

REFUGEE WOMEN

BACKGROUND

UNHCR's activities for refugee women have evolved significantly over the last ten years. While the Office continues to promote activities for women in accordance with the Beijing Platform for Action, UNHCR's policy has shifted to achieving gender equality for refugees. Its goal is to incorporate a gender equality perspective into all its activities (a concept known as "mainstreaming"). UNHCR continued to encourage asylum countries to make their procedures more responsive to the experience of female refugees.

As part of this strategy, UNHCR launched in 1996 the General Initiative Fund for Refugee Women (GIF). The Initiative was designed as a discretionary fund to encourage pilot activities geared towards empowering refugee women. Although field offices were encouraged to integrate activities for refugee women directly into their initial programme planning, it was recognised that occasionally unforeseen opportunities arose. The GIF was designed to seize these opportunities. In 1999, the Refugee Women and Gender Equality Unit made a strategic decision to fund a limited number of projects that promoted the advancement of women's interests.

OBJECTIVES

In 1999, the main goal of the Senior Co-ordinator for Refugee Women/Gender Equality Unit was to incorporate a gender equality perspective into all UNHCR's operational activities. In order to accomplish this, the Unit, in partnership with the field operations, strove to:

- quantify the extent to which this had already been achieved;
- develop mechanisms to increase the integration of gender equality concepts into UNHCR's programming;
- conduct assessments of gender equality integration in key country operations through the Country Reports and Operations Plans; and
- evaluate compliance with agreed gender equality plans.

ACHIEVEMENTS AND IMPACT

Mainstreaming and Support to Operations

To promote the integration of a gender equality perspective in UNHCR's planning processes, the Unit invested significant resources in the analysis and revision of UNHCR manuals, guidelines, and training materials. Detailed comments, based on gender analysis and the concepts in People Oriented Planning (POP), were provided to staff responsible for producing the Reintegration Operational Framework, Health and Nutrition Checklists, Camp Security Training Modules, Emergency Assessment Guidelines, the Operations Management System (OMS) Effective Planning Guidelines, and others. To complement this, gender-awareness training was provided for some managers and staff, followed by a two-day retreat for both the regional gender advisors and the refugee children policy officers. The retreat provided a useful forum for identifying policy priorities, constraints, and global operational objectives.

Training is a helpful tool for advancing the interests of refugee women. POP has been the primary training vehicle for implementing UNHCR's Policy on Refugee Women. POP has provided UNHCR staff and implementing partners with a framework for analysing the different experiences of female and male refugees, returnees, and displaced people. In 1999, the framework of analysis was revised to reflect changes in thinking over the last decade. As a result, the POP framework now more decisively highlights gender equality as a goal, and includes practical programming exercises to apply gender analysis to operations.

An important vehicle for improving the tools for mainstreaming was the new OMS. In 1999, UNHCR worked to ensure that the Country Reports and Operations Plans, as well as funding appeals, were gender sensitive and inclusive of women's needs and capacities. During the year, workshops were piloted on use of the new project description document. The Unit participated in those workshops, bringing practical support to the field on how to ensure that every project improved the lives of refugee women and children.

UNHCR made considerable efforts to encourage governments to ensure their asylum procedures addressed the barriers that women face. Increasingly, female staff were made available for status determination and translation requirements in order to redress imbalances in access to asylum. UNHCR worked to clarify jurisprudence in the context of asylum claims predicated upon gender-based persecution, and offered a legal opinion in the United Kingdom reflecting its interpretation of the relevant laws.

The Bosnian Women's Initiative (BWI) was evaluated in October 1999. Workshops were held to discuss how the BWI could better empower women in the future, and the lessons learned will be used to guide the newly created Kosovo Women's Initiative (KWI). For the latter, the Unit helped to develop a strategic planning framework to strengthen start-up activities and promote empowerment. The KWI is now fully underway and returnee women are participating in a variety of activities including fora to discuss the rights and changing roles of women in Kosovo's society.

In Turkmenistan, the Unit helped conduct a workshop on how to include gender awareness in protection and assistance activities. A checklist on asylum procedures and programming was developed, integrating gender and child policy issues. The checklist was modified for other regions (Europe, the Baltics, and Central Europe). They will be field-tested in 2000.

The Senior Regional Advisors for Refugee Women/Gender actively promoted UNHCR's mainstreaming strategy in the field. Gender networks were established in the Americas, Europe, the Baltics, the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and Central Asia. In early December, the Americas gender network held its third annual meeting to evaluate the work of the regional team. Following success in the Americas, it was agreed that the system of networks would be expanded to other regions, as it had proven to be an effective mainstreaming tool. The gender network is based on the "ripple in the pond" effect, whereby knowledge shared by one or more members of an office is disseminated throughout the office. The idea is to move away from individual focal points responsible for gender issues towards sharing responsibility among all staff members. The networks in Central Asia, the CIS, and the Baltics started off with three-day workshops for programme and protection staff in each region, to share ideas on gender awareness and mainstreaming.

In West and East Africa, projects were implemented to develop country-specific mechanisms to prevent and respond to sexual and gender-based violence against women. In the Horn of Africa, reproductive rights awareness and training was undertaken, as well as projects to promote the elimination of harmful traditional practices such as female genital mutilation and the marriage of young children. Activities to include women refugees in protecting the environment were implemented, and gender-sensitive mine awareness training sessions were held.

