

Introduction to the Handbook

Overview

Introduction

This Handbook describes some of the protection challenges faced by women and girls of concern to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and outlines various strategies we should adopt with our partners to tackle these challenges.

It sets out the legal standards and principles that guide our work to protect women and girls and outlines the different roles and responsibilities of States and other actors. UNHCR's own responsibilities in this respect are explained, both as part of its mandate to secure international protection and durable solutions and as a United Nations (UN) agency.

Suggestions for actions by UNHCR and partners to support women's and girls' enjoyment of their rights are also included. Examples of innovative practices from the field illustrate how these principles can be applied.¹

Who are women and girls of concern?

This Handbook refers to the protection of women and girls² with the understanding that we are referring to all women and girls of concern to UNHCR, namely women and girls who are:

- asylum-seekers,
 - refugees,
 - internally displaced,³
 - returnees,⁴
 - stateless,⁵ or
 - who have integrated into new communities.⁶
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Purpose and intended audience

The primary purpose of the Handbook is to help UNHCR staff fulfil their responsibilities to protect these women and girls more effectively.

It is therefore intended for representatives, other managers, protection staff in the field and at headquarters, registration officers, eligibility officers, community services staff, field officers, and others. Protection partners will find it a useful source of information and guidance.

The Handbook is intended to be used in situations of asylum, internal displacement, return, integration, and statelessness. It is equally applicable in urban and rural contexts.

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¹ Further good practices relevant to the protection of women and girls can also be found in UNHCR, *Operational Protection in Camps and Settlements: a Reference Guide of Good Practices in the Protection of Refugees and Other Persons of Concern*, December 2005.

² In this Handbook, the term "girl" refers to any female human being below the age of eighteen years, just as Article 1 of the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child defines a child as "every human being below the age of eighteen years".

³ Internally displaced persons (IDPs) are individuals who have been forced to leave their homes as a result of armed conflict, internal strife, systematic violations of human rights, or natural or man-made disasters and who are within the territory of their own country. Individuals who have been displaced as a result of natural or man-made disasters are not normally of concern to UNHCR.

⁴ Returnees are former refugees or internally displaced persons who have returned to their countries or areas of origin.

⁵ UNHCR's mandate for stateless persons derives not only from its responsibility for refugees who may be stateless, but also as the supervisory body for the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness, from UN General Assembly resolutions, Executive Committee (ExCom) Conclusions, and the UN Commission on Human Rights. UNHCR's activities in the field of statelessness fall under the following broad categories: identification of stateless populations, prevention and reduction of statelessness, and protection of stateless persons.

⁶ For refugees, this involves integration in situations of local integration in the country of asylum and, for IDPs, integration in the place of displacement or in a country of resettlement.

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Objectives

The objectives of the Handbook are to:

- improve understanding among UNHCR staff and partners of the challenges and barriers women and girls of concern confront in accessing and enjoying their rights during displacement, return, and (re)integration;
 - ensure all UNHCR staff are familiar with the international legal standards forming the normative framework for our work to protect women and girls;
 - ensure all UNHCR staff understand their responsibilities for the protection of women and girls;
 - improve knowledge of how discrimination against women and girls can lead to statelessness and what initiatives can be taken to prevent and reduce cases of statelessness;
 - provide guidance on ways of working and types of activities that can be carried out to fulfil our responsibilities; and
 - refer staff to additional resources, guidelines, and tools that may be used to enhance the protection of women and girls.
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Guide to using this Handbook

The Handbook is divided into six chapters.

- **Chapter 1** describes how women and girls are affected by forced displacement and summarizes the efforts UNHCR and the UN have made to promote gender equality and protect women and girls.
- **Chapter 2** shows how we should use a combination of a “rights- and community-based approach” and “age, gender and diversity mainstreaming” (AGDM) to achieve gender equality. It suggests ways to strengthen women’s and girls’ participation and empowerment and stresses the importance of working with men and boys on this issue.
- **Chapter 3** looks at how to identify, prevent and respond to risks which individual women and girls may face and to risks in the wider protection environment. It explains how confidential individual case management systems and committees should be established in each operation to coordinate and monitor the response to the situation of all persons of concern at heightened risk and to support solutions for them.
- **Chapter 4** explains the importance of partnerships and outlines the key approaches we can adopt to ensure the protection of women and girls. This includes several tools of particular relevance to protecting women and girls and securing durable solutions for them.
- **Chapter 5**, the longest chapter, looks at key rights of women and girls that may be violated and makes suggestions as to how we can respond.
- **Chapter 6** describes the international legal framework that underpins our work to protect women and girls.

Each of these six chapters is further divided into sections. Each chapter and section is introduced by an overview and table of contents to help users find specific topics.

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Other resources

A great deal of other information exists about the different themes and issues in this Handbook. It does not pretend to be comprehensive, but rather to point to some of these other resources, so that users can locate and use them when dealing with particular issues and themes in greater depth.

Many of these additional reference materials on particular issues, especially those relating to relevant international legal standards, are contained in the accompanying CD-Rom. These should also be used to complement the Handbook.

IASC Handbooks on gender and on IDPs

This Handbook should in particular be used in conjunction with the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Gender Handbook in Humanitarian Action entitled *Women, Girls, Boys and Men: Different Needs – Equal Opportunities*,⁷ since it also provides practical guidance on a number of issues which have not been included here.

In addition, as indicated above, the present Handbook is intended to be applicable to the protection of internally displaced women and girls. This is especially so bearing in mind UNHCR's strengthened involvement in internal displacement situations within the UN system (see also chapter 4, section 1.1). The Office is in the process of strengthening its knowledge and capacities in such situations. Users are therefore especially referred to the provisional edition of the inter-agency *Handbook for the Protection of Internally Displaced Persons*, the provisional release of which is being issued in December 2007.⁸

⁷ Inter-Agency Standing Committee, *Women, Girls, Boys and Men: Different Needs – Equal Opportunities* Gender Handbook in Humanitarian Action, December 2006, at <http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/refworld/rwmain/opendocpdf.pdf?docid=46978c842>.

⁸ Global Protection Cluster Working Group, *Handbook for the Protection of Internally Displaced Persons*, December 2007, at <http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/refworld/rwmain/opendocpdf.pdf?docid=4790cbc02>.



Chad / A refugee mother and daughter carry their belongings away from the water after their makeshift shelter was flooded with the first heavy rains near Bahai. The flooded-out refugees were immediately transferred to a new camp which had just been opened to receive them / UNHCR / H. Caux / July 2004



Afghanistan / Displaced girls who have returned to Sheikh Mesri, near Jalalabad / UNHCR / S. Schulman / October 2006