



Summary Note

# UNHCR's Strategy and Activities concerning Refugee Children

Geneva, October 2005

## UNHCR and Refugee Children

Refugee children<sup>i</sup> are a policy priority of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). The rights of refugee girls and boys, including adolescents, of diverse backgrounds and abilities are of specific concern to UNHCR.

The following documents provide the framework for UNHCR's activities to assist and protect children:

- 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees
- 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees
- 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), and its Optional Protocols on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict and on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography
- 1993 UNHCR Policy on Refugee Children
- 1994 Refugee Children: UNHCR Guidelines on the Protection and Care

UNHCR's commitment to the protection of refugee girls and boys has been reinforced through the *Agenda for Protection* which includes a specific goal with objectives and activities relating to the protection of refugee women and children. The *Agenda* also integrates the concerns of girls and boys of diverse backgrounds into its other five goals.

UNHCR's age, gender and diversity mainstreaming strategy supports the participation and protection of girls and boys. The overall aim is gender equality and the enjoyment of their rights by all refugees of all ages and backgrounds.

UNHCR believes that the protection and care of children have to be an integral part of all activities for refugees, which can best be addressed using a team approach. Working for refugees also means working with refugees. Therefore, by using a rights and community-based approach and applying participatory assessment, refugees should actively participate in all operations from the beginning. In all phases of programming, the refugee community should be involved in such a way that it represents all groups: women, men, older persons, people with disabilities, girls and boys, including adolescents, regardless of background and capacity. Thus, the protection and care of refugee children is not only the responsibility of States and humanitarian organizations, but of the refugee community as a whole.

## Five Priorities

In legal terms, every refugee under the age of 18 is a refugee child, 'unless, under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier.'<sup>ii</sup> With regard to refugee children, UNHCR has identified five main global priority issues:

- separation from families and caregivers
- sexual exploitation, abuse and violence
- military recruitment
- education
- specific concerns of adolescents

In certain regions there may be additional issues of importance which require special attention, such as birth registration, detention of children, trafficking or child labour.

## Global Strategy

UNHCR's global strategy for refugee girls and boys is three-fold:

- Prioritization of the above-mentioned five priority issues with a particular focus on participation, sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), adolescents and youth employment. These priority issues are supported by empowerment through targeted action and age, gender and diversity mainstreaming.
- Training and capacity development – UNHCR and its partners are being trained to detect the specific concerns of refugee girls and boys of diverse backgrounds and to deal with them efficiently. Action for the Rights of Children (ARC), an inter-agency and child rights-based initiative, is a practical tool designed for this purpose.
- Inter-agency cooperation – UNHCR is networking and cooperating with other UN agencies, NGOs, and governments to ensure optimum protection and care of refugee girls and boys through a number of initiatives and networks at the global, regional, and national level.

## **Priority Issue #1 Separation from Families and Caregivers**

In the chaos of conflict, flight and displacement, girls and boys face an increased risk of separation from their families and caregivers, who play a fundamental role in their protection, physical care and emotional well-being. Therefore, separation from their closest relatives or caregivers is particularly devastating for refugee children.

Unaccompanied and separated girls and boys face a greater risk of sexual exploitation and abuse, military recruitment, child labour, lack of access to school and basic assistance, and detention, even if they are accompanied by members of their extended family.

Unaccompanied and separated adolescent refugees may find themselves in very distressing situations. It is usually more difficult to find foster families for them than for younger children. Some of them also end up bearing responsibilities for younger siblings and might be exposed to discrimination and abuse.

Often unaccompanied and separated boys are particularly at risk of military recruitment, while girls require specific attention as they face the risk of forced labour, early/forced marriage, sexual abuse or human trafficking.

### ***UNHCR's Response***

*Wherever possible, UNHCR prevents separation of children from their parents. While this is not always possible in emergencies, UNHCR designs repatriation operations in such a way that separation is unlikely to occur at any time during the movement.*

*When an emergency arises or upon arrival in the country of asylum, unaccompanied and separated girls and boys are identified, registered and documented as quickly as possible and tracing is carried out. This promotes the protection and assistance of children and is important for restoring links with their families.*

*Interim care is provided for unaccompanied and separated girls and boys. This may include fostering, other forms of community-based care, or institutional care as a last resort. The status of all children in care arrangements is to be followed up and monitored to avoid abuse and neglect.*

*To assist in finding a durable solution UNHCR applies Best Interests Determination procedures.*

*For adolescent refugees, who are separated from their families, it is even more crucial to develop life skills and become self-sufficient. Therefore UNHCR works towards providing adolescent girls and boys with the opportunity to participate in post-primary education, vocational training and income-generating activities.*

*Education is also considered an effective tool for UNHCR in order to protect separated girls and boys from the dangers of military recruitment, exploitation, abuse and violence as well as an important means to give them better opportunities for the future.*

*For its operations, UNHCR developed concrete Guidelines on Policies and Procedures in Dealing with Unaccompanied Children Seeking Asylum.*

