

Women and human rights: front and centre at the Oscar ceremony this year

Gender equality, the marginalization of indigenous languages, migration, the refugee crisis, the lives of domestic workers, poverty... All these issues which are at the heart of the United Nations' work, are also front and centre in some of the films celebrated this year at the Academy Awards.

Two women, Yalitza Aparicio and Nadine Labaki, could make history this Sunday during the 91st Oscar ceremony taking place this Sunday in Los Angeles, in the United States. Mexican actress Yalitza Aparicio could become the first indigenous woman to win the prestigious golden statuette for her role in the feature *Roma*, by director Alfonso Cuarón. As for Nadine Labaki, from Lebanon, she could become the first Arab filmmaker to be awarded an Oscar, for her film *Capernaum*.

Their nominations came two years after a heated debate over the lack of diversity in the Academy Awards' lists of nominees and winners.

This year, the Academy has also shown greater range in its thematic coverage by nominating films that highlight major international issues, in particular related to human rights. For example, the film *Roma* highlights the need to protect indigenous languages such as Mixtec, as well as the life of domestic workers, and societal inequalities. As for *Capernaum*, it puts the spotlight on the suffering of migrant and refugee children. *Green Book* and *BlacKkKlansman*, also nominated, highlight issues of racism in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s.

This human-rights focus in the world of cinema takes place as the world just celebrated the [70th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#).



Image by Alfonso Cuarón

Oscar-nominated actress Yalitza Aparicio, in *Roma*.

Focus on indigenous issues and economic inequalities

Director Alfonso Cuarón has hailed Yalitza Aparicio's nomination in the Best Actress category as the most relevant nomination of the 10 his film *Roma* secured.

The young woman, who made her acting debut in this feature, plays Cleo, a domestic worker who is Mixteca, an indigenous community in Mexico, specifically in the states of Guerrero, Oaxaca and Puebla. Cleo works for a middle class family in the early 1970s in the neighborhood of Roma, in Mexico City.

In an interview with *UN News*, Mr. Cuarón noted that, in his country, indigenous peoples are particularly affected by social inequalities. "It isn't difficult to notice that economic power is closely linked to the color of one's skin, and indigenous peoples are those who usually end up having the least amount of privilege."

The director stressed that the film had started a conversation on the racism that persists in Mexico, which he said "has been ignored for too long". He added this racism had "not just been ignored" but that its very existence had actually been "denied." He also noted that the topic of domestic work and the rights of indigenous peoples have been overall taboo.

Regarding indigenous languages, of which [2019 is the International Year](#), Mr. Cuarón lamented that they are "very repressed." Cleo and her friend and fellow domestic worker Adela only speak it when they are alone "in their own spaces" – i.e. the kitchen or their bedroom – or with the "girl who is belittled, ignored and unappreciated by the masculine part of the family."



Syrian child actor, Zain, before his resettlement in Norway.

Labaki's 'duty'

In *Capernaum*, director Nadine Labaki, nominated in the Best Foreign Language Film category, sheds a light on the [plight of refugee children](#), their [violated rights](#), and how extreme poverty affects them.

The movie tells the story of 12-year-old Zain, a Syrian refugee who, caught in the limbo of conflict and forced displacement, files a lawsuit against his parents for having been born.

In an [interview with UN News](#), Ms. Labaki said that she had “a duty” – “not even a choice” – to record the reality of the refugee crisis playing out on the streets of her native Lebanon. The small country, which is also facing its own political and economic challenges, currently hosts close to 1 million refugees from war-torn Syria.

“I’m actually surprised when people ask me [what pushed me to make this film] because I think, you know, if I can do something about it, and I can use my voice to do something about it, it would be a crime not to do so,” she said. “So I decided to use my tool, which is filmmaking, to tell that story, to put that story out there and to talk about this struggle because it’s my responsibility.”

Stressing that the refugee problem is visibly growing – as one can see in Lebanon “children working on the streets, carrying very heavy loads and doing very difficult jobs” – Ms. Labaki said she purposely chose to tell this story through a child’s perspective. A child “sees things so much more clearly than any adult because he is not informed or altered by societies’ codes or hypocrisy or politics.”

Referring to Alan Kurdi, the drowned Syrian toddler found washed ashore on a Turkish beach in September 2015, she said when she saw his picture, she wondered: “if this child could talk, what would he say? What would he tell the world? How would he address the adults that put him in this situation?”

The different characters in the film are not played by professional actors, but by migrants and refugees who themselves faced very similar situations to those shown in the movie. The main character, Zain, is himself played by a refugee who fled Syria eight years ago.

Ms. Labaki explained he faced “very difficult circumstances” and “never went to school.” The only difference with the film, she explained, is that the real Zain has “loving parents.”

Since the film was made, Zain was resettled in Norway where he lives now, through the efforts of the UN refugee agency ([UNHCR](#)).

Guterres meets Venezuela Foreign Minister, reiterates humanitarian principles

United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres met on Friday with Jorge Arreaza, Foreign Minister of Venezuela, reiterated that the UN acts in accordance with the humanitarian principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence, working with Venezuelan institutions, to assist people in need.

This is the third time that Minister Arreaza meets with the UN Secretary-General in just a few weeks.

