



Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
8 December 2020

Original: English

Commission on the Status of Women

Sixty-fifth session

15–26 March 2021

Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly entitled “Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century”

Statement submitted by Peacebuilding Solutions, 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.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



Statement

This year marks the 25th anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action when 189 governments committed to creating a world free of gender inequality and honouring the human rights of women everywhere. In its strategic objectives, the declaration states that this vision cannot be achieved without the inclusion of women at all levels of decision-making in public life from small local communities to the highest levels of international politics. This year's theme on full effective participation of women in decision-making as well as the elimination of violence for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls signifies a unified push towards equitable outcomes while building on the previous theme of sustainable development. One of the most egregious violations of women's rights is exclusion and gender-based violence, which both act as a personal violation and systemic tool for oppressing women and keeping them out of public life. While there have been great strides towards these objectives in the past 25 years, much progress is still needed, particularly for empowering some of the world's most marginalized populations: refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs).

Whether from natural disasters or prolonged conflict, refugees and IDPs spend months to years in flight before resettlement, which is not an option for some. During this period, many of these communities are reliant on government and humanitarian aid as they try to rebuild their lives. However, as humanitarian aid has increasingly become intertwined with sustainable development, there has been a widening gap from providing basic, short-term aid to assisting communities with long-term projects to build resilience. This shift has brought along increased awareness of how humanitarian aid organizations can disregard the agency of those they serve, especially the voices of women and girls. Women refugees and IDPs are often denied access to effective participation in the rebuilding of their communities despite being pillars of familial stability and sustainability.

Historically, women have been socially classified beneath men creating systemic, generational inequality which can be exacerbated by race/ethnicity and status. Further, as forced migration is often a result of conflict and violence, the double stigma of gender equality and violence places a large burden on women and girls who are often cut off from resources that empower them. Economic opportunities and education, two important tools for women's equality, become limited to non-existent as women and girls spend months or even years seeking safety and stability.

In the process of fleeing natural disaster or persecution, women lose social networks that provide assistance and protection. Without these protections care-work, domestic responsibilities, and fear of violence restrict women's ability to participate in public life and many feel as though decisions about their communities are mostly held by men. Yet, refugee women are not passive in their responses to injustice. They protect themselves and each other while working to rebuild and improve their communities. Refugee women set-up community centres where women and girls can talk to one another, bathe and use toilets in safety, and learn valuable skills to promote financial independence. They establish outreach networks and provide members of their communities with information on various services, loans, skills training, counselling, and health care. Much of this work is done without funding or recognition from external parties. Despite the clear value of their knowledge and experience, refugee women are often still viewed as passive recipients of aid and excluded from decision-making processes. Even when women are invited into the decision-making process, they still face barriers to effective participation. The burdens of child-care, language barriers and the risk of violence are only some factors that dissuade women from openly participating in decisions about their community.

Without addressing these concerns and making attempts to meet women where they can talk freely, government and humanitarian aid organizations can only get a limited perspective on the needs of the community. Women need to be part of these processes at all levels including planning, implementation and evaluation of outcomes. This means that their inclusion cannot be tokenistic or short-sighted. Intentional action towards inclusion must be implemented to ensure representation; to ensure that their voices are always heard.

Effective participation and elimination of gender violence resonates across women and girls from whose daily lives are affected by exclusion and different forms of violence (e.g. physical, mental, verbal). The violence commonly associated with refugees/IDPs often excludes the individual violence faced by women within their communities. Combatting violence requires more than advocacy from women and girls. It requires a sustained and permanent change through collective efforts that involve diverse sisterhoods and brotherhoods. This is not an undertaking that can be achieved alone or in siloed spaces. The elimination of violence provides an opportunity for women and girls to be their authentic selves without fear of repercussion. In doing so, we can promote effective participation as women and girls can speak about their hopes, dreams, challenges, and strengths on their own accords and foster processes that can improve the livelihoods of themselves and their communities. Beyond the elimination of violence there must be dedicated initiatives and resources for healing, resetting misaligned paths, to allow women to rewrite their own futures which were destined for a different trajectory. We must ensure there is support for victims and survivors of violence, as this is imperative for current and future generations to thrive in their purpose as women and girls. With the reduction and elimination of violence, more assurance of gender equality and the empowerment of girls and women can be realized.

Peacebuilding Solutions is committed to promoting and cultivating environments that uphold gender equality standards and serve girls and women to realize their rights. As a firm believer that women's and girl's empowerment begin with the inclusion of women and girls in the decision-making process during the conception and implementation of any intervention or program, Peacebuilding Solutions has designed its interventions based on qualitative research conducted in the field. Our work in Gressier, Haiti, found that while men were considered leaders with many of the communities, women were gatekeepers and matriarchal leaders. In particular, the Lumiere de Jeune community, which translates to "Light of Youth", maintains a gender-balanced leadership (1 male; 1 female) through which all interventional decisions and feedback are ascertained. With an emphasis on youth, the needs of the community, including children and families, were best identified through qualitative interviews of women in the community and ethnographic approaches that strengthened an understanding of community needs. Therefore, during the planning and implementation phases, women were integral to identifying needs and priorities that would foster sustainable development. This community-based participatory approach specifically focused on eliminating gender inequality and fostering an inclusive environment. For us, this is the first and most critical step to developing sustainable practices and strategies that include gender equality considerations and empower women who also serve as role models for girls in their communities to understand that their voices and thoughts are valued.

Women's empowerment begins and ends with creating safe spaces for women and young girls. Creating safe spaces for women and young girls promotes self-efficacy and allows for their voices to be heard. Sometimes women will withhold information or not express their opinions due to possible ramifications from the men in the community or due to gender roles and constraints may not be allowed to speak during group discussions. Peacebuilding Solutions has developed research-based

strategies that focus on the ethics of inclusion to promote sustainability. Intentional action such as identifying safe spaces for women to have group discussions or home interviews along with protocols that ensure anonymity and confidentiality allow for candidness in responses and builds trust within the community that allows for Peacebuilding Solutions to operate directly with the community and empower the community through intervention. The essence of this approach is the creation of honest dialogue which leads to the empowerment of women.

In conclusion, women's and girl's equality and empowerment is necessary to the self- and community development of refugee and internally displaced persons communities around the world. Women are often the backbone of these communities and their voices need to be heard. Addressing issues of decision-making and creating safe spaces are just a few of the strategies that can be used to ensure that women and girls are included. Considering the substantial role of government and humanitarian aid in these processes, each entity must be responsible for including women in decision-making and creating safe spaces for them to advocate for themselves.
