
First International Consultation

on Refugee Women: Geneva (November 1988)

Geneva, Switzerland was the venue for a unique gathering in November 1988. One hundred and fifty (mostly) women from forty countries came together to focus on the special needs of women refugees. A common commitment to develop strategies to ensure that their needs would be met and that appropriate solutions to their needs would be developed, became a major priority for all the participants.

Geneva was a good place for the meeting, because the office of the High Commissioner for Refugees is located here. This UN body, charged with the mandate to protect refugees and to promote durable solutions, has recently begun to give more visibility to refugee women. Recent Executive Committees of the UNHCR have urged such “pro-refugee women” initiatives as reinforced preventive measures against physical attacks on refugee women, active participation of refugee women in the planning of protection and assistance programs, etc.

However, translation of words into actions requires all the help it can get! This gathering, then, came at a timely moment and the Deputy High Commissioner responded warmly, with a promise that the current momentum to address refugee women’s needs more effectively was “irreversible.”¹

The Consultation didn’t just happen. It was the result of several years of dedicated effort by a small group of people who created an International NGO Working Group on Refugee Women in 1986, following the UN “End of Decade” meeting in Nairobi in 1985. The Working Group was formally incorporated within the Sub-Committee on the Status of Women of the Special Committee of International Non-governmental Organizations of Human Rights. However, in spite of that mouthful, it has operated with a very informal structure — lobbying, collecting information,

promoting regional refugee women initiatives.

The impetus for the meeting in Geneva came from several fronts. The need to support and strengthen the goals of the UNHCR was apparent. Information-gathering results revealed serious gaps in refugee women protection and assistance in all areas of the world. Strong and concerted advocacy efforts were needed to address these gaps. Further, the group learned that many positive initiatives were happening at local levels which needed to be shared.

And so the call went out and, after a year of planning, fund raising and cajoling resource persons to complete their papers, we met. The group was comprised mainly of refugee women and agency workers. Participants were all involved at various direct levels with refugee women. This common factor allowed the substance of the event to flow from a commonly-informed view that, in addition to the many characteristics of the refugee experience shared by all refugees, women have certain identifiable needs which are different.

It was a practical meeting. One of the principal objectives of the consultation was to formulate guidelines for non-governmental organizations, international organizations and governments involved in the planning and provision of services to refugee women. Five areas were considered: Protection, Cultural Adjustment, Education, Employment and Health.

Refugee women in particular insisted, at the outset, on the preparation and adoption of a statement on root causes and the need for causes in addition to effects, to become the preoccupation of the world community. The root causes statement ended with an urgent appeal to “all peace loving governments and people to focus on peaceful negotiations as opposed to wars and to

BY KATHLEEN PTOLEMY

work towards the end of the refugee problem."²

A detailed report of the consultation with "Action Guidelines" will soon be available. Interested readers can contact me for further information regarding content and purchase arrangements [please contact me through the *Canaian Woman Studies* office]. In this report I will not attempt to summarize the findings, but to lift out some of the insights and issues that emerged during the course of the consultation.

Protection. Protection issues were the first item on the agenda — and rightly so! The most fundamental need of a refugee is to be protected against forced return (refoulement) to a territory where there is a reasonable expectation that he/she would face persecution on account of his/her beliefs. But protection in the legal sense of recognition is meaningless, if the refugee is unable to survive due to deprivation of basic human rights. The consultation agreed that protection is more than a legal recognition issue. It must be seen in relation to the basic life needs and realities of the refugee woman.

The protection problems of refugee women were identified and discussed in plenary and regional groups. The list of problems is overwhelming when measured in terms of human suffering:

- cross border raids
- bombardment of refugee camps
- abductions
- sexual and economic exploitation
- rape
- forced repatriation
- inadequate refugee determination procedures
- insufficient third country resettlement placements
- stateless children
- inadequate protection for internally displaced persons

Rape, abduction, sexual harassment, physical evidence and the obligation sometimes imposed on women to grant 'sexual favours' in return for documen-

*tation and/or relief goods remains a distressing reality for many refugee women...*³

The sexual exploitation for purposes of prostitution constitutes a particular form of abuse of refugee women.



Guatemalan refugees/Cuahutemoc Malambojoch camp

Photo: UNHCR

*What are the consequences for a woman who has been the victim of sex-directed persecution or sexual violence if forced to return to her country? Will it be possible for her to return to her country and lead a legal life, and be accepted by the community? Consequences for refugee women in some cultures are disowning by her whole family.*⁴

In tackling the protection issues the consultation adopted a working definition of protection as a right that encompasses international humanitarian laws and customs as well as international and regional refugee convention and protocols. This broadened definition, if supported and acted upon, has the potential to provide for significantly improved protection standards. In addition to the most fundamental protection rights of non-refoulement, the consultation affirmed that protection rights must also include:

- the right to choose voluntary return to one's country
- the right to a fair determination of refugee status
- protection against measures to deter refugees from seeking asylum (e.g. detention, visa requirements)
- protection against physical violence, including sexual abuse and harassment

- protection against gender discrimination
- protection of basic human rights, including food, shelter, education

Anders Johnsson in his statement on protection of women refugees, acknowledged that it is only as recently as 1985 that the

UNHCR Executive Committee discussed the particular protection needs of refugee women. The consultation participants were fully supportive of his observation that "very limited progress has been achieved since then, and much remains to be done."⁵ — an understatement to be sure!

