Women Refugee Committee (WRC) Interview

Interview questions and responses

1. How, when and why was your Committee founded?

The Women Refugee Committee (WRC) was established in 2020, at the same time as the Umbrella Refugee Committee (URC).

The Committee was created to provide a dedicated space for refugee women to come together, connect, support one another and make their voices heard.

It was founded in recognition of the specific challenges refugee women often face, including social isolation, limited access to opportunities and barriers to participating fully in society.

From the beginning, WRC's mission has been to empower refugee women, strengthen solidarity between different communities and encourage women to take an active role in society and in decisions that affect their lives.

2. Can you describe the activities your Committee does or has done?

WRC organises a variety of activities focused on empowerment, social participation, inclusion and building connections between different communities.

Our activities include cultural and traditional events, social gatherings, motivational sessions and workshops that encourage women to share their experiences, build confidence and support one another.

We also organise educational activities such as language classes, driving theory lessons, sports activities and workshops covering women's rights, mental well-being, personal development and self-care.

In addition to our community-based activities, WRC has participated in programmes, meetings and events organised by the European Parliament, the European Commission and other European institutions.

We also collaborate with NGOs, institutions and different community groups to create more opportunities for refugee women, strengthen partnerships and ensure that their voices and experiences are represented in wider society.

Our aim is not simply to support women, but to create opportunities for them to demonstrate their abilities, participate actively and become empowered members of society.

3. Who does the Committee serve? Can you tell us a little about your community in Belgium?

WRC primarily serves refugee women living in Belgium who come from different countries, cultures and backgrounds.

Our community brings together women of different nationalities and ages, including women from Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq, Iran, Ukraine and many other countries.

Every woman has her own story, experiences and challenges. Some have recently arrived in Belgium and are trying to rebuild their lives, while others have been living here for several years.

What connects us is our shared experience of displacement and our desire to build a better future.

WRC provides a space where women can connect, share their experiences, develop their skills, support one another and feel that they belong to a community.

4. What challenges does your Committee face?

One of the biggest challenges WRC faces is the lack of a permanent space where women can regularly meet, organise activities and feel that they have a place of their own.

Another major challenge is the absence of independent and sustainable funding. Limited financial resources make it difficult to plan long-term activities, implement ongoing projects and respond to the growing needs of refugee women.

As much of our work relies on voluntary contributions, we depend heavily on the time, energy and commitment of our members.

Furthermore, working with women from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds requires flexibility, additional resources and an understanding of diverse needs.

Despite these challenges, we remain committed to our mission and continue working to create meaningful opportunities for refugee women.

5. What ideas or dreams do you have for your Committee in the future?

My dream is to see WRC grow into a strong, independent and influential organisation that creates real and positive change in the lives of refugee women.

I would love for us to have a permanent, safe and welcoming space where refugee women, particularly those who are vulnerable, isolated or facing difficult circumstances, can find support, have their voices heard, regain confidence and discover new opportunities.

I also hope to expand our educational, professional and empowerment programmes, develop stronger partnerships with different organisations and play a more active role in European discussions and decision-making processes concerning the rights of refugee women.

Ultimately, I want WRC to become an organisation that we can all be proud of: an organisation recognised for its real impact, one that strengthens the voices of refugee women and turns solidarity into meaningful opportunities and lasting change.

Above all, I want every woman who walks through our doors to feel that she is not alone and that she has a place where she belongs.

6. What role has URC played for your Committee?

Since WRC was established in 2020, the Umbrella Refugee Committee (URC) has played an important role in supporting its development and activities.

URC has provided an important organisational platform for WRC, creating opportunities for cooperation, networking and connections with other refugee committees and communities.

Through URC, WRC has been able to strengthen its relationships with different organisations, participate in joint initiatives and projects, and bring the voices and experiences of refugee women to wider platforms.

URC has also helped create opportunities for representation, visibility and mutual support among refugee communities.

For us, URC is more than an umbrella organisation. It is a platform for solidarity, collective action and strengthening the voices of refugee communities in Belgium.

7. As a member of your Committee, could you tell us a little bit about yourself?

My name is Fatemah Shirzad, and I am currently the President of the Women Refugee Committee (WRC) and the Treasurer of the Umbrella Refugee Committee (URC).

I have more than five years of experience working in the field of refugee and asylum-seeker support, including through my work with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and refugee-led organisations in Belgium.

Throughout this journey, I have been particularly interested in supporting refugee communities, promoting women's rights and creating opportunities for women to become more independent and actively participate in society.

For me, being involved in WRC is more than an organisational responsibility. It is a meaningful personal commitment to creating positive change in the lives of refugee women.

8. When and how did you come to Belgium? Would you like to share your story of arriving in this country?

I arrived in Belgium in early 2016.

My arrival in this country felt as though I had suddenly been dropped into an unfamiliar world, almost as if I had found myself in the middle of an ocean, neither drowning nor knowing how to reach the shore.

