

A Call to Better Protect Women and Girls: Visibility, Dignity and Livelihoods

Working with Displaced Women and Girls: A Precondition for Peace, Security and Development

More than 60 years ago, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights proclaimed that “all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and in rights without distinction of any kind.” Today, women and girls continue to face obstacles in claiming and enjoying their rights on an equal basis with men and boys. Displacement often exacerbates these inequalities. In the last three decades UNHCR has led the way to ensure further elaboration of international and legal standards aimed at promoting and protecting the rights of displaced, refugee and asylum-seeker women and girls. These standards are expressed in treaties, resolutions, declarations and most importantly, actions – all of which are underpinned by the recognition that women’s and girls’ rights are human rights and that gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls are essential preconditions for development, peace and security for everyone.

By enjoying their rights on an equal basis, women and girls gain a sense of empowerment that leads to benefits for their own well-being and for the families and societies in which they live. Women who are literate tend to marry later and have fewer, healthier, better-nourished children.¹ Education opens doors to employment, allowing women to contribute to the family income and the broader wealth of communities. Economic empowerment initiatives demonstrate that women are more likely to invest in public goods and to reinvest a higher portion of their income into their families than their male counterparts.² When women and girls are able to influence community development, both the social and economic well-being of the community improve, especially with regard to the provision of basic services such as water, health facilities and schools. Likewise, women’s participation in law enforcement and peacebuilding has proven to be an effective tool for reconciliation and post-conflict reconstruction. It improves physical safety and also provides community members with a greater overall sense of security. In Liberia, for instance, violent crimes against women decreased dramatically after an all-female peace brigade was invited to train the national police. At the same time, female enrolment in the national police force tripled.³

“The benefits are undeniable, educated women contribute positively to every aspect of society”

Meredith Knezek,
Carnegie Mellon
University,
Pittsburgh, 1995.

“Investing in Girls is the right thing to do. It is also the smart thing to do.”

Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, Managing
Director, World
Bank.

¹ UN Chronicle, ‘Closing the Gender Gap,’ *UN Chronicle*, March 1990, pp.56-57.

² World Bank (2001) *World Development Report: Engendering Development: Through Gender Equality in Rights, Resources and Voice*. New York: World Bank and Oxford University Press., available at: <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTGENDER/Publications/20169280/gendermdg.pdf>.

³ See, for example: <http://www.unmultimedia.org/tv/unifeed/d/12412.html>.

*UNHCR, Women and Girls:
More than Just a Commitment*

Since 1985, when UNHCR's Executive Committee first adopted Conclusion 39 on Refugee Women and International Protection, UNHCR has made the protection of women and girls of concern a core activity and an organizational priority.

In order to guide the organization, UNHCR issued a Policy on Refugee Women in 1990 and Guidelines to accompany it in 1991. Throughout the 1990s, UNHCR supported programmes that enabled women and girls to play pivotal roles in post-conflict reconstruction under the rubric of a series of "Women's Initiatives" in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Rwanda and Kosovo. These activities were aimed at integrating women into socio-economic reconstruction and livelihood processes. They also laid the ground for UNHCR's engagement with, and promotion of, women and girls' participation in local governance structures and community-conflict resolution in post-conflict contexts. Further, these initiatives demonstrated the integral role that livelihood schemes play in women's and girls' empowerment. Building on this, UNHCR launched the Women Leading for Livelihoods (WLL) programme in 2008 to encourage women business leaders to donate and invest in economic self-reliance activities for refugee and displaced women and girls. WLL has shown that access to livelihoods empowers women and allows them to have a stronger voice in their communities, including in peacebuilding activities.⁴

In 2001, following consultations with more than 500 refugee women, the High Commissioner declared "Five Commitments to Refugee Women", which established focus areas for UNHCR's work with refugee women and girls. Under these Five Commitments, UNHCR committed to:

- encourage the active participation of women in all refugee committees in urban, rural and camp settings and in return areas (with the goal of 50% representation of women);
- register all refugee women and men individually (thereby ensuring that both men and women are provided with the necessary documentation so each refugee can enjoy security, freedom of movement and access to essential services individually);
- develop integrated strategies to combat Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV) in each country;
- ensure that refugee women participate in the management and distribution of food and non-food items; and
- provide sanitary materials to all women and girls of concern.

