

# Evaluation of the Implementation of UNHCR's Age, Gender and Diversity policy.

## Longitudinal evaluation, Final report

### UNHCR Evaluation Office

**Purpose:** To assess and support the implementation of the 2018 Age, Gender, and Diversity (AGD) policy. The evaluation explores how key staff understand the policy and aims to generate evidence to guide and enhance UNHCR's approach to improving AGD practice.

**Evaluation type:** strategic thematic – developmental/ longitudinal design

**Evaluation methods:** Mixed methods including key informant interviews, focus group discussions in five countries, Regional Bureaus, and HQ.

**Implemented:** 2019 - 2023 by the Overseas Development Institute/ODI.

**Scope:** Global with a focus on: Chad, Greece, Mexico, Kenya, Thailand.

**Commissioned by** the Evaluation Office

## Evaluation Context

UNHCR has long utilised approaches that address the diversity in the populations UNHCR works with and for. In 2004, it introduced its first formal AGD mainstreaming strategy, followed by an AGD Policy in 2011 and again in 2018, with the updated policy that is the focus of this evaluation. The evaluation is a forward-looking transformative evaluation designed to promote learning from the strategies adopted by country offices to fulfil the AGD policy, to identify lessons learnt and propose practical recommendations that can be tested over time.

This brief presents the findings related to the 6 areas of inquiry:

1. UNHCR's Understanding and Operationalisation of the AGD Policy.
2. Systematic collection and Use of Disaggregated Data.
3. Systems & Processes that support implementation of the AGD Policy.
4. Engagement of partners on AGD.
5. Achieving of Policy objectives.
6. Lessons learned.

## Key Findings

### Understanding and Operationalisation of the AGD Policy

The AGD approach is well known by staff and partners and is seen as a cornerstone of UNHCR's work. Staff and key partners largely understand AGD in the context of UNHCR's previous Age, Gender and Diversity Mainstreaming (AGDM 2011) policy, having a more limited awareness of the more recent policy and its requirements.

Knowledge of the current policy's specific requirements, and a practical understanding of how to embed the principles of the AGD Policy into staff's daily work, is limited, particularly among new staff. The evaluation team found that responsibility for implementation is considered to be mainly the role of protection officers. Staff interpret the policy narrowly as meaning one of two things: accountability to affected people (AAP) through participatory assessments; and a gender approach, specifically on gender-based violence (GBV).

The evaluation found there to be several reasons for the lack of understanding and operationalisation of the policy: (1) the lack of an operational and funded roll-out strategy; (2) the lack of accountability mechanisms for compliance; and (3) the limited detail on results-oriented goals, and how to measure progress under the policy.

A strength that was observed is the ability of country offices to effectively contextualise their work, although this is limited to existing areas of expertise. As a result, work on gender – and especially on gender-based violence (GBV) – has been relatively well developed, but there is general agreement that support and protection for persons who identify as LGBTQI+ still need to be included in planning and programs more systematically.

Responses to the specific needs and risks of LGBTQI+ vary significantly depending on the operation and the operation's social, political and legal context. The evaluation found a tendency in UNHCR operations to address LGBTQI+ persons as a homogeneous group which limits the understanding of the needs and risks related to specific identities, potentially affecting the individual protection needs of LGBTQI+ persons.

The evaluation, however, did find that UNHCR has made important advances in strengthening its inclusion of refugees with disabilities within its work, particularly in the past 3 years.



## Systematic collection and use of disaggregated data

Country offices collect disaggregated data both during registration and in follow-up with refugees in UNHCR-supported programmes and services. Data is recorded in the organisation's proGres4 registration and case management system and is disaggregated according to different categories of persons with specific needs. Disaggregation of data by age, sex and nationality is done more consistently than for other variables such as disability, sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression (SOGIE), LGBTQI+ status or ethnicity. Data is shared selectively with partners (to ensure appropriate consideration of data security and the purpose, legitimacy, and fairness of sharing data, as well as the level of safeguards afforded by the recipient). In some cases, fact sheets and dashboards are produced to present data and information in visual form, in addition to the UNHCR fact sheets.

The main weakness observed during the evaluation was the limited data analysis and, consequently, limited strategic use of data. Staff need more support with data literacy so that they can better understand and use data for planning and advocacy. Community-based Protection (CBP), which fosters regular interaction with the people with and for whom UNHCR works allows for the regular collection of qualitative data. Due to the limited coverage and lack of systematisation, this information remains somewhat anecdotal and is not often integrated for analysis with data obtained through other sources such as [proGres](#).

A major challenge is underreporting on refugees, internally displaced and stateless people with disabilities because questions on disabilities are not routinely nor uniformly applied during registration. The operations that introduced the Washington Group Questions saw an improvement in data collected from persons with disabilities and in the overall response to the needs of people with disabilities.

