
THE ROLE OF UNHCR IN ADDRESSING THE PROBLEMS OF REFUGEE WOMEN

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Abstract: Women face discrimination and subjugation in every aspect of their life. Refugee Women are no exception; their plight is more vulnerable and sensitive. To protect refugee women from discrimination, gender-based violence and other atrocities many international governmental and non-governmental organizations have brought these issues to the forefront. Following the United Nations' lead after the launch of the United Nations Decade for Women: Equality, Development and Peace (1975-1985), UNHCR started focusing on women and girls as a specific group with particular and different needs than that of men. UNHCR collaborating with the other UN agencies and organizations established programs, guidelines and policies dealing with the special needs of refugee women. The paper will explore the importance of the different policies adopted by UNHCR on refugee women, the role played by different non-governmental organizations in protecting and building the policies for women and how has these policies impacted the lives of refugee women?

Key Words: Refugee Women, UNHCR, Guidelines and Policies

Introduction: The 1951 Refugee convention defines Refugees as people "owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country"(1951 Refugee Convention) [1]. UNHCR since its formation has been providing protection and assistance to the refugees, and durable solutions. Refugees are susceptible and are at risk of life, and women refugees are more vulnerable and face much discrimination and subjugation as compared to men refugees, as there is an increased possibility of discrimination and gender based violence. Women comprise almost half of the world's refugee population. Taking into consideration the atrocities and discrimination faced by women and realizing that the needs and requirements of women are different than that of men, UNHCR has formed certain norms and guidelines to help and improve the living conditions of refugee women.

UNHCR and Refugee Women: Refugee women undergo much trauma, discrimination and humiliation; in order to survive and live respectively women need to understand their rights. Refugee Women often face difficulties in registering and obtaining proper documents for eligibility of assistance. For example Human Rights Watch Report stated that the system of (Bhutanese refugees in Nepal) registration harshly discriminates against women, only the male members get rations in their names as heads of house hold, denying women refugees the access to necessary provisions including food, shelter and medical supplies and services.

Physical abuse, sexual violence and exploitation are the more important and serious problems faced by refugee women. Women are victimized by border guards, soldiers, in some cases by officials and

volunteers working in the fields. Special measures need to be taken for the safety of refugee women.

The organizational goals of UNHCR regarding refugee women are – to provide protection appropriate to their specific needs; to identify an appropriate durable solution; to provide assistance, which will encourage the realization of their full potential and encourage the in preparing for the durable solution (UNHCR) [2]. UNHCR taking into consideration the special needs and requirements of women refugees have certain norms, policies and guidelines, intended to be used by the staff of UNHCR, UN agencies, inter-governmental and non-governmental organizations and host government agencies. UNHCR works in cooperation with many UN agencies, non-governmental organizations that addresses the gender issues and sexual violence. Organizations, such as International Committee of the Red Cross, The Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, International Alert and many more work consistently to improve the lives of women.

UNHCR treated all refugees (men, women, boys, girls) as one single group, dealing with the same problems; not realizing that the needs and requirements of one group are different from that of the other.

The major policies and guidelines developed by UNHCR over the years for refugee women [3] -

- UNHCR released its first Policy on Refugee Women, 20 August 1990
- UNHCR Guidelines on the Protection of Refugee Women, 1991
- First full assessment of refugee women's reproductive health care needs, 1994
- UNHCR Policy on Harmful Traditional Practices (Annexes), 19 December 1997

- An inter-agency field manual on refugees' reproductive health is published, 1999
- UNHCR's Five Commitments to Refugee Women, 12 December 2001
- Guidelines on International Protection No 1: Gender-Related Persecution within the context of Article 1(A) of the 1951 Convention and/or protocol relating to the status of Refugees, 7 May 2002
- Sexual and Gender-based Violence (SGBV) Guidelines 2003
- The Minimum Initial Services Package (MISP) for reproductive health care included in Sphere as a minimum standard 2004
- UNHCR's Executive Committee (EXCOM) adopts a Conclusion on Women and Girls at Risk 2006
- UNHCR Handbook for the Protection of Women and Girls, January 2008

It was only after the 1980 Report for the World Conference of the United Nations Decade for Women, did UNHCR realize that they had ignored and overlooked the specific needs of refugee women and girls and "unintentionally marginalized them, or even reinforced inequitable relationships" (UNHCR, Gender Equality Unit pp. 3) [4]. The UN Decade for Women got UNHCR interested and concerned in the issues of refugee women, until then not much was done to address the needs of the women refugees to deal with them as "women in particular situation with particular needs" (Johnsson, 1989) [5].

