Every year, the 8x8 Festival brings award-winning photography and film to campuses across Ireland. The festival run by students, for students, and is a great way to learn more about the burning issues shaping the world around us.

What does it mean to be free in a world where 65.6 million people have been forced to flee their homes? That’s the question the 8x8 Festival 2017 asked at campuses across Ireland.

Developed with students and artist Dee Ambrose, this exhibition of original photography and images uses ordinary items and social media to explore the issue of refugee rights and how the everyday freedoms we take for granted are being denied to millions of humans around the world.

The 8x8 Festival is part of STAND and receives support from Irish Aid.
Everyone has the right to seek asylum

Seven countries in the world host over half of the world’s refugees. Despite the debates that have gripped Europe over whether and how to receive refugees, none of the seven countries are in the EU. And despite the clamour of headlines about Brexit and Trump’s travel ban, neither the UK nor the US make the list. The seven countries are: Turkey, Pakistan, Iran, Lebanon, Jordan, Ethiopia, and Kenya. According to the UN Refugee Agency, there’s a misconception that refugees want to go to the west. Rather, most want to stay as close to their homes as possible so they can return to their lives as soon as they are able to do so. It’s only when denied access to basic resources and a decent quality of life in their host countries that people attempt the often perilous journey west.

Image: Deirdre Ambrose
Everyone has the right to seek asylum

The EU-Turkey deal saw the EU pledge €3bn and political concessions to Turkey in exchange for increased efforts to stop refugees and migrants reaching Europe. Under the terms of the controversial deal, Syrian refugees who reached the Greek islands were to be returned to Turkey, while Syrian asylum seekers in Turkey were to be resettled in the EU. The deal has received widespread criticism from human rights watchdogs and refugee charities, in particular over whether Turkey can be deemed a ‘safe country’ for refugees.

Headline: The Telegraph (14 Mar 2017)
Photograph: © Flickr.com
Children have the right to protection

An unaccompanied minor is a child under the age of 18 who is separated from both parents and is not being cared for by a guardian. In 2016, more than 63,300 unaccompanied minors entered the EU, half of them Syrian and Afghan refugees, according to Missing Children, the European federation for missing and sexually exploited children. The same year, Europol said at least 10,000 unaccompanied minors had disappeared in Europe, warning that missing children, especially refugees, are the perfect target for human trafficking, prostitution and forced begging rings, or coercion into slave labour. According to Missing Children, unaccompanied migrant children continue to go missing at an alarming rate and the numbers officially reported fall far short of the reality.

Image by: Deirdre Ambrose
Children have the right to protection

Research by Save the Children, published in March 2017, revealed an alarming rise in self-harm, increased aggression, anxiety and depression among child refugees living in degrading conditions on the Greek islands as a result of the EU-Turkey deal. The deal, brokered in March 2016, allowed for people claiming asylum in Europe to be returned to Turkey and for relocation of refugees to EU countries.

But red tape has instead left vulnerable groups of people trapped in overcrowded camps on the Greek islands.

Headline: The Irish Times (11 Jul 2017)
Photograph: © Unhcr/Yorgos Kyvernitis
Everyone has the right to participate in cultural life

On Sunday July 30th 2017, a bus-load of GAA supporters arrived in Dublin for the Roscommon-Mayo match. The group live in Ballaghaderreen, on the border between the two counties, and had yet to decide who to support. Residents of the Abbeyfield Hotel, they are Syrians and Iraqis who moved to Ballaghaderreen earlier this year from Greece, as part of Ireland’s commitment to welcome refugees displaced by the war and conflict in their countries. Elaine Mernagh, who organised the outing, told the Irish Examiner, ‘People are here in their centre and bored – they’re waiting until they’re moved on from here. Wherever they’re moving on to, there is going to be a GAA club… so what better way to get people accustomed and introduced to our culture?’

Image by: Deirdre Ambrose
Everyone has the right to participate in cultural life

The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights recognises that freedom can only be achieved if everyone can enjoy their economic, social and cultural rights, as well as their civil and political rights. For refugees and asylum seekers, cultural pursuits can provide a way to connect with new communities and to remain connected with their home countries.

The Syrian Expat Philharmonic Orchestra is made up of Syrian musicians who live in the EU who want to preserve and celebrate their country’s music.

