

## Foreword

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Almost 60 years ago, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights proclaimed that “all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights...without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status”.

Today, women and girls everywhere still face greater obstacles claiming and enjoying their rights than do men and boys. Displacement generally exacerbates these inequalities, as does a tendency to focus on human rights abuses in public, rather than private, spheres. Gender inequality is at the heart of sexual and gender-based violence. To prevent SGBV we must therefore put an end to such inequalities.

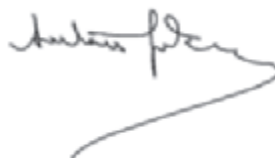
Too often, gender, displacement and other factors combine to amplify discrimination against women and girls. UNHCR’s Executive Committee has acknowledged that “while forcibly displaced men and boys also face protection problems, women and girls can be exposed to particular protection problems related to their gender, their cultural and socio-economic position, and their legal status, which mean that they may be less likely than men and boys to be able to exercise their rights”.

There is also, even now, a massive culture of neglect and denial about violence against women and girls. That culture of neglect and denial exists everywhere, and we must face up to it. This means working to change our attitudes and actively promoting equality for women and men, girls and boys, and respect for women’s and girls’ rights.

The key issue, at the levels of the United Nations system, our organization and the displaced community, remains the empowerment of women and girls. UNHCR is working to promote gender equality by using a rights- and community-based approach, by mainstreaming age, gender and diversity, and through targeted actions to empower women and girls in civil, political and economic areas. The aim is to ensure that the rights of all persons of concern – whether male or female, young or old, or facing discrimination on account of disability, ethnicity, class, sexuality or other factors – are enjoyed equally.

This Handbook is a tool to help achieve this. It replaces the 1991 UNHCR Guidelines on the Protection of Refugee Women and incorporates comments on a provisional edition, issued in June 2006, from a range of partners and users in the field.

I expect all staff members to become familiar with the Handbook as I am confident it can help both UNHCR and partners enhance the protection of women and girls of concern.



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United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees  
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