



Virtual Panel Discussion

Refugee Women: Unpacking Gender-based Violence

Event Report

Bárbara Romero

Global Independent Refugee Women Leaders



► Table of Contents

Refugee Women: Unpacking Gender-based Violence	3
Panel 1: Violence Against Women in the Access to Sexual and Reproductive Health	4
Panel 2: Economic and Patrimonial Violence Against Women	6
Panel 3: Bodily Violence Against Women (sexual, psychological and physical violence) Panelists	8
Conclusions	10
Recommendations	12
Panelists	13

Acknowledgements

This event report was written by Global Independent Refugee Women Leaders (GIRWL) Co-founder Bárbara Romero following a virtual panel discussion led by GIRWL and hosted by the World Refugee & Migration Council.

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World Refugee & Migration Council

44 Eccles Street #200
Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1R 6S4
www.wrmcouncil.org

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► Refugee Women: Unpacking Gender-based Violence

The conference **Refugee Women: Unpacking Gender-based Violence 2020** opened an online space — led by the Global Independent Refugee Women Leaders (GIRWL) and hosted by the World Refugee & Migration Council — where refugee women, through their intersectionality, could share their voices on how violence against women impacted their lives and the lives of thousands of refugee, migrant and displaced women around the globe.

Why did we hold this conference?

For GIRWL co-founders Najeeba Wazefadost, Anila Noor, Shaza Al Rihawi, Andrea Ayala and Barbara Romero, this conference was fundamental for several reasons. It was developed to mark the closing of the 16 Days of Activism against Gender-based Violence and to emphasize that the core work of GIRWL is focused on the human rights of migrant, refugee and forcibly displaced women and girls with an intersectional perspective. Secondly, there was a clear need to create a space for refugee women where they would be the

main speakers and have the floor for themselves as the experts of their own journeys. This conference responded to that deserved cause. It also responded to the fact that in 2020 gender-based violence became a pandemic within the COVID-19 pandemic, impacting the lives of all women: young and elderly, indigenous, from rural or urban contexts, lesbian, bisexual, trans, intersex and queer; with and without disabilities. Finally, gender-based violence has also created another layer of impact on migrant, refugee and displaced women, which needed to be addressed.

The conference was divided into three panels, each of them with three participants. Each panel focused on different forms of gender-based violence that refugee, migrant and forcibly displaced women face on their migration journeys — in camps, or refugee centres — and even in their day-to-day lives as recognized refugee women.

▶ Panel 1: Violence Against Women in the Access to Sexual and Reproductive Health

The first panel focused on the limitations and violence in the access to a diversity of services on sexual and reproductive health for refugee, migrant and displaced women of all ages. Panelists included Nicole Santamaría, a transgender intersex woman with indigenous roots from El Salvador, who is an asylum

“We are not living only the physically violence; we are living also the psychological violence and also the denial of the services that as women — women who have faced sexual abuse and sexual violence — we don't get.”

— **Nicole Santamaría**

seeker in the United States of America; Parwana Amiri, a young Afghan activist and writer, currently living in a refugee camp in Greece, and, Jayne Fleming, a human rights

lawyer with vast experience on working with refugee women and girls.

Participants shared their experiences about the different types of violence that women faced: gender-based violence and violence against their identities as women in their home countries; violence as sometimes one of the reasons for them to leave their homes; and violence faced on their migration journey. They noted that there have been multiple cases of women from Latin America who take contraceptive pills before the journey because they know they will be raped by other migrant man, but especially by authorities at the borders and in centres when they get to the United States. The discussants also noted that Middle Eastern women who have been raped cannot say anything to their partners or institutions because of cultural barriers and fears of retribution. In addition to this violence, women face barriers of language, a lack of familiarity

with their host country, and the uncertainty of how, where and who they can ask for help.

“In the centres, many people live in groups, in communities by their regional origin. In some of those groups the man is called stronger than the woman, and they're threatening the woman in order to not share their stories.... For the women their rights are not available.”

— **Parwana Amiri**

The panelists also discussed the ecosystem of violence against women, and how there are enabling elements for this violence to occur, including cultural factors, political systems, religion and application of laws. They emphasized that an ecosystem of protection

▶ Panel 1 (continued)

“We must engage with political actors, with policymakers, with people in positions of power, with economic power holders. We must engage in order to get them to support our movement, to create an ecosystem of protection which is led by survivors themselves.”

– **Jayne Fleming**

that needs to be redesigned to be centered on survivors’ experiences and needs.

