

*Deeper Look March 2018, Women as leaders in conflict response, Patrick Fine,
Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka*

Patrick Fine: Hello, and welcome to another episode of *A Deeper Look* podcast. I'm Patrick Fine, CEO of FHI 360, and I'm privileged to be joined by Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, the United Nations Under-Secretary-General and Executive Director of UN Women. Mrs. Mlambo-Ngcuka, welcome.

P. Mlambo-Ngcuka: Thank you, thank you.

Patrick Fine: If you're a regular listener, you know I'd love you to subscribe to this podcast on SoundCloud, on iTunes, or wherever you get your podcasts. And if you're a new listener, I'm sure you'll want to subscribe after hearing the conversation I'm going to have with Phumzile, one of the world's greatest advocates for women and girls.

Whether you're a subscriber or not, please leave us a comment. I'm serious. I'd love to hear your thoughts on today's discussion.

I'd also love to hear you comment about issues that you think need to be looked at in, in future episodes. So, so let me know.

As our loyal listeners know, this year, we're focusing on humanitarian crisis and emergency response. With International Women's Day on March 8th, this is the perfect time to discuss how complex emergencies and natural disasters impact women and girls, including the role of women as peacebuilders in conflict.

Our guest is just the person to give us an informed and informative perspective on this question. Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka is United Nations' Under-Secretary-General and Executive Director of UN Women.

She has committed her whole life to building a better world, first as a freedom fighter in the African National Congress during the struggle against Apartheid in her home country of South Africa, and like so many of Africa's founding fathers and mothers, as a schoolteacher.

She was a member of parliament in South Africa's first democratically elected government, then a Deputy Minister, a Minister, and finally Deputy President of South Africa. Phumzile, I believe at the time when you were Deputy President, you were the first African woman to hold the position of deputy head of state.

P. Mlambo-Ngcuka: Yes, at that time, yeah.

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Patrick Fine: So, you have been a trailblazer your whole life. Following service in government, Phumzile established the, the Mlambo foundation to support education and leadership development. The UN tapped Phumzile to lead its efforts to advance women's equality and empowerment in 2012, and it is fair to say that under her leadership, UN Women is a force for good on the international stage.

Phumzile, you are honestly one of my heroes. I'm so thrilled to be able to have this conversation with you today. Thank you for taking the time to discuss a very important topic.

Now, we've seen an escalation in crisis in the last several years, and we heard in previous episodes that there are more people displaced today – either as refugees, migrants, or internally displaced people in their own countries – than ever before in human history.

What should our listeners know about how these humanitarian crises are affecting women and girls?

P. Mlambo-Ngcuka: Thank you so much for this opportunity, Patrick, and it's nice to reconnect again. We miss you in southern Africa, I can tell you that.

As you know, the world is going through a real difficult time. Just the size of the problem and the challenges that we're facing in dealing with humanitarian challenges, is the biggest the world has ever had since the Second World War.

There [are] about 135 million people who are in need of humanitarian support of one sort or the other, women and children being in the majority. Women, however, have learned to be resilient.

But there's no running away from the fact that they bear the brunt of the pain that comes with being displaced, because when you have a crisis, the women will take the children, which means that they never fend for themselves alone. They will be taking the responsibility to protect everybody.

Patrick Fine: Playing the role of caregivers.

P. Mlambo-Ngcuka: Playing the role of caregivers. Women increasingly in these situations, tend to want to go and find better and safer places for

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their family, and usually this traveling and movement is full of hazards: violence along the way, places to stay that are not safe, lack of medical care for themselves and for their children, and issues of citizenship. Sometimes women are separated from their children because they cannot necessarily have their children in, in their own documents and papers.

Patrick Fine: So, that puts both the women and their children at additional risk because it breaks up the family.

P. Mlambo-Ngcuka: And then women also go to authorities to apply for identity in their own right. In some countries, it is expected that the woman needs a guardian who is a man. So, it just complicates the problem that women face.

And of course, in that situation, also one of the biggest challenges that women face, girls in particular, is trafficking and early marriages. And sometimes parents would actually give away their children, thinking that they are providing a future for their children, and it never ends well that situation.

Stereotypes and customs also can limit the capacity of women more than they limit the capacity of men. For instance, I've just been to Bangladesh, and I was in Cox's Bazar refugee camp.

Patrick Fine: That's where the Rohingya refugees from, from Myanmar have come into Bangladesh.

P. Mlambo-Ngcuka: Yes. And of course, you know, the numbers are staggering. It's the biggest refugee camp in the world right now, with about 1 million people having left Myanmar into Bangladesh.

