RALLYING BEHIND PEACE AND RECOVERY FROM CRISIS

Crisis causes specific forms of harm and upheaval in the lives of women and girls. While often at the forefront of restoring peace and recovering from crisis solutions, they are still poorly recognized as central actors in crisis situations. Change is coming, though. With UN Women’s backing, activists have cracked open space for women and gender issues at peace tables, in humanitarian action and in national disaster management plans. Humanitarian relief providers increasingly tailor assistance to women’s needs. Political leaders call for gender equality as integral to restoring justice and preventing violent extremism. The time is now.

Every day, Rohingya refugees arrive in Cox’s Bazar, Bangladesh, fleeing killings, torture, rape and other forms of violence in Myanmar. They carry little, their pockets empty, their minds full of traumatic memories. Just above half of an estimated 688,000 new arrivals are women and girls.

But along the crowded lanes of the camps the refugees now call home, there are few female faces. Fear and restrictive socio-cultural norms keep women and girls confined to the tents and small shelters they have assigned, only occasionally peeking out to see who is walking by. They do not show up to collect relief items or participate in camp meetings about needs among the refugees or even to report cases of violence or abuse. They use makeshift toilets in their cramped living spaces because they are afraid to venture out to shared camp facilities, where men linger, waiting to peer inside.

In this uncertain life, crisis has compounded the gender inequalities women and girls already face.

But hope comes from a humanitarian response that deliberately counteracts exclusion and discrimination, whether in the provision of supplies or in regulations governing the camps. As the tide of refugees began to swell in August 2017, driven by escalating violence, UN Women became a vital conduit between female refugees and the array of national and international humanitarian organizations that support them. It helped coordinate the immediate distribution of kits of soap, clothes, menstrual hygiene products and flashlights for women, as well as cleaner burning fuel to reduce their exposure to smoke from cooking fires.

When women flagged concerns over a ban on midwives and doctors entering the camp at night, leaving them without medical care for childbirth, among other issues, UN Women took that issue to a humanitarian coordination meeting, resulting in a lifting of the restriction.

By early 2018, with UN Women’s support, the first Multi-Purpose Women’s Centre was operating in the Bhalukhali refugee camp. It provides a safe space for women and adolescent girls to move outside their temporary homes and come together, get information, find referral services for gender-based violence and obtain psycho-social counselling. They can also learn livelihood and literacy skills and use a secured bathing space inside the centre that is only accessible to them.

Similar efforts are underway at the new SADA Women-Only Centre, which caters to the most marginalized women among Turkey’s large refugee population as well as in the communities that host them. In 2017, over 1,300 women turned to the centre’s educational courses, counselling services and childcare support. Established by UN Women in Gaziantep, a city with a high concentration of people who have fled conflict in Syria, the centre is the first of its kind in Turkey. It has been nominated as a best practice by Gaziantep Municipality and endorsed by the Ministry of Family and Social Policy.

Escalating violence in Burundi, a place with a history of genocide, has forced many women into flight over the border with the United Republic of Tanzania. In three women’s centres supported by UN Women, refugees find safe spaces to network, learn new skills and recover from the
These kits are so needed for all of us who have been affected by the trauma of war and sexual violence. The centres also offer a 16-week programme for male camp residents to engage them in breaking gender stereotypes and preventing harmful cultural practices. Men once resistant to the idea that women in their families should work outside the home have come to see the benefits of greater incomes, shared workloads and a happier family life.

After Hurricane Irma swept with devastating force through Antigua and Barbuda, and even as Hurricane Jose bore down, UN Women and UNFPA quickly mobilized support to ensure that hundreds of dignity kits were immediately available. These contain items essential to the health and well-being of women and girls, but that are often overlooked in humanitarian relief. They include basics such as soap, panties, bras and sanitary napkins. "We are so thankful that they thought about us," said Nadia John, a council representative on the Barbuda Council. "These kits are so needed for all of us women and even the younger girls."

PREVENTING EXTREMISM VIA EMPOWERMENT

When women are empowered and take full part in decision-making in their homes and communities, societies become more cohesive and peaceful. Violent extremism finds no ground to flourish. Based on this premise, in 2017 UN Women introduced one of its largest programmes in Asia, on preventing violent extremism. In Indonesia, through a partnership with the Wahid Foundation, the programme helped 2,000 women gain micro-loans and learn about financial management. They also learned to lobby local leaders for designating communities as "peace villages," where conflicts are peacefully resolved, women have recognized roles in building peace, and economic empowerment initiatives are led by women. In nine recently declared peace villages, early assessments found that 45 per cent of women participants strongly agree that they now know what to do in order to prevent violent extremism in their families, compared with only 29 per cent of women outside the programme. Similar results were found in their communities, signaling women's capacity to influence public opinion. Men and women have said women's greater economic empowerment noticeably decreased tensions in families and communities.

