

# Survivors, Protectors, Providers: Refugee Women Speak Out

**Survivors,  
Protectors,  
Providers:  
Refugee Women  
Speak Out**

**The project on which this publication is based was implemented by UNHCR in close cooperation with Associate Professor Eileen Pittaway and Dr. Linda Bartolomei of the Centre for Refugee Research of the University of New South Wales in Sydney, Australia. Special thanks go to the refugee and internally displaced women who spoke openly about their problems, as well as the many UNSW staff and volunteers, government, UNHCR and NGO personnel who worked tirelessly to make the project happen.**

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**“On behalf of all of the women who participated in the Dialogues in every country, we would like to say ‘Thank you’ to UNHCR for listening to us. That was the most important thing of all.”**



**One participant said that if just three good things happened because of the Dialogues, they would have been worthwhile. Let us ensure that the voices of the women and girls are heard and that not only three, but many more of their concerns are addressed.**

**Foreword by UNHCR  
Assistant High Commissioner  
for Protection Erika Feller**



A decade ago UNHCR organized its first global Dialogue with Refugee Women. Participants came together to reflect upon the hardships, challenges and prospect for solutions which had marked their experiences as refugees. Five over-arching protection issues emerged which were subsequently to become the basis for the High Commissioner's Five Commitments to Refugee Women. Now, ten years on, in the context of UNHCR's commemoration of the 60th anniversary of the 1951 Refugee Convention, another major series of consultations with refugee women has been undertaken. Encompassing seven countries and over 1,000 refugee and displaced women, girls, men and boys, the 2011 process of Regional Dialogues has sought to gauge the degree to which the Five Commitments had been acted upon and what critical protection needs yet remain.

*"We have to talk about everything – one thing leads to another – we have to break the cycle".* This was a commonly voiced sentiment.

The Dialogues reinforced the importance of effective and sustained engagement with refugee communities in the process of developing protection strategies. Those refugees – men and women – who participated brought with them a collective experience of displacement, shared across refugee camps, urban sites and in countries of asylum and resettlement in the five different regions. Despite the different geographic and cultural contexts, the commonalities in the reported experiences were striking. The women shared the harsh reality of their lives with clear-sightedness and candour. They described the impacts, including sexual violence, of lack of documentation, over-crowded and unhealthy shelters, inadequate health services, and the lack of education opportunities or safe and quality schools. One cross-cutting concern was the absence of livelihood possibilities. In every conversation, refugee women emphasized the strong linkages among the protection gaps, and discussed how failure in one area will compound problems in others. Should a woman not be individually registered, for example, she cannot obtain an identity card, which may well lead to lack of access to food, shelter, healthcare or education. Inferior and over-crowded shelters create health problems and can provoke family violence. The absence of income-generating activities may push many women into survival sex to feed themselves and their families, leading perhaps to unwanted pregnancies and social exclusion. When children remain home instead of going to school, they risk exploitation as child labourers, or being lured into prostitution or early marriage. The lack of adequate sanitary materials can force girls to miss school and women to absent themselves from work, increasing the vulnerability of both groups, and indeed of dependent family members.

The most common protection gap identified in every Dialogue was the ever-present threat of sexual and gender-based violence. The inaccessibility, or complete absence, of legal remedies in many situations allows perpetrators to act with impunity. This compounds the trauma and works as a serious inhibition to successful local integration, or re-integration, into home communities when displacement ends.

Refugee communities, properly enabled, are in fact "providers of first resort" in their own protection. In all the Dialogues to date, the importance of refugee women's active participation in decision-making processes was emphasized. Women want, and need to be enabled, to participate in decisions that affect them and their families. In every conversation they urged the humanitarian community to make use of their abilities and ideas, and to apply their resources to the formulation of basic humanitarian interventions. UNHCR strongly supports this call.

What the Dialogues have also brought to the fore is the capacity for structured discussion to address tensions between host and refugee communities. Host communities need to be better informed about the special circumstances of displaced persons and the particular risks posed to women and girls. Public education campaigns and community outreach initiatives to counter xenophobia and racism must be a component of protection strategies and developed through a two-way process of dialogue that fosters mutual understanding and tolerance between refugee populations and host communities.

The Dialogues afforded refugee women an important space to raise their voices, to articulate a clear and consistent vision of what the refugee experience has entailed for them, and to offer practical suggestions for change. These suggestions were brought to the attention of States participating in the December 2011 Ministerial Event, organised as part of the commemoration process. Many were picked up in the pledges made by Ministers at that event. It is now incumbent upon States, UNHCR and partner organizations to follow up with a program of action pursued with vigour and integrity.

Erika Feller, UNHCR Assistant High Commissioner for Protection

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**“Just because we are not crying does not mean our hearts are not bleeding.”**



# Introduction

This report summarizes a series of dialogues with over 1,000 refugee, asylum-seeking and internally displaced women and girls in seven locations around the world. Held in both urban and camp settings, the Dialogues were organized between November 2010 and May 2011 in India, Colombia, Jordan, Uganda, Zambia, Thailand, and Finland as part of a programme of activities to commemorate the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness.

The Dialogues built on the Five Commitments to Women and Girls made by the High Commissioner following similar dialogues held in 2001 to mark the 50th anniversary of the 1951 Refugee Convention. They underscore UNHCR's commitment to give women and girls a voice.

The Dialogues provided participants with a platform to share problems and develop solutions during several days of situational analysis workshops. A parallel workshop enabled men and adolescent boys to engage in the process and make suggestions to improve the protection of women and girls in their communities. Participants analyzed their protection problems, developed concrete solutions and, on the final day, came together to present the outcomes of their consultations to UNHCR staff, partners, government officials and other relevant stakeholders.

The Dialogue process was implemented in cooperation with the Centre for Refugee Research at the University of New South Wales in Australia. Discussions focused on ten core protection areas: individual documentation; women in leadership; education; economic self-reliance;

shelter; sexual and gender-based violence; other forms of violence; health; sanitary materials; and legal issues. These were explored across the life cycle of women and girls as well as men and boys, and with a focus on vulnerable groups, including unaccompanied minors, persons with disabilities and elderly persons. Concerns surrounding these ten protection areas are intricately linked. Women and girls face specific gender-based risks in every aspect of their lives.