Headline: Arte.tv (3 May 2017)
Photograph: © Unhcr/Gordon Welters

Meet the Syrian Orchestra of exiled musicians

Syrian musicians have joined together to show another side to a country now synonymous in Western media with destruction and death
Everyone has the right to education

Education is a basic human right. In times of displacement, education is crucial. According to the UN Refugee Agency, it can foster social cohesion, provide access to life-saving information, address psychosocial needs, and offer a stable and safe environment for those who need it most. It also helps people to rebuild their communities and pursue productive, meaningful lives.

Of the 16 million refugees under the care of the UN Refugee Agency, six million are of school-going age. Access to education for this marginalised group is limited. More than half – 3.7 million – have no school to go to. Some 1.75 million refugee children are not in primary school and 1.95 million refugee adolescents are not in secondary school.

Image by: Deirdre Ambrose
Everyone has the right to education

For young asylum seekers who complete their Leaving Cert, no amount of CAO points can guarantee access to third-level education. The most recent Reception and Integration Agency figures show that 190 young people aged 13-17 years are currently living in Direct Provision. They face huge barriers to educational equality. Unlike their peers, asylum seekers in Ireland are not entitled to free third-level education and must pay non-EU fees if they wish to continue their studies. These range from about €10,000-€50,000.

Image by: Deirdre Ambrose
Everyone has the right to family life

According to the UN Refugee Agency, family reunification benefits both refugee families and host communities. When families have been wrenched apart, they can experience significant trauma and long-lasting harm to their wellbeing – particularly for people who have fled conflict, persecution and disaster. Many refugees experience extreme stress and anxiety when they have lost contact with relatives living in dangerous situations, or are left without the support of family. The right to family life and the protection of the family is enshrined in international human rights law and is a shared value that cuts across cultures. Despite this, organisations such Human Rights Watch have highlighted a rolling back of asylum rights by EU member states, including family reunification measures.

Image by: Deirdre Ambrose
How would you feel if you made it to safety but couldn’t be reunited with your parents/guardians, your siblings, your grandparents?

Refugees in Ireland face struggle to reunite with families after legal change
International Protection Act causes concern amid ‘refugee and migration crisis’

Everyone has the right to family life

The International Protection Act 2015 narrowed the definition of family to nuclear family members only – spouses and children for adult refugees, and parents for minor refugees. This means a child or teenager seeking to reunite with their parents will not be able to apply for other siblings who may also be minors; an adult refugee with children both over and under 18 will not be able to apply for their young adult children; and other family members such as grandchildren and grandparents are completely excluded.

Headline: The Irish Times (30 May 2017)
Photograph: © unsplash.Com
Everyone has the right to their identity

While war reduces entire neighbourhoods to rubble, western media increasingly reduces the communities left devastated by that violence to one word: migrants. It counts them in “waves” and “swarms”. Worse, the bureaucracy of our asylum systems routinely strips away even the names of people fleeing war, conflict and persecution, reducing their identity to a number. Speaking from Vasilika refugee camp in Greece, in the film Refuge (Caoimhe Butterly, 2016), a father whose children have been without education for four years says: ‘Maybe I can accept the word refugee, but to refer to me as a number: I can’t accept this. I have become a number, the number of my tent: 5c5. It has become my name. They ask me “What’s your tent number” – to know me, to locate me. 5c5.’

Image by: Deirdre Ambrose
Everyone has the right to their identity (© UNHCR)

For people fleeing countries torn apart by war or conflict, their struggle is far from over when they reach a host country. Proving their identity is vital, but often difficult. New software unveiled at the United Nations ID2020 summit this summer could allow millions of refugees to use a phone or digital device to prove their identity. The system uses blockchain, a tamper-proof ledger system that has the potential to store personal information so that only the person who owns it can grant access to it.

We are now witnessing the highest levels of displacement on record
An unprecedented 65.6 million people around the world have been forced from home
Everyone has the right to equality

In May 2015, Ireland became the first country in the world to approve same-sex marriage by popular vote. Beginning with The Netherlands in 2000, 25 countries worldwide have now legalised same-sex marriage. However, in 74 countries around the world, homosexuality is a crime. Asylum-seekers and refugees with a diverse sexual orientation or gender identity, such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) individuals, face distinct vulnerabilities, according to the UN Refugee Agency. In addition to severe discrimination and violence in their countries of origin, LGBTI refugees are frequently subject to continued harm in their country of asylum, by members of the refugee community, by local communities and by state agents.

