



Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
7 December 2012

Original: English

Commission on the Status of Women

Fifty-seventh session

4-15 March 2013

Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the special session of the General Assembly entitled “Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century”: implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern and further actions and initiatives

Statement submitted by International Rescue Committee, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.



Statement

Violence against refugee and displaced women and girls

Women's Refugee Commission, affiliated with International Rescue Committee, welcomes the theme of the fifty-seventh session of the Commission on the Status of Women, "Elimination and prevention of all forms of violence against women and girls". This focus is a significant opportunity to more effectively address an issue that permeates nearly all aspects of life for displaced and refugee women and girls and is identified by refugee women and girls as their primary protection risk.

Violence against women is widespread throughout the world. In crisis-affected settings, the threat of gender-based violence against women and girls becomes even more acute. The risks do not abate in the immediate aftermath of an emergency; rather, incidents of violence against women tend to increase further or plateau for a period of months to years. Displaced girls are at particularly high risk. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), nearly 50 per cent of all sexual assaults worldwide are committed against girls 15 years of age or younger, and girls aged 15 to 19 years in developing countries are at a particularly high risk of physical and sexual violence.

The international community's increased attention to violence against women and girls in crises has resulted in greatly improved policies and guidance and increased resources, especially in terms of response. However, life-saving medical and mental health services are still not regularly available for survivors, and there is an urgent need to scale up prevention efforts that address the particular risk factors women and girls face in conflict and post-conflict settings and in the aftermath of natural disasters.

Disasters and conflicts create unstable situations in which women and girls must flee their homes. Women and girls who are displaced or seek asylum in other States find themselves at greater risk of being targeted for gender-based violence. During flight and in displacement settings, women's and girls' resources and social networks break down. Responses by Governments to crises are often slow or limited, and often do not take women's and girls' protection concerns into account.

Significant numbers of people continue to cross borders in search of economic opportunity and protection of their human rights. Migrant women and girls are particularly vulnerable to violence, including exploitation, abuse and arbitrary arrest and detention during their journey and when they arrive.

Recommendations

Women's Refugee Commission calls upon all Member States, particularly those that are members of the Commission on the Status of Women, to collectively advance work to address the prevention of violence against women more systematically, strategically and comprehensively. The prevention of violence against women and appropriate care for survivors must be embedded in all work conducted in crisis-affected settings. It must be addressed from the earliest days of a crisis and include reproductive health care, livelihoods programmes and access to cooking fuel. Programmes must reach all those who are vulnerable, including persons with disabilities. Action should be taken to:

(a) Support the creation of safe economic opportunities for women, and where appropriate, young women. Livelihoods programmes for refugee and displaced women must be both effective and safe. In many humanitarian settings, the livelihoods available to women put very little money in their pockets and often expose them to abuse and exploitation. Current and new programmes must be evaluated and designed to ensure they do not increase but rather lessen the risk of being targeted for violence against women;

(b) Make basic health-care services and information available to women and girls during times of crisis. Incorporate reproductive health-care planning into all disaster preparedness work and ensure that the Minimum Initial Service Package for Reproductive Health in Crisis Situations is in place at the start of an emergency;

(c) Provide safe access to cooking fuel. Displaced and refugee women and girls who must find the cooking fuel to prepare meals for their families should not have to face physical abuse and sexual assault while they collect firewood. The Safe Access to Firewood and Alternative Energy Guidelines of the Inter-agency Standing Committee must be adhered to when addressing cooking fuel needs in humanitarian settings;

(d) Protect and empower adolescent girls to decrease their risk of being targets for violence against women. Gender roles and social norms must not prevent adolescent girls from realizing their rights and protecting themselves from harm. Displaced and refugee adolescent girls should be provided assistance to build their self-esteem, life skills and economic prospects. With more control over their lives and well-being, their risk of being targeted for violence against women will decrease;

(e) Ensure that refugee and displaced women and girls with disabilities are included in needs assessments during and after crises and that they can safely access services and are involved in decision-making that empowers them to decrease their risk of being targeted for violence against women. WHO estimates that 15 per cent of any population is made up of persons with disabilities. This is likely much higher in communities that have fled war or natural disasters. Protecting and empowering women and girls with disabilities is imperative to eliminate and prevent violence against women;

(f) Protect the human rights of all migrant women and girls, including those in detention or confinement. Many of these women and girls suffer great harm, which often includes sexual abuse and exploitation. Laws and policies must be put in place, and enforced, to prevent violence against migrant women and girls and to ensure that they have appropriate access to protection justice and care.