

Refugee Women's Protection in the Arab Region: Current Responses and Future Prospects

Cairo, Egypt
May 3-5, 2016

Keynote Speech

By

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Excellencies,
Ladies and gentlemen

It is unfortunate that we are meeting to discuss ways of providing protection for hundreds of thousands of defenceless war refugees, in the very places to which they fled seeking protection.

Conflicts are raging across the globe. Wars and armed conflicts have been ongoing in our regions for decades. Yet, according to all reports, the scale of the humanitarian disaster resulting from the war in Syria is unprecedented in recent history. And the most vulnerable are children, and women who suffer multiple victimizations.

Are women truly the most vulnerable in times of war and conflict?

According to an International Red Cross study, women are, in fact, extremely resilient. They exhibit remarkable strength during war time in their role and responsibilities as protectors and supporters of their families. "Throughout the world, women affected by conflict can be extremely determined and brave and they often find ingenious ways of coping with the difficulties they face when fulfilling the role of head of household, caring for and earning income for their families or taking part in community life."¹

I can personally attest—from my own encounters with Palestinian, Syrian, Iraqi and Yemeni women in various refugee camps and communities—that, Yes, women hold the fort. They are the protectors of children and families, they are the resourceful providers, they are care takers of men, and they are the preservers of family and culture.

That does not mean that they are not also vulnerable and subject to grave dangers owing to their status as refugees and due to the fact that they are female.

According to United Nations sources the Syrian crisis the worst humanitarian crisis in our modern history. There are more than 7.5 million internally displaced, while over 4 million are refugees in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey.²

¹ <https://www.icrc.org/eng/resources/documents/feature/2007/women-vulnerability-010307.htm>

² <http://syrianrefugees.eu/>

There is no doubt that the humanitarian crisis is huge and presents a challenge to aid and development organizations in as much as it presents strains to host countries. Providing the basic needs of food, clean water, sanitation and shelter, health services and psychological support to all refugees has required coordinated efforts among governments, relief agencies, NGOs and donors.

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It is also estimated that more than 75% of all Syrian refugees are women and children and over 800,000 of those are women and girls of reproductive age.³ These numbers have created an increased awareness of the need to address the health and reproductive health issues of women and girls.

A UNFPA report has revealed that the lack of specific funding in host countries for women's health care is threatening the lives of pregnant women and their unborn or newborn children.⁴

Pre-natal, post-natal, and neo-natal healthcare are always essential—but they are crucial in the conditions under which Syrian women are living. Adequate and appropriate healthcare for women is essential for their protection and for reducing their vulnerability. With sufficient funding and the intervention of healthcare professionals, there has been some improvement in that area.

Organizations running healthcare services for refugees in Lebanon and Jordan have begun employing midwives along with social workers to raise awareness among the women and meet their healthcare needs. In Lebanon, I had the opportunity to meet female gynaecologists training Syrian women within the camps to educate and instruct women about basic reproductive health issues.

However, refugee women, girls and children remain vulnerable and in danger in far more subtle ways that are proving much harder to deal with. From gender-based violence to domestic violence; from educational deprivation to child labour; from sexual exploitation to early marriages resulting in life-threatening pregnancies—there is a minefield of cultural, traditional, religious and social norms—and at times even political complications—to cross before reaching safety and protection.

The most extreme case of sexual exploitation was uncovered in Lebanon only a few weeks ago. Human traffickers were discovered to have been holding 75 young Syrian women in sexual slavery, some them for up to five years.

But this as I said, this was an extreme case and clearly defined as a criminal act and punishable by the laws of the country.

