

Protectors, Providers, Survivors

# A Dialogue with Refugee Women In Finland



October 2011



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United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees,  
Brussels, Belgium



Centre for Refugee Research,  
University of New South Wales, Australia



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**Photo:** Eileen Pittaway  
Original drawings from the refugee women at the Dialogue

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The authors would like to thank all the refugee women who participated in the Regional Dialogue in Finland. It is their voices that present the issues and suggestions for change in this report. All unsourced quotations in this report are statements made by the refugee women themselves at the Dialogue.

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Daniel Endres  
 Director of the Bureau  
 for Europe of UNHCR

Policy development and planning for refugees must be done first and foremost with refugees, by listening to their needs and concerns, and building all protection and assistance activities around them.

UNHCR's Bureau for Europe is grateful to the Government of Finland and civil society to have made this Dialogue possible, and engaged in full trust and confidence in this process. This Dialogue and the methodology that underpins it have led to a dynamic engagement with refugee women on issues of local concern, including highly sensitive topics such as sexual and gender based violence. The presentation to Government, civil society and UNHCR at the end of the Dialogue in Helsinki, and the media coverage it received, as well as the presentation to the UNHCR Standing Committee in June 2011 by some of the women who had taken part in the process, proved empowering for the refugee women involved. This publication pays tribute to these women and their voices while providing a unique insight into the experiences of asylum-seekers and refugees in Finland, and their recommendations for change.

UNHCR is committed to addressing discrimination and inequality to ensure equal enjoyment of rights by all persons of concern. The Age, Gender and Diversity Mainstreaming (AGDM) Strategy was launched in 2004 to this effect. AGDM calls for targeted actions to address identified protection gaps, and empower those who are discriminated against. Built into the AGDM Strategy is the necessary leveraging from the rich range of capacities that exist within communities to bring about positive change. The AGDM Strategy also supports the meaningful participation of women, girls, men, and boys of all ages and backgrounds, using a participatory, rights and community-based approach, in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of refugee policies, programmes, and activities.

This Strategy has been fully embraced by UNHCR's Bureau for Europe. In Germany, for example, the UNHCR office in Nuremberg set up meetings between the Federal Working Group of Refugee Women organized by the NGO Diakonisches Werk der EKD, including social work experts of refugee background, and the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF), to allow asylum policy experts to hear about these women's experiences in their countries of origin, including the position of girls and women, the availability (or lack) of police protection, and the reality of seeking to live independently of family structures. This engagement was a useful tool to raise awareness and understanding of how gender-related forms of persecution can fall within the refugee definition.

To cite another example, since 2005 UNHCR's Regional Representation for Central Europe has cooperated with government institutions and NGOs to conduct annual participatory assessments of the situation of refugees in Central Europe. This exercise identifies needs, gaps and best practices by speaking to adults and children of all ages and ethnic backgrounds in separate focus groups.

With this publication, the UNHCR Bureau for Europe seeks to provide yet another model for government and civil society engagement with refugees. The human rights based methodology, and the matrix and storyboarding techniques afford powerful tools to hear, document and analyse the voices of refugee women, and receive their recommendations for improvement. UNHCR now looks forward to the process of consultation and cooperation across the relevant agencies involved in asylum and refugee policies and programmes to take this report forward, and stands ready to support this process.

## Executive Summary

**“We would like to thank the Finnish Government for receiving us, providing us safety, housing, education, the possibility to work and give us a place to call home. Without you we would still be living in camps as refugees or fearing persecution back home.”**

This report presents the voices and experiences of the 28 women who participated in the seventh and final UNHCR’s Regional Dialogue with Women and Girls in Helsinki, Finland, in May 2011, as part of the commemoration of the 60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the 1951 Refugee Convention. During the Dialogue, refugee and asylum-seeking women from 12 communities worked together for four days. The culmination of this work was a presentation to representatives of the Government of Finland, UNHCR staff, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society, who work to support asylum-seekers and refugees across Finland.

Refugee women participated in human rights training and situational analysis, and identified the key problems and issues faced by their communities. These focused on ten global core protection areas proposed by the UNHCR Gender Unit. The appropriateness of these protection areas was tested in the Regional Dialogues in India, Colombia, Jordan, Uganda, Zambia and Thailand. The core protection issues were further adjusted to the context of refugee women in Finland, i.e. that of an industrialized country with a mature refugee system, and once again, they were found to be an accurate and effective vehicle for assessing and identifying the fundamental protection needs of refugee women and girls. While both pre- and post-arrival experiences were discussed by the women, the main focus of the consultation, and of this report, was on their experiences seeking asylum and settling in Finland.



Global core protection issues	Core protection issues for the Dialogue in Finland
Individual documentation	Individual documentation
Women's representation in leadership	Women in leadership positions
Sexual and gender-based violence	Sexual and gender-based violence
Shelter	Housing
Sanitary Materials	Reception conditions
Health issues	Health issues
Legal remedies	Access to justice
Education	Education
Economic self-reliance	Economic self-reliance
General violence	Racism and xenophobia

The methodology and participatory approach employed in the Dialogues was developed by the University of New South Wales Centre for Refugee Research (CRR), Australia, in collaboration with many refugee communities across the world, who have expressed their frustration at the number of times they are interviewed by service providers and academics, and how little benefit they see from their input into such research.

In Helsinki, refugee women participated over two days in a number of group-based activities, in which they identified, discussed and analysed the protection issues they are experiencing in Finland and the impact of these problems on women as individuals, family and community members. This included the use of storyboards and artwork to illustrate areas of concern. Participants also discussed and identified several programmes provided by the Government of Finland and the non-government sector that assisted them most effectively. The final activity was to identify structural and community-based solutions to problems in order to address protection gaps.

Women in Finland welcomed this opportunity to talk about their experiences, develop community solutions, and suggest changes to further improve existing services and structures. This report attempts to honour the commitment given by UNHCR and the CRR to provide a broad audience for their voices. As far as possible the findings have been presented in the words of the refugee participants. While all participants in this project have given permission for these to be used, many did not want to be identified. Care has been taken to maintain their anonymity.

This was the only Dialogue held in an industrialized country in a series of seven engagements with refugee women and girls in the framework of the commemoration process. In this

Dialogue, women shared their remarkable tales of survival before reaching a safe haven, as well as their experiences and difficulties as asylum-seekers and refugees in Finland. They all expressed a high level of satisfaction with their lives in Finland, and their deep gratitude to the Government of Finland for being a generous host to asylum-seekers and refugees, and for providing a place of refuge.

The Dialogues also revealed some issues of concern, several of which appear critical to successful integration.

- The key role of language acquisition, and the reality of how difficult this can be, were discussed at length. Participants noted the additional difficulties faced by refugees with low levels of literacy in their own language, and women at home.
- The need for refugees to find employment as soon as possible was another critical issue, which impacts on the ability to earn an income, and access good accommodation, all seen as essential to a decent life. Importantly, refugee women stressed the role employment plays in building self-esteem, especially for men who are the traditional heads of households, and underlined its impact on domestic violence. Women also noted the feeling of contribution to society that employment confers, which is an important aspect of integration.
- Racism, xenophobia and fear of the negative attitudes displayed by some sections of Finnish society towards refugees were also discussed at length. While participants were very keen to point out that the majority of Finnish people were not racist and that many were very welcoming, participants agreed that racist behaviour had an effect on them and their children.
- Domestic violence was identified as a major problem in all communities. The women suggested that the changed gender roles and the perceived loss of status of men, who could no longer play their traditional role as heads of households, was a major contributor to increased violence in the family. The women also noted that the levels of violence were higher in exile than before they became refugees.
- The length of the asylum procedure was also identified as an issue as well as the isolated location of some of the reception centres, which limits access to employment and education.
- The lack of access to services and counselling for refugees, who have experienced torture and trauma, including sexual violence, was also noted as a matter of concern.

The women recommended that policies and services address these issues. They also stressed the importance of supporting family reunification as key to healing and successful integration, and felt that this should be reflected in immigration policy and practice. Conditions in reception centres for asylum-seekers were also discussed, and recommendations made about ways in which these could be improved.