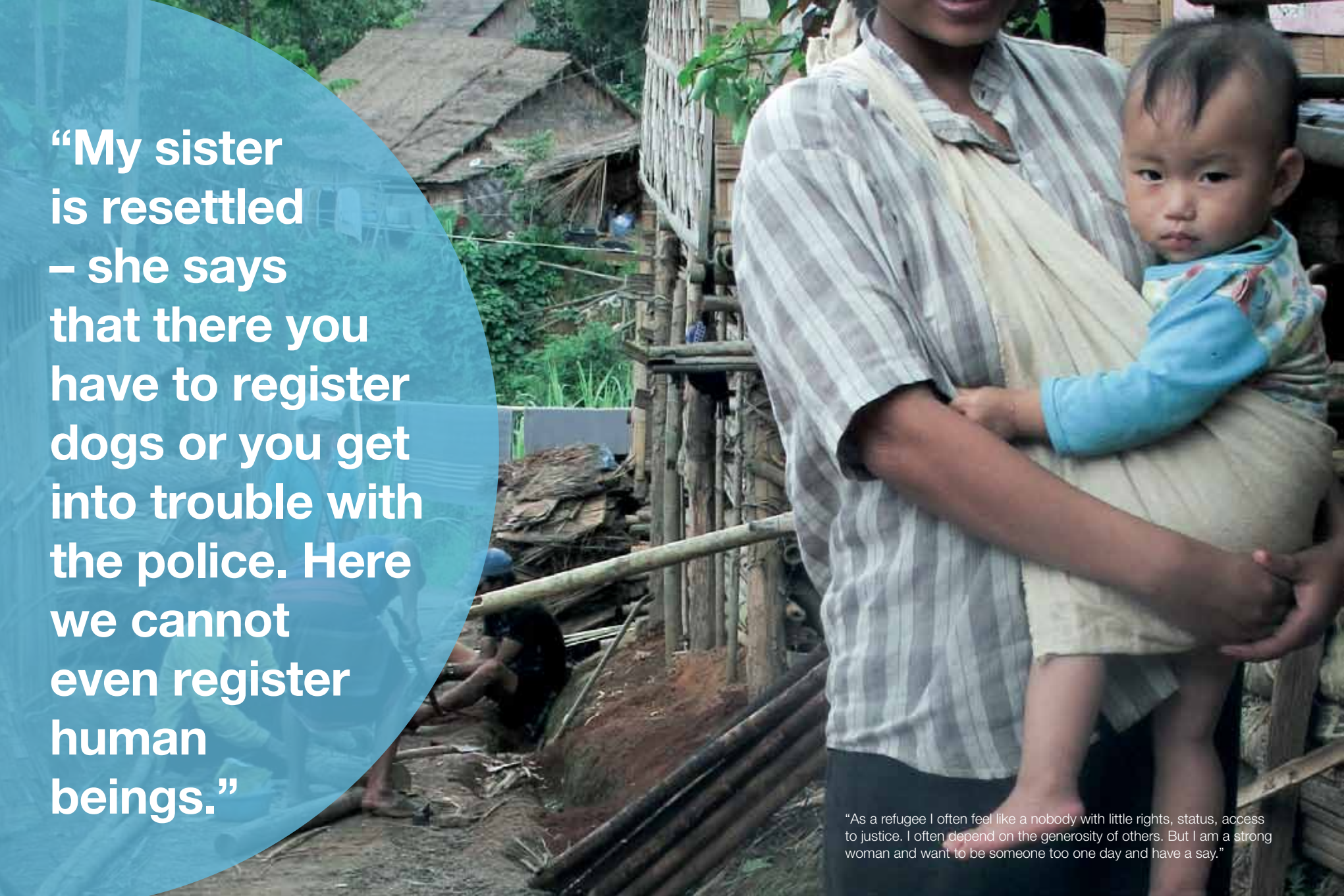
In June 2011, ten refugee and internally displaced women who had participated in the Dialogues travelled to Geneva and made powerful and moving presentations during a meeting of UNHCR's governing body and as part of annual consultations with NGOs.

This publication summarizes what women and girls reported and suggested during the Dialogues, encapsulating the problems, solutions, hopes and dreams of the participants. Their suggested solutions have the potential to address many of the protection concerns they raised.

**The ten core  
protection areas:  
Key findings and  
recommendations**

**“My sister  
is resettled  
– she says  
that there you  
have to register  
dogs or you get  
into trouble with  
the police. Here  
we cannot  
even register  
human  
beings.”**

*“As a refugee I often feel like a nobody with little rights, status, access to justice. I often depend on the generosity of others. But I am a strong woman and want to be someone too one day and have a say.”*



## I. INDIVIDUAL DOCUMENTATION

Access to registration and identity documents is a critical protection issue for displaced persons. Women discussed how difficult the registration process is in many places and the length of time it can take; sometimes up to three years. Obtaining identity documents may also be a challenge. Even when refugees get their refugee cards, these are sometimes not recognized by officials, preventing them from accessing basic services.

Without documentation women are unable to access many of the services and protection measures to which they are entitled, such as health care and education. This leaves them in a very vulnerable situation. Displaced persons in urban areas commented that lack of registration and valid documentation limits their freedom of movement, since they are more vulnerable to arrest and detention.

Difficulties in obtaining birth registration certificates also cause major problems, including exclusion from basic services. Some displaced persons are not even able to legally bury their dead babies. Children without birth certificates may be at risk of statelessness because they are not able to prove their place of birth or their parents' nationality when applying for identity documents.

Concerns were also expressed that, when no documents are produced to support an application, the credibility of asylum-seekers is often doubted. Officials and judges who determine refugee status need to be made aware that documents can be missing because of war, sudden flight and travel, and that credibility can be established by other means.







"When one has to flee there is no time to take anything... the most important thing is to save your life. When we got to the city we didn't have any documents to obtain services or to have access to our rights."



"My friend went back to her country but none of her kids had a valid birth certificate and now she has problems back home because of that."

## We, the participants, ask for:

### Documents that give us legal status and access to our rights.

- Host governments and UNHCR have to continue to work together to streamline and speed up the registration processes and issuance of individual documentation for all refugees. Refugee identity cards should be standardized and recognized as valid identity documents for all purposes. UNHCR and host governments need to have formal agreements about the use of these cards.
- Decision-makers in the asylum procedure need to receive further training in assessing the credibility of claimants who lack documentation. Refugees must not be requested to return to situations of danger in order to retrieve documents. Refugees and displaced persons will often not bring or will have lost their documents. This should not be an impediment to obtaining refugee status or family reunification.

### Birth certificates for all.

- Governments have to ensure that birth certificates are issued and provided to all refugee and displaced families within a reasonable period of time after the birth of a child.



"Children are locked inside our home because they don't have documentation, they are not sent out to play. Boys and teenagers are not going out because they might be caught by authorities. This causes domestic violence."



**“When girls want to be leaders they come up against obstacles from their teachers and from others. They are not given the opportunity to express themselves; they are silenced and their self esteem is destroyed. There is a lack of opportunities for women to express their ideas and opinions.”**

“I came here years ago and it took me a long time to integrate. But now I feel I can help others who just arrived: just try to imagine women who have suffered trauma, rape, and who are separated from their family and who do not speak a word of the language. They are lost beyond words when they arrive here.”

## II. WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP

Women taking up leadership positions in their homes, families, communities and in broader society face numerous challenges, which were discussed at length. Women were unanimous in every site that this has to change if their status in society is to improve. Women reported that they are often marginalized by men in their homes and routinely excluded from meaningful positions in their families and communities. Many are denied education, which can exclude them from learning the languages used in meetings. In addition to cultural obstacles, negative stereotyping of refugee women by people in the community may also obstruct their empowerment and hinder their capacity to take up leadership responsibilities.

Women reported that the lack of leadership opportunities is worsened by their often “tokenistic” inclusion in decision-making processes. Refugee women and girls have not yet attained substantive leadership roles in community and camp management committees, or community justice systems. Displaced women are seldom included in consultations on potential durable solutions and conflict resolution.

The participants observed that being appointed to committees is not enough. Women need training to ‘give them the right words to use’, help them to understand their rights, and develop more self confidence. **“We can defend ourselves and do things like men if we have leadership skills.”** But practical challenges also get in the way. In order to attend meetings, many women need childcare, assistance with transport, or compensation for lost income. As one woman phrased it: **“To come to this training, it costs the same as one egg. I have two teenage sons who work as labourers. Every week I try and buy one egg to share between them on Sunday. So I have to choose between the egg for my sons or to come to the training.”**

This overall lack of participation means that the special needs of women and girls, in particular the most vulnerable, are often not adequately acknowledged or addressed, with long-lasting consequences for themselves and their communities. Their knowledge, expertise and capacity are lost in these processes.



“When we have leadership roles the community is more peaceful.”





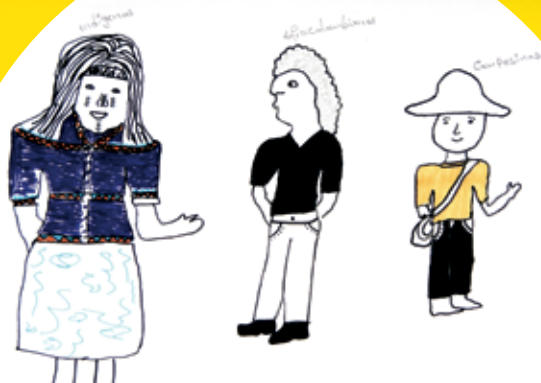
“Here we see a man with his foot on the woman pushing her not to be a leader; we have only men as leaders. The women are united, but they are in the background. They don’t have the opportunity to express themselves and they have to submit to the men’s decisions.”



