



CONFERENCE REPORT

WOMEN LEAD THE WAY: STRENGTHENING A LOCALIZED AND GENDER RESPONSIVE APPROACH TO REFUGEE RESPONSE AND PEACEBUILDING

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Chisinau, Republic of Moldova
12-13 October, 2023

OVERVIEW OF THE CONFERENCE

On October 12–13, 2023, UN Women Moldova hosted an international conference titled **“Women lead the way: strengthening a localized and gender responsive approach to refugee response and peacebuilding,”** in Chisinau. The conference was organized to provide a platform for both international and national representatives of civil society organizations and coalitions, international organizations, government officials, academics, and other stakeholders to deliberate and contemplate the implementation of the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) Agenda in the Republic of Moldova (Moldova) and its pertinence within the Humanitarian-Development-Peace (HDP) nexus, particularly in the context of the refugee response and Transnistrian region conflict settlement efforts.

The primary aim of the conference was to provide a distinctive platform for participants to delve into these subjects, facilitating the exchange of experiences, challenges, and insights. By convening women advocates, leaders, and peacebuilders dedicated to advancing women’s meaningful engagement in humanitarian efforts, promoting social cohesion at the community level, and contributing to peacebuilding across diverse global contexts, the conference also aimed to stimulate conversations on inventive approaches to furthering the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda in Moldova.

Context

The Republic of Moldova has been significantly impacted by the war in neighboring Ukraine, triggered by Russia on 24 February 2022. Since then, Moldova has faced a triple crisis of refugee response, economic shock, and insecure access to energy and all within an already fragile security context amplified by the frozen Transnistrian region conflict. The refugee influx has placed border, migration, and asylum management capacities

as well as other public services of the country under significant strain, exceeding the local coping capacities and intensifying existing social and economic vulnerabilities. As of 24 August 2023, 109,138 Ukrainian refugees are residing in Moldova and represent roughly 3.4 percent of the population of Moldova¹. Crises impact women, girls, men and boys of all ages and abilities differently. Their needs and interests differ, as well as their resources, access, capacities, and coping strategies. Marginalized groups, moreover, are disproportionately and negatively affected by gender norms and pre-existing inequalities resulting from centuries-long patriarchal societal norms.

Moldova’s population, grassroots organizations, and pertinent ministries engaged in the decision-making process regarding the refugee response, collaborated with development and humanitarian partners to promptly provide assistance not only to refugees but also to host communities and families. The focus was placed on working along the humanitarian-peace nexus and adopting a system strengthening approach, to address immediate humanitarian needs and to tackle existing development and peacebuilding challenges.

¹ Operational Data Portal, UNHRC: Moldova has received 805,259 Ukrainian refugees and 99,793 third country nationals since late February 2022. Of them, 109,138 Ukrainian refugees and 8,024 third country nationals have chosen to stay in the country as of 24 August 2023. Out of this, 45% are under the age of 18 years old (see Operational Data Platform). – link (Oct 2023)

Recognizing that the success and sustainability of humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding endeavors hinge on their synergistic application, prioritizing the needs of the most vulnerable and marginalized groups – including from host communities – prevent tensions between the refugee population and supporting communities.

This triple crisis, along with the unsettled Transnistrian region conflict and impoverishment of the local population further intensifying gender-specific risks and vulnerabilities. Consequently, there is a heightened demand for humanitarian assistance, exacerbating the precarious socioeconomic landscape and fostering conditions conducive to escalating tensions within the country. This situation compromises social cohesion among the population and complicates conflict negotiations between the Moldovan Government and Transnistrian de-facto structures.

While studies conducted globally attest that the role of women in preventing conflict in fragile contexts is highly relevant², the efforts to involve women to meaningfully participate in all processes of decision-making worldwide, including in refugee response and peace negotiation processes have been modest. In Moldova, the refugee response showcased an excellent example of mobilization of women's organizations for emergency interventions and subsequent work around inclusion and social cohesion, with a Gender Task Force (GTF) established to mainstream gender equality and providing space for refugee women and women organizations to be vocal on the priorities and modalities of the response. Despite active engagement of the GTF in the refugee coordination structures in Moldova, the approach of considering women as victims prevails, accentuating the need to continuously promote women as leaders and active agents of change in the response and recovery initiatives.

Concerning peace processes, women's participation, particularly in senior management roles,

is notably low on both sides of the Nistru River, and gender equality issues are inadequately addressed in the negotiation agenda. The current National Action Plan (NAP) on WPS for 2023-2027 in the country aims to enhance the representation of women across all sectors of security and defense. This objective is intended to improve the effectiveness of mechanisms for preventing instances of violence and to facilitate the equal involvement of women and men at all stages of conflict resolution. Additionally, the plan emphasizes a top-down agenda implementation, providing dedicated support for localization and meaningful engagement of local governance institutions. This approach aims to establish a robust foundation for integrating the refugee response and agenda into local development and action plans.

