



“Women refugees and asylum seekers in the EU”

Keynote Address by Mary Robinson

**Interparliamentary Committee Meeting
on the Occasion of International Women’s Day 2016**

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I am very pleased to return to the European Parliament to join today’s proceedings. I had the honour to be here in 2011 to give a keynote address on the centenary of International Women’s Day. That was a significant occasion, but this year we focus on a subject which challenges our basic values – women refugees and asylum seekers in the EU. I welcome the focus on protecting the rights of women seeking asylum and refuge within the European Union, because we need women members of this EU Parliament and UE national Parliaments to take a strong stand on this issue.

Do we have the empathy and imagination to put ourselves into the shoes of a woman forced to flee her country? The Somali British poet, Warsan Shire, captures the plight in her poem Home. Allow me to read an abridged version of her work:

No one leaves home unless

home is the mouth of a shark.

You only run for the border
when you see the whole city
running as well.

Your neighbours running faster
than you, the boy you went to school with
who kissed you dizzy behind
the old tin factory is
holding a gun bigger than his body,

You only leave home
when home won't let you stay.

No one would leave home unless home
chased you, fire under feet,
hot blood in your belly.

It's not something you ever thought about
doing, and so when you did – you carried the anthem under your breath,

Waiting until the airport toilet
to tear up the passport and swallow,
each mouthful of paper making it clear that you would not be going back.

You have to understand,
no one puts their children in a boat
unless the water is safer than the land.

We need to start from the premise that all women refugees and migrants have human rights. Refugee and asylum seekers have particular rights under the Refugee Convention of 1951 and its 1967 Protocol, but economic migrants also have human rights – rights to food, water, education, shelter, to be free from violence and to have their human dignity respected.

The need to address the protection afforded to refugee and migrant women and girls on the move in Europe is becoming more urgent by the day. In February, a report from the UN High Commissioner for Refugees indicated that 55% of those undertaking dangerous sea crossings and arriving on the Mediterranean shores of Europe are now women and children – compared with 27% last June.

We cannot claim ignorance of the grave risks faced by women and girls seeking sanctuary at a time of great upheaval. We know that women are disproportionately vulnerable when forcibly displaced from their homes. Existing social inequalities based on gender roles are exacerbated as traditional support structures and formal justice systems break down. We know that women face increased risks of violence, sexual assault, exploitation and trafficking. We have heard the reports from the UNHCR and others of the increased incidence of transactional sex, as women are forced to resort to desperate measures to “pay for” travel documents on their journey. We know that barriers to reproductive health care result in increased prevalence of maternity related deaths.

If we know all this, then is it not inhumane and unconscionable to fail to act? The violent scenes of police action against migrants at either end of Europe diminish us all. The European

Union must immediately undertake a coordinated fair and robust response to secure the rights and safety of women and girls seeking asylum and refuge within our borders.

Importantly, just as we know the risks, we also know what must be done to protect women and girls on these vulnerable journeys to sanctuary. The report on the situation of women refugees and asylum seekers produced by the Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality in the EU has compiled the necessary measures for a humane and gender sensitive response.

For instance:

- transit sites and reception centres must be staffed in a gender sensitive manner.
- swifter and more efficient family reunification procedures are essential.
- comprehensive and adequately resourced programmes to address the health needs of women must be made available to refugees and asylum seekers.
- every effort must be made to identify and assist victims of sexual and gender based violence – because we know that victims will not self-report.

Clearly the necessary measures to provide safety and security for women refugees and asylum seekers in Europe will require significant new resources. Those countries currently bearing the brunt of refugee and migrant arrivals must be assisted in meeting the resources they require to uphold the human rights of displaced women and girls, and that burden must be shared more fairly by all EU member states. Women parliamentarians need to raise their voices on this prior to both the EU-Turkey Summit on 7 March and the EU migration summit on 18 and 19 March.

Responding to a refugee crisis is about preserving human dignity and protecting the rights of all people. Can this generation of European leaders live with the knowledge of the terrible abuses suffered by those seeking sanctuary in our Union while member countries retreated behind border closures and excuses of economic limitations? How would history judge us?

This is a moment for European unity and solidarity. Only an urgent, robust and shared plan of action across all member states can resolve the current crisis.

In addressing the European Union's shortcomings with respect to migration and forced displacement we have the opportunity to develop durable mechanisms and safeguards that will prevent the current crisis from ever reoccurring. We know that, even though the current crisis will pass, displacement will occur again in the future. We must couple action to prevent the factors that push people to uproot their lives and move, with finding sustainable ways to support them when this becomes an imperative. In doing this, we must recognise what compels a person to leave - in the words of Warsan Shire 'no one leaves home unless/ home is the mouth of a shark.'

What constitutes the shark's mouth can vary and interrelate. We are familiar with many factors; persecution, war, civil unrest and poverty. But we must also look to new push factors, ones that are unique to our time and whose problems may be exacerbated for future generations. I refer, of course, to the importance of addressing displacement in the context the negative impacts of climate change. Climate change is a threat multiplier – it exacerbates poverty and water scarcity, it compounds food and nutrition insecurity and it makes it even harder for poor households to secure their rights. Climate change will increase migration and displacement globally.

The recurrent drought in Syria towards the end of the last decade, which destroyed harvests and forced rural communities to migrate to the urban areas, is now seen as a key aggravating factor in the lead-up to the civil war that has eviscerated the country¹. Research on other

¹ Gleick (2014), Water, Drought, Climate Change, and Conflict in Syria. *Weather, Climate and Society*, Vol 6

conflicts seems to indicate that higher temperatures and extreme precipitation correlate with greater incidence of conflict².

The impacts of climate change, as with forced migration, are different for men and women – women are likely to bear the greater burden as traditional inequalities become amplified and more acute.

In developing countries women are highly dependent on local natural resources for their livelihood, because of their primary responsibility to secure water, food and energy for cooking and heating. The effects of climate change, including drought, uncertain rainfall and deforestation, make it harder to secure these resources.

Women - for whom the impacts of climate change are part of their lived experience - must be included in the design, planning and implementation of response measures. By acknowledging women as agents of change within their communities, valuing their knowledge and building their capacity to adapt, decision makers can develop sustainable, long term climate solutions at a local level. This will strengthen whole communities, and in turn will allow for a greater resilience in the face of climate events that may otherwise force groups to uproot and move.

The current migration crisis illustrates that the world is grossly under prepared for a situation where global migration becomes dramatically exacerbated due to the impacts of climate change. EU countries, in particular, should recognise that climate change is already a “push factor” driving people out of their homes, often those affected being the poorest and most vulnerable. This problem will get worse, so European leaders need to prepare a structured

² Hsiang *et al* (2013), Quantifying the Influence of Climate on Human Conflict. *Science*, Vol 341

and humane response now, which both enables displaced people to resettle in European countries and helps their countries of origin to become more resilient to climate change.

By making the right choices now, the European Union can transform the story of migration from a chronicle of sorrow and regret to one of empowerment, contribution and adaptation - one which can instruct our European society in the values of diversity, tolerance and fair-mindedness as well as providing a model for the world to follow.

For the sake of the rights and dignity of all people and the future of the European Union, we must not fail. We can draw courage from the words of Wangari Maathai who said:

“In the course of history, there comes a time when humanity is called upon to shift to a new level of consciousness to reach a higher moral ground.”