Some of them have been embraced by the community. Bless the communities of Bangladesh who have embraced people in a time of need where they themselves have so little to share. But they've been able to take people who are in need.

But for those that are in the camps, women find it difficult to move around because if they don't have the burqa, the long dress, they have difficulty leaving their homes. In some cases, women told us, "If we are five girls and there are three burqas, we take turns. Wednesday is your turn to have the dress and go out."

Patrick Fine: Wow.

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P. Mlambo-Ngcuka: If you do not have the right dress, you could just be stuck in a house. And, and of course, it is only women that have those kinds of experiences.

Patrick Fine: In some cases, forcing women to wear a burqa is seen as a sign of oppression, or at least a sign of inequality. But in the case you've just described, it would almost seem as if providing –

P. Mlambo-Ngcuka: It's an enabler.

Patrick Fine: – women burqas would be an enabler.

P. Mlambo-Ngcuka: Yes. In fact, it is one of the most really uncomfortable choices that, that we face in situations like that. We obviously don't want to prescribe to the women who they want to be, how they want to be.

At the same time, we do not want to be associated with perpetuating customs and traditions that are limiting to women. So, it's one of those dicey, dicey situations.

Patrick Fine: Yeah, it's a dilemma.

P. Mlambo-Ngcuka: At the very least, we can expose the women to people who have shared beliefs who would be able to help women. But to completely deny women the possibility for them to solve this problem would also mean that we're condemning them into a situation that it is otherwise undesirable.

Patrick Fine: You know, it's an example of meeting people where they are. You have to meet people where they are. From there, you can establish relationships and empower them to take control of their own lives.

P. Mlambo-Ngcuka: Oh, absolutely. In the camps and in people who are in that difficult situation, is also that it could just be the best time to change traditions and norms that they have held, which tend to be oppressive often to women.

It was interesting to talk to the men, those who run the camp, about the situation of women and the need for them to find ways of addressing the problems that women are facing. And them also feeling that as people in charge of the camp, it really would be better if the women were not stuck in the house because they want women to pick up their rations, and they want the women to be able to say what would work for them in the household, because they are the ones that will also need to take care of the nutrition of the children.

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So, the practice of keeping women indoors is frustrating what is otherwise a program of the camp that should be flowing. And therefore, the camp was just saying themselves, Muslim men were saying that, "You know, maybe this is really not a realistic situation."

And hopefully, if they begin to change because of the objective conditions, that begins a process of change that may be irreversible.

Patrick Fine: The positive process of change. I've been thinking about whether these crises do provide some hidden opportunities –

P. Mlambo-Ngcuka: Definitely.

Patrick Fine: – to empower women, because we know that women are disproportionately affected, we know that the majority of displaced and refugee and migrants are women, and we know that they face these risks that you spoke about: gender violence and discrimination in the distribution of food rations, and things like that.

P. Mlambo-Ngcuka: Freedom of movement.

Patrick Fine: Freedom of movement. But I'm, I'm interested if there's another narrative about empowerment.

P. Mlambo-Ngcuka: Yes, actually, there is, because we have seen that nations that have come out of a crisis sometimes have a window of opportunity as they are coming out of a crisis to adopt radical change.

In Colombia, for instance the whole process of negotiating for peace put women in the center of the negotiations. Women took an active part in the negotiations. They ended up with a peace agreement that almost looks like the SDGs in the sense that these are chattel women, but gender equality is also reflected throughout the agreement.

This is not the way the main constitution of that country is, but what came out as a peace agreement is much more advanced than the other agreements that govern the land that they have had before, because at that time of negotiating for peace, it was an opportunity to dream bigger and to have a vision that surpasses where they are.

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Patrick Fine: Right.

P. Mlambo-Ngcuka: And because it is an agreement, it is something that is adopted, and it is something that has to be present. Of course, implementation may be a little bit tricky, but it is there for women to take forward.

Patrick Fine: Right, it does have some legal basis to it.

P. Mlambo-Ngcuka: I mean, if you think also – even Afghanistan, yes, the number of women in parliament is not as high as we would like it to be. But it is above 10 percent, which is above many of the countries that have not had the kinds of war situations that we have had in that country.

Somalia, the participation of women in the process leading to elections and the number of women that managed to get into parliament surprised us pleasantly. So, there is something about crisis that makes a lot of people want to take hold of their destiny.

Patrick Fine: So those are great examples both of women's empowerment so, through crisis, probably a combination of just practical necessity, that the society and the men in the society, they need women as partners.

