

# WOMEN AND GIRLS AT THE CENTER OF REFUGEE RESPONSES: STRATEGIES AND APPROACHES

*Women and girls are the most vulnerable proportion of refugee and displaced populations. In responding to their needs, it is important to understand the gender norms within countries of origin and their impact on how women and girls access skills, opportunities, and services differently. This article looks at innovative ways in which the humanitarian community can better address the specific needs of women and girls with the three-pronged goal of increasing services and opportunities, bridging gender gaps, and strengthening women's leadership in communities.*

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**W**e live in a world where conflicts and disasters have become the new normal. Not surprisingly, refugee crises continue to increase in scope, scale, and complexity. There are 25.9 million refugees around the world<sup>1</sup> who have been forced from their homes and countries due to disasters and conflicts. 85 percent of the world's refugees are hosted in low and middle-income countries that are facing their own economic and developmental challenges. Of the global refugee population, approximately 50 percent consist of women and girls.<sup>2</sup> Displaced communities come with their social norms which often mean that refugees' needs, capacities, and potential for recovery are gendered. Women and girls often face additional disadvantages of sexual violence and exclusion, which are exacerbated due to pre-existing gender-based discrimination. In displacement, they face further challenges of forced marriage, child marriage, trafficking, denial of rights, and stigma, both in their origin and host countries.

The importance of gender equality was clearly articulated in the 2016 New York Declaration on Refugees and Migrants (NYD).<sup>3</sup> The protection of the human rights of women and girls who are in movement — whether that be to escape crisis or persecution, or search for economic opportunities — was also addressed. The NYD's annexed Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF) took this further by addressing the rights and needs of women and girl refugees through their empowerment and meaningful participation in decision-making that impacts not only their lives, but those of their families and communities as well. The CRRF builds on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development which is premised on the principle of “leaving no one behind.”<sup>4</sup>

In 2019, the UN General Assembly affirmed the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR), a framework for more predictable and equitable responsibility-sharing. The Compact recognizes that a sustainable solution to refugee crises cannot be achieved without international cooperation. Based on established commitments to a gender-focused approach, the GCR calls for states and service providers to promote the meaningful participation and leadership of women and girls, and to support the institutional capacity and participation of national and local women's organizations. It also calls upon the provision of resources and capacity to protect women and girls from violence, abuse, and exploitation, as well as measures to strengthen their agency to promote economic empowerment.

<sup>1</sup> The UN Refugee Agency, “Figures at a Glance,” <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/figures-at-a-glance.html>

<sup>2</sup> The UN Refugee Agency, “Women,” <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/women.html>

<sup>3</sup> UN, “General Assembly resolution 71/1, New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants, A/RES/71/1,” 19 September 2016, [https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/generalassembly/docs/globalcompact/A\\_RES\\_71\\_1.pdf](https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/generalassembly/docs/globalcompact/A_RES_71_1.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> UN Committee for Development Policy, “Leaving no one behind,” 2018, [https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/2754713\\_July\\_PM\\_2\\_Leaving\\_no\\_one\\_behind\\_Summary\\_from\\_UN\\_Committee\\_for\\_Development\\_Policy.pdf](https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/2754713_July_PM_2_Leaving_no_one_behind_Summary_from_UN_Committee_for_Development_Policy.pdf)

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In December 2019, Member States, UN agencies, and other stakeholders convened the first ever Global Refugee Forum.<sup>5</sup> The forum delivered concrete pledges to scale up the implementation of key commitments integrated into the GCR. Major focal points were enhancing opportunities for refugees to become self-reliant, expanding their access to third-country solutions such as resettlement and other pathways, and improving conditions in their countries of origin so they can return in safety and with dignity.

Local women’s organizations and groups have been working to translate many of these points, particularly those that relate to empowerment, self-reliance, and protection. However, the focal points integrated into the GCR during the Global Refugee Forum require long-term, sustained, and collective efforts of Member States, UN agencies, global and national civil society, and local actors.

