

Older Refugees' Human Rights

**Parallel Event, 34th Session of the Human Rights Council
Palais des Nations, Geneva, Room XXVII
15 March 2017, 11:30-13:00**

Event Notes

Speakers:

Ms. Kirstin Lange, Senior Disability Advisor, UNHCR
Ms. Nadia Baltazzi, Co-Founder, No More Walking
Mr. Michael Räber, Founder, Schwizerchrüz.ch
Ms. Emanuela Rizzo, Humanitarian Protection Advisor, HelpAge International

Moderator:

Ms. Kelly Fitzgerald, PhD, NGO Committee on Ageing, Geneva, Vice-Chair, International Federation on Ageing

Event Sponsors:

NGO Committee on Ageing, Geneva, International Federation on Ageing, UNHCR, No More Walking, International Federation of Social Workers, International Longevity Center Global Alliance, Soroptimist International, The International Network for the Prevention of Elder Abuse.

Introduction

Dr. Fitzgerald

- Event will be a discussion of issues around human rights of older persons who are forcibly displaced, including refugees, asylum seekers and internally displaced persons (IDPs).
- Intended to be a dialogue, round table discussion, participation encouraged.

Ms. Baltazzi

- Ms. Baltazzi is the founder of the NGO No More Walking (NMW), and has worked as a volunteer with refugees in Greece.
- This week marks one year of Turkey-EU deal. A number of borders in Europe have closed to people seeking asylum, but people continue to arrive.
- Case study: Fatima (name changed for privacy)
 - Fatima is a Syrian refugee who Ms. Baltazzi met in Greece. Fatima came from a wealthy family in Syria. Her family fled to Turkey to avoid recruitment of her sons into the military. Fatima found people her age in her new community and built a social life in Turkey. Unfortunately, the family did not have finances to stay in Turkey and they moved on in March 2016. En-route to Europe, Fatima was one of 60 people in a small boat that had to be rescued. She waited on the island for a week before being allowed to move to the mainland, by which time the borders closed. The makeshift camp at the port of Piraeus was completely full, so she slept in a warehouse on the floor in a tent with one blanket for an entire month. Afterwards, the family was moved to a camp that used to be an abandoned hotel. From that point, Fatima did not participate much in village life. They stayed in that region for nine months and then moved to Germany. In Germany she feels respected, welcome, and grateful in Germany. However, her family is spread across Jordan, Lebanon, and Greece, and she still has no contact with them.

- Older persons in forced displacement often feel very forgotten and invisible. Their needs are often not met by the humanitarian system or its programs. They deserve a dignified life and have unique experiences and skillsets that can build up their communities, and they can contribute to community protection.

Mr. Råber

- Two basic requirements:
 - Older persons must not be criminalized when they flee to safety and security.
 - Older persons must not be deprived of their dignity by the governments and humanitarian programmes.
- Three demands:
 - Relocation and family reunification. Need to reconsider the definition of core family in these processes.
 - Focus on psychosocial support for older persons, as they face particular challenges coping with their situation (e.g. younger people have more opportunity to rebuild their life).
 - Need for more programmes and activities for older persons.

Ms. Bianca

- Ms. Bianca is an older woman and a volunteer of Schwizerchrüz.ch.
- When refugees started arriving in Greece, she wanted to show them that someone was waiting for them and provide a welcome. However, she knew that they would be facing closed borders.
- Older persons in Syria have to choose to remain in Syria alone or risk their lives and make a difficult journey to stay with children and grandchildren.
- While young people have a life in front of them, older persons face challenges in spending the rest of their life in a new country. For example, older people have more difficulty in learning a new language than younger people do.
- In refugee camps in Greece, Ms. Bianca could play and converse with children who often spoke English, but for older people, she could only sit with them and hold their hand. She could only show, "I'm here, I'm with you."
- Ms. Bianca stressed her motivation to respond to the situation of refugees so that future generations will not be ashamed of our lack of action.

Ms. Rizzo

- Populations are aging, and many countries are now affected by conflict and disasters. Older persons are less visible, less mobile, and less likely to be included in services and activities than other displaced groups.
- Need for a community- based approach. People in forced displacement can be a resource and active agents in promoting their own protection and protection of their communities.
- HelpAge promotes inclusion of older persons into humanitarian and development programmes.
- Lebanon Case Study: HelpAge supported the establishment of older persons protection monitoring groups. The model was designed by older displaced people and their communities. Under this model, older persons supported others in their community through outreach to provide information and support access to services.
- Knowledge of rights empowers older persons to contribute.
- Challenges older persons face in situations of forced displacement: loss, adjusting to change, lack of access to critical services (such as health, legal services).
- Need to change how services are designed and delivered. Including older persons in protection monitoring makes services more inclusive, as older persons themselves are able to monitor access.

Moment of acknowledgment of Syrian Refugee Crisis

Ms. Lange

- Provided an example of humanitarian response in Syria.
- Older persons are often not targeted in humanitarian programmes. Older persons are often less visible and humanitarian actors may not be sensitized to aging issues. One option is to put aging as a standing agenda item in coordination meetings.

- There is a need for more information about the situation of older people in forced displacement, including their protection risks and roles in their families and communities. While data is important, there is also a need for qualitative information.
- In Syria, humanitarian actors consulted with older persons themselves about their needs and ideas. This was important for informing programming.
- Older displaced persons are often viewed as universally dependent and in need of care rather than having diverse needs and capacities. Older persons are impacted differently in crisis and play different roles and have different capacities.
- Older persons experience a significant shift in their role in the community in forced displacement. In Syria, they spoke about losing their role in contributing to household income or taking on new roles in caring for children. Most spoke about becoming more isolated.
- Older persons have specific needs but also have a wealth of knowledge, skills, and experience that can contribute to the humanitarian response.
- We need to reach out to older persons themselves. They should be included in design and implementation of humanitarian programmes.

