



Elsie Aroyan changing the lives of others like her, an illustration by Bureau Verstaak.

Writing a new chapter: how a Syrian-Armenian is changing the lives of others like her

This story is part of the #Volunteers4Refugees campaign, launched by UNV in partnership with UNHCR on World Refugee Day 2019. The campaign features stories of six UN Volunteers working with UNHCR in the Arab States, Europe and CIS for one mission: to help save lives and build better futures for those forced from home.

When the war in Syria began in 2011, Elsie Aroyan was working as an elementary school teacher in her hometown of Aleppo. But instead of teaching a lesson one day, Elsie would learn one that would change the trajectory of her life.

“My husband and I were in a remote city visiting our relatives when the situation in Aleppo became worse and we couldn’t go back home,” she says. “When I closed the door of my apartment 8 years ago, I thought I would be leaving for a week, but ended up leaving my home for good.”

Just imagine what that would feel like — not being able to say goodbye to your hometown while living in a constant state of fear. Elsie isn't the only one.

Today, Armenia hosts refugees and asylum seekers of more than 30 nationalities, with around 14,000 of them being ethnic Armenians from Syria. They all fled their homes either because of war or persecution and discrimination due to their race, nationality, political opinion, religious beliefs and belonging to a particular social group.

Today, Elsie, 36, serves with UNHCR as a UN Volunteer to protect the rights of refugees and build a brighter future for the forcibly displaced communities and stateless people in Armenia.

Like millions of other Syrians, Elsie and her husband had no choice but to seek refuge in a safer place, and their journey brought them to Armenia. They did not have control over what happened to them — but they could control what happened next, and Elsie decided to close a painful chapter in her book while opening a new one where she could position herself to help those who could no longer help themselves.

She became a UN Volunteer.

It was by no means an easy journey, however. It was particularly challenging when she came to Armenia because she didn't speak the local dialect. "When you can't communicate or express yourself fully, you feel even more foreign and out of place," she says.

Despite the language barrier and other obstacles that complicated her integration into a new society and adjustment to a new normal, Elsie made a smooth transition into Armenia's labor market. She joined an initiative developed by the UN Development Programme that offered a six-month paid internship program for 60 graduates, most of whom were displaced from Syria and Ukraine. This programme allowed Elsie to obtain the necessary work experience that aligned with her education, while gaining practical skills for a career with the United Nations.

Driven by her own experience of being a displaced person, she decided to join UNHCR — first as an intern and later as a national UN volunteer specializing in community services. Today, she proudly serves as a community services assistant, where she provides both in-person as well as telephone counselling to asylum-seekers and refugees who come to Armenia from a range of countries, including Iran, Iraq, Yemen, Syria, Turkey and Ukraine.

“ Every refugee has a story to tell and while every journey refugees go through is unique, there is one thing that unites them — they all had to endure many challenges and hardships on their way to Armenia.” -
- Elsie Aroyan, UN Volunteer community services assistant with UNHCR, Armenia.


“Being a displaced person myself, I can imagine what they are feeling. The strongest feeling for me is nostalgia. Every day when I walk along the streets of Yerevan, I see students and I think of my classmates in Syria, I see families and friends gathering together in Armenia, and it reminds me of my own family and friends who are now scattered across different countries.”

The stinging reminder of the pain of her painful journey is always in the back of Elsie’s mind — and that is why she works so diligently to ease the pain of other refugees. One way she does so is by conducting regular monitoring visits to the Reception Center for asylum seekers where she meets with them, informs them of their rights and makes sure their needs are addressed properly. She finds this type of work particularly rewarding — and being able to see the impact her work has on the lives of others makes it even more worthwhile.

“Once I met a woman, who recently arrived in Armenia from Syria and desperately needed a job to support her mother and two younger sisters,” Elsie recalls. “She was working in a bakery and wasn’t earning enough to provide for her family. We were able to help her find a job at a pharmaceutical factory. No words could express my happiness, especially when I saw the smiling face of this woman. Such stories give me strength and motivation to continue my work.”

Even as Elsie is a ray of hope for others, her own future looks bright as she plans to continue supporting the work of the UNHCR in Armenia as a UN Volunteer.

“My work here taught me that I can achieve my goals, even if they seem too far away,” she says. “When I arrived, I was very lost and couldn’t imagine I would find my place in this country. But I learned to never give up and to continue my journey — and want to inspire and help other displaced persons to find their place as well.”

 Europe and the CIS

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