To drive accountability and action integrating these aspects in conflicts and humanitarian crises commitments at the global, national and local levels, UN Women established of the Compact on Women, Peace and Security and Humanitarian Action (WPS-HA)³ to provide a clear path for Member States, United Nations entities, regional organizations, private sector actors, and civil society – including women-led and youth organizations, NGOs, and academic institutions – to take concerted action on Women, Peace and Security and Humanitarian Action over the next five years.

As the war and the refugee response is in its second year, localization of the response, integration, social cohesion and peacebuilding are of critical importance to the development and stability of Moldova. Mainstreaming gender equality and fostering women's leadership and meaningful participation in all aspects of the refugee response in tight linkage with the Women, Peace and Security Agenda are central for the long-term development and stability of the country.

2 UN Women, 2015: Global Study Report "Women's Participation And A Better Understanding Of The Political", – link

3 As an outcome of the UN Women global "Generation Equality Forum" on 2nd July 2021, the WPS-HA Compact has been established as an inter-generational, inclusive movement for action on women, peace and security and gender equality in humanitarian action, to drive accountability and action on gender equality to address conflicts and humanitarian crises commitments at local and national levels. The full list of signatories is here: <https://wpshcompact.org/signatory-members/>. Further read on the ECA Compact Summit: "Reinforcing Women, Peace and Security in ECA region - How COMPACT on WPS-Humanitarian Action can translate commitments into results?", 2022

Main Objectives of the Conference

- Highlight the importance of mainstreaming gender equality in the humanitarian efforts, the localization of the response with strong involvement of women’s refugees and local women leaders and activists and their peace-building efforts at community level.
- Create the space for dialogue and comprehensive knowledge sharing on the challenges and opportunities associated with women’s meaningful participation in peace processes (including intergenerational engagement aspects). Document the exchange of knowledge, effective practices and lessons learned on women’s and young women’s leadership and contributions to peace and security, resilience and humanitarian/crisis response.
- Foster networking with women peacebuilders across the region and inclusive and sustainable partnerships to increase the influence, visibility, and resource base of local women leaders in humanitarian and peacebuilding processes and decision-making.
- Support further engagement and interactions of women peacebuilders and activists with the relevant WPS-HA global platforms.
- Formulate recommendations on how to utilize the shared lessons learnt and best practices as well as ensure meaningful participation of women in all their diversities for the implementation of the NAP on WPS in Moldova.

The Conference was organized with financial support from the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation – within the project “Women Supporting Women: Enhance Resilience and Inclusion of Refugee and Crisis Affected Women Through Community-Based Initiatives”, and Sweden support to UN Women Strategic Note Implementation – component related to Women, Peace and Security Agenda.



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SUMMARY & HIGHLIGHTS

Day 1 – Women’s Agency and Leadership in Localization of the Refugee Response

The first day of the conference, moderated by communication specialist Diana Raileanu, consisted of the Opening Ceremony and introductory speeches, followed by a VOX populi video where women and men from Chisinau and other localities, particularly from the Security Zone, voiced their views on the role and involvement of women in overcoming the crises faced by the Republic of Moldova. Following this introduction, three plenary sessions focused on Women’s Agency and Leadership in Localization of the Refugee Response. The day ended with a Q&A session, followed by conclusions of the day.

Opening Ceremony and introductory speeches

Dominika STOJANOSKA, UN Women Moldova’s Country Representative, opened the conference by highlighting the crucial role of women in refugee response, showcasing Moldova as a good example of how women’s organizations mobilize in emergency response and carry out subsequent activities to ensure inclusion and social cohesion⁴. The past year and a half have demonstrated that gender mainstreaming and promoting women’s leadership and meaningful participation in all aspects of the refugee crisis, is closely linked to the WPS Agenda, and is essential for the long-term development and stability of the country.

Larisa VOLOH, member of Moldova’s Parliament and Chair of its Standing Committee for Public Administration and Regional Development, emphasized the need to take common actions in these difficult times, when it is clear that gender equality is not only a principle but a necessity. She underlined the Parliament’s openness to providing opportuni-

ties for refugees and host communities to create a framework of understanding and tolerance.

Felicia BECHTOLDT, Secretary of State at the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection, highlighted women’s pivotal role in identifying solutions and ensuring the safety of refugees within the coordinating of the humanitarian crisis. She emphasized that the involvement of women and a diversity of perspectives contribute to more informed and effective decision-making for the benefit of the affected population.

Simon SPRINGETT, UN Resident Coordinator in Moldova, emphasized that stability, prosperity, and development hinge on gender equality as a prerequisite. Advocating for women’s leadership is crucial, requiring a trust in their abilities to shape and enhance the world positively. Despite the barriers created during conflicts, collaborative efforts can lead to mutually beneficial solutions. Bold examples in Moldova, such as the mobilization of grassroots women and women’s organizations, as well as the establishment of working groups, showcase how women have bolstered their capacities in effectively delivering humanitarian assistance.

