



Summary of Workshop on *Advancing UNHCR's Five Commitments to Refugee Women and the UN Millennium Development Goals*

Co-hosted by
Afghan Women's Network (AWN), Afghan Women's Resource Center (AWRC) and
Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children

15 June 2004
Peshawar, Pakistan

Objective

The objective of the half-day workshop was to advance the implementation of **UNHCR's Five Commitments to Refugee Women** and the **UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)**, through:

- Raising awareness among Afghan refugee women of the UN and Government of Pakistan's commitments articulated in these two policies;
- Encouraging dialogue among refugee women, UNHCR and the Government of Pakistan (Commissionerate for Afghan Refugees) to clarify mandates, responsibilities, expectations and capacities of actors;
- Developing a set of recommendations, drawn from the perspective of refugee women, on how to enhance their implementation;
- Exploring how participants can collaborate in the future to advance the recommendations and monitor implementation.

While refugees have been repatriating to Afghanistan in record numbers, more than one million refugees remain in Pakistan, either unwilling or unable to return due to lack of security, access to land, employment opportunities and other obstacles to returning in safety and dignity.

Process

The twenty-three participants included representatives from local Afghan non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the International Rescue Committee, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the Government of Pakistan's Commissionerate for Afghan Refugees (CAR). *See Annex 1: List of Participating Organizations.*

Following the workshop, the Women's Commission informally shared select recommendations with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the lead UN agency responsible for the MDGs, and with UNHCR's offices in Pakistan and Afghanistan. The workshop hosts encourage wide distribution of the findings and recommendations among UN agencies, the Government of Pakistan, NGOs and donors to support ongoing activities to advance these instruments.

Findings & Recommendations

I. UNHCR's Five Commitments to Refugee Women

In December 2001, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees announced five commitments to improve the legal and material protection and assistance for refugee women.¹ The Five Commitments to Refugee Women reinforce the agency's acknowledgement that women's participation is fundamental to advancing protection; the need for an integrated response to gender-based violence at the country level; and the importance of documentation. It is also a call to action for UNHCR's partners – UN, government and assistance agencies – to apply in their operations.

A dynamic group discussion in the workshop ensued despite the fact that, excluding the representatives from UNHCR, only three of the 17 participants had heard of the commitments.

Commitment 1: Ensure 50% female representation in all management and leadership committees of refugees in urban, rural and camp settings, including return areas.

Commitment 4: Ensure refugee women participate directly and indirectly in management and distribution of food and non-food items.

In regards to **refugee women's participation**, positive advances were noted, including:

- The presence of female social animators in many refugee camps.
- The development of women's and youth committees in camps and urban areas.
- Women's participation in additional committees in camps and urban areas, such as education and health committees.

Despite these positive advances, there was consensus among participants that significant challenges to women's active and meaningful participation remain, due to the fact that:

¹ The Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children and UNHCR's Senior Coordinator for Refugee Women and Gender Equality collaborated in sponsoring a series of regional meetings with more than 500 refugee women from around the world. The consultations culminated in Geneva in June 2001 where 50 refugee women representatives held a dialogue with UNHCR senior management. This Dialogue with Refugee Women formed the basis of UNHCR's Five Commitments, which were announced by the High Commissioner in December 2001. See *Dialogue with Refugee Women, 20-22 June 2001, Geneva*: http://www.unhcr.ch/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/home/+6wwBme3WnR_wwwowwwwwwwFqA72ZR0gRfZNtFqrpGdBnqBAFqA72ZR0gRfZNCfQfyowcdt1naioBra2nh1tnnabdMnDDzmxwwwwww1FqnN0bI/.opendoc.pdf

- Decision-making power still resides with men.
- Women are not participating in all aspects of camp *management* and only are represented on certain committees, such as health and education, rather than security and issues related to return. It is also questionable how active and meaningful women's roles on these committees are.
- Women lack mobility outside of camps and access to quality information.

