

Not just a seat at the table: refugee participation and the importance of listening

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The 2019 Global Refugee Forum was significant for its inclusion of refugee representatives. There is much to be learnt by paying close attention to the speeches they gave – that is, by really listening to their voices.

In December 2019, UNHCR convened the first ever Global Refugee Forum (GRF), bringing together over 3,000 participants to consider new approaches to addressing refugee protection and solutions globally. One of the most celebrated aspects of the Forum was the novel inclusion of refugee representatives, with 70 refugees from 22 countries of origin and 30 host countries. Furthermore, refugee representatives gave speeches on nearly all the panels convened at the event. After the event, UNHCR reflected that “[t]he pivotal role of refugees, both in preparing for and participating in the GRF ... demonstrated the importance of keeping refugees at the centre of matters that relate to their lives and futures”, setting an “important precedent” and serving as “a model for future good practice”¹

Although comprising only 2% of total participants, this inclusion of refugee representatives in the GRF responded to the calls from refugee communities for greater inclusion and marks the most concerted attempt yet by UNHCR and States to actively incorporate the views of refugees at in-person, high-level, intergovernmental dialogues. While recent historical analysis has revealed that refugees played a fundamental role in the development of the 1951 Refugee Convention and the early years of UNHCR’s work, refugees have not been seen by States and others as a legitimate, independent stakeholder.² More recently, refugee representatives participated in the formal and informal consultations leading up to the 2018 Global Compact on Refugees (GCR),³ although this participation was less prominent than the participation of refugees at the GRF.

So far, most attention regarding the participation of refugees at the GRF has

focused on the numbers and diversity of refugees present. Yet far less attention has been directed to the speeches delivered by these refugee representatives, which have ongoing relevance for the international refugee regime. This article teases out some of the key messages and insights raised by these advocates, along with some of their suggestions for reform. The article also encourages readers to engage directly with each of the 64 speeches made, which are available as a complete bibliography with weblinks for each of the recordings.⁴

Self-identification

When listening to refugees speak at the inaugural GRF, it becomes apparent that the speakers introduced themselves in several distinct ways. Notably, this self-identification did not always align with the labels and descriptors given to the speakers in the Forum programme. While many speakers self-identified as refugees and former refugees (and in some cases were explicitly proud of this identity), others were apprehensive about the label of ‘refugee’ and how it has affected their access to basic rights in host countries. Felix Sesay, a Refugee Co-sponsor⁵ of the event, noted that it was challenging to be labelled a refugee as it meant he could not access education when he sought protection in Ghana. Hina Shikhani likewise expressed her determination not to let “any label restrict my capabilities and my potential” when she sought to attend higher education as an Afghan refugee woman in Pakistan.

Several speakers emphasised the humanity of displaced persons and sought to frame refugee protection within a broader human rights discourse. Former Rohingya

refugee Azizah Noor highlighted, for example, that “[r]efugees are human too. Every single person on this earth has human rights”. Afghan refugee Hina Shikhani shared this call for equal treatment by sharing a quote from an unnamed refugee poet: “What if I am a refugee? I am human too”.

Other speakers self-identified as human rights defenders. Andrea Ayala introduced herself as a lawyer, lesbian, non-binary person and a human rights defender. They spoke of the importance of meaningful refugee participation and the need to address barriers to gender equality and bring forward the voices of refugee women and girls. Tina and Renee Dixson similarly described their roles as human rights defenders and advocates for the rights of displaced LGBTIQ+ people.

This self-identification of refugee speakers as human rights defenders is notable because it legitimises in a different form the right of these advocates to participate in decision-making fora. As the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders of 1998 reaffirms, “[e]veryone has the right, individually and in association with others, to promote and to strive for the protection and realization of human rights and fundamental freedoms at the national and international levels”.⁶

Representation

Another key observation from the speeches is the wide diversity among the speakers as to who they sought to represent. Some speakers spoke on behalf of established representative organisations and networks, either as elected spokespersons or as founders or members. This included several speakers connected to the Global Refugee-led Network (founded in 2018 to facilitate greater refugee self-representation in international policymaking) and the Global Youth Advisory Council (established by UNHCR in 2017 to enhance its work with and for refugee youth). The emergence of these initiatives has demonstrated the feasibility and necessity of refugee participation in international law and policy dialogues. This participation has debunked inaccurate and outdated assumptions that

refugees are either too vulnerable, unskilled or otherwise unable to participate.⁷

Several speakers identified their participation as being a symbolic representation of the world’s refugees. Susan Grace Duku, for example, noted: “I feel the burden and responsibility on my shoulders... to speak today, on behalf of ... refugees across the globe”. Melika Sheik-Eldin similarly articulated that “today we are not talking about ourselves. We are talking about the millions of refugees... who... do not have a voice”. Her speech focused on the needs of older refugee women experiencing sexual and gender-based violence who are often excluded from discussions on refugee protection.