*In addition, with the introduction through Project Profile of "ProGres", UNHCR's new registration database application, a Specific Needs Branch was introduced in the registration database which includes 'Unaccompanied and Separated Children' with a further breakdown into Separated Child, Unaccompanied Child, Child in Foster Care, Child in Institutional Care, and Neglected Child with Extended Family. This allows for improved identification of unaccompanied and separated children, targeting of assistance and services as well as aggregating statistics consistently worldwide.<sup>iii</sup>*

*Inter-Agency Guiding Principles on Unaccompanied and Separated Children were launched in 2004 by UNHCR, UNICEF, ICRC, IRC, Save the Children UK and World Vision International. A major output of this joint initiative is the use of a common registration form for unaccompanied and separated children. This makes worldwide tracing and family reunification easier. Early 2005, these organizations also drafted Guiding Principles on Unaccompanied and Separated Children in Tsunami-affected Countries and on Psychosocial Care and Protection of Tsunami-affected Children.*

*Practical insight was gained and best practices on the rights and best interests of separated children have been collected through the Separated Children in Europe Programme, which UNHCR and Save the Children established in 1998.*

## **Priority Issue #2 Sexual Exploitation, Abuse and Violence**

Sexual exploitation, abuse and violence often increase during flight. Boys and girls of all age groups are at risk, but adolescent girls are the principal targets. Certain groups of refugee children are particularly at risk:

- unaccompanied and separated girls, including those living in foster care, or with relatives
- child-headed households
- girls and boys in detention
- girls and boys associated with fighting forces

- mentally and physically disabled girls and boys
- working children
- girl mothers
- girls and boys born to rape victims/survivors

Refugee children, including adolescents, may face various forms of SGBV, such as harmful traditional practices, trafficking, child prostitution and sexual violence within the family or by strangers. Most cases involve female victims/survivors and male perpetrators. Fuel and water collection presents severe challenges as well as assistance shortages leading to child exploitation.

### ***UNHCR's Response***

#### *Prevention:*

*To prevent all forms of sexual violence within refugee communities, UNHCR and its partners run a variety of programmes to raise awareness on gender issues, human rights, reproductive health, and HIV and AIDS. It is imperative to involve both girls and boys, including adolescents, in such programmes.*

*Camp layouts are increasingly being planned in such a way that moving around is safe in all parts of the site. Involving boys and girls in the planning reduces the risk of sexual exploitation, abuse and violence towards children.*

*Improved access to assistance and education diminishes the risk to engage in sex for money or for favours.*

#### *Response:*

*Response mechanisms include health care, psycho-social support, measures to ensure the safety of the victims/survivors and legal redress.*

*Furthermore, UNHCR's revised Guidelines for Prevention and Response on Sexual and Gender Based Violence against Refugees, Returnees and Internally Displaced Persons (2003) includes a separate chapter on refugee children and forms the basis for a worldwide training programme to ensure that the Guidelines are implemented.*

*A Code of Conduct which, among other things, obliges appropriate behaviour by UNHCR staff towards children was issued in 2002. All UNHCR staff are required to sign the document.*

*At the inter-agency level, an Inter-Agency Standing Committee Task Force on Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse in Humanitarian Crises developed six core principles relating to standards of behaviour by humanitarian workers, which were introduced through new clauses in UNHCR's agreements with implementing partners.*

*UNHCR staff are also legally bound by the Secretary-General's Bulletin on Special Measures for Protection from Sexual Exploitation.*

*Lastly, UNHCR contributes to the UN Study on Violence against Children through participation at Regional Consultations and provision of information to the Secretariat of the Study on UNHCR's policies/guidelines and work in this area. A special project has been initiated by UNHCR's Senior Regional Adviser for Refugee Women and Children on "Refugee Children's Experiences and Perceptions of Sexual and Gender-Based Violence in Angola, South Africa, and Zambia" (returnee, urban, and camp areas) which was presented at the Regional Consultation for Eastern and Southern Africa and is based upon direct participation of children through focus-group data collection. Refugee/returnee children discussed the causes, forms, coping strategies and impacts of violence, as well as provided their suggestions for prevention and response.*

## **Priority Issue #3 Military Recruitment**

Refugee girls and boys are among those at highest risk of military recruitment. Most children associated with fighting forces are adolescents, but there are also examples of recruitment of children below 10 years of age.

A refugee child may be recruited compulsorily, forcibly or voluntarily by armed groups or forces. Both girls and boys participate in fighting as well as take on other duties as porters, cooks, cleaners, and messengers. Girls are at a higher risk of sexual abuse, forced marriage and pregnancy.