The panelists engaged in a deep reflection on the layers of responsibility of the perpetrators and the ecosystem of violence that encompasses individuals, socio-cultural and

religious systems. While the violence is different from country to country, it exists without exceptions and affects women and young girls the most. They also discussed the importance for women and young girls themselves to participate as key actors in the promotion of their own safety, building networks with their peer women, and strategies to speak up and change the history of violence for them and for other refugee, migrant and displaced women everywhere.

**REFUGEE
WOMEN UNPACKING
GBV 2020 -
16 DAYS OF ACTIVISM**

**PANEL 1. VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN
IN ACCESS TO SEXUAL AND
REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH.**

Nicole Santamaría, Intersex-trans activist
(El Salvador - USA)

Parwana Amiri, Youth Activist (Syria - Greece)

Jayne Fleming, Human Rights lawyer (Jordan - USA)

Conference led by **GIRWL** Global Independent Refugee Women Leaders

Hosted by: **WORLD REFUGEE & MIGRATION COUNCIL**

▶ Panel 2: Economic and Patrimonial Violence Against Women

The second panel was designed to be a platform where refugee, migrant and displaced women from different backgrounds could share their views and experiences regarding the economic and patrimonial violence that is being faced by women. The panel was formed by Tina Dixson, a

“There are assumptions that once women make it into those safe countries like Australia, Canada and New Zealand or to somewhere in Europe, that those challenges stop existing.... But there are a lot of cases of exploitation because people, especially those people seeking asylum, really fear that they will be deported if they make complaints.... A lot of employers exploit those situations and those fears.”

– **Tina Dixson**

“The poverty and low income ... is really affecting women, affecting her decisions, her life, affecting her family as well. We tried to start a committee, having women gathered together to have a Committee of Women to change this, to help support women to have equal salaries and equal benefits from the work, but so far it's really not happened.... The woman has no right, has no voice and has no power.”

– **Maglaha Hamma**

feminist queer researcher from Ukraine, now based on Australia; Maglaha Hamma, an asylum seeker that has been living for the last 15 years in the refugee camp SMARA in Western Africa; and finally, Wafaa Al Hayek, who has worked in psycho-social support and dialogue, she is from the United Arab Emirates is based in Dubai.

On this panel the participants examined the layers of economic and patrimonial violence against women that is rooted in the cultural and the patriarchal system, noting that among refugees and asylum seekers, women and girls have fewer economic opportunities than men, and that they are expected to do work on a voluntary basis, as opposed to others who are paid for their labor.

In the context of employment, it was stated that refugee, migrant and forcibly displaced women, frequently faced harassment and exploitation, but fear to speak up because of the threat of losing the advancements in economic autonomy they have achieved.

It was emphasized on this panel that migrant, forcibly displaced or refugee women should be central to the development of policies which should be guided by their experiences and knowledge and refugee-led efforts should be

▶ Panel 2 (continued)

“I really believe that women are really clever, and they know what they want. All we need is to support them.... It's not about just empowering a woman to reach the resources. It's about how we can minimize the barriers that stop the woman to take the benefits from the economic support... When talking about economic (support), one main factor is to be economically supported, but in a refugee situation, we need to work on the policy, and all the policies that support the document to work and to support her financially.”

– **Wafaa AlHayek**

supported instead of being developed only by those that have never gone through such

experiences. Additionally the importance of promoting economic development at the same time as the overall empowerment for women — helping them understand their rights, and providing access to services that they need. These approaches would facilitate women to be the ones that design, lead and implement activities and programs to help each other when facing gender-based violence.



The graphic is a vertical orange rectangle with white and purple text. At the top, it reads 'REFUGEE WOMEN UNPACKING GBV 2020 - 16 DAYS OF ACTIVISM'. Below that, it says 'PANEL 2. ECONOMIC AND PATRIMONIAL VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN.' Three black and white portrait photos of women are arranged vertically on the right side. At the bottom, it lists the speakers: 'Maglaha Hamma, (Western Africa SMARA)', 'Wafaa AlHayek, (AUE - Dubai)', and 'Tina Dixson, (Ukraine - Australia)'. At the very bottom, there are logos for 'GIRWI Global Independent Refugee Women Leaders' and 'WORLD MIGRATION & MIGRATION COUNCIL'.

**REFUGEE
WOMEN UNPACKING
GBV 2020 -
16 DAYS OF ACTIVISM**

**PANEL 2. ECONOMIC AND
PATRIMONIAL VIOLENCE AGAINST
WOMEN.**

Maglaha Hamma, (Western Africa SMARA)

Wafaa AlHayek, (AUE - Dubai)

Tina Dixson, (Ukraine - Australia)

Conference led by **GIRWI** Global Independent Refugee Women Leaders

Hosted by **WORLD MIGRATION & MIGRATION COUNCIL**

▶ Panel 3: Bodily Violence Against Women (sexual, psychological and physical violence)

The third and final panel was designed to have a multidisciplinary approach from refugee women with different backgrounds to discuss the different forms of gender based violence that happens directly in the bodies of women, this is, the different manifestations of sexual

“And all of those people when we come together, we do cry. We tell each other, yeah, you're not the only one going through that. Let's hold hands and let's support and give power to each other. That's what we need.”

