

PROTECTING THE RIGHTS OF REFUGEE WOMEN

BACKGROUND GUIDE
CHALLENGE TOPIC #2



The MUN Refugee Challenge is an initiative launched by UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, to encourage students worldwide to shape solutions for people forced to flee their homes. This guide was drafted to help students prepare for their debates.

THE CHALLENGE

Across the globe, women face a wide range of challenges. This includes gender-based violence (GBV), obstacles to accessing education and jobs, and a lack of inclusion in decision-making. These challenges are further exacerbated for women and girls in situations of forced displacement – who represent around 50 per cent of the refugee and internally displaced population.

Forcibly displaced women may experience violence and discrimination in different stages of their journey, either in their country of origin, while they flee to find a shelter or in the place where they find refuge. The COVID-19 pandemic has put women in even greater danger.

Yet, refugee women and girls should not be seen only as passive victims. Refugee women play a central role in their communities. They run businesses and schools, provide safe spaces for women who have experienced violence, manage households and help run refugee camps. Protecting the rights of refugee women and empowering them is critical to allow them to achieve their full potential.

WHY IS THIS ISSUE IMPORTANT TO ADDRESS?

The socioeconomic, psychological and protection challenges that result from war, conflict and displacement can have detrimental implications on women and girls and their future. These effects may have further implications on the future of individuals, overall communities and societies and may also lead to intergenerational ramifications on women. Protecting the rights and wellbeing of refugee women is key to building more peaceful societies.



"Women's rights and freedoms are essential to strong resilient societies".

—UN Secretary-General António Guterres

Access to Quality Education



Education helps refugee girls to overcome the trauma resulting from displacement, reduces their vulnerability to exploitation, gives them the knowledge and skills to live fulfilling lives and improves their ability to secure jobs in the future. Education is a human right, enshrined in the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child and the 1951 Refugee Convention.

However, according to UNICEF, girls are 2.5 times more likely to be out of school than boys in countries affected by conflict. Early marriage, poverty, insecurity and gender roles hinder women's school attendance. Displacement often forces women and girls to take on additional caregiving roles and responsibilities to support their families and communities, which often results in a high number of school dropouts. COVID-19 has disrupted education for many children, especially girls. Families who have lost jobs and are suffering economically often struggle between sending their daughters to school or sending them to work. Others send their daughters into early marriage.

Economic Opportunities and Access to Resources



"States shall abolish existing laws, customs, regulations and practices which are discriminatory against women, and establish adequate legal protection for equal rights of men and women. "

—The Declaration on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (1967)

Having a job or a source of income helps refugee women overcome the challenges of displacement, protect themselves and improve their wellbeing. When they are allowed to work, women also contribute to their host communities' economy. It is estimated that refugee women could generate up to 1,4 trillion dollars to annual global GDP if employment and earnings gender gaps were closed in the top 30 refugee-hosting countries.

However, refugee women often face obstacles in accessing jobs and financial services, which makes them more susceptible to violence, abuse and exploitation. In some refugee-hosting states, only about four in 10 women engage in paid work, compared to seven in 10 men. Furthermore, gender pay gaps favoring men over women are common in refugee-hosting states. For example, in the case of Jordan, for every dollar earned by a refugee man, the gender pay gap is 38 cents for refugee women.

Access to Health Services



Displaced women often have limited access to public health systems, reproductive health services, hygienic products and contraceptive methods. The limited access to adequate maternal health services can have serious health implications. Sixty per cent of preventable maternal deaths happen in situations of displacement or conflict. The lack of access to sanitary products can also hinder women and girls' ability to attend school, go to work or perform other activities.

Gender-based Violence (GBV)



One in five refugee or displaced women in humanitarian situations suffer sexual violence. Refugee women and girls are the target of rape, human trafficking and sexual abuse. Refugees already struggle with the trauma of fleeing war, violence and persecution and GBV often leads to another set of emotional and psychological challenges and an increase in mental illnesses for refugee women, such as anxiety, fear, despair and depression. The inadequate support and counseling services often discourages refugee women from reporting GBV incidents.

Documentation and Protection



Proper individual registration and identity documents facilitate refugees' freedom of movement and access to rights, services and resources in their country of refuge. Due to the complex, lengthy and sometimes costly procedure of registering and certifying births— or in some cases discriminatory policies—, many refugee women and girls are not registered and lack official documentation. In certain situations, one single document is provided to the head of the household, often the father, rather than separate documents to all family members. This often jeopardizes girls' and women's ability to exercise their rights, seek protection and access services.

Meaningful Participation



Patriarchal cultures, gender norms, discriminatory practices and limited levels of education often lead to women's exclusion from leadership positions. Women in refugee camps tend to be excluded from community-level problem solving. In Lebanon, for example, according to the Norwegian Refugee Council, "more men than women in NRC- established committees reported having interaction with authorities (67% and 44% respectively)."