In Eastern Europe and Central Asia, the regional advisor worked with the field offices to finalise strategic frameworks on gender mainstreaming and to develop gender-sensitive performance indicators. In the Americas, UNHCR focused on issues such as co-ownership of land for returnee women in Guatemala (as part of reintegration programmes) and refugee women in Mexico; migration documents for men and women refugees in Chiapas and urban areas of Mexico; and gender sensitive legislation and inter-agency coordination in Colombia. In other regions, UNHCR worked to promote gender-friendly asylum procedures in Egypt; to improve women's health in Western Sahara and Pakistan; to produce a public information campaign on the rights of women; and to promote micro-credit schemes and literacy training for refugee women in the Islamic Republic of Iran.

General Initiative Fund for Women

UNHCR and the other UN agencies recognised that women have been systematically left out of reconciliation processes and there are tangible benefits from bringing a female perspective to the peace table. For this reason, funds were allocated from the GIF to support preparations for an inter-agency sponsored peace mission by senior African women leaders to Eritrea, Ethiopia and Somalia, as part of peace negotiations in these countries. The mission to Somalia was delayed due to security concerns, but it is planned to take place in 2000. In the meantime, UNHCR is undertaking a more thorough study of what has already been done to promote the participation of women in the peace process, analysis of gaps, and how the participation of women can be of added value.

GIF funds were also allocated to the regional advisor in Turkey to set up gender networks in the Eastern European and CIS countries, the Balkans, and Central Asia. In each region, workshops were held with participants from programming, protection, and community services to establish a series of tools for main-

streaming gender equality in those regions. Checklists were established for gender sensitive asylum procedures and promoting gender equality in programming. In some regions, this was the first time the issues of gender awareness and mainstreaming gender equality had been discussed in such a forum. The participation of government and NGO counterparts provided an excellent opportunity to develop a shared understanding of the issues and a common vision for future activities.

Towards the end of the year, UNHCR and its partners developed the Afghan Gender Equity Project (AGEP). The Unit covered start-up costs for the consultations with Afghan women's groups in Pakistan, the Islamic Republic of Iran and Afghanistan resulting in an inventory of all projects for the advancement of women in the region and a draft concept paper for the design and implementation of the project in 2000. It was envisaged that GIF funds would provide for regional and country workshops to develop action plans and start up funds for activities, but owing to delays in the initial assessment mission, the funds allocated for the AGEP will be disbursed in early 2000.

ORGANISATION AND IMPLEMENTATION

Management

The Senior Co-ordinator for Refugee Women/Gender Equality reports to the Director of the Division of Operational Support (DOS), which is an integral part of the Department of Operations that oversees all aspects of UNHCR's activities, including ensuring full compliance with policy priorities. This arrangement is intended to assist the process of mainstreaming by ensuring that the Senior Co-ordinator is involved in policy making and monitoring through key contacts in UNHCR headquarters and through the Senior Regional Advisors for Refugee Women/Gender Equality. In the field, the regional advisors assisted staff to integrate equally the needs and rights of refugee women and men in general programming, and they provided technical advice on programming for the advancement of the rights of women where particular discrimination was identified. The Regional Advisor's post in Mexico City was transferred to the Regional Service Centre in Costa Rica, maintaining the same regional coverage for all of the Americas. The post in Addis Ababa was moved to Nairobi, and its coverage was extended to include the Great Lakes region, while the posts in Ankara and Cairo were unchanged. Structural and staff changes in the first half of 1999 led some of the posts being vacant, sometimes for six

months or more, resulting in a temporary lack of support to headquarters units and field offices.

Working with Others

The Unit continued to promote technical co-ordination and networking with partners. During the Kosovo crisis, the Unit and the Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children jointly developed a synopsis of the UNHCR Guidelines on Prevention and Response to Sexual Violence. The synopsis was developed as a quick summary aid to all humanitarian workers working in the Kosovo emergency, where numerous cases of violence against women were being reported. The synopsis was also translated into Albanian and used as a tool to generate discussion amongst refugee women and to provide information on the assistance directly available to them.

The Unit was particularly active in the Inter-Agency Standing Committee Sub-Working Group on Gender in Humanitarian Response. The Unit participated in the development of a background paper on mainstreaming gender in the humanitarian response, as well as the drafting of a policy statement that was adopted by the IASC in May 1999. The Unit also actively participated in regular meetings of the Geneva-Based Agencies Gender Focal Points. The Focal Points group drafted the Administrative Committee on Co-ordination Policy statement on gender mainstreaming that was adopted in early 2000. In addition, the Unit participated in several other key fora, such as the Commission on the Status of Women, in order to influence the discussions to include issues relevant to refugee women.

OVERALL ASSESSMENT

Despite the staffing constraints, significant progress was made towards improving policy compliance, particularly within the OMS process where activities to promote gender equality and the advancement of women's interests have been built into the programme planning documents for 2001.



Voluntary Contributions - Earmarked (USD)

Donor	Special Programmes / OTF	
	Income	Contribution
Denmark	139,082	139,082
South Africa	37,944	37,944
Sweden	47,515	47,515
TOTAL	224,541	224,541

Financial Report (USD)

Country/Operation	Name of Project	Amount
Kenya	Women Peace Missions to Somalia	0
Turkey	Sub-regional Workshops on Standards and Strategies for Gender-sensitive Asylum system	10,542
Sub-total Disbursements/Deliveries		10,542
Unliquidated Obligations		99,918
TOTAL		110,460