



## Vanessa Berhe - Sweden/Eritrea

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2015 was not only historical because of the implementation of these ambitious Goals we are discussing today, it was also the year the most amount of migrants have been displaced from their home countries since the beginning of the United Nations, and the end of the Second World War. This is something that cannot be ignored while we are discussing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) here today. My name is Vanessa Berhe, I was born and raised in Stockholm, Sweden, but my parents are both from Eritrea, which is a small country in East Africa. I am a full-time student and a full-time activist, which means I do not sleep. I study Law in London and, for the past three years, I have been running an organization working for the release of my uncle, who is a journalist who has been in prison in Eritrea for the past 15 years. As my engagement with my uncle's case grew, I started becoming more of an Eritrean activist, focusing on human rights abuses affecting the Eritrean people. With my work with these people and these problems, I detected a huge problem.

Today a lot of people are fleeing Eritrea because of systematic oppression in the country. Over 5,000 people are fleeing every month because of the situation there. A newly established UN Commission recently accused Eritrea of crimes against humanity, one of the most serious crimes, along with genocide and others, that a State can be accused of. There is no future in Eritrea for the youth; the university has been shut down, there is a forced national service program that forces the youth to be involved indefinitely and, because of this, they flee. Intellectuals are imprisoned, killed, or have disappeared, and the entire country is on the move. On this flight they experience even more trauma than they experienced in the country itself. Because there are no legal routes into Europe, they are forced to take on traffickers, and on this route they experience kidnappings, sexual exploitation, murder. And, with the establishment of ISIS in Libya, a lot of Eritrean and Christian refugees have been held hostage, a lot of women are held like sexual slaves.

The problem is that when they do come to safety a lot of attention is let off, and we think about the new migrants coming in, but the problem is that the issues that these refugees have dealt with are not dealt with properly. Mental health is something that is not talked about in the Eritrean community, very similar to these communities I have met in Sweden, where mental health is still something that is not talked about or dealt with. Eritrean women consider rape a taboo, and in a lot of cultures it is, and because of this they never actually properly comprehend and take care of the problems that they have experienced. In addition to this, when they come to Europe or to other safe countries/places, they are not encouraged to pursue their dreams and their education. Because of this they fall into a trap of low skills and low-paid jobs. There is nothing wrong with these jobs, but it should not be the only option for Eritrean refugees.

My project wants to reach Goals 4 and 5, which focus on education and gender equality. My goal is to rehabilitate and then equip Eritrean migrants and refugees with all the tools necessary for them to reach their full potential. The special, but not exclusive, focus will be on women, specifically because of all the abuses that they experience, they are the biggest victims and because of traditional gender roles, when they do come to safety, they are the first ones to take on the easier jobs and they are not encouraged to pursue their dreams.

The project is divided into two parts: the rehabilitation part and the integration part. Because of the problems that we have with mental health issues and the fact that they are so taboo, there are going to be a lot of problems to get them to actually open up. But while we are doing this we need to equip them with the language skills that they need in the country that they arrive to, we need to provide them with contacts, with mentorships and help them explore different careers. Because the refugees in general, if you look at the entire world, are people coming from different careers, social classes and backgrounds. If you look at Eritrea, a majority of the people fleeing are youth, and because of the fact that there is no university in the country, they all come with literally no academic background. It is our job then to equip them and teach them about the opportunities that exist in the countries that they have come to.

My idea is not revolutionary, it is not something new, it is not something you probably have not heard about before; but I do not think we need something revolutionary to solve this problem. We need to do something and I think, because there are a lot of initiatives, there are a lot of programs all around the world focusing on migrants, we need to combine this, and we need to include the non-profit sector, the public sector and the for-profit sector into this. It needs to be comprehensive and it needs to be global and it does not only include Eritrean migrants. I speak about them here today because of my strong ties to the community. I have been an Eritrean activist since I was 16 years old and I know practically everyone who is included in the fight for Eritrean democracy and against the human rights abuses affecting Eritrean people today. I can help find the people to

start this program, and find the people that need this help; and with time we can expand this to include migrants from all backgrounds and put this in place all around the world.

I can guarantee you one thing: the Eritrean dictatorship will fall, but when this happens, if we don't properly rehabilitate, integrate and activate this generation leaving the country right now, who will then lead? I warn you, if a comprehensive plan to deal with this pressing issue is not established and pursued soon, we are risking the entire future of Eritrea.

Thank you very much.