

To Change The World Let Refugee Women Lead <https://www.newsdeeply.com/refugees/community/2018/08/29/to-change-the-world-let-refugee-women-lead>

To Change The World Let Refugee Women Lead

Liberian peace activist and 2011 Nobel Peace Prize laureate Leymah Gbowee highlights the contrast between the resolve and strength of refugee women and their portrayal as helpless victims.

By Leymah Gbowee

THIS WEEK, AS the world marks one year since the beginning of the Rohingya exodus – one of the most critical refugee crises of our times – images of helpless refugee women are likely to abound. Too often, in an effort to raise funds or move the public into action, we paint refugee women as powerless, helplessly waiting to be rescued from the peril of their fate.

Yet nothing could be further from the truth. Refugee women are not passive victims; they are strong and courageous leaders, often the first ones to respond to the needs of their community.

Earlier this year, my fellow Nobel Peace Prize laureates Tawakkol Karman, Shirin Ebadi and Mairead Maguire visited the Rohingya refugee camps in Bangladesh. Although they witnessed unparalleled levels of devastation, they were struck by the resolve and strength of Rohingya women. The women were supporting relief efforts and offering translation services, as well as organizing and responding to their community's needs to the best of their ability.

Around the same time I visited Zaatari refugee camp in Jordan with other Nobel laureates, and memories came flooding back of my own experience as a teenager, living in a refugee camp in Ghana. The scenes were immensely familiar: homes insufficiently built to protect families from the sweltering sun and infrastructure focused solely on keeping people alive but not providing any space to truly live and thrive.

My own mother is an example of the same strength and determination that Rohingya women display today. Before fleeing Liberia with my siblings and me, my mother was a dispensing pharmacist. She was not allowed to practice her profession in Ghana, so she resolved to sell vegetables to support the 10 people relying on her. The camp didn't provide mattresses, blankets or any source of income, so the first bed we had was made of grass that was cut, dried and woven by my mother.

Despite these enormous challenges, she always took time to volunteer in our new community. Her example is a constant reminder to me that the best thing we can do for refugee communities is to provide them – especially women and girls – with opportunities to create the change they need.

I see so much strength, wisdom and resilience in the women in refugee camps. But one year into the Rohingya crisis we rarely hear Rohingya women's voices included at the decision-making table. It is time for these women to actively determine their future, leading the way for their communities in the process, and for decision-makers to act on their advice.

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When we let ourselves be led by refugee women and girls, we will create real change in the lives of refugees. For too long women and girls have been excluded from systems of representation and participation. Women are interviewed by media and humanitarian organizations, but rarely does their own understanding of the needs and strengths of their communities have a profound impact on how refugee camps are run and organized.

In Zaatari, I met a group of children playing outside. Only one spoke English: a little girl who dreamed of being a United Nations interpreter. As she shared her story, I wanted to tell her of the opportunities that exist for her beyond her camp. I know, firsthand, the anger that bubbles up inside you when you are forced to leave your home, but I want girls growing up in refugee camps to know those feelings can be channeled into creating positive change for their community. There is always hope; there is always tomorrow.

We can create tangible change in refugee communities by leaning into the wisdom and insight of refugee women and girls. It is the key to responding to the Rohingya crisis. And it's the best way to ensure that the little girl I met in Zaatari fulfills her dream of being a translator.

The views expressed in this article belong to the author and do not necessarily reflect the editorial policy of Refugees Deeply.