Participants shared a number of **recommendations** for UNHCR, its implementing partners and the Government of Pakistan to increase refugee women's participation, including:

- Establish periodic meetings with refugee women to provide an opportunity for them to express their views and concerns.
- Ensure that more than one woman is on a committee and that women work on the same issues as men, including security, camp management, food distribution and issues related to return.
- Share best practices and lessons learned from women's committees that are functioning well, including methods to improve coordination among committees.
- Provide capacity building and training to prepare a new generation of women leaders.
- Sensitize men to better represent women's specific needs.
- Establish similar structures in Afghanistan to facilitate women's involvement once they return.

Commitment 2: Commit to individual registration of all refugee women and men and provide them with relevant documentation ensuring their individual security, freedom of movement and access to essential services.

Discussions around the second commitment on **ensuring individual documentation and registration** acknowledged positive steps UNHCR has taken at new camps,² such as the distribution of individual cards for food rations and birth certificates as of January 2004. However, these advances were occurring within a difficult legal framework. In theory, the Government of Pakistan does not allow refugees to leave camps and if they do, they may risk deportation and detention. Police sometimes harass refugees without documentation. Meanwhile, those with documentation sometimes face problems once they leave the North West Frontier Province (NWFP), where they are told their documentation is no longer valid.

To strengthen the second commitment, participants **recommended** that UNHCR, its implementing partners and the Government of Pakistan:

- Widely distribute among refugees, police and other officials the tripartite agreement signed between the governments of Afghanistan, Pakistan and UNHCR as it provides the legal framework for refugees to remain in Pakistan – as a tool to prevent arbitrary detention and harassment – at least through March 2006.

² New camps refer to those refugee camps UNHCR established in Pakistan after September 11, 2001 along the border of Afghanistan.

- Disseminate information and improve access to the Norwegian Refugee Council's seven Information and Legal Assistance Centers in Pakistan.³
- Encourage hospitals to issue birth certificates to all, bearing in mind issues of legitimacy and fraud.

Commitment 3: Develop integrated country-level strategies to address sexual and gender-based violence.

The group recognized that the third commitment to refugee women on **addressing sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV)** was challenging. They identified domestic violence, sexual abuse and early and forced marriage as main concerns. While UNHCR and its implementing partners provide training and sensitization on SGBV prevention and response, they are still at the stage of identifying various obstacles and beginning to address them. Challenges highlighted include:

- The long time it takes for reports of SGBV to make their way through the “chain of command” while leaving victims who report in extremely dangerous situations.
- Issue of confidentiality, as information can be leaked especially as it travels through the bureaucracy.
- Varying notions of what constitutes SGBV, as some Afghans argue that early and forced marriage is part of their “culture.”
- The perpetuation of violations by some guards and service providers.

In terms of **recommendations**, UNHCR shared that they are in the process of developing a referral system where they would have a more direct link to women. Participants shared additional recommendations for UNHCR, its implementing partners and the Government of Pakistan, including:

- Increase awareness of SGBV among Afghan refugees in camps and urban areas, and provide opportunities for further discussions.
- Play a more active role in screening and monitoring of security and service providers. This includes the broad dissemination and implementation of the UN's Inter-Agency Codes of Conduct and training among District Coordinators, local police and other authorities.
- Hold workshops on *Pashtoonwali*, the Pashtoon code of honor, for international organizations and agencies to develop a deeper understanding of the long-term impact of programs that address SGBV.
- Involve men in programs that address SGBV.

Commitment 5: Provide sanitary materials to all women and girls of concern as standard practice in all UNHCR assistance programs.

Local NGOs shared successful experiences in the **provision of sanitary materials**, such as:

- AWRC's project, with the Women's Commission support, to distribute safe motherhood kits to pregnant women.

³ For further information on NRC visit <http://www.nrc.no/NRC/eng/frames/programs.htm>

- CAR's income generating projects that produce sanitary materials.

