



Virtual Conference

# Refugee Women:

## Responding to COVID-19

### Event Report

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Global Independent Refugee Women Leaders

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## ► Foreword

On June 9, 2020 thousands of participants from around the globe gathered digitally to give voice to the concerns of women and girl refugees and displaced persons in camps and urban concentrations as they face the extraordinary circumstance of coping with COVID-19. The leaders of the **Global Independent Refugees Women Leaders** (GIRWL) group deserve ringing applause for inspiring, organizing and implementing this landmark networking of refugee and displaced women and girls, offering a platform for participation to one of the world's most vulnerable constituencies in dealing with one of the globe's most dangerous threats.

The level of engagement can be seen in some initial metrics: over 500 registrants — nearly half of which were refugees or otherwise displaced — and more than 20,000 people reached on both Facebook and Twitter. There has also been a steady stream of emails and messages from groups and individuals adding

further comments and appeals for assistance. It is a demonstration of how global decision-making can be made more inclusive and democratic.

As attention turns to the COVID-19 aftermath, compounded by the increasingly severe climate change impacts, the imperative to devise governance that broadens and deepens participation especially for the disenfranchised of the world, is paramount. What the GIRWL global conferencing shows is that digital technology can open the door towards re-designing global democracy.

This report gives substantive, personal assessments of the conditions faced by refugee women and girls, their shortage of valuable supplies and equipment, the cutting off of economic and financial resources, the increase in violence and reduction of protection, the shutting down of services and the withdrawal of many NGO supported programs and the closing of opportunities for resettlement and asylum.

The report foresees future inequality of treatment in meeting global threats. The distribution of vaccines and curative medicines are being dominated by certain powerful nations or coalitions for purposes of hoarding for their own populations. This reinforces the need for international rules and cooperative initiatives on distribution that include the interests of those at the back of the queue. Being stateless, refugees and displaced persons must be given the direct right to be involved in decisions and programs that deeply affect them, reinforcing the basic principle of “the responsibility to protect.” Their voices must be heard.

Refugee and displaced persons participation in global decisions is one requirement. The other is to bolster and amplify the frontline capacity of refugee and displaced women to provide the leadership and action to serve their own communities. As the report underlines, there is no shortage of women with talent, experience, determination and training that can be mobilized.

## ► Foreword

However, they need enabling resources from responsive governments, international agencies, funders and NGOs to identify and then operationalize the capacity of women in the camps and the urban concentrations. As **Halima Mahmoud**, a Somali refugee participant asserted, women are giving leadership now but need further empowerment to meet the epidemic demands.

The recommendations at the end of the report deserve special attention. I strongly urge those who read this report to do so with a view as to how these proposals can be turned into action.

I would like to give special thanks to **Najeeba Wazefadst** and **Anila Noor**, co-founders of GIRWL and the authors of this document. Their steadfast devotion and passionate commitment to the cause of refugee and displaced women is exemplary.

I also want to thank those who gave of their time as panelists and commentators: Secretary of State **Madeleine Albright** a long-time friend and inspiration to women throughout the decades, **Minister Marco Mendicino**, The Canadian Minister of Immigration and Refugees as well as to the Canadian Ambassador for Women Peace and Security, **Jacqueline O'Neil** who expressed their government's avowal of the importance of supporting women and girl refugees around the world, **Jennifer Hart** from the Women's Refugee Commission who highlighted the crucial role of civil society in support of women refugees and displaced persons. They all brought to the meeting a sense of solidarity with the GIRWL initiative.

My thanks to **Jessie Thompson** of Care Canada and a member of the WRM Council who built a bridge between the Council and GIRWL, to **Fen Hampson** executive

director of the WRMC and **Jeff Stoub** the Council's Director of Communications, for working with the leaders of GIRWL to launch the conference leading to this report.

The World Refugee & Migration Council has been privileged to be a partner with the extraordinary women of GIRWL who led this effort. When we released our Action Report in January of 2019, a key recommendation was to help give presence and voice to those who were refugees and displaced persons in determining their own future. With the aid of the Rockefeller Brothers Foundation, Cuso International and the Government of Canada in launching the global conference, a major step has been taken. As the report of this network exchange makes clear many more steps towards fairness, equity and security for refugee and displaced women in the time of COVID-19 must follow.

