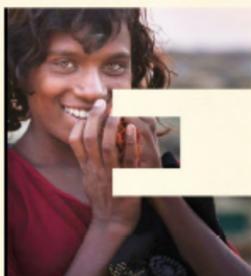


Winner of the Nobel Peace Prize

Malala

YOUSAFZAI

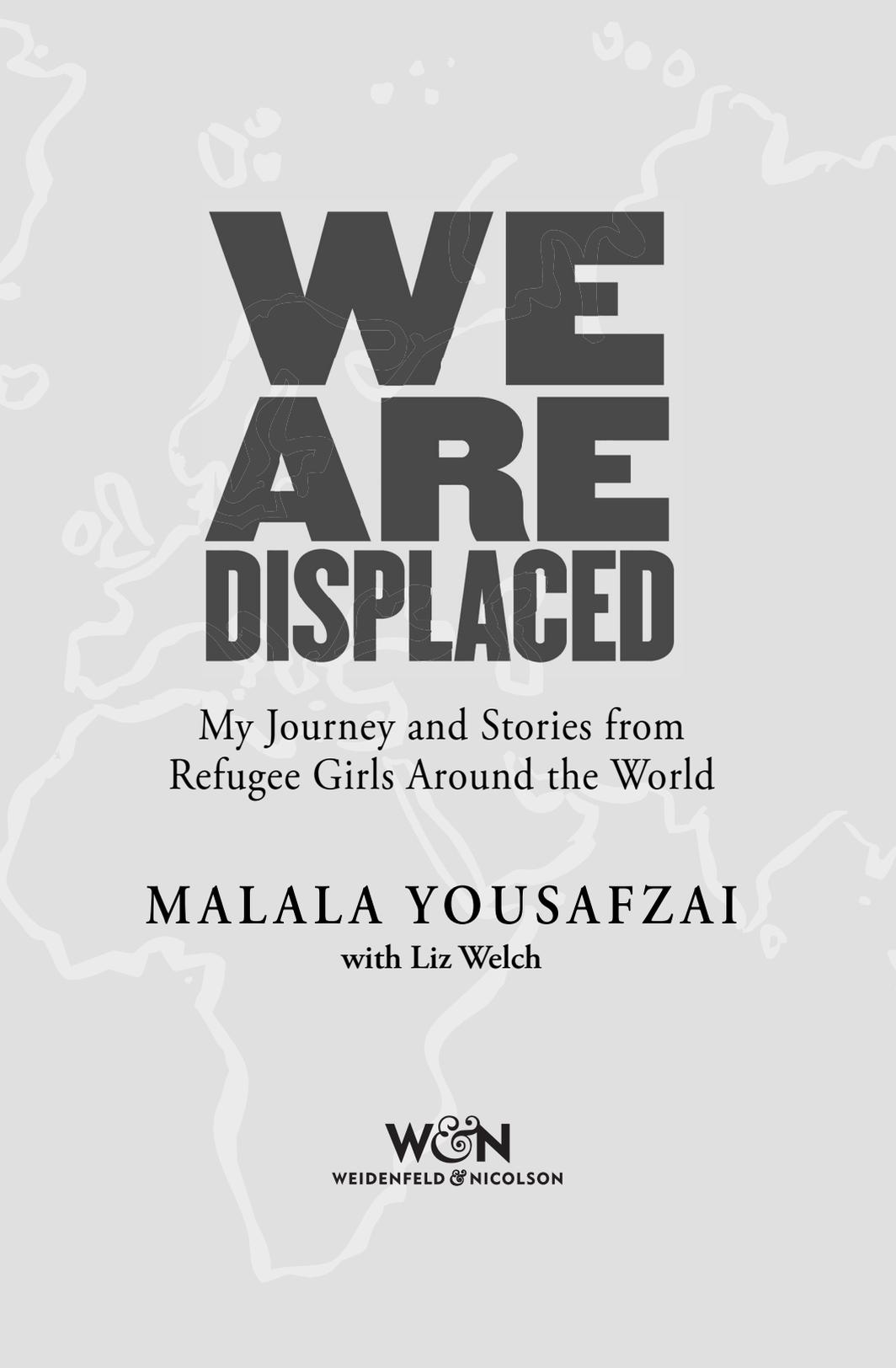


DISPLACED

My Journey and
Stories from Refugee Girls
Around the World



**WE
ARE
DISPLACED**



WE ARE DISPLACED

My Journey and Stories from
Refugee Girls Around the World

MALALA YOUSAFZAI

with Liz Welch

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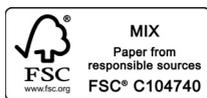
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*no one leaves home unless
home is the mouth of a shark.*

*you only run for the border
when you see the whole city
running as well.*

—Warsan Shire, “Home”



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Prologue

Walking in the streets of Birmingham with my brothers, mum and dad, I pause for a second to feel the peace. It is all around us, in the trees swaying gently in the breeze, in the sound of the cars coming and going, in the laughter of a child, in a girl and boy tentatively holding hands as they trail behind their friends. But I feel the peace, too, in my bones. I thank Allah for everything, for being alive, for being safe, for my family being safe.

It never fails to shock me how people take peace for granted. I am grateful for it every day. Not everyone has it. Millions of men, women and children witness wars every day. Their reality is violence, homes destroyed, innocent

WE ARE DISPLACED

lives lost. And the only choice they have for safety is to leave. To 'choose' to be displaced. That is not much of a choice.

Ten years ago, before anyone outside Pakistan knew my name, I had to leave my home with my family and more than two million people from the Swat Valley. We had no other option. It was not safe to stay. But where would we go?

I was eleven years old. And I was displaced.

For any refugee or any person displaced by violence, which is what most often makes people flee, it seems as if there is no safe place today. As of 2017, the United Nations counts 68.5 million people who were forcibly displaced worldwide, 25.4 million of which are considered refugees.

