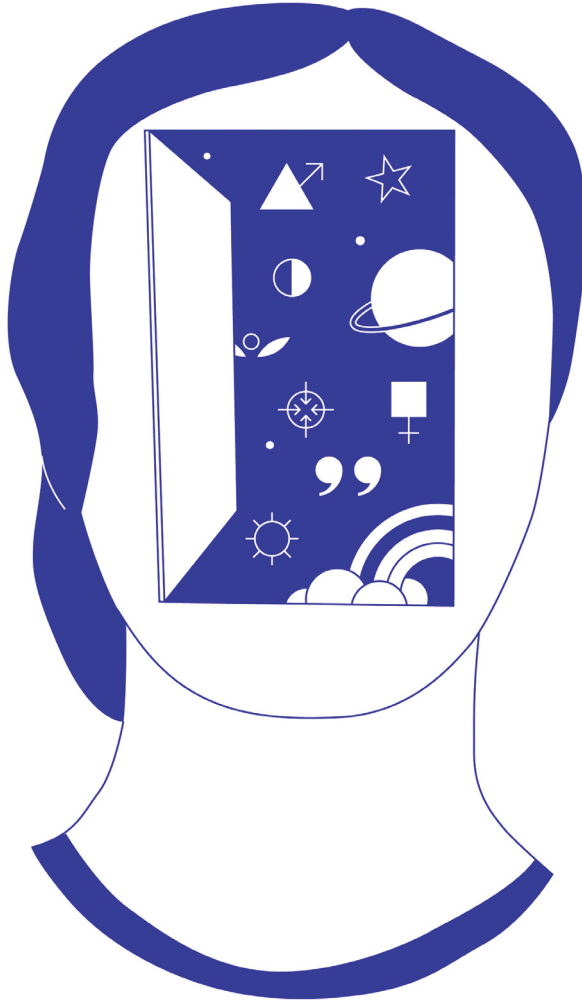




UNHCR
The UN Refugee Agency



Explorations in inclusion, diversity, gender equity and innovation in UNHCR

REFLECTIONS

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UNHCR Innovation Service
in collaboration with UNHCR's Senior Advisor – Inclusion, Diversity and Gender Equity

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“By innovatively embracing the realities of the role of cognitive and behavioural psychology in our work culture, we stand to gain dividends, where before we found detriment. If you don’t believe that this conversation is really relevant to you, then you run the risk of being a part of the problem.”

In this project, we took some time to reflect on the most latent of innovations. We believe the quest to discover and discuss inclusion, diversity and gender equity will improve our work environments and, crucially, our services to Persons of Concern.

We wanted to dig beneath the surface of our conversations around diversity and inclusion to help paint a picture of the changes UNHCR wants to see. To this end, we have collated written explorations of pressing diversity challenges in the organisation, extended recorded interviews with colleagues who have experienced the difficulties of exclusion and merits of inclusion, and an artistic examination of the visual landscape of human interactions and systematic bias formation.

On an individual level, we have found that an awareness and appreciation of the values of diversity and inclusion, particularly in

an organisation such as UNHCR, are a vital asset to the international civil servant’s professional arsenal. The emotional, ethical, and economic arguments in favour of this movement are the natural conclusion of the values that underpin the humanitarian cause more broadly.

By innovatively embracing the realities of the role of cognitive and behavioural psychology in our work culture, we stand to gain dividends, where before we found detriment. If you don’t believe that this conversation is really relevant to you, then you run the risk of being a part of the problem.

We need the honesty to reflect on our biases and behaviours, the courage to change them, and the humility to hasten to reflect once again. If you would like to join us in the pursuit of an even more diverse, inclusive and equitable UNHCR, get in touch and share your reflections.



Q&A WITH UNHCR INNOVATION'S DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION PROJECT LEAD

In the summer of 2018, Cian McAlone led UNHCR's Diversity and Inclusion project with the support of the Innovation Service's Communication and Design team. During his internship, he had the opportunity to interview and engage colleagues from across the organisation and build conversations around how we can have a more systematic approach to diversity and inclusion at UNHCR. These are his reflections on the process, lessons learned, and future opportunities for the project on his final day with the team.

What were your expectations for the project when you began? Did they change?

My expectations were rather vague in the beginning. The first elements we focused on were defining the project, scope, and overall thematics. Our first question was not about communication products but how do we move from the Innovation Service's Women's Series to a more comprehensive approach to diversity and inclusion. Initially, the idea of a podcast was thrown around a lot, and really thinking about bringing audio content and the voices of UNHCR colleagues into the fold. I had expectations around that, even though that's not exactly what we have now, it did inform the style, how we engaged people, and the process before interviews took place. I also didn't expect the discussion to be so far-reaching. I imagined that it would be difficult to bring all of these stories and ideas into a product, and indeed it was quite a challenge.

Who do you believe is the target audience for the content you've created?

Colleagues in general, anyone working in UNHCR who wants to think about where we're at when it comes to diversity and inclusion. There is also a lot in the products about how we go about change that I think is useful to people outside the organisation. What are the attitudes we need to change? What are the behaviours? It is a good initial exploration of the topics. I also hope it will resonate more specifically with managers in

the humanitarian sector. Managers have a key role in setting team cultures, the diversity vibe tends to vary between teams and subsets. The people who can make the most impact are those who lead the teams and shape that culture. As the series progresses, I imagine that future products can state that more explicitly.

What has been the most surprising aspect of the process of leading this project?

The most surprising thing is when you stumble across sensitivities. Anyone can have this conversation about being more inclusive, and say "diversity is a good thing". But then people begin expressing this through their own experiences, and you hear some negative personal stories, and they feel quite compelled to change the culture as a result. It was raw, core, personal experiences that were leading that change. Exclusion is not just bad for an organisation, it's bad for someone's self-worth, and their sense of identity.

Has your understanding of diversity and inclusion changed since you began the project?

It has changed in that it has become a lot more thorough. I see it in a more nuanced way. But what was that change? To be honest, I came to the project with an understanding of diversity and inclusion as almost meaning the same thing. I came into the project thinking that the main motivation for having

an organisation that is diverse and inclusive is that it's about the people we are serving, and how we reflect the diversity of cultures we serve. In reality, that's only one piece. When I go back to the "Why is diversity and inclusion important?" question, my understanding of that has radically changed.

What are your hopes for the project after you leave? What changes do you believe this project could catalyse?

My hopes are, in terms of communication products, I hope that there is a package of engaging stories and content that people will not only engage with but take action and learning from. I hope then that whoever listens to it, takes the action of understanding their biases, but it doesn't end there. I hope they also go to their teams to reflect on the dynamics, that we sometimes assume are just part of a team's makeup, and get miscategorised as the team's inherent, unchangeable character. I think there is a lot of space to bring in conscious awareness of how these biases impact others and lead to behaviour change. Will the products that we made do that? Maybe not. But I think it will strike chords with some people. This is just the beginning - we can test our assumptions that these stories and insights lead to a culture change, and continue to experiment.

Through the stories you've captured, what opportunities are there to change the behaviours and mindsets of people in UNHCR?

There are a few areas when it comes to policy, where UNHCR can improve. That means that our target audience also includes colleagues in human resources who are conducting interview processes, and applications. What are their insights and how can we leverage their expertise and experience better? But it's not just looking at the pool of candidates, but thinking about the questions we are asking. Are we really looking at competencies? Is it really important to have inclusive attitudes before they come on board? Then recognising specific groups - like people with disabilities, for example. Is UNHCR ambitious enough in terms of its workforce to put in the resources to making organisational workplaces more accessible? Do LGBTI colleagues have access to support services and appropriate mechanisms when they are serving in operations in countries that have widespread anti-LGBTI sentiment? The organisation has to throw resources behind being more inclusive and this means also looking at policy, human resources, and staff welfare. I think it's healthy for an organisation to adopt a positively and honestly self-critical approach to the challenges facing its workforce.

What behaviours, techniques or decisions could allow UNHCR to better function with a diverse staff?

Functioning as a diverse staff requires inspiring confidence in colleagues that diversity and inclusion are core values. This can be achieved through improving the

representation of minority groups at various levels of the organisation, by prioritising training to teach the skills necessary to overcome biases and to create equitable work environments, and by addressing the concerns of those who feel held back as a result of some aspect of their identity. Transformative change comes from a broad awareness in a group of people who can instantly identify certain views and behaviours as damaging and others as advantageous. Creating this level of awareness comes from a range of techniques, across policy, resource allocation and organisational discourse.

What do you see as the fundamental characteristics, principles or values of UNHCR that create an inclusive environment?

If you look at our function in international law, we're helping people who have had to flee their system of protection, and bringing them back in with regards to having access to basic human rights. If you look at where UNHCR is being progressive, where it puts pressure on groups to fulfil its mandate, like advocating for LGBTI refugees, I'm sure it steps on lots of toes through that advocacy. It's in the fabric of UNHCR to do this, but sometimes we're lagging behind in terms of this emphasis internally. We can equip our Refugee Status Determination (RSD) Officers to interview LGBTI refugees, but are we comprehensively equipping managers to be inclusive for LGBTI colleagues? We're equipped to make the change, but often we don't. For some

colleagues, it can seem hypocritical. There is also a link with the effectiveness of work. Who are we applying pressure to in both of these situations? Is that somehow easier than taking on the internal mechanisms of the UN? Why are these changes so difficult? If we care passionately about supporting refugees from this background, why can we be so slow to care and implement changes at an organisational level? And more importantly, who is benefiting from this exclusion? I think we have to continually question our values and principles as an organisation. I don't have the answers to these questions, but I hope that we can begin reflecting so that we can create a more inclusive environment. We still have a lot of work to get done.

You mentioned exclusion. So, who is benefiting from exclusion?

Obviously, this is context-dependent, but often signifiers of advantage or privilege are being educated, traditional, Western, straight, male. You have to look at international civil servant culture, what are the entry points? Who is sought for these roles and how? That reveals who stands to benefit from it. There are usually people who benefit financially from exclusion. People who are occupying positions that have the power to make changes, what is holding them back from turning the switch on the approach? It could be the same type of defensiveness that comes out of other conversations, when we talk about identity and privilege. In the end, it is their personal narrative that is

being challenged, and we interpret our lives, our story in a way that frames ourselves as the hero. It's an internal narrative, so when you confront someone that challenges this narrative and their accomplishments and suggests they're here because of systematic biases, discrimination, privilege. This messes with someone's understanding of themselves. And it's hard to be that honest with yourself or reconcile the two narratives.

Where would you like to see this project go next or how would you like it to evolve?

