

# Don't turn away

**Aideen McLaughlin** says our city of means can easily do more for the destitute and often abused refugees who have found their way to Hong Kong, wishing only to survive

For one hour last week, I was Zaara Schenoude, a 36-year-old Middle Eastern factory worker. My hometown was being destroyed by sectarian violence, wreaking havoc on my people, and I was forced to flee under armed guard, herded with 80 others to a refugee camp across the border. Apart from my ID card, jewellery and headscarf, I had no belongings, no money and no choice.

Along the way, I became separated from my family. I was caught in gunfire and interrogated and intimidated by armed soldiers who were supposed to protect me.

I traded my wedding ring at the border just to get across and my watch at the camp to get food and water. I was ordered to keep my hair covered at all times and wasn't allowed to speak to any of the men. I constantly kept my eyes to the floor, afraid of drawing attention to myself. I felt powerless, humiliated, frightened, alone.

I huddled in a tent in the blistering heat, cheek-by-jowl with nine others, each jostling for a small space to call our own. From there, I was handpicked by the camp guards and taken to a room where they checked my mouth to see if I was healthy, then threatened to rape me. If I refused to cooperate, they said they would kill me ... and then it was over.

This was my experience of participating in a live simulation organised by the Hong Kong charity Crossroads Foundation to try to give people some insight into what it might be like to be a refugee.

According to one refugee who had previously participated in the simulation, what we experienced was just 15 per cent of what they went through every day. I did it for just one hour and it was one of the most intense episodes of my life.

But, at the end, I was able to walk away and go home. All that stayed with me was a bad headache and the knowledge that this would never be me.

But would it never be me? Or you, for that matter? For all that really stands between you and me and a "real" refugee is circumstance.

Refugees are ordinary people caught up in extraordinary situations beyond their control. They had lives and professions and families, like us. They had hopes and dreams and expectations. They probably thought, "it will never be me" – until it was.

Today is United Nations World Refugee Day, a day of commemoration when communities around the world come together to reflect on what it means to be a refugee



and to celebrate refugees' contributions to our societies. In many places around the globe, the festivities extend to a week. But for refugees in Hong Kong, there's not a lot to celebrate.

Hong Kong does not recognise refugees. That is despite the fact that this city was built on the contributions of refugees, made by the thousands of people who fled across the border from the Cultural

**People [are] kept on the brink of destitution in an attempt to deter others from coming**

Revolution and civil war on the mainland, seeking protection in the nearest safe place.

For those refugees today who survive long enough to get here, they are forced to subsist on bags of food handed out by the government equivalent to HK\$40 a day; that's HK\$13 for each meal. They get HK\$1,500 per month towards rent, so low that it forces many to live on the margins in rundown settlements that can hardly qualify as housing.

I have met families literally living in pigsties, trying to get clean water by filtering it through a sock; people kept on the brink of destitution in an attempt to deter others like them from coming.

But still they come. Why? Because they have no choice. Today, around 500 ordinary people will have no choice but to flee Ukraine; 500,000 people have had no choice but to escape from Mosul in Iraq

since the weekend; and tens of thousands have been forced to flee Syria this past month.

There are currently around 15.4 million refugees in the world. Eighty per cent of them are hosted by poorer nations, not rich places like Hong Kong. There are only about 8,000 people seeking protection here; that's just 0.1 per cent of the Hong Kong population.

In comparison to most other countries, the numbers who make it to our city are small. And yet Hong Kong does not offer them any chance of long-term protection. Surely we can do better?

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## Respect due

**Tony Read** says people in Hong Kong need to shun prejudice and rekindle their generosity of spirit towards vulnerable asylum seekers and refugees

Whenever an article appears in the media about the plight of asylum seekers and asks for better treatment, you can expect an outpouring of scorn, racial discrimination and downright abuse from the public. When such blatant discrimination is combined with an ignorance of the facts, it is time for alarm.

When we disagree with another person's opinion, we should be able to speak out strongly in opposition without fear of recrimination or victimisation. We must not demonise, slander or vilify our opponents but instead treat them with respect.

Everyone needs and deserves respect, regardless of their views and situation. But respect is a reciprocal relationship; it is hard to respect people who violate your dignity and worth. Freedom of speech is a hard-won human right, but that does not give a person the right to use it to vilify others.

In Hong Kong, asylum seekers are damned without being heard.

