



# A Practical Guide to Empowerment



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A Practical Guide to Empowerment: UNHCR  
Good Practices on Gender Equality Mainstreaming  
Cover Photo: UNHCR, L. Taylor and W. Stone

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# Preface

The second edition of Good Practices in Gender Equality Mainstreaming uses the “lens” of empowerment to view a variety of UNHCR and partner initiatives. We hope that it will help to demystify the word and the process, thus recognizing that transformative action is possible when we recognise and value women’s contributions and when we act to end discrimination and inequality. This book is first a tribute to all women whose lives and choices have been diminished by war and conflict. We recognize that they did not wait for us to empower them - rather they have been struggling to gain control over their lives, to enlarge their choices and to influence decisions that can bring peace and stability to their communities and homes. The Good Practices is a promise to them - a promise to join them in this struggle and to protect and partner with them.

It is also an acknowledgement of the commitment of many of our colleagues who have worked with women and men in different circumstances of displacement and return. They have challenged the status quo and have envisioned and been agents of change.

This edition reaffirms the priority of partnership - all of the initiatives show that UNHCR is only one actor among many. The process of empowerment is driven by individual aspiration and collective action. Our understanding of this has been enhanced by the seminal work of Sara Longwe.

We hope the contents make a small contribution to UNHCR’s efforts to protect and assist women and men in situations of crisis and transition.

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This publication would not have been possible without the work and input of many of our colleagues, implementing partners and partner agencies. Our heartfelt thanks go out to you and our encouragement to continue a difficult journey.



# Introduction



Photo UNHCR C. Shirley

**Empowerment:** A process through which women and men in disadvantaged positions increase their access to knowledge, resources, and decision-making power, and raise their awareness of participation in their communities, in order to reach a level of control over their own environment.

**Disempowerment:** Any action, policy development and/or relief program or process through which women's and men's priorities, needs and interests are further ignored, reducing their participation in decision-making and representing an obstacle to their economic, political and social improvement<sup>1</sup>.

At the turn of the new millennium, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) faces new challenges in providing protection and finding durable solutions for those who have been forcibly displaced from their homes. The preceding decade, in which millions of civilians fled their countries to find refuge from internal conflict, reached new levels in the targeting of innocent civilians, genocide and mass rape throughout many societies. In light of these events, UNHCR has had to take on new responsibilities. Today, UNHCR's obligations extend to 22.3 million persons, including refugees (53 percent), the internally displaced (18 percent), returnees [those who have been repatriated to their countries] (6 percent) and a number of other categories of concern. The nature of UNHCR's work has also changed significantly: whereas in previous years UNHCR worked in relatively stable environments within host countries of asylum, today a growing proportion of UNHCR activities take place in conflict zones and in the context of multi-dimensional peace building and peace support operations.

UNHCR assistance and protection activities are becoming more proactive and preventative. UNHCR has begun to recognize the need to invest in social, economic and political structures to promote the sustainability of returns, and to prevent future displacements. An important principle is community empowerment, as highlighted in the UNHCR Policy on Community Development presented at Standing Committee in March 2001. This approach builds upon ten years of the application of People Oriented Planning principles, by which beneficiaries contributed to the development of protection mechanisms, the organization of camp management, the negotiation of return, and in the general rebuilding of their lives. For instance, UNHCR activities have extended to include capacity-building of local organizations and social and infrastructure projects with returnees to build stronger communities. In essence, the empowerment of refugees, internally displaced populations and returnees is swiftly becoming a central principle of this UN agency.

The purpose of this Guide is to provide practical examples of empowerment. **The Guide is premised on the assumption that gender roles and relations shape the process of empowerment.** The labour and qualities of women and men, girls and boys are valued differently in different societies, which means that women and men have varying access to, and control over, knowledge and resources. In many societies, this may manifest itself in preferential treatment of one sex over another in different social, economic or political realms. Specific initiatives to empower women and men that address gender inequalities are necessary.





This Guide provides seven UNHCR Good Practices to empower women in different situations of displacement and return. It focuses on women because gender-related barriers more frequently limit their access to knowledge and resources, as well as participation in decision-making and economic life. For example, in **Kosovo**, women constitute only 5-10 percent of clients in micro-finance institutions. The root cause of low participation stems from discriminatory practices in micro-finance institutions, international funding agencies, and Kosovar society. Women are perceived to be unproductive members of society who do not need credit. Women internalize this perception themselves, resulting in low self-esteem and hesitancy to apply for credit. Because women have been excluded from business, many lack basic skills. The Kosovo Women's Economic Empowerment Project strives to build women's confidence, to develop their skills, and to promote access to micro-finance.

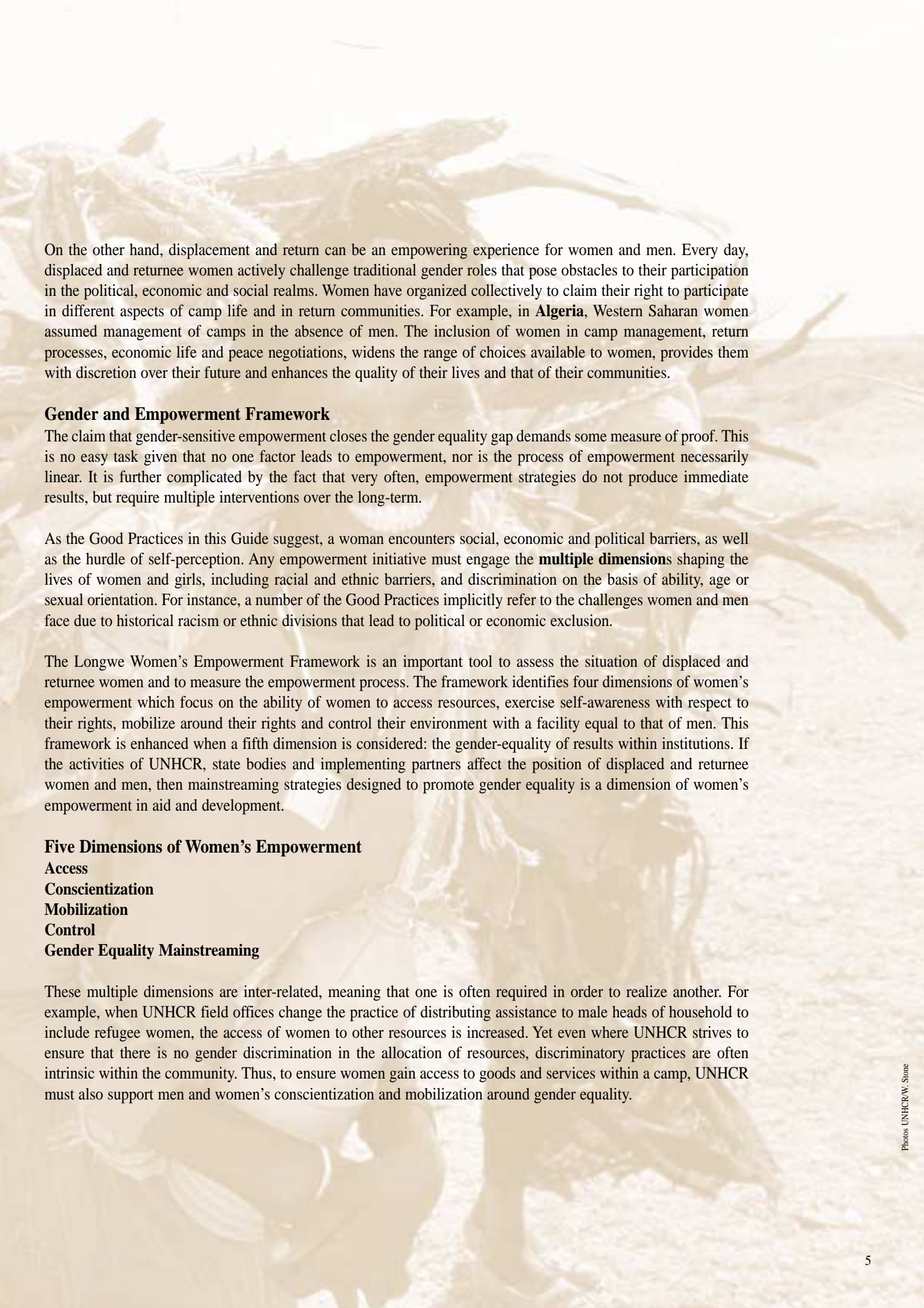
The Good Practices (GP) presented in this Guide assert that specific initiatives with women can and do facilitate gender equality through the empowerment process. For instance, in the **Arusha** Peace Process, Inter-Agency collaboration provided critical support to Burundian women from different political parties, the Diaspora and civil society to gain a few seats at the negotiating table and to translate that presence, although severely limited, into influence for a new vision of Burundian society. The All-Party Burundian Women's Peace Conference provided opportunities to share expertise with UN agencies and to develop gender-sensitive recommendations; many of which were incorporated into the final Agreements.

