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Submission to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development

Study: Vulnerabilities Created and Exacerbated by the COVID-19 Pandemic

Date: 23 February 2021

Submitted by: World Refugee & Migration Council Steering Group:

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OVERVIEW

For the more than 80 million people around the world who have been forcibly displaced from their homes — due to violent conflicts, natural disasters, as well as ethnic, racial or gender persecution — the global COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically compounded the threats they face.

We are facing a dire situation where an already taxed — we would even say broken — international system intended to protect the forcibly displaced has failed the world's most vulnerable.

We have heard from refugees themselves since the beginning of the pandemic that they have been forgotten and left “at the back of the queue” in every way.

While still early in the pandemic, in June 2020, the World Refugee & Migration Council (WRMC) held a virtual conference with the [Global Independent Refugee Women Leaders](#) (GIRWL) network to consult with refugee women and girls from around the world about the impacts of COVID-19. The conference also included the direct participation of Canadian Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Marco Mendicino, Jacqueline O'Neill, Canadian Ambassador for Women, Peace, and Security and former US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, among others.

In his summary of the discussions, WRMC Chair Lloyd Axworthy stated:

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.¹

Clearly, these early concerns have been borne out as countries continue to vie for shares of COVID-19 vaccine doses, with many developing countries — including those who host large numbers of refugees and internally displaced persons — left out altogether.

The [World Bank](#) has referred to COVID-19's impact as a ‘triple shock:’ the health risks from the pandemic itself, the economic impact of containment measures and reverberations from the global recession.

As we noted in a recent article on vaccine nationalism, “While in some parts of the world we now see a light at the end of the tunnel for the distribution of vaccines, many people — particularly refugees and internally displaced persons — are being left in the dark.” Further, we are left to ask: “How do we focus attention on their plight and, at the same time, try to mobilize support for them, especially since they have no voice in current decisions about vaccine allocations?”²

¹ Report of the World Refugee & Migration Council's virtual conference with Global Independent Refugee Women Leaders (GIRWL), “[Refugee Women: Responding to COVID-19](#)”. June 9, 2020.

² See “[Vaccine Nationalism Must Not Relegate the Forcibly Displaced to the ‘Back of the Queue’](#)”, by Lloyd Axworthy, chair, and Fen Osler Hampson, president, of the World Refugee & Migration Council.

A recent literature review conducted for the WRMC, found a massive information gap in studies specific to the impact of COVID-19 on refugees, IDPs and other asylum seekers.³ The review identified specific issues that will require further study in the context of COVID-19, including living conditions; healthcare access and vulnerabilities; challenges of disseminating public health information; the socio-economic impact; prolonged displacement; disruption to humanitarian assistance operations; and gender implications.

Other factors have also heavily impacted the current situation for the forcibly displaced, including:

- The health consequences of a lingering pandemic that has infected and killed millions, preying especially on the vulnerable who reside in refugee camps and settlements;
- The financial consequences of the pandemic, as economies shrink and countries and their citizens look inward, diminishing both the will and the capacity to address the growing financial needs of the displaced;
- The political consequences of the pandemic, with closed borders and resistance to migration generally, as well as “Covid-stigma” attaching to those who seek asylum;
- A deepening crisis in global governance, reflecting the rise of authoritarian nationalism, challenges to multilateralism, a dysfunctional United Nations Security Council⁴ and a widespread weakening of international institutions; and
- The accelerating effects of global warming and the increased frequency of extreme weather events, uprooting greater numbers and rendering their lands uninhabitable.

All of this is further exacerbated by flaws in the international response to forced displacement that have worsened since our 2019 report, [A Call to Action: Transformation the Global Refugee System](#), including:

- Responsibility sharing is rarely acknowledged and largely ignored.
- None of those who are evading their part in our collective responsibility toward the forcibly displaced is being held to account.
- Funding for refugees and the internally displaced, always far short of what is needed, has diminished even further.
- Refugees are *acted upon*, having no voice of their own and offered no place at the table. Far from being heard, they are systematically silenced, their needs regarded as a burden to be shifted rather than a responsibility to be shared.