P. Mlambo-Ngcuka: South Africa. The high participation of women in South Africa post-apartheid was as a result of the negotiated constitution, in which women and men were very clear that we want a nonsexist, nonracist, democratic South Africa. And it has been reflected in the constitution.

Patrick Fine: The examples you gave, in addition to empowerment, they're examples of peacebuilding and women's role in peacebuilding.

And there are other ones that come to mind like in, in southern Senegal in the Casamance, where women have played an important role at the community level in brokering agreements between the insurgents and the community members and the government. And oftentimes when you get down to that community level, you'll see women leaders –

P. Mlambo-Ngcuka: Playing an important role. Burundi, the peace mediators in that country who play a significant role defusing conflicts and tensions before they become fatal, those women operate at a grassroots level.

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They are the kinds of women that you will never read about in the newspaper. They will manage to avoid a situation that you would then read about.

Patrick Fine: Right.

P. Mlambo-Ngcuka: So, in their own quiet way, they take the responsibility to maintain the peace in their communities. And we've been privileged as young women to work with those women in those communities to support them with training and to make sure that we create possibilities to document what they are doing so that we are able to use that experience in other parts of the world.

Patrick Fine: So, I'm interested in what UN Women does as an organization, because the U.N. is the international community's coordinating mechanism for crisis response, and we're familiar with the World Food Programme and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, UNICEF.

People recognize these as frontline actors in emergency response. What about UN Women?

P. Mlambo-Ngcuka: Well, one, we are the people that would facilitate the provision of safe spaces for women in Bangladesh, for the Rohingya women. We have our own multipurpose center where we are able to provide the support for women. But we do not have to have all the expectations. So, someone from WHO will come and join us and assist us to address the, the health issues.

We will train people to do, um, counseling. We will go to a civil society partner to provide literacy classes. But through what we observe there, we will be able to go to the other partners who are providing these big interventions and to highlight to them the specific needs that women have that they must pay attention to.

We are the people that will raise the issue of lighting, the proximity of latrines to the house, who will go to the camp manager and insist on the documentation of incidences of violence so that we can track, prevent, and see that the incidences are not going up.

When I was in Bangladesh now, we signed an agreement with the Human Rights Commission of Bangladesh to document the violence that has been experienced by the Rohingya women from when they were in Myanmar, along the way, and where they are in the camp so that we can actually have a systematic way of tracking

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so that at some point, there should be access to justice and we would have documented properly.

We are in the Zaatari camp in Jordan. Again, there we have our own multipurpose center where women are actually working, acquiring skills, running the small businesses, improving their education, and of course together with UNFPA, we are also able to support women to address their reproductive needs. UNFPA provides some of the services that women need.

And we also make sure that in the administration of the camp, women's leadership is recognized, women get to have a voice, and if there's violence against women, the authorities of the camp are aware, they intervene, and they look at whether there's adequate supports and protection for women.

Patrick Fine: That's great. So, you're bringing some dimension of accountability for what's happening in the situations where women and girls are caught in crisis.

P. Mlambo-Ngcuka: In the DRC, in the Eastern Congo, where, as you know, the problems are so big, and it's been going on for a long time, in addition to just the basic everyday needs of shelter, food, et cetera, we also have been investing in training women to participate – as effectively as possible, in leading their communities. The last time I was there, women were telling me that, you know, "We now want the elections because we want to run. We want to take our destiny into our own hands, because what we have experienced, we do not want the next generation to experience."

To hear women from the Eastern Congo being so determined, having gone through what they have gone through, shows the extent to which even in a dark hour like that, women have the resilience and the resolve to actually get themselves out of the situation.

Patrick Fine: Yeah, that's a profound statement, and it's really indicative of deep change, of real change that can be –

P. Mlambo-Ngcuka: And not feeling helpless, that, "Well, you know, this will always be the situation."

Patrick Fine: Right.

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P. Mlambo-Ngcuka: "There's nothing I can do." They are saying, "No, we actually want to become leaders, and we want this election. We want to learn how to convene. How would I write a manifesto?"

"These are the things I want to stand for. These are the changes that I'd like to see in my society." That for me was just so special.

And we have also been obviously distressed about the situation of Nigeria and the abduction of the girls. The girls that have managed to be released and brought back to their community, we have been working side by side with the minister there and the many other partners to help them to rehabilitate, to get counseling, to get their lives back in order again, and to try to also support them to dream and move beyond the situation, and to actually do some career planning with them, and –

Patrick Fine: Right, so they see a future.

P. Mlambo-Ngcuka: Yes, and to see, "What would you like to do with your life moving forward?" A lot of them wanted to be in the careers that have to do with health and with security and with some form of economic activity.