Round Table Discussion

Dr. Fitzgerald introduced the three areas of discussion:

- Policy
- Older persons as protection actors
- Capacity building on the ground

Silvia Perel-Levin, NGO Committee on Ageing, Geneva

- Important for issues of aging to be reflected in other human rights discussions (e.g. reports of special mandate holders)

Olga Kharitonova, UNECE Ageing Unit

- Ageing needs to be mainstreamed in all policy areas.
- Marginalization of older persons in the humanitarian context reflects their marginalization in society more broadly.
 - Example: A UNECE policy brief last year on older migrants found that this population is often excluded from social services and health care.
 - Referring to the case example of Fatima: When Fatima was living in Turkey, she was able to build a social network, but then felt isolated in Germany. Often isolation is a result of loss of connections.
- Older people are often seen as a burden; however, they possess enormous resources and knowledge to contribute to society.

OHCHR

- Highlighted the need to progress from needs-based approach to rights-based approach.
- Need to see older persons as agents of change who have capacity to contribute.
- Need to systematically monitor incidents of violence and abuse of older persons.

World and Survival Project

- Governments get to make choices about persons in forced displacement that they might not make about their own people, such as deciding who they want or do not want in their country. This selection process does not happen when you are born in a country.
- We need a program that encourages governments to value the skills and resources older persons offer in order to challenge the issue of invisibility and the view that they are a burden.

UNHCR

- Support the need for better integration of aging issues into all human rights work. Work on aging should not be viewed as a separate, isolated area of work.
- Suggest to identify entry points for integrating aging issues in the humanitarian sector (e.g. revision of Sphere guidelines).
- Efforts are needed to promote an image of older persons as having capacity and contributions to make.
- Suggest to learn from the experience of the disability movement in promoting a shift to a rights- based approach.

HelpAge International

- Disaggregated data is important for improving visibility of older persons and informing policy and programming.
- Support the need to shift to a rights- based approach. This may involve consideration of what legal instruments can we bring to the conversation.
- We need to think creatively about how we can influence humanitarian programming to be more inclusive of older persons.
- Forced displacement often exacerbates pre-existing marginalization.
- Capacity building programs have been developed for age and disability inclusion in humanitarian action (e.g. development of minimum standards). We can link up with these processes.

NGO Committee on Ageing

- We need to remember that older persons are diverse and not all have disabilities.
- Emphasized the capacities of older persons and the contributions they make.

Mrs. Zulberti

- Older persons have an important role in sharing information with younger people (e.g. information about life in Syria before the conflict) and in passing on culture and history.

NMW

- It is important to keep families together. In situations of forced displacement, older persons need family connections.
- Operational level: Policies need to be implemented in practice. There needs to be a system for addressing the needs of older persons (in the Greece context, this is in place for unaccompanied and separated children, but not for older persons) that needs to be adequately communicated to the operational teams on the ground, including volunteer teams.

Schwizerchrüz.ch

- Too often older persons rely on their personal connections with humanitarian actors in order to access the assistance they need. Support is not systematic.

NGO Committee on Ageing

- Important to share more stories of older displaced persons to increase visibility.

World Federation of Mental Health

- It is important to have actors on the ground to bring information back to policy makers.

HelpAge International

- Given the role older persons often have in caring for children, HelpAge International is working with child protection actors to ensure that they reach older persons (e.g. for parenting skills training).
- Older displaced persons in urban contexts often face more challenges in accessing services, due to lack of affordable transport.
- It is important that home-based care is available to older persons.

UNHCR

- It is important that we consider diverse displacement contexts, including camp and out of camp, and emergency and protracted contexts (e.g. much of the discussion today is about Europe, but most refugees are hosted in developing regions). Different contexts present different challenges and opportunities for older persons.

Priska Fleischlin, International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW)

- There is a need to integrate services in the area where older persons live.
- To support the integration of older displaced persons in the community, it is important for them to have an active role. Younger people will often more easily integrate due to their participation in education and work.

Proposed Action Points/ Next Steps

NGO Committee on Ageing

- 15 June is World Elder Abuse Awareness Day .
- Could focus part of next HRC side event on violence and abuse, on older refugees.
- One area of focus for advocacy needs to be on family reunification for older refugees.

World Federation on Mental Health

- Propose to raise issues facing older persons to the Special Rapporteur on the right to health, who will deliver a report at the next HRC session. For example, while focus is on humanitarian contexts it is often on communicable diseases. Older persons experience a high rate of non- communicable diseases (including mental health issues).

NMW

- We need more information about the situation of older displaced persons in Europe.
- We have an important opportunity to integrate older displaced persons into the community in Europe. We can learn from the experience of other countries.

IFSW

- We need to remember older displaced persons in more forgotten regions, including in Africa. Extend the discussion beyond Europe.

HelpAge International

- Will soon be able to share the results of research that was conducted on sexual and gender based violence among older persons in forced displacement contexts, such as South Sudan, Panama, Kurdistan, and Pakistan.
- General agreement that work on this issue needs to continue. Proposal was made to form a network to advance the rights of older displaced persons.

Closing remarks: Dr. Fitzgerald

Event notes will be written and distributed. The action plan (which was created following the November 2016 HRC side event on older refugees) will be updated based on the discussions from this event. If anyone is interested in becoming part of the working group, please email Kelly Fitzgerald, NGO Committee in Ageing at ngoageing@gmail.com.