The involvement of both women and men is necessary to promote women's empowerment. In **Guatemala**, an evaluation was conducted to ascertain the sustainability of UNHCR gender activities with Guatemalan refugees in Mexico. The findings of this evaluation confirmed that women's empowerment requires more active engagement and commitment from men and male-dominated institutions.

Displacement and return provide both challenges and opportunities for women's empowerment. Displacement can be a particularly disempowering experience for women. Traditionally responsible for children, the elderly and domestic work, women are often overburdened by the realities of displacement, when traditional protection mechanisms are eroded and violence in communities - including familial violence - increases. When women face exclusion from decision-making centers they are unable to voice opinions over issues that affect their lives, or to make decisions and take control over their environments. Relegated to the domestic sphere, refugee or internally displaced women must often depend on male relatives for access to the basic necessities provided in camps. In **Colombia**, internally displaced women were initially excluded from a variety of assistance and protection activities. For example, because assistance was provided to male heads of household, women and female heads of household became dependent on male relatives. The Colombian GP reminds us that gender analyses should be integrated into displacement at the earliest possible stage to facilitate gender equality in the empowerment process. It also identifies possible actions that can be taken in later stages to do so. In this respect, the **Guinea** GP illustrates what can be done in emergency situations to ensure that women and men benefit equally from UNHCR activities.

The gender-blind procedures and practices of UNHCR, state bodies and non-governmental organizations often unintentionally reproduce women's disempowerment. This may be due to gender biases of staff or government workers, but it is also attributable to the institutionalization of gender assumptions that regulate behavior in these organizations. Often such assumptions appear to be gender-neutral, when in fact they may overlook the different experiences of women and men in displacement. In **Turkey**, Gender and Children's Teams have devised mechanisms for incorporating gender-related experiences of women and girls into all areas of work in UNHCR and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), as well as relevant government bodies. As a result of these efforts, displaced women have been better able to access the refugee status determination process.





On the other hand, displacement and return can be an empowering experience for women and men. Every day, displaced and returnee women actively challenge traditional gender roles that pose obstacles to their participation in the political, economic and social realms. Women have organized collectively to claim their right to participate in different aspects of camp life and in return communities. For example, in **Algeria**, Western Saharan women assumed management of camps in the absence of men. The inclusion of women in camp management, return processes, economic life and peace negotiations, widens the range of choices available to women, provides them with discretion over their future and enhances the quality of their lives and that of their communities.

### **Gender and Empowerment Framework**

The claim that gender-sensitive empowerment closes the gender equality gap demands some measure of proof. This is no easy task given that no one factor leads to empowerment, nor is the process of empowerment necessarily linear. It is further complicated by the fact that very often, empowerment strategies do not produce immediate results, but require multiple interventions over the long-term.

As the Good Practices in this Guide suggest, a woman encounters social, economic and political barriers, as well as the hurdle of self-perception. Any empowerment initiative must engage the **multiple dimensions** shaping the lives of women and girls, including racial and ethnic barriers, and discrimination on the basis of ability, age or sexual orientation. For instance, a number of the Good Practices implicitly refer to the challenges women and men face due to historical racism or ethnic divisions that lead to political or economic exclusion.

The Longwe Women's Empowerment Framework is an important tool to assess the situation of displaced and returnee women and to measure the empowerment process. The framework identifies four dimensions of women's empowerment which focus on the ability of women to access resources, exercise self-awareness with respect to their rights, mobilize around their rights and control their environment with a facility equal to that of men. This framework is enhanced when a fifth dimension is considered: the gender-equality of results within institutions. If the activities of UNHCR, state bodies and implementing partners affect the position of displaced and returnee women and men, then mainstreaming strategies designed to promote gender equality is a dimension of women's empowerment in aid and development.

### **Five Dimensions of Women's Empowerment**

**Access**

**Conscientization**

**Mobilization**

**Control**

**Gender Equality Mainstreaming**

These multiple dimensions are inter-related, meaning that one is often required in order to realize another. For example, when UNHCR field offices change the practice of distributing assistance to male heads of household to include refugee women, the access of women to other resources is increased. Yet even where UNHCR strives to ensure that there is no gender discrimination in the allocation of resources, discriminatory practices are often intrinsic within the community. Thus, to ensure women gain access to goods and services within a camp, UNHCR must also support men and women's conscientization and mobilization around gender equality.

**Access:** Access refers to the idea that displaced and returnee women should enjoy equal access with men to goods and services, which increases a woman's overall security. To understand access as empowering, one must examine the social, political and economic context of a population. Access alone does not meet empowerment needs but is an important dimension of the empowerment process.

**What can be done?** UNHCR has promoted women's access to resources and services by including women in camp management and distribution, micro-credit projects, health, security, water and sanitation projects.

**Conscientization:** Conscientization is the process of becoming aware that gender roles and unequal relations are not part of a natural order, nor determined by biology. Gender roles are typically conveyed through everyday messages in government policies, law, the mass media, school textbooks, and religious and traditional practices. They often reflect systematic discrimination against a social group that limits choices or roles (for example, men should not look after children, women should not participate in elections). Empowerment entails the recognition by men and women that the subordination of women is imposed by a system of discrimination which is socially constructed, and can be altered.

**What can be done?** UNHCR is actively involved in raising the awareness of displaced and returnee women and men, and NGOs and governments, of the importance of respecting women's rights. This is achieved by direct action, such as integrating women's rights into UNHCR protection and assistance, gender trainings and workshops, or information campaigns. Other activities include quotas for the participation of women in camp management and micro-projects, the insistence that men and women are given their own identity documents, and the inclusion of women's rights in legal documents such as reforms or peace processes. Evaluation and monitoring play an important role in promoting awareness of the impact of UNHCR activities on the empowerment process.

**Mobilization:** Individual women at home are unlikely to make much progress in challenging traditional assumptions. Mobilization is the process of women meeting together to discuss common problems, very often leading to the formation of women's organizations and networks and public lobbying for the recognition of women's rights. Through mobilization, women identify gender inequalities, recognize the elements of discrimination and oppression, and devise collective strategies to challenge problems.





**What can be done?** The Good Practices in this document illustrate the importance of UNHCR support to women's organizations and networks, through technical training, awareness raising, capacity building and financial support. UNHCR, working in coordination with governments, implementing partners and other UN agencies, has also supported refugee and internally displaced women's lobbies to participate in peace and return processes.

**Control:** Control refers to a balance of power between women and men, so that neither is in a position of dominance. It means that women have power alongside men to influence their destiny and that of their society.

**What can be done?** Refugee women and men must be empowered to participate in decision-making and to influence the events that shape their lives and that of their environments. UNHCR has been instrumental in opening spaces in which refugees could organize around their rights on issues such as violence within displaced populations, reproductive health, or income generation. Greater participation means that the voices of women influence areas such as land rights, development, and politics.

**Gender equality mainstreaming:** Gender equality mainstreaming is both a strategy and a process for transforming gender relations. It ensures that the different interests, needs and resources of displaced women and men, girls and boys, are taken into consideration at every step of the refugee cycle, in UNHCR protection activities, as well as in program design, planning, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation. It requires active consultation with displaced women, men and youth in all aspects of UNHCR's work.

**What can be done?** UNHCR currently endorses a policy of gender equality mainstreaming, therefore it must actively implement strategies to ensure that gender-related knowledge is included in planning, implementation and evaluation at the field-office level, and gathered with the assistance of refugees, or on the basis of refugee experiences. This work includes gathering and analyzing sex disaggregated data on population composition of displaced populations.

# Good Practice Criteria

These Good Practices were selected to illustrate how empowerment can be achieved when UNHCR and refugees, returnees, and internally displaced, women and men work together in one or more of the following areas:

- Provide equality of access for all to knowledge and resources, and devise strategies to address any barriers that women and men, girls and boys may encounter.
- Actively challenge biases based on sex and gender roles rooted in the daily beliefs of refugees, internally displaced populations and returnees, as well as those who work to assist and support them.
- Develop strategies to raise community awareness of the value of women's resources and labour, as well as women's rights.
- Promote the participation of women and men in decision-making centers with a focus on influencing and impacting decisions.
- Build the capacity of local women's organizations and networks to function locally to advance the rights of women and girls.
- Realize equality of control over the environments displaced and returnee women and men, girls and boys live in.
- Facilitate the process of gender equality mainstreaming within UNHCR, so that the effect will flow down to the refugee population.



