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Gender equality*Summary*

This paper reports on UNHCR's integration of gender equality in its work in field operations and at Headquarters.¹ It also highlights the findings of the internal gender equality review that was conducted in 2015, with particular focus on the progress made, as well as gaps and challenges identified through this process.

¹ This paper does not cover gender equality issues that are the purview of human resources and oversight bodies, including staffing and the prevention and response to sexual harassment and sexual exploitation and abuse related to staff.

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I. Introduction

1. In 2015, UNHCR carried out an internal review of gender equality in over 70 operations, documenting good field practices, key gaps and challenges, as well as recommendations on how these could be addressed. These outcomes form the basis of the updated “Five commitments to refugee women” (2001) to ensure they reflect the current realities faced by women and girls of concern.

2. Over the years, UNHCR’s approach to gender equality has evolved considerably; once focused exclusively on women, the current, holistic approach is guided by UNHCR’s “Age, gender and diversity policy” (2011); “Action against sexual and gender-based violence: an updated strategy” (2011) and the “Five commitments to refugee women” (2001).² UNHCR remains committed to ensuring progress towards the implementation of UN Security Council resolutions on women, peace and security (2000-2015), and the UN “System-wide policy and action plan on gender equality and the empowerment of women” (UN-SWAP, 2012).

II. Gender equality integration: progress and challenges

A. Equal and meaningful participation

3. UNHCR has taken numerous steps to enhance the meaningful participation of displaced women and girls in all decision-making processes that impact their lives and communities. This requires support to refugee, returnee and internally displaced communities to develop strong gender equality awareness and leadership skills among women. Under UNHCR’s global strategic priority objective on community empowerment and self-reliance, 53 per cent of the concerned operations recorded an increase in the participation of women in leadership and management structures in 2015. This was achieved through context-specific strategies such as the use of outreach volunteers in Jordan and leadership training for IDP women in Colombia. Strengthening women’s meaningful participation remains a challenge due to a range of factors, including: discrimination; the burden of domestic responsibilities; the lack of affordable transportation; the absence of meaningful inclusion; and high illiteracy rates and language barriers, among others. Despite being specifically mentioned in several UN Security Council resolutions on women, peace and security,³ refugee and displaced women remain on the margins of peace negotiations, peacebuilding initiatives and the development of national action plans.

² UNHCR also remains committed to implementing its obligations under the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (1979), the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995), and the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women (1993).

³ See United Nations Security Council Resolutions 1325 (2000), 1820 (2008), 1888 (2009), 1889 (2009), 1960(2010), 2106 (2013), 2122 (2013), 2242 (2015).

B. Individual registration, documentation and refugee status determination

4. UNHCR provides support for forcibly displaced and stateless persons to access individual registration and identity documents, as well as refugee determination processes, which are important to ensure protection against exploitation and abuse. The majority of operations that participated in the internal gender equality review noted that, in principle, both men and women have equal access to registration. Operations also reported that specific needs and risks were identified through the individual registration processes to ensure tailored protection responses, including for survivors of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), persons with disabilities, older persons and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) individuals. Operations reported improving access to registration and documentation, prioritizing women at heightened risk, providing them with individual documentation. In Rwanda, for example, all refugees over the age of 12 were provided with individual biometric identification cards which reduced their vulnerability to human rights violations, including trafficking. Nevertheless, the practice of registering men as ‘head of family’, lack of access to female asylum-seekers living in urban areas, and limited recognition of gender-based persecution as valid grounds for asylum create additional obstacles to gender equality in registration and refugee status determination.

5. Currently, women cannot confer nationality to their children on the same basis as men in 27 countries around the world. This can create statelessness when children cannot acquire nationality from their fathers. However, progress has been made in many places. As a result of UNHCR’s campaign to end statelessness, #IBelong, reforms to remove gender discrimination from nationality laws are underway in several countries, including the Bahamas, Liberia, Madagascar and Somalia. Birth registration is also a key element in the prevention of statelessness. In the context of the Syria crisis, for example, UNHCR continued to promote and support universal birth registration among children born both inside the Syrian Arab Republic and as refugees in neighbouring countries. As part of these efforts, legal aid and counselling services have been established in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, the Syrian Arab Republic and Turkey.

