



UNHCR Memorandum

A/To: All Representatives and Chiefs of Mission in the Field,
All Directors of Bureaux, Divisions and Regional Directorates,
All Head of Liaison Units, Senior Resource Managers, Heads of Desks,
Senior Regional Protection Officers and Desk Officers
All Programme and Protection Officers in the Field

De/From: The High Commissioner

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Objet/Subject: **UNHCR Commitments to Refugee Women**

In June of this year, I had the special opportunity to meet and hold discussions with refugee women from around the world. The Dialogue with Refugee Women was the culmination of a process in which over 500 refugee women engaged in more than 20 local and regional consultations. I want to use the launching of the final report and video of the Dialogue to confirm my commitment to empowering refugee women as part of a solution-oriented approach to refugee protection.

The Dialogue, held in Geneva, reaffirmed my long-held conviction that women must be at the heart of the solutions to the crises around the world today. This is underscored by recent events in Afghanistan, which has seen consensus on the need to end gender discrimination and ensure the full participation of Afghan women in national life and decision-making. Earlier in my tenure when I travelled to West Africa, I saw that families and communities depend on refugee women. I observed the women struggling to feed their families, to act as care-givers for the elderly and children who had no families, to re-knit the social fabric of their communities, to search for peace and to keep hope alive. I promised them that we would do more to help them.

The Dialogue was particularly important, as it was a time when senior managers were able to listen and learn. We took very seriously the youngest participant's call for an end to talk and a beginning of action. We responded with five concrete commitments to improve legal and material protection and assistance for refugee women. I am writing to inform you of these commitments, and I will be requesting from my managers, reports on progress towards their implementation by World Refugee Day in June 2002.

1. First, all offices will continue training and other on-going activities to encourage the active participation of women in all management and leadership committees of refugees in urban, rural and camp settings, including return areas. Where it is not already the case, the aim is to accelerate progress towards ensuring that 50% of representatives are women.
2. Second, UNHCR commits to the individual registration of all refugee men and women and to provide them with relevant documentation ensuring their individual security, freedom of movement and access to essential services. This commitment is reiterated by the conclusion on registration adopted by the 52nd Session of the Executive Committee Meeting of UNHCR.

3. Third, recognising that sexual and gender based violence continues to be a severe impediment to the advancement of women and the enjoyment of their rights, UNHCR commits to developing integrated country-level strategies to address it.
4. Fourth, to the extent possible, UNHCR will continue to ensure that refugee women participate directly and indirectly in the management and distribution of food and non-food items.
5. Fifth, the provision of sanitary materials to all women and girls of concern will become standard practice in all UNHCR assistance programs. The Deputy High Commissioner has already instructed all offices to prioritise and recognise provision of these materials as central to women's dignity and health.

I am encouraged by the number of offices in the field which, with the support of host governments, have already begun to implement positive changes. We know that refugee women are not passive recipients of our assistance - they are productive and self-reliant when we provide the support they need. As we broaden our partnerships, we must make strong efforts to ensure that women are full, active and dynamic participants.

Recently, initial steps have been taken to instruct all UNHCR offices to reflect the commitments outlined above in their project submissions. I look forward to hearing about the progress made towards implementing these important commitments.