

“

WEARING LIPSTICK  
WAS AN ACT OF RESISTANCE  
– A WAY FOR HER  
TO FEEL LIKE A WOMAN

”

**From self-care and building confidence to forming life-saving communities, *Stylist* explores the surprising role of beauty in refugee camps across the world**

WORDS: JESSICA BATEMAN



Every morning Nour walks to the pink-painted wedding dress boutique and beauty salon that she runs in Zaatari refugee camp, Jordan, home to around 80,000 people. She

organises eyeshadows and lipsticks ready for her customers and hangs out the dresses, which she designs herself, for display.

The most popular service here is bridal make-up, followed by haircuts and colour appointments. "Looking after yourself is a human need, even when you're living in a camp," says the 27-year-old, who fled her home in Homs, Syria, in 2013. "Most of us end up staying in this camp for years, so we need things that make us feel like we're still 'living'. All women should have a right to access these services if they want them."

Make-up and beauty products are not generally considered essential services in crisis settings. In refugee camps or in the aftermath of disasters, aid organisations tend to distribute what are viewed as the basics – food, water, blankets. Lipstick or moisturiser might be seen as frivolous by comparison. But around the world a huge number of businesses providing beauty and hygiene services to refugee and migrant women are showing that being able to look after your hair and skin – or even put on a bit of mascara – isn't just a treat, but something that can offer hope and a sense of humanity in the darkest of times. It's why organisations working with refugee women have started making beauty services part of their operations. Brands including Lush and The Perfume Society, for instance, donate products to women living in camps or who have recently arrived in the UK.

**SAFE SPACE TO BATHE**

In camp settings, where people wait to have their asylum claims processed, hygiene facilities tend to be limited. "The [main] communal showers are very basic – you just go in, wash, then go straight back out in the cold," says Annie Petros, operations coordinator at Becky's Bathhouse, a women-only shower facility and beauty station on Lesbos, Greece. "You can't really take time to dry yourself off or warm up." Almost 8,000 men, women and children are housed in notoriously poor conditions on the island. It's not uncommon for several families to share one tent, and rates of trauma and mental illness are high – up to 60% of new arrivals have expressed suicidal thoughts. Safety is also a big concern, with many women too scared to use the toilets alone for fear of being attacked. "We offer a safe space where women can take all the time they need to bathe themselves and their children properly, and they can relax afterwards with a cup of chai," says Petros.

Becky's Bathhouse is named after Rebecca Dykes, the 30-year-old British humanitarian worker who was murdered by an Uber driver in Lebanon in 2017. Her family, who founded the organisation, say she "loved to dress up" when not working in the field. There is also a beauty station on the premises where women can style their hair and access products donated by Lush,



NOUR'S WEDDING DRESS BOUTIQUE AND BEAUTY SALON IN ZAAATARI REFUGEE CAMP

**"THIS ISN'T ABOUT VANITY. THESE BEAUTY SALONS AND WASH STATIONS ARE CREATING A VITAL SANCTUARY WHERE WOMEN CAN BOND AND TALK"**

and all visitors are gifted a 'dignity bag' with clean underwear, sanitary pads and toiletries. "We get a lot of requests for moisturiser and lotion," says Petros. "It's not really thought of as a necessity in aid settings but if your skin gets dry, that can be pretty uncomfortable."

Parisa, 31, another Bathhouse staff member, has experienced the importance of such a space herself. Originally from Iran, she lived in the camp when she and her husband first arrived on Lesbos in 2018. "Women really need somewhere where they can relax because the conditions are, I'm sorry to say, horrible," she explains. "It's so important for their mental health. Here, refugees have absolutely nothing."

Clinical psychologist and family psychiatrist Jenny Altschuler, who has worked with refugees throughout her career, agrees. "How we look is very central to our sense of who we are," she says. "When you experience this kind of trauma, when every other part of your life has been decimated, beauty presents a way back to your identity."

Indeed, this isn't about vanity. These beauty salons and wash stations are creating a vital sanctuary where women can bond, talk about subjects perceived by some as taboo and access specialist healthcare. In camps such as Lesbos, where overcrowding is a major issue,



FOR MANY REFUGEE WOMEN, LOOKING GOOD HELPS THEM RECLAIM THEIR CONFIDENCE

women have limited access to places where they can relax or form new friendships. The few public communal areas, such as food stands, tend to be dominated by men and the cramped tents families live in offer little privacy. It's why Becky's Bathhouse has a female doctor who visits the premises every Friday to answer questions about menopause, pregnancy or anything else the women might need help with. "We get a lot of women who are worried because their period is late," says Petros. "The doctors can reassure them that missed periods are common, and that severe trauma or poor diets – which many of our guests experience – can be causes of this."