**Lloyd Axworthy,**

Chair, World Refugee & Migration Council

## ► Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic is affecting almost every country across the globe, and creating a multitude of challenges for communities the world over, with refugees and people seeking asylum being particularly vulnerable. Their concerns include, but are not limited to: maintaining safety measures in overcrowded camps and detention centers, lack of access to countries of asylum or resettlement due to border closures, and lack of income support for those who have lost their jobs.

This Event Report focuses on the feedback GIRWL received via its Global conference with refugee women and girls held virtually on the 9<sup>th</sup> of June 2020. Global Independent Refugee Women Leaders (GIRWL) is a refugee women-led group that organizes initiatives, creates networks, and advocates for and with refugee women to increase refugee women participation in shaping policies build refugee women's capacity to engage locally,

nationally, regionally and globally, and strategically advocates for and promotes inclusive human rights approaches to forced displacement.

This report aims to consolidate women's and girl's feedback on the gaps, challenges and barriers considering COVID-19 rapid responses, highlighting the coping strategies of refugee women in order to emphasize the common areas of concern for better coordination. The conference was hosted and supported by the World Refugee & Migration Council. The consultation recorded many barriers and shortfalls with the measures introduced for vulnerable groups.

The conference was created and led by refugee women and was attended by refugee woman participants, as well as **Madeleine Albright, former US Secretary of State and former refugee, Marco Mendicino, Canadian Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship, Jacqueline O'Neill, Canadian**

**Ambassador for Women, Peace, and Security** and **Jacqueline Hart, Senior Director for Strategy, Women's Refugee Commission**. The conference demonstrated that the most hard-hit group within refugee communities are women and girls, the elderly and members of the LGBTQI refugee community. The refugee community holds grave concerns for those in the camps, considering overcrowding and the associated health concerns. This pandemic is a global challenge that does not discriminate and can affect anyone — including refugees and displaced peoples — which can only be addressed through international solidarity and cooperation. Refugee women insist on equity and leaving no one behind, and see the fight against COVID-19 as a collective endeavor. This conference provided a unique platform to amplify the voices of refugee women and girls and to critically the impact of COVID-19 on all women across the globe.

1. Refugee women and girls refer to all displaced, undocumented, asylum seekers, minorities, and stateless groups of women and girls

## ► PART ONE:

### Global Context: Analysis of COVID-19 impact by International Community

The conference commenced with a welcome from moderator **Heba Aly**, director of **The New Humanitarian**, who introduced one of **GIRWL's** co-founders **Najeeba Wazefadost**. In her opening remarks, Wazefadost said, "We all know that refugees are the first and last responders to any crisis especially the current time. We, the refugee women, want to be heard, listened to and involved in policy discussions and use this conference to find better ways and to bring solutions and collaboration to the issues we face." This was reiterated by **Anila Noor** also a co-founder of **GIRWL** who noted that "We need to bring their voices, their lived experience, as knowledge to advance this policy; not to bring them only to listen to them, to their voices, to their stories, but also to try to understand what they are saying."