A worrying result of the pandemic has been a marked withdrawal of development aid and staff for refugees as funding is redirected.⁵ At the same time, COVID-19 protocols have impacted the ability of humanitarian organization to provide sufficient levels of support both inside refugee camps, as well as in urban settings where most refugees live.⁶ In response, there is a clear need shift our collective support — through direct funding and capacity building — toward enabling

³ See WRMC Literature Review, “[COVID-19 and the Displaced: How does the COVID-19 Pandemic Impact the Displaced Population](#),” Ghazal Zazai. September 2020.

⁴ A [call from the World Refugee & Migration Council to the United Nations Secretary-General](#) for an extraordinary session of the Security Council on April 16, 2020 went unanswered.

⁵ See “[Refugee groups fill gaps in COVID-19 response, and they need support](#).” *The New Humanitarian*.

⁶ See “[Refugees and the City: The Twenty-First-Century Front Line](#)” Research Paper, Robert Muggah, Adriana Erthal Abdenur, WRMC.

refugees themselves to take over more of the responsibility for public health, governance, protection against harassment and many other fundamental services.

Based on the input and evidence we have received, we are focused on two initiatives in response. One is a capacity-building project with the Canadian Institute for the Administration of Justice to support women and girl refugees through legal mentoring. Another is a proposal we have submitted to Global Affairs Canada to support a virtual global network of women and girl refugees to strengthen local capacities and empower local refugee and migrant led organizations.

In the following sections, we outline a number of key areas where we have gathered evidence, as well as recommendations, in response to the impacts of COVID-19 on vulnerable groups and populations.

THE AMERICAS

In the Americas, unresolved crises in Venezuela and Central America are swelling the number of refugees throughout the hemisphere. More than five million Venezuelans have been forced to flee their country as the Maduro regime fails to provide basic health and other services amidst the COVID-19 pandemic.

At the same time, some 500,000 people have been forced from their homes as a result of climate change-related disasters and increasing gang violence.

The needs for international cooperation to address root causes of displacement must be supported through development assistance that alleviates poverty while promoting security, climate adaptation and governance reforms. The World Refugee & Migration Council, with support from others in the region including former US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, has called for urgent cooperation in the region to respond to these crises.⁷

As we heard at a joint WRMC and Aspen Ministers Forum event [Building Political Will in the Americas: An Opportunity for Global Leadership on Forced Displacement](#), there are clear opportunities for collaboration with the new US Administration as it reassesses its own policies toward asylum seekers, forced migrants and immigration more generally.

As a response to these and other crises — both to ensure accountability for forced displacement as well as to fund the responses — one of the most important actions identified in the WRMC's *A Call to Action* report focuses on repurposing assets of kleptocrats that have been frozen by countries, including Canada. The proposal, which has received broad support, seeks to repurpose the assets to benefit the people in the country of origin, including those who have been forced to flee their communities because of the actions by the regime in question.⁸

Part of our response —which aligns with mandate letters from the Prime Minister to the Minister of Foreign Affairs and other cabinet members on extending Magnitsky sanctions — has been to promote clear legislative proposals for repurposing frozen assets of corrupt leaders, including the Maduro regime in Venezuela. In Canada, Senator Ratna Omidvar will soon table a new private

⁷ “[Canada and the U.S. must unite to help Latin American refugees](#),” Op-ed in *The Globe and Mail*. January 29, 2021. Madeleine Albright, Lloyd Axworthy, Mayu Brizuela de Ávila and Fen Osler Hampson.

⁸ See in particular Action 46 in the World Refugee & Migration Council's 2019 report, [A Call to Action: Transforming the Global Refugee System](#).

members bill on repurposing of certain seized, frozen or sequestered assets, the Frozen Assets Repurposing Act.

We have also called on Canada and the United States to mobilize regional organizations, including the Organization of American States, to tackle the violence and natural disasters that are driving forced migration in the Americas.⁹ Canada has a clear leadership opportunity as it prepares to host a major donors conference this spring.

