

**Launch of UNHCR Handbook for the Protection of Women and Girls
Room XXV, Palais des Nations, Thursday 6 March 2008, 09.15–09.45 hours**

Erika Feller, Assistant High Commissioner for Protection

I am very pleased this morning to be able to launch the new *UNHCR Handbook for the Protection of Women and Girls*. It replaces UNHCR's 1991 Guidelines on the Protection of Refugee Women and marks the fulfillment of another of UNHCR's commitments made under Goal 6 of the Agenda for Protection.

The challenges

Today, women and girls routinely face greater obstacles to claiming and enjoying their rights than do men and boys. As the Executive Committee has acknowledged, "while forcibly displaced men and boys also face protection problems, women and girls can be exposed to particular protection problems related to their gender, their cultural and socio-economic position, and their legal status". (ExCom Conclusion No. 105).

It is indeed thought provoking to hear, for instance, that refugee rape survivors are sometimes expected to pay the cost of forensic examinations themselves. In other situations, traditional gender roles, which may have shifted to strengthen women's participation during displacement, tend to reinstate themselves upon return, threatening to undermine greater equality achieved in exile.

The Handbook shows how displacement generally exacerbates inequalities and amplifies discrimination against women and girls. So too does a tendency to relegate the violations of rights they suffer to the private sphere and see them as not of public concern, which presents a serious challenge in the context of sexual and gender-based violence. In particular, there continues to be a massive culture of neglect and denial about violence against women and girls.

I have just come back from reviewing our program for Afghan refugees in Iran. I met with the women's committee in one of the settlements outside Tehran and listened to

their concerns about the negative and sometimes very tragic consequences of forced, under-age marriages. They were in the throes of investigating what looks to be a case of self-immolation of a 16-year-old girl. This is a quite horrific, more widespread reality than we think.

I observed other disturbing gender-specific protection problems during my mission to Syria last year, not least “survival sex” which has emerged as one coping strategy among Iraqi refugees. While the extent of the problem is difficult to gauge, there is no doubt that it is a feature of the situation in Syria. UNHCR has developed initiatives geared towards prevention in tandem with efforts to help the victims, including those currently in Syrian jails, apprehended because of prostitution.

Similarly, during my visit to Sudan last month, it became apparent how lack of livelihood opportunities among IDPs in Khartoum can provoke resort to negative coping mechanisms. In that situation, I met women who, for example, had been involved with illicit alcohol brewing. Their arrest had led to additional problems, including abandonment of their children, who became street children, or were pressed into early marriages or subject sexual abuse. I was introduced to a promising assistance initiative which we are supporting, implemented through a committed, local NGO partner and offering legitimate livelihood alternatives. This initiative has the promise of successful expansion, but is severely under-resourced. We are also looking at how to link up the Women Leading for Livelihoods (WLL) initiative to our programs in Khartoum, with a view to specifically supporting women’s livelihoods opportunities.

My missions consistently bring home to me how much work there is to do to change attitudes, successfully promote equality, and ensure enhanced respect for fundamental rights.

Approach set out the Handbook

As set out in the Handbook, this work involves promoting gender equality by:

- using a rights- and community-based approach,

- mainstreaming age, gender and diversity, and
- targeted actions to empower women and girls in civil, political and economic areas.

The Handbook integrates each of these directions into its text throughout.

Central to the Handbook's approach is the "at risk" concept. As you know, this has been agreed by the Executive Committee in recent years and itself flows from the valuable work done with partners such as the New South Wales Centre for Refugee Research. The approach set out in ExCom Conclusion No. 105 on women and girls at risk of 2006 and last year's Conclusion No. 107 on children at risk is thus developed in greater detail in chapter 3 of the Handbook. Working from these two Conclusions, it offers guidance on how to identify risk factors present in the wider protection environment and/or resulting from individual circumstances.

In terms of organization, the Handbook presents information in a standardized way so that users can find what they need more easily. Each section on a given issue first gives the word to a woman or girl of concern through a relevant quotation, whether of an asylum-seeking mother seeking work to be able to provide for her daughter (p. 309) or of a young girl disabled by polio who was raped (p. 202). It then sets out the challenges faced, as well as applicable international legal standards and guidelines and responsibilities. Each section goes on to suggest how to respond, and provides practical suggestions for action, as well as a total of over 60 field practice examples showing how offices have approached these challenges. It explains, for instance, how one office has used resettlement as a vital tool to protect the "lost girls" of Sudan in Kenyan refugee camps.

There is also an accompanying CD-Rom which contains some 200 UN and UNHCR documents referred to in the text. Unfortunately, these advance copies do not yet contain the CD-Rom but you are welcome to sign up to receive one. The Handbook is available on [Refworld](#) and on the [UNHCR website](#) as of today.

Implementing the Handbook

The process of producing the Handbook has admittedly been a long one. It builds on the provisional text issued in June 2006 and benefits from a wide range of comments from offices and NGOs in the field, which have certainly improved the end result.

Facilitating implementation of the Handbook on the ground is the next challenge. Our plans include producing materials such as posters, story boards and information sheets on issues, from child marriage to equal property inheritance rights, to inform implementation efforts.

In addition to these more traditional approaches, we are also working with partners to develop a series of participatory videos to support implementation of the Handbook. Films, particularly locally-produced films are a medium to overcome communication barriers such as language and literacy. They convey information in an engaging and culturally relevant format, which increases the likelihood of comprehension by diverse audiences. When combined with facilitated group discussion, they can be effectively used to engage people in a dynamic and participatory learning experience.

Of course such a video project, and production of other materials to support field implementation, is not without its financial cost. Those of you here today representing governments with an interest in gender equality and the protection of women and girls are encouraged to contact myself and/or Naoko Obi, the new chief of CDGECS, if you are interested in funding this exciting initiative.

Finally, it is most appropriate that we are able to launch the Handbook today, so close to International Women's Day this weekend. I very much hope it can strengthen all our efforts to ensure women and girls of concern are able to secure and enjoy their rights on an equal basis with their male counterparts. We continue of course to be most interested to hear comments and suggestions for our partners as the Handbook is implemented on the ground.