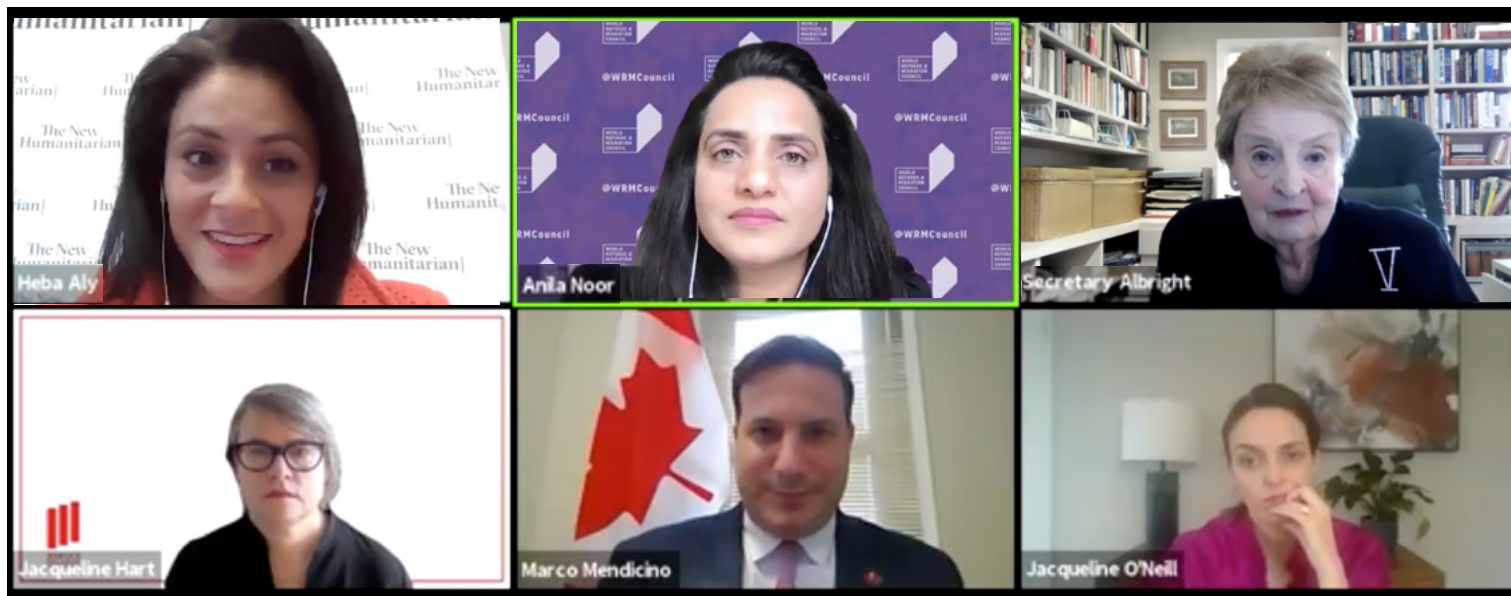
In light of the unprecedented impact of the COVID-19 outbreak worldwide, the **former US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright** stated: "Women are the biggest victims of what is going on in terms of the virus as well as the economy.... Women are the victims as well the ones who are dealing with the issues in terms of education, of dealing with others. This type of conference points to the number of women that are involved, that are out there fighting all the time on behalf of others, and at the same time are not able to pursue their careers in terms of their potential, for running for office, or having businesses, or really getting an education."



"We, the refugee women, want to be heard, listened to and involved in policy discussions and use this conference to find better ways and to bring solutions and collaboration to the issues we face."

**Najeeba Wazefadost**





Women are resilient and are willing to express what they believe; they have shown they are able to rise up against inequality. This crisis has taught women that we need to effectively work together to overcome this pandemic. More political willingness is required by states to ensure that all, including refugees, are able to access health facilities and services in nondiscriminatory ways.

It was also stressed by **Canadian Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Marco Mendicino** that there is a need to “create the space to ensure that refugee’s voices are heard when we are creating our plans, creating our policies to try and enact the meaningful reforms that are necessary, that instill public confidence. Because, you’re quite right, there is a degree of anxiety around how we’re going to continue to resettle refugees during these unprecedented times.”



“We need to bring their voices, their lived experience, as knowledge to advance this policy; not to bring them only to listen to them, to their voices, to their stories, but also to try to understand what they are saying.” **Anila Noor**

In responding to the question on how others can contribute to the international effort to empower refugees today, taking Canada’s progressive stance as an example, Minister Mendicino strongly stated that refugee inclusion should be a top priority in all plans going forward as it will allow refugees to co-develop and to co-partner in shaping international policies which translate to reforms and that it is up to the state to create these opportunities.

### **Feminist International assistance policy, how does it apply during COVID-19 and in particular its impact on refugees?**

The need to involve women in peace and security was one of the prime concerns raised by refugee women. Addressing this in her response **Jacqueline O’Neill, Canadian Ambassador for Women, Peace, and Security** emphasized that “We are asking how are women, especially refugee women and girls, being involved in decision-making, more than just thinking of them as stakeholders, how are they actually co-developers?” Additionally, she shared the importance of feminist policies in both impacts of the crises, pointing out that, pandemic or no pandemic, refugee women continue to suffer, with increased violence at home, lack of security and restriction on prime labour, early forced marriages, food and supply shortages and an increased rate of girls dropping out of school.

