IMPACT REPORT 2023

Refugees Welcome

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1. Who are Refugees Welcome?

Refugees Welcome is a citizen-led platform whose objective is to promote a Welcoming Culture through the accommodation of displaced people alongside local citizens, promoting mutual respect and equality. As such, Refugees Welcome advocate for the right to housing for this group of people, who face many challenges. The need to have a home, a refuge, and a comfortable place for people who are forced to move from their countries of origin is essential for rebuilding the rest of their lives and integrating into a new country, language, society, and culture.

Pascale, Vice President of Refugees Welcome Spain, explains how we differentiate ourselves from other organisations:

"Refugees Welcome, as a citizen-led platform, aims to promote a real Welcoming Culture. What sets us apart from other organisations is that we offer local citizens the opportunity to live with refugees. Furthermore, we involve citizens as volunteers in various activities, which is a crucial part of our work. At the same time, through their actions, they raise awareness of the need for coexistence in their communities. The people who support us, either by offering their time or their financial contributions, help build this 'Welcoming Culture'. – Pascale Mertens.

The Refugees Welcome Movement

Refugees Welcome is an organisation with a different and innovative way of thinking. Founded in 2014 in Berlin by Mareike Geiling, Jonas Kakoschke, and Golde Ebding, it aims to ensure the horizontal inclusion of displaced people in our society through access to housing solutions. With its promising and innovative goals, the organisation managed to expand rapidly beyond Germany, and in August 2015, it arrived in Spain with the establishment of Refugees Welcome Spain (RWE).

In nearly a decade of activity in the country, we have promoted these objectives through participation in cultural events, appearances in newspapers, informative sessions, collaboration with various organisations, and promotion of events. This has helped us to not only gain visibility, but also, attract more volunteers and homes willing to host refugees.

Although our core objectives are broadly aligned to the objectives of Coexistance Welcome Germany (Refugees Welcome Germany), due to our different contexts, we have specific objectives developed in the context of Spain. There are three main objectives to highlight as pillars of our organisations:

- **To facilitate the access of displaced people** to share housing with local people, with the aim of facilitating their social inclusion. We achieve this by helping displaced people and locals to get to know each other by living together.
- Raising public awareness of the situation of displaced people through **awareness-raising and communication** activities to encourage more people to live together through our system. Empower citizens through awareness-raising and communication activities about the situation of displaced people, with the aim of encouraging more people to want to share their homes through our resources.

- **Involve the local community in the 'Welcoming Culture,'** through active participation as volunteers.

Beyond integration

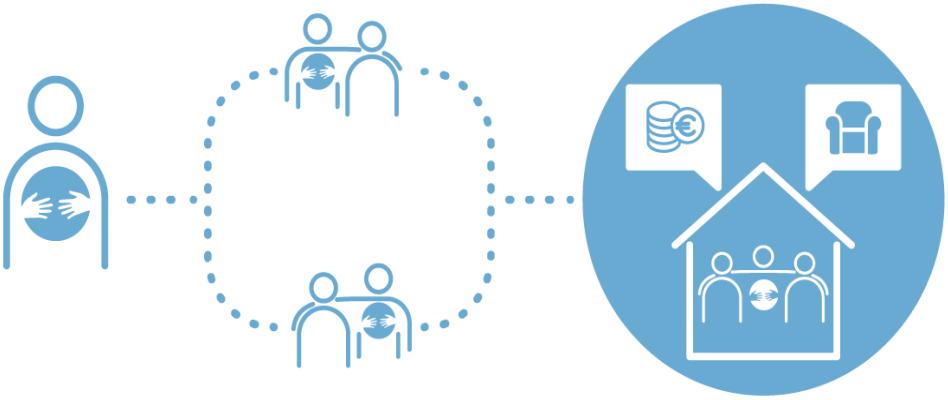
The etymology of words and how people relate to their meaning is an important part of our work. Therefore, instead of referring to migrants in vulnerable situations as "refugees," we have opted for the term "displaced people." This careful choice of terminology extends to other terms as well. One key distinction is between "inclusion" and "integration."

While "integration" is a valid term, as an organisation, we prefer "inclusion." The latter ensures that, when referring to our work, the public develops a framework within which they understand that our mission involves horizontal inclusion, where displaced people become part of society just like anyone else. On the other hand, the term "integration," can be misleading. It may suggest the insertion of displaced people into society without necessarily becoming part of existing social groups of people. Integration may be limited to being part of a particular group in society without necessarily achieving full participation, unlike inclusion, which refers to participation.