For others, their participation was strongly connected to a particular refugee community. Azizah Noor indicated that she found herself “holding the voices of Rohingya women who have faced unimaginable atrocities in a place I once called home. This includes systematic rape, torture, and the murder of family and friends”. Andrea Ayala sought to draw attention to the plight of individuals unable to participate. “You see me”, Ayala stated, “but I need you to see Camila, who was a 26-year-old trans woman from El Salvador... Camila got her asylum claim denied by the US government, and she returned to El Salvador. She was murdered by police officers just a couple of days after she returned”.

Lastly, other speakers highlighted the challenges of representation itself, both within refugee communities and with wider stakeholders. Many refugee leaders recognise the need to ensure diversity within the communities they represent. As Charles Burikumaso Nsenga shared, “As a man, I cannot know all of the needs of the different spheres and sectors of the community”. Mustafa Alio suggested that there was a double standard when stakeholders challenged the representativeness of refugee leaders or refugee groups: “It is an excuse a lot of people use: ‘Who do you represent and why do you have to participate?’”. Alio, the first appointed refugee advisor to the Canadian government, emphasised that “meaningful participation is a process that will take time and effort” and highlighted the

need for external stakeholders to support the process of increasing representation within refugee-led initiatives. This support could include financial assistance and skills training for participatory activities and elections, or advocacy and law reform to remove some of the barriers to participation that refugees face.

Key messages

One of the elements that distinguished the speeches of refugees from those of other stakeholders at the GRF was the common use of personal narrative. Refugees often recounted their lived experiences of displacement and leveraged these accounts to highlight problems with the international refugee regime. Furthermore, they shared local, regional and global examples of best practice. These included the development of refugee-led initiatives, collaborative projects with host governments and civil society organisations, and scholarship programmes that they had benefited from. Beyond this, refugee speakers also proposed actionable policy recommendations directed towards UN Member States, humanitarian actors and UNHCR. These recommendations addressed multiple dimensions of displacement, with the most prominent ones relating to education; addressing the needs of women, girls and LGBTIQ+ communities; and the meaningful participation of refugees in decision-making.

In relation to education, many speakers stressed the need to expand tertiary education scholarship opportunities for refugees. They also highlighted the importance of integrating refugee children into national education systems and scaling up remote access to education in camp and rural settings. Speakers emphasised the need to provide equal access to opportunities for refugee women, girls, and members of the LGBTIQ+ community and to advocate for their specific needs within policy responses. For example, Tina Dixson highlighted the need for “better policies on refugee determination based on sexual orientation, gender identity, and sex characteristics”. She also called on the audience to address the “intentional silencing and erasure of LGBTIQ refugees” from policy discussions

and documents, noting the lack of any reference to LGBTIQ+ refugees in the GCR.

Lastly, several speakers expressed the importance of normalising diverse, inclusive and sustained refugee participation across a range of decision-making areas. For example, the Global Refugee-led Network’s closing statement articulated concrete proposals to enhance meaningful participation of refugees and host communities in decisions that affect their lives. First, they called on UNHCR and other stakeholders to support the establishment of at least one refugee observer seat on the Executive Committee and Standing Committee of UNHCR. Second, they advocated for UNHCR and regional institutions to work with refugee representatives to establish a refugee-led advisory body that would inform protection responses at a regional level. Third, they called on all stakeholders to increase monetary and non-monetary resources to support refugee-led participation. Significantly, these reform proposals emerged from consultations with refugees and refugee-led networks held in six regions (North America, Latin America, Europe, Africa, Middle East and Asia Pacific) prior to the Forum.

Listening and responding to refugees

Enabling meaningful refugee participation is not just about giving refugees an opportunity to express their voice at major international conferences. It is as importantly about how other stakeholders listen and respond to these voices. Are the institutions and fora themselves properly designed to enable appropriate listening to the views of forcibly displaced persons? Are the views of refugee advocates taken seriously and considered appropriately? For refugee participation to be meaningful, both individuals and institutions must adapt the ways in which we listen and respond.

For individuals, appropriate listening requires engaging with the speaker’s message on its own terms, and not just feeling and expressing sympathy with the speaker’s hardship or personal experiences. For institutions, facilitating appropriate

listening involves establishing suitable fora and mechanisms, both physical and virtual. This includes properly recording what was said, providing considered responses to reform proposals, and leaving space for reflection and for alternative ideas to arise. Any truly deliberative procedure has unpredictable outcomes and must support a form of participation that is open to an outcome which the powerholders may not favour.⁸ While the 2019 GRF was a significant step forward in terms of the way it included refugee representatives, more attention needs to be paid to how we listen and respond to refugees in policy discussions such as these.

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