UNHCR's Agenda for Protection of 2003 dedicates its sixth Goal to meeting the protection needs of refugee women and children by integrating targeted actions for women and girls into UNHCR activities and by actively promoting gender equality. UNHCR also introduced the Age, Gender and Diversity Mainstreaming (AGDM) strategy in 2004 to better structure the participation of persons of concern into the protection work of the organization. By adopting an AGDM approach, UNHCR aims to ensure gender equality and the enjoyment of rights by all persons of concern while,

⁴ "UNHCR calls on women leaders to empower female refugees", UNHCR, 12 December 2007, available at: <http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/news/opedoc.htm?tbl=NEWS&id=47600b962>.

at the same time, leveraging the rich range of capacities that exist within communities to bring about positive social change.

In 2006, UNHCR's Executive Committee adopted Conclusion 105 on Women and Girls at Risk, which aims to improve the identification of women and girls who face specific risks due to gender inequalities. Specific measures are built into the Conclusion to improve individual case management practices and to identify comprehensive heightened-risk-prevention strategies.

In 2010, UNHCR issued a Strategy Note to Reduce Statelessness, which advocates, in line with the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), for women to have the same rights as men with respect to conferral of nationality on their children.

Aside from these legal and policy developments, UNHCR has also produced the Guidelines for Prevention and Response to Sexual and Gender-Based Violence against Refugees, Returnees and Internally Displaced Persons (2003), the Handbook for the Protection of Women and Girls (2008), a UNHCR Film Series for the Protection of Women and Girls and a Companion Guide to the Film Series (2010). All of these toolkits aim to improve protection programmes and increase awareness of the importance of refugee and displaced women's and girls' rights amongst practitioners, scholars, partner agencies and persons of concern.

How much does protection cost?

UNHCR estimates suggest that the total investment needed to provide each woman or girl of concern living in a refugee camp with the minimum standard of access to sanitary materials, primary education, basic health care and shelter as well as first response to, and community based prevention of, SGBV is USD200 per annum. It takes little to make a big difference in women's and girls' lives.

Recent Activities

Women's Participation in Refugee Committees and Decision Making and in the Management and Distribution of Food Items

UNHCR reports show that 37-41% of participants in camp governance committees are women. Between 2006 and 2009, the percentage of camps with more than 40% female representation rose from 56 to 65%. Although this data indicates an upward trend, more efforts are needed to ensure that 50% of participants in camp, rural and urban committees are women. Measuring the degree of "active" female participation has also proven to be a challenge. Participatory assessments performed by UNHCR Multifunctional Teams in the field suggest that greater consideration needs to be given to the family and child-care demands faced by women. If the

“[It is] time for women to speak out for themselves and to be listened to and to prove that they can do anything and everything”

Kate Ofwono, 23 year old Ugandan refugee and film-maker.

“All UNHCR Offices will encourage the active participation of women in all management and leadership committees of refugees in urban, rural and camp settings, including return areas.”

First of UNHCR's 5 Commitments to Refugee Women, 2001.

immediate needs of women are left unaddressed in programming, women are less likely to be able to contribute meaningfully to decision making in the long-term. In addition to providing child-care and women-friendly timeslots for community meetings, several UNHCR Offices are engaged in leadership and functional literacy training sessions for women, in order to provide them with the skills needed to fulfill leadership responsibilities.

A recent revision of the Memorandum of Understanding between UNHCR and the World Food Programme (WFP) emphasized the important role of women in food management and distribution. In order to facilitate this role, WFP and UNHCR agreed to provide child-care on food collection days and to sensitize men and the wider community to the importance of female representation in food management. Particular attention will be given to field operations where the role of women has been questioned or challenged.

Individual Documentation and Registration for Women

Women and girls often face higher social and legal obstacles to obtaining individual documentation than men and boys. Without such documentation, women are unable to access services or to prove their identity. Women without documentation are, for all intents and purposes, invisible. They may face detention, exploitation and/or obstacles when applying for family reunification. They may remain in abusive relationships out of fear of losing access to assistance afforded by the documents of a partner or spouse. Lack of documentation goes to the heart of UNHCR's protection concerns, and UNHCR is working with governments to ensure that national laws ensure women and children are provided with all necessary documentation, including birth registration. In 2008, 32% of reporting camps met the standard of full documentation while, in urban areas, 65% met the same standard.