Image by: Deirdre Ambrose
Everyone has the right to equality

Chechnya has made international headlines over the past year for its widely condemned treatment of the gay population there. Chechen president Ramzan Kadyrov has denied the existence of gay people in the country, stating, ‘We don’t have those kinds of people here,’ while simultaneously establishing gay concentration camps as part of a gay ‘purge’. Speaking to Out.com, the Russian LGBT Network said survivors of the camps reported being beaten and tortured with electric current.

Headline: out.com (2 Aug 2017)
Photograph: © Flickr.com
Everyone has the right to privacy

Published in 2015, the McMahon report included more than 170 recommendations from a working group asked by the government to report on Ireland’s asylum system. This was the first comprehensive examination of Direct Provision since it was established in 2000. The group also collected written submissions from children and adults living in Direct Provision. One child described their dream home as having 'a living room, a kitchen and also a bedroom each for myself, my sisters and my Mum so we can have a place to do our homework.' Another described their hopes for the future as: 'A private house where I don’t live with people I don’t know.' A single person described their life as lonely, saying: 'I can’t have female or male visitors and I can’t cultivate a relationship.'

Image by: Deirdre Ambrose
Everyone has the right to privacy

These are the recent comments of Bryan McMahon, who chaired the review group that published a report on Direct Provision in 2015. The former judge said anyone forced to live in a system that determined almost all aspects of their life without knowing when their circumstances might change ‘would go mad’. Among the problems the report raised was the lack of privacy, with the majority of families living in single bedrooms without a private living space. It also noted the challenges of sharing with strangers for protracted periods.

Headline: The Irish Times (22 Jul 2017)
Photograph: © Rory O’Neill (roryoneill.ie)
All human beings are born free and equal

Women and girls forced to flee their homes face a unique set of challenges and dangers, among them, a lack of access to sanitary products. Speaking to Reuters in March this year, Terri Harris, of the Muslim women-led development charity Global One, said: ‘There’s no dignity in having your period when you’re a refugee.’

A study by Global One in displacement and refugee camps in Syria and Lebanon found that almost 60% of the 800 women surveyed did not have access to underwear, and many more had no sanitary products for when they had their period. Instead, the women were forced to use whatever they could find, including ‘old rags, pieces of moss, pieces of mattress’. This, coupled with poor water and sanitation, can lead to infections and other health problems.

Image by: Deirdre Ambrose
Women fleeing conflict and persecution face higher risks of gender-based violence, including sexual assault, early and forced marriage, fgm, trafficking and exploitation.

Women and children ‘endure rape, beatings and abuse’ inside Dunkirk’s refugee camp

Children and women are forced to have sex by traffickers in return for blankets or food or the offer of passage to the UK.

All human beings are born free and equal

In February, The Guardian reported that children and women at Dunkirk, a refugee camp in northern France, were forced by traffickers to have sex in return for blankets, food or the offer of passage to the UK. By April, the camp, including the Dunkirk Women’s Centre, had been reduced to ashes by a fire. The centre is now operating as a mobile unit from a van, offering a much needed safe place – particularly as winter sets in – for displaced women and their children living in unsafe and squalid conditions.

Photograph: © Deirdre Ambrose
Ireland receives asylum seekers through a system called Direct Provision, which aims to provide for their welfare as they await decisions on their application. Established in 2000, it was supposed to be a short-term solution to the high numbers of people coming here in search of protection. However, the majority of people in Direct Provision have spent more than four years in institutional settings, receiving an allowance of €21.60 per week. Under current legislation, these people are denied the right to work until their application has been approved. In May 2017, the Supreme Court ruled that the ban on asylum seekers looking for work is unconstitutional. It has adjourned its order for six months to allow time for lawmakers to consider how to address the situation.

Everyone has the right to work

Image by: Deirdre Ambrose
Everyone has the right to work

Pictured are Syrian refugees preparing for Eid at the Za’atari refugee camp in Jordan. In August 2017, a job center opened inside the camp, unlocking work opportunities for thousands of Syrians living in Za’atari. Asylum systems around the world traditionally leave people who have fled conflict and persecution stranded for years at a time, in camps or institutionalised settings, with no prospect of rebuilding their lives. Not only does this undermine their autonomy and dignity, it ignores what these people have to offer society.

Headline: Reuters (22 Aug 2017)
Photograph: © Unhcr/Mohammad Hawari