Photo UNHCR/H. Caix



# The Kosovo Women's Economic Empowerment Project

Kosovo

*In the wake of the Kosovo crisis, UNHCR is striving to promote the safe and sustainable return of ethnic Albanians and minorities to their homes. An integral part of UNHCR's programme in Kosovo is the Kosovo Women's Initiative (KWI), an initiative designed to enhance the ability of women to rebuild their lives after the conflict in Kosovo.*

*The KWI was conceived to address the needs of war-affected, displaced and traumatised women of all ethnic groups throughout Kosovo, and to work within these communities to mitigate the effects of the war. After the emergency stage, the strategy of the program was developed, addressing the main objectives of empowering women, narrowing opportunity gaps between men and women, and raising gender awareness. KWI implemented a variety of activities including psychological and social support, clinic-based and community reproductive health education, sexual and gender-based violence mitigation, income generation, skills training/capacity building, legal assistance and the micro-credit program.*

*The region's infrastructure has been devastated, and although humanitarian assistance is generous, the level of commercial foreign investment is extremely low. Political volatility and consistent challenges to law and order restrict free movement, especially of minorities, while the frequent closure of the Macedonian border affects the flow of goods. The banking system is heavily subsidized by foreign institutions and does not offer investment opportunities to local clients. Many lower income or vulnerable persons are unable to establish enterprises because they have no access to capital or credit.*

*Discriminatory practices based on gender stereotypes have particularly limited the access of women to credit. Prior to the conflict in Kosovo, a common practice of banks was to extend credit to women only when their husbands or other male family members were involved. Because women were thought not to be capable of managing economic affairs, many women now lack the basic business skills necessary to generate commercial enterprises.*

*Only 5-10 percent of the total clients of micro-credit projects in Kosovo are women. In some cases, micro-credit projects fail to reach any women at all. Between August and October 1999, the International Catholic Migration Commission (ICMC) and the Kosovo Women's Initiative lead by UNHCR agreed to start a micro-credit program designed to break down the barriers that women confront when applying for loans and starting their own businesses. The Kosovo Enterprise Project (KEP) was established to provide individual micro-credit and loans to small enterprises in different regions of Kosovo. Technical assistance for women was provided through the Kosovo Women's Economic Empowerment Project (KWEEN), a special training component of the program. Activities included awareness raising and skills development. KWEEN is important because it sensitises staff within the micro-finance institution administering KEP of the value of women in economic management and regeneration. With promising results so far, KWEEN helps to "open the door for women to the economic world."*





### What Good Practice Criteria Were Met?

KWEEP counters institutional biases and attitudes that discriminate against women in the economic realm. It emphasizes to local creditors the particular needs and resources of women and men. Furthermore, it builds the confidence of women to become economically active. As a result, female clients are generating income, supporting their families and actively contributing to the reconstruction of Kosovo.

### What is being achieved?

- **Access to resources:** KEP has a circulating capital of 3.4 million US dollars, 80 percent of which is used for micro-credits. There are 3,276 clients, of whom women are 54 percent of the total. Credit disbursed to women represents 53 percent of the total value of loans. From its inception, the number of female clients of KEP has never been less than 47 percent, reaching 65 percent in October 2000. The variation is due to the fact that women are more reluctant to apply for second loans in larger amounts. Women tend to be more cautious about expanding their businesses. One of the goals of KWEEP this year is to provide current women clients with training and support to make this step possible.
- **Protection.** Micro-finance helps to combat poverty and a sense of hopelessness. But it also helps refugees and returnees to restore their dignity, facilitates community reconciliation in a post-conflict environment, and has become a tool of protection because it encourages mutual responsibility and co-operation.
- **Increased Autonomy and Respect.** Women who have obtained credit from KEP do so autonomously. KEP clients do not have to ask permission from husbands or fathers, or depend on them to tutor their businesses. Through their participation in KEP, many women are gaining respect not only from men within solidarity groups, but also within the family and from the community at large.
- **Gender mainstreaming.** Many women no longer need the support of KWEEP, and have begun to access KEP credit independently. The micro-finance institute is increasingly gender-sensitive in procedures and decision-making. The gender awareness of staff has matured through training and feedback meetings, in which they analyse the impact of their work with female clients.

### What was planned?

- **Solidarity groups:** KEP encouraged the formation of solidarity groups amongst returnees. Solidarity groups consist of 4-10 members and might be all-men, all-women or mixed groups. Solidarity groups are self-selecting, although KEP does not encourage close family members to join the same group.
- **Proposals:** All clients must attend KEP training before they submit a business plan or receive a loan. Assisted by Community Coordinators and Credit Officers, clients develop individual business proposals and submit them to the micro-credit institution. Each client then joins a solidarity group. Training is also provided on business management.
- **Loan specifics:** Loans are between 250 and 950 US dollars depending on the capacity of the clients and the type of business proposed. Up to three loans can be obtained from the micro-credit institute, with a graduated increase in the size of loan. The first loan is repayable in 6-8 months, after which following loans may be paid back up to a year later. Interest is 15 percent per annum (straight line/flat rate), with a one percent daily rate for overdue payments.
- **Outreach to women in rural areas:** KWEEP training focuses on geographically isolated women in rural areas. It introduces to women the life-changing possibilities of managing their own business, and fosters their confidence. Women who lack basic writing and arithmetic skills are provided with special classes.



### What was learned?

- Economic stability is crucial to building a more secure political environment. The absence of a consistent private sector economy, complicated by issues related to state owned enterprises in Kosovo, created a strong case for supporting the small enterprise sector. Through KEP, women have proved to their community and development organisations that they are capable of contributing to the process of economic development.
- Currently, businesses started with KEP credit tend to be based on gender stereotypical areas of work, where women make handicrafts or sell clothing and men offer services such as welding, construction or repairs. A breakdown of the most profitable businesses according to whether these were male-dominated or female-dominated would reveal many income disparities, and suggest areas for further intervention.
- Indicators for women's empowerment in micro-credit projects should reflect personal measures of success rather than solely economic measures. While the rate of repayment is one indicator, it does not necessarily reflect whether women are able to control income generated from small businesses. Qualitative indicators might also include: control over loans and business decisions; increased involvement in household decisions; increased mobility and economic security; ability to make purchases; and higher levels of political and/or legal awareness.
- Training of staff in gender equality mainstreaming is necessary to promote a sound understanding of the difference between promoting women's empowerment alongside men, and providing assistance to women that is neither sustainable nor empowering.



# The Burundian Peace Process\*

## Arusha Tanzania

*In a statement to the UN Security Council open Debate on Women and Peace and Security (October 2000), the Executive Director of UNIFEM, Noleen Heyzer, argued that:*

*“Human security and national security make up two sides of the same global security coin... Without international action, women caught in conflicts will have no security of any kind whatever the definition. And without their full participation, the peace process itself suffers for there will be neither justice nor development ... Women are half of every community, are they therefore not half of every solution? How can we, in good conscience, bring warlords to the peace table and not women?”*

*Women are often excluded from formal peace talks and negotiations, despite the fact that women are actively building peace worldwide through grass-roots organizations and international campaigns. This point is well demonstrated in the case of Burundi, where women have put aside their differences to contribute to the Arusha Peace and Reconciliation Agreement for Burundi. Their achievements reinforce Noleen Heyzer’s claim that women are half the solution.*

*On 21 June 1998, Burundian political parties agreed to sit down and negotiate an end to the political violence that has marred their country for decades. A number of Burundian women closely following the peace process were concerned that the content of the Agreement did not reflect the priorities of both women and men. As one woman observed, “the first few rounds of negotiations only men attended. This we felt was not normal, since the problems of Burundi affected all of us.” With the support of international humanitarian organizations, Burundian women are beginning to play an essential role in this landmark step towards peace in that country.*

*\* UNHCR wishes to express appreciation to UNIFEM for their assistance in composing this Good Practice. Sections were written on the basis of the booklet Engendering Peace: Reflections on the Burundi Peace Process, (African Women for Peace Series, published by UNIFEM, Nairobi). All quotes from Burundian women and men in this GP are found within this UNIFEM publication. Lessons learned were informed in a large part by the section “FINDING THE WAY FORWARD AND ITS CHALLENGES”, in Engendering Peace, p. 44.*





### What Good Practice Criteria was Met?

UNHCR, UNIFEM, the African NGO Femmes Africa Solidarite (FAS), as well as other UN agencies and NGOs, along with the Mwalimus Nyerere Foundation (MNF), and Burundian women themselves, pressed successfully for the inclusion of women delegates to the Arusha peace process. UNHCR support for women in Tanzanian refugee camps encouraged them to select representatives to defend their rights, to win a place at the negotiation table, and to advocate for a new vision of Burundian society. This is an example of inter-agency cooperation supporting a peace process through advocacy for the presence of women in a traditionally closed forum.