Participants stressed that these issues are interconnected, that changes in policies and practice are needed to support a fair and faster asylum procedure, and that a closely linked model of service provision is required to enable successful and effective integration. Refugee women noted that the integration process is two-way, and that refugees have to take advantage of the services and opportunities available, and use the capacity, skills and knowledge which enabled them to survive the refugee experience, in order to succeed in Finland. The recommendations they made are to assist individual refugees and families integrate quickly and more effectively, which will allow them to use the personal resources they bring in order to contribute to their new homeland.



The most powerful message the refugee women wanted to pass on was the need for asylum and immigration officials, service providers, and members of the community to understand their pre-arrival experiences of flight, loss and trauma, and the survival of conflict, torture, and sexual abuse which are part of the experience of many refugee women. They discussed the impact of these on their experience of the lengthy asylum procedure, their experience of waiting for a decision to be made on their asylum claims, their ability to build new lives, learn a new language, familiarize themselves with a new social system, and have confidence in a new future. They also discussed the impact on families of parents struggling to overcome trauma, and of disrupted schooling on their children. Their strongest message was that service provision aimed at assisting refugee integration has to be grounded in a deep understanding of the impact of these experiences on their lives. Many of the women commented that racist and xenophobic behaviour and language served to keep the horror of these experiences alive.

Refugee women also expressed the desire to continue working closely with local service providers in both Government and non-government organizations. A key theme throughout all the recommendations was the capacity and capabilities many refugees have to address problems themselves if allowed access to resources and information. They did not want to be a burden, nor have to rely on charity, and hoped to contribute meaningfully to Finnish society. They consistently recommended that they be involved in solution identification and implementation, and that their previous expertise and knowledge be utilized to assist their own communities. They expressed pride in their Finnish identity, and a strong desire to integrate successfully into their new home, while also maintaining pride in their own cultural backgrounds.

The solutions put forward by refugee women strive to address the issues identified in the Dialogue, and provide insightful and achievable approaches to further enhance the success of Finland's asylum and refugee policies and programmes.

## What Are the Dialogues?

In preparation for the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the 1951 United Nations Convention relating to the Status of Refugees ten years ago, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) held consultations with over 500 refugee and displaced women, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and governments from around the world. These culminated in the “Dialogue with Refugee and Displaced Women” held in Geneva in June 2001. The key concerns shared by refugee and displaced women during these consultations related to registration, individual documentation, increasing women’s participation in peace-building, decision-making and food distribution, physical safety and security and opportunities for skills development and income generation.<sup>1</sup>

In response to these consultations, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and UNHCR Senior Management committed to taking action in five key areas:

- to encourage the active participation of women and leadership in refugee committees;
- to register all women and men individually;
- to develop integrated country-level strategies to respond to sexual and gender based violence (SGBV);
- to ensure women’s participation in the distribution of food and non-food items;
- to provide sanitary materials to all women and girls of concern.

These constituted the High Commissioner’s Five Commitments to Refugee Women.

Since these Five Commitments, UNHCR has consistently reaffirmed the high priority it is putting on protection of women and girls, which has been demonstrated by the adoption of the Age, Gender and Diversity Mainstreaming (AGDM) Strategy in 2004 and the Executive Committee Conclusion 105 on Women and Girls at Risk in 2006.<sup>2</sup> The protection of women and girls is also reflected in UNHCR’s Global Strategic Priorities for 2010-2011.

Ten years on from the 2001 Dialogue with Refugee and Displaced Women, and in the spirit of bringing refugee women’s and girls’ voices to the centre of international events, UNHCR, along with the Centre for Refugee Research (CRR) at the University of New South Wales, Australia, launched the *Protectors, Providers, Survivors: Regional Dialogues with Women and Girls* project.

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<sup>1</sup> UNHCR, *Respect Our Rights: Partnership for Equality. Report on the Dialogue with Refugee Women, Geneva, Switzerland 20-22 June 2001*. Written by Erin K. Baines, PhD. Prepared and assembled by the Senior Co-ordinator for Refugee Women and Gender Equality Unit, December 2001, available at: <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4649d5d72.html>. Local and regional consultations took place in over 30 locations (including Canada), and involved approximately 500 participants.

<sup>2</sup> UNHCR, Executive Committee, *Conclusion on Women and Girls at Risk*, 56th session, 6 October 2006, No. 105 (LVII) - 2006, available at: <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/45339d922.html>.

This project is anchored in UNHCR's AGDM approach,<sup>3</sup> which seeks to ensure that all persons of concern enjoy their rights on an equal footing and are able to participate fully in the decisions that affect their lives and the lives of their family members and communities. AGDM is a human-rights and community-based approach. To mainstream AGDM means to plan, programme, implement, monitor and evaluate operations, keeping in mind equality and full participation as guiding principles.

UNHCR is also committed to advocating for the implementation of an AGDM approach by other intergovernmental, governmental and non-governmental entities working with refugees, stateless and displaced persons. These Dialogues with refugee women organized in cooperation with Government authorities and NGOs are an example of how engagement with refugees is not only possible and realistic, but also extremely useful to identify protection gaps and address these.

The Dialogue series has taken place in locations in Southern and Eastern Africa, the Americas, South Asia, and Europe. Asylum-seeking, refugee, internally displaced (IDP) and stateless women and girls were consulted on their protection needs and suggestions for improvement at each location through a five-day human rights training and situational analysis workshop. The Dialogues start with human rights training, and provide the participants with an opportunity to discuss issues with UNHCR staff, Government officials and NGOs. They also provide women and girls with a platform from which to share their stories, grief, joys, problems, strengths, and most importantly, their solutions to their own protection concerns. Refugee men and boys also contributed their views on the protection of women and girls as part of the Dialogues.

A central component of the 2010-2011 Dialogues is the planning of solutions that address the protection concerns of women and girls, as identified by women and girls themselves in each location. On the fifth day of the Dialogue, staff from the local UNHCR office, Government officials, local authorities, and NGOs were invited to a Community Presentation Day. At this event, refugee and internally displaced women and girls discussed their protection concerns and their suggestions for structural and community-based solutions to some of these protection risks.

The broad geographical reach of this project and the length of each Dialogue provided the opportunity to hear the voices of refugee women and girls from around the globe. Their voices will inform new and improved protection-based solutions put forward by women and girls in each location. In June 2011, a small number of refugee and IDP women who had participated in the Dialogues travelled to Geneva to present their recommendations to States in a presentation to UNHCR's Standing Committee. This presentation was designed to assist Governments to formulate pledges relating to improving the legal, social and physical protection of refugee women and girls, which they may wish to present at the Ministerial meeting convened by UNHCR in December 2011.

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<sup>3</sup> UNHCR, *Age, Gender and Diversity Policy*, 8 June 2011, available at: <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4def34f6887.html>.

# Asylum-Seekers & Refugees in Finland

## Statistics

The population in Finland is approximately 5,375,000 people, including about 250,000 persons born abroad, of whom 65% are Europeans, 20% come from Asia, and 9% from Africa. About 168,000 (3%) do not have Finnish citizenship. In the past few years, population increase has been driven by migration rather than natural growth.

## Legislative and Operational Framework

Immigration to Finland is well regulated, as in most European countries. The legal system is quite similar to that of other Nordic countries. The 2004 Aliens Act is a wide-ranging piece of legislation, which regulates residence, asylum procedures, the right to work and study, responsible authorities etc. Finland also has a Nationality Act (amended in 2009) and a new integration law, which came into force on 1 September 2011. The Act on the reception of asylum-seekers has been amended, and entered into force on 1 September 2011.

The public sector has the main responsibility of financing and handling matters related to asylum-seekers and refugees. Several ministries are connected to immigration issues: the Ministries of the Interior, Foreign Affairs, Employment and Economy, Education, and Justice. Several entities under these Ministries, such as the Finnish Immigration Service, Border Guards, and the Police, work on these issues.

Municipalities are responsible for developing, planning and monitoring the integration of immigrants, including refugees. They implement measures and organize services promoting and supporting integration. The state funds the municipalities for the reception of resettled refugees and of those who are granted a residence permit after seeking asylum in Finland.

The Ministry of the Interior also supervises centres for Economic Development, Transport and the Environment. These centres are state authorities at the regional level that manage the regional implementation and development tasks of the state administration. There are 15 such centres in total. They promote regional competitiveness, well-being and sustainable development. These centres also coordinate immigration and integration matters in the municipalities, and guide the local Employment and Economic Development Offices in providing immigrants and refugees, who have registered as jobseekers, with labour market services to promote and support their integration.