### *Advocacy Efforts to Advance Equality and Empowerment*

The Global Refugee Forum is used as an advocacy platform to address the gender-specific needs of women and girls. UN Women and other well-meaning organizations also advocate for a set of pledges that provide services, protection, and resources required to address the rights and gender-specific needs of refugee women, men, girls, and boys. UN Women acknowledges and promotes contributions that encourage the equal participation and leadership of women and girls, more effective refugee responses, and durable solutions.<sup>6</sup>

As part of its global advocacy and normative work, UN Women recognizes that empowerment and protection of refugee women and girls cannot be achieved without consistent analyses of gender norms. The necessity of advocacy and strategic interventions, with a focus on ending discriminatory practices against women and girls in humanitarian and protracted crisis settings, is acknowledged as well. Alongside these approaches, amplifying the voices of women and girls, enhancing their

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<sup>5</sup> UNHCR, “Global Refugee Forum,” <https://www.unhcr.org/global-refugee-forum.html>; UNHCR, “Global Compact on Refugees Digital Platform,” <https://globalcompactrefugees.org/>

<sup>6</sup> For further information, see UNHCR India, “Written contribution of UN Women to the zero draft of the global compact of refugees,” <https://www.unhcr.org/en-in/events/conferences/5a86b5927/written-contribution-un-women-zero-draft-global-compact-refugees.html>

capacities as leaders, and recognizing their part in the resilience of their communities are at the core of UN Women's interventions for sustainable change.

### *Country-Level Interventions*

In 2016, UN Women developed the Leadership, Empowerment, Access and Protection (LEAP) program. This program has been implemented in 26 humanitarian and refugee response settings, including Uganda, Bangladesh, Turkey, Jordan, South Sudan, Colombia, and Brazil, and has carried out actions for women's leadership, protection, and livelihoods based on the humanitarian-development nexus.<sup>7</sup> The core of this program is to support local women's organizations and especially women community leaders who are working with displaced communities. This allows the local community to be part of humanitarian response planning in their respective countries. The program ultimately aims to strengthen the capacity of women's organizations, support them to be familiar with national and local humanitarian processes, and assist them in planning and allocating resources, as well as in delivering services within displaced and refugee communities.

Through the LEAP program, UN Women has been able to develop partnerships with over 700 women's organizations. These organizations ensure that the gendered needs of women are taken into account in the program's delivery. Most importantly, women's leadership is enhanced even in countries where it is often not encouraged. More women and girls now raise their voices about their needs for recovery and resilience. Women's organizations have also been able to effectively participate in the design and monitoring of policy and strategic frameworks at the country and regional levels. Their further participation was encouraged in identifying critical planning tools that countries use to understand refugee needs and accordingly allocate resources. As a result, the resources of women's organizations have increased, allowing the needs of women in places such as South Sudan, Syria, Venezuela, and Cox's Bazar to be met.

Partnerships with local women's organizations and self-organized associations of refugee women and girls is one of the priority strategies of UN Women. Given women's role as responders in humanitarian settings and their understanding of gender dynamics, these partnerships are essential in advancing the gender equality agenda. Long-term and sustainable funding that supports this agenda and women's empowerment is key to unlocking the potential of refugee women and girls. It represents a second chance for refugees to access livelihood, education opportunities, and

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<sup>7</sup> To read more on the humanitarian development nexus: OCHA, "Humanitarian Development Nexus," <https://www.unocha.org/fr/themes/humanitarian-development-nexus>

be represented in leadership positions. Funding also influences the prioritization process,<sup>8</sup> and how these priorities are reflected in legal and policy frameworks concerning responses, including CRRFs and 3RPs (Regional Resilience and Refugee Response Plans).<sup>9</sup> Leadership of displaced women, including in peace negotiations, formulation of political solutions, in humanitarian, reconstruction, and recovery assessments, as well as in planning and implementation processes, is also key in providing conditions that would help refugees return to their countries of origin.