- Some boys and girls become child soldiers because they might feel safer if they have a gun to protect themselves and their families
- In some situations, the proximity of camps for refugees or internally displaced persons to conflict zones exposes adolescents to the risk of recruitment
- Unaccompanied and separated girls and boys are at particular risk

### ***UNHCR's Response***

*Joining armed groups or forces should not be an option to children in conflict zones. To address this issue, UNHCR, in close cooperation with UNICEF and other partners, promotes alternatives such as enrolment in*

*schools and training centres while seeking to ensure that such sites are protected from attack and (re-)recruitment.*

- *Demobilization, disarmament and reintegration (DDR) programmes for former combatants also include children associated with fighting forces. Both girls and boys who have been involved in any way with armed groups or forces should be included in DDR programmes, which also take into account the specific needs of girls. These children require special protection and psycho-social support until they are able and ready to be reunited with their families or reintegrated into their communities*
- *Providing adequate food rations and other assistance also reduces the vulnerability to recruitment of displaced and war-affected children*
- *Other measures include income-generating activities, family reunification, psycho-social services and recreational activities both for potential victims and for children who were associated with fighting forces*

*UNHCR continues to advocate against military recruitment of children in all circumstances and encourages States that have not yet done so to accede to the Optional Protocol to the CRC on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict.*

## **Priority Issue #4 Education**

Education is crucial for refugee girls and boys from the onset of an emergency, since:

- *Going to school brings stability and security back into the lives of children affected by armed conflict and displacement*
- *Education, by providing a potential “safe place”, may shield children from dangers such as child labour, military recruitment or sexual exploitation, abuse and violence, and may prevent teenage pregnancies and HIV infection while registration as a student also allows for follow-up and monitoring*
- *Education enables children to gain the social skills development of childhood and provides them with the hope of a better future*

Access to education is hampered by shortages in food and material assistance, including education materials, as well as by fuel and firewood collection.

### ***UNHCR's Response***

*The UN has formulated two Millennium Development Goals that apply to education: parity of girls and boys and universal primary education, which are also reflected in the Education for All (EFA) initiative. UNHCR is committed to achieving those goals.*

*UNHCR, in collaboration with governments and local and international agencies, provides education in areas of acute and chronic emergencies, as well as in the phases of post-conflict and repatriation. Education activities focus on strategies to increase girls' education and to ensure that refugee schools have the same standard as regular ones.*

*To achieve those goals UNHCR engages in a number of networks and partnerships with experienced organizations. In many parts of the world UNHCR supports:*

- *low-cost, innovative education projects that can be easily implemented, known as EQUIP (Education Quick Impact Projects)*
- *community initiatives that promote access to quality education*
- *teacher training in preparation for return*
- *activities to prevent early drop out of students, and in particular female students*
- *the promotion of gender equality*
- *the establishment of safe school environments free from SGBV, including sexual exploitation, and corporal punishment*

## **Priority Issue #5 Specific Concerns of Adolescents**

Sometimes it is not only dangerous for refugees in their own countries, they may also face mistreatment during their flight or upon arrival in the country of asylum. Military recruitment, forced labour, sexual exploitation, abuse and violence occur during the turmoil of armed conflict and displacement, and adolescents are invariably the principal targets.

School enrolment can keep adolescent girls and boys occupied and shield them from exploitative activities and abuse. Yet, adolescent refugees often cannot access education, either because they have economic and family responsibilities that prevent them from attending, or because there are no appropriate schooling possibilities for

their age group. Adolescent girls are often deprived of secondary education because of domestic chores and lack of family income.

As interventions tend to focus on younger children, adolescent girls and boys are often neglected in programming. Even though their responsibilities in the family and the community have increased, e.g. by heading households, their views are not sought or taken into account and their capacities to provide solutions overlooked.

### ***UNHCR's Response***

*UNHCR supports a number of activities to ensure the protection and care of adolescent girls and boys, such as:*

- *non-formal education*
- *vocational skills training and income-generating activities*
- *the formation of youth groups and recreational activities*
- *participation in decision-making processes*
- *(peer) education on life skills such as HIV and AIDS prevention and reproductive health*

*Research studies among adolescents initiated by the Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children and designed and led by adolescent research teams in war-affected areas (Kosovo (Serbia and Montenegro), Uganda, and Sierra Leone) produced findings that are helping UNHCR and others to tailor their programmes to work towards realizing the rights of adolescent refugee girls and boys.*

For more information, please visit the UNHCR website, [www.unhcr.org](http://www.unhcr.org), or contact the Refugee Children Unit, Community Development, Education, Gender Equality and Children Section (CDEGECS), Division of Operational Support (DOS), UNHCR Geneva, Case Postale 2500, CH-1211 Geneva 2 Depôt, Switzerland or UNHCR's Senior Regional Advisors for Refugee Women and Children based at UNHCR Offices in Pretoria, South Africa for Southern Africa; in Nairobi, Kenya for the East and Horn of Africa and the Great Lakes; in Accra, Ghana for West Africa; and at UNHCR Headquarters in Geneva for Europe.

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<sup>i</sup> While the words 'refugee children/girls and boys' are used throughout the document, this includes all girls and boys of concern to UNHCR, including internally displaced, returnee, stateless and refugee children.

<sup>ii</sup> Article 1 – Convention on the Rights of the Child.

<sup>iii</sup> "ProGres" also introduces the category of 'child/adolescents at risk' with a further breakdown into child associated with fighting forces, child in conflict with the law, child-headed household, child with special education needs, and child at risk of not attending school. The category of 'women at risk' includes threat of female genital mutilation.

Front page:

Photo on left Angola/IDPs/Cazombo camp/UNHCR/  
N. Behring/ February 2003

Photo on right Iran/Afghan refugees/UNHCR/  
Z.Soleimani/ September 2004