

**INTRODUCTION OF THE STANDING COMMITTEE PAPER
ON
AGE, GENDER AND DIVERSITY**

Louise Aubin
Deputy Director, International Protection

*Thank you Mr Chairperson.
Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,*

During my first UNHCR deployment in the field – yes, that was a long time ago - I was told to ‘go to the border and see what newly arrived refugees needed’. Wondering by what scientific method or satellite imagery I was going to know what people needed, I was simply told “well obviously, you ask them”. Words to live by, as they perfectly encapsulate what we, today, seem at pains to describe as core to protection work: to help protect people, we need to know them well, we need proximity to establish that trusted two-way communication and actively listen to and act upon the feedback they provide. In short, refugees, internally displaced and stateless people are our most valued partners.

At UNHCR, we have a longstanding commitment to placing people at the centre of our work. Our interventions, including in large emergencies, need to be accessible and indeed life-saving, not for most, but for everyone. And we’ve grown convinced that promoting the participation of the most disadvantaged and invisible among the population, far from creating imbalances, actually contributes to the overall well-being of communities.

The Updated Policy

In March this year, UNHCR issued an updated Policy on Age, Gender, and Diversity (available in hard copy at the back of the room). The policy builds on the foundational components of UNHCR’s AGD approach so far: in fact the two annexes to the new policy bring forward the *raison d’être* of our five ‘commitments to women and girls’ from 2001 and much of the substance of the original 2011 AGD policy.

So what’s new?

First, the updated policy pulls together the “DNA” of UNHCR’s protection work: our commitment to being accountable to persons we serve, our long-standing Age Gender and Diversity approach to programming, and our specific commitments to women and girls to promote gender equality are all consolidated here to complement and build upon one another in a single framework.

Second, the updated Policy articulates a much clearer theory of change. Six areas of engagement identified as essential to a people-centred, community-based response, are underpinned by ten core actions which set the mandatory benchmarks to be achieved by every UNHCR operation. Together, they catalyse agency on the part of communities, improve the relevance and impact of programs,

and eventually more equality between men and women, and persons of diverse backgrounds and experiences.

The policy requires UNHCR to institutionalize engagement with diverse groups. For children and youth, the Global Refugee Youth Consultations in 2016, just like the Global Consultations with Women held before them, provided sound lessons about what this requires: from guidance on structuring consultations with young people, to training which aims to change attitudes so that the concerns, ideas and solutions of youth are taken seriously enough for them to be used optimally. And these lessons are applied to different groups. In several countries such as in Ukraine, Mauritania, and Zimbabwe, UNHCR colleagues have held structured consultations and workshops with persons with disabilities, their care takers, local organizations of persons with disabilities, and partners (including governments), to identify barriers to access to humanitarian programmes, and jointly devise solutions.

With data collected and disaggregated by age, sex, and diversity considerations, we can more effectively identify individuals most at risk, and take measures to improve their access to humanitarian programmes. For unaccompanied and separated children, this would mean that we are able to initiate best interest procedures earlier, as per new UNHCR best interest Guidelines about to be released. Also, UNHCR's new Refugee Education Management Information System (REMIS) will help inform gender-sensitive programming by monitoring enrolment, attendance and performance data of refugee students disaggregated by age and gender.

We've begun a mapping of feedback mechanisms globally and what this has revealed so far is that there exist numerous means through which persons of concern can communicate with UNHCR staff. The new policy looks to systematize feedback mechanisms with a view to ensuring more coordinated systems, tailored to the context and communities, trusted and confidential, and importantly responsive. As a result, we expect to see all persons of concern, including those with limited literacy skills, persons with disabilities, and linguistic minorities having equal access to call centres, help desks, and different media to share concerns, ideas, as well as be able to lodge sensitive complaints.

Specifically, on gender

Allow me a brief focus on our gender equality work to give an idea of what more needs to be done and how the policy is expected to provide impetus for our efforts.

If 67% of operations reported an increase last year in the % of active female participants in leadership/management structures, the goal has always been and remains 'parity'. The new AGD will see the Organization tracking the number of operations achieving parity, their advocacy efforts, and put in place remedial measures to help address all too common societal constraints limiting women and girls' participation in leadership structures.

Individual registration is up or maintained in more than 81% of our operations reporting on this indicator. But we feel confident that we can move the needle further by setting in train measures to see more women as primary recipients of assistance on behalf of the household, not only in the absence of an adult male. The potential for economic empowerment is enormous: at the moment,

94 countries have UNHCR cash programmes with more than 10.5 million persons receiving cash assistance.

Fundamental to gender equality, programmes aimed at preventing and responding to the scourge of sexual and gender based violence need to continue benefitting from a global and system-wide concerted effort. Aggregated data from operations where the Gender-based Violence Information Management System is in place indicates a consistent trend whereby the vast majority of reported survivors are adult (80%) females (92%). We also know that the availability of quality services increases the likelihood of reporting. The new mandatory Policy not only requires mandatory referral pathways for both male and female survivors, but calls for equal access to livelihood, quality education and health programs.

Yes, the goals of UNHCR's new AGD policy are ambitious, and yet essential. Implemented as a whole, the new AGD policy is catalytic and merits our determined support.

I look forward to hearing your reactions and answering any questions you may have.