

**ANNUAL CONSULTATIONS WITH NGOs
17 – 19 JUNE 2014 - International Conference Center Geneva**

REGIONAL SESSION

BACKGROUND PAPER

MENA Regional session

**Strengthening partnerships in the Middle East and North Africa:
working together towards protection and solutions**

Wednesday 18 June 2014, 14h30 – 18h30 – Room 2

Setting the scene, MENA in 2013 and 2014: For the MENA region as a whole, this year has proven to be extremely challenging, particularly for Syria and its neighbours. The severity of violence and loss of life within Syria and the magnitude of displacement is exceptional; at the same time the generosity of host countries, host communities and donors has been extraordinary. Inside Syria, it is estimated today that nine million people are in need of protection and assistance. UNHCR and partners, as part of their participation in the inter-agency humanitarian response, reached 3.4 million people within Syria while 2.7 million refugees of which 50,6% refugees are women, were hosted in neighbouring countries.

At the same time as the Syria crisis, other crises in the region with varying levels of severity and displacement continue and are in need of greater international humanitarian support such as Yemen, Libya and Iraq.

Further, the urban nature of refugees coupled with continued mixed flows of migrants and asylum-seekers are challenges that the Middle East and North Africa region is increasingly facing. Across these different displacement and migration situations, women and men alike are adversely affected. The risks for refugees are exacerbated by numerous factors including insecurity, limited livelihood opportunities, lack of access to formal and non-formal education opportunities, lack of access to housing and the lenient application of national legal framework. Refugee women and girls can be exposed to numerous protection risks including early marriage, domestic violence, survival sex and sexual exploitation among other violations. Moreover, in the context of displacement many women, particularly female heads of household, and children are living without their traditional family and community support structures, which increases their vulnerability to protection risks, including sexual and gender based violence (SGBV).

UNHCR with partners across the MENA region is making a concerted effort to ensure that quality and coordinated responses are available for all persons of concern, including women with particular vulnerabilities. The collaboration between UNHCR and NGOS provides immense opportunities to tackle challenges of displacement and mixed migration flows and ensure the protection of refugees. Greater leadership and participation of women can only strengthen this joint endeavour.

Link with the theme of this year, i.e. women: One of UNHCR's Global Strategic Priorities for 2014 and 2015 is women's active participation in leadership and management structures. UNHCR and NGOs have a vital role to play in developing and supporting initiatives to increase women's representation in leadership structures and ensure their full and meaningful participation in decision making, as well as in promoting women's rights and empowerment in their communities. A number of examples of progress and good practices can be identified across the region. Positive results for women have been achieved following refugee community elections, such as in Sana'a, Yemen, where two women were named chairpersons for their communities. Women's committees have also been formed in several countries, such as in camps in Iraq and Mauritania, providing a structured forum for women to discuss and address issues of concern in their communities. In Egypt, UNHCR holds meetings with community representatives from some 15 community-based organisations to disseminate policy decisions and information on protection and assistance, almost a third of who are women.

Community-based protection structures, such as Jordan's Community Action Committees and Yemen's community-based protection networks, not only serve as a valuable means of sharing information between the refugee and humanitarian communities, but also help to involve men and women in planning, implementing and monitoring the initiatives that UNHCR runs through partners. In Lebanon, UNHCR partners are working to enhance women's representation in community management structures in collective shelters and informal refugee settlements. Further, more than half of Lebanon's extensive network of refugee outreach volunteers is women, empowering them to disseminate protection information and analyse community concerns and priorities.

Despite such examples of progress, more needs to be done to ensure that women are able to meaningfully participate in leadership and management structures in their communities. Across the board, women's representation in refugee leadership structures in the region is still low. Improving this situation can be particularly difficult in light of cultural considerations and limitations on movement which can impede women's engagement with their communities, as well as in situations where representatives on leadership structures are appointed rather than elected by the community.

How the theme will be integrated into our session: The MENA session this year will discuss the importance of partnership with NGOs towards strengthening the protection of refugees, IDPs and other persons of concern in the region, with a particular focus on the situation of women. The session will focus on the complex humanitarian challenges prevailing in the region, including the on-going Syrian refugee crisis and its impact on neighbouring countries, as well as new and longstanding IDP situations, including those in Yemen, Iraq and Syria. The situation of refugees in both urban and camp settings and the growing phenomena of mixed migration situations throughout the Middle East and North Africa will also be discussed.

Women's full and meaningful participation in decision-making processes across MENA will be one of the main issues discussed. UNHCR and partners will look at ways to enhance the meaningful involvement of women in the design, implementation and monitoring of effective programmes, including by exploring good practices from across the region. Special attention will be given to the development and strengthening of partnerships with NGOs to ensure that the immediate protection and assistance needs of persons of concern are addressed, while durable solutions are pursued.

The theme of this year's annual NGO consultations, "Women's Leadership and Participation" will provide an opportunity for UNHCR to engage with existing and new partnerships to reinforce and improve ongoing activities as well as identify novel mechanisms to preserve protection space for refugees and women in particular.