

14 July 2023

Statement of UNHCR Goodwill Ambassador Mary Maker

High-Level Political Forum: Panel on Perspectives from major groups and other stakeholders at the mid-point of the SDGs: Towards inclusive transformation

To Quote James Baldwin, “I find myself, not for the first time, in the position of a kind of Jeremiah.” The qualities Jeremiah listed that were required of a prophet include not being afraid, standing up to speak, speaking as told, and going where sent.

So I am here.

But I cannot speak as told because I cannot possibly represent the Haitian denied the right to asylum, the Syrian living in misery wherever they could find at least the absence of violence. Or for the Sudanese, Congolese, or Rohingya. Too many to count.

I am not comfortable telling you my story when so many stories are absent from this room. You can't put refugees in one monolith, as the experiences are vast. So I will tell you my thoughts.

The SDGs are for UN Member States a way to measure progress. But for all those people I just mentioned, for the 110 million displaced right now, and for me, my sisters and too many friends, any failure to achieve the SDGs is a measure of my misery.

I am a student of storytelling, theater and film. And so I am familiar with what Spike Lee called the Magical Negro, the wise Black character whose access to wisdom is derived from his suffering. He helps the narrative along by helping the White character on his journey. He is critical, but not central. He is the path towards redemption, but that redemption is never his.

Every refugee is fighting for redemption. Collective redemption. We engage in mutual aid. We start Refugee Led Organizations. We counsel each other, we rescue our friends from violent men. We help our sisters, even if we do not share the same mother. We are in need of your help, but we should also be held up as an example of how help should be delivered.

So I'm not here to provide redemption. Like Jeremiah, I'm here to stand up. I'm here to tell you: for each SDG that fails to be achieved, a refugee works to achieve it. My sisters were born in a refugee camp, still live in a refugee camp. How messed up is that.

You invited me here to tell you my story. I go to many forums where my story holds audiences rapt with attention. I can elicit empathy. I can make you mad. But let me tell you today, I am determined to write my own story, and for my sisters to write theirs. And I will not wait for you to achieve these SDGs. My life is too short, time is slow and against me and the forces against me are too great for me to wait.

My hope is at this forum you will feel the same urgency as me, this Jeremiah standing before you, asking you to stop measuring my misery and instead join in my liberation. Liberate me and

my sisters so we can write our own stories without the violence of war, of men, of the fathers that try to control our destiny. Don't cast us in the role of the Magical Negro, or the remarkable refugee. We don't want to be resilient and thrive because of our misery. We were born free. Let us live free. The adversity we face is not a testament to our character, it is a witness to our collective failure.

Don't let this forum end in failure. Support mutual aid. Support Refugee Led Organizations. Support our liberation from powers that seek to oppress, to control, to confine, and to keep us in limbo in camps scattered around the world.

Tragically, my story is not unique, so I will not try to make it sound representative of so many who suffer. I challenge you to invite more people like me, who suffer from our failure to achieve the SDGs, to join forums like these, speak their truth, tell their stories, and provide a model for what to do when you find your world on fire. I hope next year, we will be looking back at the wonderful steps we took, what we achieved, and with everyone represented.

We talk about not leaving anyone behind, and so I hope you do not leave refugees behind, and that next year, I won't be the only person in this room speaking on behalf of 110 million displaced people.