## Resettlement

Finland has had an established resettlement programme since the early 1980s. Within its resettled refugee quota, Finland agrees to accept refugees for resettlement. The refugee quota is confirmed in the state budget every year, and since 2001 it sits at 750 refugees per year.

Most resettled refugees in 2007-09 were from the Democratic Republic of Congo, Myanmar and Iraq, and had been staying in Rwanda, Syria, and Thailand. In 2006-07 many were also resettled out of Turkey.

In 2011, the quota comprises 300 Afghans from Iran, 200 Myanmarese from Thailand, 150 Congolese from Rwanda, and 100 emergency cases.

## Asylum

Asylum-seekers started to come to Finland in the beginning of the 1990s. The number of asylum-seekers in Finland was very modest during the early years. Since 2005, the annual number of asylum-seekers has varied between 1,600 and 6,000. 2009 registered the highest number of applicants, when close to 6,000 applications were submitted.

In 2010, just over 4,000 people applied for asylum in Finland. They came mainly from Somalia, Iraq, Bulgaria and the Russian Federation. In 2010, 30% of all asylum applicants in Finland were women (27% in 2009). In 2009 and 2010, most female asylum-seekers came from Somalia and Bulgaria. In 2010, about 330 unaccompanied minors sought asylum. They came mainly from Somalia, Iraq and Afghanistan. 28% of these were girls.

In 2010, 33% of female asylum applicants were given a positive decision against 30% of male applicants. Of the unaccompanied minors in 2010, girls were given a positive decision in 87% of the cases, and boys in 76 % of the cases.

Of the total number of new immigrants in 2010, about 16% came to Finland as refugees or asylum-seekers and the rest for other reasons. During the same year, the number of residence permit applications made on other grounds was just over 24,500, 44% of which were based on family links, 22% on study and 18% on work. Most applicants for protection status came from the Russian Federation and Somalia.

## Residence Permits for Asylum-Seekers

Most asylum-seekers do not receive refugee status under the 1951 Refuge Convention but they might be entitled to a residence permit on other grounds. Subsidiary protection is granted if the person is not entitled to refugee status but there are substantial grounds to believe that the person, if returned to his or her country of origin or country of former habitual residence, would face a real risk of being subjected to serious harm such as death penalty, execution, torture or other inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment (Art. 88(1) Aliens Act 301/2004).

Humanitarian protection is granted if the person is not entitled to refugee status or subsidiary protection but cannot return to his or her country of origin or country of former habitual residence as a result of an environmental catastrophe or a dangerous security situation which may be due to an international or internal armed conflict or a poor human rights situation (Art. 88a(1) Aliens Act).

As a result, 30% of approximately 6,000 decisions made on asylum applications in 2010 were positive, meaning that applicants were granted a residence permit. Only 3% of all applicants were given a residence permit based on 1951 Convention status, the rest was on other grounds. 59% of the applicants received a negative decision.

As processing times for asylum applications can be long (approximately one year), the applicant may start studying, find work under specific conditions, or get married while waiting. If it turns out that the applicant is not entitled to Convention status or subsidiary or humanitarian protection, he/she may, however, be granted a residence permit based on study, work or family links if the conditions for such permit are fulfilled. Finland has a single procedure for assessing all protection grounds.

## Appeal Procedure

The Finnish Immigration Service makes first instance decisions on asylum applications. Applicants may appeal against these decisions to the Administrative Court of Helsinki only. The appeal period is 30 days from the date when the applicant receives notification of the initial decision. If the decision is not appealed, it comes into force when the appeal period expires.

The applicant can also appeal against the decision of the Administrative Court to the Supreme Administrative Court, but only if granted leave to appeal. The appeal period for the Supreme Administrative Court is also 30 days from the date when notification of the decision by the Administrative Court is received.

## Asylum Process

Asylum-seekers' basic needs are catered for during the asylum procedure. The most important service provided is accommodation in one of the reception centres, which are managed by the state in cooperation with the municipalities concerned, the Finnish Red Cross and the Mannerheim League for Child Welfare. Reception centres only accommodate asylum-seekers awaiting a decision.

Furthermore, asylum-seekers are provided with a living allowance, essential social welfare and health services. If all daily meals are served by the reception centre, the allowance is €60-90 a month. If the meals are not provided, the amount goes up to €200-300 a month. If the applicant has children, the allowance is higher.

Legal aid and interpreters are also available, if necessary, during the application process. Reception centres also provide the possibility of working and studying during the application process. Asylum-seekers have the right to work after three months if they have a valid travel document. If they do not have such a document, they may start working after six months. This right to work is regulated by law.

All residence permits issued to resettled refugees and asylum-seekers who have been granted protection are "A-permits", which are granted for a continuous stay. A-permits entail rights and obligations that are similar to those of Finnish citizens, except for the rights that require Finnish citizenship, such as the right to vote in the national elections. The first permits are not permanent; they are granted for a fixed period of time. After being continuously resident in Finland for four years with an A-permit, immigrants and refugees can apply for a permanent residence permit.

As for "B-permits", these are only meant for temporary stay. B-permits involve more restrictions than A-permits. For example, the right to work can be restricted to a specific employer or industry.

When an asylum-seeker who has been granted protection is issued a residence permit, he/she is relocated to a Municipality. Refugees must be residents of a Municipality in Finland in order to receive welfare benefits.



## Integration

The new legislation enhancing integration covers all aspects of integration, including the role of authorities, integration plans, appointing legal representatives for unaccompanied minors, as well as pilot projects to develop training for integration. The law applies to everyone who has been issued a residence permit in Finland. The sections on directing people to municipalities and funding for municipalities only apply to refugees who have been granted Convention status or a residence permit on grounds of subsidiary or humanitarian protection.

The aim of integration is naturally to have refugees participating in society, in the same way as everyone else. According to very recent international comparative research involving 31 countries, including European countries, USA and Canada (Migrant Integration Policy Index, MIPEX),<sup>4</sup> Finland offers the fourth best possibilities for integration. The study focused mainly on evaluating the impact of national legislation and policy on working life, family reunification and discrimination.

The Ministry of the Interior carried out two projects in 2009-10, which developed a follow-up system for integration and ethnic relations. These provided useful information to further enhance integration. The most important factors supporting integration, according to the project results, are work, safety, health services, and knowledge of language (Finnish or Swedish, the second official language in Finland). The follow-up system forms a background for decision-making and also takes into consideration immigrants' points of view.

Learning Finnish or Swedish is one of the key objectives of integration, and a wide range of language instruction is provided, especially in large municipalities. The importance of maintaining the native languages of refugees has also been noted and, therefore, language instruction in different native languages is also provided.

All immigrants, resettled refugees and asylum-seekers once granted protection are entitled to integration support at the start of their stay in Finland. Integration is promoted through individual integration plans prepared according to the needs of each person. Plans can include education in Finnish or Swedish language, knowledge of Finnish society or the education system, and working life. An immigrant or a refugee is entitled to an integration plan if he/she is unemployed and registered as a jobseeker at the local Employment and Economic Development Office. A plan can also be made for an immigrant or a refugee who is in need of it in order to enhance his/her integration. The Municipality and the Employment and Economic Development Office formulate the integration plan together with the immigrant or the refugee, who must then implement the plan.

The rights and obligations of refugees when residing in Finland are closely connected to integration. For example, all Finnish children have the right to go to school. In fact, in Finland, education is compulsory for nine years. This obligation applies also to immigrant and refugee children. Adults can be provided with basic education as well if needed. Education in Finland is free for all, which makes it easily available for refugees.

Refugees who have a residence permit on grounds of subsidiary or humanitarian protection, can apply for citizenship after living in Finland for four years without interruption after the grant of protection. Citizenship applicants must be law-abiding and have knowledge of Finnish or Swedish in order to be granted Finnish nationality.

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<sup>4</sup> More on MIPEX at: <http://www.mipex.eu/>.



## Projects for Refugee Women

The state and NGOs have developed projects aiming at improving the situation of refugee women and other refugees in a vulnerable position. The Ministry of the Interior, for example, leads a project called “HAAPA” to support vulnerable groups amongst resettled refugees when they relocate to municipalities and providing them with the services they need in these localities. Under the “HAAPA” project, in Jyväskylä, a sub-project supports female refugees who have suffered from violence. Altogether, the “HAAPA” project operates in 11 Finnish municipalities, and many of the activities are related to women. The project is funded by the European Refugee Fund (ERF).

