

## **Put Your Pandemic Problems in Perspective**

### **By Ravi Sondhu**

To be honest, when we were told we had to write a speech about an important issue, my mind was completely blank. Who am I to talk about real-world problems? I don't know what poverty or homelessness feels like. I haven't seen melting icebergs or been stranded in the middle of a raging wildfire, so that scratched climate change off the list. The fact that I'm a girl and half-Indian haven't really been defining factors in my life, and I want to be the kind of writer who writes from experience.

Something that irritates me is when our privilege blinds us from seeing the bigger picture, when it makes us think only of ourselves, and when it makes our wants overshadow the needs of others. What I then thought about was covid, and the whole covid experience that came with it. Today, all I want is to persuade you to put your pandemic experiences into perspective, because although home school, lockdowns, and protests have all become part of these 'Unprecedented Times' and this 'New Normal', we've been in a pretty good position right from the very start. Yet, we still find room to complain about things like remote learning, when so many kids around the world don't have access to education like we do, which brings me to my first point.

Put your hand up if you're ready for this school day to be over. Yeah, me too, but we are so lucky to be here today, learning. We were even luckier in lockdown when we were still able to learn remotely.

However, while we had all of our education ready to go and right at our fingertips, more than one third of the world's school aged children didn't have, don't have and maybe won't ever have the resources available to access online learning.

Between April 2020 and April 2021, The Human Rights Watch interviewed more than 470 students, parents, and teachers across 60 different countries. One of the interviewees was a mother of seven from Lagos, Nigeria, who lost her income when the university where she cleaned shut down due to the pandemic. She stated that "Their teacher called me to tell me to buy a big phone [smartphone] for online teaching. I don't have the money to feed my family and I am struggling to make ends meet. How can I afford a phone and internet?"

As schools closed due to the pandemic, kids, mostly girls, weren't able to learn because their responsibilities shifted to caring for their families and making money, and it has been estimated by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization that 11 million girls won't even return to school at all after the pandemic.

So why is it that I get to be in school today, while all these children are being denied their basic rights to education? It's not fair, is it?

Speaking of unfair, yes, we've been stuck involuntarily in lockdown, but what about the people that are involuntarily locked up?

According to the Refugee Council of Australia, asylum seekers in Australian detention centres are held for an average of more than nine months, far longer than international standards. The average time asylum seekers are detained is 275 days – almost four times longer than the average 72 days asylum seekers were spending in detention in July last year. Yet this is just the average, and it excludes the hundreds of people who spend years in detention centres.

It's not all about the time spent locked up either; it's about the living conditions and quality of life. A Guardian Australia investigation, published in March 2019, uncovered allegations of abuse and mistreatment of people detained, rising tensions within the centres, and claims that people had been arbitrarily transferred away from their home states to other places of detention.

Asylum seekers, refugees and immigrants spend their time in cramped cells, sometimes with no access to soap, toothpaste, or places to wash their hands and shower. There is no privacy. Children

sleep on concrete floors and adults have to stand for days due to lack of space. Access to dormitories is forbidden during the day.

The environment has often been described as that of a high-security prison. The detainees are obliged to live in groups and stick to a strict timetable from sun-up till bed-time, and when they move from one place to another, they are always accompanied by guards.

How does lockdown from the safety and comfort of our own homes sound now?

Contrary to the view that we've mostly had it pretty easy, there is the fact that lockdown has had a big impact on mental and social health. Nevertheless, I think we have to realise how fortunate we all are to be surrounded by family and friends and support. We've all been through similar experiences, so let's just be more understanding and help each other out, okay?

In addition to changes in the education system and lockdowns, covid has also brought about protests against mandates, especially in Melbourne. It would seem that some people feel they have been deprived of their freedom. They don't want people telling them to stay at home, telling them to get the vaccine, telling them what to do. They even have the nerve to proclaim we're being controlled by 'Dictator' Dan, when the real weight of the word 'dictator' is felt by the thousands of people who live under dictatorships today, Australia not currently one of them.

It's completely ridiculous - I can't believe we have the audacity to declare we have no freedom, when people in North Korea aren't allowed to wear blue jeans.

Ultimately, the point that I'm trying to get at is that if we can put our pandemic problems and experiences into perspective, we can be more grateful about what we do have, and be more aware of what other people might not. And if we do that, then we'll be able to see the holes in our world that we can fill by raising awareness and helping others.

Just think about it.