The numbers are so staggering that you forget these are people forced to leave their homes. They are doctors and teachers. Lawyers, journalists, poets and priests. And children, so many children. People forget that you were an activist, a student, that you were a father named Ziauddin, a daughter named Malala. The displaced who make up these staggering numbers are human beings with hopes for a better future.

I have had the immense privilege of meeting many individuals who had to rebuild their lives, often in totally

PROLOGUE

foreign places. People who have lost so much – including loved ones – and then had to start over. This means learning a new language, a new culture, a new way of being. I share my story of being displaced not out of a desire to focus on my past, but to honour the people I’ve met and those I’ll never meet.

I wrote this book because it seems that too many people don’t understand that refugees are ordinary people. All that differentiates them is that they got caught in the middle of a conflict that forced them to leave their homes, their loved ones, and the only lives they had known. They risked so much along the way, and why? Because it is too often a choice between life and death.

And, as my family did a decade ago, they chose life.



Corsica
(FRANCE)

ITALY

Sardinia
(ITALY)

Sicily
(ITALY)

CRO.

ROMANIA

SERBIA

BULGARIA

GREECE

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CENTRAL AFRICAN
REPUBLIC

SOUTH
SUDAN

CAMEROON

E



PART 1

**I
AM
DISPLACED**

CHAPTER 1

Life as We Knew It

When I close my eyes and think of my childhood, I see pine forests and snowcapped mountains; I hear rushing rivers; I feel the calm earth beneath my feet. I was born in the Swat Valley, once known as the Switzerland of the East. Others have called it paradise, and that is how I think of Swat. It is the backdrop to all my happiest childhood memories – running in the streets with my friends; playing on the roof of our house in Mingora, the main city in Swat; visiting our cousins and extended family in Shangla, the mountain village where both of my parents were born; listening to my mother and all her friends chatting over afternoon tea in our home, and my father discussing politics with his friends.