“Because we have a lack of women involved in decision-making, many victims of sexual violence are not satisfied with the decisions. Because of an unfair decision, the mother does not want to say anything – she just zips her mouth. Then also her daughter feels sad about life and thinks about suicide – she is holding a rope.”



“This woman is alone, she is crying, she has a very low self-esteem. Another woman has a huge weight on her back because she doesn’t have the opportunity to be a leader. When a woman wants to be a leader, men tell her she’ll be losing her time.”



"We want the government to recognize our right to land restitution, to value the capacities of displaced women, and to take into account displaced women in government projects, policies and politics, with a specific focus on indigenous communities and other minorities."


## We, the participants, ask for:

### Knowing our rights.

- Context-specific and gender-sensitive training in human rights and women's rights needs to be provided to both displaced men and women, to enable them to understand the changes flight and refuge might mean to their traditional culture and to assist women and girls to develop the skills they need to participate effectively in leadership positions.

### Participating in decisions that affect our lives.

- UNHCR and NGOs need to engage women to take on an active role in camp committees and consultations, and recruit them when paid work is available.
- The participation of women has to be supported by providing childcare during meetings and training sessions, facilitating transport and, if necessary, ensuring some compensation for attending events. When required, the presence of interpreters has to be ensured.
- Governments and all agencies working with refugees and displaced persons have to support the meaningful participation of women in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies, programmes, and activities.



“As a mother I feel very helpless because I cannot even send my children to school.”

“We only have one secondary school between the settlements, serving thousands of refugees and nationals. We are 150-200 pupils in one class and have to rotate chairs. Will we be able to follow our dreams and become nurses or doctors?”

### III. EDUCATION

Dialogue participants identified access to education for girls and women as one of the most critical elements for ensuring protection, building a future, and planning for successful durable solutions.

Barriers to achieving access to education include overcrowding in schools, where classes may have up to 100 children. The participants complained of inadequate school buildings, sometimes lacking water and sanitation. They were upset about unqualified and poorly trained teachers, and high levels of violence, including rape and sexual abuse of girls and boys by teaching staff and other pupils. They reported that pupils are sometimes forced to provide 'sex for grades' or to provide sexual favours to obtain scholastic materials. Safety on the journey to school was also considered to be a problem; girls are sometimes at risk of being raped. There are few female teachers, and in some instances pregnant girls and girls with babies are not allowed to attend school.

Students and parents expressed their frustration because they lack opportunities to pursue secondary or tertiary education, and because girls dropout of school early. ***“Studying is expensive and scholarships are so rare. So girls are forced into early marriage because there is no other option.”***

Host countries often do not offer tailored language programmes adapted to different age groups, including elderly women and men. They do not make available to refugees courses that will enable them to adapt or upgrade their skills, so that they can more easily search for employment, participate in host country education programmes, or adapt to a new life-style.

When vocational and adult courses are available, they often target men and boys or are given at times when women cannot attend because of family duties. Little attention is given to the needs of pre-literate women. Former qualifications and levels of education are often not recognized by host countries and language acquisition is a problem for many students.



“Some children can’t go to school because they don’t have documents. In order for the right to education to be respected we need documentation.”

I can't ~~hear~~ talk, hear my miss is



"I am always at home alone; because I am deaf I can't continue my education. There is no communication for me. I am frustrated, I feel hopeless."



"This shows a college student. She has empty pockets, she has no money to continue her studies and the guards at that college are asking her to go out of the college as she is not accepted there."



## **We, the participants, ask for:**

### **Education that is safe, inclusive and of good quality.**

- Schools must actively recruit refugee women as teachers and teacher aides to fill chronic staff shortages, improve safety in schools, and respond to problems caused by lack of command of the local language. Women have to have access to training if necessary.
- Education programmes have to be accessible and inclusive of children with disabilities. The school infrastructure, including sanitary facilities, must be accessible, teachers must be trained to deal with a diverse range of learning capacities, and the environment must be welcoming for children with disabilities.
- Governments need to recognize teaching qualifications and other professional degrees of refugees, or offer opportunities for validation. Refugees should be allowed to work in schools attended by refugee children.
- Schools have to establish and disseminate codes of conduct for teachers, in cooperation with authorities, service providers and UNHCR. Adherence needs to be closely monitored and authorities must impose strict sanctions, including legal action, against teachers found to be abusing children. Confidential reporting mechanisms should be put in place for children to report incidents safely.
- Building materials have to be provided in camps and communities to enable displaced communities to build more schools for their children, working in partnership with UNHCR, host governments and NGOs.

### **Education for girls on an equal level as boys.**

- Schools must make special efforts to include girls, teenage mothers, and pre-literate children. Classes need to be organized in a flexible manner to accommodate other duties of women and girls.

### **Functional literacy for adult women.**

- Adult education has to be structured to meet the special needs of refugee and displaced women, in particular those who are pre-literate in their own language.



"I fled my home country twice and walked days through the jungle and the rivers to find safety. Finally we came here. My parents – both highly educated – can hardly make ends meet working in a little shop, but I have been fortunate to receive a DAFI scholarship with which I am now studying at the university. I worry about my family and the future but I am so grateful for the opportunities I got after working hard for them."



"We need those women that are educated to teach the women who don't know, who are not educated."



"When you don't have much education, some people want to abuse you, they take you and lure you with presents; you can be influenced by human brokers."



**“When a woman looks for a job she faces a lot of problems. Finally she resorts to [survival sex] as a means to sustain herself, and when she comes back to the camp, many people point her out, they know all about her and she feels depressed and ashamed.”**



“At times when I am desperate I ‘sell’ my food ration card so I can buy cheaper and lower quality rice which at least fills two bowls instead of one, so I can feed my kids. Some men offer food for sex. But I have my dignity.”

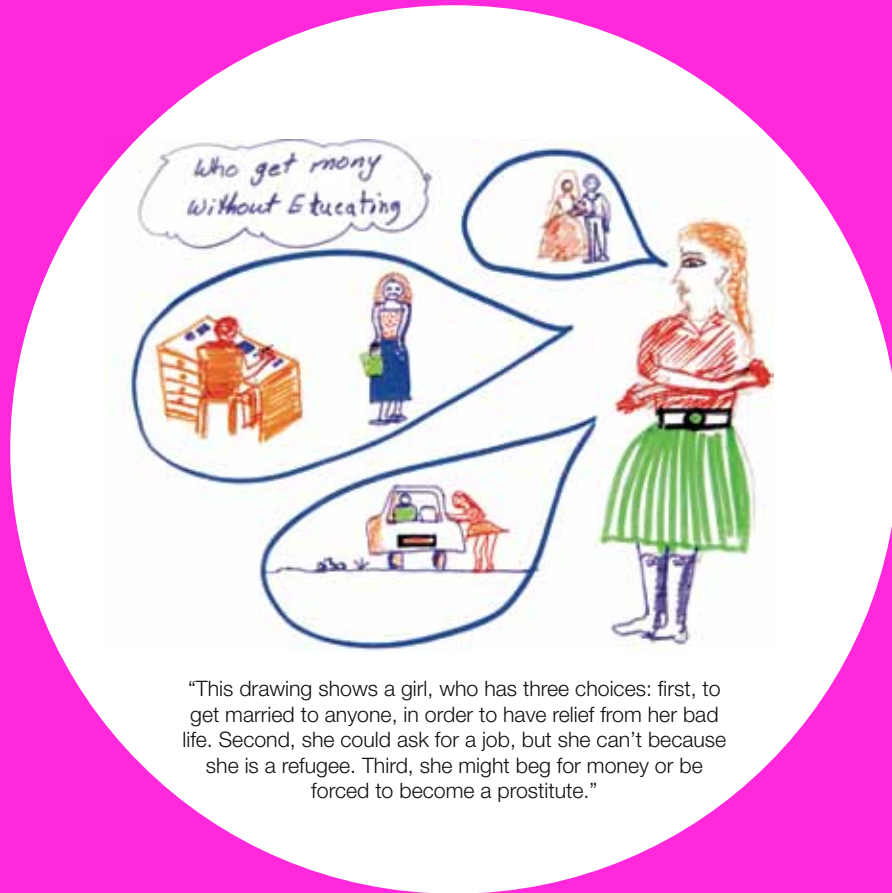
## IV. ECONOMIC SELF-RELIANCE

Lack of access to employment and to legal means of income generation were two of the biggest hardships reported by refugee women and girls. **“Because we do not have work permits, we are paid half the salary of local workers. We are supposed to get a higher salary but we do not get enough without the permit.”**