Registration with UNHCR often affords displaced persons protection and access to food, water, health, shelter and sanitation that their precarious legal situation might not otherwise allow. By 2008, UNHCR achieved gender parity in individual registrations in 78% of camp operations. However, individual registration in urban contexts remains a challenge, as the data is often limited to capital cities and to those people of concern who already have contact with relevant UNHCR Offices.

Women have also found themselves in a disadvantaged or dependent position under nationality laws. In some States, women cannot confer citizenship on their children, risk loss or renunciation of nationality upon marrying foreign nationals (even where they are not eligible to gain the nationality of their husbands) and are dependent on a spouse for their own citizenship. This places women in a legal limbo. In the last three years, UNHCR has advocated for States to reform their nationality laws in order to reflect international standards of equality.

Combating Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV)

UNHCR is currently revising its SGBV Strategy in order to improve upon good practices, particularly those in the area of SGBV prevention (more on page 7). Testimonies of women collected during participatory assessments and focus groups are a reminder that SGBV is a recurring phenomenon throughout the displacement cycle, although not always detected.

In 2005, 62% of reported SGBV survivors in camps received psychosocial and medical support. The percentage rose to 85% in 2007, plateauing at an average of 97% across 2008 and 2009. In 2009, UNHCR began systematizing its SGBV strategy and developed Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) in countries where they did not yet exist. UNHCR also improved access to clinical services for SGBV survivors. By 2009, 92% of reporting camps had updated SOPs or functioning SOPs in place. Of the 83 reporting operations in urban areas for the same year, the SOP coordination success rate was 72% with many Offices reporting that the SOPs were successful in that they served as an efficient referral system combining health, legal, and psychosocial support and facilitating access to information and services for survivors.

Workshops targeting male involvement in SGBV prevention programmes were delivered to adolescent boys and girls in a number of country operations in Africa and Asia in 2008 and in 2009. UNHCR staff in Nepal also conducted a roundtable discussion with High Court judges, lawyers, police, hospital staff, government attorneys and NGOs to address the issue of justice for survivors of SGBV among Bhutanese refugees. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the economic empowerment of women victims of domestic violence has shown that even a small amount of support can significantly improve the psychological well-being of women and families.

Sanitary Materials

The provision of sanitary materials is essential to women's dignity. Social taboos attached to menstruation often deter women from leaving the house if they lack access to sanitary materials. Girls risk missing one quarter of their school year due to a lack of sanitary materials. A survey on the provision of sanitary materials in UNHCR operations conducted in 2010 demonstrates that only 21.3% had reached the UNHCR's "100% of needs met" standard. Reporting shows that annual expenditure on sanitary items still falls short of needs.

The Africa Bureau's decision to make sanitary materials a "non-negotiable" requisite in all operations and programming in 2011 is a huge achievement to protect an area of work that is too often cut from budgets.

Women's Livelihoods

UNHCR is committed to providing women-targeted livelihood programmes both through the Women Leading for Livelihoods⁵ initiative and other livelihood strategies, in partnership with different organizations. One positive example of a livelihood project for women and girls is the MakaPads venture – a micro-business based in Uganda that employs refugees to produce cheap, environmentally-friendly disposable sanitary pads made from local reeds. Another successful programme is Lulu Works Soap and Lotion Production based in Uganda. The project leader of Lulu Works, upon her return to Sudan, applied skills and business expertise she

“UNHCR needs to take action both in the here and now but also with regard to the long-term protection and livelihoods of women”

Selay Ghaffar, former refugee and Director of HAWCA Assistance for the Women and Children of Afghanistan

⁵ The Women Leading for Livelihoods website, is available at: <http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49c3646c1dc.html>.

acquired while living in a camp in Uganda to organize a small group of local women to produce goods and to create sustainable livelihoods by selling the products to local markets and for export to Kenya.

Objectives: Where We Are Going in 2011

+ Improving Protection of Women and Girls - Why Data Matters

UNHCR has a long-standing history of engagement in projects for and with women. Livelihood programmes, education and community participation initiatives geared towards women and girls have now become standard in many of UNHCR's operations. Nevertheless, challenges remain in understanding, measuring and reporting the experiences of refugee, stateless and displaced women in a systematic manner. Without concrete data on women and girls, it is difficult to devise effective actions to meet their specific needs. Systematic data collection, especially of sex-disaggregated data, is a UNHCR priority for improving women's and girls' protection.⁶

UNHCR has identified nine "core areas" related to women and girls lives, and is currently seeking to improve reporting and data collection in these areas. The nine areas are: (1) Women's participation in decision making that affects their lives; (2) individual documentation and registration; (3) prevention and response to Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV); (4) distribution of sanitary materials; (5) education; (6) shelter; (7) economic self-reliance; (8) health; and (9) access to legal remedies.