Her Excellency Katarina FRIED, Ambassador of Sweden to the Republic of Moldova, pointed out the crucial role of women in strengthening resilience, peace and social cohesion. She reaffirmed her country’s unwavering commitment to supporting women, emphasizing the necessity of collaborative endeavors to address persistent challenges. Sweden is dedicated to providing expertise, assistance, and support to promote women’s participation in decision-making processes, both in political and economic realms, while empowering women as advocates for peace and initiators of various projects aimed at sustaining peace in the region.

⁴ According to the civil society mapping, an estimated 86% of the organizations in the refugee response in Moldova are women’s organizations

Dr. Guido BELTRANI, Director of Swiss Cooperation Office SDC, stressed the importance of sharing experiences to navigate through and to overcome crises. In times of uncertainty and tension, as well as during regular times, it is imperative to incorporate women into humanitarian assistance efforts. The most effective approach involves learning from successful examples in other countries, particularly those where an increasing number of women, including those from underrepresented groups, are emerging as champions of change.

Francesca BONELLI, UNHCR Representative expressed concerns that voices advocating for peace are being drowned out. She urged participants to amplify their calls for peace to the extent that they cannot be disregarded any longer.



PLENARY SESSION I. Setting the Scene: Women's Leadership and Agency in Humanitarian Response – International Experience

SESSION 1 highlighted the importance of integrating gender perspectives across all aspects of humanitarian response to ensure inclusivity and resilience. Panel speakers, including Iryna Rubis, İlayda Eskitaşçıoğlu, and Sofia Burtak, and moderator Katri Hoch shared their experiences from Ukraine, Türkiye and Bangladesh. The session, moderated by Katri Hoch, featured discussions that elaborated challenges, successes, and lessons learned in empowering women during crises.

Key concerns raised encompassed the need to overcome biases hindering women's advancement, combat stigma and blind spots resulting from the underrepresentation of women in humanitarian response teams and enhance collaboration with local communities and grassroots women to foster their resilience and recovery.

Katri HOCH, Humanitarian Programme Manager of the Swiss Development and Cooperation in Moldova, elaborated the challenges faced by Rohingya refugees in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. She shared a best practice wherein women refugees took leadership in mobilizing and establishing collaborate initiatives to empower women leaders in their respective refugee communities and create women's spaces.

Iryna REVIN, a Ukrainian Gender, Diversity and Inclusion Specialist and Founder of Biasless, provided insights from her work empowering women in Ukraine, highlighting the need for greater female representation in decision-making and the challenges faced by women in crisis situations. She explained how she helped to initiate a women's empowerment movement, focusing on support to working mothers and businesswomen. Her advo-



cacy campaigns and fundraising efforts aimed to promote women's rights and enhance their participation in decision-making processes. Emphasizing the significance of women's active participation in crisis response teams, she underscored the importance of vocalization and constructive dialogue.

İlayda ESKITAŞÇIOĞLU, Business and Human Rights Researcher and Co-Founder of We Need To Talk from Türkiye, conveyed her experiences in addressing menstrual hygiene needs during humanitarian crises. She emphasized the importance of providing not only essential but also tailored support to women and girls in humanitarian crises. Her organization's efforts in providing necessary assistance to women and girls affected by disasters

in Türkiye and refugees from Syria and Afghanistan underscored the significance of addressing this often-overlooked aspect. She emphasized the necessity of women's active involvement in humanitarian crisis response teams, underscoring that women's active engagement in humanitarian response helps drive greater understanding of the specific needs of women in crisis situations and ensures that they get the appropriate support they require.

Sofia BURTAK, Director of Rural Women Business Network, who joined online from Ukraine, shared her efforts to connect women in rural areas in Ukraine, emphasizing the importance of networks and mutual support for women facing various challenges. The network enables women

in different agricultural domains to interact and collaborate through which not only supportive coalitions were established but also providing opportunities for women in rural areas to engage with policymakers and decision-makers. She emphasized the urgent need for tailored programs to support women who are facing significant challenges and losses in their communities, with a focus on rural women.

In conclusion, the session showcased the significance of creating inclusive environments, eliminating biases, and providing tailored support and opportunities for women to contribute actively to societal development. As all speakers underlined, it is imperative to enhance women's leadership and empowerment – both in normal and in crisis settings – to foster positive changes within their communities through building networks and strengthening collaboration to address challenges faced by women in various crisis situations and regions.

PLENARY SESSION II. Bringing it Home: Women's Leadership and Agency in Humanitarian Response – Prevention and Participation

SESSION 2 elaborated on the crucial need for women's active participation in decision-making and their crucial role in conflict prevention and social cohesion. The panelists underscored the imperative of consistently striving for gender equality and equity and emphasized the substantial contributions of women across diverse realms, ranging from the humanitarian response to community development.

Valentina BODRUG-LUNGU, an esteemed gender expert and founder and director of Gender Centru, moderated the panel discussion and focused on showcasing women's leadership in Moldova's refugee response, highlighting the significance of

women-led organizations and grassroots initiatives in the context of participation and prevention of humanitarian crises.

