

We Dare to Dream- A message of hope and togetherness

A Documentary by Waad Al-Kateab

Executive Produced by Angelina Jolie and John Legend

Authors

Dr Hadjer Nacer, PhD, Royal Free Hospital

Prof Delan Devakumar, PhD, Institute for Global Health, UCL

Corresponding author: Prof D Devakumar, UCL Institute for Global Health, 30 Guilford St, London. WC1N 1EH Tel: +44 (0)20 7905 2839, d.devakumar@ucl.ac.uk

“We Dare to Dream” is a new documentary by the director Waad Al-Kateab, which follows the fortunes of athletes as they attempt to compete in the Olympic games for the Refugee Olympic Team. This is the second film by Al-Kateab, after the multi-award winning “For Sama”, a raw, powerful and deeply harrowing documentary that chronicled her life through the horrors of life under siege in Aleppo, Syria, and also hope with the birth of her daughter Sama. The documentary begins with Waad’s own story becoming a refugee and the emotional flee from war-torn Aleppo. Now based in London, Al-Kateab uses her camera to tell the story of other refugees and campaigns to raise awareness of the global refugee crisis.

In “We Dare to Dream”, Al-Kateab turns her lens to five incredible refugee athletes from Iran, South Sudan, Syria and Cameroon on their individual journeys to the Tokyo 2020 Olympic games. The Refugee Olympic Team was first introduced at the Rio Games in 2016 in response to the refugee crisis, which mirrors the conflicts around the world. The last decade has seen a dramatic increase in forced migrants. UNHCR reports 38.5 million forced migrants in 2011, rising to 110 million in 2023, 36.4 million of whom are refugees.¹ People

¹ The UN Refugee Agency, 2023, Refugee Data Finder, [unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/](https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/)

move because they have to. You get glimpses of their stories, escaping war and persecution. They have taken the difficult, dangerous and uncertain journeys across borders and are now living in different circumstances, some are in refugee camps, while others are settled in destination countries. Despite where they are, what they have been through, their focus though is to win gold at the Olympics. Refugees, like anyone else, have hopes and dreams to go beyond immediate situations. *We Dare to Dream* is a story of their resilience, loss, and mostly hope.

The film takes the viewers to the Azraq refugee camp in Jordan to meet 17-year-old Wael Fawaz Al-Faraj, a Taekwondo athlete and Syrian refugee. He dreams of becoming an Olympic champion one day, and of a comfortable life for his family outside the camp. We meet Saeid Fazloulou, a canoeist originally from Bandar-e-Anzali in Iran, who fled to Germany after the Iranian government accused him of changing his religion. And South Sudanese runner Anjelina Nadai Lohalith, who is an inspiring runner, a community development and social worker. She fled South Sudan as a child to live in a refugee camp in Kakuma in Kenya. At the end of the documentary, she is finally reunited with her parents after 19 years. We follow Cyrille Tchachet, a Cameroonian refugee in the UK who started weightlifting from the age of 14. His story highlights the toll of migration on mental health. He has gone on to become a community mental health nurse, after his own lived experience suffering a mental health crisis due to the trauma and the loneliness as a refugee. Then there is the powerful and emotional story of Kimia Alizadah, from Iran, who started Taekwondo in her local gym at the age of 7. Aged 18, she became her nation's first female Olympic medallist. She was hailed as a hero in Iran, but then fled her home country, citing the exploitation of athletes behind the scenes: "I had to do everything the government wants, the system wants. I had to attend political meetings and say all they wanted me to say. We're just tools." She insisted she would remain "a child of Iran" wherever she is, and would continue to fight for equality, so that all women have the ability to follow their dreams.

The film follows the athletes' journey during the COVID-19 pandemic, the spectre of the which hangs over the film and adds to all the stress, but their fire, drive and determination

were invincible. This is also a symbolic strength that shows that refugees are not merely the downtrodden, but they can reach the pinnacle of sports. Hopefully, they were watched by and inspired millions of a young men and women forced to leave their families, homes, and countries of birth to build new lives out of nothing. In the current context, the rhetoric surrounding refugees and migrants has become increasingly polarised, with anti-migrant, and often xenophobic attitudes. They are othered, demonised, or painted as a drain on resources, it is important to highlight the stories of solidarity, inspiration, resistance, and goodwill.

Dare to Dream is a documentary of representation. It is made by a refugee, about refugees, for refugees. As Waad Al-Khateab says, "This film is not about winning, it is about how many times you fall, how many times the world fails you, and how many times you stand up, and find your way."