When asylum seekers enter Hong Kong, we need to treat them with the same respect as everyone else. That is why we have a screening process designed to determine their status. We expect to be treated equally under the law and we expect to be considered innocent until proven guilty. Unless we honour those principles, regardless of circumstance and extend them to asylum seekers, we run the risk of devaluing them altogether.

The society we inherit is the society we build from the values we generate and honour. This is our responsibility as part of civil society and not the task of the government or human rights lawyers.

But the government does seem to play on these prejudices to bolster its position of not recognising refugees. In a society that is aspiring to world-class status and taking steps to be fair, tolerant of others, and providing equal opportunities in all aspects of business, it is invidious that refugees are still treated as personae non gratae.

The principle of respect needs to be embodied in the mechanisms used by the government to process asylum seekers through its unified screening mechanism and in considering resettlement. Even if Hong Kong has not signed the 1951 Refugee Convention and even if it has a policy of not accepting successful protection claimants within its borders, it still has a duty to conduct a fair and efficient screening process – and to do it with respect and consideration.

It has often been said that society will be judged by how it treats its most vulnerable people. Hong Kong has a good past record and has shown a generosity of spirit in its welcome of the Vietnamese boat people and in receiving a huge influx of Chinese fleeing the civil war on the mainland.

It would be a great loss if this were to be rejected in favour of a culture of discrimination and prejudice in the 21st century.

After all, the vast majority of its population are descendants of immigrants and should therefore extend a generosity of spirit to others facing the same horrors of war and threat to life that their parents and grandparents experienced.

Tony Read is justice advocate for The Vine Church in Wan Chai

## Beijing's white paper sounds the death knell for Hong Kong as we know it

The State Council's white paper on the "one country, two systems" policy in Hong Kong is tantamount to a death certificate for China's promise of a "high degree of autonomy" in the special administrative region.

The paper was published in Chinese and English and has also been translated into French, Russian, German, Spanish, Arabic and Japanese.

It is obviously meant to be an international announcement of Beijing's latest policy on Hong Kong, almost 30 years after the signing of the Sino-British Joint Declaration spelling out the conditions of Hong Kong's return to Chinese rule.

Much of this wordy document is typical propaganda.

Take the section on "Supporting Hong Kong in the fight against Sars", for example. It reads: "To ensure the safety of life of the Hong Kong people and help the Hong Kong economy climb out of recession, the central government promptly lent a helping hand. Although the mainland also needed medical supplies in the fight against Sars, the central government provided a large quantity of free medical supplies to Hong Kong."

What it does not say is that the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus that was spread to the world via Hong Kong came from the mainland. Hong Kong was caught unprepared because of the Chinese authorities' cover-up of the health crisis despite media reports of growing panic.

If the central government had warned Hong Kong and the World Health Organisation of the hazard, our frontline medical staff might have had the first Sars

**Albert Cheng** says by reneging on its pledge of a high degree of autonomy for 50 years, Beijing seeks to turn the SAR into just another Chinese city



patient in the city quarantined in time after he was admitted to Kwong Wah Hospital.

Propaganda aside, the white paper also signals a drastic change of Beijing's attitude to how Hong Kong is to be run.

It declares that "the high degree of autonomy of the HKSAR is not full autonomy, nor a decentralised power. It is the power to run local affairs as authorised by the central leadership. The high degree of autonomy of HKSAR is subject to the level of the central

**It is now up to Hongkongers to speak up in the months ahead to fight for what we deserve**

leadership's authorisation. There is no such thing called 'residual power'."

That is to say, Beijing can dictate what can or cannot be done in Hong Kong, as it sees fit. This, of course, includes the plan for the next chief executive to be elected on a "one-person, one-vote" basis in 2017.

This is a far cry from what Hong Kong people and the world were given to understand. China is supposed to exercise control only over the SAR's

defence and diplomatic affairs. Apart from that, Hong Kong should have a free hand in administering its domestic affairs.

The paper also introduces "patriotism" as a selection criterion for officials of the SAR government, including judges at all levels. The notion of "Hong Kong people running Hong Kong" has now been twisted into "Hong Kong patriots running Hong Kong".

Top officials, of course, have to take an oath of allegiance before they take office. Yet, patriotism is not a legal concept. In practice, it will be up to Beijing to define who is patriotic.

Even a former communist high official closely involved in the Sino-British negotiations in the 1980s has found the white paper unpalatable.

Bao Tong, the former policy secretary of Zhao Ziyang (趙紫陽), who signed the Joint Declaration as Chinese premier, has urged the Chinese authorities to retract the white paper so as to salvage its international reputation.

