

In the centre of this photograph, a young Afghan girl stands in a three-wheeled wooden cart. Wearing a lavender-coloured shalwar kameez (a long shirt with trousers) and violet headscarf, she holds her right hand up towards a pink balloon, floating inches above her head. Her body is angled towards the right of the image, her head is tilted backwards, and her eyes look upwards as she smiles at the balloon.

To the left in the background, a much-younger child, wearing a sweatshirt, looks at the girl in the centre of the image, arms aloft in celebration. Slightly to the right, positioned behind the cart in the foreground, is another cart, ornately painted in different colours. Another girl sits inside it. She wears a dark-coloured headscarf and has her arms tenderly wrapped around a small boy in a maroon hat. They stare at the girl with the balloon, smiling.

In the background, to the right of the frame, a cow grazes, its head and dark horns lowered to the floor. Behind the cow is the tired-looking brick wall of a small building. Another cow stands next to two goats, grazing in the central background. Further left is a wooden door, slightly ajar. And on the far left of the frame, children queue to buy candy at a makeshift grocery store.

The image is dominated by the bleak colours of the brown brick, the dull tones of mud and grass on the floor, and the smoky sky in the top left corner. Yet the children, as they always do, bring colour and light.

Though I took it in Pakistan, every child in this photograph is an Afghan refugee. And while the setting has an overwhelming sense of gloom, its magic and power come from the girl at its centre: wearing vibrant colours and an innocent, bright smile. The poverty of her surroundings is offset by her, the pink balloon, and the other children, finding a moment in time to do what children do, wherever they are: play.

She is old enough to recognise that her life is unfair, and that her circumstances could be much better; but she is young enough to get lost in the majesty of something as simple as tossing a balloon in the air to entertain herself, and her friends.

Captured in February 2014 on the outskirts of the country's capital, Islamabad, I stumbled upon the scene in a poor neighbourhood, which is home to hundreds of Afghan refugee families. This settlement is just one of many, locally known as "Afghan colonies".

In my 20 years as a photographer, I have spent four-and-a-half of them in Pakistan. During my time there, I would spend my days walking around poor neighbourhoods like this one, documenting the everyday life of the refugees who live there. I would take a lot of time in the same environment to get to know the people who lived there, and to become part of their landscape, gaining their trust and respect. Only then could I see through the lens into their everyday lives.

To this day, I still remember the joyous sounds I heard before capturing this moment. I was walking the streets, searching for the perfect scene to capture, when I heard the laughs and giggles of girls and boys nearby. I walked immediately towards it and was rewarded with this striking image.

The grandparents of the children in this photograph were forced to leave their homeland in 1979, taking refuge in Pakistan. The country is home to more than two million Afghan refugees, dating back to the Soviet invasion and conflict that followed between 1979 and 1989.

At first, they settled by the border, before being moved to this area on the outskirts of the Pakistani capital. With their relatives and members of the Afghan community, the

refugees built mud homes in open spaces that would eventually become the “colonies” these children call home.

The poverty here is astonishing. These children don't have access to many of the things we take for granted. They're unable to go to school because their parents can't afford to send them; while their neighbourhoods have no electricity or running water.

Worse still, as of 1 November, 2023, the Pakistani authorities have demolished many of these neighbourhoods in a crackdown against undocumented migrants and illegal settlements.

My work in Pakistan, capturing the daily lives of the Afghan children who live here, inspired me to establish the Dutch non-profit organisation: Everyday Refugees Foundation. We've been able to finance a school in support of girls' education, not far from where I took this image. It may not solve all of their problems, but it at least offers these children the basic right to education. The school is called “Encourage”, and it's found on the outskirts of Islamabad.

In my experience, conflict inflicts more suffering on children than anyone else. Because they don't get to choose where they're born, or the circumstances they're born into. And, as this photograph shows, children all over the world always seek the same things: safety, fun, and happiness.

The joy and playfulness of this image almost makes the children's reality more tragic. Because underneath the surface, it's a story of the millions of people who were forced to leave their homes, hopes, families and memories behind – all in search of safety. This is what I try to show in my work.

Whether you're in London, New York, Amsterdam, or a refugee settlement just outside Islamabad, we all crave little moments of happiness or joy. We all have things in common.

Captured with a Canon Camera EOS 5D Mark III, I named this image 'A Smile in the Rubble'. And like most moments of joy amidst the rubble of a refugee's life, this one didn't last long. The balloon drifted away and the girl chased after it. I was honoured to immortalize this scene – and to share it with the world.