Refugee Women’s Protection in the Arab World:  
Current Responses and Future Prospects

Final Communiqué

Cairo, 3-5 May 2016

The Arab region is currently facing an unprecedented crisis in the form of armed conflicts which have in turn led to large-scale displacement of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs). Responding to the crisis requires the delivery of humanitarian and development assistance in the context of complex challenges that affect social, economic, cultural and peace and security concerns across the region. At the heart of the crisis lies the human suffering of millions of refugees and IDPs forced to flee their homes seeking safety away from conflict zones.

Within this painful reality of displacement in general, there is an even extra difficult one – namely that of women and girls refugees and IDPs. Experience has proved that the conditions of women and girls in times of war and conflict are exacerbated from their conditions in times of peace. They are more exposed to gendered risks and vulnerabilities; they experience exclusion and discrimination while the existing structural inequalities deepen. Conflict leads to changes in the social fabric and transformation of gender roles where women and girls become heads of households and primary protectors and providers for dependent family members. Women and girls are also at increased risk of patterns of violence and exploitation during displacement.

With an objective of highlighting the different aspects of the deepening refugee crisis in the Arab region, particularly the conditions of women and girl refugees and IDPs, and in order to reach practical solutions that could be tabled to high-level decision makers and officials at national, regional and international levels, the Arab Women Organization (AWO) – under the auspices of H.E. Prime Minister of the Arab Republic of the Egypt - and in cooperation with the League of Arab States (LAS), the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women) –hosted a conference in Cairo (3-5 May 2016) on “Refugee Women’s Protection in the Arab World: Current Responses and Future Prospects”.

While the participants recognize that:

- The current refugee crisis in the Arab region is the biggest displacement tragedy since the World War II.

- The fact that there are so many different factions involved in the region’s conflicts makes it extremely difficult for civilians to protect themselves; and rendering those conflicts extremely complex and difficult to resolve.

- Women and girls are the most vulnerable and worst affected. They are subjected to sexual and gender based violence, exploitation and child marriages, and other crimes perpetrated by all sides of the conflict.

- Denial of the right of education for young refugees jeopardizes their potential and undermines their contribution to the future of Arab region.

- The issues of women and girl refugees and IDPs require more attention and targeted support.

They have agreed on the following conclusions:

1– General Recommendations:

- An immediate cessation of all fighting and military actions which is the main cause of the worsening displacement crisis.

- The protection of civilians from all forms of indiscriminate attack is a legal obligation and a moral responsibility. A cessation of hostilities is essential to stemming further displacement by creating conditions that save lives and allows for the delivery of humanitarian assistance.

- Mainstreaming gender in all plans, policies and programmes which are aimed at empowering, protecting and supporting refugees and IDPs, and pursuing practical targeted action that addresses the needs and rights of women and girls.

- Respecting the principle of family reunification and urging states to offer opportunities for refugees to bring their extended family together.

- Inviting the Security Council to ensure, through all possible means, the implementation of its resolution 1325 on Women Peace and Security and subsequent resolutions including other related resolutions pertaining to protecting women and children in armed conflicts.

- Supporting Arab countries and communities that host refugees to ensure that they are able to keep providing the refugees with decent living conditions while also ensuring that the economic and social needs of the host communities are equally met.

- Mobilizing support for the full funding of existing regional funding mechanism frameworks that address the protection and assistance needs of refugees.
Implementing a resilience based approach in the humanitarian response, focusing on protection and assistance of a sustainable nature rather than mere emergency relief, since the crisis is a protracted one.

Consolidating international support for refugees and IDPs and ensuring it reaches the most marginalized, excluded and vulnerable through implementing measures that increase humanitarian efficiency.

Ensuring meaningful participation of women and adolescent girls in all formal and informal decision-making from refugee camp committees to peace processes.

2– Recommendations on improving Arab efforts aimed at responding to the gender dimension of the refugee crisis in the region:

- Improving joint Arab capabilities to monitor ceasefires, elections and peacekeeping.

- Making sure any prospective “Arab Convention on Regulating Refugee Status in Arab World addresses the specific needs of women and girls.

- Boosting and supporting the Arab League Humanitarian Aid Commission that was established in accordance with the resolutions of the Arab summit held in Kuwait in March 2014.

- Forming Arab emergency teams that would be able to provide urgent support and relief to refugees in a gender-responsive manner.

