#REFUGEENIUS
This week was dubbed #Refugeenious, as proposed by our partner organizations involved in the planning and execution of this activity, which included the Octopizzo Foundation and the Xavier Project.

The sessions took place within the various high schools that the KYWI is established, among them, Parklands Arya Girls" High School, Nembu Girls" High School, UpperHill High School, Moi Girls’ High School-Nairobi and Pangani Girls' High School.

Each of these sessions was conducted having gained consent from the Xavier Project, which sponsors refugee students’ education in Kenyan high schools, as well as consent from the parents/guardians of the refugee students that were involved during the sessions.
The first session of the #Refugeenius week was conducted at Parklands Arya Girls’ High School, on Monday, the 10th of October 2016.

It was scheduled that two refugee students, Abkar Hani Mohamed and Busiku Sattor Amana, from Somalia and Rwanda respectively would attend this session, and share their experiences with the KYWI members, who have studied countries faced with the refugee crisis situation during previous sessions. Hani, from Somalia was in attendance, although Amana was unable to attend. At the start of the session, the students were given a brief explanation of the refugee crisis facing various countries within East Africa, and the need to be informed about the issues facing the refugee community in Kenya, with a specific reference to urban refugees, who reside in parts of Nairobi and other major towns in Kenya.

Hani Mohamed, the refugee student from Somalia was requested to share about her experiences as a refugee adolescent in Kenya, through questions that were posed to her by the facilitator of the session. Hani was extremely shy, although managed to disclose to the class that she is a Kenyan-born refugee, born of a Yemeni father and a Somali mother, who sought refuge in Kenya after violent conflict erupted in Somalia. During the interview, Hani revealed that her mother was not comfortable with her talking about the family’s refugee status here in Kenya, due to the challenges that the refugee community, especially from Somalia, faced in Kenya.

The KYWI students were given an opportunity to express their ideas and feelings on the refugee situation, and the session became very lively and engaging, with various issues arising from the students about the urban refugees in Kenya. The students were interested to know whether Kenyan-born refugees, like Hani, are entitled to a Kenyan citizenship once they attained the legal age for adulthood, 18 years. It was discovered that the Kenyan government does not have a legal provision for this to happen, which was received with shock and bewilderment from the students and attendees of this session.

The students, many who were from the Somali community in the class, further revealed that Somali refugees are regarded with suspicion, with linkages to the Al-Shabab terror group in Somalia, and therefore faced opposition and discrimination when attempting to integrate into the local communities. Towards the end of this session, five more students came forth and revealed that they too were refugees, but had been afraid to disclose their status to the rest of the school, due to the stereotypes associated with the refugee community here in Kenya.

The students concluded by indicating that there was great need to highlight the plight of refugees in Kenya, with a challenge to themselves and the KYWI team to be agents of change with regard to how the refugee community is regarded and treated by indigenous Kenyans. In attendance during this session were also Mary Kweny and Justin, both of the Xavier Project.

agents of change
The Refugee Awareness session at Nembu Girls’ High School was conducted on Tuesday, 11th October 2016.

Prior arrangements had been made for the attendance of three refugee students sponsored by the Xavier Project to be in attendance, and share their experiences as urban refugees in Kenya. The three students were, Sarah Vuni Kido, Magdalene Zakai and Nadia Umutesi of South Sudan, Northern South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo respectively. After a brief background on who is described as a refugee, and why it was important to be informed about refugee issues, the session began with an introduction of the three students to the rest of the KYWI club members.

It came as a big surprise when Magdalene Zakai, fondly known as “Meddy” by her classmates, and one of the KYWI officials in the schools arose to share her story. It was evident that neither her classmates nor her close friend knew of her refugee status. Magdalene revealed also that she was a Kenyan-born refugee, and admitted to not having ever been to South Sudan, her country of origin. She explained that being born in Kenya has integrated her well into the local society, with most of her friends, neighbours and classmates having been Kenyans for most of her life. She explained that her family and herself have not faced major challenges with regard to their refugee status, and did not consider herself any different from any other Kenyan girl. Sarah, also from South Sudan shared the same experiences as Magdalene, having being born in Kenya, and had little knowledge about her country of origin, except for what she hears from her mother, and relatives from South Sudan. Nadia Umutesi, the refugee student from DRC, told a different story from the other two.

Nadia disclosed that she and her family had come to Kenya in 2011, when she was 10 years old, having to escape violent conflict in the DRC. She further explained that her integration into the Kenyan society as a refugee had been difficult, owing to the language barrier imposed on her and her family. She however explained that it had taken her a lot of hard work to learn English - Kenya’s official language, and to catch up with the rest of the students in Kenyan schools. When asked whether she had disclosed her status as a refugee in Kenya to her classmates, she jokingly indicated, “I have only told the responsible ones”.

The three refugee students expressed their hesitation in disclosing their status as refugees, due to the stereotypes held by the society about refugees. At the end of the session, the three students emphasized that they were not any different from other students, and went further to give examples of achievements in their lives, such as academic excellence that even surpassed that of their Kenyan classmates.

