

Mrs. Olga Komiti – Protection Officer, Office of the UN High Commission for Refugees

(UNHCR) in Cyprus

«Refugee woman, migrant woman in Cyprus»

9 July 2019

Dear Commissioner for the Administration,

Commissioner for the Protection of Children's rights,

Commissioner for Data Protection,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Women and girls face discrimination and violence every day, simply because of their gender. An ordinary task, like collecting wood or water or even using the hygiene facilities, can put them at risk of rape or abuse.

Gender-related persecution against women includes, but is not limited to, sexual violence, domestic violence, early or forced marriages, coerced family planning and punishment for transgression of social mores, even the death penalty. Female genital mutilation is another form of gender related persecution, which affects women and girls. It inflicts severe harm, both mental and physical, it constitutes torture and can lead to death. The deceptive or forcible recruitment of women or girls for the purposes of forced prostitution or sexual exploitation is also a form of gender-related persecution, which can lead to torture or death. Trafficked women and girls face serious repercussions even if they manage to escape; such as reprisals or retaliation from the trafficking rings and risk of being re-trafficked, and severe discrimination or even family and community ostracism.

In times of displacement, these problems escalate. Armed conflict often serves to exacerbate violence against women and girls. Even when fleeing violence and persecution, thousands of women and girls who are making the journey on their own face a similar ordeal on their way to Europe, a place where they had hoped and expected to find sanctuary. Most, for lack of better and safer alternatives choose the services of smugglers and are exposed to abuse and sexual violence at their hands; or are at great risk when they travel along insecure routes, having to stay in places that lack basic security, such as parks, bus stations or at the road side.

The human rights violations faced by refugee women are directly related to the discrimination and violence women and girls endure in peace time, since women and girls do not enjoy equal status with men and boys in most societies. In 27 countries for example, women still do not have the same rights as men to confer their nationality to their children. Many of the women arriving in Europe come from these countries, including Syria and Iraq. That means that if the fathers are missing or there is no proof of paternal descent, their children will not have a nationality and are at risk of becoming stateless. This may affect access to health care and education, and affect their ability to return home when conditions allow.

Women and girls make up around 50 per cent of any refugee, internally displaced or stateless population, and those who are unaccompanied, pregnant, heads of households, disabled or elderly are especially vulnerable.

Refugee women and girls in every country and community in which UNHCR works are less likely than men and boys to have access to even the most fundamental of their rights. These include their right to food, health care, shelter, nationality, and documentation. Girls, for instance, are less likely than boys to attend school. Often, they must spend their time doing domestic work or may be married off as children and become teenage mothers. Even when it becomes possible to return home, women and adolescent girls have fewer opportunities to participate in peace and reconstruction processes. Men are usually also better placed to be involved in, and benefit from, reconstruction initiatives because of their greater control over economic resources, access to education, and participation in public life before the conflict.

The protection of women and girls of concern is a core activity and an organizational priority for UNHCR. UNHCR's Executive Committee has specifically recognized the need to devote attention and resources to help ensure the protection of women since 1985. This commitment has been reaffirmed in the Global Compact for Refugees, which was adopted in December 2018. UNHCR's commitments to refugee women include the prevention and response to sexual and gender-based violence, their equal access to food and welfare support, their individual registration and documentation, their economic empowerment and their meaningful participation.

Today we celebrate the many achievements made on the road to gender equality and the participation of women in social, economic and political life. It is also a moment to think about the long way ahead to reach full parity. But it is equally a day on which to reflect on the fact that discrimination and exclusion, because of ethnicity, religion and gender are the root causes of conflict and persecution and ultimately forced displacement.

At UNHCR, we work hard to ease the women's struggle and help them improve their leadership skills, overcome barriers to education, and access opportunities. Our work builds upon women's own resilience and strength, and helps them to improve their lives, as well as those of their children, families and communities, every single day. Let us all work together to support all refugee women and girls.

Thank you.