Leaving corporates for refugees: one life change that changed many others

“Through my experience with the refugees, I have found the real meaning of my life.” With these words, Endah Ayuningsih Yuliarso (Indonesia, 33) summarizes her life-changing experience, which demarcated a shift in her personal career from dealing with numbers to supporting refugees.

“Most of my career as a lawyer was spent representing corporations and high net worth individuals. I always felt that my efforts mostly ended up adding digits in someone’s bank account,” explains Endah.

Despite being thankful for having such a prestigious job, Endah always felt something was missing: a purpose in life.

In her journey to search for such a purpose, she came across an old friend who introduced her to the world of humanitarian work, which was completely different than the world she has been living in.

“This shift made me realize that the world is bigger than what I have always thought. It was
a new insight that gave me the courage to take a big leap and do something different, something that I have never done in my life, and which I hoped will give me a new meaning in my life," explains Endah. “That was the time when I decided to join UNHCR.”

“You would never know what the future holds for you,” says Endah. “Ten years prior to writing this story, I have never imagined myself working with refugees, let alone in Iraq.”

Crossing paths with different people has brought Endah different opportunities until she reached this point in her life. However, there is one thing she says she will always know: “I will always dedicate myself and my career to improve the lives of people who are less fortunate than me.”

At the beginning of her volunteering assignment with UNHCR in Erbil, in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, Endah supported child protection activities. During this time, her tasks focused on ensuring the safety and well-being of refugee children, some of whom had arrived alone to Iraq or had lost both parents during the conflict in their home country (mostly Syria).

Later on, Endah assumed responsibility in other core protection activities, dealing mainly with registration of refugees and assessing their protection needs, at the Urban Refugee Registration Centre in Erbil.

"During my daily work, I often face heart breaking cases of traumatized refugees who barely made it to Iraq, leaving everything behind and often in possession of nothing more than the clothes they wear," explains Endah.

Assessing the needs of those refugees and ensuring their needs are fulfilled, to the extent permitted by available resources, is at the core of Endah’s tasks.

What was touching for Endah throughout her journey with UNHCR was the patience and compassion shown by refugees.

“ I was witness to so many acts of kindness where refugee families, already living with financial constraints, open their doors for total strangers; other refugee families whom they never met before. -- Endah Yuliarso, international UN Volunteer with UNHCR in Iraq.

One of Endah’s most memorable experiences was about a refugee who tried to pay back an assistance he had received.

*One time, we delivered assistance to a refugee who had no money to cover even for a
meal. Later, that refugee managed to secure a job and came to us to return the financial assistance that was provided to him before. He said he wanted someone else to benefit from the assistance."

After explaining that original assistance was provided with no expectation of a payback, and that UNHCR cannot take it back, the man told Endah he was determined to help other refugees facing his previous situation.

Such encounters allowed Endah to learn a few valuable lessons:

"I learned that the true essence of life never lies in money, power or fame. I learned how to overcome difficulties and to always look at the bright side of life, even during some of the most challenging times."

I know that someday, when I look back at this experience, I will always be thankful for the interactions I had with refugees. These taught me some of the most valuable lessons in my life. -- Endah Yuliarso

Arab States

- refugees • Indonesia

Sustainable Development Goal: SDG 10: Reduced inequalities, SDG 17: Partnerships for the goals