

Keynote Address by Executive Director Ertharin Cousin at DIHAD 2014.

*Women and Aid: Women, on who disasters and crises inflict a disproportionate amount of suffering and women, essential providers of relief and assistance.*

Your Royal Highness, Princess Haya Bint Al Hussein; United Nations Messenger of Peace and Chairperson of International Humanitarian City; Your Excellency Sheikha Lubna Bint Khalid Al Qasimi, Minister of International Cooperation and Development; Excellency Dr. Hamdan Musallam Al Mazrouie; Excellency Mr. Ibrahim Bumelha; Excellencies; Distinguished Guests; Ladies and Gentlemen.

I come to you today with an appreciation for the spotlight that DIHAD is shining on women. Over the next three days, we have an incredible opportunity to holistically examine how women are affected by conflict and disasters, and the massive impacts that conflict and crisis have on women's safety, food security, health and education. Here in Dubai, we can build a bridge by sharing our knowledge and by agreeing on concrete actions that improve all our work and as a result improve our passion of service to women and girls.

It is time to move beyond seeing women as only vulnerable victims. We can do this by actively listening to women's voices, and recognizing their challenges, by paying attention to their capacities and their needs. Women like Way Bafena Adele, who I met just six days ago. Way Bafena lives in a camp in Eveche just outside Bossangoa, in the Central African Republic (CAR). She told me how she fled her town four months ago, when her house was looted and burned. She had no choice but to leave with her seven children. Thankfully they were unharmed, but they lost everything. Now they have no possessions and no livelihood. To complement the food that she receives from the World Food Programme (WFP), she and her children go out to pick local fruits whenever they can, because in her town everything has been destroyed; even the markets and the farms. Her town sounds like a place that God has forgotten. In CAR, I heard many more harrowing stories of violence, rape, displacement and desperation. But, I also saw, first-hand, the resourcefulness of women who, despite all the odds, are working to nourish and protect their families as best they can.

Women, just like Way Bafena, and children account for more than three-quarters of the people affected by disaster and crises. Whether we speak of CAR, Syria, South Sudan or elsewhere, it is women who most often bear the crippling consequences—be they physical, psychological, social or economic. The challenge as well as the opportunity for creating gender sensitive humanitarian responses begins long before the crisis hits because still today, in too many places around the world, women start from a relative position of greater suffering, poverty and disempowerment. There is a long-held women's adage:

*“War? Don't talk to me of war. My daily life is battlefield enough!”*

It is true. Women face barriers, long before a crisis; barriers that are laid by gender dynamics. Within the home, barriers that shape how women and men, boys and girls are nourished and influence how women and men, boys and girls are educated. Outside the home, gender determines who is mobile, who is vulnerable, who has authority, who has land, who can take initiative, who makes decisions. It defines who is dependent and who is independent, and who has rights.

And when disaster and crisis hit, the situation becomes even more regressive. Existing inequalities are accentuated. Women, like children, are seen only as victims. Yet it is women, particularly the poor and most vulnerable, who provide for their families, making ends meet and finding safe places to live. Some 80 percent of Internally Displaced Persons and refugees are women and children; displacement leads to the dramatic increase in female heads of households.

This is why we must fully understand these dynamics and the perceived, as well as real differences, between women and men. Gender sensitive programming requires us to assess the specific needs of women beneficiaries and to fully understand how women are affected by conflict and/or disaster. At the very least, we must know if we are putting women at risk. Analysis also tells us that there is no single story and that women are not homogenous. Oftentimes, women know what will make the difference. That is why special effort must be made to promote full participation of women in the planning, management, and implementation in the provision of humanitarian response as well as development.

Despite the greater attention that we have given to gender over the past 15 years, there is still a long way to go to ensure that humanitarian responses fully reflect the capacities, resources and needs of women. As humanitarian and development workers we must ask ourselves one question. Why? Why are women often denied full prominence? And, why are women's specific needs often absent from many of our programs?

Some have said that there is resistance to gender within the humanitarian community. Some say that there is an inherent male bias in humanitarian responses. Others declare that gender is a "development agenda" and not a humanitarian one. I think that all of us here in this room disagree with those statements, because we know that gender is everyone's business. We know that gender does not compete with our humanitarian imperative. We know that efforts to recognize women, their capacities and their needs, are essential to design effective humanitarian responses. We recognize that gender is not the business or responsibility of one agency or organization. Because addressing gender is not simply a question of equity. It is about increasing the chances of women's and girls' survival in times of crisis and strengthening their existing coping strategies. Failure to successfully perform this work jeopardizes not only women's well-being and safety but also that of their families, and their communities.

I can tell you that in the World Food Programme, we recognize this truth. In WFP, we accept women for who and what they are—our major stakeholder. We have made it clear that gender is the business of every staff member; whether her role is to drive a truck, to design a project or to detail expenditures, because empowering women is the first step toward a world with Zero Hunger. We can't win the fight against hunger without women. When we reach women, children are better nourished, they are less likely to die in infancy, and they are more likely to go to school.

In practical terms this includes undertaking the following key actions. Consulting with women on how we program, therefore reducing women's and girls' vulnerability to exploitation and violence. Developing programming that protects women and ensures their risk-free access to WFP services. Distributing food, vouchers, and cash in the most appropriate way. Distributing directly to women, because it increases the possibility of food being consumed by the family. In fact, WFP guidelines on relief distribution require that 80 percent of all food, vouchers, and/or cash should go directly to women, especially when they

are heads of households. Ensuring that women have opportunities to participate in development, food for work, and food for asset programs. For example, including women in our Purchase for Progress program and giving women smallholder farmers more opportunity to move beyond subsistence farming to create sustainable and durable economic opportunity. Finally, increasing nutrition education programs for women beneficiaries, not just distributing micronutrient rich products.

Ladies and gentlemen understanding gender and delivering gender-fair assistance is not an optional extra. It is a requirement if we are to protect and provide effective, sustainable support for the people we serve and if we are to demonstrate effective and more durable outcomes to the people who fund us. Despite progress in recognizing women's rights, women still, too often, face bitter realities in crisis and disaster situations. We can change this by integrating gender at all levels. As service providers, we must all accept a shared responsibility for delivering systems that ensure women, girls, boys and men have equal access to, and benefit from, assistance. We must hold ourselves accountable to ensure that we meet different needs of women, girls, boys and men.

I told you about Way Bafena in CAR. When I said goodbye she grabbed my hands between her thin hands and began to pray out loud. Some of the other women joined in. Then she said:

“God sent you to us. God sent WFP. Because of you, I know that I can safely get food for my children. I know that my children are getting not just food, but the right food that will keep them healthy.”

Way Bafena had participated in a simple, rudimentary nutrition education program when she received her ration. The program not only met her food needs and the needs of her children, but also provided her with information that could possibly change her children's life.

We can do better. We must do better. Way Bafena and women like her around the world are depending on us to do better. I believe we can do it. Thank you.