First, I'd like to see it finished, or at least the first iteration of it. I think there are areas of the debate that may have been left out. I think we should continue to experiment. We've looked at it thematically, but I think we should aim to explore with case studies. In-depth examples of challenging environments when it comes to diversity and inclusion, so, for example, we could go to a specific field office where there is a known tension between different ethnic groups. Inclusion in respect to international and national staff is a potential area of exploration. Also in terms of products, I wonder...it's hard to answer without experimenting with what we have now. A feedback process to capture how people respond to this, where are the gaps? There's an element that isn't purely communication-based, there are tangible projects that we can do to follow-up on this series. There are many challenges, that don't have to do with attitudes but actual problems. So putting these challenges

through the innovation process, beyond trying to just educate, raise awareness and looking at behaviours. The systems thinking approach could be brought into this a lot more, it's an incredibly complex issue, from individual/behavioural problems all the way to the widest global power dynamics. This problem slices through the centre of all of that. Narratives that can walk people through these complexities are important.

What have you learned through conducting this project?

I've learned a lot about interviewing people. When you're speaking to someone about something that has an emotional component, especially when it reflects the difficult experiences they have had, how can you create the ease and the trust when the information they're sharing is critical of the organisation they're working for, possibly critical of colleagues (colleagues that fit the profile of benefiting when others are not). I've also learned about the metrics of the conversations, the labels we're using. The categories are useful in certain contexts, and verging on useless in others. We sometimes see categories as "universally true". Identifying women who did not have the right to vote as a group, for female emancipation, that was effective to rally people around a situation, that's why there's a label. In the political, policy sphere, these labels are useful - LGBT, ethnic minorities, cultural labels, they are good tools. But it's a different story on the interpersonal

level. I'm honestly not sure how useful it is when building relationships, to use labels as indicators of experiences. What does it mean to employ this label in interpersonal relationships? It's just something you use to suggest an element of your experience and how that relates to experience, in a way it's a password. We need to be careful to not use this as an exercise of simplification and siloing, that you are this label. Another huge element of being a humanitarian is making use of the flexibility of identity as a tool for peacebuilding, how we understand ourselves. It's a really important tool to create bridges, bring communities together... the labels could have a negative effect on how we see ourselves. If there's flexibility in understanding yourself, it's really useful for social innovation.

Given what you've learned, how should we nurture talent that we do not understand/relate to?

It's very difficult to nurture something you don't understand. How do we nurture talent we struggle to relate to? We inform ourselves about how we can relate to them. From understanding their experiences, culture, instincts, you can find a path that allows you to communicate effectively. I don't even think we're really at a point that this is the most pressing question - you need to make an effort first to bring that talent in. The prevailing issue is that we often bring people into the organisation with the same profiles. Again, I think part of it is about investing in

these spaces. Put more money into welfare, training on diversity, give people the tools to communicate in multicultural environments. Maybe we should be looking at how UNHCR functions as a subculture in all our different local contexts. And if we could start embracing the idea of nurturing organisational culture, and thinking of it as this precious thing we shape, and change and hold dear. But how can you begin to envision that culture if we're looking at UNHCR as a self-contained unit, and not as an organisation with many parts functioning in multiple contexts, in multiple ecosystems?

Who would you recommend as 'bright spots' - and why?

Bright spots, generally speaking could be the people who already get it, care about it, and are talking about it. There was a spectrum of people who responded to the project with different levels of enthusiasm. The ones who care, these are the foot soldiers of the movement that are holding others to account. The people I interviewed are the bright spots, they are eloquently talking about the issue, they have that competency, they're leading the charge.

What were the most challenging aspects of the work, including the coordination, etc?

In terms of the initial podcast idea we had, the expertise and technical needs were very challenging. It's the difference between a

video clip and a television program. The capacity challenges led us to switch our focus to content production. I think that we've explored the issue more now, that's the clay that could lay the foundation for something bigger. In terms of reaching out to people in a diverse way, it's difficult to target specific areas geographically, it's difficult to maintain interest across a process that requires a degree of preparation, and even my position as an intern impacted on how people saw my request and whether it was worth their time. The project had inputs from Lauren and Hans (the Innovation Service's Communication and Design team) throughout the process, but it wasn't benefitting from collaboration from the entire Innovation Service team. In reality, I didn't solicit enough feedback throughout the process, being nervous about the project, so maybe it was my fault. There wasn't huge curiosity from the team. Although, the team does care about diversity and inclusion as values to carry forward in our work. Most of them, I think. But for some people in the team, as this topic does for many, the content can have the same alienating effect of undermining comfortable narratives of who we are, and our own privileges, if we truly bought into these ideas and listened. I hope some people in the team who wouldn't normally engage in this space listen to the interviews and read the articles. We can all strive to do better.

If you could start over, what two things would you do differently?

I would bring the innovation process into it from the beginning. I should have experimented with forms and processes - I should have seen it as a series of experiments and not just one large experiment. The project would be populated with more examples from outside of UNHCR's Headquarters. I ask myself, "What would these products look like if they were designed and informed in a specific context and how would that help us to paint the picture? How could it make it a more engaging project? What greater access would you have to different voices? Who has space to speak? Marginalised voices are not the first to be picked up. But this is the network of voices we have to create, even if it's in its infancy right now. These are the voices that need to be heard the most.

WHY INNOVATION NEEDS DIVERSITY

BY CIAN MCALONE,
INNOVATION CONSULTANT

If 'innovation' refers not to the presence of novel ideas, but to the process of realising ideas that create value, then an innovative approach to diversity will be concerned with the process of making diversity work; diversity is the precondition, and inclusion is the process. The diversity of a team reflects the number of ideas and competencies around the table, whereas the inclusivity of a team reflects how such expertise is leveraged, how biases and hierarchies are understood and navigated, and how physically, culturally, and socially accessible it is to contribute and operate in the workspace. Why is diversity important to innovation? How do we make multicultural teams more inclusive? What do diversity and inclusion mean when designing solutions to refugee challenges? This article will help you to answer these questions.

Many of the qualities and values that we associate with innovation are definitionally diverse and inclusive: imagination and creativity are processes that are built on a multiplicity of ideas and understandings, synthesised in new and divergent ways. Ideation, experimentation, and scaling are all made possible and enhanced by a diverse expertise, leveraged in an inclusive team culture. Many pioneering examples of

humanitarian innovation have, for example, refugee and community-led design at their heart. Whilst not all community-led initiatives are diverse and inclusive, projects that move beyond a tokenistic inclusion towards a comprehensive inclusion benefit from a diversity of experiences, perspectives, and expertise that often results in sustainable, adaptable, and inspired solutions. The alternative is solutions that don't understand problems in all their complexity, solutions that lack the knowledge of how challenges and solutions have been approached in other contexts, or challenges narrowly perceived through a homogeneous lens. At best, a lack of diversity and inclusion represents a lack of ambition, at worst, it can lead to squandered resources and problematic interventions.

Our Jetson Experience

The Innovation Service has experience of its own that speaks to the merits of diverse and inclusive project teams. Our Jetson Project team, which works to predict migration patterns based on climatic and economic datasets in Somalia, is a particularly good example. Rebeca (who is Mexican) is the technical lead and Data Scientist, Sofia (who is Albanian-Greek) is the artificial intelligence and machine learning expert. Babusi (who is Zimbabwean) takes the lead on user-experience and interface, and Hans

(who is a Swedish-speaking Finnish Korean) takes a project management and strategic development role.

“We were not just looking for those with the relevant technical skill sets for the team, but for those with unique perspectives on displacement in multiple contexts, a range of educational and professional backgrounds, and a willingness to experiment and question assumptions,” Hans explained. When asked how to tell if a team is functioning inclusively or not, Hans elaborated, “You notice it especially by contrast when it’s not working, when you’re in a non-diverse team. In a diverse and inclusive team, there’s often less of a focus on hierarchy, and more of a bent towards ‘adhocracy’ – a commitment to diversity isn’t necessarily a cleaner process, but it tends to be more dynamic and rigorous, and that’s how it can foster innovation.”

When discussing how Jetson may be brought to scale, it was the cognitive diversity that brought the conversation from geographical/regional scaling towards developing the nature of the product itself. Project Jetson’s experience demonstrates the positive impact that comes from having a variety of viewpoints and realities colliding in the exchange of divergent interpretations and challenged assumptions. The heightened patience and the more challenging dialogue that such an inclusive approach necessitates is the challenging process that improves outcomes and enhances creativity.

How can we facilitate inclusion?

To facilitate a diverse team, each team member must engage in a process of bias awareness. Managers and supervisors need to be aware of the range of personalities, behaviours, cultural norms, experiences, competencies, and prejudices of their colleagues, and design the team’s work processes around them. This approach ensures that the richness of diversity and the plurality of ideas do not fall between the subtle cracks of bias, chauvinism or racism.

It is also imperative that inclusion is built into the fabric of HR practices: accounting for a range of linguistic abilities, non-discrimination in interviews against those who think in ways not favoured by Western education systems, on-boarding and training that sets inclusive work cultures as a requirement. Overall, when teams get down to tackling the complexities of a challenge, there should be an atmosphere in which the composite members of the team can offer their insights and thoughts without fear that they are speaking above their station, that their accent and language level reflects their competence, and that contributions are not unfairly subject to unconscious and conscious prejudice. To be specific, an inclusive work environment relies on a combination of individuals’ skills, knowledge, and values. Observation, patience, and listening skills are necessary in tandem with cultural self-awareness, and cultural and socio-linguistic knowledge.

These skill and knowledge sets need to be driven by a value-set that includes respect, open-mindedness, and tolerance. We should strive to avoid behaving and communicating along ingrained notions of authority, and we should work out what behaviours and communication styles catalyse the greatest engagement.

Diversity is a stepping stone to equality, inclusion is the step. The profitability and organisational benefits of a diverse and inclusive work culture are clear to be seen in areas of the private sector. Humanitarians should be motivated both by the successes that diversity and inclusion can bring - but also by the advancement of fairness and equality that it represents. Innovation is not always about the new, and the idea of an international workforce working harmoniously is not new to multilateral organisations such as UNHCR. It is time to take a further step. Global organisations that transcend global hierarchies to reflect the spectrum of human experience and perspectives will enrich how we understand problems, and enhance our collective intelligence as we design and implement solutions. In an era where inequalities are being challenged energetically, global institutions depend on equitable workforces for factors as rudimentary as the authority of their voice.

Don’t get lost in a complicated debate. Think about how you can be more inclusive in your interactions, both personal and professional.

Here are some suggestions to get you started:

How to make a team more inclusive:

1. Reflect on who contributes most and least in meetings and discussions;
2. Reflect on how your colleagues’ accents and language affects how you interpret what they say - do these same words sound more authoritative to you in a ‘native’ accent;
3. Reflect on the cultural/religious/social backgrounds of your colleagues and consider how this may influence the manner of their participation;
4. Deconstruct and challenge the nature of your team’s power dynamics and intentional and unintentional hierarchies;
5. Engage with colleagues through both private and open conversation to establish the blocks and the incentives to contribution and active participation;
6. Encourage a safe space for reflection, suggesting ideas, and pair with a constructive feedback mechanism.

