

Agenda Item 3(c)

28/6/13 p.m.

Standing Committee June 2013
Gender Equality and Sexual and Gender-based Violence

Louise Aubin

Deputy Director (Protection Operational Support)
Division of International Protection

Madam Chairperson, Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen,

In numbers unrivalled in a decade, women and girls are forced to flee violence and persecution, often in harrowing conditions putting their very lives at risk. Over the years, women and girls have steadily represented about 48% of refugees globally. In the context of today's massive displacement, the urgency of responding to the specific protection needs of women and girls has never been greater.

I'm therefore pleased to update the Standing Committee on UNHCR's work to promote gender equality and to fight against sexual and gender-based violence (contained in document EC/64/SC/CRP.12).

Forced displacement can profoundly change the lives of men, women, boys and girls as their resilience is severely challenged and as their family and community support systems sometimes collapse. With that, traditional gender roles might change, abruptly or over time, in order to survive and adapt to a changed environment: women may become breadwinners or alone have to ensure the well-being of their household, for example. Conversely, women may be completely disempowered in their new environment. Men may feel idle and helpless as they struggle to protect and meet their family's most basic needs. The risk of sexual and gender-based violence, prevalent in most societies, rises exponentially in contexts of violence and of displacement.

This reality is not new. Women, be they refugees, stateless or internally displaced, tell us time and time again of the additional barriers they face when trying to access housing, employment, education, documentation, legal or health services. Combating sexual violence and integrating gender equality considerations in all our programs continue to be top priorities for UNHCR. After all, gender-based discrimination and inequality go to the root of so many of the problems facing displaced communities.

A main feature of UNHCR's efforts to achieve gender equality and combat sexual violence is empowerment of all members of displaced communities – girls, boys, women and men. Gender equality can neither be imposed nor achieved over night. Traditional beliefs that perpetuate cycles of violence and hold women in subordinate positions within their families and communities are often deeply entrenched. In order to promote gender equality in this context, the benefits of women's empowerment need to be understood by men and women, and men and boys need to be helped to become positive role models and drivers of change within their communities. To this end, UNHCR and our partners have been engaging with men and boys in various ways around the world – from organizing sporting and integration events in Mexico, to supporting chiefs and headmen as proponents of gender equality in Zimbabwe, to running awareness-raising campaigns in Yemen which target men and boys, to working with positive male role models in Thailand to prevent domestic violence in their communities.

In addition to working with men and boys, women and girls must be equipped with the skills and resources needed to become independent and take control over their lives. The key to empowering women is supporting their meaningful participation in decision-making – whether in domestic issues like the use of household income, in community matters such as the resolution of disputes, or in planning, implementation and monitoring of humanitarian programmes by organizations like UNHCR. Assuming leadership positions and participating in decision-making builds women's sense of dignity and strength, boosts their confidence and self-esteem, raises awareness of their rights, minimizes the likelihood that they will be victimized, and paves the way for their self-sufficiency. The refugee community more broadly also benefits from equal engagement by men and women in community decision-making. In Meheba refugee settlement in Zambia, for example, all-women food distribution committees demonstrate that they respond more comprehensively to the needs of different groups within the community, such as single women, unaccompanied minors and older persons. A strong and united community which is inclusive of women and men of all ages, backgrounds and abilities, is much better placed to contribute to its own protection and self-reliance.

Women who are educated, have the necessary documentation, and are economically self-reliant have the strongest chance of participating meaningfully in decision-making at all levels. UNHCR operations around the world are taking concrete, positive steps in each of these areas. In Dzaleka Camp, Malawi, for example, UNHCR recently supported leadership sessions for

school girls on topics such as team work, communication skills, how to work with communities, the qualities of a good leader, the role and functioning of committees and conflict resolution. The students were then taken to Lilongwe University of Agriculture and Natural Resources to interact with female lecturers as role models, and inspire them to work hard at school.

Yet when it comes to management and leadership structures in refugee communities, women's participation continues to sit well below that of men. This is not true in all locations – in Tajikistan, for example, the refugee community is represented by the Afghan Refugee Committee, and more than half of the representatives are women. And in Ampain Camp, Ghana, almost all refugee committees have at least 50% women's participation. Generally speaking, however, women are still under-represented in leadership positions in refugee communities. In part, this mirrors the global reality: when we look at legislatures around the world, for example, women are still outnumbered 4 to 1. But it is also linked to cultural and practical issues, such as gender roles in patriarchal societies, women's household and child care responsibilities, and the financial disincentive for working women to participate in management meetings. Women who are illiterate, or lack leadership skills, are also less likely to become leaders.

