

Could the next American Girl doll be a refugee?

by [Emily McFarlan Miller](#) in the [November 18, 2020](#) issue



An illustration of three possible characters for American Girl to consider, all of them Muslims and refugees. (Image courtesy of [refugeegirl.org](#))

As an American child growing up in Belgium and France, Laura Laurie mostly learned about American history from the popular American Girl books. Her favorite was Kirsten, the girl of the 1850s, who emigrated with her family from Sweden to a homestead in what is now Minnesota.

Now Laurie thinks it's time for the popular toy company to tell a new story of coming to America. She's started a petition asking American Girl to model its next doll after a modern refugee.

"People are still fleeing their countries and coming here and learning English and making friends and growing aspirations for who they want to become," she said. "We're not homesteading now, but that story is still relevant today," Laurie said.

Laurie worked with an illustrator to create three suggested characters for American Girl, each reflecting a different refugee experience: Maiah, Sara, and Magan. Two of the three wear a headscarf, and Laurie said she imagined all three as Muslim.

The American Girl company has a unique platform to model compassion, curiosity, and belonging for children as it shares the stories of American girls from a variety of times, places, and experiences, according to Laurie's petition on Change.org.

American Girl has several historical characters, each accompanied by her own doll and series of books. The company also produces a contemporary Girl of the Year each year. The girl of 2020 is Joss, a "fierce surfer girl" and the company's first doll with a disability (she wears a hearing aid).

Laurie's isn't the first petition to ask American Girl to create a Muslim character.

In 2017, another Change.org petition, by middle school student Salwa Khan and her sister, Zahra, asked the head of the company to create a Muslim American doll. It garnered more than 14,000 signatures.

It's important for young Muslim girls to see themselves represented in beloved stories and dolls like American Girls, said Judy Sengsone, creator of MU Girls, a collection of Muslim characters featured in coloring books, stickers, and other educational materials.

Sengsone started MU Girls when she was pregnant in 2000 so that her daughter would grow up with positive role models and encouragement both to be herself and to be proud of her beliefs.

"When a Muslim girl sees characters she can relate to, she can be really proud of herself and wear the hijab and still be different but, at the same time, be a part of that community," she said.

It's important, too, to share refugees' stories, according to Jody May, education manager at Exodus World Service, a Christian nonprofit based in the Chicago suburbs that works to build bridges between Christians and refugees who are resettled in the area.

It's not just refugee children who will recognize themselves as American girls in the story, but all children and their parents, May said.

“For children to be able to see these dolls and see themselves in the character in the story that’s behind the doll is so beautiful,” May said. “That allows our children to grow in them a desire to welcome others who may be different.”

Laurie, who now lives in Chicago, has volunteered with Exodus World Service for years and said her own Christian faith motivated her to create the petition, which had gathered more than 660 signatures in the first few weeks.

She completed the project, which also includes a Refugee Girl website, as part of a fellowship through her church, Holy Trinity Church in Chicago. Asked to identify an area of “brokenness” in the city, she thought of the lack of positive stories she heard about refugees.

“I think by inviting the American Girl company to pay attention to the importance of refugee stories and people, we are showing God’s love to the world and to refugees,” she said.