– **Lilith Raza**

violence, but also the physical and psychological violence and their repercussions on the lives of refugee, migrant and forcibly displaced women and girls.

On this panel, the participants were Lilith Raza, a transgender activist from Pakistan and who is now a refugee in Germany working to create awareness about diversity and policies; Noura Bittar Søborg, who is originally from Syria and is now a refugee in Denmark and a freelance writer; finally, Rachel Levitan with HIAS in the United States, who works on international efforts to increase protection, especially for the vulnerable refugee and migrants.

The reflections on this panel were related to the fact that a vast majority of refugee, displaced and migrant women encounter at least one form of bodily violence during her life time, and how the impact of that aggression does not stop after the act (s) of violence has stopped, but continues on in their lives afterwards. They referred to the fact that rape, and “sexual favours” in exchange for basic livelihood services, are unfortunately common in the migration journey of many

girls and women, as well as in the refugee camp and asylum centres.

“A trip to a toilet in an asylum camp itself is something very scary to women and girls, and also for a person of LGBTQ community because of high risk of rape. And that's not just from fellow refugees or asylum seekers in the camp, but also from staff, humanitarian staff and police staff in the camp.”

– **Noura Bittar Søborg**

The panelists referred to the difficulty of reporting the cases, not just because of language barriers, but also due to bias protocols and unprepared authorities that judge the survivors or obstruct them through measures such as asking them for proof of the lived aggression.

▶ Panel 3 (continued)

“I think it's really an obligation for policymakers – whether in the European Union or the US or other countries that are receiving thousands and thousands of refugees – as well as for the international organizations and other very large humanitarian organizations that are out there, and down to national governments and community groups. Are we really listening to the voices of the needs of survivors?”

– **Rachel Levitan**

The panelists highlighted the need for more sensitive laws that do not punish women for speaking up about the violence that they have lived, or for wanting to divorce her aggressor, as some legal systems unfortunately force refugee women to stay in an abusive relationship under the threat of losing their refugee status, being deported, or losing/being

separated from their children. Laws need to be better designed in order to cover those inequitable areas, and also recognize the diversity of women, not just as national citizens of a country, but as refugees, migrants, undocumented persons, lesbians, trans, intersex, queer, indigenous roots, women with disabilities, women with no literacy, and all girls and women.

Finally, it was stated that there is a need for governments and organizations to develop bottom-up strategies, and get the impacted persons involved in the design, decision making process and response. Also addressed was the need that any program or intervention developed for gender-based violence survivors involve economic empowerment and

economic inclusion (with a clear connection to the private sector), to guarantee the programs sustainability and the women recovery of the control over their own life.

The poster is orange with white and purple text. It features three black and white portrait photos of the panelists on the right side. At the bottom, it includes logos for GIRWL (Global Independent Refugee Women Leaders) and the World Refugee & Migration Council.

**REFUGEE
WOMEN UNPACKING
GBV 2020 -
16 DAYS OF ACTIVISM**

**PANEL 3.
BODILY VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN
(SEXUAL, PSYCHOLOGICAL, PHYSICAL
VIOLENCE)**

Lilit Raza, (Pakistan - Germany)

Noura Bittar Sjøborg, (Syria - Denmark)

Rachel Levitan, HIAS (USA)

Conference led by  Global Independent Refugee Women Leaders

Hosted by 

► Conclusions

- The conference was conducted with an intersectional approach, respecting a diverse representation of panelists, based in four continents and including cisgender, lesbian, trans, intersex, heterosexual, mothers, youth, single, married, indigenous women, and more.
- There is the need to approach the diverse realities of refugee-migrant-displaced women and girls in relation to different forms of gender based violence, in their journeys from their home land, in the process of being recognized as refugees, and in their current lives on their new countries.
- There is a need to develop a safe space to promote the participation of girls and young women to share and learn together about their rights and possibilities. Women and girl survivors of gender-based violence need safe spaces to break the silence.
- There is a need for institutions and organizations to believe survivors' stories, and not re-victimize them by asking them to prove the experiences they have lived.
- In refugee centres and camps there is an urgent need to access information in different languages, and in a friendly way provide information to women and girls about their rights, the services available to them and the resources that they can count on.
- Refugee, migrant and displaced women and girl survivors of gender-based violence not only need to be heard and respected from the individual experiences they have faced, but have their cultural backgrounds taken into consideration to understand their needs and provide them with the right support.
- It is important for host countries to recognize all the values and talents that are in the hands of every refugee person, including their individual abilities and knowledge.
- The bodies of women are still a place of battle. Women are punished in their bodies for speaking up, for the conditions of poverty they find themselves in, their sexual orientations, gender identities, migration status. They are considered subordinate to others because of the construct in some cultures that because they give birth to boys, women are there to please men, along with many more atrocities. The bodies of women and girls remain battlefields of frustration, punishment, anger, revenge, of individuals, groups, social systems, religion and culture.

