

REFUGEE WOMEN AND MAINSTREAMING A GENDER EQUALITY PERSPECTIVE

I. INTRODUCTION

1. In its last report under this agenda item to the 16th meeting of the Standing Committee¹, UNHCR provided a summary of its ongoing activities to promote the right of women to equal protection and assistance, outlining how the organization, in partnership with governments and NGOs, was integrating gender analysis throughout the planning and delivery of its activities. While welcoming a gender equality approach, the Standing Committee emphasized that specific initiatives with and for refugee women must remain an integral part of the strategy. The Committee also requested that funding shortfalls should not adversely effect UNHCR activities for the advancement of refugee women and gender equality. This conference room paper offers a report on progress since 1999, with a particular focus on initiatives aimed at empowering refugee women.

2. Since the 1999 report, a new Senior Co-ordinator for Refugee Women/Gender Equality has been appointed, revitalizing UNHCR's commitment to advancing the rights of refugee women and promoting gender equality.

II. POLICY DEVELOPMENT AND MANAGEMENT ISSUES

Policy statement

3. Work is currently underway towards the elaboration of a policy statement on mainstreaming gender equality, complementing the 1990 Policy on Refugee Women that has so far provided the framework for UNHCR's activities to promote the equal rights of women of concern to the organization. The new policy will incorporate new approaches as defined in the Beijing Platform for Action and the 1997 ECOSOC Resolutions on gender equality mainstreaming, which move on from analysing the different experiences of refugee women and men to specific programming aimed at redressing gender-based discrimination.

4. Upon arrival of the Senior Co-ordinator in mid-2000, a working group was convened to begin the process of developing a new gender equality policy. Its work revealed many different perspectives on what the policy should contain and the experiences on which it should be based. As a result, it was decided that while discussions should remain ongoing, a policy could not be defined without thorough analysis of current field approaches and a diagnosis of the experiences of refugee women and men themselves. The policy should also reflect the results of the current review of UNHCR's implementation of its Policy on Refugee Women and Guidelines on the Protection of Refugee Women, as well as a series of consultations with displaced, refugee and returnee women. It is anticipated that the new policy statement on gender equality will be completed in the course of the coming months.

¹ EC/49/SC/CRP.22.

Ten-year review

5. An assessment of the implementation of UNHCR's Policy on Refugee Women and Guidelines on the Protection of Refugee Women, undertaken by the Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children, with the support of two donors is underway². The Department of International Protection, the Evaluation and Policy Analysis Unit and the Senior Co-ordinator are facilitating the process. While its final results are expected later in the year 2001, an interim report will be presented at the 21st meeting of the Standing Committee.

Consultation with refugee women

6. Over the past decade, the Executive Committee has repeatedly called for a focus on the particular plight of refugee women, adolescents and children, who represent the majority of refugee populations. This call is based on the recognition that the interests of refugee women and their dependent children are not adequately met when refugee assistance and protection activities are designed and delivered within a "gender neutral framework". The assumption that reaching male community leaders and heads of households will always address the rights and needs of refugee women is no longer considered valid. A first international consultation with refugee women took place in 1988 in Geneva, organized by non-governmental organizations (NGOs). It brought together refugee women from all over the world to discuss inadequacies in refugee assistance and protection. As a result of their testimonies and advocacy, UNHCR and the international community took action by establishing the UNHCR Policy on Refugee Women. This became the catalyst for the activities, innovations and changes that have guided recent programmes.

7. To coincide with the 50th anniversary of the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, UNHCR together with the Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children will bring together refugee women from around the world from 20 to 22 June 2001. Fifty women representing over 25 nationalities will share experiences and offer testimonies through this dialogue, offering UNHCR staff, the Standing Committee and NGOs an opportunity to analyse past performance and define further improvements required to overcome the barriers to protection and assistance faced by displaced women around the world.

8. In preparation for this event, refugee, displaced and returnee women have already met in Canada, Colombia, Egypt, Georgia, Guinea, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Kenya, Lebanon, Mexico, Pakistan, Sierra Leone, Thailand and elsewhere. Even in the early stages of the discussions, some key issues have emerged. Many participants have gained a clearer understanding of UNHCR's role. They also experienced the power conferred by dialogue in such a forum. In the Middle East, Central Asia and the CIS, equal access to asylum procedures and participation in leadership structures were key concerns. In Eastern Europe the women discussed trafficking of refugee women and girls. In both Eastern Europe and Africa, the participants advocated for a stronger role for women in conflict resolution, peace-building and reconciliation. In the Americas, the group considered various reintegration challenges and opportunities for rural and urban women. An information paper describing the outcomes and recommendations of the Dialogue will be made available following its conclusion. A panel discussion with five women who participated in the dialogue will also take place at the time of the 21st meeting of the Standing Committee.

