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News | 08.03.2016

Women refugees urgently in need

International women's day



According to UNHCR, women and children account for 55% of those reaching Greece to seek asylum in the EU since the beginning of 2016. On this year's International Women's Day, we lay a symbolic flower on the unnamed and floating graves of the women who died trying to reach Europe, in hope of a better life for themselves and their children. We stand in solidarity with the women and girls fleeing oppressive regimes, persecuted by gender based and sexual violence, who face all forms of violence, extortion and exploitation, rape, transactional sex, human and organ trafficking by smugglers, criminal groups and individuals in countries along the route, reaching the shores of Europe desperate for help, only to find themselves in inhuman conditions, criminalised for illegal entry and facing further violence from the authorities and border guards that are supposed to protect them.

National Governments promote repressive policies against refugees, with hundreds of people having lost their lives at the EU external border, when at the same time, there is no efficient regular or "legal" alternative for people wanting to seek refuge in Europe to arrive here. Europe literally forces refugee women and girls to use and rely on smugglers in order to enter the EU. We therefore hold the European Governments responsible for their situation today, and should be held accountable for the sexual violence, push backs and human rights violations occurring against women and girls at its external borders.

We know that women are disproportionately vulnerable when forcibly displaced from their homes. We know the risks women and girls face in their migratory route, we know what needs to be done for protection, and we cannot claim ignorance of the terrible abuse they suffer.

We must therefore raise our voices, prior to the EU Summit on migration scheduled for March 17-18, demanding that the EU urgently opens safe and legal asylum routes, in order to counter smuggling networks and to increasingly enable women, children, the elderly and people with disabilities to seek refuge without risking their lives.

We underline the right of women to lodge a claim for asylum independent of their spouse as key to women's empowerment and the principle of non-refoulement; we call for an immediate end, in all Member States, to the detention of children, pregnant and nursing women and survivors of rape, sexual violence and trafficking, and for appropriate psychological support to be made available; we remind the competent authorities that when women asylum seekers are detained, facilities and materials are required to meet women's specific hygiene needs, the use of female guards and warders should be promoted and all staff assigned to work with women detainees should receive training relating to the gender-specific needs and human rights of women; women asylum seekers in detention who report abuse should be provided with immediate protection, support and counselling, and their claims must be investigated by competent and independent authorities, with full respect for the principle of confidentiality, including where women are detained together with their husbands/partners/other relatives; and we urge the EU to guarantee full access to sexual and reproductive health and rights, including access to safe abortion for women refugees, and to allocate additional resources to healthcare provision as a matter of urgency.

But these are only some urgent, humanitarian demands. We are furthermore deeply worried about the Commission's proposal to establish a common EU list of safe countries of origin, as the rights of women and girls could be undermined and result in less favourable procedural treatment for women whose claims for asylum are based on fear or experience of gender-based violence. The threat of death, facing women who have suffered gender-based violence if their application is rejected and they are forced to return to their own country, is very real. We urge the Commission not to include in safe country of origin list any country that does not have equality between women and men as an established legal principle and we urge EU institutions not to conclude readmission agreements with countries that violate women's rights or that do not recognise women's civil, political and social rights on an equal basis with men. We strongly believe that returns to those countries cannot be considered as "safe returns".

Affording dignity and rights to women refugees however has another dimension the EU must take into consideration: there are clear systemic links between the climate crisis, our economic model and the ongoing exploitation and disempowerment of women. Climate change and environmental degradation have had a significant impact on population movements worldwide – and this is still to increase. As Mary Robinson reminded us in the European Parliament this week, "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 European Parliament will this week vote on a report on "The situation of women refugees and asylum seekers in the EU", the Honeyball Report, calling for a set of policy actions which need to be urgently implemented. We Green Members of Parliament strongly believe that our governments can not continue to turn a blind eye to constants violations on women refugees rights and call both the European Commission and National Governments for urgent action.

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