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## **Protecting refugee women: promoting gender equality**

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## **I. Introduction**

1. One of UNHCR's key goals is to promote gender equality in order to better protect refugees, returnees, stateless and internally displaced persons. Achieving gender equality requires that men, women, boys and girls be provided with equal opportunities and responsibilities.

2. This paper describes UNHCR's progress with regard to targeted interventions in support of women and girls in five areas: sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV); participation in decision-making and leadership; economic self-reliance; education; and access to sanitary materials. These are the themes most frequently raised by women and girls during participatory assessments, and they present specific challenges which need to be addressed robustly. In examining the five areas, this paper includes suggested ways forward. The final section sets out important components of UNHCR's future work on gender equality.

## **II. Protecting women and girls**

### **A. Background**

3. UNHCR has adopted a two-pronged approach to ensuring gender equality and equitable outcomes for all persons of concern: the development of targeted actions to address specific protection needs, and the integration of age, gender and diversity-sensitive analysis and action into all organizational practices, policies and programmes. As part of its age, gender and diversity mainstreaming (AGDM) approach, UNHCR is working to enhance its ability to measure and monitor its impact through a results-based management system.

4. Two additional and complementary mechanisms enable UNHCR to monitor progress towards gender equality and women's protection. First, participatory assessments conducted with women, men, girls and boys of concern provide a necessary source of information. Second, the AGDM Accountability Framework provides an annual snapshot of leadership commitment to mainstreaming and progress on targeted actions in individual countries, in different regions, and for UNHCR as a whole, in relation to the 2007 baseline.

### **B. Operational activities targeting women and girls**

#### **(a) Sexual and gender-based violence**

5. Participatory assessments reveal the horrifying reality of abuse and sexual violence against women and children of concern. High numbers of women and girls are the target of rape, human trafficking, domestic violence, sexual exploitation and abuse; boys and men are also affected. Sexual violence is causing serious trauma and health problems, sometimes leading to pregnancies involving girls as young as ten. These early pregnancies in turn lead to significant health problems for girls, including maternal mortality. Many girls, especially unaccompanied minors, engage in survival sex in order to sustain themselves or their families.

6. Partnership is crucial in preventing and responding to SGBV. UNHCR is working with more than 150 national and international partners globally to ensure the best use of resources and to develop targeted, multi-sectoral programming. Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) are designed to improve coordination among partners in addressing SGBV. Today, 80 per cent of operations in urban settings and 93 per cent of operations in camp settings have such SOPs.

7. Several projects are proving effective in reducing the exposure of women and girls to SGBV, in particular during darkness and when they are searching for firewood. UNHCR

has, for example, provided solar lights and lamps in camps in Central African Republic, Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda and Uganda as well as a combination of fuel-efficient and solar cookers in Chad and Nepal.

8. In Kenya, a mobile court visits refugee camps on a monthly basis to ensure that women can obtain legal advice and legal representation. In Kyrgyzstan, both men and women refugees have undertaken training in family leadership and the prevention of domestic violence in order to challenge cultural stereotypes about gender roles. In Yemen, an emergency response mechanism to protect girl and women trafficking victims was put in place, which has led to the successful prosecution of three sex traffickers.

9. UNHCR is improving its data collection on SGBV through the use of different protection monitoring tools, such as the incident-based GBV Information Management System and the *ProGres* registration programme. The Standards and Indicators Report revealed that in 2010 there was a significant increase in the assistance provided to persons reporting SGBV. In urban areas, for example, response and services grew from 57 per cent in 2007 to 73 per cent in 2010.

10. Despite all efforts, SGBV remains under-reported. Scarce services, low respect for confidentiality, the impunity of perpetrators, and threats and stigma facing victims, all contribute to discouraging women and girls from seeking support, hiding the magnitude of the problem.

11. *Next steps for UNHCR:*

- (i) Work with partners to develop appropriate prevention mechanisms, based on successful practices such as the provision of solar lamps and fuel-efficient or solar cookers;
- (ii) Ensure that UNHCR's updated strategy, "Action to Prevent and Respond to Sexual and Gender Based Violence in Situations of Forced Displacement" (2011) translates into country-specific strategies to address gaps in SGBV response, particularly with regard to prevention;
- (iii) Continue to improve data collection systems through existing tools.