9. The dialogue with Refugee Women will also provide an opportunity to bring refugee women's voices to the Global Consultations on International Protection. Issues raised at various local, regional and international meetings will be used to inform specific thematic areas covered in these Consultations at which the issue of refugee women constitutes a cross-cutting theme.

² EC/51/SC/CRP.19, para.15.

The Gender Networks

10. The gender networks were first created in the Americas region to move away from a single, often isolated, focal point working on activities for women, to a team of colleagues sharing responsibility for empowering refugee women and mainstreaming gender equality. These teams serve to build the capacity of other staff to analyse and develop programmes from a gender perspective. Based on an evaluation of the work of the gender networks in the Americas region, gender teams are being created in the Middle East, North Africa and countries in East and the Horn of Africa. Senior Regional Advisors on Refugee Women and Gender Equality (located in Syria, Kenya, Turkey and Costa Rica) are sharing lessons learned in developing and expanding such networks in order to take advantage of the valuable experience gained.

11. In Turkey, for example, the inter-disciplinary gender team has promoted shared responsibility between units responsible for protection, programme and durable solutions, and has increased awareness among staff, governmental bodies and implementing partners on gender-related persecution and obstacles facing women and girls in the refugee status determination process. The development of tools to identify vulnerable and crisis cases, improved access to UNHCR's asylum procedures for women and girls, mutual support with focal points on child and adolescent concerns and increased staff openness to gender issues, are among the successes of the network in Turkey.

12. The gender teams in Central and Eastern Europe, and in Central Asia have developed a Gender Sensitive Checklist for Refugee Status Determination that is being piloted by offices in the region. This Checklist is a model that is being shared with other regions as an example of good practice in operationalizing gender equality in protection activities.

III. EMPOWERING³ REFUGEE WOMEN

A. Meeting the challenge

13. The recent community development approach endorsed by the Standing Committee at its 20th meeting⁴ is being complemented by work on aspects of self reliance within UNHCR as core elements to enhance the empowerment of women. The work is building upon ten years of People Oriented Planning and gender-awareness training and are examples of the impact of gender and social analysis and of working with the community. Increasingly, UNHCR is involving populations of concern in the organization of camp management, development of projects and negotiation of return. Empowerment of refugees, internally displaced and returnees is gradually becoming accepted as key to UNHCR's activities. However, it is also recognized that gender-related barriers to protection and assistance frequently limit women's access to knowledge and resources, decision-making and economic independence.

14. Displacement is a disempowering experience for both men and women. For women, this takes the form of added tasks or longer time spent on traditional activities such as childcare, care for the elderly, domestic work and the search for sufficient fuel and water. In addition, many of these tasks become significantly more dangerous as attacks and rape in refugee-populated areas

³ WFP's gender glossary describes "*empowerment*" as "a process through which women and men in disadvantaged positions increase their access to knowledge, resources, decision-making power, and raise their awareness of participation in their communities, in order to reach a level of control over their own environment".

⁴ EC/51/SC/CRP.10, Annex 1B.

are frequent. Faced with these constraints and dangers, women are unable to access decision-making structures and their voices are not heard on issues that affect their lives and those of their children. In addition, as tensions increase and traditional protection mechanisms have broken down, women face increased violence in daily life, including within the family.

15. In March 2001, UNHCR hosted an Inter-agency Lessons Learned Conference on Prevention and Response to Sexual and Gender-based Violence ("SGBV") in Refugee Situations to assess progress made in implementing the 1995 UNHCR Guidelines on the Prevention and Response to Sexual Violence. More than 150 participants representing 25 countries assembled at the three-day Conference. Refugee women, non-governmental and governmental partners and United Nations agencies joined UNHCR to identify where progress had been made in developing a multi-sectoral approach to addressing sexual and gender-based violence, to assess how and where these methodologies can be replicated, to analyse gaps and to chart the way forward. The participants developed specific tools to improve the delivery of protection and assistance to survivors of such violence. Greater advocacy and commitment, more emphasis on capacity-building of both staff and beneficiary men and women and a need to revise UNHCR Guidelines on Sexual Violence were some of the major recommendations made. A report of the Conference is available. A CD-ROM Resource Packet on SGBV, including the Conference proceedings, is being developed.