Through the conference, we encourage diverse actors to explore opportunities for collaborative multi-actor engagement of the Global Compact on Refugees to ensure meaningful participation of women in all related policies, programmes and processes.

**Jacqueline Hart, Senior Director for Strategy, Women’s Refugee Commission**, provided a crucial voice for civil society. In their work, the Women’s Refugee Commission researches advocacy and cooperation between INGOs, civil society, governments and donors, in order to make visible the critical skills and capacity of refugee women who need to be included in the conversation. Hart stated that international NGOs need to be inclusive of refugee women and not only serve them with a few ways, which have been really proactive, but to also give them space to shape and design the programming and directly participate and provide them with ownership.

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, we are beginning to see structural inequalities that have existed pre-COVID. During these times it is the most vulnerable in society that bear the brunt, especially women, people with disabilities, and LGBTQI communities. It is these communities that we need to engage in conversation with in order to address the effectiveness of aid and shifting humanitarian responses as a systemic issue.

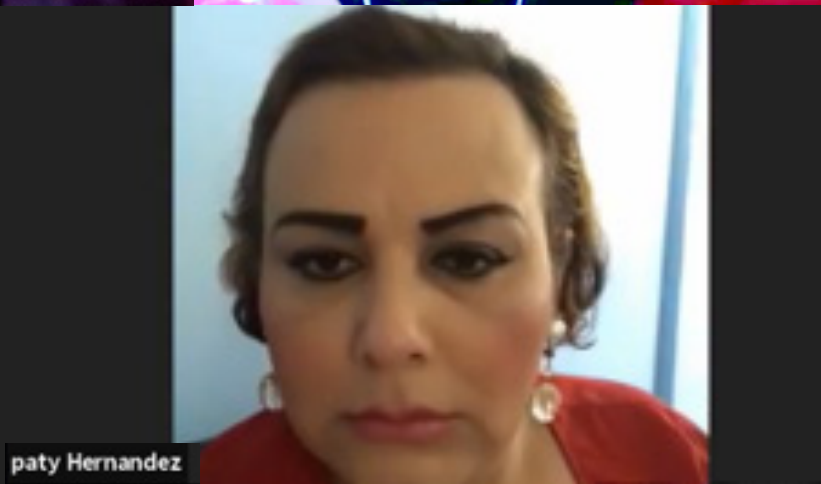
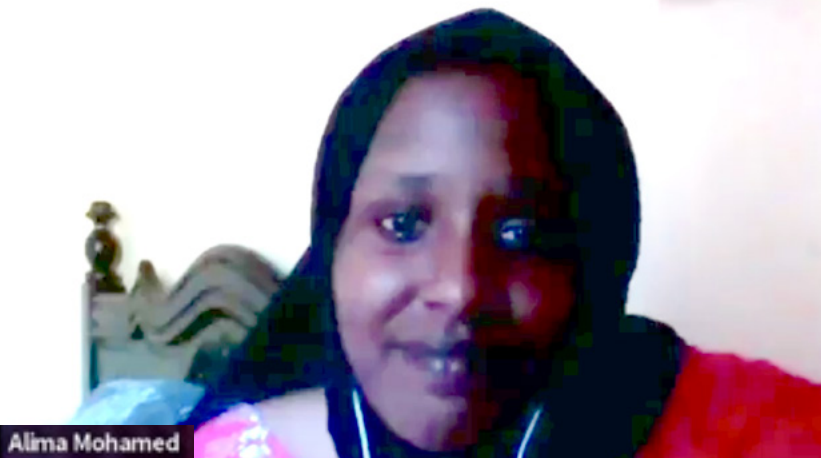




## ► PART TWO: Challenges and GAPS: Refugee Women Voices

The speed with which COVID-19 has spread around the globe has been as extraordinary as the impact it has had on communities. This includes refugee communities, but in very particular ways. From refugees in remote and isolated camps, to refugees living in precarious conditions in urban settings, to all whose movement has been blocked by the closing of borders and increased state controls, scores of refugees have been significantly affected both by the arrival of the virus and by state policies implemented in response. Specifically, because they are carrying out this work with little resources and support. The pandemic

challenged us as refugee women to become creative in the ways we reached out to each other and the broader refugee community, due to the lockdown and social distancing measures. **Shaza Alrihawi, one of the co-founders of GIRWL** noted that “The current pandemic has brought new and unfamiliar challenges to every corner of the globe. And while COVID-19 is both gender and race-blind, the societal burdens brought on by it are not. This not only threatens progress that has already been made, but brings new challenges to the table, making solidarity and collaboration even more critical during this time.”