This article attempts to scratch the surface of the discussion on why diversity and inclusion are to innovation, what skill and agility are to sport. A football team would struggle if all their players were strikers or if they didn’t make use of every player on the pitch. Please help us expand this movement by submitting your stories and experiences that expand our understanding of diversity challenges, and how we overcome them.

HOW YOU CAN TAKE SIMPLE ACTIONS FOR GENDER EQUITY IN THE WORKPLACE

BY CAROLINE HARPER JANTUAH,
SENIOR ADVISOR - INCLUSION,
DIVERSITY AND GENDER EQUITY

New ways of thinking and innovation are really important to our organisation. Whilst the prime cause of our work has not changed, the scale and the nature of the issues we seek to address has. We cannot hope to solve them with old solutions or traditional ways of thinking. Hence our ability to innovate becomes a core competence – new ideas, new strategies, new ways of engaging and relating have become critical to our organisation’s ability to adapt and respond to ever-changing challenges.

Women at the table in our strategy and decision-making sessions bring their own characteristic approaches to leading and managing. Women have different life experiences to men and therefore when they are involved, they bring a different perspective to the table. The majority of the people we serve are women and children – seeing women in our workforce is reassuring for them and instils confidence that as an organisation we are in a position to better understand and provide for their needs. Men and women have different life experiences and see the world differently – having access to this diversity better ensures we look at the issues we are trying to resolve from multiple angles.

Additionally, there’s a lot of evidence to show that women are quite naturally talented with the 21st century competencies that really make a difference – more naturally collaborative and inclusive; stronger empathy skills; stronger in diplomacy skills, interpersonal and communication skills; there is evidence to show that the attention to integrity increases as does the attention to impact of decisions on others when there is greater gender balance.

Women are no less ambitious than men, however, their criteria for success may differ; incorporating a more holistic basket of considerations. It is clear from surveys, and from our data analyses that their experiences in the organisation are different by virtue of being female. For example, there are quite a few functional areas where there are fewer women than men - partially because women are not typically associated with careers in those fields – e.g. in ICT; in Field Safety; in Registration; shelter and physical planning to name a few - but also in operational data management; public health/HIV, project financial control - women are succeeding less well than men. Similarly, in terms of rates of progress to senior level roles – a challenge is to shift the tendency for appointments to go to more men than equally qualified



women. I believe there is both an individual and systemic, largely unconscious, bias in the system where we struggle to associate leadership with our women.

Another major challenge is our mandatory rotation system which has a more adverse impact on women than men; especially those women with children. It makes it more difficult for them to balance their career ambitions with other commitments. The majority of our locations are in the deep-field and the conditions are arduous. Also, the cultural context of the location often makes living and working there more of a challenge for women. We notice that women in UNHCR are more likely to remain single and tend to have fewer children than their male colleagues. Acknowledging and tackling such systematic biases is a key challenge for the organisation in its pursuit of gender equity.

The review of our progress in respect of Inclusion, Diversity and Gender Equity in 2015 highlighted that whilst we had made some progress there is still much work to be done to ensure that we have an environment that supports the diversity of our workforce and approaches our work with an inclusive mindset.

There is a responsibility on the part of the organisation to ensure that we put in place checks and balances around gender equity, and that we implement processes and policies. But I would say first and foremost it has to start with each of us at a very individual

and personal level. We can make a lot of difference if we take an honest look at our own behaviours and take the time to uncover what our unconscious biases might be from a gender and diversity perspective. It's vital that we actually take time to stop and reflect on how our behaviours may be contributing to this. Unconscious bias is something we all have; learning more about our biases and taking steps to mitigate the negative impact is key.

Let us not underestimate the power of small changes in our daily actions. These can be very simple things like stopping to consider who it is you go to for consulting on a particular issue – how diverse is that go-to group of people? How can you mix that up? Another example is in terms of meetings. Who is invited to the meeting and how diverse is that group? Once you get to the meeting, whose voice is heard? Do you notice those who are not getting the opportunity to speak up? I think these small things can have a huge impact on the quality of the work environment and how inclusive it actually is. Another important way we can advance gender equity is speaking up when we see unfair practices against our colleagues. The responsibility for changing the experience of women in UNHCR is all of ours to share. What concrete steps will you take today to play your part?

“There is a responsibility on part of the organisation to ensure that we put in place checks and balances around gender equity, and that we have processes and policies. But I would say first and foremost it has to start with each of us at a very individual and personal level.”



INNOVATION NEEDS TO BE ACCESSIBLE AND INCLUSIVE. STOP WITH THE GIMMICKS, CATCH UP.

BY CHRIS EARNEY,
HEAD, A.I.,
UNHCR INNOVATION SERVICE

The title says it all. You either get this, or you're pushing tech and getting your bosses to be excited about products with little success in sustainability, and missing opportunities to innovate processes and approaches.

Our version of the truth is, that if you're not making innovation accessible, making it inclusive, and encouraging diversity, then you're not doing what needs to be done to make innovation as effective as it should be.

We work in an organisation with a workforce of around 15,000 people, in around 125 operations. We provide protection and assistance to millions of people. We've had to be innovative and we've had to innovate over the past 70 years in order to fulfil our role. We've recently reached a new stage in our organisation's direction that our team will also need to support with: the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF), which requires a new way of working, and much, much more inclusive innovation. It also requires that we work more collaboratively with the 'whole of society'. That is to say, a vast array of partners, a vast array of individuals, and a vast array of thoughts, and understandings. More diversity, more innovation, more flexibility.

Internally we need to equip and re-equip our organisation, and the people who work for it, to be now-ready, and future-ready. Innovation helps us to adapt and to iterate constantly. The cynics will say that innovation is a buzzword. It's not. The cynics will say with patriarchal under(over)tones, 'what we *really* need is...'. It's not. And the cynics will pick apart new approaches, because, well, that's what they do. Nevertheless, naysayers are important players and their thoughts are also needed. The more counter-thoughts, the more critiques, the better. Welcome: you'll make us stronger, and better. Thanks for your free consultation.

Within our team, we try to practice what we preach, and we'll need to do more in order

to drive even more innovation within, and outside of our organisation. Some practical things we do:

1. We hire diversity. This means of background, experience, thought, gender, and much more. Don't hire the person who talks a good game, or who has been referred to us. We'll hire the person that takes longer to understand because they have more substance. Don't talk about how to hire diversity – you don't need a policy on this, just go and do it. Our team is 72% female. We speak 14 languages and come from ten countries. We have a range of sexual orientations. Our backgrounds are extremely diverse, from geography to architecture, and we know that we can be more diverse, still.

2. We make diversity and inclusion the first thing we talk about when we talk about innovation, and explain why. At UNHCR, we want innovation to be as accessible as possible, because we want to make as much use of the diversity of our staff – their thoughts, their rich experiences, their expertise. If innovation is confined to how we use new technology, we're clearly missing a massive opportunity for our organisation, and for those we serve – including opportunities to innovate systems, and processes. Make it the first thing that your bosses talk about when they talk about innovation. Put it on the agenda, and push it. It's central to our work this year and will continue to be until we cease to exist.

“We make diversity and inclusion the first thing we talk about when we talk about innovation, and explain why. At UNHCR, we want innovation to be as accessible as possible, because we want to make as much use of the diversity of our staff – their thoughts, their rich experiences, their expertise.”

3. In a privileged position that gives you a perceived or real influence over others, make the best use of it. Are you a white male in a room full of white males talking about innovation? Point it out, make people uncomfortable, make people think, and make people question. Asked for your opinion on something because you're 'the boss'? Ask the better-suited team member to provide it. Others will follow suit.

4. Do not accept anything other than exemplary respect in your innovation team – everyone is there because they have something to offer, especially if it is off-the-wall. Your team's positive and inclusive culture will infect and influence other teams.

5. Don't attend or participate in manels (all male panels) on innovation, technology, or any other subject. Full stop. Go further: recommend a female colleague in your place. Sometimes it's uncomfortable for people, sure, but it gets better results.

6. Use and be open to a diverse array of communication media, methods, and styles. Not everybody wants to communicate face-to-face, or in that meeting. Pre-meeting, during meeting, post-meeting, be open and active in gleaning from those perspectives. We're not all good at public speaking, and those with complicated thoughts, or ideas, sometimes need several ways to communicate these to you, or to the team, or to others.

7. To innovate, we need to collaborate. UNHCR doesn't have the answers, the experiences, or the expertise to solve many of the challenges that refugees and others face today, or tomorrow. So, to solve these challenges, we need to partner strategically. We need knowledge, and we need expertise because we're in a new reality now. That's why non-traditional partnerships are key, and why we have over 25 excellent partners from the University of Florida, through to UN Global Pulse. Be open to collaboration.

8. Recognise the value that technology has to play, and the opportunities it has to offer – be opportunistic at times, but do not get lost in modernisation efforts, or worse, efforts to find an operation in which to land the newest tech.

9. Recognise profiles of people not necessarily so obviously linked to innovation. These people and functions will make or break your sustainability, whereas unrecognised prosaic spaces can stifle innovation teams and efforts. Procurement, legal agreements, programming, budgets, staff capacities and competencies, these can derail a project before it's even begun. Read that manual. Talk to that admin person. Get in their jogging path. Include them.

Our challenge isn't how to innovate more; our challenge is how to synthesise and understand more. Diversity and inclusion help us to do that. Fetishising technology does not.

WHY WE'RE DOING A SERIES ON WOMEN IN THE HUMANITARIAN SECTOR

BY LAUREN PARATER, INNOVATION COMMUNITY AND CONTENT MANAGER, AND HANS PARK, STRATEGIC DESIGN AND RESEARCH MANAGER

“Being a woman in this field has both its advantages and its challenges. I know that there have been so many achievements in terms of gender parity and making sure we’re aware – not only for refugees and beneficiaries but also for the staff. But I think we still have quite a far way to go,” says Joung-ah.

Why innovation and women?

Our experience is that innovation is often associated with technology, and technology often associated with men. The Innovation Service and its partners have worked in innovation collectively for years, across different sectors and locations, and we all recognise that innovation is not only about technology and certainly not about men. Technology alone will never be enough for humanitarian innovation – we need collaboration and cross-disciplinary fertilisation that enables new ideas and ways of thinking.

In 2016, only 25% of the people who applied to the Innovation Fellowship were women – a percentage that does not reflect the diversity or reality of our organisation. Did people

also think humanitarian innovation was also only about men? Were we as a team missing something? This was one of the assumptions we wanted to test through this series, using the innovation process to answer questions we had about our own organisation.