Nina LOZINSCHI, Co-Chair of the Gender Task Force (GTF) together with UN Women, explained the role and significance of the GTF in integrating gender considerations into the refugee response. The GTF turned into a catalyst for advancing women's representation and voices through the collaboration of women-led organizations, local civil society organizations (CSOs), women refugees, local public administration, and representatives from UN agencies and international non-governmental organizations (I/NGOs). She emphasized the necessity for a comprehensive gender perspective in humanitarian response and outlining prevalent challenges encountered by women and girls in crisis situations.

Gabriela IORDAN, Project Manager at Institutum Virtutes Civilis, shared her organization's experience responding to the refugee crisis and described their initiatives aimed at strengthening women's leadership and amplifying their voices in decision-making processes. She shared a key lesson learned about the need to work closely with local public authorities to be more efficient and more coordinated.

Irina LUNCASU, representing the Congress of Local Authorities of Moldova (CALM), discussed local authorities' involvement in Moldova's response, emphasizing positive practices and challenges. Notably, 201 female mayors contribute to women's representation, while 90% of local public administrations are comprised of women. The establishment of crisis cells, in collaboration with UN Women and UNDP, offered crucial support. Three key directives – capacity enhancement, swift response, and inter-municipality coordination – were rapidly implemented amidst the escalating crisis. Civil society and volunteers play a crucial role, particularly where neither central nor local authorities were adequately prepared. The exchange between Moldovan and Ukrainian women facilitated cultural understanding, despite occasional tensions, and contributed to a sense of unity.

Olga DYMOVA, an activist and entrepreneur, shared her transformative journey from becoming a refugee to a leader, underscoring the importance of elevating women to leadership roles in refugee response initiatives. According to her experience, there are many parallels in the experiences of Moldovan and Ukrainian women and children, emphasizing the shared values and understanding between the two communities. She emphasized the significance of various seemingly small yet impactful actions that collectively contribute to achieving meaningful results. Specifically addressing a challenge, she pointed out the difficulties faced by Ukrainian citizens in obtaining licenses for their businesses in Moldova, emphasizing the importance of legislative modifications to facilitate refugees' enterprises. Her example illustrated the necessity for collaboration among various stakeholders, including local and central authorities and civil society organizations.

Ludmila IACHIM, executive director of the Association Motivatie and prominent disability rights advocate, highlighted her organization's efforts in promoting the involvement of women with disabilities in humanitarian response and in society in general. She emphasized the need for safe and accessible transportation and facilities and described challenges related to both physical access and access to information and urged authorities to prioritize action plans, including concrete actions such as making the Bureau of Immigration fully accessible. She also highlighted that humanitarian actors need to be more attentive to both visible and invisible disabilities and ensure a Do No Harm approach to humanitarian action. She ended by calling for intergenerational approaches and underscored the importance of considering the aspirations and experiences of different generations, as well as the gender balance in discussions and dialogues in Moldova.

Elena SIRBU, President of the Roma women's platform ROMNI, shared the unique challenges which the Roma community is encountering and how these challenges and risks got exacerbated with the war and refugee situation, including challenges to find accommodation, children's education, lack

of documents and increased violence. She outlined efforts to promote peace and security at the national level and the need to break down societal barriers faced by Roma women related to education and gender roles. The central role of women, particularly in the Roma community, is one that makes women often serve as the focal point in addressing family crises. She called upon humanitarians to better target their support to empower vulnerable women, including Roma women, in difficult situations, highlighting the importance of providing them with opportunities to become visible and heard.

Roman BANARI, representing the National Council of Youth from Moldova, highlighted the engagement of young people – and particularly that of young girls – in the refugee response. The council's efforts involved mobilizing volunteers, empowering refugees, and enabling their self-advocacy. One successful example of youth engagement is a paid internship program which the Council launched, in collaboration with international partners. Despite regional resource limitations, the Council has been advocating for the needs of young people, including training aspiring young politicians, and established a platform for young officials at local and national levels. Banari stressed the significance of educating youth and empowering them, urging policymakers to allocate adequate funding and management to effectively implement youth programs.



PLENARY SESSION III. Bringing it Home: Women’s Leadership and Agency in Humanitarian Response – Protection, Relief and Recovery

SESSION 3 focused on the role of women’s leadership and agency in the humanitarian response to the refugee crisis in Moldova, with an emphasis on protection, relief, and recovery.

Cristina LESNIC, a Gender Expert in Conflict Resolution, Peace and Security, moderated the session and emphasized the importance of women’s organizations roles in effective protection and recovery and the significance of economic resilience in promoting social cohesion.

Alina CEBOTARI, President of the Board of the national Coalition “Life without violence” and Executive Director of the feminist NGO “Women for Women,” shared insights of her organization’s efforts to promote gender equity and inclusive society, along with her role in mentoring young individuals on feminism and women’s rights. More specifically, the organization is working on

the rights of women and marginalized groups, and for the last year and a half with refugees by developing and implementing initiatives aimed at empowering women and girls and fostering an inclusive society.

