

Ms. Jaf: I was born a refugee during a chemical-gas attack in Kurdistan. Thanks to my mother. I was also born a feminist. After spending the first 15 years of my life in camps and asylum centres, I am now dedicating my life to working with and empowering other refugee women and girls. I am speaking today in my capacity as founder and Director of Women's Refugee Route and on behalf of the NGO Working Group on Women, Peace and Security. I am speaking here in complete safety. Yet many displaced women and girls do not have that luxury, especially since one in five of them have been raped or experienced other forms of sexual violence.

Sexual violence is a gender crime used to shame, demonstrate power and reinforce gender norms. It sustains fear and insecurity. The stigma associated with sexual violence prevents many survivors from reporting abuse, accessing medical and psychosocial services and seeking justice. I want to focus on the need for gender-sensitive support for refugees and the critical importance of empowering refugee women. I also want to highlight the urgent need for programmes that cater to all populations at risk, including refugees with disabilities, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) individuals, and men and boys.

More than 65 million people around the world have been displaced from their homes as a result of persecution, conflict or human rights violations, often intensified by the flow of arms. In times of crisis, women and girls are at a heightened risk for all forms of gender-based violence, from rape to assault, domestic violence and early marriage, as well as exploitation by smugglers. Displaced women and girls also experience disruptions to their education and livelihoods and often have to take drastic measures to survive. Women have told me that they have engaged in prostitution for as little as a couple of euros in order to be able to feed their families. One woman in particular has stayed in my heart — she was the same age as me and had to sell her body to buy milk for her baby.

I founded my organization when I realized that international humanitarian responses to refugee populations were largely gender-blind. For example, a woman I worked with at a refugee processing centre wanted to report her violent husband. I went with her to help translate for her, but the shelter insisted that she speak using their interpreter, who was a man. She did not feel comfortable doing that and cancelled the meeting. In every refugee setting I have worked in, there is a huge lack of trained women interpreters, volunteers and specialized service providers for dealing with survivors of sexual and gender-based violence, and a lack of understanding of the ways in which services must be adapted if they are to be gender-sensitive.

The fear of stigmatization and of breaches of confidentiality also compound access issues. I met a 17-year-old woman who had fled the Islamic State in Iraq and the Sham and been raped by soldiers at a border crossing. She left her family so that she would not have to tell them what had happened, and continued on her own. She was too scared and ashamed to report the rape and so received no medical assistance until she reached her final destination in Northern Europe, where she gave birth. That is despite the fact that international humanitarian law says that donor aid must be delivered in a non-discriminatory manner that includes access to sexual and reproductive health care such as abortion. In Greece, I urged a 16-year-

old unaccompanied minor from Afghanistan who had been gang-raped to report it and thereby get access to services. She refused, asking me what the point of reporting it was if the system would not protect her.

It is also very urgent that we address the protection needs of groups that are at risk. I recently met a refugee woman in a wheelchair who had to struggle even to maintain basic hygiene. She could not lock the shower once her wheelchair was in it, and she was too scared to take a shower when the door was open. The tools and guidelines to protect displaced women and girls from sexual and gender-based violence already exist. We need the political will to consistently implement them.

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex refugees, because of their sexual orientation, gender identity or sex characteristics, face an increased risk of discrimination and violence compared to the larger refugee population. Many flee persecution, but subsequently do not disclose their sexual orientation, gender identity or intersex status to service providers out of fear of becoming the victim of more violence. Moreover, notions of masculinity prevent abused and at risk men from admitting their vulnerabilities to sexual violence and from seeking support. My colleagues who work with refugee men also talk of the challenges encountered in getting those who were raped to report it. They say they need to “remain men”.

Time and time again, I see humanitarian agencies working to implement standardized programmes instead of adapting responses to the survivor’s concerns and needs. Yet, not all refugee camps and protection programmes are the same. Those where refugee women have been consulted in designing and implementing protection strategies are much safer. Refugee women are resilient. They have survived the unimaginable. When empowered to advocate for themselves and to be part of the decision-making on providing a safe environment and work opportunities, refugee women become the bedrock of peaceful and sustainable communities. Investing in women and women’s organizations that support empowerment is critical.

Sexual violence in conflict does not happen in a vacuum. It is the result of systematic failures on the part of the international community to address the root cause of conflict, gender inequality and impunity. That must end. I call on the Security Council and all Member States to undertake the following: promote gender equality and women’s and girls’ empowerment as fundamental to all efforts to prevent and address sexual violence in conflict and support women’s organizations working on the front lines; join and support the Call To Action on Protection from Gender-based Violence in Emergencies; ensure that the Global Compact on Refugees, to be completed in 2018, is progressive in meeting the needs of refugee women and girls; uphold the rights of all refugees by urgently improving access to international protection through humanitarian visas, increasing refugee resettlements, granting greater access to information and fair hearings; ensure that aid complies with international humanitarian law and is not subject to donor limitations, including the denial of sexual and reproductive health care, such as abortions; commit to programmes that are informed by gender analysis, meet the needs of all survivors and include sex- and age-disaggregated data, which must involve gender-sensitive training on working with survivors for all field workers and including survivors in

consultations on their individual protection strategies; lastly, curb the flows of small arms by ratifying the Arms Trade Treaty and implementing it through enforced national laws and regulations.

It is not enough to condemn acts of sexual violence in conflict. Everyone here today is responsible for putting an end to such violence, bringing all the perpetrators to justice and putting women at the front and centre of all responses to prevent it.