Resettling refugees and other asylum claimers in the Americas are an important part of delivering on this support, especially with large numbers awaiting responses at the southern border of the United States. Canada and the United States have both recently made significant increases to their resettlement targets. Private sponsorship programs such as our partnership with Lamp Lifeboat Ladder — which supports refugee survivors of torture and sexual violence to resettle in Canada — can be models for effectively responding and should be further supported.¹⁰

Recommendations

- Governments of countries in which regimes have deposited financial assets, including Canada, should develop appropriate legal measures to confiscate and repurpose such assets for the benefit of the people in the country of origin, including those who have been forced to flee their communities because of the actions by the regime in question.
- Develop a new peer review mechanism to hold both states and non-state actors accountable for displacing people; *refoulement* of refugees; and finding solutions.
- Draft a new protocol to the 1951 Refugee Convention that includes a monitoring and accountability mechanism for compliance with the obligations assumed under the Convention.
- Regional organizations should increase their monitoring of potential displacement situations; develop the capacity to support governments in the region when displacement occurs; and play a central convening role, by bringing together governments of countries of origin and receiving countries, to develop solutions for refugees.
- Regional development banks should provide more concessional financial support to countries hosting refugees and IDPs. While the World Bank has taken important steps toward increasing its support for countries hosting refugees, there is an important role for regional development banks as well.

⁹ See [“Canada and the United States Must Unite to Help Latin American Refugees”](#), Op-Ed, The Globe and Mail, 29 January 2021, Madeleine Albright, Lloyd Axworthy, Mayu Brizuela de Ávila and Fen Osler Hampson.

¹⁰ See [“Council Launches Partnership with Lamp Lifeboat Ladder to Resettle Refugee Survivors of Torture.”](#) WRMC, 9 July 2020.

REFUGEE WOMEN & GIRLS

Worldwide, there has been a dramatic drop in the rate of resettlement tied at least in part to the COVID-19 pandemic but also due to the lack of political will to protect the displaced. As a result, refugees have been caught in place, captive to circumstances they cannot control, and are enduring conditions they cannot long survive. In many cases the pandemic is leaving them, and especially women and girls, without even basic health care.

As attention also turns to the COVID-19 aftermath and recovery, 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 we heard during our [Refugee Women: Responding to COVID-19 global conference](#) from refugees as well as institutional actors about the issues, unmet needs as well as knowledge and capacity gaps faced by refugee women and girls. We also heard about opportunities, including using digital technology to open the door toward redesigning global democracy.

Our event report outlines 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.¹¹

In December 2020, we held a second consultative conference — [Refugee Women: Unpacking Gender-based Violence](#) — with GIRWL to better understand the sexual and gender-based violence that refugee women face on a regular basis, in camps and urban settings, as well as during their precarious journeys to find new homes. Part of the international 16 Days of Activism against Gender-based Violence campaign, this highly interactive virtual conference brought together women refugees from around the world at a critical moment. Panels led by refugee women from around the world assessed access to sexual and reproductive health as well as economic, physical, psychological, and sexual violence against women.

Recommendations

- Support a network of global women leaders as part of the Global Action Network for the Forcibly Displaced.
- Incorporate women's voices, experiences and knowledge and ensuring equal representation in all COVID-19 response planning and decision-making
- Develop 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.
- Supply 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.

¹¹ Report of the World Refugee & Migration Council's virtual conference with Global Independent Refugee Women Leaders (GIRWL), "[Refugee Women: Responding to COVID-19](#)". June 9, 2020.

- Recognize the health needs of women and ensuring access to resources for reproductive and sexual health services are available.
- Ensure women's safety in data collection for violence against women.
- Create innovative ways of delivering health information to women who lack literacy skills.
- Create leadership spaces for refugee women and girls to meaningfully engage and participate in the Commission on the Status of Women process, Beijing 25+ and the Generation Equality Forum.
- Organize 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.