### What was achieved?

- **Common grounds:** Women united across party, ethnic and class lines to find common solutions to their exclusion from the peace process. This meant looking beyond differences that have led to violent conflict in their country, identifying common problems, and pooling resources to find answers. In light of this extraordinary accomplishment, Raphael Bitariho, a senior male official of the Ministry in Charge of the Peace Process stated that “women are ahead of men in the issue of reconciliation”.
- **Knowledge building:** Women from post-conflict countries throughout the world, as well as UN and non-government agencies, exchanged experiences on the consequences of conflict for women and girls, and to reaffirmed the importance of the participation of women in peace-building, governance, reconstruction and development.
- **Gender equality mainstreaming:** Burundian women were able to incorporate a gender equality perspective into the Burundi Peace Agreement. Many of the recommendations put forth by the All-Party Women’s Conference - 30 percent quotas for women representatives in political bodies was rejected - were included in the final agreement. Burundian women and girls now have a legal basis with which to claim their rights to active participation in the reconstruction and development of their country.

### What was planned?

- **Bringing women to the peace process:** The All-Party Women’s Conference brought together 48 women and

two men to analyze the peace accords and to make recommendations. Great pains were taken to ensure that diverse groups of women were represented at the Women’s Conference. This included representatives from all political parties; refugee, internally displaced, diaspora and professional women; as well as representatives of civil society. UNHCR, in coordination with UNIFEM, provided financial and logistical support to transfer refugee women from the camps in western Tanzania to Arusha.



- **Confidence building:** UNHCR supported refugee women at the early stages of their lobbying efforts. Between 1998-2001, UNHCR in Tanzania undertook a number of initiatives that contributed to raising the awareness of women and heightening their consciousness on a number of critical issues, including women’s rights; sexual and gender based violence; and reproductive health, peace building, and income generation. Under the ‘Imagine Coexistence’ project, UNHCR also supported Burundian women as they discovered common ground in areas such as poverty and access to land. In partnership with UNIFEM, UNHCR focused on six provinces to help the women to prepare for the return of refugees and the internally displaced. Through these activities — planned, monitored and evaluated by the UNHCR Community Services Unit as well as Field and Protection Units — UNHCR has been able to address women’s concerns at the community level and to build up a network of “empowered” women. In turn, refugee women were able to represent and lobby for refugee women’s concerns at various meetings, including the Burundi Woman All Party Conference and the Arusha Peace Process.



- Tools and resources for analysis:** In order to guide analysis, participants of the Women's Conference drew upon international legal principles on women's human rights, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women and the Beijing Platform for Action. International resource persons from a variety of relevant bodies (judicial, UN agencies, the military) facilitated the discussion with the use of presentations and question-and-answer sessions. International organizations - such as UNIFEM, MNF and UNHCR - provided impartiality to opposing viewpoints, which led to a consensus on final recommendations. Lessons learned were exchanged with women representatives from other post-conflict countries (Eritrea, Guatemala, South Africa and Uganda).
  - Including the grass-roots:** To ensure that Burundian women at the grass-roots level had input into and ownership of the Declaration and recommendations flowing from the Conference, representatives were encouraged to hold consultations with their constituencies and to forward any additional recommendations.
  - Strategic lobbying:** At the end of the conference, a Declaration was drawn up addressing issues crucial to women's empowerment. The Declaration recommended the inclusion of a Women's Charter, provisions for affirmative action, and accountability mechanisms to ensure that women's issues would receive adequate resources and priority. Women representatives met with Nelson Mandela, the Facilitator of the Arusha Peace Agreement, as well as with the heads of negotiating parties. In February 2000, Nelson Mandela held closed-door sessions with seven women observers of the Conference to discuss the issues of gender and conflict. He later met with a wider group of women representatives from the conference - including refugee and internally displaced women - to discuss their recommendations. These meetings were considered vital to the eventual incorporation of women's recommendations in the Peace Agreements.
- Men need to be sensitized at all levels, particularly as policy and decision-makers, and must be encouraged to attend women-dominated meetings on gender issues. They must also advocate alongside women for gender equality.
  - Women and men need gender sensitive training, and both female and male political leaders must be encouraged to separate gender issues from political affiliations. The All-Party Women's Conference illustrates that it is possible for women of different political and ethnic backgrounds to unite around the issue of gender equality, although this new-found solidarity will need to be fostered and built upon.
  - From the onset, the debate about who should participate in the peace negotiations rarely considered extending beyond official representatives to include such groups as victims and those outside the halls of power. The All-Party Women's Conference illustrates that the negotiation of peace must be a democratic process that includes a wide cross-section of people. Care must be taken to ensure that women who are risk-takers at the beginning of a process are not sidelined when others join. High-profile women must always be encouraged to forge links with grass-roots women.
  - Diligence in promoting gender equality must be continuous. The fact that gender concerns were incorporated in the final Peace Agreement by no means ensures their implementation. Strategies and mechanisms for monitoring the implementation of the Agreements are required. Likewise, it is important that women continue to be involved in decision-making fora. These consultations laid the basis for the largest UNHCR consultations with refugee women foreseen for June 2001. Refugee women participating in the Arusha Peace Process, UNHCR Tanzania, and refugee women in camps in western Tanzania have received funding for a peace building project from the General Initiative Fund for Refugee Women. The Refugee Women and Gender Equality Unit supported these efforts by bringing a Burundian refugee woman from a Tanzanian camp to the high level Executive Committee meeting in October 2000.

#### **Lessons Learned:**

- Conflict impacts differently on men and women. Peace plans must recognize these differences, and seek to minimize gaps in equality.



# Evaluation: Impact Assessment in Returnee Communities

## Guatemala

*When asked what she had learned in Mexican refugee camps, a Guatemalan refugee woman replied “that I am a person too, that I have human rights too.” Her statement reflects the courage with which many Guatemalan refugee women have claimed the right to equality. Indeed, this very sentiment is why Guatemalan women are often upheld as an example of how exile can be an empowering experience for women and girls. In the early 1990s, Guatemalan refugee women formed organizations to support the return process as it was being negotiated between the Guatemalan government and committees representing refugees. Refugee women soon became active in education and literacy projects and launched women’s rights and reproductive health campaigns. Membership grew, and women became more confident to participate in non-traditional activities such as income generation and male-dominated committees. They successfully lobbied for the inclusion of women’s rights in the Guatemalan Peace Accords, specifically an accord on the forcibly displaced. Repatriation began in the late 1990s, and Guatemalan returnee women are looking forward to a better future.*

*UNHCR played an important role in the empowerment process, providing training, financial support, and support for the inclusion of women in decision-making centers. UNHCR insisted that implementing partners incorporate gender equality elements into programs, and negotiated with relevant government bodies on gender issues. Guatemalan women were provided with their own documentation, of symbolic as well as legal importance in a culture where women traditionally rarely even have birth certificates. Yet the impact of return on Guatemalan women’s organizations and returnee women has been hard. Women’s workloads have increased as they struggle to feed their families and care for the sick, the elderly and the very young in impoverished situations. Women have encountered ridicule, criticism and, in some instances, violence when they continued to attend women’s meetings. The dispersed location of return communities has made communication and travel difficult, and women have found themselves isolated. Given the challenges of return, UNHCR conducted an evaluation of UNHCR gender mainstreaming activities and empowerment projects, to assess the impact and sustainability of those efforts.*





Photo UNHCR/A. Serrano

### What Good Practice Criteria were met?

The evaluation included the perspectives of both men and women, and provided a comparative analysis. Although the findings affirm the accomplishments of women's empowerment, they also remind the reader of the value of working with a long-term strategic vision in order to promote the sustainability of results.

### What is being achieved?

- **Knowledge building:** The evaluation report contributes to a little known area of UNHCR work: the impact and sustainability of women's empowerment strategies.
- **Impact Indicators:** Gender-sensitive indicators were developed to measure the impact of UNHCR empowerment activities in future operations.
- **Improving approaches to women's empowerment:** The evaluation report identified areas for improvement. These include the need to work more closely with men towards women's empowerment, and to constantly challenge gender assumptions that guide work around women's rights to documentation, land, income generation, family planning, and inter-familial and sexual violence.

