I spent my entire days learning English.

ALICE: Were there other things that, in addition to going to school, what helped you feel welcome?

MUSTAFA: I was lucky that I met a couple of friends who were from Iraq, and so they were very helpful. However, after six months, they moved to Chicago. So, I decided to go to Chicago. However, my experience in Chicago was not that good. I realized that even though I was living with three friends, it was very expensive, the cost of living. And I noticed that accessing education in Chicago was very competitive. I applied to many jobs, but unfortunately, I got denied because people saw me not speaking very well English and not having any degree. And they saw me a person with physical disabilities.

So, I applied for a housing program, and I got accepted in Morgantown, West Virginia. And I came to Morgantown, West Virginia alone. So, here I met a couple of friends who helped me a lot in the beginning. And one of them suggested to me to apply for a disability scholarship that was offered from one of the local disability organization. So, I applied for this scholarship, and they told me, yes, you are qualified; however, you have to pass a comprehensive test, and then if you pass the test, then you will be qualified for the scholarship.

So, I took the test. And as I was taking the test, I realized that this exam was not testing something that I was exposed to. It was testing something which was easy for someone who grew up, who went to high school. And so, I just realized that this test was unfair and unjust. And I was like, I need to come up with something that helps my counselor understand that this test was not designed for a refugee with disabilities.

I told my counselor, please, I need to explain my situation to you. I feel like there was something wrong in this test that you guys need to need to know. So, I told her, like, I am going to give you a very short test. If you passed my test, then I will walk out. I don't need any scholarship. But if you fail my test, you have to give me at least one chance and help me for one semester. I told her, I'm going to give you a word. If you know this word, and if you know how to spell it, if you know the meaning, then you will pass my test. Before I did this test, I ask one of my friend who was in college. I told them, like, can you give me a word like in any course that every college student is exposed to? And he gave me a word in biology. And he said, "Yeah, every college student needs to learn this word." So, I told my counselor, "Can you please spell this word for me and tell me the meaning?"

I did not mean to embarrass my counselor. I just wanted her to understand my situation. So, she tried to spell it. She couldn't spell it, and she couldn't tell me the meaning. And I told her, like, "You see? You are exposed to this word and you finished college in the U.S., and you have a master degree. And you couldn't answer my question. How can you expect me, where I did not, I wasn't exposed to all the questions you asked me to know it?" She consulted with her supervisor, and they decided to give me a scholarship for one semester. If I complete it successfully, then they will continue helping me. And guess what? I finished my Bachelor's with an honor. I completed with magna cum laude.

ALICE: And that's a lot of hard work in terms of your advocacy and determination. You know, so many of these application processes, testing really actively exclude a lot of people. And you were able to identify that, and luckily, you had a counselor that responded to that. So, that's really wonderful to hear. But hopefully, you made a difference in the way that they think about all the different kinds of students that are applying for this scholarship.

MUSTAFA: Yes. Yes. And, you know, after me, I encouraged other refugees with disabilities to apply for this scholarship. And I believe three of my friends were able to access this scholarship, and all of them successfully completed their Bachelors.

ALICE: That is awesome. And it's hopefully just the beginning!

[tender music break]

Leadership Education in Neurodevelopmental and Related Disabilities (LEND) and work to support refugees with disabilities

ALICE: You are currently a graduate student and trainee at Leadership Education in Neurodevelopment[al and Related] Disabilities at West Virginia University and working on a Master's in Public Administration. And you're also working on a project right now to help refugees, especially refugees with disabilities. Can you tell me a little bit about this project?

MUSTAFA: Yes, yes. So, from my experience, I noticed that we needed to approach refugee issues, especially refugees with disabilities' needs from bottom up, which means that we need to connect local agencies, local social organizations like disability organizations, rehabilitation services, human rights organizations, and refugee resettlement agencies. So, here in the U.S., we focus on work first instead of training first.

And but we see that refugees with disabilities needs a lot of help in the beginning, because their first year just focuses on getting their health issues taken care of. So, they need a little bit more time to gather themselves and access other services.

However, there is a gap that refugees with disabilities face after their time ends with refugee agencies. They are just left out. They don't know what other services are available in their communities. They don't know if there's like rehabilitation services, disability organizations, and things like that. What my project is doing right now, I'm combining that bottom-up approach with biopsychosocial model that emphasizes that we need to reduce that discriminatory policies, we need to reduce that societal attitudes against people with disabilities, and we need to open the access of people with disabilities to services. So, I am going to, in this process, to invite all the local organizations in Morgantown, West Virginia. That includes resettlement agencies, the Center for Excellence in Disabilities, other disability organizations, and rehabilitation services, human rights organizations. And I wanna have a discussion on how we can make sure that refugees with disabilities have an access to social services after their time ends with resettlement agencies. So, the hope in that is to we can reduce the timeline that refugees access social services. Because without this approach, refugees are left, and they wander around like myself, who traveled three states to find services. So, I'm hoping to solve these issues by connecting local organizations and helping refugees access social services easily and smoothly.

ALICE: What can disability-led community-based groups, what can they do? What should they do to better reach out and serve refugees with disabilities? What would you like to see?

MUSTAFA: Yes, thank you for this question. I really hope all disability organizations reach out to their local refugee resettlement agencies and ask them how we can help these vulnerable refugees access our services. Because what happened with Trump administration is that the Trump administration reduced the number of refugees accepted to the U.S. from 120,000 refugees to less than 15,000 refugees. That devastated refugee agencies, and many refugee agencies forced to close, lay off their workers. So, they are really struggling to meet the needs of refugees, especially refugees with disabilities, which we know they need more help. When disability organization and other social organization reach out to refugee agency and ask, like, how we can help, I think they are going to strengthen refugees and help them become self-sufficient, become independent, and help them, you know, contribute back to our society.

ALICE: Thank you for that.

MUSTAFA: You're welcome.

[mellow ambient music break]

ALICE: I guess my final question as we wrap up this conversation is that you talked about earlier, about wanting to spend your life and work serving others. So, what do you see for yourself in the future once you get your Master's degree? What do you wanna be doing in five or 10 years from now? What are you excited about?

MUSTAFA: Yeah. So, I am in the process to apply for a PhD program. Policy is a very important element while helping marginalized groups. So, from my Master's in Public Administration, I am getting this training. From my Master's in Social Work, I got to develop these crucial skills on how to help marginalized communities. However, as I moved on to help, I realized that there's a big gap in research on how to help marginalized and

underserved communities, especially refugees with disabilities. So, I am really hoping to get my PhD degree and start doing research. At the same time, I hope to become a professor and teach at graduate level.

ALICE: Well, Mustafa, I am just so thankful that you can share your story with me today. I really appreciate it.

MUSTAFA: Oh, I am very, very pleased to be on your show. Thank you very, very much for allowing me this chance to have this chat with you. And I really appreciate that.

ALICE: Well, I appreciate you. And I wish all the best with what you do with the future. And just thank you for your wisdom and all the things that you're doing for multiple communities.

MUSTAFA: Thank you. Thank you very, very much.

Wrap-up
[hip hop]

ALICE: This podcast is a production of the Disability Visibility Project, an online community dedicated to creating, sharing, and amplifying disability media and culture. All episodes, including text transcripts, are available at DisabilityVisibilityProject.com/Podcast.

You can also find out more about Mustafa on my website.

The audio producer for this episode is me, Cheryl Green. Introduction by Lateef McLeod. Theme music by Wheelchair Sports Camp.

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Thanks for listening! And see you on the Internets! Bye!!!

♪ rocket to the blast off
stop drop dance off ♪