Many women, especially single mothers, face a desperate situation because they are not authorized to work in their host countries and lack access to adequate subsistence allowances or rations. They cannot pay rent or purchase food and other essential items, and this affects their health as well as their ability to send their children to school. Their only option is to seek employment in the informal labour market, where exploitation and sexual abuse are endemic. When they are excluded even from this source of income, women are at times forced into survival sex to feed themselves and their families.

Child labour was reported to be common, and to be associated with high levels of child sexual exploitation, forced prostitution and trafficking. Vocational training often does not facilitate access to local labour markets or income generation schemes, and therefore does not help refugees and displaced persons to earn the revenue they need.

Refugee women noted that they suffer because their qualifications are not recognized. **“Often refugee women [who have qualifications from their countries of origin] will get a job as an interpreter or working in projects [as unqualified workers]. Even if they have higher education, a degree from their own home country is not recognized.”**



## **We, the participants, ask for:**

### **Market-oriented, sustainable vocational training.**

- Local experts in vocational training and income generation need to be employed to establish effective and productive programmes for refugee women, taking into account the local labour market.
- Host governments are encouraged to give refugees access to national vocational training programmes.
- In cooperation with host governments, donor governments need to be encouraged to fund proven, successful income generation programmes, which generate both short-term and long-term benefits.
- Host governments are encouraged to develop a system to recognize qualifications secured in refugees' countries of origin.

### **The right to decent work.**

- Host governments are encouraged to grant work permits to refugees and asylum-seekers to ensure their self-reliance, facilitate durable solutions and limit the burden they might otherwise represent for the host country.
- Host governments, UNHCR and partners are encouraged to assist refugees to find employment, become self-reliant and contribute to the economies of host countries.
- UNHCR and partners need to assist women who have been forced into survival sex to support their families in finding alternative employment. Staff and refugee communities have to be sensitized to the reasons why some women engage in survival sex.



"Women have to walk very long distances to the market, even when they are pregnant. This woman has not yet reached the market and she is tired and sits under a tree. She is crying and very worried about her family. What happens if she doesn't reach the market to sell her goods?"



"This is a girl looking for wood near her home. She is carrying the wood on her head, and then a man comes and defiles her and the wood falls off her head...Who will help her?"



"When mothers have to go look for money they sometimes leave children on their own. While they are away, people may burn their houses, break in or rape the children."



“We need to fight hard to prove that we can offer added value and not be a burden to this society. But sometimes it is hard to do it right. When you have a job some say we take their jobs. When you don't have a job some say we take their money.”





**“I would like to have a house that has a door so I can keep my daughters safe.”**

“Back home we had a permanent house like the ones they have in Kampala, with electricity. Here we have no bed, no mattress, you just put down a net on the floor and sleep there.”



"When it rains it leaks everywhere and we suffer a lot, physically and mentally. Our children suffer a lot as well. There is no safety and we have no dignity."

## V. SHELTER

In both urban and camp situations, refugees and displaced persons reported that they have great difficulties in finding suitable accommodation. Housing is often overcrowded, unsafe, unhealthy and not weather-proof. In many cases, large families are forced to live in small unventilated spaces, such as mud huts without window or hearth, which they are sometimes obliged to share with their domestic animals. The cost of housing materials is prohibitive and most refugees and displaced persons are powerless to improve their housing conditions. Women with a disability, older women and LGBTI<sup>1</sup> displaced persons reported particular problems in finding safe shelter. Some are obliged to move many times because of the negative attitudes of landlords and other displaced persons.

The absence of simple security measures, such as locks on doors or lights near latrines, creates serious protection problems for single women in camps. In urban areas, because of high rents, families are often obliged to share accommodation, with the result that too many people live and sleep in a single cramped room, in which they also have to cook. Unaccompanied minor girls in urban areas frequently have to share rooms with single young men and, in camps, to work as domestic servants for families. This puts them at heightened risk of rape and sexual abuse. Poor access to adequate clean water and sanitation is a further problem in both urban and rural sites. Women regularly have to walk kilometers to water points, or in cities must sneak out at night to obtain water from public taps.

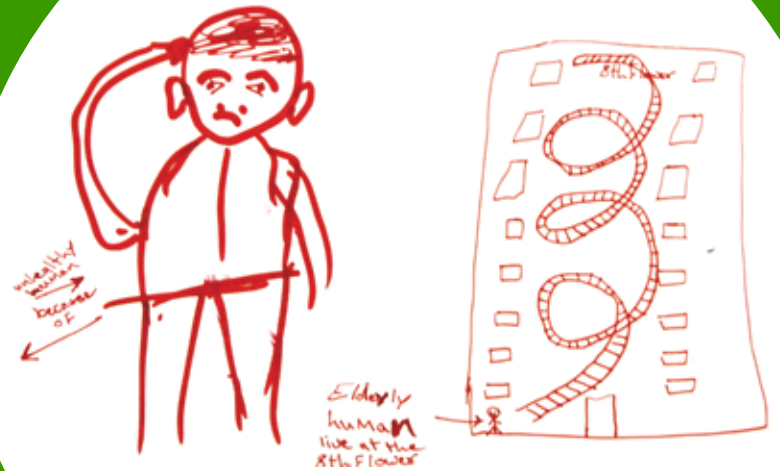
Overcrowding causes both health problems and domestic stress. Lack of privacy contributes to family breakdown, because married couples have no privacy for intimacy and women are ashamed to undress in rooms in which their children also live. Lack of privacy also poses particular problems for women and girls during menstruation. Single women who head households may find it particularly difficult to afford rents, and may have to live in inadequate dwellings.

<sup>1</sup> Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex.





"When we have more than three children, they don't want to rent to us because they say the children will damage the property. The owners won't rent to minorities. These people are subject to discrimination, exploitation and racism."



"For people with disabilities and old people it is difficult to enter any apartment, especially if they are in a wheelchair, as they need to be lifted."

## **We, the participants, ask for:**

### **In urban areas:**

#### **Non-discriminatory treatment.**

- UNHCR and local NGOs need to work with governments to establish a network of landlords who are prepared to house refugees and displaced persons in a non-discriminatory and non-exploitative manner.

#### **Affordable and safe housing.**

- Mechanisms should be explored for providing safe and affordable shelter in cities. For example governmental institutions could make available to UNHCR or implementing partners rented accommodation for displaced persons, which could be managed and maintained by committees of displaced families.

### **In camps:**

#### **Safe and accessible housing.**

- Housing materials have to be provided commensurate with the size of families, so refugees and displaced persons can build housing that provides adequate shelter and the privacy they need to conduct family life.



"For lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex people shelter is a very big problem. Some of us are kicked out by our family or have no family, and friends cannot let us stay a long time as it brings problems to them. I have lived in many different places in the camp and still have no fixed place."



"Because we live in such a small house, when my children eat they don't have enough space. But they get many germs if they eat outside."



