

**Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief**  
**Coordinator, Mr. Mark Lowcock, *Delivering better outcomes for women and girls***  
***in humanitarian crises***

*Global Centre for Pluralism, Ottawa, Canada, 22 February 2019*

*As delivered*

A few days after starting this job, in September 2017, I went to Diffa in Niger, on the border with Nigeria, a place to which huge numbers of people, most of them women and girls, had fled from the Boko Haram terrorists who were wreaking havoc in their homelands.

I met a woman called Achaitou, and her four young children.

They were living under a plastic sheet. Achaitou was terrified of violence, especially fearful that she and her daughters might be abducted by armed men roaming over the border. To protect them, she took her children into the bush every night, risking disease and snakebites.

A few weeks later I was in Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh, listening to the stories of women who had fled the violence of the Myanmar authorities in Rakhine. Stories of being forced to watch as their husbands, sons and fathers were killed. And then being themselves subject to the most extreme forms of rape and sexual violence.

A few months later, I met Monga Albertine and her children, in a camp near the shores of Lake Tanganyika in the east of the Democratic Republic of Congo. Her husband had been killed in tribal fighting, and she fled to try to save her children. She was trying to survive under a plastic sheet on a wet, slippery hillside, with not enough to eat, no school for the children and no way of making a living.

And two months after that, I met a woman called Fatima in another camp in South Kordofan, in Sudan. She described the risks she took every day, gathering firewood in an area where women are frequently assaulted and raped.

Most people caught up in humanitarian crises round the world are just like this. The majority are women and girls – although there are many men and boys too. Most of them are caught up in conflict. And the thing that makes it hardest to help them is how the men with guns and bombs behave in those conflicts.

The world's humanitarian agencies do a good job in saving lives and reducing suffering among people caught up in conflict. But we do not do a good enough job for women and girls.

In my dozens of visits to countries caught up in crisis, the stories of women and girls have stuck with me more than any others.

Stories of escape from violence and terror.

Stories of barbaric acts committed against them.

Stories of fear for their children and loved ones.

But, stories also of resilience and hope.

Women and girls defiant.

Mothers determined to ensure that their children were safe and had the chance to go to school.

Young girls with ambitions to be doctors, engineers and leaders.

Heads of households who had resolved to take control of their lives, start businesses and provide again for their families.

Brave survivors, not just helpless victims.

So today, I want to talk about how the complexity of humanitarian crises in the 21<sup>st</sup> century disproportionately affects women and girls.

I then want to highlight ways in which we can do better for them.

- First to ensure women and girls are better protected in humanitarian crises. In particular, how can we protect them from violence – including sexual violence - in conflict?
- Second, doing a better job to ensure women and girls get the specific support they want and need. Like reproductive health services, and trauma, recovery and counselling support for those who are survivors of violence.
- Third, doing better to ensure women and girls are empowered to thrive, and given access to opportunities to get an education and become self-sufficient.
- And, fourth ensuring women's needs, skills and capacities are better understood and represented at all levels of the humanitarian system. The problems we are dealing with have at their origin power imbalances: including in the humanitarian system itself. More women at the top would help.

I am particularly pleased to be addressing these issues here in Canada.

Canada understands that a global humanitarian system that better responds to the needs of women and girls is, simply, a better humanitarian system.

In so many ways, you are the trailblazers on this issue, and you should be recognized and applauded for it.

Prime Minister Trudeau famously proclaimed himself a proud feminist in 2015. And since then, he and his Government have walked the walk.

By launching Canada's first Feminist International Assistance programme, Minister Marie-Claude Bibeau has set a standard that many others around the world should seek to emulate.

Canada's commitment to ensure that at least 95 per cent of your bilateral international development assistance integrates or targets gender equality is an excellent demonstration of your leadership on this issue.

And Canada is also rallying the rest of the world to this cause. The G7 Whistler Declaration, your leadership on the Call to Action, and the hosting of the Women Deliver Conference in June all speak to your global prominence on improving the lives of women and girls.

I also want to say that it was the only Canadian who has served in my role – Carolyn McAskie, who was also the first woman to do the job – who supervised the first gender strategy produced by my office.

I'm very pleased to be speaking at the Global Centre for Pluralism – your message of strength through diversity, is so important in today's fragmented world.