- Intensifying inter-Arab coordination in order to overcome the main legal and administrative obstacles that the refugees face.

- Developing an efficient framework for cooperation among the AWO, LAS, UNHCR and UN Women for an effective response to the crisis of refugees and IDPs in the region, with a special focus on protecting and empowering women and girls. Such cooperation should be based on dialogue with all relevant Arab nations to promote awareness of the issue and create new sources of funding would benefit both the displaced and their host communities.

- Giving issues related to the protection of women and girl refugees and IDPs in the region top priority on the agenda of all official Arab meetings.

- Urging Arab funds to finance the refugees’ needs and designing programmes that are informed by gender analysis and sex and age disaggregated data.

- Urging all humanitarian stakeholders who make grants or contracts with local implementing partners commit to fund women’s organizations, to provide women’s groups with capacity and mentoring to increase their ability to deliver in humanitarian settings.

- Encouraging efforts to monitor and document the humanitarian response plans and programmes in a gender responsive manner.
3– Recommendations for the civil society

-Urging Arab and international civil society organizations to support the refugees and IDPs in the Arab region and encourage voluntary work to the same end.

-Calling on civil society organizations which are already assisting the refugees to include the gender aspect in their programmes in order to cater for the specific needs of women and girls.

-Paying a great deal of attention to building social cohesion and overcoming barriers between the refugees and their hosting countries, supporting the refugees to overcome the feeling of alienation and vulnerability, and promoting a different image for the refugees: one that does not depict them as a burden to the hosting nation, but rather as an asset that could enrich national capacities.

-Urging civil society organization that work with the refugees to cooperate and coordinate among themselves in order to unify their efforts.

-Boosting partnerships among civil society organizations and other relevant regional and international agencies for a collective effort to help women and girl refugees and IDPs.

4– Recommendation for media and academic institutions:

-The Arab media should allocate a larger-scale coverage for the various aspects of the refugee crisis, in a way that would reflect its true scale and political, security and humanitarian fallout.

-It is vital that the media coverage of refugee issues includes the humanitarian aspect and provides the women and girl refugees and IDPs with a platform to talk about their problems and voice their views.

-It is important to train journalists and broadcasters on how to approach the issues of women and girl refugees and IDPs, and to improve the ability of media to stick to the highest moral and professional standards when reporting those issues.

-Urging academic researchers and university professors in the Arab region to take part in highlighting the refugee crisis from their own platforms, and through encouraging their students to write about it, or even embark on related voluntary work.

-Media and academic institutions should open their door for serious and thorough discussions on the different aspects of the women and girl refugee and IDPs crisis. They should also invite experts to give their views on the best way to end the crisis, and present those views to decision-makers.
5 – Recommendations for AWO

- Praising the initiative that the AWO has taken in preparing a report on the conditions women and girl refugees and IDPs in the Arab region, and emphasizing the recommendations included in the report on suggested solutions for some of the key problems facing women and girl refugees, particularly those related to health, education, housing, food, and access to sustainable livelihoods.

- Continue its visits to Arab countries that host the refugees to monitor and document the conditions of female refugees and IDPs. The visits will be resumed to include more countries at the request of a number of relevant Arab governments.

- Intensify its peace and security training courses, and add to them the skills of gender-sensitive monitoring and documentation. The ultimate goal is to create skilful Arab teams who are capable of monitoring the living conditions of female victims of conflicts, as well as making sure that the gender aspects is incorporated within any programmes aimed at supporting and protecting the refugees, and also within post-conflict plans to re-build civil capabilities.

- Create a website for “The AWO’s Network for Supporting Female Refugees”. The website will be open to all those who would like to volunteer to support female refugees and IDPs in the Arab region. The AWO will coordinate with all relevant national, regional and international agencies in order to determine the best way to benefit from the efforts of the volunteers.

- Act as a catalyst to generate support, including funding, for humanitarian and developmental projects that benefit refugee women and children in their host communities in the Arab region.

- Seek cooperation with relevant regional and international organizations to launch health and education projects and initiatives to help the refugees.

- Present the conference’s recommendations to the World Humanitarian Summit which is due to convene in Turkey on 24/05/2016, and to the UN General Assembly High-Level Meeting on Refugees and Migrants, which will take place on 19/09/2016.

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