**(b) Participation and leadership**

12. UNHCR is committed to supporting the equal and meaningful participation of women in the decision-making bodies and processes that affect their lives, from camp committees to conflict resolution. These efforts are resulting in women increasingly assuming responsibilities in the public sphere. On average, women now account for 40 per cent of refugee camp committee members. In Malawi, all refugee decision-making bodies have a 50 per cent ratio of active representation by women. In Algeria, Bangladesh, Colombia, Ecuador, Eritrea, Guinea, Namibia, Nepal, Rwanda and Zambia, sports and other non-formal education activities have increased girls' and women's participation in community activities. In Meheba refugee settlement in Zambia, UNHCR supported a fair process of election of refugee leaders. Prior to the election, only 7 per cent of refugees participating in public meetings were women. A quota system was introduced for the elections with the result that 36 per cent of representatives elected were women.

13. This progress is unfortunately not matched in urban settings or other places where persons of concern are dispersed over large areas. Where "outreach" is difficult, ensuring women's participation and leadership in decision-making is a complex and time-consuming task. In order to address this challenge, UNHCR is working with skilled partners and local women's groups.

14. The Office is also encouraging women to build social networks and to find solutions to their problems. In India, for instance, girls and young women from urban areas have an opportunity to participate in youth clubs. This project has provided a key opportunity for

young women to engage with their peers, and helps promote communication, integration and skills sharing between refugee and local youth.

15. UNHCR looks to empower and support women to play a positive, active and catalytic role within their communities. In Colombia, for example, a UNHCR-sponsored capacity-building project supports destitute, internally displaced women in urban areas to recover their dignity and pride by assuming collective responsibility for their community's safety. They now have a network that has successfully lobbied local authorities for access to better services. In addition, they have started to operate small businesses, such as fast food, hairdressing, tailoring and child care.

16. UNHCR has affirmed the importance of incorporating the displacement dimension into follow-up of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security. A specific recommendation was presented during the 10th anniversary commemoration of this Resolution, urging the active inclusion and participation of refugee, displaced, returnee and stateless women in peace talks and negotiations.

17. *Next steps for UNHCR:*

- (i) Continue to advocate with stakeholders involved in peace-building, return and reconstruction to include displaced women consistently and meaningfully in discussions and negotiations;
- (ii) Work further with communities to ensure that women's leadership is understood, accepted and welcomed by all community members.

**(c) Economic empowerment and self-reliance**

18. UNHCR is working to support women of concern worldwide through addressing the daily struggle they face in securing some form of income for themselves and their families. In the past three years, there has been a 50 per cent increase in the number of women of concern engaged in gainful economic activities.

19. UNHCR has been advocating for refugees to be granted permits to work legally. This requires joint efforts from Governments and humanitarian and development partners. Many refugees and displaced people rely on high-risk activities in the informal sector and/or subsidies that increase their dependency on UNHCR or other service-providers. The inability to work in the formal sector puts women in enhanced situations of vulnerability to both economic and sexual exploitation.

20. Addressing issues of self-reliance must be a critical component of UNHCR's work, particularly in the early phase of displacement and as a way of avoiding dependence on the Office and others for the provision of subsidies. Refugees, stateless and internally displaced people sometimes move with some of their assets and it is important to ensure that they can use these assets to maximum effect, to reduce the possibilities of destitution and dependence. For example, a group of Iraqi refugees depleted their savings because they could neither accede to the banking system nor work in the country of asylum. Within a few months, they were calling on UNHCR for a subsidy.

21. In a number of countries, UNHCR has engaged in small income-generation projects for women. Among the successful stories, the following are illustrative:

- (i) Bangladesh: In Cox's Bazaar, refugee women and Bangladeshi women from 15 villages received skills training and now earn a living by producing toys, household items, and art for export under fair-trade principles. The project has increased self-reliance, helped counter negative refugee stereotypes and raised host population awareness of the difficulties refugees face;
- (ii) Democratic Republic of the Congo: In Kikonde and Katanga, women received training in agricultural techniques, soil conservation and seed selection and

extraction. Through the project, agriculture has become a source of income, rather than just a means of subsistence;

- (iii) Morocco: A community centre for refugee women and children is working to improve the self-reliance of a significant number of sub-Saharan refugee women and girls. The project combines mental health support, recreational activities, vocational training and business start-up opportunities.

22. *Next steps for UNHCR:*

- (i) Reinforce efforts to advocate with national governments for work permits for refugee women and asylum-seekers. This is a critical mechanism for supporting women's protection and reducing their vulnerability;
- (ii) Advocate with Governments to facilitate the conversion of school diplomas, academic titles and the re-professionalisation of refugee and returnee women, to facilitate their integration into the local labour market;
- (iii) Advocate for fair access to banking and financial systems as a means to preserve the assets of displaced women (and men) and contribute to their self-reliance.