They indicated also that they would love to go back to their countries of origin once they had acquired academic and professional qualifications that would enable them to improve the social, political and economic situations of those countries.
The session was different from all the other sessions in that the focus was outside the country of Israel, Upper Hill’s country of focus for the term ending November 2016.

The session was facilitated by Alvin Wafufo, Joel Okwemba, Joan Njeri and Michelle Dibo; the last two from the media and communication team of the Know your world initiative. The topic of discussion for the session was the plight of refugees, particularly in light of the decision by the Kenyan government to close down, Dadaab refugee camp - based in North Eastern Region of Kenya and the biggest refugee camp in the world.

It was a particularly sensitive topic to one of the students who is a refugee from Burundi. His willingness to be interviewed on his thoughts on the Kenyan decision was a difficult but welcome idea for the benefit of the beneficiaries of the initiative- with him being already a member of the KYWI. The interview was conducted by Alvin Wafufo and involved basic questions on his experiences as a refugee in Kenya and his hope for Urban refugees.

He surprisingly supported the government’s decision to close the camp, citing the alleged accusations on the camp being used as an avenue for terrorist activities as his main reason.

Post the interview, the students raised several questions; questions that were tailor-made to feed their curiosity on the status of refugees in Kenya and the world at large. The questions were largely centered on the availability of legal provisions to allow for refugees to apply for citizenship in the host countries, to protect them from any form of threat to their livelihoods and to access equal employment opportunities in a bid to improve their living standards. The question of repatriation was also of interest to the students as they sought to understand why some refugees are being forced to go back to their countries against their own wishes.

The facilitators addressed these questions to the best of their ability and knowledge and promised to look further into the question of the laws that apply to the refugees.

The attendance for the session was above average and the desire for the students to understand more about global issues of concern was evident in the questions raised. If not for the time constraints, the session would have gone late into the night.
The Know Your World Initiative Refugee Awareness week continued at Moi Girls' High School on Thursday, 13th October 2016.

The Xavier Project had identified one student, Gloria Maroy from the Democratic Republic of Congo, as the guest refugee student for this session at the school. Before the beginning of the session, the KYWI team in attendance had an opportunity to meet with Gloria, and inquired if she was comfortable sharing her story as a refugee in Kenya. Gloria was very receptive to the idea.

The session began with Gloria sharing her story, and explained that her family came to Kenya when she was five (5) years old, and therefore had no recollection of her formative years in Congo. She however told the students about the horrific stories told to her by her parents as to why they had to leave the DRC. She explained that her life as a refugee in Kenya has not been too difficult because she had integrated well into the Kenyan society, pointing out that many Kenyans refer to her as a “Luyha”, a local Kenyan community. She however pointed out that there were still challenges that she and her family faces on account of being refugees here in Kenya.

Gloria explained that access to basic needs such as medical healthcare has been a challenge to her family, telling a story about her mother falling ill and lacking quick access to medical facilities, because she did not have a Kenyan identity card for admission into hospital.

She also explained that as a refugee, she lacked the freedom of movement, due to lack of a Kenyan identity, which put her and her family at risk of harassment and arbitrary detention by Kenyan authorities. When asked by the students if she wished to be a Kenyan citizen, she said that she would prefer going back to the DRC on completion of advocacy studies, to help improve the socio-political situation in DRC.

The students at the end of the session suggested that there was need to have greater awareness on refugee wellbeing, and hoped to have greater interaction with people from the refugee community, to enhance their understanding of their lives.

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The last session of the KYWI program at Pangani Girls on Friday, the 19th of October, 2016. The session marked the end of Urban Refugee week.

The session began with an introduction on who refugees are and how one gets a refugee status. The students were keen to know more. We had a guest speaker, the Head-Girl Mahlet Tefatsion who is an Eritrean refugee in Kenya. Mahlet gave her experience starting from the journey from Eritrea through Ethiopia to Kenya.

Most of the students did not know that she was a refugee as she had blended well in school as a refugee in Kenya she explained how Kenya is a good nation however not everyone knows about refugee status in Kenya. As she narrated her story one could see the students were inspired by her.

She attributed her strength and zeal from her parents. Her parents are hardworking people and encourage their children to do their best. As a closing remarks, she said she would return to Eritrea and help in democratizing the Nation, but for now she wants to pursue a career in Science.

At the end of the session students gave out their suggestions and actions they would take to make refugees feel more at home. They understood that refugees need to be assimilated and it is their duty to do so.

The session was moderated by Joel, in attendance were student volunteers from the Institute of Diplomacy and International Studies - University of Nairobi as well as KYWI team including Joan, Michelle, Polycarp and Noelle Choo.

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**feel more at home**
CONCLUSION

The week proved to be a pivot point with regard to comprehension on matters biased to refugee affairs. With the focus being on the refugee child, who has the potential to be a source of peace for the young and future generations, the week exposed failures by the system to fully take care of the basic as well as psychosocial support of the child.

Key areas that will be keenly followed through the existing partnerships by the Octopizzo Foundation & The Xavier Project

- How to ease the integration process in the urban communities in political, economic and social spaces.
- How to build up societies that have no stereotypes and misconceptions of refugees.
- How to lobby successfully for full human rights and dignity for refugees in Kenya.

APPRECIATION

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