Bao denounced the paper as a short-sighted attempt to suppress the Occupy Central movement.

His views, expressed through the international media, resonate with mainstream public opinion in Hong Kong.

In June 1995, *Fortune* magazine screamed in its cover story, "The Death of Hong Kong", saying that under Chinese rule Hong Kong would

lose its role as an international commercial and financial hub. Twelve years later, the magazine back-tracked and conceded, "Well, we were wrong ... reports of Hong Kong's death have been greatly exaggerated."

Another seven years have gone by. *Fortune's* original prediction now does not seem that far off the mark, after all. The promise of Hong Kong's high degree of autonomy is meant to be valid for at least 50 years. The white paper, however, has ended that 33 years too early.

Critics have taken the white paper as a renunciation of "one country, two systems" as we know it.

We can hardly depend on Leung Chun-ying's administration to defend our rights. Instead, top local officials have been lobbying community leaders to rally behind the white paper.

It is now up to Hongkongers to speak up in the critical months ahead to fight for what we deserve.

The legal fraternity will launch a protest march from the High Court to the Court of Final Appeal next week.

Lawyers are, for the most part, not accustomed to street action. This may as well mark the beginning of a new campaign to prevent Hong Kong from degenerating into just another Chinese city under communist rule.

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## More female voices needed in media to ensure fair reporting

**Su-Mei Thompson** says gender stereotypes are holding women back

Last week, the region's leading media titles gathered in Hong Kong for the annual awards dinner of the Society of Publishers in Asia, which this year celebrated a new category for "Excellence in Reporting on Women's Issues". Earlier, in March, Singapore toasted the winners of the "Women's Empowerment Journalism Awards", which attracted over 300 entries.

For both awards events, several of the most highly commended pieces were investigative accounts of the brutal Delhi rape incident. Incisive coverage by the international press condemning the assailants ignited months of local protests and global scrutiny.

Under pressure, the Indian government passed several tough new laws against rape, underscoring the power of the media to effect change.

But the awards and the positive outcome of the media coverage of the Delhi rape belie the fact that, in most reports of violence against women, the press is largely insensitive to the gender implications of the way reports are constructed.

Indeed, many accounts manifest the media's presumptions about ossified patriarchal systems and the patriarchal values that act as the lens through which harassment against women should be viewed and judged.

Reporting that leads by describing what the victim was wearing, whether she was drinking and why she was out so late at night implicitly – if not explicitly – shifts the blame to the victim instead of focusing on

the central question of why, in the 21st century, men and boys continue to perpetrate violence against women and girls.

For example, last May, in response to a government report showing that rape cases in Hong Kong for the first three months of the year increased by 60 per cent over a year ago, Secretary for Security Lai Tung-kuok appealed to women not to drink "too much".

International finger-wagging at India for lagging behind first-world liberal attitudes towards women is also hypocritical and doesn't stand up to scrutiny.

For example, in last year's highly publicised Steubenville case, two high school athletes

**Finger-wagging at India for lagging behind liberal attitudes towards women is hypocritical**

sexually assaulted a drunken teenage girl in yet another incident of campus rape in the US. CNN's reporting of the incident was roundly criticised for presenting an unduly sympathetic view of the rapists and how their promising academic and athletic careers had been brought tragically low by the outcome of the trial.

These biases are in part due to a gender imbalance in reporting – both in terms of talent and topics reported.

Worldwide, women make up just 36 per cent of reporter jobs and occupy only 27 per cent of top management in media organisations. Across the major UK newspapers, women write around a fifth of the stories; in the US, women write less than a third of the op-eds.

A survey of one month's worth of articles in the seven most widely distributed Chinese and English newspapers in Hong Kong shows that only 38.5 per cent were written by women and, of these articles, 80 per cent were on "pink-collar" topics: fashion, food, family and leisure.

Clearly, we need a new awareness of the value system that is colouring or occluding the narrative.

And we need more women's voices to emerge, not just in social media, but in the pages of the traditional press and on the most popular TV news channels, across the most important issues of the day, from geopolitics to global security, from the international economy and financial markets to global health and the environment.

Through the influence of more female voices and more informed media practices, excellence in reporting on women's issues can truly begin to transform the pervasive gender stereotypes in media and news reporting, and ultimately the attitudes that continue to hold women back.

Su-Mei Thompson is CEO of The Women's Foundation. Lisa Moore and Jessica Gao also contributed to this article, which is part of a monthly series on gender issues developed in collaboration with the foundation