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Using a gender lens and putting women’s organizations at the heart of refugee responses enable cross-fertilization between global policy-making and realities on the ground. It also strengthens the accountability and coordination between humanitarian actors and local governments. Increase in leadership, participation, and representation of women inside refugee camps and out, as well as in local decision-making processes within host communities, are also part of observed effects. Knowledge creation,<sup>10</sup> investment in younger generations, analysis and dissemination of gender statistics, development of skills among international and national actors, and country-specific monitoring frameworks should be key priorities of all partners working on refugee responses.

UN Women has been testing innovative programmatic interventions in refugee settings since June 2018. One of such is the Second Chance Education and Vocational Learning (SCE) Programme that aims to develop context-specific, affordable, and scalable learning and employment pathways for empowering the world’s most disadvantaged women, with a focus on refugees. One of the key challenges of displacements is the lack of education. Young people are forced out of school and consequently left with very limited options for continuing their education once they have been displaced. This is particularly significant for women as globally 132 million girls are out of school, which include 34.3 million girls of primary school age, 30 million girls of lower secondary school age, and 67.4 million girls of upper secondary school age.<sup>11</sup> Displacement increases girls’ probability of never finishing school, lim-

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<sup>8</sup> The prioritization process is the allocation of humanitarian funds to needs identified from humanitarian needs assessments. These needs are usually around food, water & sanitation (WASH), shelter, GBV.

<sup>9</sup> 3RP Syria Crisis, “In response to the Syria Crisis,” <http://www.3rpsyriacrisis.org>

<sup>10</sup> This includes raising awareness of rights and opportunities, and providing skills and capacities for refugees.

<sup>11</sup> Global Partnership for Education, “Education data highlights,” <https://www.globalpartnership.org/results/education-data-highlights>

its their skills to very little, and then often forces them to marry at an early age. Displaced women who already have little or no education, and are married with children, are even more vulnerable to trafficking, sexual exploitation, and sexual and domestic abuse. The SCE seeks to partially address this challenge. The program is piloted in Cameroon, Jordan, India, Mexico, Chile, and Australia, and aims to benefit 67,000 women and girls from indigenous, refugee, displaced, and low-income groups. By supporting innovative ways of learning and acquiring skills, the SCE promotes economic opportunities. This also fosters better interaction between refugees and host communities, and facilitates inclusive economic growth for both.<sup>12</sup>

### ***Supporting Women's Empowerment Centers and Hubs***

Another example of how to effectively support women's leadership and response in a refugee setting are women-focused empowerment centers and hubs. One example is the SADA Women's Empowerment and Solidarity Center established and managed by UN Women in partnership with Gaziantep Metropolitan Municipality, the International Labour Organization (ILO), and the Association for Solidarity with Asylum Seekers and Migrants (ASAM). As the first of its kind, the women-only center in Turkey has set an example for gender-sensitive services. UN Women developed the Center's concept by reaching out to the most excluded and marginalized who have little or no access to existing services. Since Fall 2017, the SADA Center has provided vocational and language trainings, childcare, outreach, and protection services to approximately 8,000 women and girls. The Center also conducts health, legal, sexual and gender-based violence counseling, and referrals to local service providers. 49 percent of the women supported through livelihood activities, such as language and vocational training courses, have been identified as most-at-risk individuals. These individuals include single mothers, women with disabilities, survivors of violence, and victims of child and/or forced marriages.