### What was Planned?

- **Selection of evaluators:** The organization for Community Development and Training (CADECO) implemented a number of UNHCR projects in Mexico, and continued this work in specific return communities in Guatemala. CADECO was selected to carry out the evaluation because of their knowledge of and support for the refugee women organizations. Both male and female evaluators participated in the process, and translators were provided in instances where interviewees spoke a different language from the evaluator.
- **Methodology:** In-depth interviews were conducted with 106 women and 107 men representing different return communities, ethnic groups, ages and civic statuses. Within the sample group, 60 percent of men belonged to some form of community organization, while 42 percent of women were participants in various women's organizations.

- **Follow-up:** Evaluation findings and recommendations were presented and discussed at the fourth annual regional gender team meeting held in Mexico, October 2000. Lessons learned will be applied in other field offices by UNHCR staff in the future, particularly in returnee and reintegration communities.

### Lessons Learned from the Evaluation

- **Documentation and information.** Of those interviewed, 90 percent had received information on the return process: 47 percent of women and 40 percent of men had been interviewed by UNHCR on the degree to which their return had been voluntary: and 100 percent had some form of documentation. Documentation provided women legal grounds for participating in cooperatives and to be co-owners of land.
- **Sex bias and community meetings.** Men and women had different access to information in community meetings within refugee camps. Men-only groups discussed community development and work projects, as well as cooperative and land issues. Women-only meetings discussed women's projects and organization, as well as women's rights and training. Of the men, 85 percent had knowledge of what was discussed at women-only meetings while 63 percent of women knew what topics were discussed by the men.
- **Intra-familial and sexual violence.** UNHCR and implementing partners sponsored information campaigns on the subject of gender related violence in Mexican refugee camps. The evaluation found that 79 percent of women and 73 percent of men knew what intra-familial violence was and could describe it in their own words. On the topic of sexual violence, 67 percent of women and 68 percent of men understood and could describe what it meant. Men recognized that rape could occur in a stable relationship. 82 percent of women reported they knew where to report instances of violence, and 71 percent felt safe to do so. In comparison, 68 percent of men knew where to report such violence, and only 55 percent felt safe to do so.



- **Paid and unpaid work.** The evaluation found that both men and women engage in community work but in different capacities. Men largely carry out errands concerning the economic and political vitality of the community, whereas women generally engage in work to support the family and home, including childcare. While 18 percent of men stated their contributions went unrecognized, 45 percent of women felt their contributions were undervalued. In paid work, a division of labour likewise exists along traditional gender lines.
- **Sustainability of women's empowerment.** Despite obstacles, women's organizations born in exile continue to actively promote women's rights in Guatemala. UNHCR undoubtedly contributed to women's empowerment. Nevertheless, the negative impacts of return must also be viewed in relation to UNHCR and implementing partner activities. The evaluation found that greater collaboration between UN agencies and implementing partners during the return process around gender issues, and follow-up training on gender issues in returnee communities may have helped mitigate the negative impacts of return on women.
- **Working with men.** Women had received the majority of trainings on women's rights during exile. As a result, women appear to be more conscious of and open to the prospect of change. In contrast, a significant number of men have insisted that women return to traditional gender roles, leading to tensions and violence in returnee communities. Awareness raising must be aimed not only at women, but also at men. For example, women received the majority of trainings on family planning and reproductive health issues, and family planning policies were oriented to inform or guide women only. Excluding men reinforced the idea that such matters are not their responsibility.



Photos UNHCR/T. Bolstad



*Civilians are often the first casualties in internal armed conflicts, caught in the middle of warring factions vying for geo-political control. In the early 1990s, this very scenario forced tens of thousands of indigenous persons, Afro-Colombians, Paisas and Chilapos (settlers and Mulattos) from their ancestral homes in the rain forests of Uraba, Colombia. Today, violence in the region continues to escalate and awaits a concrete response from all warring parties .*

*Some internally displaced persons in the Uraba region have not accepted their situation passively. Forming Peace Communities, the internally displaced of Uraba have declared themselves neutral in this protracted conflict. Each member of the Peace Communities agrees to abstain from bearing arms or participating in the conflict. In search of solutions to their situation, Peace Communities have organized two levels of committees. Internal committees deliver humanitarian assistance and facilitate health and education services. External committees negotiate with the Colombian Government as well as maintain relations with international humanitarian organizations.*

*Some encouraging progress is being made. In 1997, the Pavarandó Agreement was signed between the Peace Communities and Colombian Government, pertaining to the conditions for return. The Committees have also met, and continue to meet, with armed factions in order to ensure respect for their principles of neutrality and non-violence. Although this process has encountered certain ambiguities in response, it has undoubtedly opened essential communication channels. Importantly, Peace Communities have created a sort of “safe haven” in the region, helping to prevent further displacement. Slowly, internally displaced persons have begun to return home.*

*In August 1998, UNHCR intervened to assist Peace Communities during the reinsertion phase. The UNHCR team applied a gender analysis in order to identify areas where gender inequalities might exist, and to assess whether the empowerment of women was necessary.*





### What Good Practice Criteria were met?

In Colombia, a gender perspective led to new knowledge and awareness about the different needs and resources of women and men. In this case, women were disadvantaged by their exclusion from assistance and decision-making bodies. In such situations, UNHCR strives to empower women by transforming the discriminatory practices of male-dominated committees, decision-making bodies and state institutions.

### What is being Achieved?

- **Identifying gender gaps:** Gender analysis reveals how assumptions and ideas based on sex can lead to discriminatory practices that disempower women or men. During the initial phase of displacement, humanitarian assistance was provided to male heads of household. Polygamous unions are a habitual practice in Afro-Colombian communities. The distribution of assistance through male heads of household increased the number of partners men took. This situation creates grave problems for female dependants in the process of return. As men reassume responsibility for their families, many are no longer able to provide for them independent of international assistance. Many women have been forced to leave polygamous relationships, and as a consequence are left in limbo.

Inequalities were also identified in the economic realm. Afro-Colombians' land titles are passed through men, although female heads of households represent between 27-35 percent of the total population. The strict relegation of men and women into different work-related roles establishes barriers to women and men. Traditionally, Afro-Colombian men play a provider role, controlling resources. Women participate in tasks considered secondary to production. The Afro-Colombian culture assigns reproductive tasks such as child rearing and domestic work to women.

- **Increasing visibility:** UNHCR and international NGOs insisted that women participate alongside men in different projects. Increased participation enhanced not only the self-esteem of women, but also respect for women within communities. In some instances, men began to assist their wives in domestic tasks to support them. For children, seeing their

mothers and fathers undertaking new roles began to change their perceptions about what they, as girls and boys, could do. Women have begun to form organizations and are requesting international support in technical training and legal assistance on land issues. Incipient women's organizations have demanded equitable services from, and representation in, committees in Peace Communities.

- **Promoting participation:** As a result of UNHCR sensitization workshops, the initial resistance of male dominated committees was overcome as they began to recognize the value and importance of including women. Women leaders have successfully demanded more equitable participation in external committees of the Peace Communities. In the year 2000, only one woman was represented in external committees. In February 2001, this number increased to four as a direct result of sensitization measures.
- **Mainstreaming gender equality:** As a result of UNHCR sensitization on gender issues, state entities have revised procedures for acquiring land along gender equitable lines. UNHCR has also worked to sensitize humanitarian and development organizations in the region. Currently initiatives are underway to facilitate a gender mainstreaming process in these bodies.





### What was planned?

- **Gender-related research:** UNHCR sponsored research on gender issues in the areas of land, documentation and decision-making processes. Members of the Peace Communities were actively involved in this research, generating new perspectives.
- **Awareness raising:** Three major workshops were carried out with NGOs, government institutions, and women and men from Peace Communities. The workshops led to the development of a coordinated strategy to improve the issuing of personal documentation for women and a working plan aimed at the empowerment of women within the Peace Communities.
- **Documentation:** Both women and men were provided with their own personal documentation. This was the result of a massive registration and documentation campaign launched by UNHCR and the National Registry. In the first phase of the documentation campaign, of a total of 474 persons issued with documents, 260 were women (55 percent). Documentation is an important means of affirming citizen rights, particularly land ownership. It should be noted that the scope of this first phase was limited due to security reasons. The documentation campaign continues to be implemented.
- **Inter-Agency Coordination and Strategic Planning:** National and international NGOs operating in the Uraba area have established a mechanism for joint analysis, advocacy and the coordination of activities. This mechanism is called Mesa de Uraba y Atrato (MUA). A gender approach was integrated into the framework of the MUA.