**CREATING COMMUNITY**

In Zaatari, Nour agrees a strong community has built up around her salon. Having previously worked as a beautician in Syria, she set up the business three years ago with the help of UNHCR, the UN's refugee agency, and now employs five women including her sister. Zaatari, which was founded a decade ago to house



ORGANISATIONS SUPPORTING REFUGEE WOMEN ARE MAKING BEAUTY SERVICES PART OF THEIR OPERATIONS

Syrians fleeing war, has grown into a permanent settlement with a bustling high street: there are grocers, barber shops, cafes, even a travel agency. Nour's salon wouldn't look out of place in any city within the region, with shelves stocked with hairspray and bridal tiaras. "I don't feel like I'm the boss here, I feel like I'm everyone's friend," she says. "After I've helped a customer choose her wedding dress and got her ready for the biggest party of her life, we've formed a strong bond – we'll stay in touch and call each other. They recommend other people to me, and I feel like we're one big family that supports each other."

**LEARNING A TRADE**

At Tijuana in Mexico, close to the US border, hairdressing and nail tech courses are also helping refugees from central America and the Caribbean build communities. Families Belong Together, which runs the programme, started out by providing sewing and knitting circles, but then the women requested beautician training so that they could gain commercial skills. "When I arrived I didn't know anyone, and I struggled to get paid work because I didn't have the right papers," says Lietsy, 33, who worked as a PE teacher in Cuba

but has styled hair "for fun" since she was a child. She says that professionalising her skills, which she now advertises on social media, has helped her connect with other women and build supportive friendships. She has also been offered a job in a salon in California for when her asylum claim in the US is finally processed. "I want people to know that we are not here because we want to take from society, but that we want to contribute," she says.

But even after women have arrived in their destination country, they can still face hardship and discrimination. "The women we work with have suffered torture, rape, war, trafficking... they come here looking for safety but are often unable to access quality legal representation and end up facing destitution," says Samantha Hudson from UK charity Women for Refugee Women, which helps provide basic hygiene needs such as sanitary towels throughout the year and, at Christmas, gifts women luxurious beauty products. "It helps to show women that people care, and that they are deserving of some joy and beauty," she says. "One woman told me that she would wear the lipstick she was given every time she went to the Home Office. She said it was an act of resistance for her to feel beautiful – to feel like a woman –



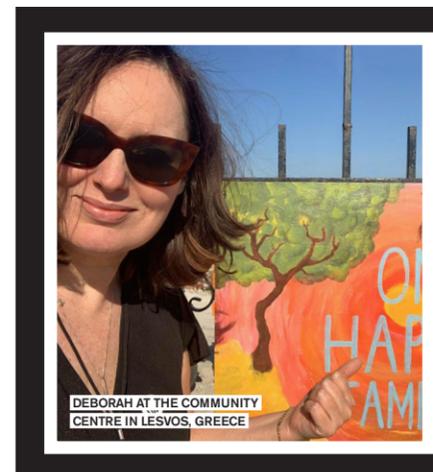
BECKY'S BATHHOUSE IS A WOMEN-ONLY SHOWER FACILITY AND BEAUTY STATION ON LESBOS, GREECE

when the Home Office wasn't treating her like a human being anymore."

For other refugee women, dressing up and looking good has helped them reclaim their confidence after traumatic journeys. "When I'm dressed up, wearing clothes that fit my body, I feel so good – and so strong," says Shafiqeh, 33, from Afghanistan, who previously lived in the Lesbos camp but is now settled in Athens. "When I was travelling here I felt so unsafe the whole time. I covered myself in long loose clothes for protection." A trained tailor since the age of 12, Shafiqeh is now working on her second fashion collection fusing European and traditional pan-Asian styles, featuring scarves, tunics and loose trousers as well as more fitted pieces. She takes colour palette inspiration from the mountains around her in Greece. "Mountains are so strong, and that's how I want to make women feel," she says. "In my culture we have a saying, 'You have a mountain behind you', when someone is powerful."

More than anything, accessing beauty products and services while in a state of displacement offers a chance to better yourself and to dream of a different tomorrow. Nour says that, after helping her customers look better, their feedback and compliments inspire her to "become better too – at my art, at learning new techniques and treatments in the salon." And perhaps that's what it comes down to. Because when everything else has been taken away, hope is always the most powerful – and beautiful – thing that remains. S

PHOTOGRAPHY: PAUL JUNG/THE LICENSING PROJECT, GETTY IMAGES



DEBORAH AT THE COMMUNITY CENTRE IN LESBOS, GREECE

**"These things make you human"**

"When I went to the women's centre in Lesbos, in the Moria camp, a woman asked me if I wanted my eyebrows threaded and I thought, I'm a feminist but... I'm in a refugee camp and the first thing that's been said is, 'Shall we tidy your eyebrows up?' They really must need doing. But then I realised they were having a spa afternoon trading grooming treatments and doing yoga.

Of course, you never need self-care more than when you're going through trauma. When I go to the camp in Calais and ask what they want me to bring, they always

say hair conditioner. It's a luxury you can't always afford if you're displaced but as Fleabag taught us, 'Hair is everything' and that doesn't change in a camp. If you have to run fast you might arrive without a toothbrush much less a lipstick. But these are the things that can make you feel human and individual."

*Jonal*