THE MIDDLE EAST

New WRMC-led research, with support from the International Development Research Centre, has conducted a deep analysis of the challenges amidst the COVID-19 pandemic facing Syrian refugees in Jordan — as well as the pressures on Jordan as a host country.¹²

Among the findings of the study:

- A stagnated Jordanian economy with a near 20% unemployment rate (particularly among youth), and a fluctuating GDP is having reverberating impacts on deteriorating economies in surrounding countries with large populations of refugees and internally displaced persons such as Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria.
- The Jordanian government's swift and strict COVID-19 response effort was largely successful in preventing the spread of the virus but has led to a national deficit of around US\$4.5 billion, with long-term implications on livelihoods, particularly for Syrian refugee populations (of whom approximately 80 percent live under the poverty line).
- Economic sectors where Syrian refugees overwhelmingly find employment including tourism, construction, trade and customer service, have been significantly impacted by the pandemic.

In Lebanon, one in four people is a refugee. Chronic government corruption and growing economic instability is undermining the spirit of sharing and caring that has accommodated asylum seekers for decades. The recent explosion in Beirut as well as ongoing regional conflicts has left the forcibly displaced in the country with few options, as we heard during our [Crisis in Lebanon event](#). The event panellists working in the region nevertheless offered a number of constructive assessments and recommendations.¹³

In Iraq, thousands of Yazidi refugees who have been left entirely without protection struggle bravely to go "home," coping with resistance from government and violence from non-state actors, as well as a terrain littered with unexploded land mines. The Council supported a call with the

¹² "[Challenges Facing Syrian Refugees and Jordan: Pressures from a Pandemic](#)." Summary Report. World Refugee & Migration Council. Elizabeth Ferris, Diana Rayes, Rasha Istaiteyeh Oroub El-Abed, Nuseibah Shabaitah, Omar Asfour, Hosam Allaham. November 2020

¹³ "[Event Report: Crisis in Lebanon](#)". World Refugee & Migration Council. September 9, 2020.

Women Refugees Advocacy Project and other groups for the Canadian government to explore diplomatic and political strategies to protect and aid Yazidi refugees.¹⁴

Recommendations

- Regional organizations should establish consultative processes as well as peer review and peer support mechanisms to hold members accountable for their response to refugees and IDPs. Donor governments should support regional and local capacity-building initiatives in this regard, including the support of sanctuary, welcoming and solidarity cities around the world.¹⁵
- Develop an international emergency fund that includes local actors that work with the international community on both the identification of needs in Lebanon and oversight in the distribution of financial aid.
- Support efforts to counter corruption through judiciary reform as well as a forensic review to discern where money has been diverted from its original purpose of supporting refugees and migrants.
- Promote new mechanisms for resettlement so that those who do wish to go back are able to do so in a safe and dignified way and are not at risk of violence or traumatization, and those who stay must be able to live a dignified life.

About the World Refugee & Migration Council

The World Refugee & Migration Council was formed in May 2017, originally as the World Refugee Council, under the leadership of former Canadian Foreign Minister Lloyd Axworthy and with the support of the Government of Canada. The Council is an independent global body composed of more than 20 political leaders, policy advisers, academic experts, a Nobel prize winner, and civil society actors and human rights activists from around the world. In its major report, *A Call to Action: Transforming the Global Refugee System*, the Council seeks to strengthen the global response beyond the United Nations and its Global Compacts on refugees and for migration.

¹⁴ See [“Call for Intervention in the Humanitarian Crisis Taking Place as Thousands of Yazidi Leave Refugee Camps to Return to Sinjar.”](#) September 15, 2020

¹⁵ See in particular Action 19 in the World Refugee & Migration Council’s 2019 report, [A Call to Action: Transforming the Global Refugee System](#).