Over the past few years, I have had the very sad privilege of meeting hundreds of refugees: Palestinian, Iraqi, Sudanese, Syrian, and Yemeni. I have met families and men. But predominantly, those that I have connected with and spoke to were women—
Women responsible for children;
Women responsible for extended families;

³ The Response to Syrian Refugee Women's Health Needs in Lebanon, Turkey and Jordan and Recommendations for Improved Practice by *Goleen Samari* <http://www.humanityinaction.org>

⁴ <http://www.unfpa.org/news/shortage-funding-threatens-care-pregnant-syrian-refugees>

Young girls responsible for younger siblings;
Little girls who are not able to be children;
Mothers with babies when they are no more than children themselves

In Alazraq Syrian refugee camp in Jordan, a nine-year old girl stood watching boys her age playing football. When I approached her, she looked at me with a bitterness that should not be in the eyes of a child her age and said: "Is this living? Why should anyone want to live this life? I wish I had died under the bombs in Syria. This life is revolting."

I did not have the courage to ask her whether she was referring to anything other than her dismal living conditions or the fact that she was not allowed to play with the boys. Sometimes a spontaneous burst of emotions from a child puts us face to face with the enormity of the human disaster we are facing. And we are left speechless.

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Host countries are facing a huge challenge: their financial resources are stretched, their infrastructure is unsustainable, their service, medical and educational sectors are burdened. These are understandable difficulties and the costs are enormous. But the heaviest price is being paid by women and girls.

- When households are made up of 25 to 30 members, many of them distant relatives, young women and girls fall prey to sexual harassment.
- When it is not safe for girls to walk to their schools due to sexual harassment, they are deprived of education.
- When the financial burden on the family is too huge to bear, girls become a commodity to be traded in.
- When the pressure of supporting and providing for a family becomes unbearable, men will take out their frustration on the women in the family.

I have spoken to young teenagers who are either married or engaged to be married. Each and every one of them said that they wished they could go to school instead. These are girls as young as 12 and 14. Some of whom were "sold" into marriage, not for gain, but to help provide for their families.

In other cases girls are married off for their own protection—*al sutra*. The belief that a girl's sexual maturity will lead her "astray", or will invite male attention and will therefore result in "sinful" behaviour that will reflect on the reputation of the family. Ultimately, the aim is to protect the family name.

However misguided this belief and its resulting actions, marriage is sometimes the only recourse for families to protect their daughters. I have heard from girls themselves that they consent to marriage because it may give them some measure of freedom that they do not have within their families. These adolescent girls have been subjected to sexual harassment and abuse within their own communities, in the camps, and in the community at large. It is not only their parents who do not allow them to leave their homes or their tents, the girls themselves are sometimes too afraid to go out even to use the communal washrooms.

There is no doubt that displacement and refugee status, combined with the lack of education, have contributed to high rates of early marriages. Even when parents view these marriages as a way to create safety for their girls, sometimes they only increase their vulnerabilities.

Newly married girls face difficulties dealing with the responsibilities of marriage and taking care of a new household, as well as difficulties associated with conceiving or the health complications resulting from adolescent pregnancy. These health complications, if they do not result in death in childbirth, often cause severe damage to a girl's reproductive abilities leading to physical and emotional abuse by the husband or the husband's family when she is no longer able to conceive.

Education is an essential factor in the protection and empowerment of women and children. This is something I cannot stress enough. It is my personal belief and it is supported by evidence around the world—education is the most essential ingredient in any development agenda.

In Lebanon, although the Ministry of Education has provided places and spaces and extra shifts and additional teachers to accommodate Syrian children within the public school system, the majority of female students enrolled in schools are under the age of 10. This is due to the disparity between the educational curriculums in Syria and Lebanon, and the language barriers Syrian students face in the classroom.

In Lebanese schools the language of instruction is either English or French, while Syrian students only receive instruction in Arabic. This has resulted in hundreds of Syrian students being left behind. Luckily, the younger students in elementary classes have been able to catch up and have acquired new linguistic skills.

However, the main factor that has prevented enrolment of Syrian adolescent girls in public schools in Lebanon, is that they are co-educational. I heard from many refugee parents that they cannot accept to send their daughters to non-segregated schools—which is the case for most public schools in Lebanon.