A big problem currently faced by UNHCR in this area is under-reporting. Almost 70% of operations reporting on female participation in leadership and management structures in 2012 met the standard of 50% representation by women, which is an excellent result. However, this is only based on data provided by 35 operations worldwide. To improve reporting – and more importantly, to ensure that operations make women's leadership a priority – this has now become a UNHCR Global Strategic Priority for 2014-15. It is expected that an increased number of operations will therefore provide more reliable data. In addition, UNHCR is aiming to build the commitment and capacity of our own staff to successfully promote women's leadership by developing guidance on how to improve women's representation in leadership structures.

Strengthening women's position and participation in their families and communities also contributes to preventing sexual and gender-based violence and improving survivors' access to services and ability to pursue justice. Sexual and gender-based violence is one of the most damaging yet widespread means of disempowering women and girls, as well as men and boys. The conference room paper before you details a range of initiatives undertaken by UNHCR to

prevent and respond to SGBV, including through improving access to justice for survivors, deciding together with women on appropriate domestic energy initiatives, preventing female genital mutilation, and engaging with men and boys – both as survivors and potential perpetrators.

Yet particularly in the emergency context, the prevalence of SGBV remains dangerously high. We hear horrifying stories of women and girls fleeing violence in Syria, for example, only to find themselves living in neighboring countries in acute fear of sexual exploitation, harassment and abuse, domestic violence and trafficking. Economic distress sometimes leads women to resort to survival sex, or to arrange early marriages for their daughters. Most are afraid to report even the most horrific incidences of SGBV, for fear of facing stigma and retaliation from family and community members, or even being subjected to honor crimes.

As recent emergencies have made clear, prevention and response programs to deal with sexual and gender-based violence are life-saving interventions. From the very outset of an emergency, UNHCR strives to ensure that an SGBV strategy is in place, partnership and trust is built with communities adequate staffing dedicated to SGBV is on the ground, prevention and response activities are underway and relevant government services are engaged and supported. In Burkina Faso and Niger, for example, UNHCR developed multi-sectoral SGBV strategies for Malian refugees early in the emergency phase. In Jordan and Lebanon, UNHCR recently increased its staffing capacity by creating four new protection posts with a specific focus on sexual and gender-based violence.

UNHCR is also supporting the Governments of Lebanon and Jordan to improve community outreach and support services for Syrian survivors of sexual violence. In Lebanon, for example, UNHCR is supporting 26 Social Development Centers through the Ministry of Social Affairs. These Centers provide survivors with in-depth counseling, home visits and follow-up, psychosocial support, vocational and life-skills training, and assistance where possible. In Jordan, UNHCR has strengthened its partnerships with governmental institutions such as the Family Protection Department and the Dar Al Wafaq emergency shelter, which provide access for survivors to specialized services including psychosocial support, legal advice and counseling, and shelter for emergency cases.

In an emergency context, the operating environment for SGBV prevention and response programmes can be extremely complex, particularly where the

general security situation is volatile, cultural and religious factors dissuade survivors from disclosing SGBV incidents, and human and financial resources are stretched among numerous competing protection challenges. But it is imperative that UNHCR and the international community continue to recognize the criticality of SGBV prevention and response activities as both empowering and life-saving interventions.

Before I conclude, I would like to share a final reflection on the importance of women's empowerment and involvement in decision-making. You will remember that two years ago during the Standing Committee of June 2011, ten women IDPs and refugees addressed you here as representatives of the more than one thousand women and girls who participated in the UNHCR Global Dialogues with Refugee Women. They moved us as they called for urgent action to address the many challenges they face as displaced women. When asked how important it was to them, as individuals, to participate in community decision-making structures, they described their participation as empowering, eye-opening and life-changing. I thought you might want to know what's become of some of these courageous women: at least two completed their studies, one of them will soon graduate with a university degree in microbiology. Several have sought and obtained employment, often in jobs allowing them to help other refugees, while one has started a catering business. All have continued to actively participate and lead within their communities. It is this hope and this positive energy which come about when women are empowered and actively involved in making the decisions that affect their lives – that can make a real difference to individuals, families and communities.

Thank you.