But I was struck by the number of those that wanted to be in, in security-related.

Patrick Fine: Yeah, that's interesting.

P. Mlambo-Ngcuka: So, I asked them, "So why is this?"

"No, because I now appreciate the importance of security forces that work to protect people. Because if we had adequate security in our community, we would never have been stolen."

Patrick Fine: Right.

P. Mlambo-Ngcuka: "I do not want this to happen to my children and to my family and to other people in my community. I also now understand the importance of security forces that care, that will fight for us, look for us until we are found."

Patrick Fine: Yeah. You know, when you live in an insecure situation, you realize how basic security is the foundation for everything else.

P. Mlambo-Ngcuka: Yeah, absolutely. Yeah, something that you take for granted.

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Some of our colleagues have been and, and still are working with the different authorities to make sure that there is safety and support. For instance, we have seen a big influx of refugees - some of them girls and children that are unaccompanied. When young children, boys and girls for that matter, are unaccompanied, it is also very important that the children are documented, because if the children are not documented and are unaccompanied, they just disappear. They are trafficked, and you can't even trace.

Patrick Fine: Right.

P. Mlambo-Ngcuka: And even when there's an opportunity for them to be reunited with their families, if you do not have documentation, that makes that exercise even the more complex.

Patrick Fine: Are you seeing new technologies being put to use to improve the documentation?

P. Mlambo-Ngcuka: Well, blockchain technology for us.

Patrick Fine: So, you use blockchain?

P. Mlambo-Ngcuka: Yes. We are at the brink of rolling out the technology in Kenya, as well as in the Middle East.

Patrick Fine: And that's for documentation – documenting the –

P. Mlambo-Ngcuka: That is for documentation and for transfer of money.

And we will be providing each refugee with a device which will have the apps that they can download for themselves, through which then we are going to be able to interact with them, to transfer resources for them to pursue training and education, of course also for identity.

Patrick Fine: That's great. And that use of mobile money, I think it's becoming more and more clear that that's one of the most effective things that can be done to empower refugees and displaced people.

P. Mlambo-Ngcuka: In the case of education, we were partnering with Vodafone for online learning, some of which will be blended learning.

So, that is on and off – and offline. It is to make sure that they can get pre-tertiary qualification, especially up to grade 12. So, that after that, they will be able to go to a university anywhere in the world. So, the curriculum is such that they will be able to have a

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high school qualification that opens doors for them to go to university with a certificate that is recognized by most universities in the world.

Patrick Fine: That's fantastic, because one of the greatest disruptions caused by all this conflict is the disruption of children's education.

P. Mlambo-Ngcuka: Yeah. At the very least, as they go through all the difficulties that they go through, we just want to make sure that there's an aspect of their lives that is not completely at a standstill. There's a sense of purpose.

Patrick Fine: Right.

P. Mlambo-Ngcuka: There's a sense of achievement. There's a sense of intrinsic value being added which no one can ever take away from them, which is the good thing about education.

Patrick Fine: Right, and that creates a sense of hope.

P. Mlambo-Ngcuka: Absolutely.

Patrick Fine: And without hope, it's difficult to accomplish anything.

P. Mlambo-Ngcuka: Absolutely, absolutely. And this is also one way in which you give the hope that might make people think twice before they become radicalized because they have something to live for.

Patrick Fine: That's right. You've spoken a couple of times about psychosocial counseling. And it makes me think about the role of women as counselors. And when you think at, at the family level, often it's the mother who plays that role in the family.

I understand that women and girls need psychosocial counseling after they've been through these traumatic experiences, but do you see women playing the role of informal counselors within their communities?

P. Mlambo-Ngcuka: Oh, absolutely. From your grandmother to your aunts to your sisters, these are the people that you will sit with, and you will talk about some of the things that you can never share with anyone else. And because these are members of your family, they're going to be in your life for a very long time. It then becomes a safe environment, and there's continuity.

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Women in Serbia, for instance, in their own interaction about their experiences, sharing with their friends through dialog were able to identify the problem of girls that were disappearing, girls that then were identified to be trafficked, and out of that were able to start a formidable program that tracks the girls, brings them back, helps them in a counseling process to talk about their ordeal, and through those discussions track other girls that they have met wherever they have been.

One of the programs that we are supporting, the women were amongst themselves tracking this phenomenon, going to authorities, and authorities saying, "No, this thing does not exist."

They tracked the occurrence, documented, went back to authority, provided them with their evidence. Authority then became involved, and the program that they have now has become one of the pioneering national programs. They are now the advisors to government.

It was women-to-women, friends looking after friends, you know, like, "I'm your sister – I'm my sister's keeper."