So, why do we need a specific focus on women and girls?

Over the last decade, there has been an unprecedented growth in humanitarian need across the world.

In 2018 the UN provided life-saving help to more than 100 million people caught up in crisis, and we raised a record \$15 billion to do so.

This explosion in need is largely driven by conflict.

21<sup>st</sup> century conflicts are more intense, violent and protracted than they were 30 years ago.

Often, non-state armed groups splinter into multiple factions with weak command and control. Fighters – from both states and non-state groups – show scant regard for international humanitarian law.

These characteristics of modern conflict have specific consequences for women and girls.

The Yezidi women. The Chibok girls. The Rohingya refugees.

Their stories rightly caught the world's attention.

The barbarity and cruelty that they experienced shocked us all.

My colleague, Pramila Patten, for example, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict, returning from Cox's Bazar in November 2017, recounted horrific descriptions from Rohingya women and girls of the brutality they suffered. In addition to rape, forced public nudity and sexual slavery in military captivity, many reported being tied to rocks or trees before being gang raped by multiple soldiers. It was a concrete example of sexual violence being used as a deliberate tool of dehumanization.

There is a clear statistical correlation between physical security of women and the levels of conflict in a country.

Something like one in five displaced women who are asked, say they have experienced sexual violence.

Rape is increasingly used as a weapon of war and terrorism.

Girls are victims of kidnap and forced marriage.

As my colleague Virginia Gamba, the UN's Special Representative on children in armed conflict has pointed out, girls as well as boys are among the children recruited into armed forces. Just as they are traded, sold, trafficked or exploited as sex slaves in the brothels of war.

Globally inter-connected terrorist groups use young girls as human bombs. Strapping explosives to their bodies and forcing them to walk into crowds of civilians before detonating the bomb.

In crises, women and girls often cannot get access to vital, basic health services. Every day more than 500 women and girls die from pregnancy and childbirth complications in crisis-affected countries.

And inadequate help with menstrual hygiene is keeping girls in tents and shelters, preventing them from accessing services and limiting their mobility.

Girls in conflict zones are more than twice as likely as boys to be out of school.

The central role that women often play in caring for their families can also contribute to their added vulnerability.

Take the current Ebola outbreak in the DRC. Twice as many women as men have been infected. Because it is women – many of them heads of households - who are in charge of caring for the sick, bringing them to hospital and preparing bodies for burial.

Let me be clear that we are making strides in the right direction with all these challenges. But let me be equally blunt: far more needs to be done.

Doing more to strengthen our support to women and girls in humanitarian crises is in everyone's interest. It's going to help men and boys as well as women and girls.

So, the first area I want to highlight is how we can do better at protecting women and girls in crises.

At a minimum, we should be making sure that camps are well-lit; putting locks on toilets and showers; and setting up safe spaces for women and girls.

When I visited Cox's Bazar, I met Rohingya refugee women who had regained hope through safe spaces and counselling services provided by the UN Population Fund and UN Women after suffering sickening levels of violence.

As my inspiring colleague Natalia Kanem of UNFPA told me, the women she meets are clear that the greatest wound is the one the doctor cannot see.

That is why I welcome the second Summit on Mental Health to be hosted by the Netherlands in October, with its focus on mental health and psychosocial support in emergencies.

Improving protection means that everyone needs to take responsibility for it.

For example, women and girls are at greater risk of violence at food distribution points or if they have to travel long distances to a water point.

There is clear evidence that as food insecurity increases, levels of domestic violence also go up.

This means that protecting women and girls is not only the concern of a small minority of gender specialists.

The camp manager, the local mayor, the food distribution contractor all have to think about how their particular activities can be adapted to better protect women.

Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka of UN Women rightly reminds us that changing the behaviour of men is as important as protecting women and girls.

Violence against women is preventable. It is not an inevitable by-product of war. There are clear examples of how the right kind of action makes a difference.

A project funded by the UK's Department for International Development in the Democratic Republic of Congo supported faith leaders to work in their communities to address violence against women.

This successfully reduced domestic violence from 69 per cent to 29 per cent, and sexual violence was down from 21 per cent to 4 per cent.

If we want more success stories, we need to invest in protection.