"We fled our country more than 20 years ago and lived many years in a camp before coming to the city. Life is tough as we are many in a small apartment. Sometimes we are so many in the house that people cannot sleep at the same time, or they have to go onto the roof. But on the roof there is abuse so we have to watch over our children at night."

- Houses must be safe and secure for all, particularly for single women and female-headed households. Shelter plans in camps need to consider the specific needs of refugees.
- Shelter must be accessible to older persons and persons with disabilities.
- Resources and training should be provided to groups who are willing to assist others in the construction and maintenance of shelter.

### **Water and sanitation close to our homes.**

- Water and sanitation must be illuminated well and situated close to accommodation.

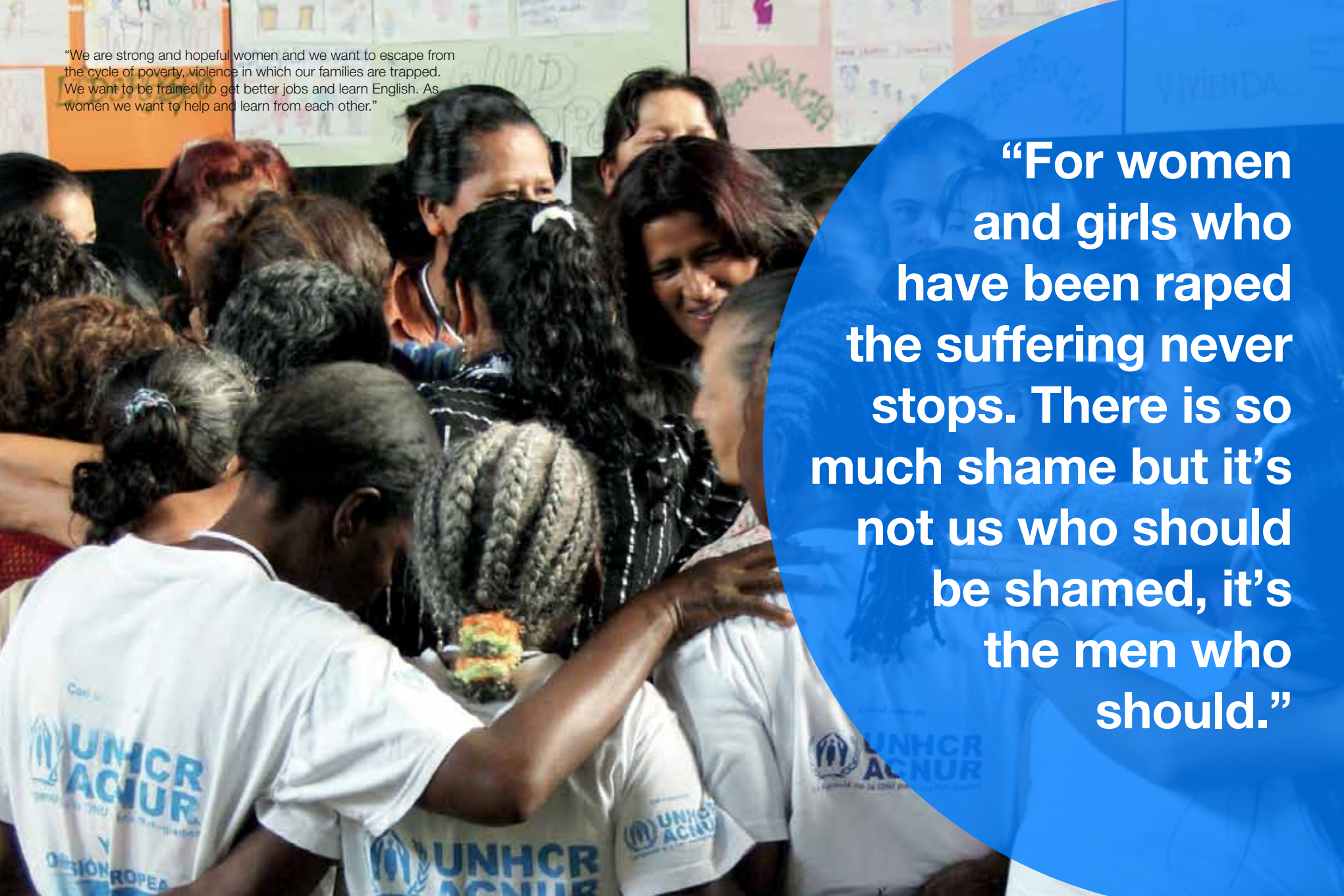
### **In all sites:**

### **Safe houses for life-threatening situations.**

- UNHCR and partners need to provide safe houses in camps and urban areas for women and girls who have experienced or may be at risk of rape or any other form of sexual or gender-based violence and who find themselves in a life-threatening situation.



"We are strong and hopeful women and we want to escape from the cycle of poverty, violence in which our families are trapped. We want to be trained to get better jobs and learn English. As women we want to help and learn from each other."



**“For women and girls who have been raped the suffering never stops. There is so much shame but it’s not us who should be shamed, it’s the men who should.”**



“When women go to fetch water, they may be raped and their property like jerry cans is destroyed. And when you want to cook for your children, you fear going for firewood because you can be raped there as well.”

## VI. SEXUAL AND GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Sexual and gender-based violence is endemic, occurring too often and influencing every aspect of the lives of displaced women and girls and their families. **“We live inconstant terror, unable to protect ourselves and our children.”** In every Dialogue, women discussed sexual and gender-based violence in its many forms: rape and torture during conflict; sexual harassment; rape, exploitation and abuse in the workplace and at school; ‘corrective rape’ of lesbians; and domestic violence precipitated or aggravated by the trauma of displacement. Women and girls also suffer from discrimination, racism and ostracism, especially if it is known that they have been raped or sexually assaulted.

In public spaces, women reported being raped while collecting firewood or water, or while travelling to the market. Market places are considered to be ‘dangerous’. Young girls and boys may be sexually assaulted or raped in schools or forced to exchange sex for grades or scholastic materials. The rapists include men in the local community, authority figures, and other refugees or internally displaced persons.

In all sites, women reported an increase in young teenage pregnancy due to rape and forced early marriage. **“Rape of girls causes many problems for young women: some become pregnant, this causes depression, isolation and fear, and in some cases suicide.”** Boys and young men are also targets of rape, and families simply do not know how to respond to the needs of abused girls and boys. Many men also expressed their helplessness and grief about such situations. **“When they rape our mothers and daughters, it hurts us. Many of our daughters are forced into prostitution to survive.”**





"If a lonely girl has faced abuse from a stranger, and if she has been raped and has nowhere to go...who will help her get her rights back?"



"When a displaced woman arrives in the city she has three choices: prostitution, begging or starvation. Which one would you choose?"

Single women and children are attacked in their homes, many of which do not have doors or locks. Survival sex is a major problem, because women shamed by rape, who are forced out of their family and community, may have no other option. Women may also be forced into survival sex to feed their families; their body is the only thing that some women have to sell.

Forced marriage of young girls is common. ***“Not all families can support all family members, so adolescent girls might be forced into prostitution to support the family. Also they are at risk of forced marriage to older men or to obtain residency. This is an early age to be responsible for a family.”***

In all Dialogues, women emphasized the high vulnerability of unaccompanied minors and women with a disability. Unaccompanied minor girls are particularly vulnerable to rape or sexual abuse by foster parents. This can lead to early and unwanted pregnancies, and to engaging in survival sex. In some of the Dialogues, the participants noted that lesbian women and girls are also vulnerable and face additional discrimination.

Many of the younger participants raised the issue of female genital mutilation (FGM). The majority of them reject this practice. While many countries have banned FGM, it is still practiced in numerous communities.

Domestic violence was also reported to be common. Many women commented that it has increased since their displacement. The women reported that training about domestic violence needs to be adapted to

context and provided to both men and women. Training sessions alone are not enough, and may even be detrimental if efforts are not made to support the participants and their families and identify and address the violence that affects them.