Emanating from the SADA Center, UN Women and partners have supported the establishment of the SADA Women's Cooperative, founded and led by refugee and local community women. SADA Women's Cooperative brings together Afghan, Syrian, and Turkish women. The Cooperative strengthens solidarity among refugee and local women through co-production and equal sharing, while reinforcing social cohesion and peaceful co-existence. Operating in the fields of shoe and bag-making, traditional food production, and home textiles, the Cooperative has generated more than 40,000 TRY since its establishment in March 2019. The Cooperative has emerged as the best practice creating livelihood opportunities for women, thanks to

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<sup>12</sup> See Global Compact on Refugees, paras. 70-71.

its democratic governance structure, women-centered feature, and bottom-up approach. In fact, it was selected as one of the top 10 scale-up projects by the Paris Peace Forum – a multilateral platform for global governance projects under the auspices of the Government of France – in November 2019 out of 1,600 projects.<sup>13</sup>

### ***Building Social Cohesion with Women’s Leadership in Refugee Settings***

UN Women’s Refugee Response Programme recognizes the importance of social cohesion in Turkey to achieve peaceful coexistence between refugees and host communities. The program understands the value of acquainting refugees with the values and social norms of host communities to facilitate understanding and reduce propensity for discrimination. One such initiative includes community-level projects in Turkey that aim to introduce the cultural, traditional, and historical heritage of Turkey to Syrian women. In 2019, more than 830 women both from refugee and host communities actively participated in social cohesion activities, such as Turkish language conversation clubs, in Mardin, Kilis, Gaziantep, and Şanlıurfa. In Istanbul for example, UN Women, with its partner Habitat Association, conducted museum tours and book fair visits where women from refugee and host communities had the chance to interact with each another.

The engagement of men and boys is equally important in efforts to dismantle discriminatory social norms and provide equal opportunities for all. UN Women acknowledges that gender equality and women’s empowerment can only be achieved with the active participation of men and boys. Therefore, UN Women’s Refugee Response Programme encompasses a vast array of awareness-raising and engagement activities for men and boys to further buttress the empowerment of women. In 2019, more than 430 men and boys have engaged in awareness-raising activities and structured discussions carried out by UN Women and its partners in the field. The discussion topics covered gender equality, women’s economic empowerment, fatherhood, and the mitigation of gender-based violence.

### ***Conclusion***

Placing women at the core of refugee responses remains one of the most critical ways through which gendered needs are addressed. This approach ensures that women’s leadership and voices prevent future conflicts, both in displaced settings and in their countries of origin. When refugee responses are appropriately gendered and planned, they become a useful tool for social cohesion and bridging distrust

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<sup>13</sup> UN Women Europe and Central Asia, “SADA Women’s Cooperative ranks among the top 10 projects at the Paris Peace Forum,” 29 November 2019, <https://eca.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2019/11/sada-womens-cooperative-ranks-among-the-top-10-projects-at-the-paris-peace-forum>

among host and refugee communities, allowing understanding to develop between each another. Supporting gendered responses also allows women and girls to have new realities through access to education, skills, and livelihoods they might otherwise not have had.

To further strengthen gender mainstreaming within refugee responses, all partners — Member States, UN agencies, national and local authorities, and civil society — will have to consider five critical issues. These include increasing the protection capacity of those receiving refugees, and ensuring women and girls are not exposed to and are protected from sexual exploitation and abuse. Another critical principle is that women are consulted on the types of marketable skills they would like to acquire and have opportunities to strengthen. They should also be encouraged to explore new and nontraditional skills — skills that will not only serve them while displaced but will also be needed to rebuild their societies and communities of origin. Although supporting innovative, online, and virtual learning should be paramount in any humanitarian and refugee planning, women and girls especially must have equal access to technology, new forms of learning, and opportunities to complete their education. While this is not only a right, it is a requisite for bridging gender gaps and inequalities.

Ultimately, the overriding principle in supporting refugee women is that they independently decide on their own durable solutions based on available options. In addition, they must be protected, their choices respected, and rights ensured. Accessible, relevant, and actionable information on all options for durable solutions — be it voluntary repatriation, resettlement, and other legal pathways — must be provided to all refugees so they can freely make informed decisions. By focusing on the gendered needs of women and girls, along with supporting male engagement, the overall socio-economic outcomes for their countries of origin and host communities are certain to be beneficial and sustainable.