The evaluation found that data collection on LGBTQI+ is uneven as it depends on LGBTQI+ self-identifying in a (perceived) safe environment and on staff being able to enter the information correctly in UNHCR's databases. The added limitations of a restrictive social and political context lead to staff assuming the data collected to be incomplete and unreliable. Due to these limitations, and unlike other AGD areas of programming, UNHCR relies more heavily on qualitative data over quantitative data, and it remains unclear how the first is used and integrated to inform programming, with those at HQ and in the bureaus highlighting the lack of consistency in reporting as a barrier to the identification of protection risks of LGBTQI+ persons. Staff utilization of the data available through "proGres4" was found to be limited and requires greater support.

The evaluation found that there is an opportunity for UNHCR to play a larger role harnessing the data it collects to guide AGD-led programming by other actors – and key to planning and advocacy for Nexus programming and inclusion. This is

especially evident where UNHCR engages on internal displacement. The evaluation notes that AGD related and disaggregated data collection on internally displaced persons is often limited due to conflicting or overlapping agency and government mandates, and difficulties in access in conflict settings in particular, as well as lack of resources in countries with extremely large populations of internally displaced persons. There is a need for continued efforts around internally displaced persons and complementary use of qualitative data as well as other national datasets to ensure programming and advocacy choices that UNHCR makes are informed by AGD related analysis.

## Systems and processes to support AGD implementation

In terms of the systems and processes to support implementation of the AGD policy, there have been many positive developments. These include: the introduction of COMPASS (a results-based management system) in 2022, which includes three mandatory AGD indicators (requiring disaggregation of data by age, sex and disability); use of the Gender Equality and the Disability Inclusion Markers; the introduction of the Washington Group Questions on Disability; the launch of the Global Data Service on Registration, Biometrics, and the introduction of the Digital Identity across more than 100 operations worldwide; the creation of Data and Information Management and Analysis (DIMA) teams in Regional Bureaus; and the continued migration of operations to the most recent version of the proGres4 registration and case management system.

However, current monitoring and reporting mechanisms are still not able to capture the full extent of UNHCR's results on AGD, including progress in terms of awareness-raising, advocacy and information-sharing; nor are the monitoring and reporting mechanisms geared towards organisational learning.

Overall, while there are considerable efforts to develop guidance and support on AGD principles by key advisors at HQ level, this filters down to the country office level in a limited and uneven way. The evaluation finds that this is due to human resource capacity constraints, limited championing by leaders at HQ and country level in a concrete and practical sense and – arguably the most important constraint – inadequate financial resourcing.

An important gap identified in terms of human capacity is that current Human Resource systems do not allow the mapping of existing in-house expertise, limiting identification of staff with the right skills and experiences and reducing the opportunity to understand where skills gaps persist. While training programmes on working with and for LGBTQI+ (for example) in forced displacement may exist, the impact of these programmes is reduced without the ability to appropriately leverage and deploy expertise.



Operations highlighted limited and often earmarked financing – which makes responding to certain AGD dimensions or building programming approaches not prioritised by donors difficult to deliver - as key barriers to programs addressing the needs and specific risks of LGBTQI+ persons and persons with disabilities. That said, Country Offices are increasingly embedding AGD principles within funding proposals, and this could be a mechanism to strengthen the mainstreaming of AGD into programme implementation and monitoring, evaluation and learning.

### Engagement and dialogue with partners

**Non-Governmental organisations:** Country Offices generally enjoy strong partnerships with NGOs and generally held shared values around the importance of AGD and participatory approaches to working with the people with and for whom UNHCR serves. Implementing partners expressed varied but generally positive views on the quality and adequacy of their engagement and dialogue with UNHCR Country Offices on AGD issues. Some identified the need for more training, sensitisation and monitoring by UNHCR to strengthen implementation (for example, on approaches to engaging men as ‘champions’ in tackling discriminatory gender norms, and on working with LGBTQI+ persons). There was also a perception that, given UNHCR’s strong international reputation and legitimacy with government actors, the organisation could be more vocal about some AGD issues in its advocacy work.

**Refugee led organisations:** An important change that was observed during the three years of the evaluation was the increasing cooperation with refugee-led civil society organisations and networks. More recently, there have been investments in capacity building that allow refugee led organisations to apply for and secure funding in the form of small-scale grants from UNHCR. However, it should also be noted that interviews with refugees as well as observation in the evaluation case study countries indicated that these refugee organisations often have their own biases, such as a tendency for leadership and meeting spaces to be male, which can lead to very limited involvement of women, older persons and persons with disabilities.

**UN agency partnerships:** Partnerships with other UN agencies involved in humanitarian affairs related to AGD issues vary across contexts, but are most productive in terms of advocacy efforts. Joint efforts with UNICEF around child protection issues, including support and services for unaccompanied children and to tackle child marriage, were noted at global, regional and country levels and in some cases included the development of a joint workplan. Collaboration with the World Health Organization (WHO) around access to national health insurance for the people with and for whom UNHCR works was also key in some cases.

