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The Most Important Outcome of the World Humanitarian Summit

By Jennifer L. Windsor

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As the first-ever World Humanitarian Summit closed yesterday, many important commitments were made, but none as important as the agreement to place women and women's empowerment at the centerpiece of the international response to humanitarian crises.

We know that women bear the brunt of conflict. Women for Women International was founded in 1993 in response to the rape camps in Croatia and Bosnia. And over the last two decades, we have worked with women survivors of war in countries including post-genocide Rwanda, eastern DRC (the rape capital of the world), South Sudan, and most recently with Syrian refugees in northern Iraq.

So we have seen on a daily basis the impact conflict has on women. Not only have they suffered unspeakable trauma themselves, but conflicts have torn their families apart. Women survivors often inherit greater responsibility for the financial and social needs of family members. Ensuring these women have the support they need is critical. The issue is what kind of support and how it is delivered. We have learning to share from our own experiences.

First, women affected by conflict face a myriad of obstacles that require an integrated program that addresses all of their social, political, and economic realities. Too often, the international community has taken a piecemeal approach providing disparate services to women. For example, narrowly crafted programs that only offer cash transfer payments often miss the opportunities to address the interconnected challenges that prevent women survivors from gaining new skills and rebuilding.

This was a critical lesson we learned 20 years ago from our work in Bosnia. Stipends were not enough, women asked for more: they needed safe spaces,

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basic business training, greater literacy and numeracy, peer support, and opportunities to connect with other women. And so our program evolved.

This underscores a second key point: women and girls impacted by conflict are isolated. They have lost their networks of support; they are prone to isolation and depression. While developing income generating skills is critical to moving along a path to self-reliance, we must also recognize the steps women need to take to regain self-confidence, to find their voice, to realize their own power.

So we must also invest in women's leadership and role in decision-making. Multiple speakers reinforced this key lesson, recognizing women as agents of change in their communities. We have found that while conflict and humanitarian crises provoke human suffering, they ironically provide an opportunity to refashion gender roles and challenge the social norms that exclude women from participating in civic and economic life.

Programs need to provide women with skills and opportunities to amplify their own voices to influence changing social norms that stem not from religion or culture but from traditional power arrangements that are in flux. These steps are key to actualizing women's full participation, and ultimately to building more peaceful and resilient societies, less susceptible to conflict in the future.

So bravo to global leaders who have made commitments to do more for women over the last two days. Now we need to make sure that words translate into actions and strategies that are based on best practices to date, with programs that meet women where they are and that include all the components needed for them to not only heal, but rebuild their lives, their families, and their communities.

[Learn more at www.womenforwomen.org.](http://www.womenforwomen.org)