C. Management and distribution of food and core relief items

6. UNHCR strives to include women and girls in the distribution and management of food and core relief items, ensuring that such mechanisms are gender-sensitive. This is achieved by establishing gender-balanced management committees and participatory assessments, monitoring and evaluation. In the United Republic of Tanzania, UNHCR registered women as “heads of household” in order to ensure food security for their families after a recent study found that when food distribution interventions target women, child malnutrition rates are significantly reduced.⁴ In Afghanistan, UNHCR has prioritized the distribution of food and relief items to women at heightened risk, including female heads of household, single women and widows. Operations are increasingly relying on cash-based interventions to ensure access to food and relief items. Several operations are providing access to sanitary materials through cash vouchers or direct distribution. While cash-based interventions are more flexible than in-kind assistance, UNHCR stresses the need to monitor the impact of cash-based interventions on the lives of women of concern. Women

⁴ UN Women, “Preventing Conflict, Transforming Justice, Securing the Peace: Global Study on the Implementation of UNSCR 1325” (USA: UN Women, 2015), 85. Available from: <http://wps.unwomen.org/~media/files/un%20women/wps/highlights/unw-global-study-1325-2015.pdf>

must continue to be included in the development of these initiatives to ensure their needs are met. Key challenges include long distances to distribution centres or extended waiting periods, which create protection risks for women and their children, often exacerbated by a lack of adequate crowd management. Furthermore, a lack of resources leading to insufficient food rations and a reduction in the distribution of sanitary materials were also identified in the review as threats to food security, dignity and safety.

D. Economic empowerment

7. UNHCR believes that portraying women and girls as victims is detrimental to addressing their specific risks, and has designed a range of programmes to identify and build on their strengths and capacities in order to promote empowerment and self-reliance. The internal gender equality review showed that nearly 90 per cent of the operations that participated have livelihood programmes. Operations highlighted that economic empowerment facilitated women's meaningful participation in decision-making, including in peace and security initiatives. Economic empowerment was also part of UNHCR's multisector support to SGBV survivors and women at risk.

8. Despite progress in creating livelihood opportunities through the graduation approach⁵, gender-sensitive programming has faced several challenges, including the scarcity of adequate economic prospects for women and adolescent girls, limited access to education and training, restrictive cultural practices and legal frameworks, and insufficient access to childcare. Even when livelihood opportunities are accessible to women, they are often limited to activities that are low-paid and fail to provide opportunities for women to grow. This lack of access to sustainable livelihoods, including due to the absence of the legal right to work, contributes to harmful coping strategies, such as: transactional sex, forced sex work, and early and forced marriage, with women and youth turning towards unregulated employment where they are more vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. There remains a critical need for safe, dignified and sustainable economic opportunities for women that are driven by sound market analysis, as well as for programmes which support their participation in local economies.

E. Sexual and gender-based violence

9. Improving gender equality, eliminating gender-based discrimination and empowering displaced women and girls are vital for the creation of safe environments. In 2015 progress was made by many operations in responding effectively to and preventing SGBV. During the year, 43 operations developed and implemented SGBV strategies, and 22 operations strengthened SGBV information management. Through the "Safe from the start initiative", dedicated Senior Protection Officers (SGBV) were deployed to various emergency operations, implementing multi-sector projects to promote the use of alternative energy and to increase women's access to technology and livelihoods. Female and male survivors of SGBV have benefited from strengthened counselling and referral services, as well as from increased access to safe shelters. UNHCR has also increased its SGBV prevention work with specific groups such as LGBTI persons. Prevention activities included community mobilization through radio and theatre to encourage a change in attitude and behaviour. In addition, UNHCR participated in the development and

⁵ Pioneered by BRAC and piloted by the World Bank's Consultative Group to Assist the Poor (CGAP) and the Ford Foundation, the graduation approach enables refugee and local families to progressively move out of extreme poverty and access sustainable livelihood opportunities.

implementation of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) “Guidelines for integrating gender-based violence interventions in humanitarian action”.