To ensure the success of our mission of inclusion, several strategies have been adopted. Firstly, raising awareness of the 'Welcoming Culture.' To achieve our goal of minimising fear of the unknown and making local people more welcoming towards displaced people, we have actively appeared in the media, events, talks, and more. In 2023, for example, **RWE Catalonia made 20 appearances across various media,** including radio, television, articles, and other communication channels. This media presence is not limited to Catalonia; it is a strategy adopted by all RW branches.

Another important strategy that helps to ensure inclusion in the local community is participation in events. In 2023, RWE participated in various **events**, such as **World Refugee Day, Festa del Associa't, Sant Jordi al Raval, Festa Tardor in Sant Cugat, Mescla't in Sabadell (local festivals in Catalonia), etc.** By participating in cultural events, displaced people have the opportunity to meet the local community and gain a better understanding of local culture, which ultimately contributes significantly to their inclusion. However, displaced people are not the only ones who learn. The local community has the opportunity to meet displaced people, learning more about other cultures and societies.

One of our latest strategies to ensure the inclusion of displaced people in society is through 'cultural outings'. We invite those involved with the organisation to go out and participate in culturally enriching experiences. These activities allow everyone to socialise and get to know the community they belong to better. Some of the cultural outings that took place in 2023 included **cinema on the beach, concerts, plays, dance and music performances, and sporting activities such as climbing, and football.**



2. The organisation

Overcoming challenges; not only borders

Refugees Welcome Spain has faced multiple challenges over the years. As an organisation dealing with issues that have become highly politicised rather than humanised, the organisation has experienced a major discriminatory challenge with the rise of far-right anti-immigration political ideologies in Europe.

In Spain, discrimination is even more tangible. During **2023, 118,842 applications for international protection** were submitted and 86,997 resolution proposals were made, of which **only 15.11% were granted protection**. This is much lower than the European average of 35%. The Spanish government has not only hindered the migration of displaced people through a 'passive' attitude of not supplying new homes to those seeking safety, as per the above statistics, but they are also actively building barriers to better inclusion.

In April 2021, the State Reception System changed the pathway for people in the asylum programme, preventing applicants from receiving housing assistance until they reach the second phase of the programme. This decision makes the inclusion of displaced people even more difficult. Not only does it have a direct impact, as the government actively delays the inclusion of displaced people, but it also has indirect consequences.

Such indirect consequences can be seen through the data collected in the '2022 Discrimination Observatory Report,' prepared under the management of Barcelona City Council's Citizens' Rights Services, under the Social Rights, Global Justice, Feminism, and LGTBI departments, which states that 'in 86% of cases, real estate companies discriminate and exclude the migrant population as tenants of housing'. It is at this point that Refugees Welcome Spain takes action to minimise such discrimination and finds homes with local people who are willing to learn about the "Welcoming Culture," and facilitate the inclusion of these vulnerable people.

The challenges facing both government and society are expected to be exacerbated by the war in Ukraine. Not only has the war caused an exponential increase in the already alarming number of forcibly displaced people in the world but, according to the World Bank, the economic consequences of this war will worsen the situation of refugees settled in developing or low- and middle-income countries, leading to further forced displacement. A year in which, according to the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), more than 100 million people have been displaced due to persecution, human rights violations, wars, and the secondary effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, among other reasons.

Despite all these challenges, Refugees Welcome Spain has been able to have a positive impact on the regions within which it operates, and, within its context, it has been able to grow and raise awareness of the above issues. It has managed not only to maintain and strengthen its activities, but also to increase the number of complementary activities, such as language exchanges, access to sports, cultural outings, household equipment; and all of this is thanks to the support of volunteers.

3. Achievement and reach

Regional teams

65 volunteers helped Refugees Welcome Spain in 2023 to carry out its work by hosting refugees, finding and securing accommodation, organising events, and assisting with communication, among many other vital tasks.

25 homeshares in 2023 between locals and displaced people in the different regions we operate. Total number of displaced people registered on the website: 106
Total number of displaced people interviewed: 55

Number of **acts of advocacy in 2023**:
10 protests, 2 reports
Number of media publications: 23
Online and offline communication campaigns: 4 (3 campaigns to find homes and 1 for member recruitment)

Cultural events and outings:
46 events such as conferences, talks, organised events, World Refugee Day celebration, etc.
10 information sessions
6 cultural outings
4 sporting events

4. Above all else, people...

At Refugees Welcome Spain, we appreciate the value of numbers, and we understand what the number of people we have helped represents. However, it is the individual stories that matter most to us. Knowing that each number directly means making a person's life better and contributing to a better society is what really motivates us to continue our work. That is why we believe it is so important to share those stories.