Legal remedies are all too often inaccessible or ineffective. Justice systems, including traditional systems, fail women and children. Perpetrators can therefore act in the knowledge that they have impunity. In many of the Dialogues, women said that, if they report a rape and the man is arrested, he will usually be set free a few days later, having bribed the police, and will then harass the family. Women are also afraid that, if they report a crime, the police will rape them a second time. Humanitarian workers are overwhelmed by the sheer size of the problem and often do not know how to respond.

Few complaint mechanisms and services to address sexual and gender-based violence are effective, nor are services to provide physical and mental health support widely available. Some women are also reluctant to access these services, afraid that staff will breach confidentiality, make them feel ashamed, or act as if the rape was their fault.

Even where services and safe houses for victims of domestic violence are open to everyone, including displaced women and girls, staff may not be prepared to accommodate cultural differences or deal with the sexual and gender-based violence that women coming out of conflict situations and women on the move experience. Trained cultural mediators are too often unavailable.





“One man tied his wife up and tortured her. The woman escaped and went to stay in the safe house. It was decided that one child had to stay with the mother and one with the father. The mother thought of the best interest of the child so she reconciled with the father; she was forced back to this torture. If women had been involved in the decision, it might have turned out differently.”



“This boy was raped at school. He is sad and crouching in the corner. The community is outside; they are pointing at him and shaming him.”



“When I lost my husband life got hard, as I have no protection and I feel exposed. I am ready to work hard but I worry leaving my children alone at home with violence and abuse around.”

## **We, the participants, ask for:**

### **Fighting impunity and prosecuting perpetrators: sexual and gender-based violence is a crime.**

- Host governments need to strengthen access to legal proceedings in cases of rape or sexual abuse (of women, children or other survivors of violence) and prosecute all forms of sexual and gender-based violence.
- Impunity has to be fought by all institutions and actors involved in the protection of displaced persons.

### **Providing survivors with immediate, effective responses.**

- Police, doctors, teachers, humanitarian and NGO workers, members of camp committees and staff in refugee reception centres need to receive training on appropriate responses to sexual and gender-based violence.
- All stakeholders must work together to provide an accessible and fast response to survivors of sexual and gender-based violence. This has to include legal, medical and mental health support, as well as protection from further attacks.

### **Talking about sexual and gender-based violence to prevent it.**

- Awareness-raising activities and training aimed at combating sexual and gender-based violence must constantly be promoted in uprooted communities and in institutions working with them. The communities themselves have a responsibility to talk about sexual and gender-based violence and act to stop it.
- Governments, communities and other stakeholders have to respect and promote gender equality and women's rights: this is the key to preventing sexual and gender-based violence.



"Life in my home country was horrible and I can't describe what I went through. But life here is tough too. We all look so different and people make us feel different. They touch and scold us in the street and bus and say 'hey negro'. All I want is a safe place where my children can grow up."

## VII. OTHER FORMS OF VIOLENCE

While sexual violence was the key issue for refugee and displaced women, the participants also discussed other forms of violence that they face in camps and urban areas. These include inter-tribal violence and harassment by local populations, including beatings and the burning of huts in camps and refugee accommodation in cities. Violence in school was also reported. ***“There is a big problem with violence in schools. There is drug addiction, arms, rape amongst the children. Sometimes the teachers know but they don’t do anything. Parents don’t know what is going on.”***

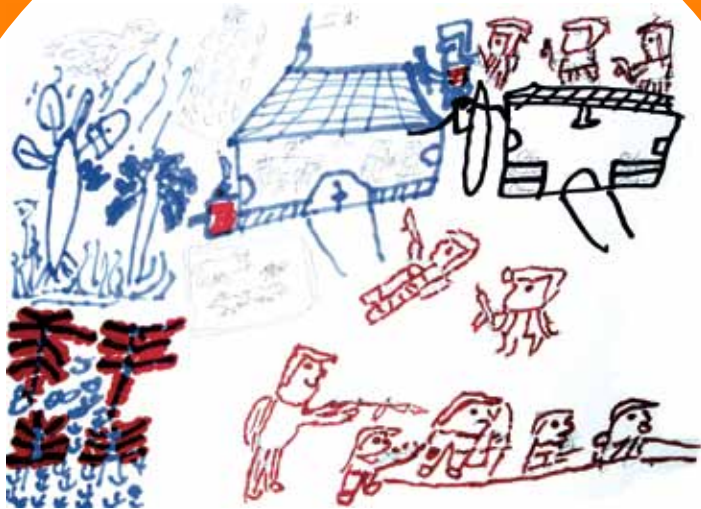
Racist and xenophobic violence was raised in every site. This particularly affects women and girls when they are targets of sexual abuse because they are different from the local populations. This causes all members of the community both physical and psychological distress. In some cases, the police and authorities have little understanding of the refugees’ experience or may themselves be responsible for violence and discrimination.

Refugee women expressed particular concern about young refugees, who are more likely to be victims of racism and xenophobia because “they do not know how to be cautious”. They often face racism in public places and at school.

On some occasions, women reported that displaced persons reproduce the violence from which they have suffered. This increases domestic violence and discrimination against other groups of displaced persons. Women and girls are, once again, particularly vulnerable to violence by their family members. ***“Violence that has been suffered is not forgotten and it’s repeated on the children of those who suffered it. It is like a circle that is constantly reproduced.”***

In some of the Dialogues, the issue of witchcraft was raised. Although on the whole communities were reluctant and afraid to discuss the issue, it was reported that women are at risk of violence when they are accused of witchcraft.

The need for active rehabilitation of child soldiers was discussed. Participants reported that young men find it difficult to settle back into communities after they have been involved with armed groups. People in their communities are afraid of them because they often exhibit violent behaviour that they have learned during their time with armed groups.

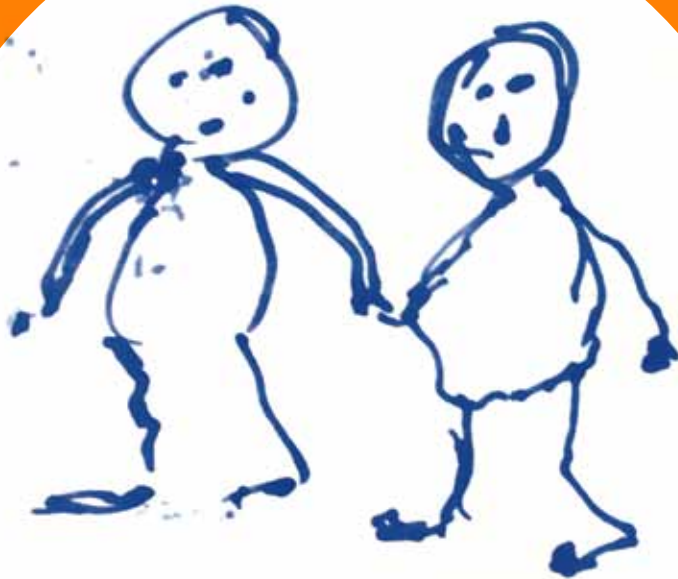


"They are running from the war, to save their lives; they look for shelter in small towns and cities. Armed groups recruit their boys for the war, and this creates displacement."



"This woman has come to a reception centre. She has very difficult things in her mind: rape and war related violence, and her family that she had to leave behind. Her mouth is taped; she cannot talk about those things, she is crying. The person working in the reception centre does not know how to communicate with her and just offers her some painkiller..."





“Older persons are more vulnerable. They can’t run, they can’t escape danger.”

## We, the participants, ask for:

### Respect, non-discrimination and tolerance.

- To counter prejudice, joint activities need to be organized whenever possible for refugee and displaced persons and for host populations, and host communities should be made aware of the reasons why refugee and displaced people are there.
- Police and other officials should receive special training about the circumstances of displaced persons to assist the construction of positive relationships.
- Public education campaigns and community outreach against xenophobia and racism should be organized, involving refugees and stressing the importance of a two-way process of integration.