For UNHCR to move forward and address the challenges of the twenty-first century we have to innovate and to innovate we have to collaborate, and we want to ensure that women’s voices are a part of that conversation and process.

As we began asking our colleagues questions around these issues, we also realised that this was an opportunity to not only talk about women and innovation but the role of women in UNHCR and what gender means in the workplace. Through these conversations, we

found that women in the organisation were eager to have a space, to be frank, open, and transparent about the role of women in the humanitarian field. We are absolutely not the first to realise or attempt something like this – people have been active in bringing these issues to the table. But we saw the opportunity to engage women on action-oriented and innovative approaches to address some of the challenges that haven’t been solved.

Quickly the conversations we were having shifted to being less about innovation, which is something we’re excited about. Soon we had participants recommending other women to participate in the series and we recognised this as an opportunity to dig deeper into what it meant to be a woman working in the humanitarian system.

So the Innovation Service launched the Women Series, now with multiple goals; to spotlight what challenges and opportunities women face in UNHCR, to highlight concrete actions we can take to address some of these challenges, and to better understand women’s take and role in humanitarian innovation.

“UNHCR fights so much for women empowerment and for refugee women to be empowered but then somehow that doesn’t get reflected to the inside...to those who provide services to refugees,” explains Margarida

This series is meant to be contributing to an already ongoing discussion in-house and within the broader humanitarian system. We believe that by having an open discussion (with action-oriented goals) about the institutional and professional biases around what gender means in the workplace, we can be part of a change, something that is fundamental to innovation, and applying innovation in UNHCR.

Reflecting on your own biases and actions

Gender diversity in the workplace has been a hot-topic issue for those working strictly in technology and innovation, and something that has played out openly in the media. In the humanitarian sector, there have been real strides and accomplishments over the past decades but we also have to be willing to come out and say we haven’t figured it all out either.

Each person has biases surrounding gender that is not often noticed at the individual level. With this series, we are starting with the ones that affect the working environment for women in this organisation. We do not just want to raise awareness of this issue but also look at concrete actions we can take to address it. This is not just our conversation to have, but one we want to build on from previous work, and to be driven by each person within the organisation.

Our view is that as an organisation we can

do better and we can also tap into the innovative ideas of women at UNHCR to drive this change. We see within our team, other teams at HQ, and in the field, the consequences that unconscious biases can have on UNHCR's workplace. One of the first steps we can take as individuals within UNHCR is reflecting on these simple day-to-day actions and how we might make simple changes to our own behaviours.

“We can make a lot of difference if we take an honest look at our own behaviours and take the time to uncover what our unconscious biases might be from a gender and diversity perspective. Very simple things like stopping to consider who it is you go to for consulting on a particular issue – how diverse is that go-to group of people? How can you mix that up? Another example is in terms of meetings, who is invited to the meeting and how diverse is that? Once you actually get to the meeting, whose voice is heard? Do you notice those who don't get the opportunity to speak up? I think very simple things like that can have a huge impact on the quality of the work environment and how inclusive it actually is,” explains Caroline, UNHCR's Senior Advisor for Inclusion, Diversity, and Gender Equity.

While there is a responsibility on the organisation to ensure that we have the right processes and policies in place, this behaviour change must also begin at the

individual level. And we hope these videos can be a catalyst for some of these changes.

“Women are still underrepresented in leadership positions. UNHCR is a strange organisation and we work in very difficult situations, and sometimes it might not be the best situation for a woman to work. But nevertheless, we have many other positions where women can be represented at the senior level. And after so many years of it being an issue on the agenda – we should get it right and I think we can get it right,” says Astrid.





This past year it has been a pleasure to collaborate with UNHCR's Innovation Service. A pleasure because the dialogue with Hans and Lauren is engaging and always expanding to look at questions with fresh and critical eyes. It has been an active exchange in which their concepts and ideas inspire me, while the sketches I do in response, are for them inspiring and interesting interpretations of complex challenges UNHCR and the humanitarian innovation sector is facing. I believe it is a symbiotic partnership where both sides can learn.

One of my favourite parts of the collaboration during 2018 and 2019 was the 'inclusion project', a series of interviews initially dealing with the difficulties faced by women within UNHCR and then extending to an intersectional approach, covering a range of issues - from gender to language biases. Listening to the interviews from this project made me realise how discrimination happens on different levels, at different intensities. Some differences seem negligible, but still, they can create frictions with our sense of ease, and our ability to work at our best, and to participate actively in a team project.

I found myself relating to the difficulties created by verbal expression mentioned in the audio interviews. Language competence and fluency, all the way to cultural backgrounds, formations, economic origin, sexual orientation, religion, gender are all differences that if not approached in an inclusive way might create difficulties, barriers and exclusions.

The illustrations I created for this publication and project focus on the state of mind that views all of these differences as a source of richness; human richness, the wealth that really matters. Each of us has an inner universe that's the result of a personal path, origin, background, selection of interests and experiences. That's something we should value. It's something to be curious about, something that should spark the gentle discovery of others, and something to be proud of as our inner universes interact and find their place in a larger collective universe.

“Each of us has an inner universe that’s the result of a personal path, origin, background, selection of interests and experiences. It’s something to be curious about, something that should spark the gentle discovery of others, and something to be proud of as our inner universes interact and find their place in a larger collective universe.”

WE NEED TO FIX THE
GENDER IMBALANCE
IN OUR STORIES ON
INNOVATION

BY LAUREN PARATER, INNOVATION
COMMUNITY AND CONTENT MANAGER

“The faces of humanitarian innovation i.e. the number ones and number twos in the media are usually white men. It’s easy to go back to the usual suspects featured at SXSW every year – but we can do better. This is the current master narrative and we want to help change it.”

Here’s how we’re going to do it.

Have you ever felt like a hypocrite? Or worse: an imposter? Both emotions have the effect of surprising you when you least expect it. We don’t actively reflect on things we don’t believe to be true – we think with our gut more than our head and science confirms this. If you’re human, you’re likely to have felt like one or both of these characteristics in your lifetime.

Recently, I felt like the former and latter after conducting a small experiment on the team. Inspired by the recently published Atlantic article, “I Spent Two Years Trying to Fix the Gender Imbalance in My Stories.” I wanted to understand the gender balance (or imbalance) in the stories we have on our website. In the article, Ed Yong, a gifted staff writer at the Atlantic who covers science, reflects on the systemic gender biases in his field as well as the exclusion of women’s voices in his stories. Yong undertook an exercise to understand the gender ratio of those interviewed and quoted and found surprising results. “I looked back at the pieces that I had published in 2016 thus far. Across all 23 of them, 24 percent of the quoted sources were women. And of those stories, 35 percent featured no female voices at all. That surprised me. I knew it wasn’t going to be 50 percent, but I didn’t think it would be that low, either,” he stated.

We did a similar experiment – with the

help of our in-house Data Scientist (or data geek as she likes to be referred), Rebeca Moreno, we used Python to sift through 163 articles on our innovation website checking for pronouns and quotes mentioned in articles. In addition, I scraped each article to identify how many authors were female vs. male and understand what the gender balance looked like when it came to who we were interviewing. We acknowledge that, of course, there is a spectrum and this conversation should not be binary – but to replicate the study and to gain a bit of insight into what we’ve published – this experiment focused on women’s experiences and voices in our content.

A total of 89 interviews took place over the period of 2015-2017 that were included in the articles we posted and only 34% of these interviews were with women. Nearly 75% of the team at the UNHCR Innovation Service are women – so it was not surprising to me that 68% of the articles were written by women. We also have an additional female consultant who supports writing essays throughout the year. And not all team members write stories for our blog but nearly all the men do. In all the interviews conducted by men on our team – only one article included an interview with a woman– in any article they wrote. Ever.

These numbers are not good and certainly not great. In one article about our Innovation Fellowship that was published last year, we interviewed three Fellows – all who

were men – to talk about how the program was changing the minds of UNHCR staff. I remember when I worked on this article, having discussions with my colleague Emilia who runs the Innovation Fellowship, and we were both concerned that none of the women we wanted to include were available before the deadline. But I made a decision to move forward. Looking back, I should have changed the deadline or completely changed the article. As I manually counted the three of them and added them to my Excel, that feeling of hypocrisy washed over me again. We weren't practising what we were preaching.

In Yong's article, he quotes his colleague Adrienne LaFrance who completed an initial exercise which inspired Yong to do one of his one. Discovering similar surprising data points for her articles, she reflects stating, "These numbers are distressing, particularly because my beats cover areas where women are already outnumbered by men—robotics, artificial intelligence, archaeology, astronomy, etc. Which means that, by failing to quote or mention very many women, I'm one of the forces actively contributing to a world in which women's skills and accomplishments are undermined or ignored, and women are excluded."

This feeling had great resonance with me. We witness day-in and day-out stereotypes play out around those working in humanitarian innovation. Blockchain, drones, biometrics: the high-profile innovations associated with

the white men at the top talking about them. While we've been very vocal that "Tech is not innovation" – I think we have also ignored part of the puzzle and the story here. Our colleagues who are supporting the more technical aspects of our work – predictive analytics, data science, artificial intelligence – are only women. Rebeca, who I mentioned previously, is an absolute data-innovation-computer loving star. Then we also have our colleague Sofia who is supporting our team as an Artificial Intelligence Engineer. They are working in fields that are outnumbered by men and we haven't been doing a good job of telling their stories, capturing their voices or those women in similar backgrounds in our organisation. I've witnessed firsthand the ugliness that men have shown towards women working in these areas and I know we have a long way to go in changing this narrative.

So we did this experiment and we realised quickly we needed to make changes.

UNHCR Innovation Women Series – a starting point

Okay before we move on, let's address the elephant in the room – yes we do have a series on women that we launched last year.

We wrote an essay titled "Why we're doing a series on women in the humanitarian sector." The series originated from a conversation my colleague Hans and I had with a senior female colleague at UNHCR. It started out

as any normal conversation does prior to an interview: here is the concept, here is our approach, here are some questions, this is lighting we have, etc. But when we began asking her what she wanted to speak to us about (and not what ideas we had in our own heads) we discovered that the stories she wanted to tell focused primarily on the challenges she faced being a woman in the humanitarian sector.

We found the perfect angle for our new series: Innovation and women. In the article I write, "Our experience is that innovation is often associated with technology, and technology often associated with men. The Innovation Service and its partners have worked in innovation collectively for years, across different sectors and locations, and we all recognise that innovation is not only about technology and certainly not about men. Technology alone will never be enough for humanitarian innovation – we need collaboration and cross-disciplinary fertilisation that enables new ideas and ways of thinking." I mentioned this idea above – it's crucial to the messaging we use as a team and our brand. And we thought we were going to do this right and we were going to address some of the biases we had about women and innovators in the humanitarian field. And you know what else we were going to do? We were not just going to talk about these challenges but start linking action-oriented goals focused on gender equity to our content. Aren't we great and progressive?