Andriana ZASLAVET, Project Coordinator at the Center for Rehabilitation of Torture Victims “Memoria,” and Vice-President of the Gender Equality Platform in Moldova, discussed her involvement in multidisciplinary approaches to addressing violence and her contributions to the prevention and management of gender-based violence. In response to the refugee crisis, Memoria promptly adapted to provide support, including the provision of essential goods and services, the organization of Romanian language courses, and various activities to facilitate the integration of refugees into Moldovan communities. Women’s organizations, due to their rapid response capabilities and the trust they garner from the predominantly female and child Ukraine refugee population, play a crucial role in offering support. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that this places a strain on staff, leading to potential burnout. It is imperative to emphasize that while women’s organizations serve as critical first responders, sustained operation necessitates adequate support and flexible funding.



Carolina BUGAIAN, President of the Association of Women Entrepreneurs in Moldova (AFAM) and General Director of Moldcell, highlighted her endeavors to promote economic empowerment and education for women, including refugees, particularly in the telecommunications sector. The private sector can play an important role in joining efforts in the refugee response. Among other initiatives, Moldcell involved refugees in learning visits to economic agents, business opening and master classes. In stressing the importance of access to information and means of communication, she described how Moldcel provided free mobile cards at border crossing points, which enabled refugees to communicate with their relatives who remained in Ukraine.

Irina REVIN, Chairperson of the Association of Women Entrepreneurs with Disabilities and a fierce advocate for the rights of women living with disabilities, emphasized the importance of gender equality and the inclusion of most vulnerable groups in social and political spheres and addressing their special needs with tailored programs. She underlined the importance of harnessing the potential that women living with disabilities have and encouraged everyone to celebrate the abilities, skills and knowledge of everyone instead of focusing on their limitations.

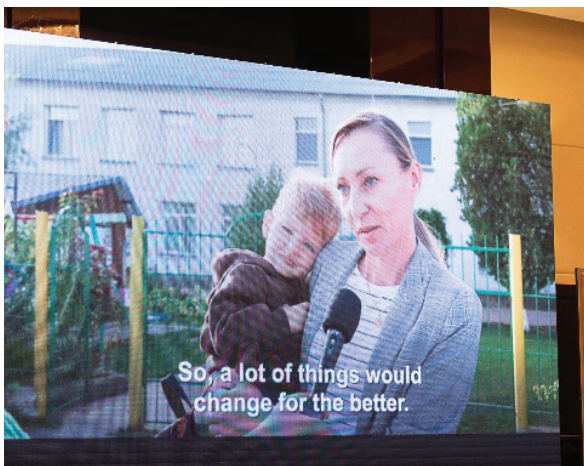
Doina BAESH, a communication specialist and women’s rights activist representing the Center for Support and Development of Civic Initiatives ‘Resonance’, shared the organization’s prompt response to the refugee crisis in the Transnistrian region and its efforts to address women’s specific needs and elevate their roles within their communities. At the same time, she cautioned that the Transnistrian region lacks longer-term support programs, an important gap that must be filled.

Steliana RUDCO, Co-Founder of Moldova for Peace and of the LGBTQIA+ Platform, and Administrator of the Community Center 151 ‘Laolalta,’ shared her experiences in crisis management and her initiatives to provide humanitarian aid and integration programs for marginalized groups, including refugees who are members of the LGBTQIA+ community. As a best practice, she highlighted how the establishment of the Community Centre 151 has contributed to offer an important space where refugees may connect with each other and among host community as well as receive various trainings and opportunities to encourage and empower each other.



Day 2 – Women Agency and Leadership in Peacebuilding

The second day of the conference, moderated by journalist Valentina Ursu, began with keynote speeches and a VOX populi video, where women and men from a number of localities, including from the Security Zone, responded to the question, “What would be the result if more women were involved in peacekeeping, frozen conflicts or decision-making in tense situations.” This was followed by two plenary sessions and Q&A session, which focused on Women’s Agency and Leadership in Peacebuilding from an international and country-level perspective. Tammy Smith, an international expert on gender-responsive peacebuilding, Cristina Lesnic, gender expert in conflict resolution, peace and security and Dominika Stojanoska, UN Women Moldova Representative then wrapped up the conference by summarizing the main conclusions and recommendations.



Keynote speeches

Ana RACU, Member of Moldova’s Parliament and of the Special parliamentary monitoring and control commission on the reintegration policy, inaugurated the second day of the conference by highlighting the multifaceted challenges faced when the war started in Ukraine, Moldova has been exposed not only to security threats at its borders and to a major emotional stress of the population, but it has been a huge challenge for the country to manage the refugee influx from Ukraine. RACU stressed the importance of colla-

borative efforts between the government, development partners, and civil society in crisis response. Beyond meeting basic needs, providing employment opportunities is crucial alongside with social protection, education, and medical and psychological support. The engagement of women leaders, women’s organizations, the women-led initiatives both in communities and in the national context are all the more valuable as for women the price of life and health is placed above other priorities and interests.