Only 3-4% of all humanitarian spending goes to protection activities. Even less – around half of one percent – is spent on gender-based violence.

That needs to change.

I will play my part in addressing this.

From the Central Emergency Response Fund, which my office runs, and to which Canada is an important contributor, we have for the first time asked the UN's Resident and Humanitarian Coordinators – who are the people who have access to the fund - to prioritize activities that support women and girls.

But most of the choices on what to fund in humanitarian crises are made by the donors. So, there is more they, including Canada, can do to ensure that our rhetorical commitment to protecting women and girls is backed by financial decisions.

With Ine Eriksen Soreide, the Norwegian Foreign Minister, I will be organizing an international conference on tackling gender-based violence in humanitarian crises in Oslo in May. We will make new commitments there. So please watch this space.

We must also do better at protecting women and girls from sexual exploitation and abuse by people working for humanitarian agencies.

The work we do is dependent on trust.

When aid workers commit the terrible crime of sexual exploitation and abuse of the people we are supposed to serve, it is the most deplorable breach of this trust.

The United Nations has zero tolerance for sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment.

We are addressing this challenge across the whole of our system.

We need a determined, enthusiastic, energetic, and long-term commitment to really get to the roots of the problem.

We are making it much harder for perpetrators to move from one organization to another. We are strengthening our investigatory capacity.

We have also created a fund, which I am financing from my office, to pay for investigations when allegations arise.

We have adopted new and better mechanisms to report abuse, to investigate complaints, enforce disciplinary proceedings, and provide assistance to victims. And all our staff do mandatory prevention training.

We must be vigilant and ensure that every day, we are applying our policies on the ground.

The second area where I think we can do better is to ensure that the global humanitarian system provides women and girls with what they actually want and need.

There are a range of key services that women and girls rely on in any humanitarian crisis.

For example, we know that they need reproductive healthcare – including access to family planning, pre-natal, maternal and newborn care, and nutritional support.

After the massive earthquake that struck Palu in Sulawesi in Indonesia last October, it became clear that there were up to 40,000 pregnant women in the affected area. The first concern of many of them who, following the destruction of hospitals and clinics, would look after them and help them have their babies safely.

We provided money from the Central Emergency Response Fund for just that. And when some days after the earthquake the UN Secretary General and I visited Palu, we saw the work UNFPA were already doing on exactly that topic.

We should take a ‘no regrets’ approach. Before we have even conducted a needs assessment in a new or changing crisis, we should roll out the Minimum Initial Service Package for Reproductive Health.

To make sure we understand the needs, we should rapidly deploy gender and protection experts from the very beginning of any crisis to shape the overall response.

This brings me onto the third area where I think we can do better. Helping women and girls not only survive in a crisis, but actually thrive.

Specifically, this means girls getting access to education; women being helped to become self-sufficient; and women being given a voice and empowered to take control of their lives.

By now, everyone knows that educating girls is one of the best investments on this planet.

As Bill and Melinda Gates said in their letter this month on the work of their Foundation: “Educated girls are healthier. They are wealthier...And their families benefit, too. The more education a woman has, the better equipped she is to raise healthy children.”

But, as I said earlier, in the midst of a conflict, girls are more than twice as likely as boys to be out of school.



We are making positive strides on this.

Since it was launched in 2016, Education Cannot Wait, the fund to get children in crises back to school has reached 364,000 girls.

As Gordon Brown, who chairs the fund, has said: “Putting girls in school is the most effective way to keep them free from exploitation, forced labour, trafficking, and child marriage”.

Another key vehicle for empowering women in crises is to give them the tools to attain self-sufficiency and support their families – through cash transfers, credit lines and livelihood support. There is a direct link between women’s economic security and their physical safety.

UNICEF projects in Jordan and Lebanon, for example, are providing girls and women with skills, which are enabling them to get jobs so they can earn an income.

Cash is proving a real game-changer for women in humanitarian settings.

The International Rescue Committee’s research into their humanitarian cash programmes in Jordan showed that women receiving cash assistance feel strong, confident, respected, independent and able to negotiate.

Throughout the world, women continue to play a vital role in crisis response. In almost every crisis, local women are the first to respond and the last to leave.