**(d) Education**

23. Education is central to supporting girls in developing competencies and personal skills to improve their own lives and capacity for self-protection. Educated women and girls can bring positive changes to their families, economies and societies. Yet participatory assessments reveal that girls have limited access to schooling. In East Africa, for example, only one in every five refugee girls aged 12 to 17 is attending school, and only 1 in every 3 refugee girls attending primary school will advance to secondary education. Worldwide, only 36 per cent of refugee girls in camps and 31 per cent of refugee girls in urban areas are enrolled in secondary school.

24. The issue of girls dropping out of school is a serious concern for UNHCR, as failure to attend school leads to many protection risks. In Burundi, Kenya, Rwanda and Uganda, for example, the average female enrolment rate in secondary school was only 12.5 per cent, as compared with 67.8 per cent in primary school. Statistics for some countries are even more dramatic. In Malaysia, primary school enrolment for refugee girls is 78 per cent but drops to 2 per cent at the secondary level, while in Bangladesh 96 per cent of girls enrol in primary school but less than 1 per cent in secondary school. Adolescent girls face various challenges that can have a negative impact on school attendance such as early marriage, poverty, lack of parental guidance and insecurity.

25. UNHCR is therefore supporting targeted education programmes, resulting in increased enrolment rates or stabilized enrolment levels for girls of concern in many countries, including Azerbaijan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Benin, Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Liberia, India, Egypt, Morocco and Somalia. In Ethiopia, for instance, specific programmes targeting Somali girls in Jijiga refugee camp raised the enrolment level from 30 per cent in 2009 to 50 per cent in 2011. Overall, primary school enrolment rates for refugee girls in East Africa increased from 62.7 per cent in 2009 to 64 per cent in 2010

26. Overall, UNHCR has undertaken a number of initiatives to increase access to education, improve its quality and enhance the protection available in schools. These include:

- (i) Providing incentives: Experience has shown that school feeding encourages enrolment, facilitates attendance and retention rates, and improves learning. UNHCR has successfully collaborated with the World Food Programme in school feeding programmes in Algeria, Colombia, Djibouti, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Sudan and Yemen. In Benin, microcredit facilities have been provided to parents of refugee students to ensure that students remain in school;

- (ii) Reducing disincentives: In Myanmar, a girls' hostel programme has enabled girls to attend secondary school. In South Africa, UNHCR's efforts have led to a waiving of school fees for refugee children in government schools. In Burundi, a campaign against early pregnancy was organized in two refugee camps and pregnant girls were encouraged to continue attending school. These initiatives have led to an increase in enrolment levels;
- (iii) Enhancing the learning environment: UNHCR has improved girls' enrolment and attendance in school in several places, including in eastern Sudan, Chad, Ethiopia and Uganda, by constructing secondary schools with separated latrines and spaces for girls, establishing child-care services, providing scholarships and making sanitary materials available. These interventions, although limited in numbers, have yielded promising results. A Safe Learning Environment (SLE) e-learning module focusing on responding to violence in educational settings has been piloted in Chad and Ethiopia and will be made more widely available by mid-2011;
- (iv) Promoting female teachers: Joint efforts by UNHCR and its partners have resulted in an increase in the global number of trained or qualified female teachers, which rose by over 5 per cent in comparison with male teachers during the last three years.

27. *Next steps for UNHCR:*

- (i) Enhance data collection and analysis on critical indicators such as retention rates and learning achievements;
- (ii) Continue to provide incentives to promote enrolment and enhance retention rates in both primary and secondary schools;
- (iii) Enhance the quality of teaching by supporting ministries of education to improve teacher qualifications. Promote training and enrolment of female teachers.
- (iv) Reinforce all safe learning environment initiatives; promote the inclusion of subjects on safe learning environments, gender equality, respect for diversity and the issue of displacement; and create a network of support and protection for girls studying at all levels;
- (v) Promote literacy courses and non-formal education for adults and advocate with local authorities to promote certified formal education for young girls and women through accelerated learning programmes.

(e) **Sanitary materials**

28. Access to sufficient and adequate sanitary materials is central to women and girls' dignity and well-being. Lack of sanitary pads often has serious health implications and can lead to restricted freedom of movement, resulting in girls missing school or dropping out completely, and women being unable to leave the house to go to work and perform other daily activities.