### Rehabilitation of child soldiers.

- UNHCR and NGOs need to advocate for more funds to construct and run rehabilitation centres for former child soldiers.



"Older boys don't have access to education, so they may use drugs, or get involved in crime..."



"They tied us up and they said to the women: we are going to rape you and if we don't rape you we will kill your husbands."



"I get told 'hey chocolate' or 'hot chocolate' a lot. I normally turn my head and walk on. As long as my children are not affected by it, I simply try to ignore it."





"We don't have a lot of money so we end up living all together in bad accommodation. The rooms are mouldy and cold and many of us get very ill from it. As long as we live here, we will not get better."

**“We know that overcrowding is a problem for everyone in the hospital, but the discrimination makes it very dangerous in emergency cases... because we are always at the end of the queue.”**

## VIII. HEALTH

In every Dialogue, women discussed their unhappiness at the absence of effective health care, including reproductive health care. Medical treatment for women and girls who have suffered rape is often inadequate or not available. Not only do health centres often lack medicines: it was reported that generic painkillers are often issued inappropriately to treat serious diseases, the consequences of rape, and mental illness. Medicines are reportedly often out of date. The confidentiality of rape victims who seek medical treatment is often not respected. Women also expressed deep concerns about the large number of young girls who have problems in delivery because their hips are too narrow; as a result, many die. They requested that doctors able to perform caesareans should be available for such cases.

Even when displaced persons have access to local health services, they are often required to pay for operations, the services of midwives, and the materials needed during delivery. Health provision is generally unavailable for people with long-term or chronic diseases. Access to hospitals is also a problem; insufficient ambulances are available both in camps and urban areas. In all sites, displaced persons reported that patients have died on the way to hospital or because of long queues at hospitals and health centres. Racist attitudes among some medical staff, and lack of medical interpreters, seriously affect the level of care received.

Lack of fluency in the language of the host country can be a serious obstacle to health care. In the absence of sufficient medical interpreters, children are often requested to interpret, because they learn the language of the host country faster than their parents. It may be embarrassing for mothers and fathers to talk of sexual and reproductive health issues in front of their children. Lack of interpretation also prevents many families from receiving trauma counselling.

Lack of specialist care for people suffering from trauma and torture and the impact of rape and other forms of sexual and gender-based violence was discussed in every Dialogue.





"Because of displacement we don't have the indispensable resources to buy the necessary food for good nutrition. As a consequence, our children suffer from malnutrition."



صوره حقيقيه

"Women, men and children with disabilities need special care, but they can't afford that. There are many people who suffer from disabilities."



"She was twelve years old when she got pregnant and she died because her hips were not wide enough to give birth. There are so many teenage pregnancies and there is no one who can perform caesareans."



"There is not enough clean water for the population, and the area is overcrowded. Toilets are placed at the back of house, and when they are full there is nowhere else to put it."

## **We, the participants, ask for:**

### **In urban areas:**

#### **Non-discriminatory access to health care.**

- Host governments and service providers are encouraged to ensure refugees' access to comprehensive health care, including sexual and reproductive health care, at least on an equal basis with nationals.
- Trained interpreters need to be identified and made available to accompany refugees to medical appointments. Members from the refugee community can assist each other with translation and may advise and support service providers on this.
- Refugees and displaced persons are often in need of specific counselling: service providers in reception centres have to build their capacity to provide torture and trauma-related services, specifically for refugees and asylum-seekers but also for internally displaced persons.

### **In camps:**

#### **Decent quality health care, including reproductive and emergency health care.**

- Host governments and service providers are encouraged to ensure access to comprehensive health care, including sexual and reproductive healthcare. If these services do not exist, good clinics should be established for displaced communities.
- Additional ambulances should be provided in camps located far from clinics and hospitals, in particular to assist young pregnant women at risk of birth complications, seriously ill patients, and older persons.
- Medical staff must receive specialized training in sexual and reproductive health, including the performance of caesarean delivery, so that they can better meet the needs of rape survivors and young pregnant women and girls.
- Medical clinics have to be staffed with female doctors and properly resourced with equipment for childbirth and current medications.
- Whenever necessary, female interpreters should assist female patients in hospitals and medical centres. If possible they should belong to the same refugee communities.

**“Not having access to sanitary materials is a problem: women and girls have to stay home like prisoners when they have their period. Some girls can’t go to school; some women can’t attend meetings so they cannot be leaders.”**



*“We have one bucket to mop, to wash, to clean and to bathe and very little soap. How can I prevent myself from getting infections?”*



## IX. SANITARY MATERIALS

Although some improvements have occurred since the UN High Commissioner for Refugees' Five Commitments to Refugee Women (2001), lack of sanitary materials is still a major problem for the majority of refugee women and girls. This is usually due to lack of funding. In some sites, no sanitary materials are available at all and in others their quantity and quality are insufficient. Many women supplied with reusable sanitary materials do not have enough soap or a bucket in which to wash them.

In most sites, only women from 12 to 49 years of age receive sanitary materials. Yet some girls begin to menstruate at the age of nine and many women continue to menstruate when they are over 50. Lack of sanitary materials prevents some women and girls from leaving their house during menstruation, causing girls to miss school and preventing women from working, attending meetings or doing other daily activities. It is also a problem that causes great shame. Women injured by rape and older women also requested incontinence pads.








“When a girl has her period when she is in class, when she stands up and goes outside, the sanitary towels leak onto her uniform and her friends laugh at her and ask what has happened, and she feels ashamed.”

## We, the participants, ask for:

### Sanitary pads: it's a matter of dignity and respect.

- Sufficient funding must be made available for the adequate provision of sanitary materials for all women who need them, which is protected from budget cuts.
- Implementing partners and UNHCR have to regularly consult with refugee women about their preferences regarding sanitary materials and the most effective mechanisms for their distribution.
- The age limit for sanitary materials should be reviewed to include all women and girls who need them. Incontinence pads should be provided when necessary.
- Soap and buckets need to be provided as a standard part of sanitary material distribution.
- UNHCR should monitor implementing partners to ensure that sanitary materials are distributed equitably, regularly and in conformity with UNHCR standards.



**“Even if a woman  
has the money to  
take the man to court...  
the person who is taken  
to prison will stay for  
a few days only, and  
then return to his  
settlement.”**

*“I found some peace in the camp and take care of my little garden and family. But I still look over my shoulder every day. The danger of the past does not go away in my mind and impunity is all over.”*



## X. LEGAL ISSUES

### Access to legal remedies.

Lack of legal protection was a major concern in all Dialogues. The participants reported cases of racism and discrimination against displaced persons, corruption in police forces, and beatings and rape at the hands of police when people try to lodge complaints. Perpetrators act with impunity, bribe the police, and often return to threaten their victims for having reported them. The delay in response to criminal matters by officials means that action is seldom taken. Many women cannot access or afford lawyers, and access to mobile courts is limited.

In refugee contexts, camp justice systems are generally mistrusted. They are run by powerful men in the communities and very few women are represented. The judgments of camp justice systems are often detrimental to women. Women reported cases in which women were incarcerated after they were raped whereas the perpetrators walked free. Men are often fined insignificant sums for serious abuses, or not prosecuted at all.

