

Executive Committee
Of the High Commissioner's Programme

UNHCR's Standing Committee
33rd Meeting
28-30 June 2005

**NGO Statement on
HIGH COMMISSIONER'S FIVE COMMITMENTS TO
REFUGEE WOMEN
Agenda Item 5(i)**

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

We welcomed the announcement of the Five Commitments in 2001 and particularly wish to note that they grew out of the dialogue with refugee women who themselves identified their top protection concerns. We also appreciate the paper reporting on implementation of the Five Commitments, based on identified standards and indicators. It has furthered our understanding of both progress made and challenges that remain in the field as UNHCR and its implementing partners strive to improve programming for, and protection of, refugee women and girls.

Before addressing the specific commitments, we believe it is important to recognize that the Five Commitments will remain an empty promise as long as the overall security situation for displaced populations is inadequate. We also wish to note that the Five Commitments are equally applicable to IDPs and returnees, as was originally reflected by the diversity of participants in the Dialogue for Refugee Women, and we would appreciate more detailed information on their application in those contexts.

The paper provides interesting data on the extent to which the Five Commitments are being implemented. While we believe that the paper is a good start, we would urge UNHCR to undertake greater analysis of the barriers that have prevented more consistent application of the Five Commitments. We would also appreciate greater detail on the exact locations where the Commitments have not been implemented and the reasons for this failure. We particularly note that the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is consistently cited as a country in which the commitments are insufficiently met. Equally important is the need to identify best practices and what led to successful implementation of the Five Commitments in some camps.

Commitment # 1. We note with particular concern that while progress has been made on women's participation and decision-making in terms of the percentage of women participating, the quality of that participation remains problematic. We would like to know what specific measures UNHCR plans to take in order to: (1) increase participation in those camps where it is still less than equal; and (2) ensure that women's participation in decision-making is meaningful.

Commitment # 2. The provision of identity documents, even temporary ones, is a critical protection tool for refugees and IDPs. In too many contexts, including Chad, Burundi, Colombia, Guinea and Liberia, this commitment has not been adequately implemented. We welcome the implementation of Project Profile, which will enable UNHCR to provide data disaggregated by age and gender. We are concerned that most of the reports did not provide this breakdown and would ask UNHCR to make available disaggregated data from the countries in which Project Profile has been implemented. We would like to know, in particular, in how many countries refugee and IDP women are individually registered, and how this impacts their protection situation. We would also like to have information on the extent to which women are individually registered for voluntary repatriation, as voluntary repatriation documentation is critical for accessing assistance and protection on return. The issue of voluntary repatriation also has a critical link to Commitment #1 and the ability of refugee women to make their own decisions to voluntarily return.

Commitment # 3. SGBV continues to be a critical problem prior to, and during, displacement, as well as after return. In Darfur, rape and gender-based violence continues unabated despite the presence of international humanitarian actors. For example, an NGO working in Darfur recently reported responding to more than 500 rape cases in its clinics in a three-month period. In Liberia, rape and gender based violence, including violence against children, even those less than 5 years old, is pervasive in both IDP camps and areas of return. In this respect it must be remembered that these are only those cases that have been identified, estimated by one NGO to amount to less than 2 per cent of actual cases. In most cases survivors do not receive appropriate reproductive health care, including post exposure prophylactics. In this respect we would appreciate greater information from UNHCR as to the extent to which HIV/AIDS prevention and response is incorporated into its SGBV programmes. We would also welcome information about UNHCR's response to domestic violence, which is prevalent in many refugee settings.

Some of the problems recognized in the paper, such as harassment and rape when women and girls collect firewood, have been chronic problems in the field for years. Sexual exploitation of students by teachers is prevalent in many countries, including Guinea, DRC and Uganda, and greater attention must be paid to ensuring that schools are safe. We urge UNHCR to move quickly towards not only identifying, but also implementing, innovative strategies to address these problems.

We also believe that further scrutiny needs to be given to traditional systems of justice, and their impact on the rights of women and girls. In addition, we would like to know what measures are being taken to address the fact that in most post-conflict situations there is an absence of a functioning judicial system, and, as a result cases are under-reported, or even if reported, are not addressed. In addition, in host countries refugees often face obstacles in accessing the judicial system.

We welcome the establishment of a country-level database to record information on SGBV cases and would be interested in receiving more information on how confidentiality concerns will be addressed as the database is implemented.

Commitment # 4. We appreciate the information provided on food distribution and note the improvements made in women's participation. We note however, that sexual exploitation often occurs during food distribution, and would like to know the measures being taken to address this issue. We remain particularly concerned about the breakdown in food pipelines which further puts women at great risk. We would ask that UNHCR also provide information on the distribution of non-food items, such as materials for shelter, which can also have serious repercussions on women's security.

Commitment # 5. We were concerned to learn about the failure to provide sanitary materials in all camps. This gap also has been a chronic problem in refugee settings for many years and one that requires immediate resolution. Every woman and girl should have access to sanitary materials from the onset of an emergency. The lack of sanitary materials is also one of the key obstacles to girls' school attendance.

As UNHCR continues to move forward with implementation of the Five Commitments, we would like to point out that accountability at all levels of UNHCR, as well as its implementing partners, is key to achieving their fulfillment. We would appreciate receiving specific information on monitoring of the implementation of the Commitments, staff training and on other measures being taken to ensure individual and organizational accountability. This should include information on the extent to which the recommendations contained in the report "Increasing Accountability for Age and Gender Mainstreaming in UNHCR" are being implemented. We note that the age-gender-diversity mainstreaming initiative promises to help ensure that the needs and rights of women are integrated in all sectors.

We call upon UNHCR and members of its Executive Committee, to take greater action to address the chronic rights abuses and protection risks faced by women and girls.

We would also urge UNHCR to undertake a similar assessment of implementation of the Five Priorities for refugee children for consideration at UNHCR's Executive Committee.

Thank you for your consideration.