



**Presentation by Dr. Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, Co-Director of the UCL Migration Research Unit to the UNHCR High Commissioner’s Dialogue on Protection Challenges  
Panel 1, Session 1 on Reception and Admission**

**Introduction**

One of the international community’s greatest challenges is the need to reconcile ‘immediately’ responding to ‘mass’ emergency experiences and needs, with the fact that not all people, individuals, households, communities, are equally or similarly affected in a mass disaster, or have ‘standard emergency’ needs.

The UNHCR’s 2017 thematic consultations and diverse written submissions<sup>i</sup> have systematically asserted the urgency of implementing the Age, Gender and Diversity approach already underpinning UNCHR’s work, and of strengthening institutional capacity to ensure gender-sensitivity in screening and reception procedures.

I agree entirely with those assertions, and I also hold a deep personal and professional commitment to ensuring that appropriate systems are in place to ensure that women, children, people with disabilities older people, survivors of trafficking are able to secure their right to meaningful protection.

However, based on my long-standing academic research with and about refugees from the Middle East and North Africa,<sup>ii</sup> I would like to argue that what we need is an *intersectional* approach which aims to ensure people’s dignity and safety without creating or reproducing hierarchies of vulnerability and worth which have dangerous, and at times deadly, outcomes for refugees.

***Intersectionality***

Briefly, intersectionality<sup>iii</sup> here refers to the recognition that experiences of displacement are framed by a range of intersecting and overlapping identity markers (including gender, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, and age), and also by a range of power structures (such as patriarchy, xenophobia, Islamophobia, and homophobia).

Importantly, the relative significance of these identity markers and related power structures shift across time and space, including in processes of displacement. This can help us understand – perhaps even predict – that individuals and social groups may be vulnerable to, or at risk of, different forms of violence throughout different stages of their journeys to secure international protection.

With this in mind, the first main point I would like to make is that an intersectionalist lens must be streamlined from the onset, and indeed before, the ‘emergency’ phase.

**1. Contextualising Basic Needs**

‘Basic needs’ in humanitarian situations are often highly gendered *and* intimately related to the religious identity and belief system of refugees and IDPs, with local conceptualisations of ‘basic needs’ often transcending secular organisations’ perceptions.

For instance, UNFPA noted that many Muslim IDP women affected by the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami held that headscarves were essential to maintain their dignity and were a prerequisite to be able to access other services in public spaces.<sup>iv</sup> In essence, even if aid packages were to be delivered to the community, women (here veiled Muslim women) would be unable to access aid *in dignity* – here, the *hijab* was a basic needs item.

Basic needs and dignity must also be viewed in relation to the importance that displaced people may give to

celebrating key rituals pertaining both to life, *and* to death; indeed, being able to bury a loved one with dignity can be as, if not more, important than what the international community often assumes to be the ‘immediate’, emergency needs for food and shelter.

However, international agencies have often been reluctant, or have even ‘resisted’, displaced people using tarpaulin ‘officially’ designated to be used for ‘living spaces’ to be used as mosques or temple spaces, or even to bury loved ones instead.<sup>v</sup>

In essence, reconceptualising ‘basic needs’ requires sensitive consideration of *who the people are* who have been displaced.

It is of course not surprising that an intersectionalist mode of analysis is not yet mainstream, when we acknowledge that it was only in the 1990s that the humanitarian system even recognised that millions of people affected by displacement would have menstrual hygiene needs. Sanitary materials were only provided to women and girls as standard emergency procedure in the mid-1990s,<sup>vi</sup> and it remains shocking to me that the international humanitarian system still today is failing to provide adequate sanitary materials to hundreds of thousands of women and girls who are displaced around the world.

While this is a clear basic (still unfulfilled) need, women and girls are not simply bodies in need of materials – displaced women and girls have much more diverse needs and rights that go beyond their biological functions. As demonstrated in the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami example, identifying basic needs transcends the assumption that all ‘women’ will have the same ‘basic needs,’ precisely because there is no homogenised ‘woman’ affected by displacement.

### **Recommendation**

We need to understand the priorities of displaced people, with sensitivity to (inter alia) gendered, cultural and religious/spiritual needs and rights, when determining even what a ‘basic need’ is on a case-by-case basis.