The Executive Committee of the UNHCR at its 36th session incorporated the question of refugee women on its agenda for the very first time stressing the need for UNHCR and host government to pay specific attention to the protection of refugee women (Osaki Keiko, 1997 pp. 13) [6]. UNHCR further elaborated on the special vulnerability of refugee women and the problems that they face. It also highlighted the importance of active participation of refugee women in assistance programs. In 1988 UNHCR established a Steering Committee on Refugee Women to define and oversee the assessment, and strengthen existing policies and programs in favour of refugee women. The 1990 Policy on Refugee Women focused on the view of benefiting the entire refugee population (UNHCR, 1990). UNHCR organized the People Oriented Planning Training Programme (POP), which provided the UNHCR staff framework for analyzing various roles of men and women. UNHCR appealed to governments and other international organizations to take measures to ensure the physical safety of refugee women and girls. Global developments in terms of women's rights and gender mainstreaming had an impact on UNHCR as well. By 1998, there was a massive shift in UNHCR, the focus had shifted from women to gender, due to the 1995 Beijing Declaration and 1997 ECOSOC Conclusions.

The Age, Gender and Diversity mainstreaming (AGDM) focused on process, developing the tools needed to ensure a consistent approach. It aimed to empower refugee women by mainstreaming age, gender and diversity. In 2008, UNHCR developed a Handbook for the Protection of Women and Girls, which sets the principles that guide UNHCR'S work. In 2011, UNHCR formed a five year AGDM Forward Plan, a living document that provides concrete measures for implementing the 2011 Policy.

Most importantly UNHCR in 2001 issued its own five commitments to Refugee Women [7]-

1. Develop country level strategies to address violence against refugee women, in coordination with security, legal, program, community services and health sectors. Partnerships with NGOs, governments, implementing partners to make these strategies enduring.

2. That all Refugee Women would be registered individually and provided with proper documentation to ensure their security, freedom of movement and access to services. Both men and women will participate in the registration process.

3. In all representation of refugees to UNHCR in urban, rural and camp settings, 50% representatives would be women.

4. Distribution of food and non food items will be controlled directly by female household members

5. Availability of sanitary materials to all women and girls of concern should be a standardized practice in UNHCR assistance programs.

These five UNHCR commitments are still the bedrock that shape and inform UNHCR country operations and field practices.

Since the initial release of UNHCR's Policy on Refugee Women in 1990 numerous policies and guidelines have been developed to address the problems of refugee women. Most of these guidelines did not do much for the development and improvement of refugee women. However some of the policies have successfully improved the situation of refugee women, especially in the reproductive health services, in terms of women participation, gender-based violence has gained attention and huge response over the decades (Buscher, 2010) [8].

Conclusion: UNHCR has no doubt worked hard to safeguard women's needs and assure that they have equal access to protection, basic goods and services. There has been an increasing effort to provide better health care, improve food and water supplies, increase literacy and skills training, programs to study and combat sexual violence, and genital mutilation (Susan Forbes Martin, 2006) [9]. There is definitely a positive change however the atrocities faced by refugee women are still rampant. UNHCR and its partners working in the field should focus on organized collaboration - following proper time

schedule and agendas, skilled and efficient workers in the field, and most importantly implementation of the policies. Refugee Women should also be encouraged in decision-making process in regard to the camp decisions concerning them. The schools set up in the camps should not discriminate girls, there should be equal opportunities for both boys and girls. Refugee women face the challenge of registration such an issue should be addressed at the earliest. Women in camps should be encouraged to form

groups and spread awareness on problems relating to the reproductive health, security and safety of refugee women. Some refugee women at times are obligated to grant sexual favours in return for documentation and relief goods along escape routes and in border areas, camps, settlements and urban centers, which remains a painful reality. UNHCR along with many of its partners around the world has brought about a positive impact in the lives of women and girls and a lot more is yet to achieve.

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