UNHCR



UNHCR is committed to protecting the rights of refugee women and girls and has developed actions to respond to women's needs during all stages of displacement. This is anchored in the Global Compact on Refugees as well as in UNHCR's 2018 "Age, Gender and Diversity Policy", which includes 5 core commitments to women and girls.

- UNHCR supports women to participate and improve their leadership role within their communities. For example, in Zambia, UNHCR introduced a quota system so that more women would be elected as refugee leaders in a refugee settlement. In Colombia, UNHCR sponsored a project which empowered internally displaced women to advocate for themselves and obtain better services from authorities.
- UNHCR empowers women economically. UNHCR helps women to develop businesses; for example, In Cox's Bazaar, refugee women from fifteen different villages received skills training by UNHCR and have been earning money making toys, household items, and art. UNHCR also supports refugee women with cash assistance, which makes them less vulnerable to exploitation.
- UNHCR works towards improving refugee girls' access to education. UNHCR partners with governments and universities to offer scholarships to refugee women. UNHCR also works with businesses to provide refugees with schooling material and connectivity for digital education. UNHCR also organizes food distributions in schools with the World Food Programme to boost class attendance and reduce malnutrition.

UN Women



UN Women aims to promote peace and security by supporting refugee women of all backgrounds, ethnicities and ages to participate in processes to prevent conflict and build peace.

- UN Women also work to place refugee women in decision-making roles and include their needs and realities and policies and solutions.
- UN Women promotes women's roles as first responders during humanitarian crises. UN Women's project, "Who Holds the Microphone", features the work of women affected by conflict in Bangladesh, Colombia, Jordan and Uganda.
- UN Women also empowers refugee women economically by providing vocational and entrepreneurship skills training.



Host Governments

Refugee-hosting governments can play a key role in protecting the rights of refugee women and girls.

- Host governments can allow refugee girls to enroll in their public schools and provide incentives for girls to attend school. For example, despite the lack of enrollment spaces, Lebanon has established an educational system where refugee children attend public schools in the afternoon.
- Host governments can improve refugee women's access to justice, especially for victims of GBV, by guaranteeing their legal representation, improving their access to national legal services such as counseling services and informing them of their legal rights in their host countries.
- Host governments can facilitate the access of women refugees to public health systems and national reproductive health services.



Businesses

- Businesses can employ refugee women. For example, IKEA Group in Jordan is employing refugee women and girls to produce artisan-made goods which are sold around the world.
- Businesses can conduct skill training for women refugees or further develop their talents. Made51 is a global brand of home decor that is crafted by women refugees from several countries, in collaboration with social enterprises around the world.
- Businesses can support refugee women through in-kind donations, such as sanitary products and hygiene kits. For example, Nana Arabia has been working to eradicate period poverty by providing 2 million pads to refugee and impoverished girls and women in Lebanon.



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Liesse Ombeni, a 28 year old refugee from the Democratic Republic of Congo, tailors washable masks amidst the COVID-19 pandemic in Kampala, Uganda.



Refugee Women

Despite all the challenges, refugee women and girls have taken leadership roles in their communities.

- Refugee women play a prominent role in protecting their communities. Many are on the frontline during the COVID-19 pandemic. Women have disseminated health information, worked as doctors, scientists and teachers, and supplied masks and soap in their communities.
- Refugee women also work to empower other members of their communities. Congolese refugee Sabuni Françoise Chikunda, the regional winner for Africa for the 2020 UNHCR Nansen Refugee Award, has supported 1,000 fellow refugee women by providing counselling to survivors of sexual violence and teaching them skills such as tailoring and hairdressing.



Saleema Rehman is the first Afghan refugee woman to ever become a gynecologist in Pakistan. Her sense of duty to help women led her to specialize in gynaecology.

The Nansen Refugee Award regional winner for Africa, Sabuni Françoise Chikunda (right), meets with her fellow refugee women in Nakivale settlement, Uganda.



Questions to Guide the Debate

- How do we ensure women's rights are protected throughout all stages of displacement?
- How do we ensure refugee women and girls' meaningful participation in decision-making and leadership?
- How do we prevent and respond to gender-based violence affecting refugee women?
- How do we support refugee women and girls who have been victims of trauma and violence?
- How do we improve refugee women's access to healthcare, reproductive health services, sanitary products and contraceptive methods?
- How do we ensure women and girls have access to proper identity documents?
- How do we improve refugee women's access to jobs and financial services?
- How do we improve refugee girls' access to education?

Useful Resources

- [UNHCR Policy on Age, Gender and Diversity](#)
- [UNHCR: Protecting Refugee Women: Promoting Gender Equality](#)
- [UN Women: Women, Peace and Security](#)
- [Women Refugees on the Front Lines of COVID-19 Response](#)
- [MADE51: Refugee-Made Products, Brought by UNHCR](#)