

## **Women Leading for Livelihoods** *Worlds of Women Coming Together*

**Report of the Information Meeting**  
**10 December 2007**  
**UNHCR Headquarters, Geneva**

Over 50 people attended the 10 Dec. 2007 information meeting on Women Leading for Livelihoods (WLL) – businesswomen, students, foundation representatives, refugees, UNHCR staff, and personnel from UNHCR partner organisations and local NGOs. They came to learn about WLL as a new UNHCR initiative to promote the economic independence and empowerment of forcibly displaced women and girls around the world. Beyond this, they came to share their goodwill, interest in, and ideas for making the initiative succeed.

Three contributions stand out as highlights of the meeting. The first was the teleconference with Princess Haya Bint Al Hussein of Jordan, who is a member of WLL's International Advisory Board. Princess Haya spoke passionately about the difficulties that refugee women face, and the importance of UNHCR's work to support refugee women's livelihoods.

In the context of the Middle East, the Princess explained, the issue is actually one of world peace. Unless they have hope, people can only fall back on extremism. Women are the backbone of families in the region. If their lives can be improved, their children and families will gain more stability and hope in the process.



Women at the meeting listening to Princess Haya Bint Al Hussein.

Second, the polar explorer Liv Arnesen gave a deeply inspiring presentation on her expeditions to the North and South Poles, and how she and her fellow explorer, Ann Bancroft, made their adventures an educational experience for thousands of children.

Liv, who recently became a Goodwill Ambassador for the Norwegian Refugee Council, spoke of the power of human will over adversity and the significance of turning setbacks into positive experiences. These messages – and another she gave, not to accept defeat – go directly to WLL's aim to capitalise on the strong will of refugee women to survive, move on, and make a new life.

Third, from the podium and the audience refugee women talked about the struggle and pain of living as a refugee. The stories of Denise Beutler Mateso, Halima Ahmed, and Suad

Aden included accounts of rape, genital mutilation, and the deep entrapment of cultures where girls are not to go to school, they are always to stay at home. Yet these women spoke out. They did so because, for them, positive change for refugee women depends on promoting their self-reliance.

***When I was in the camp, the wildest thing we girls could think of was having food, shelter, a house...If you could manage to help girls to dream, this would be a major breakthrough.***

The stage was set for the meeting thanks to Erika Feller's opening comments. UNHCR's mandate is twofold, as Feller explained: 1) to protect the forcibly displaced and 2) to find solutions to their problems.

Approximately 17 million women and children are among UNHCR's population of concern (which includes refugees, internally displaced persons, or IDPs, and the stateless). This group, Feller noted, is strongly affected by displacement and the disruption it brings to social and family structures. Women also bear a disproportionate share of displacement problems. These include issues of abuse, gender violence, and 'survivor sex' (having only one's body as a means to provide for oneself and one's family).

Feller emphasized that livelihoods activities develop skills, reducing women's vulnerability and creating alternatives and new opportunities for them. More formally, UNHCR seeks to advance livelihoods for displaced women for the following reasons:

- The absence of livelihoods is a root cause of protection risks;
- The absence of livelihoods create problems for displaced families to survive;

- Livelihoods training helps women to realize their potential in achieving a durable solution. In the process, it empowers women as agents of development and change.

UNHCR has had some notable successes in creating viable women's livelihoods projects, as Marjon Kamara and Ursula Aboubacar highlighted in their presentations. However, as discussed by Kamara, Olivier Delarue, and others, the agency has real resource limitations. When UNHCR must respond to a new crisis, or has to otherwise face a budget shortfall, budget cuts often fall on self-reliance projects. The result is that the agency is reaching only a fraction of the women who need support.



Halima Ahmed, Liv Arnesen, and Suad Aden.

The livelihoods resource gap underlies the creation of Women Leading for Livelihoods. The core idea, which originated with Tina Tinde in conversations during a 2005 conference in Norway, is to involve businesswomen as partners with UNHCR in developing and funding livelihoods activities for displaced women.

The private sector aspect of the initiative builds on UNHCR's Council of Business Leaders. WLL represents a 'niche' of a special kind, however. Its driving force is women leaders, whether as individuals or as corporate representatives. They have repeatedly expressed to UNHCR representatives – and again clearly articulated at the

10 Dec. meeting – their strong support for empowering women refugees and IDPs.

***The difference women make is the idea we embrace, which is solidarity.***

Building on the WLL motto of “Worlds of Women Coming Together,” what does UNHCR mean by partnership? The meeting provided several concrete examples, starting with Princess Haya, who has joined WLL’s International Advisory Board as a long-term committed funder of livelihoods activities.

In her presentation on Dadaab refugee camps in Kenya, Line Pedersen also highlighted another avenue for engagement: through participation as a donor on a visit to meet refugees and to plan with them for livelihoods activities. The first WLL donor visit will go to Dadaab camps in early April 2008.

For many, however, the most accessible basis for partnership will be through WLL’s rolling project roster. A selection of some of the 2008 projects that WLL seeks to fund was distributed to the meeting. Included therein are projects in Africa, the Middle East and North Africa, Asia, and Latin America, with budgets ranging from 25,000 to over 1 million USD. WLL donors have the possibility to support all or part of these projects, as well as others which UNHCR is in the process of identifying.

The 10 Dec. meeting was intended not only to introduce attendees to the WLL initiative, but also for UNHCR to learn from participants how to further this private sector engagement. Lisa Cooper spoke as a businesswoman to businesswomen to say that “we know what needs to be done – the issue is to do it.” Businesswomen, Cooper

noted, have skills they can draw on to empower their refugee counterparts. Among these are the following:

- *Adapting skills*, e.g., coaching and mentoring, to help refugee women to build self-esteem, manage conflict and foster community;
- *Business and learning skills*, e.g., market analysis, services insights, and more generally cultural awareness of globalisation, how it works, and its prospects as well as limitations;
- *Entrepreneurship skills*, or the orientation and drive to draw on and adapt the best practices to advance a new business.



Grazyna Samsel, Irmelin Drake, Ragnhild Nilsen, and Nicole Thonnard Voillat

Cooper joined another attendee to emphasize that UNHCR has to “help us to be advocates” by providing “success cases” in the context of forcible displacement to draw upon for brainstorming.

Other important points raised by participants included the following:

- Businesswomen’s involvement in WLL is volunteerism. And this should be celebrated – businesswomen will work in the spirit of volunteerism to share our resources and skills;

***Companies today are just like individual donors – they don't want just to give money, they want a relationship. WLL needs to build in relationship creation from the planning stage.***

- UNHCR should examine how it can involve communication firms in supporting WLL, especially with the internet media. A 2-3 minute video of success stories available on the net is a far more powerful promotional tool than any report;
- WLL should seek to engage with women partners in leading law firms. A law firm could take a project and raise capital in each city where the firm has a branch. Many women lawyers could be interested in helping in this way;
- UNHCR should consider how it can engage with Diaspora

women to ask them to direct some of the remittances they are sending back home.

(Thanks to Donna Keher, Nina Gardner, and Mireille Mugisha, as well as everyone else who contributed to this discussion).

Erika Feller concluded the meeting by describing how UNHCR sees the WLL initiative evolving. The agency will reach out to contacts, she said, both as potential donors and as people able to expand WLL's network among women of influence in the corporate world.

"We will make every effort to keep you all interested and involved, to the extent you feel you able," Feller said. "In this latter connection we would like to hear from you at some point how you found this meeting, where and how you believe this initiative could most successfully be directed, and whether you feel inclined to be a part of it."