Discovering a home and a family

At Refugees Welcome Spain, we love to share the inspiring stories of those who have found support and community through our project. We had the pleasure of interviewing M. D, a young man from Mali who told us about his experience of integration in Catalonia.

Hello, M! To begin with, tell us a little bit about yourself.
Hello! I'm M.D., I'm 23 years old and I'm originally from the city of Kayes in Mali. It's one of the most important cities in the country apart from Bamako, the capital. You could compare it to Madrid or Barcelona in Spain, you know?

When did you come to Catalonia?
I came here two years ago.

Where are you living now?
Thanks to Refugees Welcome, I am now living in Terrassa with Miquel and Laura, an incredible family!

How would you describe your relationship with Laura and Miguel?
They are like my family! They treat me like a son, and we are always together. We eat, we do activities, and we even went to the Terrassa fiestas together last weekend. They are great.

For how long have you lived with them?
Since February 2023, and since then I have felt like part of their family. Also, although she doesn't live with us anymore, I get on very well with their eldest daughter.

How did you find out about the Refugees Welcome programme and what encouraged you to take part?
It was thanks to my Spanish teacher, who is also my friend, who showed me the Refugees Welcome website. I was motivated by the idea of finding a home in a new country.

How was your experience of looking for and finding a place to live through Refugees Welcome?
It was a huge relief. I had been looking for a room to rent for months, and it was getting very complicated. Refugees Welcome helped me find a home where I feel really happy.

Have you settled in well in Barcelona?
Yes, I love living here! I'm working in a Mango store, putting prices on clothes and I've even found a football team to play for!

How do you think your experience with Refugees Welcome has impacted your integration process into your new surroundings?
Thanks to Refugees Welcome, I am living in a home where I feel part of a family. They have made my integration process much easier and more enjoyable.

Have you found opportunities to keep up or develop your skills and passions while living in Barcelona?
Yes! I am playing football with a team in Sant Vicenç dels Horts and I love it. It's great to have the opportunity to continue playing a sport that I am passionate about.

What advice would you give to other refugees who are looking for a home in a new city?
I would tell them to contact Refugees Welcome. Without them, I would not have found the wonderful family I have now. I would also advise them to be responsible and respectful when they find a home to live in.

And finally, what has been the best experience you have had since you arrived in Catalonia?
Without doubt, meeting this amazing family. I even get on really well with Laura and Miquel's siblings! It has been an incredibly positive experience.

Resilience and Hope: Najiah's story

Hello Najiah! Could you tell us a bit about yourself?

Najiah: Of course! I'm from Sheberghan, a city in the north of Afghanistan. I am 27 years old, and I am currently studying a Master's degree in Applied Research in Economics and Business at the Autonomous University of Barcelona. I studied Economics and Business in India, and when I returned to Afghanistan I worked as a teacher in a high school. Everything changed in August 2021 when the Taliban took power and banned women from studying and working outside the home. I could no longer work, and within a few months, I fled my country to seek refuge in Iran.

What was your life like in Afghanistan before you left?

My life in Afghanistan was very difficult. The Taliban were already present in the country before 2021, but that was the year they took power. Before that, we had been at war for years. It was a very dangerous situation for me and all women. It was clear to me that I wanted to keep studying and working, and I didn't want to get married, which is not allowed under the Taliban regime. We women can't leave the house, and we don't know what is going to happen to our lives; we have no rights. Life there is incredibly hard.

When did you come to Barcelona?

Before arriving in Barcelona, as I mentioned, I spent a year in Iran. Living in Iran was also very complicated; I had a lot of problems finding accommodation and getting a visa. I arrived in Barcelona in October 2022 thanks to the organisation Afghan Women on the Run, which helps Afghan women and families leave the country. I lived in Arenys de Mar for a year with the organisation Diaconia, but that was complicated because of the distance from the university. Thanks to Refugees Welcome, I was able to move to Valldoreix.

Barcelona is an extremely welcoming city, and the people welcomed me very warmly. When I arrived, as soon as I left the airport, I felt a sense of freedom I hadn't experienced in a long time.

How did you find out about Refugees Welcome?
Through Afghan Women on the Run, I was connected with Refugees Welcome to help me find a home. Thanks to their homeshare programme, I found a home and they always help me and call me often to see how the homeshare is going.