This must be determined not just from an institutional perspective for operational purposes, but based on the perspectives of displaced individuals, families, and communities, whose priorities may not match those of humanitarian institutions.

This requires the collection of disaggregated data, but also goes beyond collecting ‘quantitative data’ to drawing on insights from people with deep knowledge of the cultures, rituals, belief systems of the people who have been displaced: these will include members of different groups of displaced people themselves, and also members of diverse host communities (see section 4 below).

## **2. Dangers of the hierarchy of vulnerability and worth**

For many reasons, we need to highlight the specific experiences and needs of particular groups on an operational level. Today, for instance, we still need to redress refugee women’s and girls’ earlier invisibility in mainstream studies and policies by purposefully tracing the specific and diverse experiences of women, children, LGBTQI refugees, older people, and people with disabilities, amongst others.<sup>vii</sup>

However, there is a major danger of presenting (in advocacy, campaigning, policies) certain groups as having ‘specific needs’ – it fuels popular and populist narratives that the groups which aren’t listed as having ‘specific needs’ are not vulnerable, are less worthy of assistance protection, and, by extrapolation, that the people who don’t have those specific needs aren’t bona fide refugees.

This institutional framing can *become* part of a system that enables discrimination and violence against certain refugees. In this context, it is not surprising to see discrimination and violence against refugee men when the international system consistently reasserts that women, children and disabled people (inter alia) are vulnerable and particularly worthy of protection, while men’s gender-specific vulnerabilities have systematically been rendered invisible.

### Recommendation

With reference to the proposed Solidarity Conferences and international, national and local-level campaigning approaches more broadly, campaigns must be designed to develop sustainable solidarity with refugees, including male refugees, to ensure that their protection needs and rights are met, and challenging populist narratives/rhetoric which threatens their safety and wellbeing by rendering certain refugees as less worthy of protection, as ‘bogus’ or as ‘threats’ to inter/national and personal security.

### 3. ‘Sexual violence and beyond’: gender-based violence

We must acknowledge the urgency of preventing and responding to sexual violence against women, children and men, with the latter confirmed most recently by UNHCR’s commissioned report published this month on *Sexual violence against men in Syria*.<sup>viii</sup> Given that male experiences of sexual violence have now been widely documented around the world, this should no longer be surprising to the international community.

However, it is also important to go beyond the equation of SGBV = ‘sexual violence’ – it is of course essential to focus on the ‘SV’ but we also need to address the GV (gender-based violence),<sup>ix</sup> the protection needs arising from different forms of gender-based violence towards men, which include sex-specific genocide and the sex-selective massacres of specific men we have witnessed in the Former Yugoslavia, in Rwanda, in Syria and Iraq amongst others (ie. massacres of specific men with particular - real or imputed - ethnic and/or religious identities).

In specific contexts men may be at particular risk to certain forms of violence *because* they are men: in Lebanon, for instance, where I have conducted extensive research, Syrian refugee men have often felt unable to leave their homes for fear that they will be detained and/or deported; this directly affects their and their family members’ well-being and safety. Amongst other things, these men’s inability to safely leave the private sphere to work means that families often rely on their children begging for money in order to stay alive. Here, in Lebanon, as in many other host states, certain refugee men’s vulnerability is *caused* by a policy *structure*.

### Recommendation

A gendered lens must be intersectional – and this includes recognising both the extent to which different groups of women *and* men have gender-specific protection needs, and also that they experience different forms of gender-based violence. Strengthening institutional capacity to ensure gender-sensitivity in screening and reception procedures must include training vis-à-vis women’s, girls’ *and* men’s gender-specific protection needs throughout different phases and spaces of displacement: this should include reference to experiences of sexual violence *and* also diverse forms of gender-based violence.

### 4: Communities and overlapping displacement

The Concept Note for the High Commissioner’s Dialogue asked delegates to consider how to promote the security of refugee and host communities, and also asked ‘which actors’ should be involved in promoting the identification and referral of those with ‘specific needs’.