In reality, the series was focused more on giving voices to women we had worked with (at HQ and in the field operations) and the women our interviewees had also worked with, than actually speaking about innovation. They wanted to speak about their experiences and identify actions that can help us address the biases in our day-to-day work. And that's okay. We love the series and we're going to keep doing it. We believe there is a gap in the humanitarian space and these stories should be told. The majority of women we have spoken with are also innovators and have been at the forefront of transforming the organisation. But we believe that there is a larger focus needed on women innovating in the humanitarian sector and ensuring that their voices are contributing to the current trends and conversation. And on a separate note – why did we box these leaders into the "women category" to acknowledge the impact they've had in the first place?

In a way, this is exactly the problem. In order for us to speak and write about women (or women as innovators), we needed to make a series on its own. And that really bothers me. As Yong states in his article for the Atlantic, "I'm not asking people for their opinions because of their gender; I'm asking because of their expertise. Every single person I contact is qualified to speak about the particular story that I'm writing; it's just that now, half of those qualified people happen to be women." And this is where I, as a communicator, have failed in our stories and directing the conversations

and contributions. There are women who are experts in this space – but we haven't been focusing on their stories or interviewing them.

The faces of humanitarian innovation i.e. the number ones and number twos in the media are usually white men. It's easy to go back to the usual suspects featured in Fast Company or at SXSW every year – but we can do better. This is the current master narrative and we want to help change it.

I'm not saying everyone is on the same page here – there are those ahead of us. But I would challenge you to do this same experiment as a starting point and see what your numbers look like over the past few years.

Before we move on, I also want to be very clear that we have not addressed the separate issue of the total number of refugee women that were included in our content. We also calculated this: 13% of our articles had refugees that were direct authors or specifically interviewed for the article itself. This deserves a separate article that undertakes not only the question of including refugees voices in the humanitarian innovation conversation (because we all know they are the true innovators) but also defining what meaningful journalism and stories are that include "refugee voices." Ideally, these are stories written and led by refugees themselves. But again, this is for another day.

So what are we going to do about all of this?

Let's go back to diversity in teams and let me give you a few examples of how we've made changes:

- **Putting diversity and inclusion at the focus of everything we do.** Talking about it internally but also externally. We've made diversity and inclusion a core part of our vision and our objectives as a team. Our boss recently published an article titled, "Innovation is about diversity and inclusion. Stop with the gimmicks, catch up." – now we need to make sure those other voices are heard. Whether we're recruiting a new member of the team or setting up a feedback mechanism in Nigeria – we have to be accountable as it is now indispensable to how we operate.
- **Senior Management refusing to participate in panels.** The Head of our Innovation Service has been steadfast in this approach, and while it may seem like an obvious or small contribution – it's important. You can help shift the master narrative by highlighting women with expertise who can speak instead of another male panellist or usual suspect. And if they don't accept your suggestion, it's probably an event you don't want to attend anyway.
- **Ensuring there is gender balance in our innovation learning programmes.** My colleague Emilia who leads our

Innovation Fellowship programme has made sure this is a priority in how we approach our training on innovation. She told me, "I think we have made a real improvement when it comes to the gender balance in the Fellowship program. If we look back to 2015, only 25% of those applying to the Fellowship programme were women while those for our 2018 cohort has improved to 45%. While we've made progress, it is not enough. We need to make sure that women are represented in all other innovation learning activities as well. From a learning perspective, having a list of workshop participants consisting only men is not, and should never be acceptable." Again, we have work to do but if you are running similar programmes – take an active role in ensuring there is equal representation.

Moving forward – correcting the gender balance in our stories

I'll be honest – this article took me a long time to write. I wasn't really sure where to start except for trying to understand how I could personally change some of the stereotypes in our stories. There are a lot of layers and challenges to these issues that I can't sum up eloquently but I thought I'd give it a try and hope to inspire more of the humanitarian innovation tribe to also do better.

And I'm sure you have ideas and recommendations on this too - we'd love to

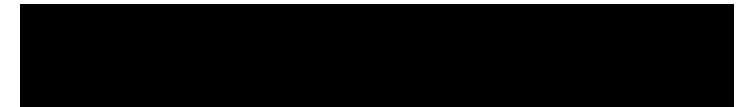
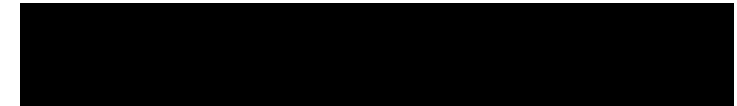
hear them. Innovation is about the diversity of thought, ideas, and opinions. Collaboration is key for us to tackle these complex issues, remember?

So, after completing our experiment, I've decided these are the actions I will take in my role to help bridge the gender balance gap in our stories:

- Interview more women on humanitarian innovation. Interview them about their work, their impact and their opinions.
- Track this. Be diligent and accountable for these statistics.
- Encourage and mandate contributors to our blog to include women's voices, ideas, opinions, and expertise in their stories.
- Have an evolving list of women with expertise throughout the humanitarian innovation space that can be interviewed.
- Hire more women writers. Hire more diverse writers in general. Purposely seek out and highlight these voices.

We won't accept the argument anymore that you couldn't find a qualified woman to interview or speak about innovation. Neither should you.

“We need an HR policy that does more than just waiting for people to arrive at our doors, but who actively seek these profiles that are not well represented within our organisation.”



SOWING THE SEEDS OF DIVERSITY IN UNHCR'S BRAZIL OPERATION



Vinicius Feitosa at the Innovation Fellowship workshop in Bangkok, 2018

The Innovation Services's Diversity and Inclusion project "Reflections" advances efforts to drive cultural change within UNHCR and the wider humanitarian ecosystem to increase diversity, inclusivity, and gender equity. The project seeks to dig beneath the surface of our conversations around inclusion and paint a picture of the change that UNHCR wants to see. Employing innovative communication methods and techniques, we have reached out to people inside and outside of UNHCR, where vibrant discussions are ongoing, to find the stories and experiences that exemplify and educate us on the lessons that, when adopted, will help drive structural and behavioural change.

One of these conversations took place with two colleagues who have created pathways for change for this global network. Vinicius Feitosa, Associate Research and Information Officer, and Diego Nardi, Associate Protection Officer, offer their insights into supporting gender and sexual equality at the field level, their shared and unique experiences at gay men at UNHCR, and their visions for how the organisation can systematically be more inclusive to the most marginalised communities.

Both Vinicius and Diego are at the forefront of UNHCR's innovation work, having previously supported the creative activities of UNHCR's Brazil operation and through their recent

work as Innovation Fellows for UNHCR's 2018 cohort.

Sowing the seeds of diversity in UNHCR's Brazil operation

Vini: My name is Vinicius Feitosa, and everyone knows me as Vini. I'm currently working as an Associate Research and Information Officer in the Refugee Resettlement Determination (RSD) Section in Copenhagen. Previously, I was working as a Senior Protection Assistant in UNHCR's São Paulo Field Unit in Brazil. And before UNHCR, in my previous lives, I worked with other United Nations organisations and the European Union.

Diego: My name is Diego Nardi and I used to work together with Vinicius in Brazil, and I was stationed at the Branch Office in Brasília. First as a Protection Assistant and then as a Durable Solutions Assistant. Now I work as Associate Protection Officer (Community Based) in Nampula, Mozambique. Before UNHCR, I was working with community development with local communities in Brazil, and I also worked with community-based organisations in Japan.

Vini: I can start with an introduction to some of the challenges we had working with gender issues in Brazil from the São Paulo and Field Unit perspective. One of the things that we faced when consulting our population of concern, was how binary our programmatic

cycle was, in terms of women versus men when we started our consultations. I realised that there was actually not so much flexibility in terms of our programme cycle to create more targeted interventions. In the beginning, we were focusing our vision of gender very much on women, but we actually realised that we had to include men in the conversation on gender. When I started working in Brazil, in 2012, nearly 70% of our constituents were male. I don't know if that percentage changed over time, but we had many more men than women.

Diego: I agree with Vini. I think one of the main issues in our operation, at some point, was the fact that we were mainly focusing our gender discussion on women. And as Vini said, the majority of our population of concern in Brazil is comprised of men. Although we've had some changes recently with the Venezuelan situation, this profile somehow remains in the rest of the country. To change this focus and engage more men into the discussion, we developed some very nice initiatives in the operation. One of them was the development of a booklet called *Avante!* ("Let's Move Forward" in English). It was a gender-sensitive leaflet that was prepared by a feminist group, together with UNHCR. The main idea was to share basic information on local integration in Brazil for refugees while working towards a greater gender awareness by our population of concern. The main character of this leaflet

is actually a male refugee, and throughout the story, he's supporting his wife while she's looking for a job and supporting her in the household. He's performing a non-hegemonic masculinity, while being exposed to topics such as sexual and gender diversity, racial inclusion, and this was one of the main tools that we shared with our partners to push forward discussions surrounding this agenda. Our partners used it to compliment methodologies that they were already implementing. For example, one project that I really liked was the so-called street football in Rio de Janeiro, where they gathered a mixed group of men and women to play soccer. Through soccer, they discussed gender issues and the results were just amazing.

Vini: I was going to add two takeaways that we had from both processes. I think that from when we started mapping the concerns of the community to having a booklet with cartoons and educational material, we have matured a lot in terms of our community mapping. I think that within the operation, there was a greater understanding of the needs to keep mapping and mainstreaming gender concerns into everything that we do. So much so, that we had a Portuguese book as a foreign language for refugees and this book also stemmed from participatory assessments and the needs of the community, but we also included human rights as one of the topics for the book. The final chapter discussed issues

such as gay marriage, women's rights, and it was very well received by the community.

I think one of the other takeaways is the fact that we have the Refugee Cup that is organised by refugees every year. This year, and in previous years, they have also mainstreamed gender concerns in promotional events before the Cup, and during the Cup, by giving women a very central role in the organisation and in the awareness-raising components of the event. The workshop on new masculinities was given by a regional consultant that specialised in new masculinities and we piloted these workshops in Brazil in 2011/2012 when I started there São Paulo. These workshops then became the participatory assessments that were developed with the feminist group that Diego mentioned.

Diego: While working with LGBTIs, one thing that I have noticed is that bringing this discussion to the operation catalysed colleagues to rethink their beliefs about sexual and gender diversity. And you can see significant changes in the way colleagues react to these topics for example. Before I left the Brazil operation, one of the biggest allies I had regarding this agenda in the office was someone who was less open to discussing gender equality when I joined the operation back in 2016. He was someone who was always complaining about inclusive language, but it was amazing to see him

changing his views and becoming an active supporter; giving visibility to gender equality on social media, in our printing materials, in our reports. It's meaningful because when Vini left the operation, we were the only two people who were openly gay. Somehow I felt alone after he left. When you know that you have other colleagues that you can count on, this will not be viewed by others as solely a personal agenda (although the personal is political), as an agenda solely related to our own sexual identity, but as an effort within our wider compromise as a human rights organisation committed to celebrate diversity in all its forms.