Meanwhile, discussions around the fifth commitment highlighted challenges, including:

- Difficulties of prioritizing in an environment of tremendous needs and limited resources.⁴
- Issue of sustainability, particularly in light of dwindling resources.

The group **recommended** that UNHCR and donors:

- Increase resources to continue to provide sanitary materials to CAR and other local women's NGOs to distribute.
- Increase support to effective projects, such as CAR's income generating project.
- UNHCR should monitor existing implementing partner effectiveness in promoting women's protection, and exercise more flexibility in selecting implementing partners.

The workshop participants also **recommended that translated versions of the Five Commitments in Pashtu and Dari (and possibly other languages) be made widely available**. Some participants were not fluent in English and the hosts discussed the possibility of AWN and AWRC undertaking follow-up discussions using translated documents.

II. UN Millennium Development Goals

At the United Nations Millennium Summit in September 2000, 191 countries adopted the Millennium Declaration, which places development at the center of the global agenda and includes a set of interconnected and mutually reinforcing goals. The eight Millennium Development Goals set clear targets for reducing poverty, hunger, disease, illiteracy, environmental degradation and discrimination against women. Targets and indicators have been defined to track the progress in meeting the goals by 2015.⁵

Displaced populations are disproportionately affected by poverty and these related conditions. Therefore, in order to achieve progress in each of the eight goals, displaced populations must be considered in MDG programs, policies and strategies. As the Government of Pakistan will soon release its national Millennium Development Goal report, the second half of the workshop focused on the MDGs as an important mechanism to hold both governments and donors accountable to their commitments.

The workshop provided an opportunity to:

- Introduce participants to the eight goals and related targets;
- Consider the responsibility of governments to meet the set targets;
- Identify applicability of the MDGs to refugees in Pakistan.

⁴ At new camps established along the border of Afghanistan after September 11th, UNHCR distributed sanitary materials through 2002 until funds were cut. UNHCR stated that funds had recently been located and there were plans to begin providing the materials at new camps once again.

⁵ For more information on the MDGs visit <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals>. For further information on gender and the MDGs visit the Women's Environment and Development Organization at www.wedo.org or UNIFEM at www.unifem.org.

Participants divided into four smaller, mixed groups to discuss one or more goals.⁶

Goal 1: Eradicate Extreme Poverty and Hunger

Participants discussed how refugees are more vulnerable to poverty and hunger as their movement is restricted, limiting their access to basic services, employment and arable land. Restrictions on refugee employment also contribute to poverty and hunger. Meanwhile, refugee households headed by women, children or the disabled face increased vulnerability. The issue of mandates for UN agencies and governments was also raised, as many poor refugees live in urban areas, beyond the scope of UNHCR assistance, yet are not perceived as a population for the government or other UN agencies to support.

In order to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger among refugee populations, the group **recommended** that the Government of Pakistan, with support from partners, should:

- Increase self-sufficiency programs, such as income generating activities, vocational training and rotating funds established by the community.
- Guarantee refugees' freedom of movement.
- Increase security country-wide, as little progress in reducing poverty can be made as long as the overall environment is unstable and insecure.

Goal 2: Achieve Universal, Primary Education for all Girls and Boys

This group identified a number of obstacles to achieving universal, primary education for all refugee girls and boys, including:

- Limited support from host country;
- Long distance to travel to schools;
- Cultural barriers that won't permit girls to travel long distances or mix with boys;
- Language barriers;
- Extreme poverty that forces children to work or participate in household chores;
- Lack of female teachers;
- Early marriage for girls.

Despite these challenges, they developed a list of **recommendations** to improve refugee children's access to primary education, including:

- Increase awareness among families on the importance of education for both girls and boys.
- Provide education in all camps and support attendance in urban areas.
- Ensure that a number of classes are held in Pashtu and Dari.
- Include vocational skills training in the curriculum.

