

## REPORT ON INTERNATIONAL PROTECTION OF WOMEN AND GIRLS IN DISPLACEMENT

### I. OBJECTIVES AND FOCUS

1. This paper attempts to demonstrate that the civil, political and economic empowerment of women and girls and their participation in policies and programmes affecting them, is an effective tool for the protection of people of concern to UNHCR. Empowerment is the process of engaging women and girls in reflection, enquiry and action that will allow them to take control of their own lives and well-being and to respond to protection challenges confronting them. This process enables them to become active members of their community.

2. The paper will review the background of UNHCR's work with women and girls and the development of the Age, Gender and Diversity Mainstreaming (AGDM) strategy. The paper explains how the empowerment cycle, from education to participation and self-reliance would provide the most effective response to serious protection concerns and concludes that increased attention should be placed on the empowerment of women and girls as a strategy to enhance their protection.

### II. BACKGROUND

3. UNHCR adopted the Policy on Refugee Women in 1990 and the related Guidelines on the Protection of Refugee Women in 1991. These tools integrated, for the first time, the resources and needs of refugee women into all aspects of programming.

4. During the years that followed, UNHCR demonstrated increased organizational commitment to this policy, making "protection of women" one of the Office's policy priorities and through the development of several tools<sup>1</sup> and projects to operationalize the principles set out in the policy. Most notably, UNHCR launched programmes entitled "women's initiatives" in Bosnia (1996), Rwanda (1997) and Kosovo (1999), which played a useful role in addressing the protection needs of women and their communities and facilitated targeted actions to empower them. These efforts culminated in the adoption by the High Commissioner, of the Five Commitments to Refugee Women in June 2001. They are: i) to promote the participation of women in all relevant management and leadership committees; ii) to ensure individual registration; iii) to counter Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV); iv) to promote direct

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<sup>1</sup> In 1995, for instance, UNHCR issued "Sexual Violence against Refugees: Guidelines on Prevention and Response", a practical field manual that offered advice to field workers in the areas of medical treatment, psychological support and legal intervention. This tool underscored firmly the need for education, training and information campaigns among the people of concern.

participation of women in the distribution of food and non-food items and, v) to ensure provision of sanitary materials to all women and girls of concern as a standard practice in all UNHCR assistance programmes.

### III. FROM FOCUSING ON WOMEN TO GENDER EQUALITY

5. The thinking and practice within UNHCR has evolved from a focus on women refugees to considering the broader concept of gender, i.e., from specifically targeting women to challenging the inequalities between men and women. The gender-equality perspective, therefore, helps analyse whether programmes are having an equal impact on all groups, and if not, whether UNHCR is taking corrective measures<sup>2</sup>.

6. This concept laid the foundation for the two-pronged approach introduced in 2004: the mainstreaming of age, gender and diversity in programmes on the one hand and targeted actions on the other. The AGDM strategy, together with its ACTION<sup>3</sup> Plan and Accountability Framework, promotes a conceptual framework which takes the different interests, needs and resources of displaced women and men, girls and boys into account at every step of the displacement cycle, in protection delivery, as well as in programme design, planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. By adopting a rights- and community-based approach, the AGDM strategy promotes the participation and empowerment of individuals and communities as the two underlying principles to address the inequalities and discrimination that women and girls face.<sup>4</sup>

7. The second prong of the approach, developing targeted actions, is intended to bridge the gap of inequality that affects women and girls and to reinforce further the process of empowerment and participation. Civil, political and economic empowerment act as a protection mechanism since they give women and girls access to information and resources that they can use for their own and their family's protection and survival. The participation of women and girls in decision-making processes also enables them to properly address many of the protection issues affecting them and their community. Since the protection of women and girls is a core activity and a policy priority for UNHCR, targeted actions form a central and integral part of the Office's strategy<sup>5</sup>.

### IV. EMPOWERING WOMEN: A PROTECTION STRATEGY

8. Close scrutiny of the situation of women and girls in refugee, returnee and internally displaced settings reveals that the protection problems that they face, such as SGBV or exploitation are deeply rooted in a protection environment in which gender inequalities persist. The protection of women and girls should, therefore, be directly linked to the reinforcement of

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<sup>2</sup> EC/49/SC/CRP/22, Standing Committee, September 1999.