29. Ten years ago, UNHCR made a commitment to provide sanitary materials to all women and girls of reproductive age receiving assistance from the Office. A survey was conducted in 2010 to assess progress. The survey revealed around 10 per cent progress since the 2009 baseline, with half of UNHCR's country operations fully meeting the target in 2010. It also showed important financial and logistical obstacles to the delivery of sanitary materials to women. Inadequate budget was expressed as a specific constraint by 38 per cent of offices. Other challenges included difficulties in sourcing appropriate materials; difficulties in accessing women and girls of concern; and distribution problems caused by lack of road infrastructure and border restrictions.

30. In addition, women's reproductive health remains a taboo subject in many societies and the question of cultural acceptance of sanitary materials came up strongly in the survey. UNHCR has responded in various ways, including finding culturally acceptable and environmentally responsible measures for hygienic processing, waste management, and local production of sanitary materials, either by local enterprises or by refugees, as an income generating activity. This approach has yielded positive results. For example, in Uganda a micro business employs refugees to produce cheap, environmentally friendly disposable sanitary pads made from local reeds.

31. *Next steps for UNHCR:*

- (i) Continue to ensure regular provision of sanitary materials;
- (ii) Provide guidance and share best practices across all operations, including the review of present standards to reflect women's cultural preferences, complementing sanitary kits as appropriate;
- (iii) Where possible and appropriate, promote the local purchase and provision of environmentally friendly sanitary materials as a means to reduce transport costs, promote self-reliance and develop local manufacturing capacity.

### **III. The road ahead**

32. UNHCR will continue its efforts to embed gender equality, as well as age and diversity-sensitive approaches, into protection strategies, guidelines, tools and planning instructions, and to translate these into concrete actions with tangible impact. It will be crucial to maintain a high level of awareness about risks of discrimination and the protection challenges faced by women and girls, linked to their gender, age and background. Building the capacity of staff and partners, ensuring training opportunities and providing updated guidance on how to further strengthen an AGD-sensitive approach and responses will be a priority.

#### **A. Capacity building**

33. The "Protection of Women and Girls" film series, published last year, is presently used for training on gender awareness and capacity building for police officers in different African countries

34. UNHCR is developing an SGBV e-learning tool that will complement the organization's protection training package and will be a requirement for all protection, community services, programme, managerial and field staff. In addition, the Office is introducing a new, mandatory e-learning module on its AGDM approach and is including a session on the Accountability Framework for AGDM in the induction programme for Representatives.

#### **B. Policy direction and guidance**

35. In 2011, a new policy will define UNHCR as an AGD-sensitive organization. The policy will be implemented under a three-year plan.

36. A new tool for collecting and analysing best practices on gender equality and working with women and girls will be produced, to complement the 2008 Handbook for the Protection of Women and Girls.

### **C. Results-based data collection and analysis**

37. Recognizing that progress towards gender equality is incremental, reliable qualitative and quantitative information needs to be collected on an ongoing basis to inform the design of targeted interventions and to monitor impact. UNHCR will continue working to improve data collection and analysis in order to better understand gender inequalities and address SGBV. This will translate into the consolidation of baseline data on women and girls, the enhancement of impact indicators and the improved use of specific indicators already included in the Results-Based Management framework.

### **D. Effective inclusion of women and girls in planning and programming**

38. Communication with persons of concern is the basis for effective and sustainable protection interventions. In this commemorations year, UNHCR has held a series of Regional Dialogues involving women and girls, as well as men and boys, and has mapped their global protection needs. Over 600 women and girls and 300 men and boys in seven countries participated in the project, which was concluded in May 2011. While already confirming the continued relevance of the High Commissioner's five commitments to refugee women, the Dialogues will inform the further development of UNHCR's work on the protection of women and girls.

39. Engaging men and boys in building a protective environment is an integral part of a gender equality strategy. Their contribution provides a complementary perspective to both problems and solutions and ensures a higher level of engagement. UNHCR will continue to ensure that a collective voice informs planning and programming as well as interventions and responses by UNHCR.

## **IV. Conclusion**

40. Protection challenges faced by women and girls remain enormous. Progress has been made, but new conflicts and new patterns of violence are affecting an increasing number of women and girls, as well as men and boys. In the years to come, UNHCR will pursue its engagement in the protection of women and girls of concern through the age, gender and diversity approach as well as building on good practices arising from targeted actions. UNHCR looks forward to the continued support, engagement and cooperation of States and partners in this regard.

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