

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

UN Security Council Open Debate on Sexual Violence in Conflict
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Statement by Ms. Mina Jaf

Mr. President, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Good morning,

I was born a refugee during the chemical gas attacks in Iraqi-Kurdistan. Thanks to my mother, I was also born a feminist. After spending the first 15 years of my life in camps and asylum centers, I now dedicate my life to working with and empowering other refugee women and girls.

I speak today in my capacity as Founder and Director of Women's Refugee Route and on behalf of the NGO Working Group on Women, Peace and Security. I speak to you in full safety, while many displaced women do not have this luxury especially as one in five displaced women and girls have been raped or experienced other forms of sexual violence.

Sexual violence is a gendered crime used to shame, exert power, and reinforce gender norms. It sustains fear and insecurity. Stigma associated with sexual violence prevents many survivors from reporting the abuse, accessing medical and psychosocial services and seeking justice.

I want to focus on the need for gender-sensitive support for refugees and the critical importance of empowering refugee women. I also want to highlight the urgent need for tailored programs that cater to all at-risk populations including refugees with disabilities, LGBTI individuals, and men and boys.

Over 65 million people around the world have been displaced from their homes as a result of persecutions, conflict or human rights violations, often intensified by the flow of arms. In times of crisis, women and girls are at heightened risk of all forms of gender-based violence, from rape to assault, domestic violence and early marriage, and exploitation by smugglers. Displaced women and girls also experience disruptions to their education and livelihoods and often have to take drastic measures to survive. Women have told me they engage in prostitution for as little as a couple of euros to be able to feed their families. One woman in particular stays in my heart as she was the same age as me and sold her body to buy milk for her baby.

I founded my organization when I realized that international humanitarian responses to refugee populations were largely gender blind. For example, at a refugee processing center, a woman I worked with had wanted to report her violent husband. I went with her to help translate but the shelter insisted that she speak with their interpreter who was a man. She did not feel comfortable doing this so cancelled the meeting. In all of the refugee settings I have work in, there is a huge lack of trained women interpreters, volunteers and specialized service providers to deal with survivors of sexual and gender-based violence, and a lack of understanding of the ways in which services must be adapted to be gender-sensitive.

Fear of stigmatization, lack of anonymity, and breaches of confidentiality, further compounds access issues. I met a 17-year-old woman who had fled ISIS and was raped by soldiers at a border crossing. She separated from her family, so as not to tell them what had happened, and continued on her own. She was too scared and ashamed to report it and so received no medical assistance until she reached her end destination in Northern Europe where she gave birth. This is despite the fact that international humanitarian law says that donor aid be delivered in a non-discriminatory manner that includes access to sexual and reproductive healthcare, such as abortions. In Greece, I urged a 16-year-old unaccompanied Afghan minor who was gang raped to report it and access services. She refused, asking me what the point of reporting it was if the system would not protect her.

There is an urgent need to also address the protection needs of all at-risk groups. I recently met a refugee woman in a wheelchair who struggled even with maintaining basic hygiene as she could not lock the shower once her wheelchair was in it and was too scared of taking a shower with the door open. The tools and guidelines to protect displaced women and girls from sexual and gender-based violence already exist. We need the political will to consistently implement them.

LGBTI refugees, because of their sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, or sex characteristics, face an increased risk of discrimination and violence compared to the larger refugee population. Many flee from persecution then do not disclose their sexual orientation, gender identity or intersex status to service providers, out of fear of more violence. Additionally, notions of masculinity prevent abused and at-risk men from admitting their vulnerabilities to sexual violence and from seeking support. My colleagues that work with refugee men also talk of the challenges of getting those who were raped to report it. They say they need to ‘stay men.’

Time and time again, I see humanitarian agencies working to implement standardized programs instead of adapting responses to the survivor’s own concerns and needs. Yet, not all refugee camps and protection programs are the same. Those where refugee women have been consulted in the design and implementation of protection strategies are much safer. Refugee women are resilient. They have survived the unimaginable. When empowered to advocate for themselves and be part of the decision making on providing safe environments and work opportunities, refugee women become the bedrock of peaceful and sustainable communities. Investing in women and women’s organizations which support empowerment is critical.

Sexual violence in conflict does not happen in a vacuum. It is a result of systematic failures by the international community to address the root causes of conflict, gender inequalities and impunity. This must end. I call on the Security Council and all Member States to:

- Promote gender equality and women and girls’ empowerment as fundamental to all efforts to prevent and address sexual violence in conflict and support women’s organizations working on the front lines;
- Join and support the Call to Action on Protection from Gender-based Violence in Emergencies;
- Ensure that the Global Compact for Refugees, to be completed in 2018, is progressive for refugee women and girls;
- Uphold the rights of all refugees by urgently improving access to international protection through humanitarian visas, increased refugee resettlements, greater access to information and fair hearings;
- Ensure aid complies with international humanitarian law and is not subject to donor limitations including denying sexual and reproductive healthcare, such as abortions;
- Commit to programs which are informed by gender analysis, meet the needs of all survivors and include sex and age disaggregated data; this must involve gender-sensitive training on working with survivors for all field workers and including survivors in consultations on their individual protection strategies; and
- Curb the flows of small arms by ratifying the Arms Trade Treaty and implementing it through enforced national laws and regulations.

It is not enough to condemn acts of sexual violence in conflict. Everyone here today is responsible for ending it, bringing all perpetrators to justice and putting women front and center of all responses to prevent it.

Thank you.