Daniela MISAIL-NICHITIN, State Secretary of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, highlighted that the implementation of the UNSCR 1325 on Women, Peace and Security must be accelerated to achieve the program’s objectives and needs to be implemented in such a way that we ensure a greater involvement of women in all areas and levels related to the security and defense sector. Increasing the participation of women in the security and defense sector and enhancing the effectiveness of mechanisms for preventing violence against women are essential. It is crucial to facilitate equal participation of women and men in crisis management and the identification of peaceful solutions to conflicts and focus should be on both national and regional security agendas.

Dominika STOJANOSKA, UN Women Moldova’s Representative, pointed that the adoption of the UNSC Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security and 9 other following resolutions calling for prevention, protection and prosecution of conflict related sexual violence, meaningful participation of women in recovery and peacebuilding substantiates that gender equality and women’s empowerment has been shown to be the most important predictor of peace, a country’s wealth, level of democracy, or religious identity. However, she raised concerns on the lack of gender-responsive peace processes, including the fact that from 1992 to 2019, women constituted only 13% of negotiators, 6% of mediators and only 6% of signatories to agreements. In 2022, only 6 out of 18 peace

agreements reached (33 per cent) included provisions referencing women, girls, and gender. In the context of worsened conflicts in the region, and global climate change, she called for women to claim rightfully their seat in Parliaments, governments, at the negotiation table, to change the concept of threats security and national interests, to work for justice and accountability, to rule for peace and sustain the peace.

Vladimir RUSIC, OIC/Deputy Head of OSCE Mission to Moldova, acknowledged the importance of including women in advocating and promoting sustainable peace, sustaining that their aim is to make the Transnistrian conflict settlement process more representative and inclusive. He reiterated the value of strong partnerships to achieve joint efforts in the security and defence sector, to promote women who have the courage to break gender stereotypes and traditional norms.



PLENARY SESSION I. International Experience on Women's Agency and Leadership in Peace Building

SESSION 1 focused on international experiences regarding women's agency and leadership in peacebuilding. The session showcased best practices and examples of the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda from across the globe, discussed the concept of localized WPS approaches and the intersection of peace within the Humanitarian-Development-Peace (HDP) nexus.

Tammy SMITH, international expert on gender-responsive peacebuilding, moderated the session, highlighting the challenges faced by women in participating in formal negotiation processes and the importance of women's networks and their valuable experiences in overcoming these barriers.

Cecilia PELLOSNIEMI, independent expert on women's participation in peace processes, discussed her research on Women's Advisory Boards across the globe, as well as her efforts to create and engage the Women's Advisory Board (WAB) in the Syrian peace process. The Syrian WAB's advocacy led to a 30 percent minimum women representation in the Constitutional Committee. Emphasizing grassroots women's pivotal role, she underscored the importance of their input in drafting settlement documents. Tapping a broad network of external civil society actors through the WAB helped diversify formal discussions and offset party resistance. However, engagement was not without challenges, including threats against women, logistical hurdles, inflexible funding and COVID-19 restrictions that hindered participation. She concluded by reflecting that the Syrian WAB's success stemmed from the fact that it is homegrown initiative and not something that was imposed by external actors.

Samar MUHAREB, the Executive Director of the Arab Renaissance for Democracy and Development, who joined online from Jordan, highlighted efforts in women's empowerment, refugee aid, and human rights. Her focus on elevating women's roles in decision-making underscored women's advocacy for vulnerable communities during conflicts. In Jordan, initiatives targeted women's empowerment in response to the Syrian refugee crisis, grappling with security concerns and civil society integration. Addressing budget disparities, integrating the women's agenda into security sectors proved pivotal, alongside enhancing civil society's capacities for effective engagement. She underscored the importance of partnerships with government bodies and security forces in tailoring the National Action Plan on WPS to intersect with climate change, extremism, and civil society. A specialized UN Security Doctrine study and a regional knowledge library aimed to consolidate relevant experiences and understandings.

Iulia KHARASHVILI, the Founder and Chairperson of the Women's Association for Internally Displaced People (IDP) "Consent" in Georgia, emphasized regional cooperation in peacebuilding. She recounted past efforts to bridge differences and engage young women and men, underscoring the significance of women's financial support. Facing language barriers and displacement, these women have initiated changes in Georgia, realizing the importance of solidarity, supporting women in dangerous areas, and addressing refugee and activist challenges. She stressed broad community involvement in peacebuilding, including empowering youth and the elderly, investing in women's projects, and providing flexible funding for women's rights organizations. Despite challenges, she reaffirmed the relevance of the WPS agenda in Ukraine's ongoing conflict, citing its urgency in addressing women's challenges through tailored initiatives during conflicts.

Natalia KARBOVSKA, from the Ukrainian Women's Fund, provided insights into the progress and challenges of advancing the WPS agenda in Ukraine

in the context of the current war. She described initiatives of the Women's Fund in Ukraine over the past five years, which have fostered local empowerment and advocacy for women's rights. Through the establishment of local coalitions, including grassroots as well as local government, localized plans have been established with tailored strategies and initiatives depending on the community needs. The discussion also touched upon challenges faced by women in conflict zones and the importance of addressing issues such as violence against women and the impact of war. She highlighted the need for collaboration and support from international organizations to promote women's rights and peace at the local level.

