



28 August 2025

Re: Priorities for the next United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

Dear candidate,

The Women's Refugee Commission (WRC) welcomes your interest in becoming the next United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. The challenges facing the next High Commissioner are extraordinary. WRC is reaching out to all candidates to share our vision and priorities for how we believe the next High Commissioner should navigate these crises and ensure that UNHCR maintains its global leadership in protecting all forcibly displaced people.

For over 35 years, WRC has led research, programs, and advocacy designed to protect the rights of displaced and refugee women, and those at risk of or experiencing statelessness. Women and girls face unique risks and vulnerabilities in displacement, including sexual and gender-based violence, discrimination and exclusion, and restricted access to essential services, including sexual and reproductive healthcare. They often face increased care and financial responsibilities within their families and communities. Our work has made critical progress towards ensuring that their unique needs are met during crises and displacement, and that they can build safe, healthy, self-reliant, and dignified lives wherever they are. WRC's leadership has been instrumental in advancing sexual and reproductive health in emergencies, preventing and responding to gender-based violence in humanitarian settings, and advocating for solutions to statelessness. We co-founded the Refugee Self Reliance Initiative to advance policies and practices that support the self-reliance of refugees and host the Global Campaign for Equal Nationality Rights, which supports UNHCR's efforts to end gender discrimination in nationality laws, a leading cause of childhood statelessness. In partnership with UNHCR, the consultations we carried out with youth led to the creation of the High Commissioner's Global Youth Advisory Council, and since 2015 WRC has hosted the Global Refugee Youth Network to champion the leadership of refugee youth.

But in 2025, the progress we have made – along with many partners – is at risk. The world faces record levels of forced displacement, drastically shrinking humanitarian funding, rising anti-refugee sentiment, and a growing global backlash against gender

equality and women's rights. Refugees from Sudan and Syria are being forcibly deported to their home countries; growing numbers of women are forced along treacherous routes in Central America or across the Mediterranean while fleeing violence; while stateless Palestinians and Rohingya continue to face existential threats to their rights and safety. Meanwhile, the long-established leadership of the United Nations, and UNHCR in particular, is being undermined by funding cuts and a disregard for international law and norms.

In this context, we believe the next United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees must:

- 1. Provide bold and courageous leadership to champion the rights and protection of refugees, internally displaced persons, stateless people, and advance gender equality for all displaced people.** The next High Commissioner must be an effective international advocate who can work with, and rebuild consensus with, diverse actors to address the gap between robust frameworks such as the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol, as well as the Global Compact on Refugees, and current political and societal reactions against refugee rights and gender equality. Gender equality must remain high on the next High Commissioner's agenda, with clear linkages between women's rights, refugee rights, and advancing self-reliance and solutions to displacement and statelessness.
- 2. Ensure dedicated and effective programming, policies, and funding to protect the rights of displaced and stateless women and girls and advance gender equality in all areas of UNHCR's mandate.** Recent funding cuts by major donors have had an outsized impact on gender equality, gender-based violence, and sexual and reproductive health programs. Local women-led organizations have been disproportionately impacted. Displaced and stateless women will bear the brunt of lost services and funding. The next High Commissioner must dedicate a percentage of UNHCR's funding for gender equality and women's protection programming, and ensure that gender equality and gender sensitivity is integrated across all aspects of UNHCR's mandate.
- 3. Unwaveringly advocate for the centrality of protection in all displacement crises, and particularly retain and invest in expertise to prevent and respond to gender-based violence.** As the entire humanitarian architecture undergoes a radical reset at a time of drastic funding cuts, including proposed changes to the Global Protection Cluster and Gender-Based Violence Area of Responsibility, the next High Commissioner must leverage their leadership on protection to ensure that expertise on prevention, risk mitigation, and response to gender-based violence in displacement crises is not lost.

4. **Ensure the leadership, inclusion, and participation in decision-making of displaced and stateless women and youth, including refugee-led, stateless-led, women-led, and youth-led organizations.** Impacted communities are in the strongest position to shape and lead solutions to address their needs, yet too often are sidelined from decision-making, funding, and leadership. Displaced women and youth face unique forms of discrimination and exclusion, despite the critical role they play in local humanitarian responses and community resilience. The next High Commissioner must commit to the full and meaningful participation of impacted communities in all levels of programming, policy, funding across UNHCR's partnerships and programming, recognizing displaced women and youth as partners, innovators, and leaders.
5. **Invest in sustainable solutions that protect the rights of refugees, displaced and stateless communities wherever they are.** 60% of refugees live in urban areas. 66% of refugees have been displaced for at least five years. 40% are under the age of 18. As funding models shift, the next High Commissioner must invest in innovative models with diverse actors – including municipalities – to ensure that displaced and stateless women and girls are able to access essential rights, including the right to work, access national healthcare and education systems, and obtain legal identity, so that they are able to build safe, sustainable, and fulfilling lives wherever they are. UNHCR's commitment to mobilize action to end statelessness – including the reform of gender-discriminatory nationality laws – requires sustained leadership, dedicated human and financial resources, and strengthened partnerships with stateless-led and other key civil society allies, to capitalize on momentum and uphold UNCHR's statelessness mandate, particularly in the wake of drastic cuts to statelessness-dedicated staff.

WRC would welcome the opportunity to meet with you to learn more about your priorities and discuss how we could support your leadership in advancing gender equality and protection of women and girls in displacement and those impacted by statelessness and discriminatory nationality laws.

We wish you all the very best as you pursue the role of High Commissioner and thank you for your leadership and commitment to advancing the rights of the world's most vulnerable communities. We look forward to speaking with you.

Yours sincerely,

Sarah Costa

Executive Director