



UNHCR

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
Haut Commissariat des Nations Unies pour les réfugiés

Item 3 (c)

Gender Equality

UNHCR Standing Committee Meeting, 22 June 2016

Louise Aubin, Deputy Director
Division of International Protection

Mr Chairperson, Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen:

I'm grateful for the opportunity to present Conference Room Paper no. 18 on gender equality, and for the chance to share with you some of UNHCR's efforts to integrate gender equality into the work that we do.

Reflecting on my own experience with UNHCR as a protection staff, I can't help but recognize that most of what I've learned came from the coaching and mentoring generously provided to me by refugee women themselves. Young and old, organized in formal associations or loosely as simply neighbors in a camp or settlement, these women offered their observations on life in displacement and provided advice, gently and sometimes forcefully, on what kinds of services were needed and how they should be delivered.

We've come a long way in terms of professionalizing services targeting women, girls, men and boys, and in the way we make sure to listen to the voices of diverse groups so that their needs and priorities shape the services UNHCR and its partners provide. Throughout, we insist on proximity to people we serve – that meaningful contact and exchange with diverse refugees, internally displaced and stateless persons that provide the foundational insight to risk and needs analysis, protection and solutions strategies, and multi-year programmes. Proximity to people serves many objectives, one of the key ones is to provide otherwise marginalised people the means to advocate for and enjoy the full scope of their rights.

From our collective experience in UNHCR, inequality in its different manifestations, is at the root of so many obstacles to achieving comprehensive, equitable and participatory assistance, protection and solutions. As is stated in our Age, Gender and Diversity Policy, the systematic promotion of gender equality is essential to ensuring protection and durable solutions for women and men of all ages and backgrounds.

As you know, women's empowerment is one of the main strategies for reaching the goal of gender equality. But gender equality is not just a 'women's issue' nor can it be narrowly defined as the prevention and response to sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). UNHCR's policy on Age, Gender and Diversity is helpful in that it situates gender equality within a broader human rights framework by defining gender equality as "the equal enjoyment of rights, responsibilities and opportunities of women, men, girls and boys." It not only accounts for difference between individuals, but also seeks to respond to particular challenges that may arise when gender equality intersects with age, disability, sexual identity, as well as religious and ethnic status.

Because of existing gender inequality, which is often exacerbated in contexts of forced displacement and statelessness, we recognize that women and girls can face additional challenges to accessing their rights, and too often can face extreme forms of discrimination and violence.

(Take the case of one young woman who fled her conflict-ridden sub-Saharan country. Fearing for her life after her brother-in-law was killed and her own sister disappeared, she travelled alone towards Germany. During her journey she was forced to engage in transactional sex twice, the first time to access a fake passport and the second time to gain passage on a boat from Turkey to Greece. "I had no choice", she explained. Upon arrival to Greece, she slept outside for two nights without shelter, privacy or access to information about the services available. "I fear that I will go crazy", she admitted.¹)

In the course of 2015, UNHCR carried out an internal review of gender equality in over 70 operations, documenting good field practices, main gaps and challenges, and formulating recommendations. This Conference Room Paper that I am presenting today on Gender Equality is largely based on the outcomes of this review.

While the paper itself outlines the progress and existing challenges to gender equality integration within UNHCR's work, across eight areas of engagement (

1. *Equal and meaningful participation;*
2. *Individual registration, documentation, and refugee status determination;*
3. *Management and distribution of food and core relief items;*
4. *Economic empowerment;*
5. *Sexual and gender-based violence;*
6. *Public health;*
7. *Education; and*
8. *Shelter, housing, land and property)*

, for the sake of time let me briefly touch upon three of them: participation, economic empowerment, and education.

Our goal is to ensure that women and adolescent girls are active and equal participants in all decision-making processes that affect their lives and their well-being, as well as that of their families and communities. Our operations in the field have been able to significantly increase women's participation in leadership and management structures, namely by recruiting female refugee outreach volunteers, providing leadership training for women, and helping set up democratic election processes for the establishment of refugee and IDP committees. For instance in Malaysia, UNHCR last year organized training on leadership, communication and gender equality for women as well as promoting their active participation in committees and meetings. As a result, 139 women identify as decision-makers in their community and they are helping to ensure that the needs and capacities of refugee women and girls are heard and acted upon.²

But in many instances, women and adolescent girls continue to be held back by their families, communities and societies, facing discrimination while they continue to take on the vast majority of domestic and caretaking responsibilities. In addition, they are blocked by high illiteracy rates, language barriers and they lack the basic means which would enable them to take time off and participate in public life. Increasing women's meaningful, not tokenistic, participation requires that UNHCR's protection and assistance work is driven by a participatory and equitable approach and that, with the help and expertise of partners, we systematically engage with the entire community of concern; that means including men and boys in structured discussions and programmes that

¹ UNHCR, UNFPA and WRC. "Initial Assessment Report: Protection Risks for Women and Girls in the European Refugee and Migrant Crises" (2015) 8. Available from <http://www.unhcr.org/569f8f419.html>

² UNHCR, "Age, Gender and Diversity Accountability Report 2015" (Geneva: UNHCR, 2016).

help identify and reduce gender stereotypes and restrictive gender roles which hinder women's participation. As is mentioned in more detail in the 2015 AGD Accountability Report, in Bangladesh UNHCR and partners have involved refugee men and boys as agents of change for gender equality, providing awareness raising and training with communities in order to increase women's participation and prevent SGBV .