The Finnish League for Human Rights also has the “KokoNainen” project (“the Whole Woman”), which aims at protecting girls from female genital mutilation (FGM). The focus of the project is to prevent and stop FGM in Finland and beyond. The League also has a “Kitke!” project aiming at preventing traditional harmful practices, such as honour-related conflicts and violence.

Some multicultural organizations also support refugee women. A Multicultural Women’s Association called “Monika-naiset” operates as the umbrella organization for several associations for women of ethnic minorities. The organization supports the wellbeing of migrant women in different forms. It encourages migrant women to participate actively in social issues, provides services and guidance to victims of domestic violence, lobbies actively decision-makers, and provides training for social and health professionals.



## “Third Sector” (Non-Governmental) Activity

Finland’s third sector working with refugee issues is active and competent. Cooperation between NGOs, the government of Finland and ministries is broad, and takes many forms. For example, NGOs offer services ranging from legal advice and assistance to activities to support refugee integration and general advisory services covering a wide array of topics.

NGOs also work closely together. NGOs working with refugee issues, including the Refugee Advice Centre, Amnesty International - Finnish section, the Finnish Refugee Council, the Finnish Red Cross, the Central Union for Child Welfare and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland’s immigration workers, meet once a month to discuss current topics and plan common efforts.

NGOs are also often invited by the Government to comment on different practices in refugee policy and on questions regarding domestic and international legislation. Many Finnish NGOs also engage in close cooperation with other European and international organizations. The Refugee Advice Centre is an official partner of UNHCR in Finland; the Finnish Red Cross and the Finnish Refugee Council also cooperate with UNHCR, as does the inter-governmental International Organization for Migration (IOM).

# The Role of UNHCR in Finland

## UNHCR's operation in the Nordic and Baltic Countries

UNHCR's Regional Representation for the Baltic and Nordic countries (RRBNC) covers eight countries (Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, and Sweden) from Stockholm, Sweden. There is no country presence in any of the other countries covered, apart from a UNHCR Liaison Officer who is co-located with UNDP in Vilnius, Lithuania. Advocacy, durable solutions and capacity building are the cornerstones of UNHCR's activities in the Baltic and Nordic region. RRBNC supports the governments and first and second instance decision-makers in their implementation of international instruments, in particular the 1951 Refugee Convention and the Statelessness Conventions, by giving advice, training and providing information. UNHCR also assists NGOs and asylum lawyers. International Refugee Law, European Union Directives and Regulations, UNHCR Handbooks and guidelines, as well as extensive knowledge of national legislation form the basis of the legal protection work in the region.

An integral part of UNHCR's activities is putting refugee and asylum issues on the agenda, raising awareness and providing correct and updated information about the situation of the world's millions of refugees and other persons of concern. The Regional Representation organizes public information campaigns, exhibitions and events together with governments, local authorities and NGOs.

UNHCR is almost entirely funded by voluntary contributions, above all from governments. Private sector fund raising plays an increasingly important role in financing UNHCR's global activities, and UNHCR has started to pursue this more proactively in the Nordic countries, both at corporate and individual donor level. In particular, RRBNC carries out various fundraising projects aiming specifically at women and girls.

## UNHCR and Finland

Finland is a European Union (EU) Member State and is actively engaged in the efforts of the EU to build a Common European Asylum System. International human right standards and provisions aiming at equality between women and men are embedded in Finnish legislation. RRBNC welcomes the various projects in Finland, such as HAAPA, KokoNainen, or Monika-naiset, aiming specifically at supporting refugee women and their rights. Moreover, RRBNC notes with satisfaction the emphasis in the new government's programme on integration, as well as language training for women staying at home. The Government has also acknowledged the need for a more efficient and faster asylum procedure, and an end to the detention of asylum-seeking children.

Concerns remain for UNHCR in relation to access to information on the asylum procedure; the narrow interpretation of the 1951 Convention refugee definition leading to the grant of subsidiary protection under Article 15 of the EU Qualification Directive, or humanitarian status

instead; the application of the benefit of the doubt in credibility assessment; and consistency of asylum decisions. UNHCR has been addressing these issues jointly with Governments in other EU Member States through Quality Initiatives. UNHCR is also concerned by the increase in xenophobia and racism, which renders refugee integration more difficult; the implementation of the new integration legislation will remain a challenge. In particular, difficulties with the municipalities must be addressed in order to avoid long waiting times for resettled refugees. As for family reunification, UNHCR encourages the Government of Finland to consider ways of improving existing provisions. These issues have all been raised by the refugee women during the Dialogue.

Finding durable solutions for refugees remains a key focus for RRBNC. UNHCR emphasizes the need to take age, gender and other diversity factors into account in policy development and programming, and pays attention to family reunification for successful integration. Finland has struggled in recent months with long delays in departures from countries of refuge as a result of an increased unwillingness on the part of municipalities to receive accepted resettled refugees. RRBNC continues to focus on strengthening the cooperation with the Finnish authorities in relation to reception of resettled refugees.

Another issue raised during the dialogue, also of concern to UNHCR, relates to domestic violence. Despite the fact that women and men enjoy equal rights in Finland, women (both Finnish and refugee women) are not always sufficiently protected in law or in practice against domestic violence. This is an ongoing concern.

In view of its statutory responsibility to supervise state obligations arising from international conventions for the protection of refugees and stateless persons, RRBNC engages in the development of refugee law and practice in Finland. The lack of physical presence of UNHCR in Finland limits the possibilities to interact, influence and cooperate with authorities, NGOs and other counterparts. Finland is, however, a cooperative partner generally open to sharing information with RRBNC, providing updates on important legal developments and amendments, and informing the Office of relevant projects and events in relation to persons of concern to UNHCR. The Regional Dialogue with Refugee Women in Finland is a further example of the good cooperation between UNHCR, the authorities and NGOs in Finland. UNHCR is grateful to the Government of Finland and the Refugee Advice Centre for their support to this dialogue with refugee women and girls, and the success of the event.

Immigration issues became increasingly important in the lead-up to the April 2011 elections, and anti-immigrant sentiments rose reportedly to 60% in 2010 compared to 37% in 2007. The True Finns party campaigned on anti-immigration issues, and won nearly a fifth of the vote (in comparison to 4.1% in the previous election) becoming the third largest party. Racism and xenophobia affect refugees and asylum-seekers along with other foreigners. UNHCR is therefore pleased that the Regional Dialogue in Finland received much positive media coverage.

Following the publication of *“Voices of Afghan Children – A Study on asylum-seeking children in Sweden”* in 2010,<sup>5</sup> RRBNC continued its commitment to Age, Gender and Diversity Mainstreaming (AGDM) through the engagement with refugee women and girls in the Dialogue in Helsinki, and now looks forward to the follow-up of the recommendations identified during the Dialogue.

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<sup>5</sup> UNHCR, *Voices of Afghan Children - A Study on Asylum-Seeking Children in Sweden*, June 2010, available at: <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4c19ec7f2.html>.

## Methodology

The Dialogue with Women and Girls in Finland was conducted with a total of 28 women over a long weekend. Participants came from Helsinki and towns across Finland.

The methodology is based on the Community Consultation and Participatory Action Research approaches developed by Eileen Pittaway and Linda Bartolomei from the Centre for Refugee Research (CRR) at the University of New South Wales, Australia. It emerged from their work examining the occurrence and impact of rape and sexual abuse of refugee women and girls in camps and refugee sites in Thailand, Kenya, Ethiopia, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and, the subsequent impact on resettled refugees in Australia.

The method uses an introduction to human rights and gender to provide a context to guide refugee, asylum-seeking and displaced participants through an examination and articulation of issues of critical concern to them and their communities. The facilitators work with participants with the aim of exploring potential solutions to local problems, as well as strategies for action and advocacy. The techniques include community education strategies, the telling of stories, and storyboarding. The latter is a process in which participants conduct situational analyses. This process is based on the belief that all people have capabilities and the capacity to identify and address community problems if the resources are available to them. The technique was developed by the CRR for use with refugees in camps, and urban settings as well as in resettlement countries. Being visually-based, these exercises can be used with people of all levels of education, from university professors to pre-literate people.