WE ARE DISPLACED

I do recall my father talking about the Taliban, but as a faraway threat. Even as a young child, I was interested in politics and would listen to everything my father and his friends discussed, even if I didn't always understand. In those days, the Taliban were in Afghanistan, not Pakistan. Nothing for us to be concerned with. Certainly nothing for me and my younger brother, Khushal, to worry about. And then came Atal, the baby. My biggest problem was how I felt about these brothers taking over the house.

That began to change in 2004. I was only six years old, so I didn't notice anything at first, but when I think back on those years, my memories are tinged with the fear that I know must have been growing in my parents' eyes. And then five years later, my beloved Swat was no longer safe, and we were forced from our home along with hundreds of thousands of others.

It started slowly. Our country had begun a time of advancement for women, but our region was going backwards. In 2003, my father opened his first high school, and boys and girls attended classes together. By 2004, mixed classes were not possible.

An earthquake in 2005 was not only devastating for the

destruction it caused and the lives it took – more than 73,000 were killed, including 18,000 children – but it also left vulnerable survivors. When men from an extremist group, who had provided aid to so many who had been displaced by this natural disaster, began to preach that the earthquake was a warning from God, people listened. Soon those men, who later became part of the Taliban, began preaching strict interpretations of Islam on the local radio, saying that all women must cover their faces entirely and that music and dancing and Western movies were sinful. That men should grow their beards long. That girls should not go to school.

This was not our Islam.

These were religious fundamentalists who claimed they wanted to return to an old way of living, which was ironic considering that they used technology – the radio – to spread this very message. They attacked our daily way of life in the name of Islam. They told people what they could wear, what they could listen to, what they could watch. And most of all, they tried to take away the rights of women.

By 2007, the dictates had become more aggressive and specific: they called for TVs, computers and other electronics to be not only banished from homes but also burned and destroyed. I can still smell the stench of melting plastic and wires from the bonfires they organised. They aggressively discouraged

girls from going to school, commending by name parents who had kept their girls out of school as well as the girls themselves, and condemning by name those who had not. Soon they declared that educating girls was un-Islamic.

How was going to school un-Islamic? It made no sense to me. How was any of this un-Islamic?

My family mostly ignored these commands, though we did start lowering the volume on our TV in case anyone walking by outside could hear us.

The call for girls to be kept home upset my father, Ziauddin, too. He ran two schools that he had built from scratch; one was for girls. At first, these extremists still felt fringe to my father – more an annoyance than a real terror. He had been focusing his activism on the environment. Our city was growing quickly; air pollution and access to clean water had become problems. He and some friends had founded an organisation to protect the environment as well as promote peace and education in the Swat Valley. He was becoming known by some as a man to be listened to, and by others as a troublemaker. But my father has a deep sense of justice and cannot help but fight for good.

Then the Taliban gained more followers and more power, and soon life as we knew it became a collection of happy memories.

The words *Taliban* and *militant* entered our daily conversations; it was not simply something discussed on the news anymore. And rumours were spreading throughout Mingora that these militants were infiltrating Swat Valley.

I began to see men with long beards and black turbans walking in the streets. One of them could intimidate a whole village. Now they were patrolling our streets. No one knew who they were exactly, but everyone knew they were connected to the Taliban and enforcing their decrees.

I had my first real brush with the Taliban on our way to visit family in Shangla. My cousin had several music cassettes in his car for the ride and had just inserted one into the player when he saw two men wearing black turbans and camouflage vests waving down cars ahead.

My cousin ejected the tape, grabbed the others and passed them to my mother. 'Hide these,' he whispered.

My mother shoved them into her handbag without saying a word as our car slowed to a stop.

Both men had long beards and cruel eyes. Each had a machine gun slung over one shoulder. My mother pulled her veil across her face; I could see that her hands were trembling, which caused my heart to beat more quickly.

WE ARE DISPLACED

One of the men leaned into the car and asked, ‘Do you have any cassettes or CDs?’

My cousin shook his head no, and my mother and I stayed silent. I worried the Talib could hear my heart thumping or see my mother’s hands shaking. I held my breath when he pushed his face into the back window to address us both.