+ Women's Participation in 2011 Events in Geneva

Within the framework of the 60th anniversary of the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 50th anniversary of the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness, several women of concern will participate in a series of upcoming regional dialogues. A representation of women from these dialogues will be invited to Geneva in 2011 to present their recommendations and contribute their opinions and feedback to events including:

- the Standing Committee meeting in June 2011;
- the NGO consultations in June/July 2011;
- the meeting of UNHCR's Executive Committee in October 2011; and
- the High-Level Ministerial Meeting in December 2011.

+ Collecting Field Practice: Working with Partners

An additional outcome of the regional dialogues with women and girls will be the collection of field practices from at least seven countries. With the practices collected during the project, UNHCR plans to launch and host an online activity-sharing space. The space will integrate field practices on livelihoods, women's empowerment, SGBV prevention and other areas of concern to women and girls. Sharing practices with other UN agencies, as well as implementing partners, governments, NGOs and women's organizations will provide positive, replicable examples of empowerment practices that have a positive impact on women's and girls' lives, and on entire communities.

⁶ This objective is set out in Executive Committee Conclusions 39 (i); 60 (h); 64, para 7 and in the Age, Gender and Diversity Mainstreaming Accountability Framework, sections A4 and D2 of the Country Representative reporting card.

✚ Protecting Livelihoods: An Integrated Strategy

Economic self-reliance, documentation, enjoyment of education and/or vocational training, access to safe spaces and freedom of movement are core components of women's livelihood. This holistic approach underpins UNHCR's livelihoods programme, which will be cultivated in 2011 in order to encourage the economic independence of refugee, stateless, asylum-seeker and internally displaced women worldwide. With more funding and staff resources, the livelihoods programme will help UNHCR identify and provide opportunities that promote women's economic independence. The implementation of new and innovative strategies must be responsive to women's own capacities and economic needs. This is especially true for livelihood projects that target women and girls with disabilities and older women.

✚ SGBV Strategy and Implementation Plan

UNHCR will release its new SGBV strategy and e-learning tool in the coming months. This strategy seeks to further institutionalize SGBV as a core protection concern for UNHCR through enhanced focus, leadership and accountability. The strategy sets forth a number of programmatic areas of focus, which include: engaging men and boys in the prevention of SGBV; addressing survival sex; ensuring safe access to firewood, providing water and sanitation and alternative fuels; focusing on displaced women and girls in urban areas; targeting SGBV against persons of concern with disabilities; targeting SGBV against Lesbian, Gay, Transgender, Bisexual and Intersex persons (LGBTI) of concern as well as SGBV against children of concern.

✚ Working with Men and Boys

More work is needed to involve men and boys in promoting and respecting women's and girls' rights. One priority area for UNHCR is to build awareness among men and boys about the socially constructed nature of gender relations and harmful cultural practices, including early marriage. Work with men is integral to mapping women's protection space, and men who are vocal and active in their belief that discrimination against women leads to the abrogation of everyone's social and political rights need to be supported and made visible.

✚ Five Films – Five Commitments

As 2011 marks the passing of a decade since the High Commissioner's Five Commitments to Refugee Women, UNHCR in partnership with FilmAid International will make available five three-minute film clips. Each film will be dedicated to one of the High Commissioner's Five Commitments. They will be shot in Kakuma Refugee Camp in Kenya. All of the films aim to reflect the realities faced by refugee and displaced women and girls, as well as their communities, on these specific issues. At the same time, creative visual and narrative approaches will be used to ensure that the films are engaging and stimulate productive dialogue.

“I had a fantastic day today... We did participatory assessments with mothers identifying areas of concern to them, and especially using their knowledge to build better protection mechanisms for boys and girls. They were great: forthcoming, creative, honest, thoughtful and unified in reaching very helpful conclusions”

UNHCR staff member, Nepal, 2008.