We also need to focus on increasing the inclusion of forcibly displaced and stateless women and adolescent girls in peace and security decision-making, including peace negotiations and conflict prevention and resolution – as is mandated by the UN Security Council Resolutions on women, peace and security. In 2015, UNHCR actively advocated for women's participation at multiple levels of peace processes and peace and security policy making. Seven UNHCR operations reported on assisting in the development or implementation of national action plans on women, peace and security. Additionally, in Colombia, UNHCR strengthened female participation in peacebuilding processes. As a result, the operation reported to have involved 560 women in decision-making roles in community peacebuilding mechanisms, exceeding their target of involving 300 women.

Economic empowerment is life-changing. Take the example of a Congolese woman who, after fleeing her own country, and again another where her daughter was threatened with female genital mutilation, she found refuge in Mauritania. She undertook IT training at a UNHCR Women's Centre in Nouakchott and qualified as a teacher; and in addition, she's now a representative for refugee women, using her own experiences of life in displacement to help others.³

UNHCR supports livelihoods initiatives that specifically target women, including survivors of SGBV, as well as ensuring that women have equitable access to all livelihoods programming. There remain serious challenges to women and adolescent girls' economic empowerment - from the absence of a legal right to work and limited access to education and training, to restrictive cultural practices and the absence of childcare. We've noted that even when women can access livelihoods initiatives, they are too often oriented toward low-paying or feminised activities for which there might not be a demand in the local market. And so we are working more purposefully with different partners to develop programs for safe, dignified and sustainable economic opportunities that are a result of sound market analysis. In **Uganda**, in order to engage refugee women in income generating activities, they were provided with start-up kits including seeds and farming tools and encouraged to cooperate and participate in farmers' associations. Operations such as **Chad** offered child care services to women, especially female-headed households, to make it possible for them to pursue livelihood opportunities. In **Burkina Faso**, UNHCR initiated a project in 2015 which seeks to contribute to the self-reliance of Malian refugee artisanal households through sustainable income-generation. Forty per cent of Malian refugees in Burkina Faso were artisans and this multi-year project supported them by providing access to raw materials, tools and adequate work spaces; promoting savings through building upon the tradition of women pooling their savings; strengthening technical skills; improving numeracy and literacy; supporting the formation of associations; and identifying local and international demand. Women at risk of SGBV are being targeted for inclusion in their projects and will be supported by female case managers trained in SGBV prevention and response.

In addition to participation and economic empowerment, we continue to improve access to safe and quality education for girls. The words of a Syrian scientist, currently seeking asylum in Turkey, are quite telling in terms of how critical this is for all children and youth fleeing conflict: "I left Syria for the sake of my daughter. I want her to have a childhood. I moved her from school to school

³ UNHCR TRACKS "The Refugees Learning to Reconnect", 2015. Available from <http://tracks.unhcr.org/2015/07/the-refugees-learning-to-reconnect/>

until there were no more left.”⁴ Education is vital to women and girls’ empowerment and protection – it is in so many ways a corner stone for much of our work to ensure more gender equality.

In the past year, we recorded progress in the number of girls and boys enrolled in primary school. Across twenty priority countries, enrolment rates rose to 42%. In addition, measures have been taken to increase girls and women’s access to education through increased enrolment rates, reduction of SGBV and recruitment of female teachers). Despite this, refugee and IDP children, if able to access a primary school at all, continue to face unsafe and overcrowded classes in inadequate school buildings that exclude disabled children. Women rarely have the opportunity to go to university or even to access basic literacy classes. In the face of these challenges, UNHCR promotes the inclusion of displaced girls and women in national education systems and efforts to create a safe and quality learning environment. For instance in Jordan, UNHCR with partners began a community-based education initiative where girls set their own educational goals, are provided with peer support, and the staff work together with parents to ensure retention and improved academic performance.

Gender equality, as you well know, requires dedicated focus and commitment to achieve incremental successes. One way we are revitalizing our work towards gender equality is updating UNHCR’s Five Commitments to Refugee Women issued in 2001. We want to ensure that revised commitments which inform all of our programmes meet the needs, priorities and capacities expressed by the diverse women and girls of our concern.

Another way of ensuring that our work towards gender equality remains at the forefront of our strategic engagement with displaced and stateless persons is to tackle some of the challenges uncovered through our recent internal review of gender equality: for instance, the majority of operations participating in the survey indicated a need for more resources – human and financial, technical expertise, and training. Equally important, many of our operations report challenges related to the collection and analysis of sex and age-disaggregated data. Our own internal review revealed similar challenges in our annual reporting in regards to implementation of the UN System-Wide Action Plan on Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women.

In the face of unprecedented displacement, now is the time for each and every one of us to recommit to ensuring that all of our protection and assistance work contributes to gender equality – rather than continued marginalization of women and girls. UNHCR needs your collaboration and support to systematically and comprehensively live up to the standard we have set ourselves – to ensure that we deliver the best possible protection and assistance to and with diverse women, girls, boys and men of concern around the world.

To conclude, I share with you parts of poem by Najat Abdul Samad, a Syrian writer:

“...She does not cut a tree, does not steal, does not surrender her soul to weariness, does not ask anyone’s charity, does not fold with the load, and does not yield midway...”

from When I am overcome by Weakness

⁴ UNHCR TRACKS “A Syrian Scientist in Exile”, 2016. Available from <http://tracks.unhcr.org/2016/05/a-syrian-scientist-in-exile/>