‘Sister,’ he said sternly to me. ‘You should cover your face.’

I wanted to ask, *Why? I am only a child.* But the Kalashnikov slung over his shoulder stopped me from speaking.

They waved us on, but all the excitement we had felt earlier that day disappeared. We spent the next hour in total silence. The cassettes stayed in my mother’s handbag.

The fear that had been growing around us now felt too close to ignore. And then the violence began.

CHAPTER 2

How Could This Be Happening?

I was eleven when the Taliban started bombing girls' schools throughout the Swat Valley. The attacks happened at night, so at least no one was hurt, but imagine arriving at school in the morning to find it a pile of rubble. It felt beyond cruel.

They had begun cutting our electricity and targeting local politicians. They even banned children's games. We had been told stories of Taliban fighters who heard children laughing in their homes and burst in to destroy the game. They also bombed police stations and attacked individuals.

If the Taliban heard that someone had spoken out against them, they would announce those names on their radio station. And then the next morning, those people might be found dead in Green Square, our city centre, often with notes pinned to the bodies explaining their so-called sins. It got so bad that each morning, several bodies would be lined up in the town centre, which people started calling Bloody Square.

This was all part of their extremist propaganda. It was working: they were asserting control over the Swat Valley.

My father had been cautioned to stop speaking out on behalf of girls' education and peace. He didn't. But he did start varying his routes home in case he was being followed. And I started a new habit: I would check the locks on the doors and windows before I went to sleep each night.

We felt hopeful when the army sent troops to Swat to protect us. But it meant the fighting had come closer. They had a base in Mingora near our home, so I would hear the whirring of helicopter blades cutting the thick air and then look up to see metal hunks filled with soldiers in uniform. Those images, just like Taliban fighters holding machine guns in the streets, became such a big part of our daily lives that my brothers and their friends started playing Taliban versus army instead of hide-and-seek. They would make guns from paper and stage battles and 'shoot' at one another. Rather

HOW COULD THIS BE HAPPENING?

than share idle gossip and talk about our favourite movie stars, my friends and I shared information about death threats and wondered if we'd ever feel safe again.

This was our life now. It was nothing any of us could have ever imagined.

Scary things became normal. We'd hear the big, booming sounds of bombs and feel the ground tremble. The stronger the tremor, the closer the bomb. If we didn't hear a bomb blast for an entire day, we'd say, 'Today was a good day.' If we didn't hear firearms being shot at night, like firecrackers, then we might even get a good night's sleep.

How could this be happening in our valley?

Near the end of 2008, the Taliban made a new decree: all girls' schools would be closed on 15 January 2009, or they would risk being attacked. This was an order even my father would follow, because he could not put his students – or his daughter – at risk.

By then, I had begun to write a blog for BBC Urdu that later helped the world beyond our country learn our story and the truth of the attack on girls' education in Pakistan. I had written about how the walk to school, once a brief pleasure, had become a fear-filled sprint. And how at night,

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my family and I would sometimes huddle on the floor, as far away from the windows as possible, as we heard bombs exploding and the rat-a-tat-tat of machine guns in the hills surrounding Mingora. I missed the days when we had picnics in that same countryside. What was once our refuge was now a battleground.

Many girls stopped attending classes or left the area to be educated elsewhere when the ban was announced – my class of twenty-seven had dwindled to ten. But my friends and I continued going until the last day. My father postponed what would have been winter break so we could get in as much school as we could.

When the day came that my father was forced to close our girls' school, he mourned not only for his students but also for the 50,000 girls in our region who had lost their right to go to school. Hundreds of schools had to close.

We had a special assembly at school, and some of us spoke out against what was happening. We stayed as long as possible that day. We played hopscotch and laughed. Despite the looming threat, we were children being children.

It was a sad day in our house for all of us. But for me, it cut deep. A ban on girls' schools meant a ban on my dreams, a limit on my future. If I couldn't get my education, what kind of a future did I have?