

Mot de bienvenue

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my pleasure to welcome all of you to this **Colloquium on Harmful Traditional Practices**. I would like to extend an especially warm welcome to Ms. de Bethune, President of the Senate and Mr. Van den Bulck, Commissioner General for Refugees and Stateless persons.

I would also like to thank **Intact** for taking the initiative to approach UNHCR to organize this colloquium on Harmful Traditional Practices, as the existence of such practices and the impact they may have on the lives of women and girls as well as men and boys are often not sufficiently understood.

Furthermore, I would like to thank the **Institute for the equality of women and men** for the conference room and support. Promoting gender equality is also an important objective for UNHCR as too often gender inequality leads to social exclusion, the denial of human rights, barriers to education and development, or heightened vulnerability to abuse and trafficking.

This is an important year for UNHCR, as **we commemorate** the 60th anniversary of the 1951 Refugee Convention, and the 50th anniversary of the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness. This represents an occasion to reflect on protection gaps. We are thus pleased to pay specific attention to a subject for which more awareness raising is needed.

As part of the **celebrations** for the 60th anniversary of the 1951 Refugee Convention this year, UNHCR conducted a series of seven consultations with refugee women on five continents. These have given us a clearer picture of refugee women's concerns and their suggestions as to what should be done to tackle them. One of the messages which the refugee women in Finland wanted to pass on was the need for asylum and immigration officials, service providers, and members of the community to understand their experiences of flight, loss and trauma before they arrived in Europe. They want all these actors to understand what it means surviving a conflict, torture, and sexual abuse, which are part of the experience of many refugee women. Refugee women reported that levels of violence were higher in exile than before they became refugees. In Southern Europe where I worked until recently, UNHCR became painfully aware that the majority of African women who had reached Lampedusa after crossing the Mediterranean sea and the Libyan desert went through experiences of violence and trauma.

Moving to Belgium, one project which might be of interest in this context is the **Senperforto** project. It is coordinated by the International Centre for Reproductive Health at the University of Ghent in Belgium and aims to tackle sexual and gender-based violence in reception facilities in Europe. Resulting documentation includes an excellent "Make it Work!" Training Manual to sensitize staff and asylum-seekers to

the issue, and a Code of Conduct for staff and for asylum-seekers in reception centres, as well as Standard Operating Procedures to respond to such violence.

The roles assigned to women and men and their position in society influence the types of harm to which they are exposed. **Harmful traditional practices** are one type of sexual and gender-based violence. They include treatments that are often rooted in discrimination against women and children, girls and boys. They include **female genital mutilation**, a phenomenon with which UNHCR is often confronted with in the context of refugee camps, such as in the Horn of Africa. But not only. Some participants in the dialogue with refugee women which took place in Finland noted that while female genital mutilation is banned in Finland, some families send their girls under the guise of holidays to their countries of origin for FGM to be performed.

Harmful traditional practices include forced or early marriage, and so-called honour crimes. As the trial for the killing in Belgium of Sadia Sheick is reminding us, the tragedies linked with honour killings do not only take place in far places of origin.

These forms of gender based violence and discrimination are regularly invoked in the context of **applications for international protection**. As this harm is often inflicted in the domestic sphere by private actors rather than the state, this can lead to difficulties in “proving” the persecution they have suffered and also in assessing issues such as the availability of state protection and of internal relocation possibilities. In addition, it may be extremely difficult for victims, after having escaped, to discuss their experiences during an asylum procedure. And of course, an additional and important problem may be the insufficient awareness by the victims themselves that certain experiences may be valid reasons to be granted international protection.

To conclude, I would like to underline the importance of being all here to highlight the present challenges in this field and to discuss possible ways to ensure **effective protection** to victims of harmful traditional practices. There are recent developments with respect to asylum and human rights at the level of the European Union or through the Council of Europe which show broader commitments to better protect individuals belonging to this group. However, a lot still needs to be researched and understood on the scope of harmful traditional practices, the consequences for the victims and the most recent developments to address such protection gap.

We really hope that today’s discussions **will help all of us** to deepen our understanding of such practices, to ensure a proper consideration of these issues by all stakeholders in the asylum procedure and to provide quality social and legal support to asylum seekers who went through such terrible experiences.

I wish you all a very productive day.