The focus of the method is the collection of information from often vulnerable populations in a way that is empowering, not harmful, not exploitative, and which has the potential for bringing about social change. It is ideal for use with marginalized and disadvantaged groups who have valid and historically-based reasons for distrusting people in authority, including researchers, academics and representatives of governments and other institutions.

The CRR also developed two matrices for this project, the Women's Matrix and Men's Matrix. In line with the UNHCR Age, Gender and Diversity Mainstreaming approach, both matrices include issues along one axis, and age/risk categories along the other. The matrix is used as a visual prompt for storytelling and situational analysis. Participants are asked to form groups and write issues on sticky notes and place them onto the appropriate grid reference within the matrix. As the matrix boxes become full with sticky notes, it becomes apparent how inter-related the core areas of concern on the matrix are. When full, the matrix is not only a situational analysis, but a qualitative risk analysis matrix.

While the Regional Dialogues aim to inform quantitative data analysis, a qualitative methodology was suitable for this project because such an approach builds ‘a complex, holistic picture, analyses words, reports detailed views of informants, and conducts the study in a natural setting’.<sup>6</sup> Qualitative research uses participant responses as a starting point, from which broader analytical categories are drawn.<sup>7</sup> This methodology enables researchers to examine the experiences of refugee and asylum-seeking women and girls and their capacities, as well as the challenges they face on a daily basis. The researchers approached this study with a responsibility to listen to the voices of the participants as they articulated the issues that were important to them.<sup>8</sup>

This methodology complements UNHCR’s human rights based approach, and the organization’s commitment to mainstreaming an Age, Gender and Diversity perspective throughout the planning and community-consultation cycle. The Regional Dialogues with Women and Girls are not AGDM Participatory Assessments; however there is scope for some of the techniques developed in these Dialogues to be incorporated into guidance on UNHCR Participatory Assessment methodology. More broadly, the methodology detailed here can also be used by governments, NGOs and community-based organizations in order to place the voices, stories and capacities of refugees and asylum-seekers at the core of all aspects of planning.

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<sup>6</sup> Creswell, J.W. (1998), *Qualitative inquiry and research: Choosing among five traditions*, Sage Publications, California, p. 15.

<sup>7</sup> Basit, T. N., ‘Manual or electronic? The role of coding in qualitative data analysis’, *Educational Research*, Vol. 45, No. 2, 2003, pp. 143-154, and Ezzy, D., ‘Qualitative analysis’, Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest, 2002.

<sup>8</sup> Muli, C., ‘Poverty, Gender & Community Development: The Lived Experiences of Slum-dwelling women in Nairobi’, PHD thesis, 2009, University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia.

# “Hear Our Voices”







## Individual Documentation

The refugee women who participated in the Dialogue in Finland expressed concerns about the length of the asylum procedure in Finland. They reported that the refugee status determination procedure can take a very long time, up to three years. Without documents or alien passport people have limited freedom of movement, and in some cases, no ability to open a bank account. Their lives are put on hold; and given the often isolated location of reception centres, asylum-seekers have limited opportunities to work while their application for asylum is being processed. Reports about the fear amongst asylum-seekers of being arrested because of their lack of individual documents from their countries of origin were also mentioned, a fear which is common for people who have survived human right violations and seek safety.

The participants also expressed concerns about how the credibility of asylum-seekers is often doubted, when no identity documents are produced in support of the application. The feeling of being accused of lying was quite general amongst participants. Government officials involved in the refugee status determination procedure need better to understand how documents can be missing because of war or sudden flight.

“... when refugees come from war or natural disaster or political problems, the last thing they think of is taking their documents with them; they are so focused on survival. Refugees or asylum-seekers go to other countries but not as tourists, through travel agencies; they go through another way. Even if they do manage to take something important with them they might lose it on the way... Survival is more important...”



*No documents.  
Trust people.*



## Less time to wait

Refugees also expressed concern that family reunification is difficult, and can take a very long time. The application process is rendered all the longer by the absence of documentation. Concerns were also expressed regarding family members being asked to return to situations of danger to retrieve documents. The importance of family reunification for successful integration was discussed: refugee women find it challenging to learn the language and establish themselves in their new home when they are constantly concerned about family members left behind in situations of danger. The lack of traditional family support is also a major problem to the well-being of newcomers. Grandparents are not included in the family nucleus of people eligible for family reunification, which is an issue for people accustomed to living in extended families.

“ It takes 3-4 months for a Finnish man to have his Thai wife come over, while it can take 3-4 years for an immigrant to bring his or her family, including children, to Finland.”

Several participants also mentioned the difficult Finnish citizenship exam, which can pose a real barrier for refugees who are not literate in their own language, and those for whom the acquisition of Finnish language has not been an easy process. The women noted that lack of written or spoken Finnish does not mean that refugees are not proud to be Finnish and cannot contribute to the society. Participants worried about the impact the difficult citizenship test could have on refugees who may have lost their citizenship and are not able to gain Finnish citizenship, which could lead to statelessness-like situations.

## Solutions Proposed By the Women Participants

1. The authorities should explore ways of processing asylum applications faster so that refugees spend less time in reception centres and can more quickly integrate into and contribute to Finnish society.
2. Decision-makers in the asylum procedure should receive further training on credibility assessment in the absence of documentation and how to take into account the trauma some asylum-seekers may have suffered.
3. Family reunification should be recognized as an important aspect of successful integration, and efforts made to process family reunification applications as quickly as possible.
4. The impact of the Finnish language test on access to citizenship and integration should be considered.

## Reception Centres

Many of the women participants had lived in reception centres, or knew family members and friends who had. Some of the refugee participants were also workers in reception centres in different capacities.

The main concern shared by all participants was the isolated location of some of these centres, coupled with lengthy asylum procedures. Refugees live for up to three years in the reception centres not knowing their fate, with little information on life in Finland, and no overall knowledge about services and their rights.

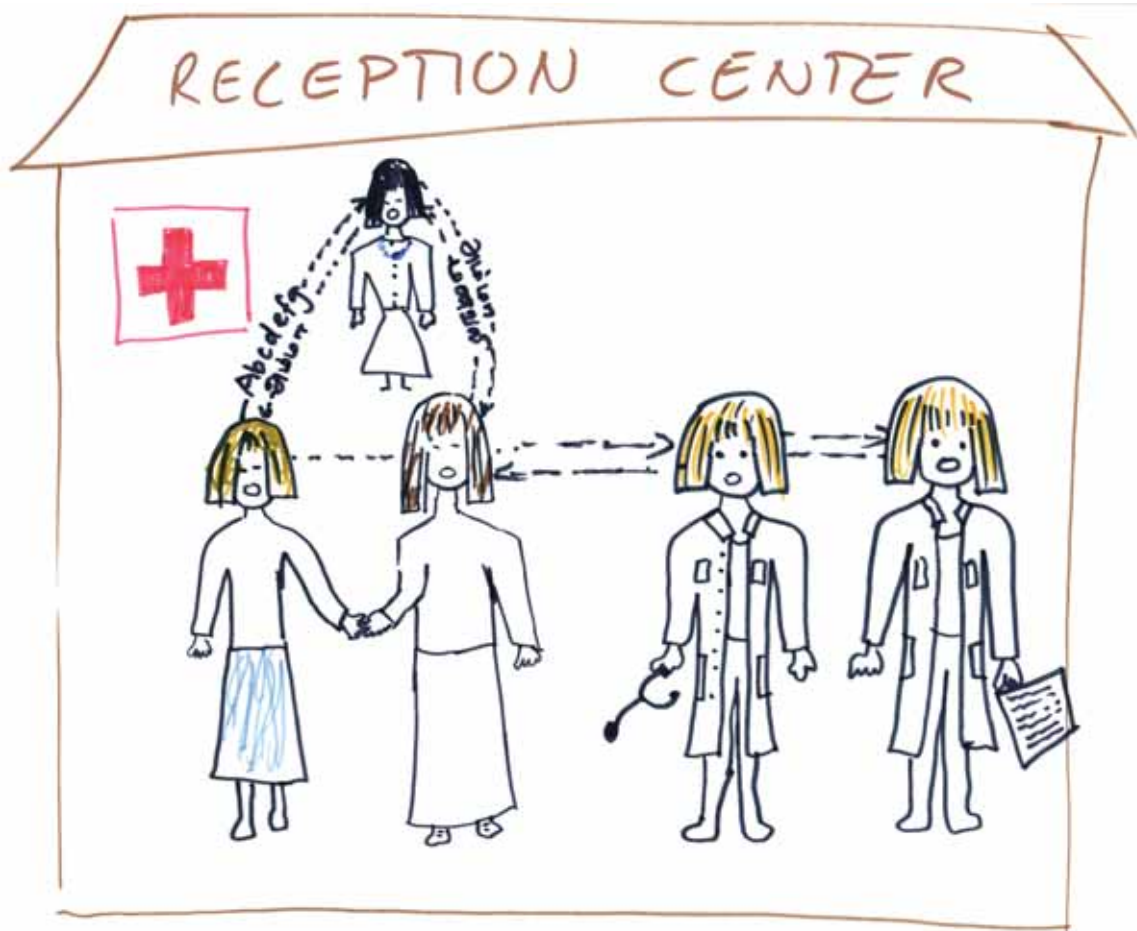
Participants also noted a lack of understanding by reception centre staff of refugee circumstances, including the situations in countries of origin, and how this could impact on asylum-seekers while living at the centres. This often resulted in communication and translation problems.