Actively bringing this agenda to the operation made colleagues relate to it in a way or another, and it became more easy to move this agenda forward in the operation. More recently, the Brazil operation has actively supported the inauguration of an LGBTI refugee shelter in the context of Venezuela situation, and we had 100% support by the operation to push this initiative forward.

However, more than an inclusive and supportive environment for LGBTI refugees and staff, it is extremely important to have representativeness in our organisation. It is fundamental to have LGBTI colleagues who can openly share their experiences, because these experiences shape the way how we relate to the world and they are very enriching when it comes to implementing our mandate

and deconstructing our assumptions. Moreover, it is important to have LGBTI colleagues who can be recognised as such by persons of concern. If LGBTI refugees do not recognise themselves within our organisation through representation, how can they build trust in us? Representation matters.

Shared truths and experiences of being a gay professional at UNHCR

Vini: Building on what Diego said, I think that it's super important that we have a diverse group of people in UNHCR. Particularly because we are working with age, gender, and diversity (AGD) mainstreaming and because we are coming with this background in our lives, as gay men, or belonging to a specific group within AGD. I think it is important that we look at our human resources (HR) in a way that we incorporate these principles also when we're hiring people. So, I think that inevitably, Diego and I, we were allies in that sense, and this was an agenda that was really important for us.

I think that to me, the experience in Brazil, and now that I live in Scandinavia, is a huge contrast. Brazil is seen as this amazing, gay-friendly country where a lot of people assume, "It must be really easy or really amazing to be gay in Brazil," but the truth is that yes, while we're a progressive country for LGBTI+ rights, we are also one of the

countries that has the highest homicide rates in the world related to homophobia. I think it's important that we talk about these facts. In the office, I've never myself felt discriminated but in the community work, I was also a little weary about how I am going to come out or if I am going to come out. And I think that some small symbols help. I remember always wearing the pin with the rainbow flag, I remember one refugee came to me and identified himself as gay because he saw security in the rainbow flag at an event that I was doing in São Paulo, which was really cool. These small signs and symbols are super important.

I have a second point to add, that most of the time and this is something that has really bugged me recently. Perhaps because I have been thinking more and more about trans rights, but most of the time when colleagues use LGBTI, they are actually only talking about gay men. And it's important that we don't forget that we have other letters in the acronym that have a lot of challenges. I feel that gay men and lesbian women have already gained a lot of rights in specific parts of the world but for transgender and intersex, there is still a long way to go. I think it's crucial that when we talk about LGBTI rights we acknowledge that we are talking about a group of people who have different rights.

Diego: Similar to Vinicius, I never felt discriminated against in the office in

Brazil but it did occur outside of the office with colleagues. Colleagues would say inappropriate jokes about gayness but I had a very easy approach to say, "This is not nice," and they were very open to understanding why. I used to feel so safe in Brazil that I was actually the guy who would say, "Hi my name is Diego, and I'm a proud gay UNHCR staff." I believe it is important to show who we are so people become aware that we are a part of this organisation. For those of us who are LGBTI and who happen to be working at UNHCR, we are ourselves a privileged part of this community. It's important for us to bring visibility to this issue if we can, if we have the privilege and the opportunity, so others can join us.

But now I am in Mozambique and I am having a completely different experience. Before arriving here, I started to think about how I would deal with my own sexual identity in the workplace. Coming out is not a simple thing, especially in the workplace. It's not that colleagues must know that I am gay, but – as I said – it is important to show we are part of this organisation to avoid – for example – people taking for granted that we are heterosexuals. Moreover, I have a partner, and when visiting me, I want my partner to be with me in the spaces where I may find colleagues. I do not want to be hiding who I am due to fear of suffering prejudice. And it's not that I think that colleagues here will be homophobic, but you cannot also pretend

everything will be okay, especially when we know colleagues in the field who have suffered prejudice by supervisors and fellow colleagues.

During my first days in the new operation, I had a meeting with the most prominent LGBTI organisation in Mozambique – which is not recognised by the local government – and while discussing with them our willingness to implement activities in the refugee camp to promote awareness on gender and sexual diversity, one of the representatives of the organisation told me, "Look, you can do whatever you want as UNHCR, but as you do not have LGBTI staff, people will not be able to relate with you and build trust." And this was extremely difficult to hear because at that moment, in other contexts, I would say, "No - but I am LGBTI myself." But I had other colleagues from the organisation in the meeting and I didn't feel safe to do so. My colleagues here have not shown any sign of prejudice so far, but it's not an easy task. Every place you arrive you have to make this choice: passing through the experience of coming out again and again, or stay low-profile. Both are right decisions, both options must be supported, but I expect, and hope, we can build an organisation where it will be commonplace not to take for granted the gender or sexuality of our colleagues and persons of concern and where everyone feels safe.

For me, one of the reasons that we, colleagues in the field, are afraid of identifying ourselves as LGBTI is because we don't have a clear support network to tell us that it is okay, that you don't need to fear the situation, that there are reliable mechanisms in place to protect us against harassment, homophobia, transphobia, biphobia, etc. And we need more Senior Managers who understand that raising awareness on diverse gender identities, sexual orientations, is a core element of our mandate towards our persons of concerns, but also a core principle for building an inclusive organisation

As Vinicius said, many times when we're talking about LGBTI experiences we are talking about male experiences. About gay, cisgender, white men. And LGBTI is much more than just about its G, about gay men. However, within our organisation itself when we talk about LGBTI, we are often talking about gay men. How many transgender colleagues do we have, how many lesbian colleagues, bisexual colleagues? Most of the LGBTI persons you know are gay men, and most of them from the Global North. They will have a very contextualised experience and this is not diversity. If we want to embrace diversity we should be actively looking for transgender professionals to join our organisation, for example. This is not only about LGBTI but also about persons with disabilities, about black colleagues

occupying higher positions, and also about refugees themselves. It is important for us as the LGBTI community within UNHCR to foster this relationship among ourselves, to fight together to improve safe spaces and improve visibility, for better and more inclusive HR policies, to create solidarity bonds with other groups within the organisation.

UNHCR is now pushing equality and inclusion more than ever before. But there is a long way ahead. We should foster solidarity among ourselves to support each other's agenda, for the inclusion of one is the inclusion of all. At the end of the day, when we are facing homophobia or transphobia, for example, it's also about recognising gender equality. It's about surpassing the association of our LGBTI existence with this place of disempowerment and inferiority that women themselves are also fighting against, showing that occupying the space of the feminine is occupying a positive (and powerful) space. It's about bringing more diversity into the organisation and into our discourse surrounding the LGBTI inclusion within the organisation. I want to have black transgender colleagues working with me side by side – I know many of them who would do an amazing job. We need an HR policy that does more than just waiting for people to arrive at our doors, but who actively seek these profiles that are not well represented within our organisation.

Why we need to put faces and stories to the entire LGBTI acronym

Vini: I think acknowledging my own privileges now is something; there are differences. A difference of access, for example, that I am having compared to other colleagues in this network because I am based at UNHCR's Headquarters. I have a broader vision of the organisation now that I didn't have in the field. In times that I felt a little helpless, I didn't know who to speak to. There was a time that I felt discriminated against from someone in the community, in a participatory assessment, that I was doing when I came out. And I knew I could count on my fellow colleagues to talk about the situation - but was there another global community that I could count on? So, I think that it is super important that we try to foster more spaces of dialogue in the organisation. I think we should make people's voices equal in a louder way, in a more effective way. We need to think about supporting networks, both at the global, regional, local levels, community development, improving the visibility of these questions and these voices within the organisation. If we can do this, then we can definitely improve the way people represented and the fact that they are not alone and that there are many more of us in the organisation that can join this fight.

We have colleagues living in countries where being gay is actually a crime. It's

much deeper. Everyone at so many levels - at this time in the world - is going through paradigm shifts. For example, in Brazil, it wasn't so long ago that we had gay marriage legalised. And at the same time, we are also in an organisation that have people from countries that are criminalising it. I also totally agree that it is almost our obligation as UN staff to come out, that this is a huge part of our conduct because we are part of a generation that is cementing the idea that it is okay to be gay, it is actually politically correct, we have generations behind us who have fought for these rights. And I feel that we have a responsibility, to come out and give a statement, "Yes we are here to stay."

Diego: Right now, this is an issue that I am really giving a lot of thought to because of my current situation. As I said before, every time we move operations or we move offices, we are coming out again. And everyone who has lived experiences of coming out knows how hard it is. It's not something that you just say, "Look, I am gay." People don't need to know about my sexuality, but it's important that we recognise we are part of a broader political and social context. And it is important to make ourselves visible because there is an unconscious bias behind the way the organisation works, and which is framed for cis-gendered, heterosexual persons. If we don't show the organisation actively that we exist, it will take much more time for things to change.

I was really happy to know that they were changing the methodology behind this year's Code of Conduct. And they have chosen diversity and inclusion as the first topic of this new approach, and I am really looking forward to the results. This will be an opportunity for me to maybe be more open with my new colleagues about who I am. It's not good when you are in a place and I am telling everyone that, "Look I have a cousin - oh wait actually that person isn't my cousin, it's my partner." I am pretty sure colleagues hear me talking almost every day about gender equality and sexual diversity. Sincerely, I don't believe that they are thinking that, "Oh, this is a nice heterosexual guy who is a supportive ally of LGBTIs!" I think that it is a public secret, that everyone knows but no one talks about it. This is a very uncomfortable situation. But if I had arrived here in my new operation, and there was another LGBTI colleague, I think I would be much more comfortable. And really, if I arrived anywhere and there is another LGBTI colleague, I would be more comfortable to go through this new scenario, to go through this work.

We need senior staff to constantly pass a clear message of respect for diversity and inclusion. And they should create an environment where people feel welcome and embraced. But I don't believe that this is the situation of most Field Offices in our organisation, despite UNHCR being

pushing this agenda a lot recently. Again, to achieve a more inclusive and diverse workplace we need selection processes that are more inclusive and we need processes that actually assess candidates awareness of diversity and inclusion. We must make clear for our staff from the very beginning that we are a human rights organisation, we have a human rights-based approach and that prejudice has no place here. We cannot rely only on documents expecting that people will read them. We should have a diversity induction. You may not agree with someone else's identity but this is something that cannot interfere with our work. We are here to respect and advance human rights of every single person.

