

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

SIDE EVENT

BACKGROUND PAPER

Women's Leadership, Faith and Protection

Tuesday, 17 June 2014, 13h30 – 14h30 - Room 3

The United Nations is an eminently secular organization. Since its creation in 1950, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has engaged with faith-based organizations, faith communities and faith leaders in carrying out its work. This partnership has proven its value over the years and yielded substantial protection and other benefits for persons of concern to the Office (i.e. refugees, asylum-seekers, stateless persons, the internally displaced and others of concern).

UNHCR recently embarked on a 'journey of mutual discovery' with faith-based organizations by exploring the role of faith in humanitarian responses. In December 2012, the fifth High Commissioner's Dialogue on Protection Challenges explored *Faith and Protection*. The Dialogue assembled over 400 representatives of faith-based organizations, faith leaders and other partners for a two-day discussion in Geneva on partnership with faith-based actors.

This was the first formal multi-faith dialogue UNHCR ever engaged in and explored the common values underpinning the notion of refugee protection in all of the world's major religions. It also fostered deeper appreciation for and understanding of the role religion and spirituality plays in the lives of those UNHCR serves.

Participants in the Dialogue on *Faith and Protection* further recognized the importance of UNHCR's existing and potential partnerships with faith-based organizations, especially to improve the protection of persons of concern to UNHCR. Participants strongly reaffirmed the key principles underpinning humanitarian work¹ (i.e. impartiality, non-discrimination, respect for the beliefs of others, diversity, empowerment, equality, humanity, and protection against any form of conditionality) and acknowledged the need to respond to humanitarian situations according to these principles.

¹ For a full description of the principles, see ICRC, "Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in Disaster Relief", <http://www.icrc.org/eng/assets/files/publications/icrc-002-1067.pdf>. The Code of Conduct has been subscribed by over 520 organizations.

At the close of the event, High Commissioner António Guterres underscored “the valuable contributions that faith organizations and communities make to the protection of refugees and the displaced.” He highlighted a number of concrete suggestions for follow-up, which included four broad work streams: identifying good practices from UNHCR’s engagement with faith-based organizations; developing guidance for faith leaders on supporting protection activities; identifying key research and learning topics related to faith and protection; and setting out broad guidance for UNHCR staff on the multiple dimensions of faith in the context of forced displacement. This year’s side event will be another opportunity to report on progress made in follow-up to the Dialogue on *Faith and Protection*, as well as the interesting ‘ripple effects’ it has set in motion.

In keeping with this year’s overarching theme, ‘**Women’s Leadership and Participation**’, this side event will also discuss the role of Women of Faith in Protection. Drawing together recent work on Faith Literacy and Community-based Protection (CBP), presentations will discuss how the leadership of women of faith has enhanced and developed understanding of the nature of protection issues and scope for action in response. The importance of faith for both beneficiaries and those involved in protection activities has often been overlooked. Similarly there is poor understanding of the impact of the informal and voluntary nature of much of this protection work on the ability of faith-based protection actors to connect to mainstream protection activities.

Faith based organizations and religious leaders have often been key advocates for strengthening protection activities related to gender based violence. Examples include campaigns such as the WCC *Decade of Churches in Solidarity with Women*, the resultant *Thursdays in Black* (TiB) campaign, and the inter-faith anti-GBV platform *We Will Speak Out*. FBOs have also invested in the development of resources for capacity building around gender, faith and protection such as the WCC resource, *Created in God’s Image: From Hegemony to Partnership* (2010).

Religious responsibility to protect men and women from violence is a deeply held belief within most faith communities, underpinned by an understanding that gendered bodies and lives are a sanctuary of their creator and therefore deserve to be protected from violence. However there are many obstacles for FBOs willing to take on these issues with their respective faith communities. Presentations will also review the challenges and opportunities for this important work.

This side event will be moderated by Ms. Helen Stawski of Islamic Relief Worldwide. Panelists will include Dr. Fulata Moyo of the World Council of Churches Gender Desk, Rev Flora Winfield of the Anglican Alliance UN Liaison, Reyhana Patel, Global Advocacy and Campaigns Coordinator for Islamic Relief and José Riera of UNHCR’s Division of International Protection.

The side event will be structured as follows:

1. Update on follow-up to the HC’s 2012 Dialogue on Faith and Protection
2. Women of Faith’s participation and leadership in protection activities
3. Religion, Gender and Protection
4. Engaging Faith Groups on GBV: Challenges and Opportunities

5. Launch of UNHCR guidance on faith literacy: “UNHCR Partnership Note on faith-based organizations, local faith communities and faith leaders”.

References

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