**Engagement with Governments:** While Country Offices also put considerable emphasis on fostering strong relationships with government partners mandated with providing services and support to asylum-seekers, refugees, internally displaced and stateless persons, there was a sense that

uptake of AGD principles by government partners has been more uneven. There has been considerable successes noted, however at the sub-national level, especially with municipal and mayoral authorities

### Achieving AGD policy objectives

In terms of the **Accountability to Affected Persons** dimensions of the AGD policy, over the course of the evaluation, there was increasing visibility towards core actions 1-5 (i.e., on participation and inclusion, communication and transparency, feedback and response and organisational learning and adaptation). The emphasis on work with and funding of refugee-led organisations represents a major positive trend in terms of participation and inclusion, with joint monitoring visits of country programmes simultaneously serving as an important venue for feedback and response by country offices.

On **gender**, while there is a relatively strong focus on gender commitments to girls and women in UNHCR’s programming, some core actions (core action 7 on registration and core action 10 on SGBV) are more effectively addressed than others, with weaker attention to the core actions aimed at promoting broader gender equality and economic and political empowerment.

The evaluation underscores that despite UNHCR’s growing attention on supporting **persons with disabilities**, there is still limited focus on technical expertise and partnerships that promote inclusion of persons with disabilities generally, and particularly persons with different types of functional difficulties. Even where there are initiatives to support persons with disabilities, they are often very small in scale.

In terms of vulnerabilities based on age, across contexts, the evaluation found no comprehensive approach for **older persons**, even though (due to greater likelihood of chronic ill-health and disability) they tend to be key beneficiaries of cash transfers, health care and other forms of social assistance. This is further reinforced by the dearth of personnel at HQ and regional levels with technical expertise on older persons. At the other end of the age spectrum, there appears to be a relatively strong focus on the rights and needs of unaccompanied children and adolescents, which is an increasingly important issue in regions such as the Americas.

In order to achieve its AGD objectives UNHCR is faced with a number of constraints, many of which are outside of its direct control: (1) the very constrained funding environment, with limited flexibility for innovation; (2) the complexity of dealing with diversity in all of its dimensions and especially given the wide range of countries of origin and circumstances under which the people with and for whom UNHCR work arrive; (3) weaknesses in existing social service provision and bureaucratic governance structures; (4) socio-normative and legal constraints in some country contexts regarding gender equality and LGBTQI+ persons’ rights; and



(5) the limited incentives systems and processes in place throughout the organisation to promote compliance with (and limited sanctions for non-compliance with) the AGD policy.

### Lessons Learned and Good Practices:

- Operations partnered with government and NGO health providers to ensure LGBTQI+ had full access to health care. The evaluation findings underscore that context-specific tailoring of services allowed LGBTQI+ people to continue having access while moving through the territory.
- Diversified information & communication channels are critical. There has been considerable growth and innovation over the evaluation period as context-specific dynamics evolve.
- Cross-agency working groups are important mechanisms and UNHCR can continue to play a key role in these forums.
- Structures for the representation of refugees and forcibly displaced persons are important and an effective way to ensure that refugees and forcibly displaced persons voices are heard, but more work needs to be done on ensuring sufficient inclusivity in these structures (especially of children, adolescents and youth, older persons, persons with disabilities, and LGBTQI+ persons).  
Regular participatory assessments have helped to embed the principles of AGD into country operations, annual workplans, and the overall ethos of work. While findings from these assessments could be more systematically taken up throughout the programme cycle, participatory assessment offer an important mechanism for UNHCR to invest in.

### Recommendations

**Reinforce and adapt existing systems** to strengthen AGD-informed programming.

**Strengthen commitment & action from leadership & management** at all levels around the AGD Policy & AGD as a corporate approach that reaches beyond the Protection unit.

**Strengthen monitoring, evaluation & reporting** to better understand UNHCR’s progress & achievements in AGD, as well as its strengths & weaknesses.

**Apply an intersectional lens** in the disaggregated analysis & use of data & evidence to promote strategic, evidence-informed programme design, implementation & advocacy, recognising that strategic partnerships with other actors may be key to achieving these aims.

Partnerships

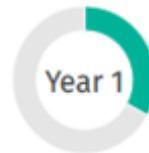
Ensure a more effective & coherent response to the needs of the people with & for whom UNHCR works on the AGD policy commitments by **continuing to invest in & strengthen partnerships around AGD policy commitments with external actors** at national, regional & global levels.

Policy & Adaptation

Build on lessons learnt, & on the results of the implementation of these recommendations, to **inform future revisions of an adequately resourced AGD policy.**

Continue to invest in **improving & innovating mechanisms for accountability** to affected people, ensuring **a clearer role for persons with & for whom UNHCR works.**

### Evaluation Key Products



[Baseline report](#)



[Persons with Disabilities & LGBTQI+ persons](#)



[Final Report with recommendations](#)

**Contact us:** For more information on this evaluation please reach out to Joel Kinahan ([kinahan@unhcr.org](mailto:kinahan@unhcr.org)).

Culture & Leadership

Data collection & Use