### We, the participants, ask for:

#### Access to justice.

- Gender-sensitive, fair, accessible and affordable legal processes must be made available to all displaced persons, if necessary through the use of mobile courts. Information shared must be handled confidentially and in keeping with the wishes of the survivor.
- All displaced persons need to have access to a lawyer or other forms of legal assistance when bringing a case to court.
- UNHCR needs to work with host governments to provide the police, judges, lawyers and other justice personnel with training on handling cases of sexual and gender-based violence. If such crimes are not sanctioned under national law, UNHCR should advocate with governments to amend relevant legislation.
- Cultural awareness training for front-line and border police officers needs to be developed, including awareness of the particular circumstances of refugees and why they generally distrust the authorities, to assist the building of positive relations between the police and the community.
- Corruption has to be identified, isolated and prosecuted. Strong penalties should be enforced on police officers or humanitarian workers who act in a corrupt manner.
- UNHCR and implementing partners have to ensure that women are trained and appointed to senior roles in community justice mechanisms, and monitor the performance of men and women in such roles.
- Men and women involved in community justice systems need to be trained on human rights and women's rights and how to handle cases of sexual and gender-based violence.

**“The government gave the land back to us, but we don’t have the security to go back. We are afraid. We can still be killed there.”**

## Access to land rights.

Many displaced women indicated that they do not wish to return to the land from which they have been displaced, even if this were possible. They fear that they will experience more violence and will not be able to resume their previous livelihoods. Other women, in particular indigenous women, want to reclaim their traditional lands and asked for support to return to their homes as soon as possible.

## We, the participants, ask for:

### Safe return to our land.

- Property rights of women must be acknowledged and respected. Communities need to protect women’s property rights and support their access to land.
- The traditional ownership of indigenous lands and the right of indigenous people to voluntary return have to be recognized.
- Effective return plans need to be established with those families who wish to return to their places of origin, and need to include: the provision of land to ensure self-sustainability; help in reconstructing destroyed houses; land mine clearance where relevant; and the restoration of essential services such as schools, transport and health care. Security has to be guaranteed by re-establishing police and legal structures.



“In the solutions we have placed an ear: women should be heard, understood and attended to when they report cases.”

**“I came here as a young girl, caring for my five younger sisters. One of them was raped and has a child. I am only 23 years old myself. If we are forced to return, how can we build a house and live? The men will harass us and rape us because we are single women. We would rather die than be forced to go back to that.”**



## Protection against forced return.

Refugees in several sites voiced their fear of forced repatriation. This fear has only been increased by the fact that, despite the best efforts of UNHCR, refugees and displaced persons have been returned forcibly to danger or death in some places. The major concern is the lack of information available to communities about what is planned, and failure to involve refugees in the decision-making process.

Participants deemed some groups to be in particular danger if forced to return to their home country. They included in particular people known to be politically active in resistance movements, people suffering from high degrees of trauma, and single women who have been raped or forced into survival sex.

## We, the participants, ask for:

### Voluntary return in safety and dignity.

- UNHCR must consistently share information about planned repatriation with refugee communities and discuss the process with them. Women have to be actively and fully involved in these consultations.
- Governments, with the support of UNHCR, need to develop a transparent process for identifying refugees and displaced persons whose return would put them at risk, and provide alternative solutions for them. Specific and careful consideration has to be given to any persons who suffered or are at risk of sexual and gender-based violence upon return.

### Respect for our right not to return.

- The right not to return needs to be respected and supported by governments, UNHCR and NGOs.



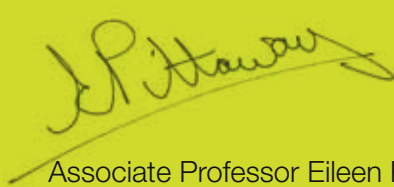
# **Concluding remarks by the Centre for Refugee Research**

It took tremendous courage to tell the stories presented in this book. During the months of the Dialogues, refugee women and men from around the world bravely shared their pain and their grief, as well as their hopes for the future. At times people outside the process questioned if such an emotionally-charged undertaking was justified, yet it was the refugees themselves who were certain it was. Above all, they valued the opportunity to speak out, to be consulted and have their voices heard.

Dialogue after Dialogue, these voices articulated the same concerns and recommendations, underscoring the global impact of protection gaps for refugee women. Women need to be empowered to participate in the decisions that affect them and their families. They need their insights and abilities to be respected, and to have opportunities for themselves and their children to develop their talents. They need to be able to support their families in a dignified and sustainable way. They need access to decent healthcare and shelter. They need to feel safe in and outside of their homes. They need to have crimes against them met with justice. They need human dignity to form the foundation of their relationships with those who surround them.

Achieving these aims will take determination and resources. The determination, we have seen, can be amply and ably provided by refugees themselves, but the resources are another matter. Political will must be committed and sustained in order to fully realize the hopes so earnestly shared in the Dialogues. A positive step in this direction was the recent Ministerial Event held in Geneva, in which States from around the world made pledges to provide funding, services and legal protection for refugee and internally displaced women and girls. We must propel the momentum fomented by this event forward, encouraging States not only to follow through on their pledges, but to invite others to undertake further action to close the protection gaps that leave women and girls especially vulnerable. For as High Commissioner António Guterres succinctly said, “If we cannot get protection right for them we won’t get it right for anyone.”

We would like to thank UNHCR staff at Headquarters and at the Dialogue field sites for their hard work in helping to make this process a success. Yet without the thoughtful and active participation of the refugee and displaced women, men, girls and boys themselves, this process would never have taken place. We are proud to have worked with them, and honor their strength and vision. Thank you for sharing with us.



Associate Professor Eileen Pittaway and Dr. Linda Bartolomei  
Centre for Refugee Research, University of New South Wales

**A personal reflection by  
UNHCR Goodwill Ambassador  
Angelina Jolie**

During my travels as UNHCR Goodwill Ambassador, I am always humbled by the strength and the courage of refugee and displaced women.

This book is a testament to the 1,000 women and girls, and the countless others whose voices are never heard, who participated in the Dialogues with Refugee Women that UNHCR organized as part of commemorating the anniversaries of the refugee and statelessness conventions.

The women and girls found the strength to describe their reality, the horrors they experienced and ongoing traumas. They were also courageous in working together to find solutions to some of the most difficult problems they face in their lives.

The most harmful and widespread issue they identified was the pervasive sexual and gender-based violence that plagues women in all phases of their lives. The world over, women and girls are discriminated against, oppressed and subjected to violence on a daily basis. Almost every woman and girl who participated in the Dialogues had experienced sexual abuse or knew someone who had. I was disturbed to learn the sheer magnitude of the problem. How does one even begin to tackle a problem that is so widespread that no part of the globe is spared?

The demands the women make are far from extravagant. In my view, as a woman and a mother, I find the solutions they propose to be practical, thoughtful and completely understandable. Mothers want to keep their children healthy and safe. They want a roof over their heads that won't leak, along with doors and locks to protect them from attacks. They want to be able to take their children to a doctor and receive adequate medical care. They want to support their families without being exploited, having to sell their bodies, or running the risk of their daughters having to do the same.

As importantly, mothers want to send their children to schools where they know they will be safe, and where they will receive a solid education. Owing to outdated customs and the harsh reality of exile or displacement, too many women and girls are denied an education. This has devastating consequences for their futures and jeopardizes their safety, health and prospect of a happy and fulfilled life for themselves and their families.

When women and girls are educated, they are empowered, and when empowered they are less likely to suffer violence. Girls and boys must be given equal access to education. Their mothers also want an opportunity to learn. Ensuring education for all is a good place to start, although it is not the only answer. Sexual and gender-based violence exists at every level of society, preventing women and girls from engaging in and contributing to their communities.

A community cannot hope to begin to move forward when half of its population lives in a state of marginalization and in fear of victimization. Men and boys must be recruited as advocates and allies in the fight against sexual and gender-based violence, and to help spread the message that this is truly a universal issue – one that affects both women and men. As the ones who largely shape the systems and structures that leave women vulnerable to discrimination, abuse and violence, male partners have to challenge harmful practices and bring about new ways of thinking.

The women and girls who participated in the Dialogues demonstrated remarkable resilience by not only opening up about their experiences, but by using them to envision ways forward. That first step took extraordinary strength and courage. Now, the next step is ours.



Angelina Jolie, UNHCR Goodwill Ambassador

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