16. While displacement creates obstacles to empowerment for refugee women, it also creates opportunities. Every day, displaced women and returnee women, overcome traditional roles that inhibit their participation in economic and political life, challenging customs and traditions out of sheer necessity, in order to continue to provide for themselves and their families. Such efforts deserve support and encouragement.

B. Recent initiatives

17. Specific initiatives to empower women and facilitate gender equality are to be found in Volume II of UNHCR's Good Practices in Mainstreaming Gender Equality, to be issued shortly. Those that follow are some examples in varying situations of displacement and return. Country chapters within the Global Report on Activities in 2000 provide more detailed descriptions of activities underway in the various regions.

Kosovo Women's Initiative

18. With the support of a donor, the Kosovo Women's Initiative (KWI) was set up in 1999, and aimed to empower women to participate in the re-emerging economy. This was a daunting task given the devastated infrastructure and negligible foreign investment. For women in particular, access to credit has been further limited by traditional practices that require the involvement of male family members and inhibit women from acting autonomously in financial matters. This in turn has meant that many women lack the business skills required to enter the commercial sector.

19. Despite considerable funding from donors for Kosovo's reconstruction, only 5–10% of micro-credit project clients in Kosovo are women. Under the KWI, UNHCR and the International Catholic Migration Commission introduced a micro-credit support scheme designed to empower women to overcome some of the barriers they face when applying for loans and starting small businesses. It has provided technical support to women to enable them to take out loans with an existing micro-financing institute without requiring the permission of their male family members. Today women comprise 54% of borrowers and many women no longer require the technical support of the project to continue borrowing and increasing their business. In the process, the staff and practices of the micro-credit institute itself have become increasingly gender sensitive, thus creating an institutional change.

Peace-building

20. Economic empowerment of women is important but economic stability requires peace. Security Council Resolution 1325 of 31 October 2000, called for the empowerment of women, including refugee women, to participate actively in the peace process as a key goal of the United Nations, UNHCR and partners. Despite their active participation in non-formal peace building campaigns, women are frequently excluded from formal peace negotiations. In Burundi, United Nations organizations including UNHCR, sought to draw Burundian women into the peace-building process to ensure that their voices were heard. Burundian women united across ethnic, political and class backgrounds overcoming the threat of exclusion from the peace process and showing leadership in the reconciliation process. Most of the recommendations they put forward jointly were included in the Burundi Peace Agreement. While there is still a long way to go before lasting peace is a reality in their country, Burundian women, including refugee women, now have a legal basis upon which to claim their right to participate as equals in the reconstruction process.

21. At the local level, capacity-building to ensure that refugee women strengthen their peace-building skills is under way in several countries including Kenya and Uganda. In the United Republic of Tanzania, Burundian refugee women are participating in a non-violent conflict resolution and peace building project. It involves refugee women in educating the community in peace-building mechanisms and creates a forum for women to discuss issues such as peace and reconciliation.

22. Finding alternatives to violent conflict is also a key issue for displaced women in the Americas region. In Colombia, internally displaced people of Uraba have formed Peace Communities in response to a decade of ongoing violence throughout the region. Each member of a Peace Community agrees to abstain from bearing arms or participating in the conflict and the community declares itself neutral. Yet despite this innovation, women were excluded from assistance and decision-making bodies. Through training and rights awareness, UNHCR and other agencies are working in partnership with the women and men of these communities to help them overcome discriminatory practices that prevent women from accessing assistance and land.

23. Many internally displaced in Colombia do not live in rural communities but move to cities in search of safety. Economic survival is particularly difficult for women who often face barriers to finding paid work. UNHCR is undertaking a study of alternative income-generating opportunities that would empower displaced women living in Bogota.

Gender perspective in emergencies

24. One of the lessons from the Colombian experience is that a gender perspective should have been applied as from the initial phase of the forced displacement. Lack of such a perspective has had repercussions on women throughout displacement and later during reintegration. This example has illustrated the importance of a gender focus as from the outbreak of an emergency situation.

25. In Guinea, on the other hand, UNHCR deployed a Gender Advisor as part of the Emergency Response Teams following attacks at the border in 2000, causing displacement of refugee and local populations. The Gender Advisor has been working with UNHCR staff, security forces and non-governmental groups to ensure that steps were taken to prevent gender-based violence, and to empower young girls and survivors of sexual violence through education and psychosocial support. Consulting refugee women and men about camp design and protection activities also facilitates equality of access. A key indicator of success is that refugee men are now beginning to take responsibility and leadership in the campaign to end violence against women.