APPENDIX

WRMC Conferences and Consultations

[Refugee Women: Responding to COVID-19](#), 19 June 2020, with Global Independent Refugee Women Leaders

[Holding Kleptocrats to Account: Redirecting Frozen Assets and the International Anti-Corruption Court](#), 6 August 2020, with Integrity Initiatives International

[Crisis in Lebanon: The Impact on Refugees and the Forcibly Displaced](#), 9 September 2020, with the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace Middle East Center

[Challenges Facing Syrian Refugees and Jordan: Pressures from a Pandemic](#), 17 November 2020

[Why Climate Change Matters to All Canadians](#), 9 November 2020, with Massey College

[Refugee Women: Unpacking Gender-based Violence](#), 11 December 2020, with Global Independent Refugee Women Leaders

[One World Refugee Film Festival, The Least We Can Do](#), Yazidi Film Panel Discussion, 12 December 2020, with Women Refugees Advocacy Project

[Placing Refugee Return and Reintegration at the Heart of International Development](#), 7 December 2020, with the Center for Conflict and Humanitarian Studies and HRH Prince El Hassan bin Talal of Jordan

[Building Political Will in the Americas: An Opportunity for Global Leadership on Forced Displacement](#), 19 January 2020, with the Aspen Ministers Forum and Madeleine Albright.

[Refugees, Education and Conflict](#), 27 January 2021, with the US Institute of Peace

[Climate Change & Forced Displacement](#), 25 February 2021.

WRMC Research and Analysis

Publications

[Challenges Facing Syrian Refugees and Jordan: Pressures from a Pandemic](#), Summary Report

[Impact of COVID-19 on Syrian Refugees in Jordan from the Refugee Perspective](#), Oroub El-Abed, Nuseibah Shabaitah

[Between Two Outbreaks: Syrian Refugees and the Consequences of COVID-19 in Syria and Jordan](#), Omar Asfour, Hosam Allaham

[The Economic Impact of COVID-19 on Syrian Refugees in Jordan](#), Rasha Istaiteyeh

[COVID-19 and the Displaced](#), Literature Review, Ghazal Zazai

[Repurposing Frozen Assets to Assist the Forcibly Displaced](#), Research Paper

[Refugee Women: Responding to COVID-19](#), Virtual Conference Report, Global Independent Refugee Women Leaders

Analysis

[It's Time for an International Anti-Corruption Court](#), *Diplomat Magazine*, Lloyd Axworthy and Allan Rock

[Canada and the United States Must Unite to Help Latin American Refugees](#), *The Globe & Mail*, Madeleine Albright, Lloyd Axworthy, Mayu Brizuela de Ávila, Fen Osler Hampson

[Forced Displacement and Climate Change: Time for Global Governance](#), Policy Brief, *International Journal*, Rosemary McCarney and Jonathan Kent

[Resettling Refugee Survivors of Torture and Sexual Violence](#), Jayne Fleming, Lamp Lifeboat Ladder

[Vaccine Nationalism Must Not Relegate the Forcibly Displaced to the 'Back of the Queue'](#), Lloyd Axworthy and Fen Osler Hampson

[Q&A With Canadian Senator Ratna Omidvar: Refugee Women and Girls](#), Senator Ratna Omidvar

[Letter to the UN Secretary-General on the Situation in Ethiopia](#), World Refugee & Migration Council

[Resetting the Response to Forced Displacement: The Challenge We Now Face](#), Statement, World Refugee & Migration Council

[Creating a Network of Refugee Women Leaders in the Pandemic](#), Fen Osler Hampson

[International Community Must Step Up for a Fairer Refugee System](#), HRH Prince El Hassan bin Talal

[New Coalitions Needed to Address Climate Change, Forced Displacement](#), interview with Lloyd Axworthy

[Launch of the Action Network for the Forcibly Displaced — Women as Agents of Change](#), Fen Osler Hampson

[Call for Intervention in the Humanitarian Crisis Taking Place as Thousands of Yazidi Leave Refugee Camps to Return to Sinjar](#)

[Innovative Investment Fund in Colombia Will Benefit Forcibly Displaced](#), WRMC

[Partnership with Lamp Lifeboat Ladder to Resettle Refugee Survivors of Torture](#), WRMC

[Let's Hold the Kleptocrats to Account](#), *The Globe & Mail*, Lloyd Axworthy and Allan Rock

[Letter to the Secretary-General of the United Nations on Refugees and COVID-19](#), WRMC

[The World Faces a Pandemic: Where Is the Security Council?](#), WRMC