### Lessons Learned:

- A gender perspective was not applied during the initial phase of forced displacement, which had clear ramifications for women's empowerment in the reinsertion phase. The immediate demands of an emergency cannot exclude a strategic vision, specifically a gender focus and other affirmative action measures.
- All agencies that seek to protect and empower displaced populations must avoid contradictions regarding the rights of any member of that group. Cultural practice does not hinder UNHCR from seeking to protect the rights of ethnic minorities. Nor should culture be a reason to ignore gender inequalities.
- Gender analysis and women's empowerment are essential tools to move away from an excessively assistance-oriented process focused on immediate and practical needs, towards longer term, sustainable approaches that empower women and men. Gender analysis by all stakeholders is a necessary precondition for the empowerment of internally displaced women and men.
- The relative success of UNHCR's experience in Uraba is based on coordination between the Government, NGOs and UN agencies. Internally displaced communities have been actively involved, building confidence between all participating actors. This represents an important achievement considering the extremely polarized situation of the area as a result of the armed conflict.



# Emergency Response Teams

## Guinea

*Guinea has been host to refugee populations from Liberia and Sierra Leone for over a decade. At the height of the influx, up to 500,000 refugees resided in Guinea. Following democratic elections in Liberia, most of the refugees from this country have been repatriated. Today, the majority of refugees in Guinea are from Sierra Leone.*

*Between September and December 2000, a series of cross-border attacks by rebel groups from Sierra Leone struck refugee populations in Guinea, heightening insecurity in the regions concerned, and leading to a large-scale displacement of both the local Guinean and refugee populations. In response, UNHCR has initiated an emergency operation to relocate refugees from the insecure regions to safer sites further inside Guinea. Refugees who decided to repatriate to Sierra Leone are also being assisted under the emergency operation.*

*From December 2000 to January 2001, UNHCR deployed Emergency Response Teams (ERT) to both Guinea and Sierra Leone. To enhance the gender-sensitivity of the teams, the Office of the Senior Coordinator for Refugee Women and Gender Equality and the Emergency Preparedness and Response Unit of UNHCR deployed a Gender Advisor to serve as part of the ERT. The deployment was a first in UNHCR history.*

*Since January 2001 the Gender Advisor has been shuttling between Guinea and Sierra Leone, working to provide technical advice and support to teams in both countries. In Guinea, the Gender Advisor's work has focused on UNHCR's ongoing operations to relocate refugees from Languette to safer sites inside the country. The Gender Advisor and ERT have been working to ensure that services and facilities in relocation sites are responsive to the needs and priorities of both women and men. Emphasis has been placed both on influencing the establishment and management of camp level structures and on protection activities.*





### What Good Practice Criteria are being met?

Consulting with refugee women and men about camp design and protection activities facilitates equality of access. The Gender Advisor has actively promoted gender considerations in the Emergency Response Teams and security bodies. Drawing on the support and resources of the Pan-African women's organization, UNHCR has taken steps to prevent gender-related violence, and to empower young girls and survivors of sexual violence through education and psychosocial support. Impressively, refugee men are beginning to take responsibility and leadership in the campaign to end violence against women.

### What is being achieved?

- **Identifying gender gaps:** Discussions with refugee women highlighted a series of gender gaps in refugee camp design. The non-demarcation of male and female toilets and shower facilities and the absence of locks on the doors of toilets compromised the security and privacy of women in the camp. Refugee women were also concerned that an overwhelming number of staff in implementing partners within the camps are men. Single women related that they required support in the construction of their shelters. Further, it was learned that a significantly large number of adolescent girl-mothers, school-dropouts, and survivors of sexual and gender-based violence lived within the camps.
- **Making camps safer:** Gender gaps identified at the camp level were brought to the attention of UNHCR field, protection and community services officers. As a result, toilet and shower facilities are now clearly demarcated for men and women, and locks have been fitted on the toilets. Single women heads of households are being assisted with the construction of their homes. An educational facility is being planned to provide counseling, education and skills training to adolescent girls.
- **Balancing staff representation:** NGO implementing partners as well as UNHCR field staff have been advised of the need to provide field work opportunities to both women and men. The camp management team has assumed responsibility for monitoring progress towards this objective.

- **Addressing sexual and gender-based violence:** A heavy military presence in the camps and in areas of refugee movement has led to many complaints by refugee women of increasing harassment. In some cases, refugee women and girls have been raped. UNHCR is investing in efforts to ensure that refugee women and girls, who may have experienced sexual abuse en route from Guinea to Sierra Leone during the repatriation exercise, are provided with adequate medical services and rehabilitation support upon arrival in Sierra Leone.

### What was Planned?

- **Consultations:** The Gender Advisor met with site planners and the field officer to review the location of facilities within the camp and to discuss whether these addressed the security concerns of women. They also assessed what social service provisions were available and what mechanism will be established to ensure ongoing consultation with refugees. The Gender Advisor then met with refugee women and men in camp to assess the extent to which their needs and priorities were in line with those identified by UNHCR. These consultations led to a set of recommendations for improvement of camp facilities, which were communicated to those responsible for camp design and management.
- **Focal points:** To institutionalize commitment and attention to gender issues at the camp level, implementing partners responsible for camp management have agreed to serve as focal points for mainstreaming gender within all sectors of the operation. In the near future, the camp management team plans to attend a gender training workshop. They will refine their terms of reference as gender focal points through this training. Focal points will be responsible for convening inter-agency meetings at the camp level to address gender concerns within the various sectors of operation - health, education, shelter, and water and sanitation. Refugee women representatives will also be present on an Inter-Agency Coordination Committee on Gender.
- **Measures to prevent sexual and gender-based violence:** The Gender Advisor and UNHCR protection staff convened two workshops for senior and mid-rank members of the Guinean security



services. The objective was to sensitize these persons with respect to UNHCR's mandate —including protection of women against sexual and gender-based violence. Refugee men are becoming aware of sexual and gender-based violence. Recently, after discussions with the Gender Advisor, a group of five refugee men drafted a programme of action whereby men will undertake sensitization of other men on the need to end violence against women. They will continue to collaborate closely with the Gender Advisor.

#### Lessons Learned:

- Applying a gender perspective and strategizing about how to empower women and girls at the earliest stages of an emergency is both desirable and possible.
- Men have an important role to play in preventing violence against women. UNHCR should provide support to men who take initiative and leadership on the issue.
- The fast moving pace of the emergency operations often overshadows or de-prioritizes gender-related concerns. Many of the issues and gaps identified at the camp level in consultation with refugee women were identified and followed up by the Gender Advisor. The presence of a Gender Advisor is important to ensure that the concerns of both women and men are addressed.
- Gender focal points are necessary to ensure adequate follow-up of problems identified. At the same time, it is important to develop a strategy for promoting responsibility amongst all UNHCR and implementing partner staff for gender mainstreaming and women's empowerment.

- **Protection through partnerships:** A partnership arrangement is being established with the Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE) in Sierra Leone. They will serve as an implementing partner for a program to help identify and provide support to survivors of sexual violence. UNHCR supports an International Rescue Committee program on prevention and response to sexual and gender-based violence. It has been in place for over two years now. Refugee women are highly sensitized and are very vocal at raising the problem within public forums held at the camp level.