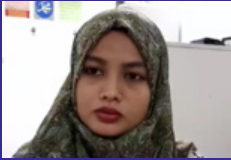


This conference sought to address this need by providing women a safe space to collaborate and share information on coping strategies, resilience, and needs. **Halima Mahmoud, a Somali woman refugee** related to us the experiences of women in Ugandan camps, by stating that women refugees are also leaders who are doing a lot of work to support the community. She pointed to a lack of facilitation which exacerbates the suffering of people with disabilities and those living with HIV. She highlighted the fact that whilst during this time of COVID-19 sanitizer and handwashing is promoted as a prevention, it is difficult to do when they do not have drinking water in the refugee camps. Mahmoud also stated that in the Ugandan camp they are facing a lot of problems, but they are trying to support the community by providing sanitary packs for girls, and food for people with disabilities. She highlighted that NGOs have not been helpful, telling them that everywhere is closed, including their offices.



Refugee woman from Kampala Camp using a complete hand washing machine.





“But living in a camp or urban area or city it’s never been easy for refugees especially for women and girls because we are front liners regardless of what we are.”

**Hasnah Hussin**



In recognizing the heightened challenges, **Hasnah Hussin, Rohingya woman refugee in Malaysia**, working as volunteer community mobilizer shared how regardless of her own difficulties she is working and collaborating with another three local organizations. Through resilience she has actively engaged to provide relief to affected communities and has reached out to nearly 10,000 refugee migrants and 40 groups in Malaysia. Hussin pointed out that the fight against COVID-19 has to go together with food distribution, in-person counselling for women and girls and addressing the needs of refugees migrating. She also highlighted her experience with facing racism that “We are not living in a refugee camp, but living

in between Malaysians, its more frustrating and challenging when you are called with unwanted names, and hate speech around the community, its mental health challenges. Camps are harder due to the limited resources but living in urban areas is more dangerous. But living in a camp or urban area or city it’s never been easy for refugees especially for women and girls because we are front liners regardless of what we are.” On the other side of the world, **Paty Hernandez, Salvadoran trans woman refugee and founder of Centro Internacional Arcoiris (USA)** shared that women refugees face distinct struggles during their journeys and it is vital that we highlight the work of refugee women during this pandemic.



## ► PART THREE:

### What Are Refugee Women's Unmet Needs & Capacity Gaps?

**Bárbara Romero, GIRWL co-founder** led this segment of the discussion by using a gender lens to identify the needs and capacity gaps of refugee women. Romero herself is now a refugee in Europe, having to leave her country due to her work as a defender of women who faced violence. She stated the importance of girls and women having access to justice, and advocating for LGBTQI rights in tackling multiple structures of discrimination and its impact on access to opportunities. **Dr. Olfat Mahmoud, Palestinian woman refugee leader in Lebanon,** highlighted the current situation and difficulties of being described as stateless and not being allowed

to work. She stated that in the camps people are doing their best at social distance, but it is not easy. She has been working with young people from the camp as volunteers to raise awareness. Another important issue which she highlighted was the loss of income due to COVID-19, where previously most refugees took daily payment work in order to survive, they could no longer rely on this which resulted in people not having food. She called for support so that refugees may live with dignity and urged us to also look at the good examples and practices of those who despite the conditions and lack of resources are supporting their communities.



