

SPOTLIGHT: Equity in Response – The Right to Seek Safety

On June 20th, we celebrated World Refugee Day by focusing on the right to seek safety and the core belief that “every person on this planet has a right to seek safety – whoever they are, wherever they come from and whenever they are forced to flee.”¹ This focus is particularly relevant as the world continues to bear witness to the atrocities in Ukraine, and the global community enacts policies, practices, and actions in support of Ukrainians.

The global response to the conflict in Ukraine has been swift and united in support of individuals and families facing displacement and seeking safety. This is a commendable act and an opportunity for celebration of unity and shared humanity. At the same time, it also stands in stark contrast to the global response to conflict and displacement in other communities and countries. Even within the response to Ukraine, there has been discrimination based on race and nationality with reports of people from the global majority (black, indigenous, and people of color) receiving different treatment and reception than people who are white or white passing.²

In March of this year, Filippo Grandi, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, issued a statement in which he noted “We can – and must – salute solidarity, while also resolutely condemning acts of discrimination and bias.” He continued to explain that the refugee experience is not bound by borders, race, or identity and that refugees share common experiences of “the same pain and sorrow; the same loss and anguish; the same relief at finding safety; and trepidation of an uncertain future.”³

As the U.S. welcomes up to 100,000 Ukrainians, we cannot turn away from the deportations and denials of safety for Black and Brown people seeking refuge. It is an important time for those of us in the social services network to be prepared to respond at all levels of our work by taking reflective and actionable steps:

- **Identify biases:** As individuals in this work, we must examine our own biases and prejudices so that we are able to enter into this space without judgment, oppression, or upholding of colonial and white supremacy values.
 - Start by taking an [implicit bias test](#) and encouraging your teams and colleagues to do the same.
 - Continue by asking ourselves and each other: How can we ensure recognition of common humanity in each and every person seeking safety? Even as we seek to promote the safety of those we serve, who are we not serving? Why are we not serving them?

¹ <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/world-refugee-day.html>

² <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/3/2/more-racism-at-ukrainian-borders>

³ <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/03/1114282>

- **Learn:** Read, discuss and learn more about the legacy of colonialism in humanitarian aid.
 - Start by learning from different sources:
 - [Time to Decolonize Aid](#)
 - [The impact of racism on U.S. immigration past and present](#)
 - [Facing up to the racist legacy of America's immigration laws](#)
 - [Race, equity and neo-colonial legacies](#)
 - [The future of humanitarian action: decolonizing humanitarian aid](#)
 - [Humanitarian aid system is a continuation of the colonial project](#)
 - Continue by:
 - Reading, reflecting on, and reconfirming our commitment to the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#).
 - Asking ourselves and each other: How can the experiences of black, indigenous, individuals and families of color be acknowledged, embraced and validated within a country with an omnipresent history and threat of racism and white supremacy?

- **Remember:** While we continue to welcome and support those individuals and families who are arriving in the U.S., current and past unequal and unjust representation of who is welcomed and supported can bring up a host of emotions from all involved. Those from exploited and marginalized communities or diverse religious and racial backgrounds might experience recurring feelings of exclusion and marginalization. We must continue to be prepared to receive, bear witness to, and validate the range of emotions and experiences clients share with us and view this as an important moment to recommit ourselves to the work of welcoming all to claim and realize their right to safety.