My first point here would be that host communities – including local faith communities – are not merely ‘affected’ by displacement, they are key responders. The key question is how to make community-led responses sustainable, and to determine which stakeholders within local communities can promote the identification and referral of people to appropriate services and protection mechanisms. With reference to stakeholders, these will often include community leaders, including local faith leaders, who can promote solidarity-based responses; here I would like to stress the need to go beyond identifying and partnering with ‘traditional’ leaders – who tend to be male – and to purposefully seek out female leaders (with both ‘formal’ and ‘informal’ leadership roles), rather than assuming that they do not exist.

With reference to refugee-host relations, my ongoing research highlights the extent to which structures and policies can *create* tensions and violence between communities. These tensions are far from inevitable, and now is the prime time to address the role that structures and policies play in *creating* tensions.

Indeed, my second point is that it is not always possible to differentiate between ‘refugee’ and ‘host’ communities. My ongoing AHRC-ESRC-funded research project, ‘Refugee Hosts,’<sup>x</sup> highlights that precisely because displacement is increasingly urban and protracted, refugees share spaces for longer periods of time both with local host communities, and with other displaced people themselves. This means that, over time, refugee groups often become members of the communities which are subsequently called upon to offer protection and support to other groups of displaced people. It is widespread for refugees to be members of host communities (refugees-hosting-refugees), and indeed for hosts to have once themselves experienced displacement. While citizens are often celebrated for hosting and/or supporting refugees, it is also essential to recognize the extent to which refugees host, assist and protect other refugees around the world.

As displacement is increasingly commonly protracted in nature, here we must also acknowledge that vulnerabilities may increase over time. It is thus not sufficient to focus on immediate needs and self-reliance mechanisms when structures may mean that people become more vulnerable as they spend more months and years in displacement.

In the context of overlapping displacement and of refugees-hosting-refugees, tensions towards newly (or more recently) displaced people may precisely arise as the result of the uneven development and implementation of programmes for different ‘generations’ of refugees and for refugees according to their country of origin. This is particularly visible in Baddawi refugee camp in North Lebanon, whose established residents have received limited assistance from UNRWA since the 1950s, while new arrivals from Syria have the potential to receive support and access to protection (including durable solutions unavailable to Palestinian refugees) from an expanding range of inter/national organisations, including UNHCR.<sup>xi</sup>

A challenge that remains for the international community in acknowledging the widespread reality and implications of overlapping displacement, is to simultaneously meaningfully engage with the agency of refugees and their diverse hosts as active responders in displacement processes, while also recognising the challenges that characterise such encounters. At a minimum, new programmes and policies must avoid re-marginalising established refugee communities which are hosting newly displaced people; at best, with appropriate attention (and political will) they can be sensitive to supporting the needs and rights of all people affected by displacement, whether they are hosting or being hosted.

### **Recommendation**

Local communities – including local faith communities *and* established refugee communities – are not simply ‘affected’ by displacement: they are key responders in the short-, medium- and long-term. Meaningful engagement, partnerships and appropriate forms of capacity-building co-developed with local communities must be prioritised in line with the NY Declaration, in a way that is attentive both to gender (ie. through seeking out and working with female community leaders), and also to the reality and implications of overlapping displacement.

Diverse structures limit the ability to develop sustainable community responses, with vulnerability often increasing over time. New programmes and policies must avoid re-marginalising established refugee communities that are hosting newly or more recently displaced people.

### **Conclusion**

Far from denying that different people have specific needs, it has been my aim, firstly, to stress that we need gender-sensitive analyses which are intersectionalist in nature, and which are sensitive to the significance that culture and religious belief and identity may hold for displaced people. Diverse, intersecting identities and belief systems will influence what different groups of refugees prioritise as their basic needs, and will help us better determine what barriers need to be lifted so that people have access to the protection they are entitled to, to meet and transcend their basic needs, and to be able to live in dignity.

Secondly, I have offered this provocation as a way of putting a spotlight on the structural *barriers* that prevent individuals, households, communities, and states from finding and acting upon their own solutions in dignity. This is to say, for instance, that is inadequate to propose reactive and responsive measures to ‘empower’ people in contexts characterized by diverse (local, national and international) systems of oppression, inequality, discrimination and exploitation that *prevent* people from making decisions and acting upon these.