Patrick Fine: Right.

P. Mlambo-Ngcuka: So, this thing about women, sisterhood, within families – within community, creating an environment where people can trust you with some things that they otherwise do not feel free to, to share with other people, helps to gather information and insights that then directs us to the right interventions – including access to justice.

Patrick Fine: Right, which you have mentioned a couple of times, the importance of accountability and access to justice.

P. Mlambo-Ngcuka: Absolutely, because, you know, perpetrators in situations where impunity goes unchecked, they become repeat offenders. I mean, they do it because they can.

Patrick Fine: And it also is one of the things that gives rise to radicalism. If you feel like the authorities or the people who have power over you can act with impunity –

P. Mlambo-Ngcuka: What do you have to lose?

Patrick Fine: What do you have to lose? And there's this desire for justice.

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P. Mlambo-Ngcuka: Yeah.

Patrick Fine: What do you think we need to do better? What's missing in the way we you know, governments, civil society, U.N. agencies?

P. Mlambo-Ngcuka: Two things that I'd like to highlight, the role of men and boys in these interventions. In many cases, you would find that it is women for women, trying to engage men, who are the ones in authority.

You actually need the people in authority to be the ones that take it upon themselves to exercise their authority in a humane way, in a caring way, in a responsible way, respecting the rights of everybody, and ensuring that women are part of decision-making so that there's nothing about them without them.

So, getting men to be part of the solution is actually quite critical. We don't have enough of that.

Secondly, the investment in gender equality. I mean, the women's agenda is broke – in terms of not having enough money. There just isn't enough investment, and yet the rate of return when we invest in women from investing in microcredits, in women's education, in women's health, in women's economic empowerment, you change society inter-generationally.

Patrick Fine: You absolutely do, and you get stability. You get –

P. Mlambo-Ngcuka: You prevent –

Patrick Fine: You get higher living standards. You get better health outcomes.

P. Mlambo-Ngcuka: So, I would say that these are some – it's not the only two things, but I would just like to emphasize the importance of engaging men and boys and of gender-responsive budgeting and investment in the humanitarian work.

Patrick Fine: How do we make the case to policymakers that there is that return on investment?

P. Mlambo-Ngcuka: Many policymakers in this day and age actually know this.

Patrick Fine: Then, why don't we see action?

P. Mlambo-Ngcuka: Patriarchy is resilient to the extent that even the people that actually believe in equality to some extent still do not think that this is a major priority for society.

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So, that is why engaging men and boys starting from a young age so that injustice must just irk them.

Patrick Fine: Right.

P. Mlambo-Ngcuka: They take for granted the privilege that men have, because, you know, patriarchy is an affirmative action for men, and privilege isn't always obvious to those who have it. So, they actually think this just is the way society is supposed to, to be. So, in –

Patrick Fine: The natural order of things.

P. Mlambo-Ngcuka: Yeah, this is just – this is just the way life is. So, and at the same time, I don't want to take away from many men who are pioneers, who are doing a lot of good work, men like you. We just need many more.

Patrick Fine: I've been thinking about how do you change that behavior and about the importance of recording new narratives that men, boys, women and girls can grow up with that emphasize these qualities that you're talking about.

P. Mlambo-Ngcuka: We have to exhibit this new masculinity that we want to have as a norm in society. Giving greater visibility and celebrating men who do the right thing is actually quite important. We try to do that in our small way, but at the same time we also want to be careful not to celebrate men for doing something that is normal.

Patrick Fine: That they should be doing anyway.

P. Mlambo-Ngcuka: So, we should not be rewarding men for being human, because women do extraordinary things, and we don't even reward them. And the men do something that is just normal that they should be doing. So, we don't want to beat too much the drum, but at the same time, because we want it to be visible. So, it's just one of those tightropes.

Patrick Fine: It's managing change.

P. Mlambo-Ngcuka: Yeah, it's managing change. Yes, it's managing change.

Patrick Fine: So, Phumzile, thank you so much for this conversation. I could go on. It's so useful to have your perspective and to hear the examples that you've cited, of both the challenges ahead and the opportunities and the progress that we're making. And so, we're

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ending on an optimistic note.

And I want to thank our listeners, both new and returning. I'd love to hear what you think of this discussion, so leave a comment on SoundCloud or iTunes or wherever you get your podcasts.

You can listen to previous episodes of *A Deeper Look*, both from this season and last season, when we discussed the Sustainable Development Goals. And stay tuned. Throughout this year, we will continue to explore pressing issues related to humanitarian crisis and emergency response. Join us next month for another conversation.