“The unmet need ... is mainly dignity. We need our dignity, we need to be treated with dignity and with respect. Being a refugee is not a stigma. I don't want to be called as a victim, I'm not a victim. I believe I am a survivor. Refugees are survivors.” **Dr. Olfat Mahmoud**



“For GIRWL the most important thing is that this space become a megaphone. That women refugees, across their full range of diversity, can discover a space where their requests can be heard and that, especially, their leadership can be fully realized.” **Andrea Ayala**

We believe if access to the opportunities and space are given to the Refugee women they become co-developers and co creators to improve their own situation. **Nibras Rahbe, Syrian woman refugee representative of Asia Pacific Network of Refugees (APNOR)** the only refugee led network across Asia, shared that whilst COVID-19 has hit all refugees, it has definitely had a bigger impact on refugee women and girls. Rahbe stated that the aim of APNOR is to amplify the voices of refugees specifically women. Some of their initiatives during COVID-19 has included providing a platform for medical refugee doctors and nurses to provide fortnightly live online conversations on COVID-19 prevention to refugee communities in different languages (Arabic, Assyrian, Chaldean, Turkish, Farsi and Persian). They have also provided emergency food packages to more than 100 families and also produced their own masks for undocumented refugee women.

As response to these refugee women voices from **Sarah E. Hendriks, Director, Policy and Intergovernmental Division, UN Women.**

Final thoughts were given by **GIRWL co-founder Andrea Ayala**, who stated that discrimination permeates through the daily lives of refugee women, which has been compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic. She stressed the need for GIRWL to continue to sustainably build a network that creates spaces where women and girls feel heard, acknowledged and cared for, but most importantly as spaces that develop their potential. Ayala concluded that during last year’s Global Refugee Forum the pledges from many people and organizations confirmed the urgent need to support all women and girls with budgets designed with a gender and social inclusion perspective. Ayala noted that this conference demonstrates refugee women’s immense potential to be part of the decision-making process, to advise on the policies and strategic plans that will affect women’s lives and their communities. “For GIRWL the most important thing is that this space become a megaphone. That women refugees, across their full range of diversity, can discover a space where their requests can be heard and that, especially, their leadership can be fully realized.”





Heba Aly



Alima Mohamed



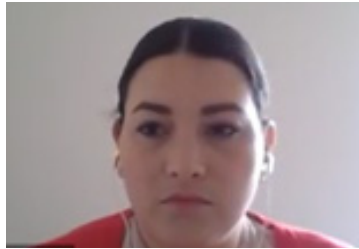
Andrea Ayala



Madeleine Albright



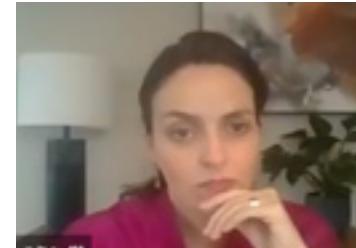
Najeeba Wazefadost



Bárbara Romero



Jacqueline Hart



Jacqueline O'Neill



Lloyd Axworthy



Sarah E. Hendriks



Anila Noor



Marco Mendicino



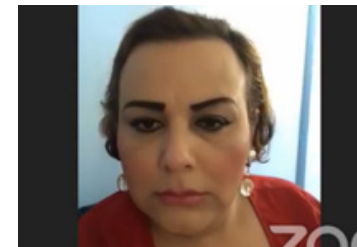
Shaza Alrihawi



Hasnah Hussin



Dr. Olfat Mahmoud



Paty Hernandez



## ► Conclusions

### Closing remarks:

The conference was closed by the **Chair of the World Refugee and Migration Council, Lloyd Axworthy**, who is also a global leading voice advocating for the unmet needs of refugees and others who have been forcibly displaced. Axworthy mentioned that he found it inspiring to listen to all these women refugee leaders, as the experiences of refugee women are often invisible, stating that it is important that refugee women are brought forward to the table and made part of the decisions which would change the sense of fundamental responsibility. He also reflected that it is vital to pull all these efforts together in order to benefit from this virtual event, to expand and develop strategies with partners, such as Facebook to develop new technologies to broaden the work of the GIRWL network in order to facilitate outreach. He added that the WRMC and the Rockefeller Foundation support initiatives such as GIRWL, which create networks that address the unmet needs of refugees by providing tools and resources. Lastly, Axworthy concluded by positioning the COVID-19 pandemic as a turning point that has opened up an opportunity to re-examine and re-build our future.

