



We Need #HerToo, For the Women Left Behind, Reed Smith Lawyer Says

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As a human rights lawyer, I've interviewed thousands of women displaced by war, violence and natural disaster. The common thread running through these interviews is gender-based violence. As I've watched the #MeToo movement gain momentum as a symbol of women's empowerment, I've asked myself what it has to do with refugee women? Not much, I'm afraid. If you ask a displaced woman about #MeToo, she probably won't know what it is. Why should she be excluded? If now is the time to empower women, shouldn't the #MeToo movement include her too?

You know without my telling you that refugee women are exploited in the labor market. Many work as domestic servants. Last month, a Syrian woman in Jordan told me her employer demanded sex from her. When she refused, he accused her of stealing from him and threatened to have her arrested. She didn't report him because the imbalance of power was too great. An Iraqi refugee told me a wealthy man offered her work. For twelve hours a day she cleaned his house, cooked for him and did his laundry. On the last day of the week, he told her she hadn't done a good job and he refused to pay her. She didn't report the crime. The risk of working without documents is deportation.

No one is more vulnerable than a refugee widow with young children to feed. Many Syrian and Iraqi refugees became brides at the age of thirteen or fourteen. Some people attach a judgment to the issue of early marriage. I did. But this judgment isn't going to undo a cultural practice that has existed for centuries, so why not focus on what's in front of us? Many of these brides are now war widows with young children. If a widow is lucky, her brother or uncle will help her. But anyone who's followed the war in Syria knows the impact on men. It's more likely our young widow is supporting an amputee relative, along with a mother with a glass eye, and a father with high blood pressure. This is her reality after nearly a decade of war. How can she survive?

If you go to certain neighborhoods after dark, you'll find her standing on the corner waiting for work. They're not doing washing and cooking jobs, but something more soul crushing. If she doesn't take too many nights off she'll earn enough to pay rent on a rat-infested room with no heat. Where's the #MeToo movement for her?

There's another thing that happens. Refugee women are being violated in their tents, assaulted on their way to the latrine or behind the camp security building. Two days ago, I got a call from one of our field assistants who said a gang of men attacked a 16-year old girl on her way to buy medicine for her sick mother. This happens every hour, every day, in every part of the world where there are refugees and displaced women and girls. The most despicable perpetrators are aid workers and

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peacekeepers that prey upon refugees living in extreme poverty. The tragic thing is that most of us know about these abuses—they're widely reported—but we feel helpless to do anything about them. We resort to knitting pink hats and marching on the capital. Do we deserve praise for these actions? Yes. Do they help the refugee girl raped in her tent last night? Not so much.

Recently the United Nations came up with more themes for International Women's Day—PeaceforProgress and the TimeisNow. These are good. They invoke optimism. But we need more than slogans and marches. We need the community of nations to reopen their borders to refugees. We need special protection programs for victims of gender-based violence. We need funding to alleviate the suffering of refugee women trying to survive on their own. We need employers to create job opportunities so women are not forced to work in the shadows, or trade their bodies for food. We need to demand justice for refugees who are victims of gender-based violence and hold perpetrators accountable.

These are ideas of some of the best voices in the field. We need to turn ideas into action. And we need to change the hash tag from #MeToo to #HerToo. Because millions of vulnerable women in the world are excluded, and none of us want to be part of a movement based on race, privilege or the part of the world we come from. **#HerToo**

Pro Bono Counsel Jayne E. Fleming leads Reed Smith's firm-wide Human Rights team, representing victims of persecution and torture worldwide in the legal, medical and social issues refugees face daily.



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