Tolekan ISMAILOVA, the Director of the human rights organization "Bir Duino" in Kyrgyzstan, shared her experiences in advocating for women's rights and promoting multi-stakeholder partnerships during crises through women's empowerment and anti-discrimination legislation. She described Central Asian border conflicts and explained why localization of the key UN Resolutions, including UNSCR 1325, helped address the underlying factors leading to flare ups. She concluded by reflecting on the successful partnership with UN Women to promote the Women Learning Partnership methodology, which included an annual Festival with vulnerable groups under the program Art and Human Rights.

Inna TERESHCHENKO, Director of the Odesa Regional Mediation Group in Ukraine, discussed her experiences working with Ukrainian internally displaced persons and refugees, emphasizing the importance of incorporating grassroots perspectives in peace discussions. Although she has always promoted tolerance throughout her 30 years of experience as professional mediator, she observed that peacebuilders must recognize that the use of hate speech, which is triggered by fear during an armed conflict, often is a temporary phenomenon that may provide a brief therapeutic effect for some. To combat hate speech in the current regional context, then, she recommends

fostering dialogue between internally displaced people, Ukrainian refugees, people from Transnistrian region and host communities, starting with creating professional platforms on subjects unrelated to the conflict, such as among psychologists, teachers, educators, and building trust and understanding through indirect means.

In summarizing the session, Tammy SMITH emphasized the importance of supporting women in conflict areas and highlighted the positive impact of women's involvement in peace negotiations, citing examples from Guatemala and Colombia. She highlighted the need to enhance internation-

al efforts to document and register crimes such as conflict-related sexual violence, particularly in the context of the war between Ukraine and Russia, and the important of NGOs in human rights documentation and advocacy. She stressed the need to address both physical and psychological consequences of such violence and emphasized that sexual crimes in wartime should be categorized as torture and genocide, not ordinary crimes. Emphasizing holistic support, specialized training, including for police and prosecutors, and compensation mechanisms, she stressed the importance of bridging the gap between victims and available resources.



PLENARY SESSION II. Bringing it Home: Women’s Agency and Leadership in Peace Building

THE SECOND SESSION focused on women’s agency and leadership in peacebuilding, with the discussion moderated by Svetlana Andries, Programme Specialist at UN Women Moldova. The session aimed to showcase examples of women’s leadership in peacebuilding in Moldova and highlight the role of women, including young activists, in promoting social cohesion through grassroots initiatives. The panel speakers discussed various topics, such as the women’s movement’s perspectives on peace processes in Moldova, the challenges faced by young women in peacebuilding processes, and the role of gender equality experts in promoting women’s economic empowerment. The speakers shared insights, experiences, and best practices, emphasizing the need for continued efforts and support to advance peace and security in the region.

Irina TABARANU, a journalist who serves as **President of the NGO Academy of Creativity and Media Innovation** and is a member of the informal Women’s Advisory Board for Sustainable Peacebuilding, emphasized the importance of cons-

tructive dialogue between communities living in both banks of the Nistru river. Noting that these two communities live in different informational spaces, she cautioned each side not to accuse but instead to strive to disseminate objective information on both banks of the Nistru river, without resorting to hate speech or unproductive stereotyping or labelling.

Natalia ALBU, **Executive Director of the Platform for Security and Defense Initiatives**, observed that in the current security environment, characterized by increasing conflict, it is necessary to integrate human security into national policies. She cautioned that issues related to human security are not directly stipulated in the current draft National Security Strategy, although broad agreement on the need for a holistic approach was reached in public discussions held in April 2023. In this regard, there is also a need to develop concrete objectives that would ensure social cohesion in Moldova’s divided society. Although reference is made to the phenomenon of resilience, this concept is not understood by citizens.

Tatiana SIKACHEVA, **member of the women’s discussion platform `Alisa` from Ribnita**, emphasized the need to create opportunities for women from the Transnistrian region to effect positive change in their communities and called upon national and international actors to provide support enab-



ling these women to apply the lessons and skills acquired through various informational and educational events. The goal is to establish a platform of motivated women activists ready for impactful action and skills gained at various informational and educational events to create a platform of women activists who are motivated for action.

Victorina LUCA, a human rights lawyer and founder of the Roma Awareness Foundation, and member of Equality Council, who was designated the 2023 Global Anti-racism Champion by the US Department of State, fiercely advocated for the rights of the marginalized and harassed. She advocated for the need for government programs that would ensure Roma full access to education and public life, asserting that political will is essential to alter societal attitudes toward minorities.

Ecaterina KUSHNIRENKO, a youth activist and member of the UN’s Adolescent and Youth Advisory Panel, drew attention to the need of engaging more young women and men in civic participation, and to listen their voice and build their capacities to become agents of change within their communities. Youth people are a powerful driving force that can channel positive energy, dedication, and passion into meaningful action by studying and implementing innovative solutions aimed at fostering respectful communication, and more resilient and inclusive societies.