We also need a peer network, this is essential. One of the greatest advantages I have had is that I know other fellow LGBTI colleagues who are at diverse levels - some are more senior or at my level - but we informally support ourselves when facing challenging situations. We support each other on what to do, and how to do if we face a specific situation. The 2016 report on diversity and inclusion in the organisation clearly presented cases of homophobia faced by staff. And they were showing only cases that were officially reported, and we know that many just go out of the radar. If I read this report and I am aware of the situation, how can I feel safe to be who I am? Being aware that in other contexts people have faced

prejudice, exclusion, and harassment for being who they are, how can I feel embraced by the organisation? Especially colleagues who are at higher levels and in more visible places such as Headquarters and Regional Offices, they should push forward this agenda, as many are already doing.

During the last RSD workshop that I delivered, together with colleagues in Brazil, we were covering LGBTI asylum claims. I invited colleagues from the LGBTI movement to join the workshop. One was a non-binary colleague, another a transgender colleague, and a black lesbian colleague. At first, the RSD Officers were shocked when they first met them. You could see it in their faces. You could see that they were feeling very uncomfortable. Because these persons are not part of their daily experience. We talk about LGBTI people, but unless it's not a gay man, we are always asking, "Who are these persons?" Most people don't have daily interactions with them. And if they do, they completely ignore or try to avoid them. The majority of people will not bring members from the LGBTI community into their inner circles. This workshop was really nice because during two days LGBTI colleagues shared their experiences with RSD Officers and they could put a face to the acronym, they could see who LGBTIs are, and understand their challenges. After two days, they were all taking pictures together and sharing contact information. They were no longer strangers causing discomfort on

them. For me this was amazing. And this is about empathy. Diversity and inclusion create empathy for other people's experiences.

We often hear that empathy is one skill you need for innovation, and I completely agree. Empathy is a social ability that we obtain from walking away from our comfort zone, and that's what happened in this RSD workshop. They challenged their own assumptions and perceptions about sexuality and gender. Then they were socialising and collaborating with persons different from them and learning how to think beyond their own mindsets. So, I'm pretty sure - or I hope, that the next time that they were interviewing a LGBTI asylum seeker, they will have a much better approach and performance.

Diversity and inclusion promote this environment where innovation can succeed. To allow us to think outside the box, outside our own identities. Beyond our personal experiences and we can then better innovate and collaborate with each other.

Vini: I mean, both Diego and I are openly gay. And we have worked with UNHCR for some time. But you can see, even we - who come from a similar background and the same country - are having completely different perspectives and stories. Even though they are comparable. The experiences that he is facing in Mozambique, concerning his partner and the way he is going to come out, they

are very different from my experience living a comfortable life in Copenhagen. Here I am able to bring my partner to have lunch with me every day. And these are questions that I am not having in my day-to-day life. I feel like this is diversity - even within the LGBTI community. The more you talk with people who are having different experiences, the more you see that to create solutions that are tailored to them, the more that you see that there are limitless experiences. The number of experiences within just the LGBTI community are limitless and I think that the more we talk about gender - the more we will innovate. We will see that people have very very different experiences when they are facing gender and LGBTI issues, especially if they are coming from historically marginalised groups.

Diego: We must always be aware of how gender and race are important identity markers and the role they play on structural dynamics in our organisation. Maleness and whiteness, they come with lots of privileges and we must be aware of them as an organisation and as individuals. When we talk about people with diverse sexual orientation, we must avoid what Vinicius has said - this single narrative on what it means to be gay, for example. We must avoid reducing this experience to a single category - the gay, white man. It is important for us to foster diversity within our group, and foster solidarity with other groups. So we must have positive discrimination, otherwise, we will be requiring much more efforts from these

persons who are part of not so privileged groups to join the organisation. This is not fair, this is not justice and this is not equity. I am seeing the organisation move forward on these issues. UNHCR was probably one of the first UN agencies to talk about sexual and gender diversity. And I hope we can be the lead - or the number one agency as we like to say - on inclusion and diversity.

“We must always be aware of how gender and race are important identity markers and the role they play on structural dynamics in our organisation. Maleness and whiteness, they come with lots of privileges and we must be aware of them as an organisation and as individuals. When we talk about people with diverse sexual orientation - this single narrative on what it means to be gay, for example. We must avoid reducing this experience to a single category - the gay, white man.”



HOW TO MAKE OUR 'WORKING LANGUAGE' WORK FOR DIVERSITY AND INNOVATION

A collective need for cultural and behavioural reflection at UNHCR

How we communicate has a story. For example, when the native English-speaker was 18, he or she may have been wielding a highly developed and deeply ingrained set of language skills to navigate complicated social settings, educational demands, films, music and books. When the person who now works through English, but for whom it is a second language ('secondary speaker'), was 18, he or she was similarly consolidating their native language skills, whilst honing their English core vocabulary and grammar at school.

There is a spectrum of experiences, often informed by a spectrum of privilege and opportunities, which means that communication in multicultural workplaces hinges on the interaction of not just varying linguistic abilities, but of diverse backgrounds and perspectives. But does the space between fluent and native competency present barriers or undiscussed difficulties? How aware are we of language bias in teams with multi-lingual backgrounds? What is the unsaid... and how should we say it?

Imagine a team that is composed half of native English speakers (two Americans and two British people) and half fluent non-native speakers (two Brazilians, an Italian, and an Egyptian). There is seldom miscommunication or misunderstanding, meetings run seemingly seamlessly, and language as a mechanical function of information-transfer is well-oiled and doing its job. So what's the problem? Technical and linguistic issues are usually overcome intuitively by adjustments to vocabulary and syntax, as relationships within the team develop and they become more familiar with each other's speech patterns and idiomatic knowledge. So, why does the Italian feel at a disadvantage? Why does the Egyptian feel like she is underappreciated and not fulfilling her professional potential? Why does the Brazilian sometimes feel unable to assert himself or feel listened to?

To probe deeper into the question, it is useful to consider a secondary speaker's use of English as not just a communication tool, but as a cultural indicator, and the mask of his or her cultural interactions.

This approach reveals that language bias in the workplace is much more than just a tension arising from a range of linguistic abilities, but it is a battleground of cultural tensions encompassing race, gender, and other modes of identity. This may play out on several levels, and it is often a question of perceived cultural hierarchies. In discussions, the native speaker may take advantage of the insecurities and the uncertainties of the secondary speaker. The secondary speaker may be made to feel less competent by not being able to express herself as she would in her native tongue, or by not being able to communicate in a style that has connotations of authority and competence in the culture of the working language. Perhaps this may be called linguistic gaslighting? Conversations can be 'controlled' by the native speaker employing a fast pace, or vocabulary and structures that are not commonly known in the sphere of 'international English'. This exclusionary behaviour, deliberate or latent, can be seen when teams socialise, and cultural references and common 'native' experiences help to form social hierarchies that feed back into the professional realm.

If native competency is pinned to the formation of social hierarchies in a team, the consequences for innovation can be profound. A team that is unaware of such biases and behaviours risks isolating secondary speakers, limiting their capacity to participate, or even to feel understood. Risk-taking, trust-building, effective collaboration,

divergent thinking, transparency and openness - they all take a hit. Like most kinds of barriers to full and operational inclusion, language bias may not seem overly malignant on a day-to-day basis, and it rarely exists in isolation from other types of social imbalances. However, an awareness of the potential for a common language to be a force for exclusion, rather than inclusion, should be on the minds of every member of such a team.

The solution to this challenge on the personal and team level requires collective cultural and behavioural reflection and change. It is not a question of native speakers giving more space to secondary speakers. It is a question of deliberate and honest analysis of work culture and practice. Teams should re-conceptualise their measures of what competence and contribution look and sound like. Utilise feedback mechanisms on meeting structures and work culture, and avoid equating language ability to the cultural knowledge that comes with being a native speaker of a language.

There are avenues for solutions to language and cultural bias at a structural level, too. Beyond senior figures helping to drive the kind of cultural change outlined above on an organisational scale, organisations can incorporate data on the proportion of native speakers of the working language as evidence of the extent of linguistic and cultural bias, with the aim of using linguistic

Gabriela Coelho Lemos participated in a discussion with UNHCR's Innovation Service on the challenges and opportunities of a multicultural workplace - including how language influences our interactions. Listen to her full interview online soon at: www.unhcr.org/innovation/inclusion



diversity as a measure of broader diversity and inclusion efforts. Do native speakers rise through the ranks easier? As an organisation, what behaviours and skills do we seek to reward?

There is also the potential for a greater understanding of the idiosyncrasies of non-native English to be incorporated into machine-learning. In 2016, MIT researchers released 'the first major database of fully annotated English sentences written by non-native speakers'. Removing the bias towards the comprehension of purely native English structures and features in computer analytics may heighten inclusion in contexts where English serves the purpose of a working or common language. As machine-learning, and the machine analysis of open text in areas such as recruitment and feedback mechanisms, for example, become more commonplace, we have a responsibility to make sure that the quirks and traits of non-native English are not causes of devaluation or omission in these systems. Systematically assessing the readability of organisational communications products may also be possible by using readability assessment formulas, as is done in some legal settings. In the story of how we come to communicate, there are answers to question of 'how do we become a more diverse and inclusive organisation?'

Facilitating effective communication amongst people with diverse linguistic and cultural

backgrounds is a skill that is practiced on a daily basis in UNHCR, but there is always room for improvement. Language biases dissect a multitude of debates on organisational culture, management styles, and diversity, and intersect with how some view certain genders, ethnicities, and sexual orientations. As UNHCR works to further embed diversity, inclusion, and equality into its structure and strategy, let's not forget the vital role of language and communication as the precious interface of our relationships.

“There is a spectrum of experiences, often informed by a spectrum of privilege and opportunities, which means that communication in multicultural workplaces hinges on the interaction of not just varying linguistic abilities, but of diverse backgrounds and perspectives. But does the space between fluent and native competency present barriers or undiscussed difficulties?”

DESIGNING FOR A REPRESENTED WORLD

BY RUSSELL ABRAHAMS, ILLUSTRATOR

“The subconscious mind is a strange place and I’ve learnt how I have been impacted by toxic masculinity over the years. More alarming was the manner in which I drew the generic male figure. I almost immediately drew a very straight white male figure.”

In 2018, UNHCR’s Innovation Service partnered with Russell Abrahams to work on a set of creative animated videos to make innovation more accessible to the humanitarian sector. These animated videos educate or illustrate a specific topic through a fresh, yet comprehensive, approach to understanding innovation. The series of animations will include insights into the emotions we experience while innovating, the greatest fears we may experience, the importance of collaboration, among other diverse interpretations of the innovation process.


