

# Enhancing the protection of women and girls through the Global Compact on Refugees

Eileen Pittaway and Linda Bartolomei

**The consultative process involved in drafting the Global Compact on Refugees presents an ideal opportunity to ensure that gender equality is integral to this new international policy framework.**

The New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants of September 2016 is the first United Nations (UN) declaration adopted specifically for refugees and migrants and is therefore a critical agenda-setting document. It includes a clear reaffirmation of the principles of the 1951 Refugee Convention, and is the first document adopted by the UN General Assembly specifically for refugees and migrants that includes strong gender commitments.

The New York Declaration included draft text of a Global Compact on Refugees and provided for the roll-out of a Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF). Although the Declaration has a strong focus on gender the CRRF remains weak on these issues. We prepared a 'gender analysis' of the CRRF<sup>1</sup> and were subsequently engaged by UNHCR to undertake a 'gender audit'<sup>2</sup> of five thematic meetings held in 2017 and of the High Commissioner's Dialogue on Protection Challenges in order to assess how gender equality and the protection of women and girls are addressed in the Compact process. These meetings have informed the development of a draft Programme of Action (PoA) to implement the commitments made in the CRRF.

One of the New York Declaration's major recommendations is to mainstream a gender perspective. However, mainstreaming very often leads to invisibility. If we are to genuinely achieve gender mainstreaming, we must ask ourselves what the outcomes are when we fail to recognise and address barriers to gender equality. For example, if we fail to identify lack of access to sanitary materials as a barrier to education, it means that for one week a month girls must miss school. If we do not ask what the risks are for women and girl asylum seekers making

sea crossings, we do not hear that all of them have experienced rape or other forms of sexual violence.<sup>3</sup> If we do not ask how single women survive on a single person's rations in a camp, we do not hear that for most women survival sex is their only option to survive.

## Why focus on women and girls?

The discourse about refugee women and girls is key to unpacking the reasons why they do not enjoy adequate international protection. Although classified as a minority or vulnerable group, women and girls are not a vulnerable group *per se* and nor are they, numerically speaking, a minority. Used sociologically rather than quantitatively, however, 'minority group' denotes those who suffer discrimination and subordination because of their status, have unequal access to decision making, infrastructure and resources, and have their personal capacities ignored. Cultural norms often ascribe to women a lower social status than men, placing them in a position of dependency, while a lack of educational opportunities makes it more difficult for them to access decision-making and income-generation opportunities.

The most important difference between women and girls, and men and boys, is that of exposure to endemic sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). While recognising that some refugee men and boys also suffer sexual violence, research indicates that the majority of refugee and displaced women endure this human rights abuse. Both men and women can suffer severe psychological impacts and physical injury and can contract sexually transmitted diseases. Women, however, face the additional consequence of bearing children of rape, and many girls who are too

young for child-bearing die. Women and girls are isolated from families or communities, and all bear a burden of stigma. Disabled women are often the target of sexual violence. Lesbian and transgender women are subjected to 'corrective rape' and sometimes killed. Many women are forced to engage in survival sex to feed themselves and their families, with the additional stigma of prostitution. Many face forced marriage. Men are shamed because they cannot protect their female family members, and communities suffer collective guilt.

Refugee women and girls are not just passive victims; women run crèches, arrange care for orphaned children, provide safe spaces for women who have experienced SGBV, ensure that families are fed, run small businesses and organise basic schools. Much of this work is done without funding or external support. In the absence of men, women take on all roles in the family and community. These activities are undertaken by women who have not only formal but also a wide range of informal skills. Refugee women and girls have a keen awareness of the problems experienced in refugee camps and urban settings – and of potential solutions.

However, these capacities, skills and abilities often go unrecognised. Women are silenced by limited access to representation at every level. They need targeted support – in leadership skills, advocacy, human rights law, formal meeting procedures and public speaking – in order to make their voices heard in the policy-making process, to contribute effectively in potentially discriminatory forums and to ensure that their inclusion in such processes is not tokenistic.

