

## **STATEMENT FROM WOMEN'S REFUGEE COMMISSION EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SARAH COSTA ON THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

As countries around the world navigate the unprecedented restrictions in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic – communities on lockdown, the need for physical distancing, the closing of local businesses – the Women's Refugee Commission (WRC) is acutely aware of what this could mean for displaced women, children, and youth globally.

Sixty percent of the more 70 million people currently displaced by conflict or crisis are women and girls. Displaced women and girls face unique challenges and risks – including increased risks of gender-based violence (GBV), limited access to critical health care services, and significant barriers to economic stability. The COVID-19 pandemic is sure to exacerbate these risks in alarming ways. Women and girls also are often the primary caregivers, with 70 percent of the global health and social service workforce made up of women, further increasing their risk of exposure.

WRC was proud to contribute, along with our partners, to new global interim agency guidance, released just days ago, which focuses on gender and COVID-19 with the goal of ensuring that humanitarian response to the pandemic prioritizes the needs of women and girls.

The guidance for gender and COVID-19 emphasizes – among other things – the importance of including women and girls in all their diversity in COVID-19 response plans; of assessing the specific needs of women, girls, and persons with disabilities in displaced settings; of ensuring access to essential services such as sexual and reproductive health (SRH) care; and of preventing GBV against women and girls and LGBTI persons. An effective response that does no harm must pay attention to existing and heightened gender and other inequalities.

Acutely aware of the increased risks that COVID-19 pose for displaced women and girls, WRC is working directly with partners across the humanitarian community – from governments, to local organizations, to displaced women and girls – to assess in real time how the pandemic is affecting the lives of those we are proud to serve. We stand prepared to support them with our knowledge and expertise.

Here are some of the things we know already:

### **ADOLESCENT GIRLS**

Adolescents everywhere benefit hugely from the influence of peer groups, adult role models, and social norms and structures. In humanitarian settings, adolescents may be separated from their families or communities, with social structures disrupted, and formal and informal education discontinued. The COVID-19 pandemic threatens to further isolate adolescents, particularly displaced adolescent girls, depriving them of essential services, education, and support networks. WRC has long recognized the importance of understanding adolescent girls' needs and priorities from the perspective of adolescent girls themselves, and will continue to meaningfully involve girls in the design and implementation of programs that build on their existing capacities to make safe and healthy transitions to adulthood.

### **CHILD MARRIAGE**

WRC is researching the prevalence and key drivers of child, early, and forced (CEFM) marriage in humanitarian and crisis settings to inform what works and what doesn't work to prevent CEFM and respond to the needs of adolescent girls in all their diversity. Emerging evidence suggests the key drivers and consequences of CEFM are directly linked to poverty, increased social isolation, and lack of access to basic services such as health care and education. These drivers are exacerbated in humanitarian settings, and potentially more so in relation to the global pandemic. With the clear link between poverty and child marriage, and the impact that COVID-19 will have on economies around the world, this work is more important now than ever.

## **CASH AND LIVELIHOODS**

Displaced families everywhere struggle to meet their basic needs in times of crisis, including during this COVID-19 shock. Cash transfers as a form of economic assistance for displaced persons can help families make choices about goods and services to which they need access, promote dignity, and help local economies to recover. WRC has a long history of working with women and women's groups to maximize the benefits of receiving cash assistance while mitigating associated risks – including the risk of GBV – to ensure the greatest benefit from cash assistance. With an uncertain economic climate ahead, displaced women and their families may face the loss of the livelihoods they have fought so hard to establish. WRC is working with our partner organizations to help ensure that the economic needs of displaced persons are met swiftly and safely during and after the pandemic.

## **SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH**

Since the earliest days of WRC, we have worked to ensure access to lifesaving sexual and reproductive health (SRH) services in humanitarian settings. We know that the effects of conflict, disaster, and epidemics are wide-ranging, affecting the lives of women and girls in a multitude of ways. The impact of COVID-19 on the SRH of displaced women will be tremendous, with increased risk of sexual and gender-based violence, maternal and newborn deaths, transmission of HIV and STIs, unintended pregnancy, and unsafe abortion. WRC is working with our partners to ensure that women and girls everywhere have continuous access to lifesaving SRH services and supplies such as contraceptive methods and essential medicines. With our partners, we are working to protect the safety of SRH frontline health care workers by advocating for access to essential personal protective equipment.

## **NATIONALITY RIGHTS**

The lack of equal nationality rights for women during COVID-19 is likely to contribute to a lack of access to essential services for affected families. Women, their children, and/or spouses who are denied nationality in their country of residence as a result of gender-discriminatory nationality laws are often denied access to a range of social services, including national healthcare systems. This looks to be potentially devastating for families and of grave concern for host communities as the world faces the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, where women are denied equal rights to confer nationality on their family members, their spouses and adult children are often excluded from accessing formal employment. As a result, many families affected by gender-discriminatory nationality laws may have even fewer resources to deal with the economic fallout from the pandemic.

## **MIGRANT AND ASYLUM RIGHTS**

WRC has been on the front lines of asylum rights for more than a decade. We are alarmed by recent government efforts to suspend asylum claims as part of COVID-19 responses. The right to seek asylum cannot and must not be suspended during a pandemic and governments must ensure that actions in response to COVID-19 are governed by science and public health expertise rather than by xenophobia. As governments, such as the Trump administration, use the crisis as an excuse to curtail protections for migrants and asylum seekers, WRC is actively working to hold the administration accountable for its inhumane actions. We remain committed to ensuring human rights are respected, especially during this pandemic, and are working to ensure that governments take important steps such as minimizing detention of vulnerable individuals and children.

During these unprecedented times, WRC is committed to continuing our critical work on behalf of displaced women, children, and youth, to assessing what this pandemic means for them and what they need from the humanitarian community, and to ensuring that their voices are heard around the world.

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