

Peace and Refugees

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Statement presented by the following non-governmental organizations:
International Alliance of Women, International Council of Social Welfare,
International Federation of Aging, International Federation of Business and
Professional Women, International Federation of University Women, Pan Pacific
and South-East Asia Women's Association, Soroptimist International, World Union
of Catholic Women Organizations, Zonta International

We are pleased that the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) is giving special emphasis to refugee and displaced women and children at its 35th session. The Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies called attention to the sufferings of these vulnerable individuals and urged remedial action. It is important for international agencies and organizations concerned with women's issues to become strong advocates for this population.

We welcome the Report of the Experts Group convened by the CSW this past July in Vienna. Its recommendations provide a basic framework for actions to improve the situation of refugee and displaced women and children, and should be implemented by governments and international agencies.

Several issues deserve particular attention:

Protection

Because some members of these vulnerable groups have experienced persistent abuse, sexual harassment, violence, forced prostitution, and other assaults, it is essential that "protective" measures be taken at all stages of the refugees' route, from flight to refugee camp to resettlement to repatriation.

"Protection" is as vital to the survival of refugee women and children as life-sustainable assistance.

Participation of Women

Refugee policies for women should be developed with the input and participation of refugee women themselves. To promote active and leadership roles by the women, formation of women's organizations should be encouraged.

Older Women

The special needs and contributions of older refugee women who may be "invisible" to relief agencies, should be identified. Because of the rapid aging of the world's population, in both developed and developing regions, there are growing numbers of elderly persons, particularly older women, within refugee populations. Specialists who understand their needs and can tap their abilities, should be included in projects by UNHCR, governments, and NGO's.

Disabled Women

Within the refugee women population, the special needs of the disabled must not

be forgotten. They bear a double burden and require additional assistance. Programs and services must be equally accessible to women as well as to men. They need to be appropriate for the specific physiological and social requirements of women. Women who are caretakers of disabled family members should receive attention as well.

Data Collection

To plan appropriately for the refugee and displaced women, it is essential that demographic data be systematically collected.

UNHCR

As the lead UN agency charged with the humanitarian mission to provide life-sustainable assistance and protection to refugees, the UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees) should continue to develop strategies and strengthen policies to improve the situation of refugee women and children. Following are suggestions to further this goal.

Put more women in top management positions and place women in field and interviewing positions.

Set up specially targeted programs for women parallel to current "mainstreaming" efforts.

Institutionalize the Office of Women's Coordinator and provide for it through regular staffing procedures; elevate it to a top management post. Such action would send a powerful message to all working with refugees that UNHCR had translated a major commitment to women into effective action.

Make gender-impact training a permanent component for management and field staff of UNHCR, and implementing agencies.

UN Conventions, Resolutions and Protocols

All conventions and other UN-adopted declarations and instruments that are relevant to the human rights, well-being, and equality of women and children, should be utilized by UN and other agencies.

The Convention on Elimination of Discrimination Against Women is a logical vehicle to monitor the treatment of refugee and displaced women. Governments reporting to CEDAW should be required to account for the situation of refugee and displaced women in their countries.

Coordination and Cooperation Within the United Nations

With the increase in the number of refugees and the burgeoning population of non-refugee asylum seekers, it is essential that other UN agencies assist UNHCR carry out its mission. Some have already done so; more resources and cooperation are needed.

The recently-initiated CIREFCA PROCESS in Central America, carried out by a Joint UNHCR/UNDP unit, is an example of the kind of collaboration that would be particularly beneficial for refugee women who often are left out of development

programs.

Repatriation

As the planning process for repatriation goes forward, hopefully for hundreds of thousands of Afghans, Cambodians, and others, it is urgent, since many repatriated women will have to provide for their families, that development strategies be built into programs from the beginning. The particular needs, interests, desires, and resources of refugee women must be taken into account.

Commitment of Donor Countries

The financial crunch caused by a shortfall of contributions from donor countries has been devastating to UNHCR which has had to cut back staff, services and field offices, at a time when the refugee population and large new groups of asylum seekers are growing exponentially.

It is essential that the more developed nations increase their contributions and share the burdens of the poorer nations who are hosting the majority of refugees. Since women and children suffer most when there are cuts of this magnitude, it is urged that donor nations earmark funds for specific targeted projects that suit women's interests and needs.

With the global increase in the number of displaced persons, many fleeing poverty and famine, more emphasis is needed on economic development. Not bona fide refugees, these people do not automatically receive the assistance of UNHCR. Their plight is another tragedy that calls for remedial actions by the international community.

Conclusion

We call upon the Commission on the Status of Women to use all the means at its disposal, both at the United Nations and with individual governments, to persuade agencies and governments to provide the resources and take actions needed to assist this population of women resume productive, dignified and self-sustaining lives.