### “GIRWL” bridging the gap, reinforcing Action 5

The Council’s Call to Action Report recommends under action 5 that a network of global women leaders, in support of the Council’s recommendations, be convened as part of the Global Action Network for the Forcibly Displaced. GIRWL will deliver this recommendation, with support of the WRMC and suggests the appointment of GIRWL core team members as Refugee Women Commissioners.

## ► Recommendations

- Incorporating women's voices, experiences and knowledge and ensuring equal representation in all COVID-19 response planning and decision-making
- Continue monthly online webinars commencing to provide sustainable and regular conversation with refugee women as a follow up to the conference / and to develop refugee women indicators.
- Developing educational and awareness programming resources such as statements, COVID-19 health information, video clips in diverse languages in #refugeewomenmatter social media, advocacy messages, and highlight the role of refugee women health workers on the front-line.
- Women empowerment packages including sanitary kits, food/medicine baskets, COVID-19 testing resources for undocumented refugee women.
- Increase grassroots women consultations; support for digital training and learning for women is needed.
- Recognizing the health needs of women and ensuring access to resources for reproductive and sexual health services are available.
- Ensuring women's safety over data collection for violence against women.
- Innovative ways of delivering health information to women with lack of literacy skills.
- **Create leadership spaces for refugee women and girl's to meaningfully engage and participate in the Commission on the Status of Women process , Beijing 25+ and the Generation Equality Forum. \*URGENT\***
- Organise a set of virtual safe/open conversations to mobilize and capture refugee women's voices to inform the Action Coalitions to accelerate gender equality and intersectionality.

## ► Input via Eventbrite Questions

### *How Can GIRWL Add Value and Support Your Work?*

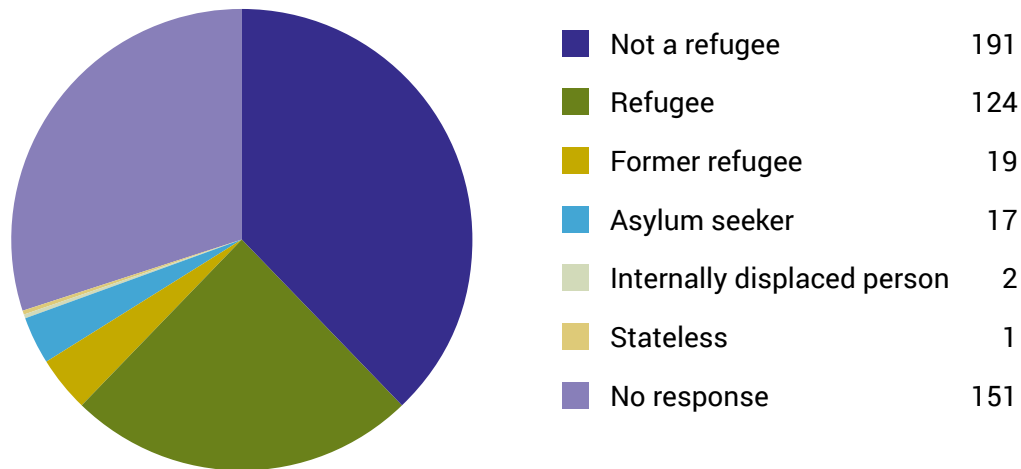
In the registration form for the conference refugee women stated that they expected the following from GIRWL: capacity building, collaboration, advocacy, and empowering the voice and agency of refugee-led organizations. One respondent indicated that GIRWL enabled her and other women to engage locally, nationally, regionally and globally. Another respondent stated that GIRWL allows us women and girls to raise our voices. Whilst many others indicated that GIRWL provides much needed capacity building, providing awareness during COVID-19, providing women with skills to start new ventures, bringing refugee women's rights to the forefront, advancing women's agency globally, sharing best practices in supporting refugees and promoting the inclusion of women refugee voices.