Designing for and with diversity in mind is somewhat a tricky task. While it should be the norm, however, it is a lot easier for people to create with what one knows. As designers, I feel we’re really complacent creating in the comfort of our own experiences. But this is a dangerous mindset as we should always strive to incorporate ideologies of diversity and inclusivity throughout all that we do.

When I was approached by the team at the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) and given an overview of the creative work, it was an exciting challenge which I grabbed with both hands. The interlink between the goals of this animation project vs. the beliefs of UNHCR met at a point where diversity was one of the main priorities. With the kind of work that is being carried out by the Innovation team and their efforts to provide aid for a wide

audience who might be displaced and in need of security, it only felt right to not make any group of people feel excluded in any way or form, with regards to the animation project.

As it stands, the design industry is facing a major problem regarding issues of diversity and inclusivity. The sad truth is that it’s not only the design industry battling with this agenda but many industries across the board. The idea of companies trying to dismantle these structures in place is open for discussion. However, these structures and systems are oppressive tools which to this day, keep marginalised folk at bay. At its root, this type of oppression is institutionalised and we definitely have a difficult task ahead of us if we are willing to fight for those who deserve better. From better representation to receiving equal pay as well as opportunities for/as minorities. Together, we should aim to solve this problem with relentless ambition. The only way we will find a solution is by working together through collaboration, by truly understanding why these structures are in place as well as listening to those affected.

This is why the innovation video collaboration with UNHCR is so important. Firstly, it’s important to myself as a person of colour living and working in Cape Town, South Africa. I work in an industry dominated by straight white males. The idea of any industry or practice being dominated/saturated by one specific group of people is problematic



Russell Abrahams in Cape Town

in itself and I would presume even more so in the creative industry. The truth is that to work and live as a designer in South Africa is a privilege. It's a career path that not many people of colour are able to pursue due to the fact that most people of colour live in underprivileged areas. To elaborate on this idea and to put it bluntly, many parents of colour are not willing to fund the studies of a student who wants to further their education in design as it is seen as a "fun/passion job". This has a devastating and direct impact on the design industry as it means there are fewer people of colour entering the industry. The next reason is that based on structures of privilege, many parents of colour are unable to afford the correct equipment necessary to create work that is of standard, leading to students producing weaker work than that of their more privileged peers.

Secondly, it's a big step in the right direction for animation work. The status quo for animation work is usually a few generic characters performing quite a few generic tasks. To illustrate this, the generic characters are usually depicted as straight white men in an office space conversing with themselves to solve a problem. The dilemma with scenarios of this sort is that they lack diversity as well as inclusivity but even more frightening is the fact that they hint towards how office spaces are coordinated in reality. As a person of colour, I was very intrigued when asked by UNHCR to help bring this project to life. What took me by surprise was the urge to create

a video that spoke to a larger audience. The goal was to create a body of work that would help explain innovation in a fun yet thoughtful and accessible manner. The most challenging part of this project was to create characters that represent a wide variety of people; a group of characters that felt approachable and relatable. Through collaborative efforts, we were able to create a positive bunch of characters that made us smile as a team.

The image on the next page is a perfect example of a collaborative effort. We needed to explain the emotion of fear one can experience while innovating. The team over at UNHCR created a sketch of the main character shooting an arrow at an apple. What may seem not the most perfect sketch, the idea and thinking behind the image was the most fitting way to illustrate the message. When working on a project I am a firm believer in collaboration. I guess it is the idea that many minds are better than one - a principle also greatly valued in the innovation space. This was an ongoing effort for the duration of the project. The conceptualisation and illustration phase was a seamless effort between both parties. It's imperative to work together in this manner as the chances of creating a cohesive body of work which ticks all the right boxes are higher. It also creates a sense of teamwork throughout the project.

When creating characters, I think it's of the utmost importance to keep people in mind. To understand that we are communicating with

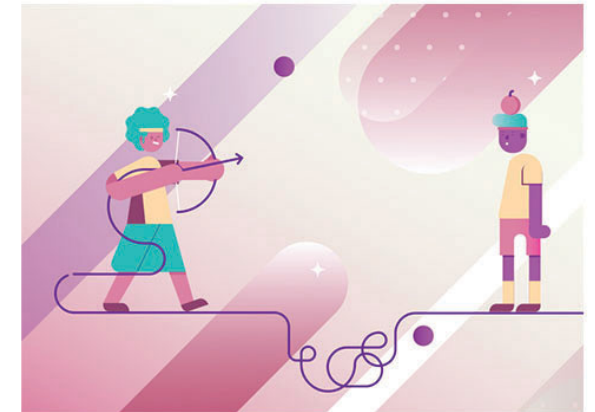
real people who all face real circumstances. To note that whatever we create can either have a positive or a negative effect on quite a wide audience. This was reason enough for us to strive to always have diversity at the centre of all that we created throughout this project. As a group, we scrutinised our lead character vigorously. After many reverts, we were able to create a being that we felt was quite relatable and positive; a non-binary individual who is abstract enough to fit into many different groupings. Creating a hero character who represents a wide audience is a tricky task. Themes of gender/race/ableism and body positivity all came into play. The idea of ticking all these boxes off seems impossible but it's a necessary step.

The illustration below captures the evolution of our character and its development. From a generic male figure to what is now more of an abstraction/blend of different types of people. An interesting point to note is how the character's body is based on a wide skeleton. It's aesthetically pleasing to see this development, while at the same time I feel it also shows the thought process of keeping the diversity of people in mind. As a male, I corrected my views countless times as I created this character. I caught myself constantly creating a male figure as the default and was constantly corrected in my errors by my team. The subconscious mind is a strange place and I've learnt how I have been impacted by toxic masculinity over the years. More alarming was the manner in which I drew the generic male figure. I

almost immediately drew a very straight white male figure. This is strange as it does not represent me as an individual, however, I somehow thought it was the most relatable way to represent a larger audience. This is problematic and I definitely feel it has a lot to do with how certain men are depicted through advertising, film and media in general.

As someone who strives to always be sympathetic, it was definitely an eye-opener having caught myself create something that I'm vocally against. To further our discussion on character work, our main character is accompanied by a group of characters who are more specific on who they represent but yet abstract enough to be mindful of others. I do think the style of these characters allowed us to accomplish our goal as they were less human-like while holding onto familiar features which could be relatable to the audience. The use of colour theory was a way to avoid pinpointing a specific race to these characters and it allowed us to enter them into a weird and fantastical world.

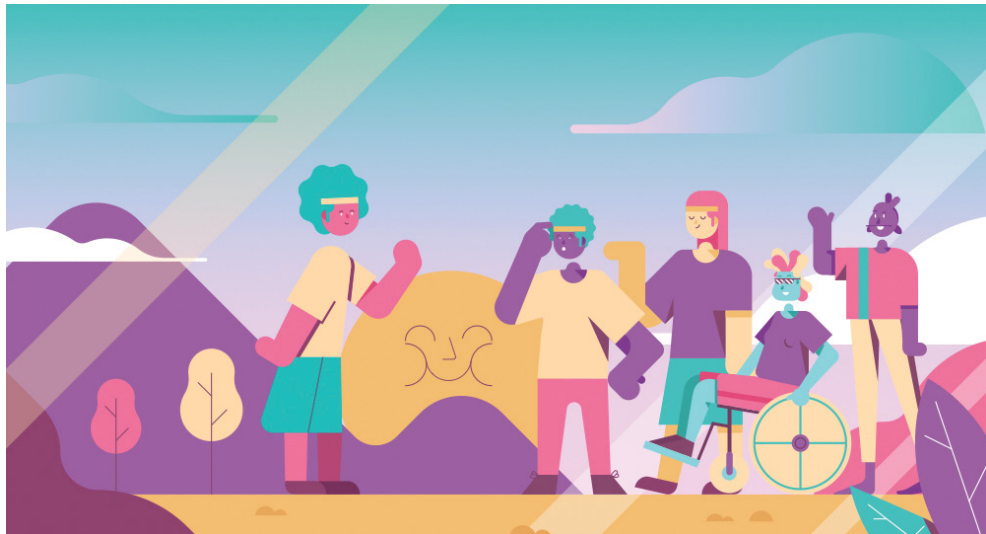
These characters have then been put into a world where abstraction and fantasy are the norms. The goal here was to be able to illustrate complicated scenarios in a fun and light-hearted manner. Not to say we are taking these serious issues lightly but rather, it is a means for us to capture the audience and allow them to engage with something that feels quite new to them while addressing topics that they are very familiar with. I truly



Concept sketches by UNHCR vs final illustrated image.



Development of the main character.



A scene from the explainer video.

feel that it's a big jump in the right direction. This world, along with its diverse group of characters should set a standard for what is seen within the design industry as well as how designers consider people in general. Design which transcends aesthetics or style and speaks to human values is honestly what this is all about. Designing for change definitely has its different levels. From the creation of artificial intelligence engines to help understand the movement of forced displacement, to creating animations that has minority-focused figures, design can and should always strive to help solve a problem. A great example of this would be how large comic book companies have created black superheroes. It is mind-boggling to see how enraged a certain sector of comic-book readers become as it's not the status quo. Personally, seeing young children of colour see themselves in superheroes that look like them is a magnificent moment and I am certain that the illustrators and designers behind the scenes are smiling from ear-to-ear.

I do think we are entering an era where it's possible for design to be a lot more sympathetic to an audience. We definitely can change the world through design, as cheesy as it might sound. For those in the design industry, I think we need to continue seeing design as a tool for communication. By understanding that we are able to solve real problems for real people we are in turn executing the very core values of design. It's an interesting scenario whereby the

designer needs to remove themselves from the equation to really understand the work, the mission and their audience. By removing oneself's personal beliefs and needs from the design process it's a method in which the work and its audience dictates the solution. It is then an open call to hearing the opinions and thoughts from a wider audience to establish creative executions that may not have arisen from working independently. It opens up the conversation to understand the problem we face and how we can arrive at a solution that benefits all. I feel the basis for good design work should be people focused and less so on the trend of focusing on the designer themselves. This is the premise of all good work which helps to create good.

Moving forward, I think we all have a little bit of soul searching to carry out. With a little introspection, we can help find problems and, sooner rather than later, solve them in our communities as well as in our workspaces. By questioning the status-quo and scrutinising ideologies that we believe to be right we can figure out a means to help others who are perhaps marginalised by systems and structures that tend to silence their voices and overlook their value. An innovative approach to design can enable communities to tackle the problems they face, and reap the rewards.

MORE INTERVIEWS AND INSIGHTS ON
INCLUSION AND INNOVATION ONLINE.

VISIT US AT:
unhcr.org/innovation/inclusion

“In terms of the risk of the system being exclusive rather than inclusive: it not only has moral consequences, but it has financial consequences too. From an economic perspective, being exclusive is not optimal - and by marginalising you are undermining the efficiency and the very mandate of the organisation.”

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