At the reception centres, there is only limited access to language training, which is not tailored to the different needs of the various age groups or educational levels. Participants agreed that orientation courses on life in Finland would be good for the mental health of asylum-seekers, and would help the integration later of those granted protection in Finland.

The limited recreational facilities for asylum-seekers in reception centres often lead to depression and compound trauma. Refugee women also noted that the lack of facilities to allow families to cook their own food adds to trauma and depression, as families miss both the familiar flavours of home and the family rituals of food preparation and eating together.

The lack of child day care means that young children are often socially isolated and bored, and their development hampered in the confines of the reception centres. Medical treatment is basic; patients are not entered into the national data base, and as such vital information may not be available in case of emergency.

Participants felt that shorter asylum procedures and improved services in the reception centres would reduce the long term social cost and increase the success of the integration of asylum-seekers. The Municipality quota system also created additional problems as refugees who had been granted asylum had to continue living at the reception centres until a place was found in a Municipality for them to move to.



## Solutions Proposed By the Women Participants

1. All staff working in reception centres should receive additional training to assist them to understand the past experiences of refugees, and the impact which life, sometimes for years in reception centres, while not knowing their future, may have on asylum-seekers.
2. In particular, all staff working in the reception centres' health services should receive training on the impacts of sexual and gender-based violence, torture and trauma on asylum-seekers. Services to treat trauma should be made available.
3. Every effort should be made to reduce the time spent in reception centres. This includes an examination of the Municipality quota system.
4. Specially trained interpreters should be used at all times by workers in reception centres and related services.
5. A range of services provided in reception centres should be reviewed and improved, including the provision of Finnish language classes, orientation classes and recreational facilities.
6. Young children in reception centres should be allowed to attend external pre-school and kindergartens in order to be able to socialize with other children and learn Finnish.
7. Facilities should be provided to allow families to cook their own food

## Women in Leadership Positions

All participants acknowledged that women and men enjoy a high degree of equality in Finland. Some of the women participants were also role models, having achieved leadership positions in politics, through their careers, and in student movements, and some having received the Finnish "Refugee Woman of The Year" Award. However, participants also acknowledged that this is not the case for many refugee women. A major barrier to leadership in employment, education and civil society is the lack of Finnish language, which can take years to acquire. Importantly, the group also discussed the barrier to wider participation in public life which unresolved trauma constitutes for many women.

"People assume that everything is equal in this country and everything works; there is equality. When this person seeks certain services in her environment she feels there are many people speaking a language [the language of equality] around her but no one to listen."



In addition, many refugee women come from cultural backgrounds which do not encourage them into leadership positions, and some men in refugee communities actively prevent women from participating in Finnish society. Likewise, people in the wider community often do not understand the cultural backgrounds of newly-arrived refugees, and women are often stereotyped, which does not support their empowerment and their capacity to take leadership responsibilities.

"The society victimizes refugee women, and women fall in that trap, and in some cultures, the refugee communities too."



## Solutions Proposed By the Women Participants

1.

The orientation service for newly-arrived refugees and families should include training on human rights, in particular women's rights and the law in Finland. Men should be supported to understand the changes this might mean to their traditional culture.

2.

Refugee women's empowerment should be supported through training to enable them to take leadership positions.

3.

Language training should be tailored to the specific needs of women adapting to their new lives in Finland, and provided in a range of formats, such as home-based education, and community-based language training.

## Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV)

Domestic Violence was raised as the single most important issue facing all refugee communities in Finland:

“The biggest problem for refugee women is refugee men!”



maahanmuuttajanaisten  
kokema alistaminen ja  
väkivalta



“.....We have here a husband hitting his wife. The wife does not know what to do. His thoughts have changed; he wants to protect his honour and his family. The wife is perplexed; she does not know why her husband changed; she does not know where to look for help, and she is upset because her husband has changed. When you come to a new country, everything is dark and all you see is the problems, the alcoholism in the streets. You get very reserved, and you keep to yourself. This vicious circle goes on, because the family is tense; the mother beats the kids, and children have no one to talk to and go to the streets and do bad things.....”

Women from all of the communities talked about the impact of domestic violence, and the factors which contribute to it, in particular men's feeling of losing their status in exile.



Though services and refuges for victims of domestic violence in Finland are open to all, participants reported that often the staff are insensitive to cultural differences, and do not know how to respond to the SGBV experienced by refugee women. The lack of trained cultural mediators and mental health support for survivors suffering from trauma were mentioned as key issues of concern.

Some participants noted that honour-related practices still occur in Finland, and that many women live in fear this could happen to them or their daughters. While female genital mutilation (FGM) is banned in Finland, women explained that some families send their girls under the guise of holidays to their countries of origin for FGM to be performed. The vulnerability of lesbian girls to domestic violence and violence in some communities was also noted, as well as the risk of forced marriages in these situations.

Several women were pleased to confirm that when sexual abuse or rape are reported to the police, strong action is taken against the perpetrators. Participants also noted the responsibility of women to take action against sexual and gender-based violence.

Another woman stressed the responsibility of women in ensuring that their daughters are not prohibited from leaving the house and from mixing with Finnish youth.

“When we talk about human rights and we talk about shelter, since I worked with immigrants and refugees I ran into a lot of domestic violence with the women leaving the home... [in the past] women from different cultures had their networks ... their families, which they do not have in Finland. Perhaps even their own communities do not accept them seeking help from the Finnish authorities. So ... for these women who had to leave their home, services are not available when they need them, and I get women at night crying from the railway station.”

“A lot of terrible things happened to us but now we are in Finland, a great country for women. It’s up to us to take up these problems, know our rights, and how to realize them.”

## Solutions Proposed By the Women Participants

1. As part of their orientation to Finland, refugee women and girls should receive information on the Finnish law on sexual and gender based violence, their rights including reproductive rights, how to defend themselves from unsolicited sexual advances, and what to do in case of domestic violence or violence in the wider community.
2. Refugee men should also receive information on the Finnish law on sexual and gender-based violence and on their obligations to respect the law. Training should also be provided to support them understand and accept changes in status, authority, and family values, as part of their integration into their new homeland.
3. Reception staff should receive training to support refugee families adjust to changes, and protocols to assist and protect (potential) victims should be implemented in reception centres.
4. Information on assistance and protection services for victims of sexual and gender based violence should be made available and accessible to refugee women.
5. Programmes addressing domestic violence should be available for all refugee communities. Service providers should be aware of cultural differences and the impact of exile and trauma on violence, and trained to address these.

## Housing

On the whole, participants expressed satisfaction with the housing available to them in Finland. Having a family home was seen as important to build secure futures.

However, the women noted that it is difficult for newly arrived refugees to leave the reception centres because Municipalities increasingly refuse to take on new refugees. Access to the private rental property market is almost impossible as good accommodation is expensive. Participants noted that there is not enough accessible information on financial support available for housing.

Single women heads of households find it particularly difficult to afford rents, and may have to live in very small apartments.



“I lived for 6 years in a two-room apartment with my children. I couldn’t afford anything else.” (Single woman head of household)

Participants acknowledged that the waiting list for municipal housing in Helsinki is very long, and that all in the capital are affected. Families with many children however have additional difficulties accessing larger houses, which are in short supply. Many large families have been forced to live in cramped conditions, which impacts on the mental health of all family members, the ability of children to study, and family relationships.