Photos UNHCR/L. Taylor

# Institutionalizing Gender Equality in UNHCR

## Turkey



Photo UNHCR/H.J. Davies

*Sala suffered severe physical and sexual abuse at the hands of her father since she was six years of age. When Sala's mother eventually divorced her husband and received custody of the children, Sala hoped the violence would end. However, she was later sent to Turkey with her father under the pretext of starting university. Once there, she was brutally beaten and sexually abused. At one point, the father tried to force her into prostitution. When she became pregnant, they went to Iran for an illegal abortion, after which she suffered severe complications, and was left infertile. The applicant, who had no hope of getting support from her mother, fled Iran and went to Turkey. When the father discovered where she was, he threatened to kill her. Sala successfully appealed to UNHCR for refugee status and was resettled to Canada.*

*Sera, aged 16, is Sala's younger sister. Like her sister, Sera was taken to Turkey by her father, without objections by her mother. Upon discovering that her younger sister had left for Turkey, Sala informed the UNHCR office and told them that she was concerned that Sera was also being abused. Sera was interviewed. She confirmed that her father had not only tried to force her into prostitution, but had beaten her and had tried to sexually abuse her so that she might be 'prepared' for prostitution\*.*

*These cases involving two sisters from Iran highlight gender-related forms of persecution increasingly recognized and addressed by UNHCR and by countries extending asylum. Refugee women and girls considered 'at risk' require special assistance and protection mechanisms. In particular, it is important to adapt existing asylum guidelines and procedures to help protect the rights of refugee women in Turkey, to train relevant governmental and non-governmental organizations, and to build domestic capacity to assist and support refugee women and children. At the moment, the lack of state assistance to non-European refugees in Turkey and the meager capacity of domestic women's organizations and services in Turkey means that refugee women and girls have had virtually nowhere to turn for assistance in times of crisis.*

*While significant advances in the protection of refugee women and children have been made this decade, systemic discrimination often continues to impede the process of resettlement. With this in mind, the UNHCR Branch Office in Turkey took an innovative approach to ensure gender issues were institutionalized in UNHCR protection activities. Inter-disciplinary and inter-unit teams were created to work together. Gender and Children's Teams (GCT) actively integrate gender and youth issues in UNHCR policy development processes, implementation procedures, and even project design and fundraising. The Inter-Unit Committee on Special Cases (IUCSC) was created to ensure the most effective use of resources and expertise in special case circumstances. It also promotes shared responsibility between different UNHCR units —Protection, Programme and Durable Solutions —for special cases.*

\* Sera and Sala are fictitious names



### What Good Practice Criteria are being met?

Integration of a gender perspective into protection mechanisms promotes equality of access by challenging discriminatory assumptions and practices. The creation of gender teams has fostered awareness among UNHCR, state bodies and implementing partners of gender-related forms of persecution and obstacles women and girls sometimes encounter in the refugee status determination RSD process.

### What has been achieved?

- **Research and tool development.** The particular gender-related needs of refugee women and men, girls and boys are being documented and addressed in a comprehensive, analytical and systematic manner. The GCT and IUCSC have developed new tools to facilitate the identification of vulnerable and crisis cases.
- **Improving efficiency and access:** Through the integration of a gender perspective in UNHCR procedures and mechanisms, the GCT has empowered the organization to deal with difficult and complicated cases. It has also helped to improve access to UNHCR procedures and assistance for women and girls who may not have otherwise succeeded in obtaining asylum.
- **Mutual co-operation and support:** The GCT brought together gender and children's focal points to work as a team, which has contributed to an environment of co-operation and strategic planning.
- **Awareness raising:** The creation of teams across different UNHCR units has increased the visibility of gender issues among a wide range of persons in the office, with a positive impact on staff openness and attitudes towards gender issues. Trainings held with state bodies and implementing partners has also raised awareness of gender issues.

### What was planned?

- **Gathering gender-sensitive information:** The team has made it possible to uncover and begin to address the gender-related protection concerns of women and girls in areas such as domestic abuse or forced prostitution. This has been achieved through gender-sensitive needs assessment surveys, improved mechanisms for the early identification of vulnerable

cases, and improved systems for documenting and recording cases related to gender issues.

- **Working with partners:** The GCT and the UNHCR Branch Office have requested that implementing partners highlight gender-related concerns in project descriptions and submissions. UNHCR constantly maintains contact with other relevant actors, including government bodies, academic and other institutions, as well as other UN agencies on gender issues. An Inter-agency Caucus on Gender Issues was established at the instigation of UNHCR. Gender-related training programs for Government counterparts have been provided.
- **Guidelines:** Procedural steps for cases of domestic abuse were developed by the IUCSC, and distributed to relevant staff, including clerks and interpreters. More procedures (and accompanying guidelines) are to be developed on other specific gender-related problems in the near future, such as forced prostitution, incest, and sexual abuse, including rape.
- **Changing RSD procedures.** The new appeal procedure allows for the consideration of gender elements. Measures to improve the access of refugee women and girls to the Refugee Status Determination process and to UNHCR assistance programs have been taken. These include separate interview questions for female spouses, procedural guarantees for refugee women, fair assessment of gender persecution cases, expedited procedures for vulnerable cases, and special assistance to refugee women at risk and survivors of violence, including domestic violence.



Photo UNHCR/M. Pfeiffer



- **Strategic approach and accountability:** GCT members developed a common Strategy and Work Plan to mainstream a gender equality perspective throughout UNHCR protection and operational activities in Turkey. The GCT Work Plan was incorporated into the Branch Office Plan of Action and benefits from the automatic monitoring function of the Operation Steering Committee. An expanded management committee meets once a month to review the implementation of the UNHCR Turkey Branch Office Plan of Action. Tasks are then delegated for implementation to relevant units and persons. Responsibility for gender-related tasks falls on staff in different units of UNHCR, thereby promoting accountability.

#### **What was Learned?**

- Mainstreaming is an ongoing process and requires creative strategies and actions. There is no one solution. Empowerment and gender mainstreaming strategies must be based on the context in which the strategy is being developed.
- Senior level commitment and participation in the GCT is required to make sure that implementation of

activities and plans occur. Field level representation is also required in order to ensure adequate implementation.

- Commitment and motivation is required when dealing with gender issues. A group like the GCT needs to operate as a 'team,' understood as a group of people working together to achieve agreed goals. The team must have a comprehensive overview of the situation and of the needs of the refugee women and children. The interdisciplinary nature of gender and the inter-unit composition of the team results in a better identification of problems, and a realization that there is a need for more knowledge about the problems and how to deal with them.
- Women's empowerment is an important component to facilitate gender equality mainstreaming. The UNHCR Turkey Branch Office has assisted local non-governmental organizations in the design and planning of specific projects to empower refugee women and girls, and the office continues to help to fundraise for these projects.



# Western Saharan Refugee Women and Community Empowerment

## Tindouf camps Algeria

*Since 1975, UNHCR has, in collaboration and coordination with the host country, implemented a care and maintenance assistance programme for the estimated 165,000 Western Saharan refugees in Algeria. For Saharan refugee women, displacement poses enormous challenges. Life in the four desert camps on Algeria's southwestern border is hard, with intense heat and few resources. Saharan women have had to cope with poverty, food shortage, illness, and lack of medication and shelter. As men are largely absent from the camps, women have assumed sole responsibility for Dairas, local administrative structures that provide for the management of the refugee camps. In 1976, the National Union of Saharan Refugee Women was founded in order to promote the advancement of women. Saharan women have learned new skills, actively sought out education, and assumed new positions in community decision-making. This experience empowers not only Saharan women but by extension, all members of the local refugee population. UNHCR has worked closely with Saharan refugee women's structures to improve the standard of living in camps.*

*Under the UN Settlement Plan of 1990, the UNHCR is to repatriate voluntarily those refugees and their immediate families who elect to return, and who have been identified by UN (MINURSO) as potential voters in the proposed Western Saharan Territory referendum, as foreseen in the UN Settlement Plan. The voluntary repatriation will only begin when it is judged that conditions under UNHCR's principles are created for the return of refugees in safety and dignity. For refugee women, return also raises new questions regarding the sustainability of the rights women have achieved, and highlights important areas of future work.*





### What Good Practice Criteria are being met?

The participation of women in camp management structures and the National Union of Saharan Refugee Women have empowered women in Tindouf refugee camps. Campaigns and awareness raising inform women of their rights, and encourage political participation. UNHCR projects provide women with knowledge and technical skills that, in turn, enable them to take on more prominent positions in society. UNHCR has begun to recognize the importance of promoting women's rights in the preparation for repatriation, providing documentation to women and men, and planning the construction of Women's Centers.

### What is being achieved?

- **Camp management:** Saharan women are in charge of the reception, handling and distribution of basic humanitarian assistance that arrives in the camps. Women are also responsible for running local and regional government structures, neighborhood committees, schools, medical centers, sanitation projects and food distribution to the general population. This has greatly increased women's self-esteem, and respect for women among family members. As one refugee man argued, "in general men appreciate what the Saharan women have achieved, even among the older generation, they admire the role of women and encourage it".<sup>1</sup>
- **Improving health and welfare:** A nutritional survey carried out with Saharan women resulted in a project aimed at improving the nutritional status of pregnant and lactating women suffering from anemia. The project has improved health standards among the refugee population by combating anemia through treatment, prevention, and improving the nutritional status of women and children. Similarly, the UNHCR water project in Dakhla camp has had an important impact on women's lives. The project raises hygiene levels and assists in the carrying out of household work and food preparation. The project has reduced the number of abdominal cases and skin diseases in the refugee camps.