It is through acknowledging that there are barriers and systems that prevent people from being able to act, that we can then strive to find ways to lift these barriers and enable people to find ways to live in dignity. Importantly – whether through building capacity to maximise the application of existing systems and standards, or through developing new systems - we need to ensure that we do not unintentionally (re)create hierarchies of vulnerability and risk, either through systems that render invisible the gender-specific protection needs of men and boys, or through process that risk re-marginalizing protracted refugees.

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<sup>i</sup> Submissions classified by UNHCR under the category ‘women and girls’ are available here: <http://www.unhcr.org/search?cid=49aea93aa7&scid=49aea93a57&tags=women>.

<sup>ii</sup> This includes research funded by the UK’s Arts and Humanities Research Council and the Economic and Social Research Council (ref: AH/P005438/1 – see [www.refugeehosts.org](http://www.refugeehosts.org)), by the Henry Luce Foundation, the Leverhulme Trust (PLP-2015-250) and the European Research Council (ref: ASSHURED 715582).

<sup>iii</sup> Intersectionality as a concept and analytical framework originated in the 1980s and early-1990s when Kimberley Crenshaw first developed it as a means of exploring and explaining the overlapping experiences of oppression and marginalization faced by African American women by virtue of their race and gender in a society characterized by everyday, institutionalized racism and patriarchy. On the significance of intersectionality in studies of and responses to displacement, see Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, E. (2014) ‘Gender and Forced Migration,’ in E. Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, G. Loescher, K. Long and N. Sigona (eds.) *The Oxford Handbook of Refugee and Forced Migration Studies*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>iv</sup> See Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, E. and Ager, A. (eds) (2013) *Local Faith Communities and the promotion of resilience in humanitarian situations*, RSC Working Paper 90, Oxford: Refugee Studies Centre, available at <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/local-faith-communities-and-promotion-resilience-humanitarian-situations-scoping-study>; and Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, E. (Ed) (2016) *Gender, Religion and Humanitarian Responses to Refugees*, MRU Policy Brief, September 2016, available at <http://www.geog.ucl.ac.uk/research/research-centres/migration-research-unit/pdfs/Low%20Res.Gender%20Religion%20and%20Refugees.MRU%20PB.pdf>.

<sup>v</sup> Discussed in Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, E. and Ager, A. (eds) (2013) *Local Faith Communities and the promotion of resilience in humanitarian situations*, RSC Working Paper 90, Oxford: Refugee Studies Centre, February 2013; and Wilkinson, O. and Ager, J. (2017) *Scoping Study on Local Faith Communities in Urban Displacement: Evidence on Localisation and Urbanisation, Migration Research Unit Policy Briefing* available at <http://www.geog.ucl.ac.uk/research/research-centres/migration-research-unit/pdfs/Scoping%20Report%20typeset.pdf>

<sup>vi</sup> See Sommer, M. (2012) ‘Menstrual hygiene management in humanitarian emergencies: Gaps and recommendations,’ *Waterlines*, 31(1&2): 83-104.

<sup>vii</sup> See Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, E. (2014) ‘Gender and Forced Migration,’ in E. Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, G. Loescher, K. Long and N. Sigona (eds.) *The Oxford Handbook of Refugee and Forced Migration Studies*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>viii</sup> UNHCR (2017) ‘*We Keep It in Our Heart*’ *Sexual Violence Against Men and Boys in the Syria Crisis*, October 2017, available at: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/5a128e814.html>

<sup>ix</sup> Also see Dolan, C. (2014) ‘Letting go of the gender binary: Charting new pathways for humanitarian interventions on gender-based violence,’ *International Review of the Red Cross*, 86(894): 485-501.

<sup>x</sup> See [www.refugeehosts.org](http://www.refugeehosts.org)

<sup>xi</sup> Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, E. (2017) ‘Refugees helping refugees: how a Palestinian camp in Lebanon is welcoming Syrians,’ *The Conversation*, 3 January 2017. Available at <https://theconversation.com/refugees-helping-refugees-how-a-palestinian-camp-in-lebanon-is-welcoming-syrians-48056>. Also see [www.refugeehosts.org](http://www.refugeehosts.org).