Western Sahara

26. In the Western Sahara, UNHCR is learning from the women who formed their own National Union and assumed sole responsibility for local administrative structures in the absence of most adult men. These women ran campaigns informing other women of their rights and encouraging their participation in the political arena. They are in charge of reception, distribution of food and non-food items, running committees, schools, and government bodies, sanitation and health projects. In view of the importance of promoting women's rights, UNHCR is providing documentation to women and men. In addition, UNHCR is currently constructing women's centres as places to discuss issues of concern in an atmosphere of trust and confidentiality. Through their active participation, the whole community has increased its respect for women, and their own self-esteem has grown.

Guatemala

27. At recent survey of UNHCR 's empowerment activities in Guatemala focused on Guatemalan refugee women's organizations created in exile, which had successfully lobbied for the inclusion of women's rights in the Guatemalan Peace Accords. Throughout the process UNHCR and its implementing partners had encouraged the empowerment of women through training, financial support and ensuring their participation in the decision-making process. In addition to receiving their own documentation, women had the right to participate in cooperatives and own land. This survey helped UNHCR to understand the impact of return on empowerment activities undertaken in exile and the need for long-term planning in order for the efforts to be sustainable. While women knew of their legal rights, few were able to exercise them as they were not always recognized in practice. To help redress this situation, UNHCR has implemented a programme to train lawyers and officials on women's rights, and placed trained lawyers within government offices where women must go to register for land deeds.

The importance of male involvement

28. The survey in Guatemala also made it clear that awareness-raising of women's rights, both in asylum and return must target men as well as women in order to ensure sustainability, particularly if gains made during conflict and asylum are not to be lost upon return, when many men insist that women return to traditional roles. In the Americas, working with men on understanding masculinities and women's rights has been going on for some time. These ideas were also explored at the aforementioned Inter-agency Lessons Learned Conference on Prevention and Response to SGBV held in March 2001. A pilot workshop exploring these issues further will take place in Turkey in June 2001. It is clear that UNHCR and its partners need to work more closely with men in order to increase understanding of the value of gender equality for men. Men at all levels of society need to be sensitised to gender issues and this is particularly crucial among decision-makers. Men should also be encouraged to participate in women-dominated activities and training, such as reproductive health and family care.

III. CONCLUSIONS

29. These examples show that a number of important experiments are underway, led both from Headquarters and at field level. As a learning organization, UNHCR is also incorporating relevant experiences from outside the organization. Over the last two years, there has been a marked increase in collaboration across sectors. This "crossing of borders" is critical to advance the cause of refugee, displaced and returnee women and to integrate gender issues within protection and assistance activities. More recently, field offices have begun to include empowerment of

women as part of the strategy to mainstream gender equality in protection, programming and durable solutions. Steady progress is occurring. Of particular merit are the new Protection and Management Learning Programmes that include a gender perspective.

30. Two major challenges remain, however, of which the first is resources. Given the continued challenge of enhancing gender quality in programming and protection activities at all levels, adequate resources must be maintained to allow significant progress to be made in the countries covered by the Senior Regional Advisors for Refugee Women/Gender Equality, and to reach new regions notably in West Africa, Southern Africa and Asia, as soon as this can be achieved.

31. Another challenge is that of sustainability. Mainstreaming gender equality through ensuring its inclusion in all Country Operations Plans is not enough in itself. It must become an integral part in developing all policies, strategies, activities, monitoring and evaluation of protection and assistance activities. Once this is achieved, the impact of equality for all refugees, returnees and displaced people will be clearly visible. In pursuit of this vision, UNHCR plans to select one or two locations in 2002 where intensive efforts to promote gender equality will be targeted. Specialist staff will be deployed, comprehensive training offered to all staff in the operation and targeted funding provided with the intention of showing the impact of a gender equality approach in a refugee situation. The implementation strategy for this project will draw on lessons learned from the ten-year review and input from the dialogue with Refugee Women.

32. In the context of diminishing resources, an approach based on attitude, activism and accountability is all the more important to safeguard activities such as those linked to the empowerment of women and a gender mainstreaming strategy. Attitudinal change is a long-term process but can be accelerated by facilitated learning; activism refers to the need for a broad constituency for gender equality; accountability is linked to devolution of responsibility from a single gender unit or focal point, requiring senior management leadership and response systems that call upon all staff to utilize gender analysis and promote gender equality in policy and in practice.