- **Participation in decision-making:** Saharan women played a prominent role in the decisions made for return during the pre-registration exercise carried out by UNHCR as a preparatory step for the voluntary repatriation process. The National Union of Saharan Refugee Women continues to raise awareness amongst other women of their civil and political rights such as voting and nomination to political structures. They encourage women to participate in decision-making processes.
- **Literacy:** The 27 February School was established in 1976 exclusively for the training and education of women. In 1982, the National Union of Saharan Refugee Women initiated literacy campaigns and began to train women in vocations such as teaching, nursing and administration. Since 1982, education centers and campaigns have reduced the illiteracy rate of women from 90 percent to 20 percent.

### What was planned?

- **Support to women's organization:** UNHCR's close collaboration with the National Union of Saharan Refugee Women entails both direct material assistance to projects already set up by the Saharan women, as well as designing projects specifically for the advancement of women. For example, UNHCR has promoted the self-reliance of women in the camps through vocational training and income-generating projects. Saharan women have received training in technical areas such as agriculture, computers and solar energy. In order to reach more women in the camps, they have been trained to become trainers themselves.
- **Health and water programmes:** Saharan women played an active role in determining and defining the objectives of surveys conducted for nutritional and the potable water projects. This was achieved through their presence on local health committees and in the Ministry of Health. Joint consultations took place between the relevant ministries, the Health and Family Sections of the National Union of Saharan Refugee Women, UNHCR and implementing partners.

<sup>1</sup> All quotes come from UNHCR interviews held with a Saharan man and woman for the purpose of this publication



- **Pre-registration for returns:** Completed in October 2000, UNHCR pre-registration in preparation for return entailed conducting confidential interviews with individual refugee women and men, thereby allowing refugees to freely express their wishes regarding both place of return and means of transportation. Women, comprising more than 80 percent of those interviewed and registered, made decisions in the absence of their husbands and fathers and on behalf of their families.
- **Women's Centers:** UNHCR is currently finalizing a project for the establishment of 'Women's Centers' in all camps. The Centers will provide a venue where women can meet and discuss issues of concern in a confidential environment, and will include facilities for holding seminars and conferences, a library, as well as qualified Saharan personnel to provide legal and social counseling. The objective is two-fold: to promote women's academic advancement, and to raise rights-consciousness.
- The Saharan refugee example is unique in the sense that women have independently gained a predominant role in society as a result of both social and historical factors. Their empowerment is in part attributable to the nature of Bedouin society that values women's work. However, the fact that men were absent in exile and that women's assistance was supported by male-dominated political structures with the objective of returning home, also promoted women's empowerment. It is crucial for UNHCR to enhance this empowerment by providing women with the necessary means to sustain and extend their present role (in particular through rights-training). As one member of the Women's Refugee Union explained, "Whilst our short-term objective is return, our long term goal is to ensure a respected and active role in the future, based on the model of the modern, proactive and productive woman and not the marginalized passive consumer".

#### Lessons learned:

- A glass ceiling exists for women in political participation. It has been argued that low participation may be due to the reluctance of women to engage in politics on a high level. This is due, in part, to the perception that only men should participate in high level politics and the fact that women often have little time to devote to politics outside domestic and community work. Continued support to advocate for refugee women's participation in higher political structures is necessary.
- UNHCR plans to focus on rights-training and raising awareness on refugee law and women's rights through a planned joint Protection and People Oriented Planning/Gender (POP) workshop. This training, which was already conducted in 2000 and 2001, is necessary to continue to ensure gender equality is promoted in all areas of UNHCR work, particularly as they prepare for the repatriation of Saharans to their homeland.





# Conclusion

The initiatives presented in this Good Practice publication reflect evolving trends within UNHCR towards combining reactive emergency measures with longer-term pro-active development goals that seek to promote gender equality. Bridging the relief-development gap requires an investment in communities and working in partnership with populations so that they are the authors of their own solutions. In this way, empowering initiatives facilitate the sustainability of solutions and enhance the quality of UNHCR assistance and protection activities. The UNHCR Policy on Community Development reaffirms the principle that populations of concern should be empowered to become active partners and participants during all stages and in all sectors of UNHCR operations.

The idea that empowerment must include women and men, girls and boys, upholds the principles of nondiscrimination and equality embodied in the UNHCR Mission Statement (1998) which reads: *“UNHCR offers protection and assistance to refugees and others in an impartial manner, on the basis of their need and irrespective of their race, religion, political opinion or gender. In all of its activities, UNHCR pays particular attention to the needs of children and seeks to promote the equal rights of women and girls.”* This document is an attempt to illustrate how specific initiatives to empower women are necessary to narrow the gender equality gap.

The Good Practices suggest that empowerment must be supported throughout different stages of displacement: from the initial movement of persons, through internal displacement, to long term refugee situations and

during repatriation and rebuilding of returnee communities. The **Guinea** experience reminds us that even at the onset of an emergency situation, it is possible to integrate gender concerns and to work with refugee women and men to enhance the protection of women.

The **Colombian** experience illustrates that gender analysis is an important tool in UNHCR protection and assistance activities in situations of internal displacement.

In **Algeria**, women’s empowerment emerged in the context of long-term exile that thrust them into new positions and roles in Saharan society. The **Burundian** Good Practice reminds us that where women have made efforts to add their voices to the major decision-making processes such as Peace Agreements, the contributions of UN organizations such as UNIFEM and UNHCR can and do make a difference.

The **Kosovo** Good Practice illustrates how ‘gender-neutral’ micro-credit projects and the empowerment of women have contributed to an increasingly secure environment. While empowerment begins with displaced and returnee women and men, girls and boys, the process must also engage and change institutions which shape their lives. In **Turkey**, Refugee Status Determination procedures and the sensitizing of staff promotes the protection of refugee women and girls who fear gender-related forms of persecution.

Finally, the **Guatemalan** Good Practice reinforces the suggestion that empowerment is a long term, multi-dimensional process. In assessing the impact of return on Guatemalan women and men, it is possible to revise and adjust empowerment strategies to changing circumstances. The Good Practice thus highlights the relevance of evaluation and monitoring in developing sustainable strategies to empower women.

Collectively, the Good Practices in this Guide provide some important lessons learned for current and future UNHCR initiatives with refugee, internally displaced and returnee populations that seek to promote gender equality.





## Lessons Learned

- Empowerment is a long-term process involving multiple dimensions: access, conscientization, mobilization, control and gender equality mainstreaming. These dimensions are not necessarily sequential, but should be viewed as inter-related: each dimension shapes the other and leads to new levels of empowerment.
- The empowerment of forcibly displaced and returnee women and girls is improved when gender roles and relations within a population of concern are well understood and inequalities addressed. One of the first steps in developing empowerment strategies is to consider differing experiences, profiles, resources and needs within a population of concern.
- Empowerment is both necessary and possible at all stages of displacement and return, and should be incorporated into all areas of UNHCR work. In emergency situations, it is necessary to meet the immediate needs of all refugees or internally displaced persons, as well as to develop long-term strategies for empowerment. In all situations of forced displacement and return, the resources of all concerned must be identified and supported, so as to build capacity and facilitate the empowerment process.
- The participation of women and men, girls and boys in planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation is essential if UNHCR assistance and protection activities are to be empowering. Specific initiatives to facilitate the participation of women are necessary where women face discriminatory barriers, low self-esteem, or where their resources are undervalued.
- Support to women's organizations and networks is a key strategy for promoting empowerment and building local capacity. Empowerment begins with displaced and returnee women and men, girls and boys. It is supported by international actors, such as UNHCR, through technical, financial and moral means. Inter-agency coordination around women's empowerment greatly enhances this process.
- Empowerment involves not only a process of change

within a population of concern, but also within UNHCR and implementing partners. Empowerment is facilitated when biases and discriminatory practices of UNHCR staff are challenged and changed. Individual staff members should reflect upon their contributions with respect to upholding the rights of women, men, children and youth, the elderly and community development.

- The relationship between empowerment strategies and gender mainstreaming should be clearly defined and pursued. Gender mainstreaming throughout UNHCR operations often requires specific projects with women in order to build self-esteem, support women as agents of change and promote access and participation. Conversely, empowerment promotes awareness of the many ways in which refugees, the internally displaced and returnees can participate in UNHCR planning, implementation and evaluation.



Photo UNHCR/A. Hollmann

- The concept of empowerment has been defined and used in a number of ways in the work of humanitarian and development organizations. When initiating a strategy or project, UNHCR field offices should define and explain how it will promote empowerment and define the concept in a clear and measurable sense. Women's empowerment should strive for equality of results, and strategies should clearly identify objectives, activities and measures for assessing impact.

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