

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE OF THE
HIGH COMMISSIONER'S PROGRAMME

STANDING COMMITTEE
45th Meeting
23-25 June 2009

NGO Statement on the Report on International Protection of Women and Girls in Displacement

Agenda Item 4 a)

This statement has been drafted in consultation with a wide range of NGOs and attempts to reflect the diversity of views within the NGO community.

Madam Chair,

We commend UNHCR on the leadership the organization has demonstrated in protecting and empowering refugee and IDP women and girls. We believe that the same leadership will increasingly be demonstrated in protecting the rights of stateless women and girls as well.

UNHCR's age, gender and diversity mainstreaming initiative has been instrumental in putting the concerns, needs and capacities of refugee women and girls, front and center in their operations. Refugee women and girls living in camp settings are, in fact, often better served and protected and participating in greater numbers and in new opportunities than they were in their communities of origin. UNHCR has capitalized on the displacement of women and girls to address inherent inequities and has generally done so in a thoughtful, culturally sensitive manner. The NGO community recognizes this and applauds these efforts.

As always, however, more can and should be done. We, the NGO community, remain concerned that country programs struggle with operationalizing the findings from their participatory assessments with refugee women and girls. We believe that more support and guidance is needed to turn the identified needs as well as the identified capacities into policy and program changes that meaningfully impact the lives of women and girls. We also believe that more needs to be done to engage refugee men and boys in promoting women's inclusion, participation, and gender equality. The real empowerment of women and girls requires the participation, support and involvement of men and boys as partners in this process.

UNHCR's articulation of empowerment as education, equal and meaningful participation, and economic empowerment and livelihood is well formulated. We support the approach. This means not only achieving gender parity in primary education but ensuring the equal access and participation of girls in secondary, tertiary, non-formal and vocational education programs. It

requires that schools be safe places for girls and that adequate numbers of female teachers are trained, recruited and appropriately compensated.

With regards to women's participation, we recognize UNHCR's efforts to involve women in refugee leadership structures and in food distributions. This is making a difference. However, we must ensure that this participation is meaningful and not token. Too often the refugee women on the leadership committees are silent, sitting in the back of the room. Appropriate support must be provided to enhance the meaningfulness of their participation. This, at times, requires investing in women's leadership training as well as confidence and capacity building activities. This, too, requires work with the men – to ensure they provide voice and space for their female counterparts.

We are very concerned, however, by the apparent stagnation on achieving the High Commissioner's Five Commitments to Refugee Women. Both the level of women's participation and the provision of sanitary materials appear to continue to fall short of the mark with little progress over the past couple of years. We recommend that those country operations lagging behind in these areas be identified and a concerted emphasis be made to assist those operations improve their performance. Eight years after the announcement of the High Commissioner's Commitments, it is distressing to know that the provision of sanitary materials – so basic for one's dignity – remains an unachieved goal. We recommend that progress on achieving the High Commissioner's Five Commitments to Refugee Women be reported on annually with data disaggregated by country operation at the Standing Committee meeting.

The NGO community notes and supports the increased focus on women's economic empowerment and believes it is vital to their protection including against gender-based violence. As we are all aware, too often, economic programs fall short and do not lead to dignified employment or sustainable income. As such, we hope that UNHCR is carefully planning and vetting the economic interventions they are funding so that the programs are based on real market demand and therefore lead to real economic empowerment.

The NGOs strongly commend UNHCR for updating its protection standards and guidance in the Handbook for the Protection of Women and Girls which was published by UNHCR last year and particularly commend the inclusion of stateless women and girls. We recommend that the Handbook's guidance be applied by all UNHCR operations, NGO partners, donor and refugee host governments.

On the protection of refugee women and girls, we note that the pilot Global Needs Assessment conducted by UNHCR in 2008 highlighted disturbing gaps in several areas, including the prevention of gender-based violence, which points to the urgency of addressing gaps in protection. We appreciate, in this regard, UNHCR's participation in the IASC Task Force on Safe Alternative Fuel and Energy (SAFE) and the development and endorsement of the guidelines. The IASC's Guidelines on Safe Alternative Fuel and Energy provide tools to address the protection needs for women by coordinating a fuel strategy. The NGO community welcomes UNHCR's commitment to fully implement these guidelines as an essential element for the protection of women.

We would, however, draw UNHCR's attention to the specific protection needs of women and girls with disabilities who are the most marginalized, invisible, and under-served, and at high risk of abuse and exploitation. We hope that governments will support UNHCR to continue the work they began on promoting effective services and inclusion for displaced people with disabilities over the past two years. In addition, we would like to highlight the plight of women refugees and IDPs in urban settings who face particular challenges in accessing services in general, but in particular to health and reproductive health services and to livelihoods. Lack of economic empowerment also constitutes an additional protection risk for these women. We would also like to highlight the importance of recognizing and addressing the equally essential and specific protection needs of stateless women and girls.

We commend UNHCR for its comprehensive reproductive strategic plan for 2008-2012 and the integration of reproductive health within its other public health strategic plans. We also note that UNHCR is clearly monitoring key reproductive health indicators in its Health Information System. We do, however, recommend that UNHCR further emphasizes family planning including voluntary, long-term methods in its programming, integrates family planning with HIV/AIDS programming and ensures clinical treatment and response to rape survivors as an integral part of its protection strategy – in order to respect and protect women's right to health

Lastly, we agree with and support UNHCR's two-pronged approach – mainstreaming for equal access and participation and targeted action to address inherent inequalities. We suggest UNHCR begin compiling lessons learned and practice models of these two approaches as a means of assisting country programs operationalize the findings from their participatory assessments.

We thank UNHCR for all they have done and are doing to promote greater protection and equality for displaced women and girls and we stand ready to assist with these efforts.

Thank you, Madam Chair.