People from African communities also reported experiencing racism from landlords, who had told them that they did not like renting to dark skinned people. Neighbours in some areas also displayed racist behaviours such as forbidding their children to play with refugee children. This has been the cause of great stress to families, and affected the behaviour of refugee children, who sometimes become hostile and aggressive.

## Solutions Proposed By the Women Participants

1. Information about housing and rental assistance should be made accessible to all refugee families.
2. Municipal housing developments should take into account the need to accommodate the larger refugee families with several children.
3. Community education campaigns should be undertaken in areas in which refugees are settled to foster closer and more harmonious community relationships.
4. Education and information should be provided to landlords about the needs of refugee tenants, and anti-discrimination laws applied when refugees are discriminated against in the housing market.

## Education

Education was seen as key to successful integration. It enables refugees to learn their new language, participate in the workforce and civil society. Above all, the refugee women wanted good quality education for their children.

Participants discussed the waste of lives and potential, when people are denied education whilst waiting for refugee determination, before being finally allowed to live in Finland. They suggested that access to education should be provided from the moment people arrive in Finland for both resettled refugees and asylum-seekers in reception centres, including children, even if some of the latter may not be allowed to stay.

Access to day care was seen as critical for mothers to enable them to attend Finnish classes and other educational opportunities. Many women do not have families in Finland, who in their country of origin would often provide this support to them.

The participants also mentioned the need for tailored Finnish language programmes, adapted to different age groups, including elderly women, to varying past education levels, and to different purposes (employment, education, daily life). While language classes are available, they are often not suitable to the special needs of the refugee communities, who may be pre-literate, or traumatized, or unused to western models of schooling and education.

“As for older women, after 40 it is hard to learn perfect Finnish, and later when you apply for Finnish citizenship Finnish authorities demand you pass a language exam which is almost university level. This leads to discrimination; I don't think any person can be asked to reach this level.”



For refugee children, the ability to play, study and mix with Finnish children is very important to allow them to integrate well. Steps should be taken to introduce special programmes to enable this to happen, as well as combat racism in schools. Children in reception centres also need access to education and the opportunity to mix with Finnish children.

The women insisted on the importance for children to also learn the language of their country of origin, which will enable them to retain their culture, religion and language of origin, and will provide a better foundation for learning and studying in Finnish.

Participants also discussed the fact that at times, cultural values and power relationships in the family might be a barrier to education for refugee women and girls, which must be acknowledged and addressed. Women expressed concern that the education of boys was more of a priority for the men than that of girls, who may be forced into marriage at an earlier age.

The women agreed that access to vocational training and recreational activities is needed for women, especially single women and women whose children have grown up, and who no longer stay at home.

“There are many children who do not speak Finnish properly or their own original language properly. It causes psychological problems.”

## Solutions Proposed By the Women Participants

1. Access to education for asylum-seeking children in reception centres should be made compulsory.
2. Adult education classes should be structured to meet the special needs of refugees, in particular those who are pre-literate in their own language. A range of service delivery models should be explored.
3. Some language courses should also be tailored to support employment, and targeted at people with educational and/or professional qualifications.
4. Anti-racism education and programmes should be developed to support a better integration of refugee children at school.
5. Provision should be made for children to learn their own language as well as Finnish.
6. A range of vocational training courses should be made available to refugee women.

## Health

The women were unanimous in their appreciation of the excellent health-care services available to them and their families in Finland. They also identified some barriers which they and their communities experience in accessing these services.

The lack of fluency in Finnish language can be a serious obstacle to access. There are very few specialist medical interpreters and children are often forced to interpret for their parents. Mothers find it very embarrassing to talk of sexual and reproductive health issues in front of their children, who often do not know the words to use. Parents cannot use their children as interpreters for trauma counselling. Lack of language can cause delays in accessing health care and in obtaining proper treatment.

“I do not speak very well Finnish. It takes me months to get an appointment but on the day [of the appointment] I did not have anyone to go with me and interpret for me.”

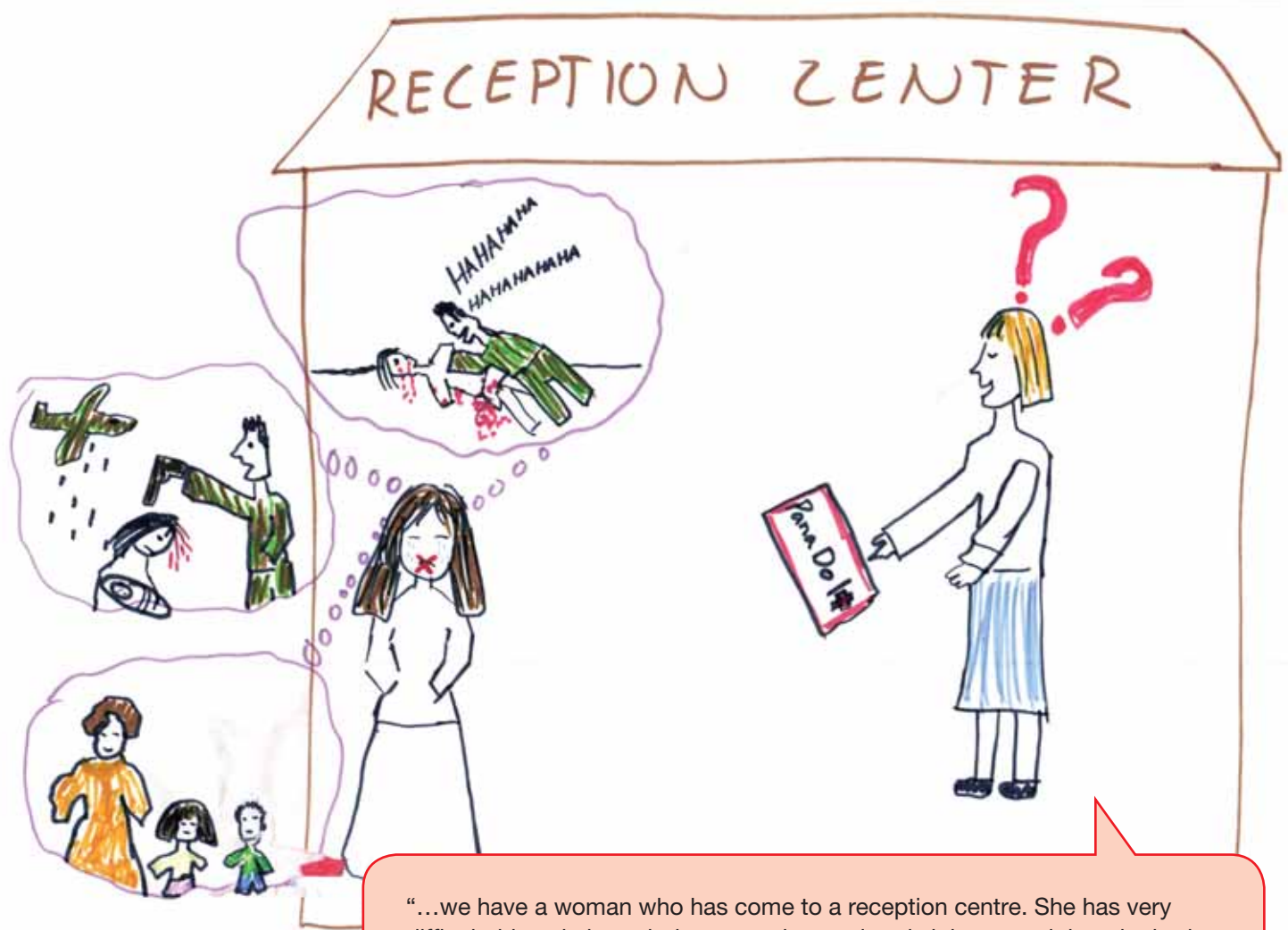
The strong patriarchal cultures of some societies also caused problems for women, who were forced to use their husbands as interpreters. This inhibited their ability to report mistreatment and often prevented them from discussing personal issues with medical staff.

“Women should have the right and possibility to seek health care services without being accompanied by the husbands. We have to make sure these young women know how to demand these services, and clear guidelines on how women can ask their husbands to leave.”

Refugee women from Africa also discussed experiencing racial discrimination from some medical staff.