Elena RATOI, gender equality expert and Program Officer at the Center for International Private Enterprise, shared her belief that the role played by the feminist movement in peace processes is an important one, as civil society organizations and gender equality activists continuously advocate for peace, for combating violence and for women’s participation in peace building as a prerequisite to ending conflicts. For example, the feminist March organized by the gender equality movement on 8th of March in 2022, right after the start of the war in Ukraine, clamored for peace and an end to war. Women’s engagement is essential in all stages of the peace process, to ensure that the final agreements reflect women’s perspectives and creates equal opportunities for all, including women with disabilities.

Marina YASKOVA, President of the Center for Social and Legal support “Motivation” and left-bank member of the informal Women’s Advisory Board for Sustainable Peacebuilding, highlighted the positive impact that dialogue platforms have had on building trust among people. Reflecting on her own experience, she observed that WAB members from opposite sides of the Nistru river initially harbored feelings of distrust and suspicion toward each other, sentiments that evolved in time to become more open to sharing opinions due to regular interactions and facilitated discussions.



FINAL CONCLUSIONS

Over the course of two days, the conference provided a great opportunity to amplify the voices of the courageous women and men who have been tirelessly working on the refugee response in Moldova. Their dedication ensures that not only are refugee communities' needs being met but that host communities of vulnerable Moldovans are also not left behind. The conference reminded participants of the tremendous work of CSOs and average citizens, who sprang into action when people were in need and have been working ever since. Speakers' experiences revealed that this is emotionally and physically draining work and demonstrates the commitment of the women and men working in this field.

Through powerful examples, it was shown how an organization and pre-existing resources can be utilized and retooled to extend its original mission in order to meet emergent needs. At the same time, it was revealed that refugees bring with them tremendous potential, a reserve of untapped skills and experiences that can enrich their adopted communities, even as the opportunity to exercise these skills helps them recover parts of themselves or stretch themselves in new ways to develop new, untried skills.

The conference conclusions highlight the **need for inclusive and targeted actions and women's leadership at the local level** to foster cohesion within communities. Women-led organizations are to be recognized for their substantial efforts in responding to humanitarian crises and building peaceful societies, despite limited resources. Practical solutions such as social cohesion events, peace parades, and localized infrastructure projects were highlighted as effective means of promoting integration and social harmony. The significance of sustained support for women-led organizations, how-

ever, was underscored to enable their continued contribution to local social cohesion. The role of gender-sensitive planning and inclusive responses in addressing the needs of both local and refugee populations was outlined.

Efforts to promote partnerships between central and local authorities, civil society organizations, and development partners were emphasized as essential for efficiently addressing humanitarian crises and ensuring the accessibility of basic necessities and services for vulnerable groups. Recommendations were made for improving accessibility infrastructure and addressing the specific needs of marginalized communities, such as the Roma refugees.

Amidst an already increased burden of professional, house and family work, women still find the time, energy and resources to volunteer to help others. This solidarity is the heart and the engine keeping whole communities afloat. However, despite the ways in which women are rising to the challenge of leadership at the local level, women are rarely present in the higher-level peace talks.

Collectively, speakers all reflected on the need for localizing global policy and human rights commitments, including the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security, and the significance of promoting multi-stakeholder partnerships in times of crisis through women's empowerment and anti-discrimination legislation. Speakers expressed the imperative to not only take a stance, condemn, and react to atrocities against civilians but also to strengthen regional and global efforts to ensure sustainable and inclusive peace in the world.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Establish inclusive environments and promote women's active participation in decision-making processes during humanitarian responses, with a focus on the specific needs of women and girls in crisis situations.
- Prioritize collaborative efforts with local communities and grassroots women to enhance their resilience and recovery and ensure their active involvement in all aspects of humanitarian response.
- Provide tailored and targeted support to empower vulnerable groups, including Roma women and women with disabilities, by creating opportunities for them to be heard and actively participate in local and national discussions on peace and security.
- Enhance collaboration between various stakeholders, including local authorities, civil society organizations, and development partners, to ensure gender-sensitive and localized responses to humanitarian crises, along with accessible services for marginalized communities.
- Support the initiatives of women-led organizations by providing sustained resources, flexible funding and backing for their efforts in fostering community cohesion, such as through social cohesion events, peace parades, and localized infrastructure projects.
- Leverage the valuable contribution of women leaders in promoting peace by showcasing their experiences as exemplary practices. The role of women in seamlessly balancing work, personal life and humanitarian response builds the power of example and a valuable source of inspiration.
- Go beyond the mere audibility of women's voices and ensure their active inclusion at the negotiation table. Facilitate the meaningful participation of women, especially those from under-represented groups, in decision-making processes to expedite peacebuilding efforts and enhance social cohesion, thereby mitigating internal conflicts and community discord.



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WOMEN LEAD THE WAY:

STRENGTHENING A LOCALIZED AND
GENDER RESPONSIVE APPROACH TO
REFUGEE RESPONSE AND PEACEBUILDING