During their meeting at UN headquarters in New York, they discussed the situation in the country and in the region, and Mr. Guterres urged the Venezuelan authorities not to use lethal force against demonstrators.

Amid deepening economic and political uncertainty, the UN has been supporting local institutions by providing medical kits for women and children, and aid teams are also delivering 100,000 treatments for severe acute malnutrition. Six temporary shelters have been set up in the western border states to house 1,600 people and offer them protection and information, as well as family kits containing food and clothing.

The [World Health Organization \(WHO\)](#) confirmed that it is continuing to work with the authorities through the Pan-American Health Organization (PAHO), notably to prevent and control communicable and non-communicable diseases. Immunization campaigns have been carried out to halt the spread of measles and diphtheria.

In a bid to help 3.6 million Venezuelans, including 2 million children, the UN humanitarian coordination office ([OCHA](#)) has appealed for nearly \$110 million.

UN chief lauds Philippines' 'landmark achievement' on setting up transition

authority in Bangsamoro

United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres congratulated the Philippines on Friday for establishing a government body to push forward the formal creation of an autonomous region.

In addition to the Government, he commended the Islamic Liberation Front, civil society groups, local communities and the Bangsamoro Transition Commission itself, which was first tasked some six years ago to help draft what in [2018](#) became the Organic Law for the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao.

The de facto seat of the Autonomous Region, which consists of five mostly Muslim provinces, has its own government, which is outside of its jurisdiction.

Following the plebiscite confirmations of 21 January and 6 February, Mr. Guterres called the Bangsamoro Organic Law "[a landmark achievement](#) on the road to lasting peace in the Southern Philippines," as well as "a historic occasion for all people from the Philippines."

He pledged continued UN support in implementing the Bangsamoro Organic Law and helping to "build the capacity of the Bangsamoro Transition Authority to achieve peace, democratic governance, and respect for human rights."

Nicaragua: UN rights chief 'deeply concerned' over increasing criminalization of dissenters

Over the last six months, a diverse section of several hundred people has been arrested and held in pre-trial detention for long periods for their alleged roles during protests that took place last year between April and July.

Amid rising concerns over the judiciary's independence, since December, various criminal courts in Managua have handed down guilty verdicts and extremely heavy sentences to prominent opposition and community leaders.

Students, journalists, and a Supreme Court judge, among other dissenting voices, have fled the country.

The proceedings in many of the cases have been marred by a lack of

transparency; witnesses independence and credibility; undue restrictions on evidence and witnesses for the defense; and defendants' insufficient access to their lawyers.

Recent convictions/sentencings in controversial circumstances:

- Student leader Jonathan López, sentenced to five years and three months in prison.
 - Peasant leaders Medardo Mairena and Pedro Mena sentenced to 216 and 210 years in prison respectively.
 - Former army officers Carlos Brenes and Tomas Maldonado, who face sentencing for 32 and 34 years, respectively.
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Venezuelan refugees now number 3.4 million; humanitarian implications massive, warns UN

As the number of refugees and migrants from Venezuela continues to rise – hitting the 3.4 million mark this month – United Nations agencies sounded the alarm on Friday over the humanitarian needs these women, children and men face, and the strain this represents for communities hosting them.

The UN refugee agency ([UNHCR](#)) and the UN migration agency ([IOM](#)) issued [statements](#) based on data from national immigration authorities and other sources, showing that, on average, in 2018, 5,000 people left Venezuela every day in search of protection or a better life. The vast majority of them – 2.7 million – are hosted in countries of Latin America and the Caribbean.

Currently, Colombia hosts the highest number of Venezuelan refugees and migrants, with over 1.1 million. It is followed by Peru, with 506,000, Chile 288,000, Ecuador 221,000, Argentina 130,000, and Brazil 96,000. Mexico and other countries in Central America and the Caribbean are also hosting significant numbers of refugees and migrants from Venezuela.

“The countries of the region have shown tremendous solidarity with refugees and migrants from Venezuela, and implemented resourceful solutions to help them,” said Eduardo Stein, joint UNHCR-IOM Special Representative for Venezuelan refugees and migrants.

“But these figures underscore the strain on host communities and the continued need for support from the international community, at a time when the world’s attention is on political developments inside Venezuela,” he stressed.

To date, Latin American countries have granted about 1.3 million residence permits and other forms of regular status to Venezuelans. Asylum systems have also been reinforced in order to process an unprecedented number of applications. Since 2014, over 390,000 asylum claims have been lodged by Venezuelans – close to 60 per cent (232,000) happened in 2018 alone.

As the numbers continue to rise, so do the needs of these refugees and migrants, as well as those of the communities hosting them. Governments in the region are leading the response and working to coordinate efforts based on the [Quito Declaration](#) for example, adopted in September and which has been an important step towards a regional approach to scale up the assistance and protection of Venezuelan nationals and facilitate their legal, social and economic inclusion.

The next regional meeting of this process will take place in the Ecuadorian capital in the first week of April.

To complement these efforts, a humanitarian [Regional Refugee and Migrant Response Plan](#) was launched last December, targeting 2.2 million vulnerable Venezuelans and 500,000 people in host communities across 16 countries.