(Excerpts from **Rhetoric to Reality: Achieving Gender Equality for Refugee Women and Girls,** (2018) Eileen Pittaway and Linda Bartolomei WRC Research Paper No. 3

There is a danger in focusing only on the vulnerabilities of women and girls, as it can create a discourse of helpless victims. There has been a movement in the past decade to change this focus and to recognize the strengths of refugee women and girls: they are also resilient, and have immense social capital and capabilities. Despite the layers of discrimination, they are not merely passive victims. In many camps and refugee sites, women run crèches (daycares) for children, arrange care for orphaned or lost children, provide safe spaces for women who have experienced SGBV, manage scarce rations to ensure that families are fed, run small businesses to support their families, organize basic schools, and provide protection (Bartolomei et al. 2016; Olivius 2014). Much of this work is done without funding or external support. In the absence of men, women take on all roles in the family and community. Women have formal skills, as well as a wide range of informal skills, and have a huge capacity. They are also capable of keen analysis of the problems experienced in camps and cities, and of formulating potential solutions. However, because of their minority status, and the discourse of vulnerability, their capacities, skills and abilities often go unrecognized. **Women are silenced by limited access to representation at every level, by culture, tokenism, gender stereotypes and lack of funding for targeted programs.** Therefore, to focus only on strengths is to ignore the widespread challenges, discrimination and abuse that refugee women and girls survive. They are simultaneously strong and resourceful, victims and marginalized. They usually survive, despite the vulnerable situations in which they find themselves. An adequate response involves addressing structural vulnerabilities that result from pervasive gender inequalities, as well as creating opportunities for strengths to be capitalized.

The other crucial element in achieving gender equality is the recognition that refugee communities are not homogeneous and that certain groups, including people with a disability, ethnic and religious minorities and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI)[1] individuals face additional discriminations. This analysis informed the development of UNHCR's recently released Age, Gender and Diversity (AGD) policy. Designed to ensure that all refugees have equal access to their rights, it recognizes that intersecting personal differences based on age, gender and diversity affect people's experiences of forced migration (UNHCR 2018b). It is therefore imperative that policies not focus solely on gender inequality, but also recognize the way in which gender inequality is compounded by inequalities based on race, dis/ability, religion and sexuality (Verloo 2006). Core to both the new AGD policy, which includes the updated Five Commitments to refugee women and girls, and to the global compact on refugees, is an emphasis on **the central role that refugee communities, including women, must play in assessing needs and developing solutions.**

Refugees are minorities wherever they go. They flee their own countries and are seldom welcomed for the long term in countries of asylum. Refugee law and policy is either interpreted to suit the politics of the country of asylum or sometimes ignored by countries from both the Refugees, and in particular refugee women, are seen as burdens, not potential contributors and economic actors. The reasons vary from country to country. They include a lack of resources,

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6. The term LGBTI is used, in the context of this paper, to describe people affected by discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, gender identity or intersex status. However, the authors acknowledge that use of LGBTI as an umbrella term is contested by some groups. For example, see www.humanrights.gov.au/our-work/sexual-orientation-gender-identity-intersex-status/publications/resilient-individuals.

resentment from developing countries about the high expectations and often low levels of funding from developed countries. These contentious issues have had a strong influence on the UNHCR's ongoing formal consultations with states to develop the final text of the global compact on refugees. With many countries from the Global South (such as Iran, which has hosted large numbers of Afghan refugees for decades) strongly resisting the use of the language of "responsibility sharing" and arguing instead that, in the absence of sufficient donor support, refugee hosting can only be regarded as a "burden" (Pittaway 2018). There is anger and fear from host populations if they perceive that the refugee population is using the country's scarce resources or receiving more assistance than they are. This politics is also mediated by ideological opposition to sexual and reproductive rights by several states, including the United States and the Holy See (Benson Gold and Starrs 2017; Coates et al. 2014). Some states and humanitarian aid providers have noted that principles, laws, policies, and best practice guidelines developed at headquarters are not always easy or possible to implement at a local level in geographically and socio-politically diverse refugee sites (Pittaway, Bell and Bartolomei 2017).

It is also important to recognize that culture is not rigid, but is a fluid concept and changes over time. Prolonged refugee experiences create a layer of "refugee culture" that overlays original culture, often reinforcing old practices that were or are changing in the country of origin. This is often a defence mechanism against the loss of power and place. The people who are recognized as community leaders in refugee situations are not always the ones who would have led the community in the past, and may lack the appropriate knowledge to navigate the context of displacement and alien social structures. Some who take gatekeeper roles revert to old power bases, which often exclude or negatively impact women and girls (Pittaway, Muli and Shteir 2009).

As explored above, the discourse used to discuss refugee women and girls is usually embedded in the cultural, religious and ideological frameworks of patriarchal societies, both in the country of origin and in receiving countries. This is reinforced by the attitudes of NGO staff and a failure to implement UNHCR's AGD policy at the field level (Women's Refugee Commission 2016). **Women are viewed as passive victims, and as beneficiaries rather than contributors, and the lack of funding and support for refugee women's community-based organizations further entrenches their marginalization (Olivius 2014).** This is reflected in both the political and ideological positions of much domestic law, policy and service provision and has devastating impact on the protection of women and girls.

References

Pittaway. E and Bartolomei. L (2018) *From Rhetoric to Reality: Achieving Gender Equality for Refugee Women and Girls*, WRC Research Paper No. 3, World Refugee Council Research Paper Series- https://www.cigionline.org/publications/rhetoric-reality-achieving-gender-equality-refugee-women-and-girls