### *What Should Be the Top Priority in Responding to Refugee Women's Issues in the Context of COVID-19?*

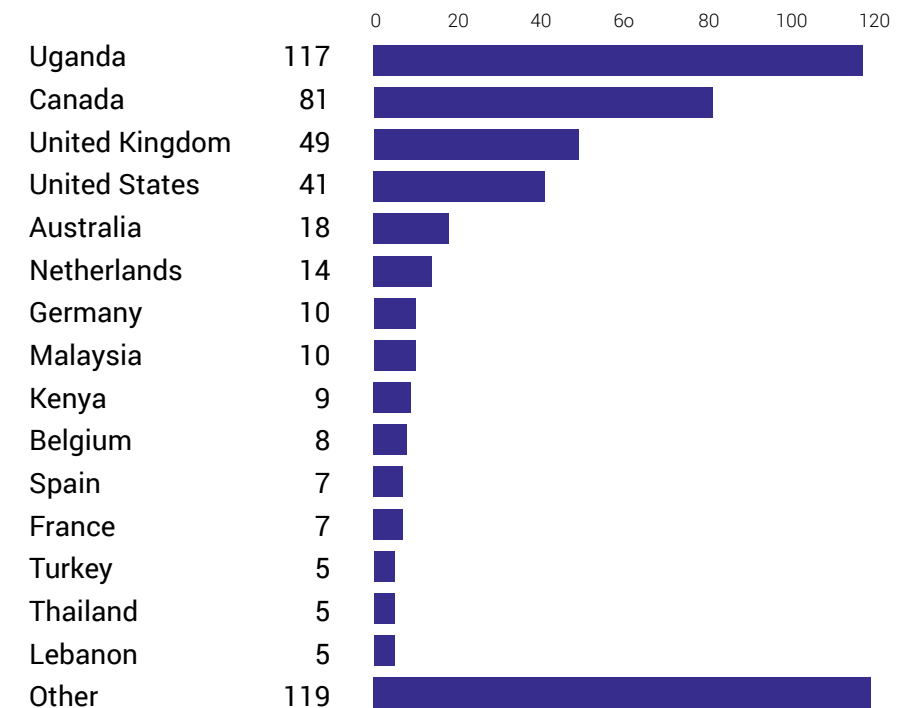
- Provide support and resources to single mothers and survivors of gender-based violence in order to ensure the safety and alleviate the mental distress of women during the COVID-19 pandemic
- Make sanitation, water and healthcare provisions
- Advocate on behalf of refugees to host governments and related organizations to provide financial or other resources to help refugees who have suffered a loss of income due to the COVID-19 pandemic
- Advocate on behalf of refugees to host governments and related organizations to make provisions for access to online education for refugee children
- Provide medically accurate public health awareness information regarding COVID-19.
- Provide support and resources for dealing with multiple structures of discrimination and access to opportunities
- Provide sanitary kits and hygiene products
- Provide access to mental health and reproductive health care
- Provide a platform for women refugees to share their experiences and to learn from each other's successes
- Advocate on behalf of refugees to host governments and related organizations to make possible working opportunities for all refugees, with specialized placement programs for high-skill refugees
- Ensure that the negative economic impacts of the pandemic on host governments are not used as a means to discriminate against refugees
- Advocate for feeding schemes and/or food packages during COVID-19

## ► Virtual Conference Participants

### 505 Registered Participants



### Countries Represented



## Facebook (Event Video Post)

Facebook.com/wrmcouncil



People Reached	<b>21,319</b>
3-Second Video Views	<b>8,023</b>
Reactions, Comments & Shares	<b>617</b>

## Twitter (June 4-10)

Twitter.com/wrmcouncil



People Reached (Impressions)	<b>20,500</b>
Engagements	<b>598</b>
Engagement Rate (considered "high" by industry standards)	<b>4%</b>

## ► Global Independent Refugee Women Leaders

Global Independent Refugee Women Leaders (GIRWL) is a group of refugee women-led initiatives, networks, and advocates that works with and for refugee women to

- 1) increase refugee women participation in shaping policies,
- 2) build refugee women's capacity to engage locally, nationally, regionally and globally, and
- 3) strategically advocate for and promote inclusive human rights approaches to forced displacement.



**Shaza Alrihawi**

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Exec. Director New Women Connectors & Steering Committee  
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**Bárbara Romero**

Psychologist. Master in Social Sciences.  
Consultant & Researcher  
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**Najeeba Wazefadost**

Founding member of Global Refugee-led Network & director of Asia Pacific Network of Refugees  
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## 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.

This conference and event report were made possible through a partnership with Cuso International and the generous support of the Rockefeller Brothers Fund.

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