▶ Conclusions (continued)

- ▶ There are violations of human rights happening against women and girls in refugee camps and migration centres, such as sexual harassment, rape, forced hysterectomies, separation from mothers and children and deprivation of medications.
- ▶ In different contexts, refugee, migrant and displaced girls and women had experienced violence from perpetrators that are supported by a permissive system that is not responding as it should to protect, defend and attend to the survivor of those forms of violence. There is the need to review the system to guarantee women and girls protection.

► Recommendations

- Open up more channels of communication and new strategies to guarantee refugee women to use their own voices when sharing their needs, experiences and challenges.
- Design, support and fund more bottom-up strategies developed by refugee women and girls, so they can represent themselves
- Revise how the policies of refugee centres and camps is being develop, and work to orientate them with more agency for impacted individuals to guarantee their wellbeing, safety and respect, from a holistic perspective.
- Create more spaces like this conference that embrace the diversity and intersectionalities of refugee women.
- The programs that support survivors of gender-based violence need to be properly funded. There is also the need to allocate resources to initiatives led by the survivors themselves, to support other survivors, and to develop economic initiatives to ensure refugee survivors the possibility to get back in control over their own lives.
- Develop more sensitive protocols, policies and laws regarding attention to refugee, migrant and displaced women and girls who are survivors of gender-based violence, and assure that there is accurate implementation and follow up.
- Develop programs to guarantee that the police officers, medical and school staff, and those responsible for organizations, centres and camps are better prepared to receive, refer and attend to cases of refugee, migrant and displaced women and girl survivors of gender-based violence.

▶ Panelists

INTRODUCTION

- ▶ Introductory words from **Bárbara Romero** (GIRWL) (El Salvador)
- ▶ Welcome from **Devota Nuwe**, WRMC Council Member and Head of Programs, Refugee Law Project, School of Law, Makerere University (Kampala, Uganda)
- ▶ **Najeeba Wazefadost** (GIRWL) explains the dynamics of the panels. (Afghanistan – Australia)

PANEL 1: VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN ACCESS TO SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH

- ▶ Refugee woman: **Parwana Amiri**, youth activist (Afghanistan – Greece)
- ▶ Refugee woman: **Nicole Santamaría**, intersex trans woman (El Salvador – USA)
- ▶ **Jayne Fleming**, Pro Bono Counsel and Human Rights Team Lead, Reed Smith, and International Project Leader at Lamp Lifeboat Ladder (Jordan – USA)

PANEL 2: ECONOMIC AND PATRIMONIAL VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

- ▶ Refugee woman: **Hamma Ayena, Maglaha** (speaking in Arabic), women's rights (Western Africa SMARA)
- ▶ Refugee woman: **Wafaa Jammal AlHayek**, quality of response to migrant women (AUE – Dubai)
- ▶ Refugee woman: **Tina Dixon**, research in queer women (Ukraine – Australia)

PANEL 3: BODILY VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN (SEXUAL, PSYCHOLOGICAL, PHYSICAL VIOLENCE)

- ▶ Refugee woman: **Lilith Raza**, trans activist (Pakistan – Germany)
- ▶ Refugee woman: **Noura Bittar Søborg**, advocate against rape (Syria – Denmark)
- ▶ **Rachel Levitan**, Vice President, International Programs, HIAS (USA)

CONFERENCE SUMMARY

- ▶ Conference summary by Anila Noor, GIRWL

CLOSING REMARKS

- ▶ **Caroline Masboungi**, UNICEF GBV service delivery and innovations work (Amman, Jordan)
- ▶ **Rosemary McCarney**, WRMC member, Massey College Senior Fellow in Foreign and Defence Policy, and former Ambassador of Canada to the United Nations (Canada)
- ▶ **Andrea Ayala**, GIRWL (El Salvador)





World Refugee & Migration Council

Chaired by former Canadian Foreign Minister Lloyd Axworthy, the World Refugee & Migration Council offers bold thinking on how the international community can respond to refugees through cooperation & responsibility sharing.

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