10. Ongoing challenges in this area include the lack of attention to addressing root causes of gender inequality; the shortage of safe shelters; weak and overburdened identification and referral systems; ineffective justice systems; and limited access to persons of concern. UNHCR’s work on strengthening effective SGBV prevention and response mechanisms continue to be supported in the framework of the “Call to action on protection from gender-based violence in emergencies”.

F. Public health

11. UNHCR prioritizes quality health care, including reproductive health services, and promotes increased availability to services which are integrated into national systems. Comprehensive reproductive health services include the prevention of maternal and infant mortality, response to the needs of SGBV survivors, prevention and treatment of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and HIV, and the provision of family planning services. In Malaysia, UNHCR ensured access for refugee women to post- and pre-natal care, assigning interpreters to five maternal health clinics and conducting free mobile clinics in various locations around the country. In Israel, UNHCR held training workshops for female asylum-seekers in Ashdod and in Tel Aviv, aimed at increasing family planning and reproductive health awareness. UNHCR also supported initiatives to increase women’s participation in the planning, implementation and monitoring of health services and facilities, as well as to increase the availability of female doctors, nurses, midwives and counsellors. Key progress included the growing number of operations in which births were attended by skilled personnel, which rose from 38 per cent in 2008 to 76 per cent in 2015. UNHCR has continued to expand the availability of post-exposure prophylaxis with the objective of ensuring that all refugees have access to this prophylaxis within 72 hours after a rape takes place. In addition, UNHCR continued to advocate for an end to all mandatory HIV testing of persons of concern. Access to mental health and psychosocial support for refugee women and girls has also been strengthened.

12. While there has been progress, UNHCR operations have identified gaps in the availability of quality sexual and reproductive health care. This remains one of the leading causes of death, disease and disability among forcibly displaced women and girls.⁶ Globally, 60 per cent of preventable maternal deaths take place among women affected by conflict, natural disasters and displacement;⁷ however these services remain chronically unavailable in emergency settings.⁸ In the review, operations stressed that the need for quality sexual and reproductive health care far exceeds supply and access to national health care from the onset of an emergency, including comprehensive family planning services, is therefore a priority for UNHCR.

⁶ Women Refugee Commission, “Sexual and Reproductive Health”. Available from: <https://womensrefugeecommission.org/programs/reproductive-health>

⁷ UNFPA, “Shelter from the Storm”, 2015, page 4. Available from: https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/sowp/downloads/State_of_World_Population_2015_EN.pdf

⁸ See no.7

G. Education

13. According to the gender equality review, increasing access to quality education for women and girls is vital to their protection and empowerment. It also contributes to achieving greater participation as it provides women and girls with information, helps build their knowledge, and eventually provides them with skills that are essential for developing self-reliance. In 2015, enrolment rates of displaced primary school children increased in 56 situations across various operations, including Cameroon, Chad, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Iraq, Lebanon and Somalia. Specific measures were taken to increase the level of school attendance by girls. Measures were also taken to prevent and respond to SGBV in schools, and to increase the recruitment of female teachers with the aim of ensuring retention of girls in schools. In 2015, women and girls accounted for 42 per cent of all students enrolled in the tertiary education scholarship programme, the Albert Einstein German Academic Refugee Initiative (DAFI).

14. Challenges in this area include: overcrowding; inadequate school buildings and infrastructure; unqualified teaching staff; lack of female teachers; lack of access to sanitary materials; early and forced marriages; and the risk of SGBV in, and on the way to, school. Marginalized women and girls, including those with physical and cognitive disabilities, and overaged learners face even greater challenges in accessing education. In many contexts, family and community members imposed restrictions on the participation of women and girls in education. UNHCR promotes the inclusion of displaced girls in national education systems; the creation of safe learning environments; and initiatives to increase enrolment and retention rates of girls in school.