The lack of educational opportunities for adolescent girls is a major contributing factor to early marriage. These early marriages have resulted in one form of violence, intended or otherwise, to be perpetrated against Syrian girls. But my observations at refugee camps have shown that older women married for many years, are now suffering from domestic violence in larger numbers and some for the very first time.

A 45 year old woman I met explained this phenomenon, saying that although her husband was a good father and husband who had never shown her anything but respect, she now has to accept his occasional beatings because he is going through a very stressful time. She said this through swollen lips, looking at me through bruised eyes.

But she is not alone. Many of the women being subjected to physical and psychological domestic abuse consider it a necessary sacrifice or even a way to help their husband release stress.

This is supported by a report from the International Rescue Committee which states: "Women and adolescent girls shared with us their perception of increased physical and emotional violence from their husbands since fleeing Syria. Some women attribute this

'yelling and beating' as men's way of coping with the stress of trauma and of being a refugee."⁵

In Jordan's Al Zaatari and Alzarqa camps, mothers spoke about the dangers their daughters were subjected to. A particularly affecting story in one of the camps involved four girls from two neighbouring tents who stopped eating or drinking. Upon investigation their mothers found out that the teenagers thought this was the best way to avoid using the communal washrooms, where, it turned out, each of them had been sexually assaulted by a man who waited there for that purpose. Fear of being blamed, shamed and stigmatized prevented the girls from reporting the attacks.

But the mothers—as most mothers do—took action to protect their daughters; they reported the incidents to local Jordanian Police. Their action resulted in raising awareness about gender-based violence; removing the burden of blame from the girls; and the implementing training for men in the camp and Jordanian security personnel on providing protection and reducing the risk of gender-based violence.

As some of you may know, before I took on this post, I was UN Special Rapporteur for Disabilities. And although I am no longer in that capacity, the rights of persons with disabilities remain a concern of mine. I therefore make it a point to inquire about services and protection for persons with disabilities.

Sadly, I have found that they are either lacking or few and far between. This is not due to neglect, perhaps, as much as it is due to the enormity of the crisis.

A UN Women reported identified this gap in services available to "older persons, especially older women. Given that [they]...require specialized medical care...not covered by UNHCR, they [become]...subject to abuse, harassment, and refusal of services at clinics or neglect by families unable to pay for costly medications and other health services." The report continues that the same is true for persons with special needs, whether educational or emotional, and persons with all types of disabilities.⁶

I think I have taken up much of your time and so I will end with just two main recommendations which I hope will be included in the final recommendations.

- Seeing that there is awareness among relief organizations about:
 - women's specific health needs
 - prevalence of gender-based violence
 - increase in early marriages

I recommend that an appropriate portion of healthcare funding be earmarked for women's health services.

Furthermore, educational and awareness raising programs directed at gender-based violence and the dangers of early marriage should also include men and/or families.

⁵ https://www.rescue.org/sites/default/files/resource-file/IRC_WomenInSyria_Report_WEB.pdf

⁶Inter-Agency Assessment of Gender-based Violence and Child Protection among Syrian Refugees
<https://www.womensrefugeecommission.org/resources/gender-issues/985-unpacking-gender-the-humanitarian-response-to-the-syrian-refugee-crisis>

Realistically speaking, we cannot end the practice of early marriage; therefore, it is important to have access to these young brides, to monitor their health, their living conditions, their pregnancies and deliveries.

Yes, I know that this is a huge job. But I believe older or more mature women within the refugee communities can be trained and recruited to help advise and support teenage brides and report back on potential dangers.

- Second, I would like to see the media shedding light gender-based violence and teenage marriages, not in a sensationalist manner, but in educational and awareness raising role.

Excellencies,
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We cannot stop what is happening and we cannot protect every woman and child. But we can help reduce the risks and make changes in the lives of women and children.