

NGO Consultations 2010: Session on Protracted Refugee Situations

30 June 14:00 – 18:00

Title of the Session: "A harsh life in long-term exile – partnerships for overcoming vulnerabilities and empowering women".

Brief overview: figures and trends.

The protracted displacement situations (PRS), which UNHCR defines as a situation “where more than 25 000 refugees have been in exile for more than 5 years” is one of the most complex humanitarian challenges nowadays. Indeed, UNHCR listed at least 30 major protracted refugee situations in 2009, accounting for over 6 million refugees worldwide (that is to say about 2/3 of refugees today). What’s more, the average length of the periods of exile is increasing, from an average of 9 years in the early 1990’s to an average of 20 years nowadays.

These situations occur mostly in the world’s poorest and most unstable regions. Most PRS are located in Africa. But in terms of number of refugees, Central Asia, South West Asia, North Africa and the Middle East are the most affected regions. Different environments are concerned, including camps, rural settlements and urban centres.

Women and girls, who constitute on average 49 per cent of persons of concern (UNHCR data), do not experience PRS in the same way men do. Indeed, long-term exile is not a gender neutral phenomenon: women are particularly vulnerable to human rights abuses and are often dependent on different forms of assistance. Guaranteeing the social well being of refugee women could impact whole families, due to the formative role women play in societies. Therefore, gender-sensitive policies are needed.

Main issues and challenges.

- **Refugee women in protracted situations are confronted with a very harsh and difficult life.** They are dealing with poor living conditions (such as shelter, hygiene, or medical assistance) in often insecure and remote locations. Their freedom of movement is frequently limited, as well as their access to land or to professional or educational opportunities, in violation with some of the rights contained in the 1951 Convention. Women in PRS also face inequalities in their everyday lives: they do not participate in the camps decision making processes, incomes are lower for women, poorer health conditions exist in female headed-households, etc.
- **Violence against women is an often-reported condition in protracted refugee situations,** including emotional, physical, or sexual violence. Women are particularly vulnerable to acts of violence as they have to leave the refugee-camps on a daily basis in order to secure basic needs for their families, such as

collecting firewood. What's more, it is difficult for women to report on these acts of violence and judicial procedures are often inaccessible or ineffective. Subsequent trauma and lack of appropriate support can thus represent obstacles to finding durable solutions.

- Threats to the refugees' security also originate from **tensions with host populations**, as the long-term stay of large populations can cause regional instability. In some camps, activities such as arms trafficking, drug smuggling or trafficking in women and children have been reported. Furthermore, as scarcity of aid to the refugees in protracted situations has sometimes been noticed after the "initial emergency phase", competition with host populations over limited resources can appear.
- Moreover, with the increasing duration of exile, finding a way to earn a living is essential to the refugees' well being. And in many socio-cultural backgrounds, **women are those who have to care for their children and feed the family**. Therefore, they need to have better access to opportunities to take care of their loved ones. Indeed, access to livelihoods can stabilize the situation of a refugee and help to explore and develop strategies for more durable solutions.
- **Effective partnerships with national and local NGOs can help overcoming vulnerabilities and empowering refugee women in protracted situations.** As stipulated by the UNHCR (*Protracted refugee situations*, 2004), essential elements of the strategy regarding PRS should therefore include: (i) providing refugees with physical, legal and economic security; (ii) removing barriers to self-reliance; and (iii) creating opportunities".
Indeed, long-term solutions to the issues of women in PRS should be based on increasing the representation and leadership roles of women, through skill trainings or self-reliance programs. A few significant examples can be given:
 - women leadership trainings to improve their capacity of reaction facing difficulties and providing for their families;
 - professional trainings;
 - access to microfinance;
 - assistance with judicial procedures;
 - psycho-social counseling and education on health issues for young women to prevent them from being victims of gender-based violence.

All these activities are meant to favor female refugee's autonomy and develop their potential by limiting their dependence on subsistence-level assistance.

To bring them about partnerships with different actors are needed who connect the knowledge about their specific situation and their needs with specific knowledge on how to train and empower them.

Objective of the session.

The aim of the session is to raise awareness on the above issues and have a meaningful exchange in order to draw concrete recommendations. In particular, this session will give a showcase of the situation of women in PRS; it will look at practices to overcome the vulnerabilities and providing women with opportunities for leading a self-sustained life; it will present models about good cooperation with local/national partners (including host communities) – making a link with the development of the community. Finally, it will identify key issues and develop recommendations for follow up.

Format of the session.

Presenters will frame the two subjects for discussion – violence against women in PRS and access to livelihoods - by presenting four case studies on their practical experience and on example of effective partnerships at national and local level. Participants will be then divided into two break-out sessions with the aim of mapping examples of effective partnerships and of elaborating recommendations for effective partnerships, which help to improve the situation of women. The sessions will look specifically at the protracted situations of refugee women in camp settings.

Questions for the break-out sessions:

- What actions could be undertaken in order to prevent violence against women refugees in PRS?
- What actions could be undertaken in order to favor women refugees' integration in the host country and their access to livelihood?
- Do you have examples of effective partnerships improving the situation of women with regard to combating violence against them and their access to livelihoods?
- How can partnerships with local and national stakeholders be encouraged and strengthened?

Suggested readings:

- Conclusion on Protracted Refugee Situations, No. 109 (LXI) – 2009, EXCOM Conclusions <http://www.unhcr.org/4b332bca9.html>
- *Protracted refugee situations: revisiting the problem*, UNHCR, Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's programme, Standing Committee, 2 June 2008, <http://www.unhcr.org/484514c12.html>
- *Protracted Refugee Situations*, UNHCR, Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's programme, Standing Committee, 10 June 2004, <http://www.unhcr.org/40c982172.html>
- *Forced Migration Review*, Issue 33, September 2009.
- LOESCHER G., MILNER J., NEWMAN E., TROELLER G., (ed.) *Protracted refugee situations: political, human rights and security implications*, United Nations University Press, 2008.