H. Shelter, housing, land and property

15. UNHCR encouraged shelter arrangements that support rights and freedoms, enabling displaced persons to make meaningful choices about issues affecting their lives, contribute to their community, and live with greater dignity and independence. To this end, UNHCR prioritizes persons at heightened risk, including, female-headed households, LGBTI persons, families with disabled children, survivors of SGBV, and unaccompanied and separated children. However, finding adequate, safe and affordable housing remains a challenge, with displaced families frequently facing discrimination and exploitation by owners and landlords. In camps, women and girls face additional security risks, including SGBV, due to the lack of simple security measures, such as locks on doors and adequate lighting. In some contexts, the shortage of shelter services has created a challenge in ensuring that all persons of concern find suitable and safe accommodation.

16. In return situations, women and adolescent girls can face severe discrimination in the areas of housing, land and property. In some cases this is due to discriminatory national or customary laws that deny women and children the right to inherit, own or use land and property. The loss of documents and land titles during flight, as well as complicated legal procedures, further exacerbate the situation, particularly for widows. Continued engagement in this area is key to achieving successful durable solutions for women.

I. UNHCR capacity

17. In addition to assessing progress in key areas of UNHCR's work, the gender equality review also examined the Office's internal capacity to promote gender equality. Over 70 per cent of operations indicated that identifying and responding to gender equality concerns in humanitarian situations, particularly in emergencies, remained a challenge. They requested increased access to capacity building, financial and human resources, and

technical expertise. The development of learning tools on gender equality has been prioritized for 2016-2017.

18. Operations also stressed the need to sustain and expand funding for targeted gender equality programming, based on an analysis that examines the various challenges that women, girls, men and boys face in displacement contexts. Additional capacity development is also required to effectively integrate gender equality within all areas of programming in a measurable and concrete manner. There has been consistent operational engagement on age, gender, and diversity mainstreaming, UNHCR operations that received dedicated expertise (through the Surge and GenCap rosters and roving Senior Protection Officers (SGBV)) reported that the additional capacity had enabled them to improve targeted gender equality and SGBV programming, as well as AGD integration. Operations highlighted the need for guidance and good practices on gender equality, as well an expansion of the collection and further analysis of sex-specific and sex- and age-disaggregated data. These capacity gaps are also reflected in UNHCR's annual mandatory reporting on the implementation of the UN System-Wide Policy and Action Plan on Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-SWAP).

III. Conclusion

19. In moving forward, UNHCR intends to address the challenges and gaps that were documented its internal gender equality review of operations. This review, along with the findings from dialogues with 1,400 displaced and stateless persons provided strong evidence for the identification of priority areas to achieve gender equality integration. UNHCR has revised the 2001 Commitments to Refugee Women based on research, analysis and consultation conducted in the course of the review, which will be rolled out in the course of 2016.

20. Working toward gender equality improves the protection environment for all persons of concern. Significant progress has been made in a number of areas; however, it is clear that much more needs to be done. UNHCR will focus on improving its capacity to ensure systematic and consistent gender equality integration across operations, through the development of guidance and other learning tools. The Office also seeks to strengthen a range of initiatives highlighted in this paper that are essential to the self-reliance of women and girls. UNHCR will also increase efforts at the community level by addressing the role of men and boys in efforts to achieve gender equality.

21. Progress requires sustained effort and the long-term commitment of staff at every level. Strong partnerships are also fundamental to these efforts. Many of the issues identified in the course of the internal gender review require the committed engagement of persons of concern, NGOs, national women's organizations and other civil society actors, as well as hosting States and communities. It is only through a sense of shared responsibility that meaningful progress in the area of gender equality can be made.