At that time, I felt as though my life had come to an end. I was alive, but I was not really living. I was a young refugee woman, far away from my family, my home and my country. I knew nothing about my new surroundings. I did not speak any of Belgium’s local languages, or even English. I did not know where to begin, and there was no one to show me the way.

During my first years, I experienced deep loneliness, uncertainty and many difficult moments. Brussels witnessed some of the hardest days of my life. These experiences affected me so deeply that I even considered writing a book titled “Brussels and My Tears”, in which I wanted to bring together the memories, difficulties and experiences of those years.

Despite all these challenges, I always held on to one dream: continuing my education at university.

In Afghanistan, I had completed my secondary education and earned a Bachelor’s degree in Civil Engineering. However, while living in a refugee reception centre, I repeatedly heard people around me saying that Afghan educational qualifications had no value in Belgium and that continuing my studies in engineering would not be possible. Gradually, these comments affected my confidence. Even in language classes, I sometimes felt ashamed to mention that I had a university degree in Civil Engineering because I thought people might laugh at my educational background.

During this period, I started learning English and French and attended French classes at Bruxelles Formation. Thinking that perhaps I would not be able to continue studying engineering, I considered taking a vocational course and entering the job market. I therefore chose accounting.

During one of the guidance meetings, a staff member suggested that, as an Afghan woman, I should instead take a course in cleaning restaurant tables. When I explained that I already had a university degree, she told me that this degree did not matter and that I should put it aside. This experience was deeply painful and

discouraging, but it also made me more determined not to let others decide what I was capable of or what my future should look like.

In 2017, I went to ULB to register and continue my studies, but I received no help or guidance. In 2018, I returned to the university. This time, I met a woman who was responsible for supporting and guiding refugee students. She listened to me and helped me with the registration process and continuing my education. I have never forgotten her support, because meeting her became an important turning point in my life.

Eventually, I was able to continue my studies and complete my Master's degree in Civil Engineering through my studies at ULB and VUB.

For me, this achievement meant much more than simply obtaining a university degree. Education helped me rebuild my confidence, regain my professional identity and find my place in Belgian society. Along the way, I made wonderful friends and built a valuable network of successful and supportive people. I no longer felt as lonely and lost as I had during my early years. I rediscovered motivation, happiness and a sense of belonging.

This experience taught me that even when the path seems very difficult, we should never give up on our dreams or underestimate our abilities. Sometimes, one opportunity, the right guidance or the support of another person can change the course of someone's life.

Finally, I would like to share a sentence that, for me, expresses the feeling of migration very well:

"Immigrating to another country splits your heart in half. After a while, you become too foreign for the home you left, and too foreign for the home you found. It makes you unsettled, no matter how many years have passed."

9. What is your motivation?

My greatest motivation comes from my own personal experience. I know what it feels like to start life in a new country, to be separated from your family, unfamiliar with the language and culture, confused and unsure where to begin.

I also understand how vulnerable a woman can become when she lacks information and support, and how easily people in difficult circumstances can be exposed to exploitation by those who take advantage of their vulnerability.

One of my strongest motivations is that I do not want other women to experience the same loneliness, confusion and lack of support that I experienced when I first arrived in Belgium.

I want refugee women to have access to accurate information, reliable support, equal opportunities and a safe environment where they can ask questions without fear, speak about their challenges and make informed decisions about their futures.

For me, being involved in WRC is not just an organisational responsibility; it is a personal and humanitarian commitment. I believe refugee women should not be seen only as recipients of support. They should also have the opportunity to discover their abilities, become independent, make their voices heard and play an active role in society.

My greatest motivation is to be part of the change that I once needed myself.

10. What is your advice for refugees who are newly arrived?

First of all, believe in yourself and in your abilities. I know how difficult, confusing and sometimes discouraging it can be to start life in a new country. But remember that arriving in a new country does not mean that your life has come to an end. It can be the beginning of a new chapter.

Give yourself time. Learn the language, find out about your rights and the opportunities available to you, take education and learning new skills seriously, and try to build healthy and supportive social connections.

Do not be afraid to ask for help, and do not allow your current circumstances to limit your dreams for the future. Try to maintain your independence, make informed decisions and plan for your future.

Most importantly, do not define yourself only by the word “refugee”. Before anything else, you are a person with talents, abilities, dreams and many possibilities.

I once arrived in Belgium feeling lost and discouraged, but education helped me find my direction again.

Never lose hope. Your circumstances may be difficult today, but your life story is far from over.

11. Is there a word or phrase from your language that you wish everyone knew?

The word I would like everyone to know is “Omid” (Hope).

In Persian, hope means believing that even in the most difficult circumstances, a new path may still be possible.

For me, hope is more than just a word. It is what gives people the strength to start again, work towards a better future and refuse to give up.