Among the champions of the programme and the idea that underlies it is the President of Indonesia, also a HeForShe champion. Commemorating the International Day of Peace in 2017, he joined UN Women and an audience of 8,000 people to celebrate women's contributions to development and peaceful coexistence. "Women are the key to sustainable peace," he said, "from family, to country, to the world."

SEEKING TRUTH AND JUSTICE

There is no peace without justice, which is why Mali created a Truth, Justice and Reconciliation Commission to manage a daunting task: provide justice in the wake of the many human rights violations committed over the decades since the country's independence in 1960.

The Commission, in formulating its programme of work, recognized as well that peace and justice depend on gender equality. So it turned to UN Women to help establish a special committee that can bring gender dimensions into all activities.

A large share of violations in Mali have involved deliberately targeting women and girls. The Commission now uses new tools to analyse and respond to such cases, including a database to track them, and a comprehensive plan to respond to survivors. Learning sessions have brought best practices from similar exercises in other countries. These have helped victims' associations and women's groups see how they can act to claim women's rights. The Commission itself has now committed to upholding these rights at every point in the long journey of healing the wounds of the past.

SETTING NEW STANDARDS

In 2017, UN Women was responsible for developing a new Gender Equality and Economic Empowerment in Humanitarian Action policy for the global humanitarian coordination body, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee. The policy updates the global humanitarian system's commitments to gender and establishes a formal accountability framework to monitor future delivery of assistance in all humanitarian settings. The new policy reflects a series of landmark international commitments to gender equality and women and girl's empowerment adopted in recent years at the World Humanitarian Summit, and under the Sendai Framework on Disaster Risk Reduction as well as the Grand Bargain on humanitarian assistance.
Women champion women in peace processes

In 2017, women around the world came together in different forums that sent a clear message. Women will stand up and speak up for their right to be part of all peace processes until disparities are resolved.

The AFRICAN WOMEN LEADERS NETWORK convened during the UN General Assembly to mobilize around transforming Africa into a peaceful, stable and prosperous continent. The network was launched in 2017 at a forum organized by the African Union Commission and UN Women (see photo); 80 women leaders, in their roles as Heads of State, ministers, ambassadors and grass-roots leaders, serve as high-visibility advocates for women’s leadership and full participation in governance, peace and stability.

The WOMEN, PEACE AND SECURITY NATIONAL FOCAL POINTS NETWORK met for the first time in 2017, conducting a vibrant exchange of ideas on advancing women’s participation in national peace and security policies and programmes. Participants took up the greater integration of existing international commitments into domestic policies and laws, and strategies to tackle challenges in putting these into practice. The meeting, held annually with UN Women serving as a secretariat, is also an opportunity to boost coordination of related funding and assistance programmes.

“WOMEN ARE SEEN AS SEXUAL OBJECTS; DOMESTIC AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE IS ON THE RISE.”

CHARO MINA-ROJAS
Charo Mina-Rojas is the National Coordinator of Advocacy and Outreach for the Black Communities’ Process (Proceso de Comunidades Negras) in Colombia. Following the historic peace agreement which ended the more than 50-year conflict between the Government of Colombia and Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), Mina-Rojas advocates for justice and equality for Colombia’s afro-descendent women. The peace agreement includes a specific chapter on the ethnic perspective through efforts by Afro-Colombian women activists like her.

“I grew up in an afro-descendent community in Cali, Colombia, surrounded by strong and capable women. Yet, the men in their lives dictated what was right or wrong. Afro-descendent women like me face a double discrimination—because of our race and gender—and additional discrimination, because of poverty. At school, I would get disparaging looks by some, while others were overprotective, as if I couldn’t manage anything by myself. Later in life, the discrimination continued—while working at a ministry, the assistants would rarely support me. Many of the approximately 5 million afro-descendent people in Colombia live in violence-affected areas. Women are seen as sexual objects; domestic and sexual violence is on the rise. The space that has been left vacant by rebel groups since the peace agreement was signed, is being seized by other armed groups. Sexual violence, kidnappings and torture are being used as political weapons, and affecting younger women and girls, more now than in the past. This violence creates a terrible stigma for women. We are also suffering from economic, environmental and cultural violence. Do I think that the peace agreement will be implemented? Yes, I trust that it will. But it needs to be implemented in a way that acknowledges the diversity of the Colombian people, and of women, and respect their rights.”