⁶ All groups were assigned to discuss *Goal 3: Promote Gender Equality and Empower Women* as essential, crosscutting components for the achievement of all the goals. *Goal 7: Ensure Environmental Sustainability* and *Goal 8: Develop a Global Partnership for Development* were not specifically addressed, as Goal 8 is relevant for donor countries. Workshop hosts encourage further discussion of Goal 7, as access to potable water and sanitation is particularly relevant to displaced populations.

- Raise awareness among women on their rights to an education.

Goal 4: Reduce Child Mortality & Goal 5: Improve Maternal Health

Participants in the third group identified positive practices in child and maternal health such as the provision of trained traditional birth attendants (TBAs) at camps, basic health units (BHUs) run by the UN and NGOs at camps and that both men and women are health workers. They also, however, highlighted significant obstacles, including:

- Lack of funding by the Government of Pakistan for basic health services;
- Government’s attitude that refugees are temporary and therefore not necessary to invest in;
- Cultural barriers that impede refugees’ access to health services;
- Refugees’ lack of awareness of child and maternal health.

The group **recommended** that the Government of Pakistan, UNHCR, implementing partners and other NGOs should:

- Include a separate unit in BHUs to address mother- and child- related issues.
- Create 24-hour mobile health units to reach more remote areas.
- Train more TBAs and provide refresher courses for those trained a while ago.
- Ensure TBAs are representative of the tribes in the areas they serve.
- Provide ongoing monitoring and evaluation of health services to identify gaps and propose recommendations to improve services.
- Develop standards and uniform policies on maternal and child health for NGOs.

Goal 6: Combat HIV/AIDS, Malaria and Other Diseases

To reduce the spread of HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases prevalent among displaced populations, the final group **recommended** that the Government of Pakistan, in cooperation with specialized UN agencies and NGOs, should:

- Build upon existing HIV/AIDS awareness campaigns and extend them to refugee populations. This could include awareness-raising in schools, women’s and community centers, BHUs, and among TBAs.
- Conduct a needs assessment in camps and urban areas on disease prevalence and issues of concerns among refugees.
- Replicate the successful “Polio Eradication Campaign” model for vaccinations for the diseases identified among the communities in the needs assessment.

Next steps

The workshop was an important opportunity for Afghans and Pakistanis to come together to network, to increase their own capacity as monitors and advocates and to strengthen linkages with the UN and Government of Pakistan in promoting the protection of refugee women and girls. Findings and recommendations from the workshop will be shared with various stakeholders including Afghan women’s groups, the UN and the Government of Pakistan. The hosts encourage UNHCR, UNDP and the Government of Pakistan to undertake follow-up sessions with Afghan women. Locally-based women’s groups have already discussed their potential role in monitoring implementation of these policies,

including establishing a monitoring committee of representatives of local NGOs, UN and Government of Pakistan to oversee the implementation of the workshop recommendations and to consider measures to strengthen collaboration on the Five Commitments and MDG process.

Information gathered in the workshop will also contribute to Women's Commission advocacy on advancing refugee issues under the UN's MDG process as leading up to the five-year review in September 2005. In addition, lessons learned from the Peshawar workshop will be applied in organizing future workshops in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Locally based workshop organizers plan to translate written materials, including the Five Commitments and MDGs, into Dari and Pashtu to use in future workshops as well as to share with agencies working with refugees and internally displaced people.

For further information about the workshop, please contact Jenny Perlman at jennyp@womenscommission.org.

For further information on Afghan Women's Network, please visit www.afghanwomensnetwork.org.

For further information on the Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children, please visit www.womenscommission.org.

Annex 1: List of Participating Organizations

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ORGANIZATIONS

Afghan Institute for Learning (AIL)

Afghan Women's Cultural Association (AWCA)

Afghan Women's Network (AWN)

Afghan Women's Resource Center (AWRC)

Afghan Women's Welfare Department (AWWD)

Commissionerate for Afghan Refugees, Social Welfare Cell (CAR/SWC)

International Rescue Committee (IRC)

UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)

Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children