Women convene assistance networks. They coordinate responses. They provide psychosocial support. They raise funding. They spread awareness. Lay the foundations for conflict resolution. And they mobilize the peace.

A recent study on women’s roles in the Yemen crisis gives a sense of their multiple roles. There, women mobilizing aid, administering first aid to the wounded, running checkpoints, and engaging in conflict resolution on both sides.

In every humanitarian crisis, we need mechanisms that allow for two-way communication and engagement to ensure that the voices of women and girls are heard, and that the planning and implementation of the response takes into account their needs.

For example, following Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines in 2013, women played a central role in the recovery and reconstruction process.

With the help of Canadian funding, women were able to ensure that assistance to women was prioritized, and that women were included in decision-making.

The fourth area where we need to make more progress is to increase the number of women working at senior levels of aid agencies.

This is important because – and I will quote your Prime Minister here – “it’s 2019”.

My boss – Antonio Guterres – has identified this issue as one of his personal priorities, as “the unfinished business of our time”.

Not only is achieving gender parity the right thing to do. It is also important because it will improve outcomes for women and girls in humanitarian crises.

When women are appointed at decision-making levels results play out on the ground.

For the first time last year, we reached the point where half of the top jobs in the UN were held by women.

When I took up my post, there were two men for every woman heading up OCHA’s country offices. Now it is close to parity.

At the end of 2017, 30 per cent of the posts in OCHA at P5 – basically, the first senior management grade – or above were held by women. At the end of 2018, it was 42 per cent. It will continue to rise.

In October 2017, visiting Pulkha, the small town in Borno in north-east Nigeria which the Boko Haram insurgents for a brief period captured and made their capital, I met a young woman working for the International Organisation for Migration. Having grown up in Borno, she had previously been a teacher, but when conflict broke out, wanted to play her part to relieve the suffering of her people. So, she became an aid worker. She was committed and knowledgeable, and had clear leadership skills – and she had been promoted into a management position. One of too few women in such a role. But an example we need much more of.

An important way of achieving progress on this issue is to try to remove the obstacles that have been preventing women from reaching senior positions in humanitarian organizations.

These include HR policies that address maternity leave, health, well-being and aggressively fight all forms of harassment in the workplace.

I am conscious that some of the things I have talked about will strike some people as nerdy, techy or processy. That’s true. But my experience over many years in big bureaucracies – and thank you for pointing out quite how many- is that worthy initiatives often die between concept and implementation. Particularly in the sector I have worked

in, intellectually spirited people have been good at describing the problems we face and proposing conceptual frameworks to address them, and then moving on to some other problem before making sure things are really changing.

We don't want that to happen this time on these issues. That means focusing in a determined, detailed and durable way on things that appear nerdy but experienced bureaucrats know will actually make a difference.

Another one of those things is data. We do not have enough information detailing the specific needs of women and girls versus men and boys in humanitarian crises.

As Bill and Melinda Gates again said in their letter last week, 'data can be sexist'.

Inadequate data is a key barrier to designing, implementing and monitoring humanitarian action that can benefit women and girls.

Every year, my office produces the Global Humanitarian Overview, the world's most sophisticated, authoritative and comprehensive assessment of humanitarian needs and response. This year, we are going to improve the coverage on women and girls.

But this is another area where the donors can help. For example, by investing more in data gathering, and in response programmes in which it is a requirement that the issues affecting women and girls are properly identified.

So in conclusion, we have seen that there is a lot that we in the humanitarian sector can do to respond to and empower women and girls.

To secure wider change we'll need political players and institutions across the development, peace and security and international justice systems to continue to push for results. As well as women's groups, advocates, national and international NGOs. We'll need more money too.

Importantly, men and boys must be part of the solution, and they too stand to benefit from its outcomes.

Studies show that when laws and policies are backed up by powerful grassroots action, critical social change can occur.

These dynamics have been part of the key to the success of the global #MeToo movement, which is starting to shift deeply entrenched power imbalances across the world.

This critical mass can take years to build. So, we must be determined. And persistent.

In the words of the Nobel peace prize winner, Wangari Maathai: “No matter how dark the cloud, there is always a thin, silver lining, and that is what we must look for. The silver lining will come, if not to us then to the next generation or the generation after that. And maybe with that generation the lining will no longer be thin.”

Thank you.