<sup>3</sup> ACTION: A: Attitudes, leadership and accountability, C: Coordination and partnership, T: Targeted actions for empowerment, I: Integration of AGDM into UNHCR's work, O: Organizational capacity building, N: Non-negotiable standards of assistance.

<sup>4</sup> Members of the ExCom have specifically recognized in different Conclusions the need to devote attention and resources to help ensure the protection of women. The same principles were reaffirmed by the ExCom Conclusion No. 105 of 2006 (LVII) on Women and Girls at Risk.

<sup>5</sup> Please see also: The Handbook for the Protection of Women and Girls, (UNHCR, 2008) a comprehensive tool to address the main challenges faced by women and girls of concern to UNHCR. The Handbook highlights that empowerment is a participatory process that engages women in reflection, enquiry and action.

their capacity to enjoy their rights both as individuals and as part of a community. Even though the three key areas of the empowerment cycle, namely, education, participation and self reliance form a vital part of UNHCR's work to protect women and girls, they require increased attention.

#### A. The door to empowerment: education

9. Education is a human right. Quality education is essential for the sustainability of durable solutions, to enjoy and exercise other fundamental rights and to overcome situations of conflict. Education forms an important part of any protection strategy, as it is both life saving and life supporting.

10. Education is an essential step towards women's empowerment. It teaches them awareness of their rights, giving women the capacity to negotiate for themselves and their families and to enhance their self-reliance and skills. Educated and empowered women could strengthen their position in the community and gain respect within their families and from their neighbours. They would be capable of dealing with people of authority. It is, therefore, of paramount importance to uphold: i) the right to formal and non-formal education and the right to gender-sensitive, quality programmes with properly trained teachers and curricula that include raising awareness of women and girls' rights; and ii) equal access to safe schooling and learning environments.

11. Specific attention has to be devoted to unaccompanied or separated girls, disabled girls, teenage mothers and single mothers, who often have particular difficulties in gaining access to education opportunities. Girls denied education can more easily fall prey to whoever may offer solutions, thereby risking abusive situations. Therefore, ensuring free access to education and creating safe school environment are crucial to combat any form of SGBV and exploitation.

12. According to statistics from operations in 2007<sup>6</sup>, 66 per cent of refugee children aged 6-17 are enrolled in primary and secondary schools. Reports from operations in camp settings indicate an average of 83 per cent enrolment at the primary level, showing a decrease of 12 per cent compared to 2006 statistics. Gender parity was almost achieved for primary education, with 44 percent girls and 56 percent boys. However, the enrolment rate at the secondary level is significantly lower as compared to the primary level. Overall enrolment stood at 20 per cent, with gender disparity increasing at higher grades. The data clearly indicates the need for an increased commitment to education, particularly for girls, and continued attention to ensure equal access to education.

13. UNHCR has been engaging in a series of gender-sensitive interventions in education to increase girls' participation, including ensuring quality teaching. UNHCR is partnering with UNICEF to address teachers' training needs and to enhance their qualifications. Activities such as UNHCR's [ninemillion.org](http://ninemillion.org) campaign, which raised almost USD 1.8 million<sup>7</sup> in 2008, provided additional support to these initiatives.

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<sup>6</sup> An analysis of the 2008 statistics is not yet available at the time of writing.

<sup>7</sup> In addition to the financial contributions, in-kind contributions were provided through the [ninemillion.org](http://ninemillion.org) campaign, mainly sport equipments and uniforms.

## B. Civil and political empowerment: equal and meaningful participation

14. Many United Nations Conferences<sup>8</sup> have stressed that the equal participation of women in decision-making processes is a requirement for sustainable development. It also assists in raising awareness of women's rights in their communities, which will in turn enable them to reach a level of control over their own environment. Failure to include women and girls in decision-making processes often leads to their concerns and protection risks not being addressed in the community's negotiations with external stakeholders and the overall response. As a result, resources may be inaccurately allocated and the protection problems women and girls face regarding their security, including SGBV and access to basic services, could even be exacerbated.

15. Concrete steps, as described in the Five Commitments of the High Commissioner, need to be vigorously pursued since they are both strategic and practical. Gender equality also requires the promotion of specific and focused activities that address needs and grant dignity, for example, by ensuring a proper provision of sanitary materials to all women, as it will enhance their movement and social interactions and access to education.