The women reported that while some information is available about health services, it is not easily accessible. There is little information for people who are illiterate or who do not speak Finnish. They also highlighted the need for more awareness about sexual and reproductive health. They suggested that this information should be targeted at young women and girls, and newly arrived refugees.

Additionally participants all recommended a greater range of psycho-social support for refugees suffering from the impacts of torture and pre-arrival trauma and sexual abuse. Asylum-seekers in the reception centres and refugees in the wider community are all impacted by the lack of support services.



“...we have a woman who has come to a reception centre. She has very difficult things in her mind, rape and war related violence and that she had to leave her family behind. Her mouth is taped; she cannot talk about things, she is crying. Reception centre worker in the reception country, they cannot communicate; and she offers her some Panadol....”

## Solutions Proposed By the Women Participants

1. Efforts should be made to make trained interpreters available to accompany newly-arrived asylum-seeking and refugees to medical appointments.
2. Efforts should be made to build the capacity of torture and trauma services for refugees and asylum-seekers, in reception centres and the wider community.
3. Medical staff, in particular those in areas where refugees are settling, should be provided with training about the experiences and potential special needs of refugee women and their families, as well as training in non-discriminatory practice.
4. Information about health services, including sexual and reproductive health issues, should be made available in a range of formats, and targeted at newly-arrived and vulnerable refugee women and girls.

## Economic Self-Reliance

The ability to gain employment and earn an income was identified as one of the key steps to successful integration. Yet participants noted that it is hard to get a job without speaking proper Finnish. Refugees also suffer from the lack of recognition of their overseas qualifications.

“Often these women [with an overseas qualification] will get a job if they have vocational training and if they work hard. In the best case scenario they get a job as an interpreter or working in projects. Even if they have higher education, a degree from their own home country is not recognized in Finland.”

Participants also reported discrimination towards foreigners in the work place, and provided personal examples of how they had been isolated at occasions or not given equal opportunities in the work place. They also wished refugees could receive more orientation when they start a new job.

As for young women, they noted how weekend or summer jobs were important for their economic self-reliance and independence, and how they wished they could access these jobs on an equal footing with young Finnish girls especially when their Finnish language skills are the same.

A further barrier to women's employment was identified as internal to the family. In some cultures women are not allowed to work, especially if their husbands cannot find employment. The women provided examples of how the power of men in the family could translate in many restrictions in their daily lives and barriers to economic self-reliance, such as prohibition to leave the house to learn Finnish language, prohibition to work or open a bank account. In other cases when the men cannot find work while the women in their households are employed, the latter are still expected to undertake all of household duties, and their husbands sometimes become abusive because of the reversed gender roles.





“Some Finnish people think that immigrants who have a job they take their jobs, and if immigrants don’t have a job they take their money.”

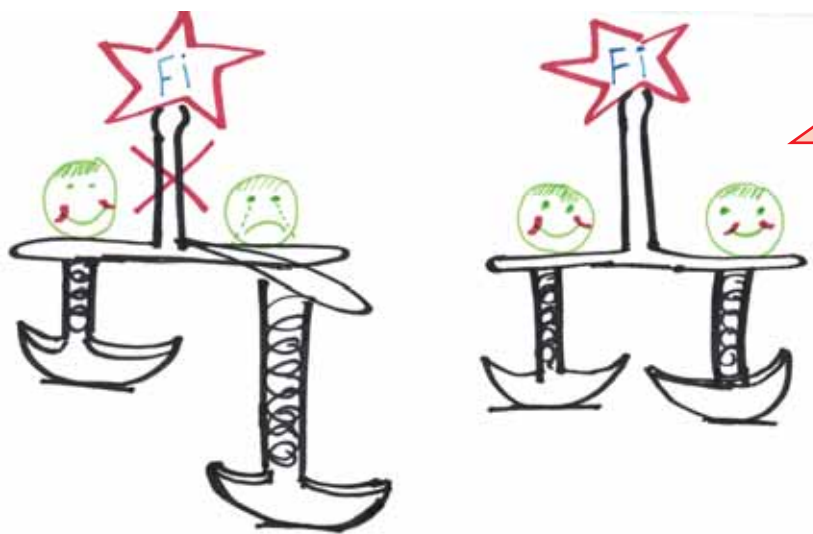
## Solutions Proposed By the Women Participants

1. Employers should be encouraged to employ refugees, recognize the potential, skills and capacity they bring to business, and take into account their prior learning and work experiences.
2. Efforts should be made to establish a system for the recognition of overseas qualifications, which takes into account the particular circumstances of refugees.
3. Special programmes should target training to assist refugee women to update their professional skills so that they can enter all areas of the Finnish workforce and use their capacity and skills to contribute to their new society.

## Access to Justice

While appreciating the safety of life in Finland, participants still felt that at times the law did not treat them equally to other Finnish citizens.

Some women had stories of negative interactions with the police, and concern that these would lead to under-reporting was mentioned.



“Crime is less of a crime when they hear it is against a foreigner/ refugee/ immigrant.”

“Police come too late or not, if you are a foreigner.”

A discussion also took place about the refugees’ general lack of trust in the police and the authorities, due to their experiences in their countries of origin.

The women also noted that the media tend to issue negative media reports when immigrants commit crimes, which tend to stigmatize all migrants and refugees. They deplored the lack of positive media reporting about the contributions made by migrants and refugees to Finnish society.

## Solutions Proposed By the Women Participants

1. Cultural awareness training for front-line police officers should be developed, including awareness of the particular circumstances of refugees and their general lack of trust in the authorities, to assist building positive community policing relationships.
2. Resources should be made available to civil society actively working to challenge racism in the community.

## Racism and Xenophobia

Following the discussion on access to justice, discussion shifted to xenophobia and racism, which had already been touched upon under other sections.

It is obvious that the shadow of anti-immigrant groups hangs over the heads of most of the refugee communities.



“Despite many positive sides of Finnish society, there is a fear of discrimination, racism and xenophobia.”

“Fear of this getting worse as we can be the victims.”

The refugee women expressed particular concerns about young refugees who are more at risk of being victims of racism and xenophobia because “they do not know how to be cautious”. They often face racism outside the house. Refugee youth, and girls in particular, feel very ambivalent about Finnish youth, who lead a life so different from theirs and whose values seem sometimes so at odds with their own.

## Solutions Proposed By the Women Participants

1. Public education campaigns and community outreach against xenophobia and racism should be organized, involving refugees and stressing the importance of the two-way process of integration.
2. Efforts should be made to monitor and report on hate crimes.
3. Efforts should be made to strengthen law enforcement and prosecution of racist and xenophobic acts.

## CONCLUSION

The methodology used at the Regional Dialogue with Refugee Women in Finland once more provided the space for women to discuss, identify and articulate the problems of most concern to them as individuals and as representatives of other asylum-seeking and refugee women living in Finland.

The findings of this Dialogue demonstrated that UNHCR's identified ten core protection areas, once adjusted to the specific context of an industrialized country with a mature refugee system, provide a relevant framework and are of great value for situational analysis.

The report presents the experiences and aspirations of refugee women. More than anything, the women wished for themselves and their families to be integrated successfully into Finnish society and able to contribute to their new country. Their suggestions for improvements were not made in a spirit of complaint, rather because they wish to enhance the asylum and integration experience of their communities and that of asylum-seekers and refugees to whom Finland has given a chance to start a new life.

"I want to say that we all feel privileged to be here in Finland – to call ourselves Finnish. We are the lucky ones – it is a great country and I am very grateful."

It is hoped that the voices of these women will be heard, and ways forward found.

<b>AGDM</b>	Age, Gender and Diversity Mainstreaming
<b>BAMF</b>	German Federal Office for Migration and Refugees
<b>ERF</b>	European Refugee Fund
<b>EU</b>	European Union
<b>FGM</b>	Female genital mutilation
<b>HAAPA</b>	Ministry of the Interior-led project to support vulnerable groups amongst resettled refugees in their municipalities
<b>IDP</b>	Internally displaced person
<b>IOM</b>	International Organization for Migration
<b>MIPEX</b>	Migrant Integration Policy Index
<b>NGO</b>	Non-governmental organization
<b>RCC</b>	Centre for Refugee Research, University of New South Wales, Australia
<b>RRBNC</b>	UNHCR's Regional Representation for the Baltic and Nordic countries
<b>UNHCR</b>	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
<b>SGBV</b>	Sexual and gender-based violence

Further details on these terms can be found in this report.