What is your experience with the Refugees Welcome programme like?
It is a very positive experience; my life is much more stable. I am living in a beautiful house with Mireia, who always helps me when I have problems, and she supports me to integrate better. I moved to Valldoreix in December 2023, and since then I feel much calmer, and I have more time to study. In Arenys, I faced difficulties because I lived with a lot of people, and I wasted a lot of time commuting to the university. I had a good time there, but it's a challenging place for newcomers, as it's not very well-connected and it was difficult for me to get to my classes. In Valldoreix, I have more time to attend classes, learn languages, pursue my interests, and even meet up with friends.

Also, thanks to Refugees Welcome, I have met wonderful people in Barcelona.

Would you encourage other people to offer their homes as part of the Refugees Welcome programme?
As a refugee, someone whose conditions in her country have forced her to leave her home, I have found myself homeless and untethered, with uncertainty about the future and a place to sleep weighing on my shoulders. However, in the midst of the problems, there are moments of kindness that shine like a beacon in the darkness and light the way. One such moment occurred when a kind and compassionate woman, Mireia, offered to rent me a room in her house. This act of kindness not only provided me with a literal refuge but also restored my faith in humanity. It is an example of the profound impact a simple gesture can have on someone's life, especially under difficult circumstances. I urge others to help migrants by collaborating with organisations dedicated to their cause, to help illuminate their path in life. I am sincerely grateful for all the support and assistance provided by Refugees Welcome.

What are your plans and dreams for the future?

My dream is to set up an organisation that helps Afghan women who have no access to education or work. I am currently studying a data analysis course to improve my professional skills. I hope to find a job soon and, after that, set up my own company to support Afghan women both here and in Afghanistan. But first, I want to work on myself and build my skills before I help others.

Thank you very much, Najiah Mohammadi, for sharing your story and for being an example of determination and resilience. Your experience is a testament to the positive impact that programmes like Refugees Welcome can have on the lives of refugees.

Photo of Najiah at the beginning of the homeshare (from left to right: Clara, Regional Liaison, Flavia, Social Worker, Najiah, and Mireia, in their home).

A beautiful story of companionship

A, thanks to the Refugees Welcome project, shares a flat with Martí in Barcelona. We interviewed him so that he could tell us about his experience.

Hello, A! What has your experience been like since you came to Barcelona? Has this city welcomed you warmly?

A: My experience in Barcelona has been very positive. I have had many good experiences in this city and, yes, it has welcomed me very warmly. Starting from scratch in a new country is not easy. I used to work as a human rights activist, and when I arrived in Barcelona, I decided to study software programming. Now I am working for a web software development company.

How did you hear about the Refugees Welcome programme, and what made you get involved?

A: I found out about the Refugees Welcome programme through another NGO that supports women in my country. I met Flavia and Pablo from Refugees Welcome there, who told me about their programme. Without them, it would have been very difficult. At that time, I was living in a refugee centre and was looking for somewhere to live. But it was very difficult for me; either they didn't get back to me or it was too expensive. Refugees Welcome offered me the opportunity to share a house with Martí.

How is your experience living with Martí in Barcelona? Do you do activities together?

A: My experience with Martí has been great because I don't feel like a guest; we really are flatmates, and I feel like it's my home. I have no restrictions at home, I have total freedom to bring friends over and come home late without feeling worried. This is not very common when you rent a room. We help each other a lot and share lots of things, like food. We are friends, and although we are both very busy with work, we have plans to do activities together. Martí is very cool.

Can you tell me any special anecdote or something you have learnt while living together?

A: Yes, when I arrived in Barcelona, I thought I would like to learn to play an instrument, and Martí's girlfriend asked me if I wanted to go to ukulele lessons with her. We've been going one day a week for a month now and it's been great fun. I haven't learnt much yet, but I'm having a great time at the classes.

I'm sure this experience has had an impact on your life. What positive changes have you noticed since joining the Refugees Welcome programme? Has this experience contributed to your integration in this city?

A: Yes, this experience has helped me integrate better in Barcelona. Besides living with Martí, I also have a family in Barcelona that I met through the other NGO. Whenever there are important events like Christmas meals, I celebrate with them.

What would you like to achieve in the coming years thanks to this experience?

A: In the coming years I want to continue living in Barcelona and gain more experience in my field of work. I really like diversity and living in Barcelona has been very positive and full of good memories.

What would you say to those who are thinking of offering their home as part of this programme?

A: I would tell them that they are angels, and for that, I am very grateful. For me, it has been a great support. Life has meaning when we help each other. If we don't feel each other's pain, we are dead.

We close the interview because A. has arranged to meet his neighbour, a 93-year-old man, to go to the hairdressers with him to have his hair cut. He tells me that he doesn't understand how his neighbour, who has a son, is almost always alone and he offers to accompany him in whatever he needs.