16. In all operations, UNHCR strives to achieve the equal participation of women in refugee management and leadership committees, as set out in the High Commissioner's Five Commitments. Data from 110 refugee camps in 2008 show that the participation of women in refugee camp committees stood at 39 per cent. Compared to the data for the period between 2005 and 2007, this indicates a stagnating number of women involved in decision-making bodies. Participatory assessments have proven to be extremely helpful in promoting women's meaningful participation and involvement in decision-making fora, as they provide opportunities for them to voice their particular concerns. Adult literacy and vocational courses in camps have been attended by 8 per cent of the refugee population between the age of 15 and 24 in 2008, the majority women (51 per cent).

17. UNHCR continued to improve individual refugee registration, with approximately 3 million active records in *proGres* of refugees and asylum-seekers. This system allowed the consistent inclusion of women, ensuring their individual registration. However, the Office faces several registration challenges, particularly in urban contexts, where refugee and asylum-seeking women and girls may find it difficult to go to UNHCR offices as these are often widely dispersed, or due to social and cultural reasons. Similarly, displaced women and girls encounter obstacles in obtaining government-issued documentation in their own name, as such documentation is often issued only to male heads of household.

18. Ensuring the provision of sanitary materials to all women and girls of reproductive age remains another challenge for UNHCR. In 2008, 35 operations reported the distribution of sanitary materials for a value of about one-and-a-half million USD, while the total cost of full coverage had been estimated at USD 16 million. UNHCR continues to discuss the most suitable form, quality and quantity of the sanitary materials with women and girls in several operations. The Maka Pads project in Uganda, which was developed to produce sanitary materials using natural and local material, not only meets at least half of the needs of sanitary materials of refugee women in Uganda, but also provides an employment opportunity for refugee women. UNHCR is committed to replicate such livelihood projects in other locations

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<sup>8</sup> See i.e. the Beijing Declaration and Platform of Action, 1995, and the World Summit Outcome Document, 2005.

### C. Economic empowerment and livelihood

19. Economic empowerment enables women to meet the immediate and long term needs of their families, their children and themselves. UNHCR recognizes that economic empowerment is critical to the protection of women and girls and that it is an integral part of the Office's responsibility to protect them and to secure durable solutions. Providing women and girls with livelihood opportunities reduces situations in which they can be obliged to engage in survival sex, due to their inability to work gainfully or to restrictions on women's freedom of movement. Economic empowerment will also reduce the exposure of women and girls to rape and other sexual assaults when they venture out of camps in search of firewood, which, in some instances, constitutes their only source of income. The early identification, appraisal, inclusion and capacity-building of women's groups, ensure collaboration, shared ownership, eventual handover and the sustainability of any empowerment initiative. In addition, self-reliance projects for women act as a means to strengthen their capacity to protect themselves.

20. UNHCR's Women Leading for Livelihoods (WLL) was initiated in 2007 and aims at promoting the economic independence and empowerment of refugee and displaced women and girls around the world. It provides a good example of an initiative that promotes a gender, age and diversity sensitive livelihood strategy. In this strategy, women are not considered victims or passive recipients of aid but, rather, demonstrate that when given the proper resources, they are capable of changing their lives and that of their children, families and communities. Many private donors have expressed interest in contributing to this initiative; WLL started supporting six projects in Brazil, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Georgia, Kenya, Morocco and Serbia. Reports highlight the positive impact these projects have on families and surrounding communities. Some twenty additional projects have been developed by field offices, in close cooperation with implementing partners and women's groups. Several other operations are also applying for funding, which illustrates the potential and effectiveness of WLL funded projects to enhance the economic empowerment of women.

## VI. CONCLUSIONS

21. The effective protection of women and girls requires an increased focus on women's empowerment through participatory, rights- and community-based approaches. Systematic policies and programmes to empower women and girls are an effective strategy to address serious protection concerns affecting not only women, but also their families and communities.

22. Targeted actions to address protection problems faced by women and girls will support the effort at empowerment. They will overcome the inequalities between men and women in terms of power and access to resources and information. In this regard, access to education, equal and meaningful participation in decision-making processes and economic empowerment are three key principal areas that will continue to receive focused attention by UNHCR. This entails UNHCR working hand in hand with all stakeholders at recognizing and implementing the concept that adequate and sustained solutions to the problems caused by displacement can only be found by putting people at the center of decision-making processes and by giving women and girls the means to become active agents of their own protection and that of their communities.