### **The gender audit and Compact progress**

Progress on ensuring gender equality in the Compact, while slow, has been significant. The report of the first thematic meeting (held in July 2017) mentioned women once, and gender and SGBV not at all. The gender audit team attended the second and third thematic meetings in October but, despite the evidently strong commitment of UNHCR senior staff, there was little meaningful discussion about gender equality. In several panels, were it not for interventions from refugee participants,

it would not have been mentioned at all; in others these interventions triggered the chairs to reflect gender issues in recommendations. Most panelists were men and while there was strong commitment to refugee participation, there was no recognition of the additional barriers that refugee women and girls face to have their voices heard. Without a dedicated speaker or instructions to the chair, women and girls were not mentioned, and once again gender was mainstreamed into oblivion.

In their report the gender audit team made strong recommendations that, for subsequent meetings, there should be gender parity on panels and suggested that chairs ask panelists to address the gender dimensions of issues being discussed.<sup>4</sup>

At the November meetings, it was evident that UNHCR had worked hard to ensure gender parity on panels. While there was not a huge increase in the number of interventions addressing gender equality and SGBV, there was a significant shift in the quality of the interventions, both from States and other stakeholders. There was a real concern expressed by some States from the global South about how to address these issues at a national level, and how to resource them. This positive shift was a reflection of the excellent interventions made by the refugee participants, and also by some of the chairs and panelists.

UNHCR again worked tirelessly ahead of the High Commissioner's Protection Dialogue in December to ensure gender parity on panels. Most significant was the addition of a roundtable on gender equality to the formal meeting. Importantly, the majority of speakers on this panel were from refugee backgrounds, including women from Myanmar and Sudan and one young Sudanese man living as a refugee in Uganda. There was also a significant increase in interventions by States from both the global South and the global North to raise gendered concerns and to propose concrete recommendations, and an increased number of States also shared good practices to support more effective gendered protection responses.

Our challenge now is to move to practical implementation. The Declaration's strong commitments to women and girls must be

February 2018

[www.fmreview.org/syria2018](http://www.fmreview.org/syria2018)

incorporated into a preamble to the CRRF, and in the PoA. The Compact must articulate the specific needs of women and girls, men and boys. It must support transformation on the ground to genuinely address gender inequality and the endemic sexual violence which is a key barrier to achieving this.

The voices and participation of refugee women and men must be included at all levels. Specific actions to build gender equality must be included in all four pillars of the Compact's Programme of Action and must be clear, specific and achievable, and include practical support for States and non-state actors. There need to be an accountability mechanism and viable monitoring mechanisms in order to ensure that commitment to gender equality is transformed into effective protection for all refugees. Civil society, non-governmental organisations and all key stakeholders can assist by ensuring that any input they make

into the Compact process addresses gender equality in every aspect of protection.

**Eileen Pittaway** *E.Pittaway@unsw.edu.au*

Adjunct Associate Professor

**Linda Bartolomei** *linda.bartolomei@unsw.edu.au*

Co-convenor, Forced Migration Research Network

University of New South Wales, Australia

<https://www.arts.unsw.edu.au/research/forced-migration-research-network/>

1. Pittaway E, Bell C and Bartolomei L (2017) *Strengthening the response to refugee women and girls in the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework*, University of New South Wales [www.unhcr.org/595b7f344.pdf](http://www.unhcr.org/595b7f344.pdf)
2. The gender audit team was led by Linda Bartolomei and Eileen Pittaway and involved refugee community representatives Cheery Zahau, Melika Sheikh-Eldin, Tina Dixon, Apajok Biar and Shaza Al Rihawi. Additional support was provided by Charlotte Bell and Geraldine Doney.
3. Global Compact on Refugees Thematic Discussion 2, Side event: Protection at sea.
4. Bartolomei L, Dixon T, Sheikh-Eldin M, Zahau C and Pittaway E (2017) *Gender Audit Report on the Second and Third Thematic Discussion on the Global Compact on Refugees*, [www.unhcr.org/5a251b537.pdf](http://www.unhcr.org/5a251b537.pdf)