Refugee Women and Cultural Adjustment.

Cultural adjustment is not assimilation or integration.

It is the accommodation or modification of cultures to a level of mutual comfort and enrichment of both the refugee woman and the host society.

*Institutional (state and voluntary) practices which encourage or create barriers to this two way process of adjustment need to be identified.*⁵

In her keynote address on cultural adjustment, Helene Moussa [one of the Guest Editors of this issue of *CWS*] talked about women refugees' vulnerability and strength as two sides of the same coin. This perspective prevailed during the plenary session and workshops on cultural adjustment. Again the listing of difficult situations faced by women in the adjustment process, left one numb — isolation; loss of identity; discontinuity of family structures and relationships; loss of social status; language discontinuities; spousal abuse; family breakdown; unwillingness to adjust; trauma and depression related to untreated flight and exile experiences; and so on.

But the other side of the coin was very much in evidence as well. The strength of refugee women; their ability to change and to influence; their resilience and profound commitment to protecting their most deeply-held values — these traits dominated and gave much hope.

One of the major themes which emerged from this session was the need for policies and approaches which affirm the refugee women who has had a past, a present and a future which should not be dominated by the refugee flight and exile experience. Not that these experiences can be forgotten or dismissed. They must be shared, healing must take place and they must be channeled ultimately into strength-giving and self-affirming energies.

Many recommendations were developed with respect to the empowering of refugee women in the cultural adaption process. Many of the recommendation coming directly from positive experiences shared by refugee workers and "front line" workers who gave witness to the power of a mutually supportive, two-way process which transformed perceptions and behaviours of the refugee women and the "host country" support systems. Guidelines for action will stress the importance of "active listening," supporting refugee women's organizations, encouraging cooperation between refugee women's groups and other women's groups in areas of mutual interest.

Irmtraud Weissinger from the Psycho-Social Centre in Frankfurt, reminded us that we are all involved in cultural adjustment experiences. We are all coping with radically changed family structures, changing social relationships, different areas of responsibility.

The consultation participants affirmed the critical importance of women's role as guardians and enrichers of traditional and emerging cultures and as powerful transformers of the cultural barriers such as racism and xenophobia which plague so many societies.

Drawing on the strength of women refugees will not only enable their own process of adjustment but it is the key to their empowerment. They must be seen as active shapers of their lives, their cultures and their new situations.

Refugee Women and Education.

Women refugees are not in a position to gain equal access to many of the facilities set up for refugees in countries of asylum.⁶

Two thirds of the world's illiterates are women.



Sudan

Photo: David Barbour

Despite the existence of refugee agencies and refugee community groups in most western countries, most refugee women "slip through the institutional net" and remain unassisted in their struggle to gain education and training in the host country.⁷

In every world region women refugees were shown to be seriously disadvantaged with respect to gaining access to educational services. UNHCR Statistics for 1979-80 estimated that women and girls comprised only 26% of refugee students worldwide. This inequality arises from discrimination, lack of opportunity, and priorities such as childcare, cooking, etc., imposed on women by their societies. Traditional barriers to educational opportunities are further exacerbated in refugee situations and emergencies where there is a disruption of support systems, lack of basic human needs and an absence of the sense of security that is essential for learning.

The needs of refugee women for education at both the formal and informal levels were strongly affirmed. Participants stressed that effective educational programs had to be planned with active participation by the women themselves, with a strong curriculum emphasis on women as agents of social change. Given

the existing barriers which hinder women's access to educational opportunities, the UNHCR and NGOs were urged to take affirmative action in selecting and training women refugees for work placements and educational programs in both the formal and nonformal sectors.

The unmet educational needs of refugee women present an enormous challenge that must be met, if women are to assume active and meaningful roles in their exile/return environments. The conference urged that a special international fund be established to identify existing opportunities and gaps and to develop strategies for further actions in promoting meaningful educational opportunities for all women refugees.

Refugee Women and Employment/Development. An overview of issues relating to

the economic activities of refugee women was provided by Susan Forbes Martin of the Washington based Refugee Policy Group (RPG). Ms Forbes summarized some of the key findings of a recent study undertaken by the RPG on the effectiveness of efforts in Sudan, Pakistan and Costa Rica to enhance the economic self-reliance of refugee women. She stressed the importance of recognizing that refugees will not easily opt for a risky "self-sufficiency" project if it means losing the security of survival rations. Activities which increase family incomes are most desirable.

Most traditional "income-generating" projects for women are planned to serve a variety of social needs, such as confidence-building, skills development, learning to access systems, health education, etc. The economic activity often is geared not to assist women to become economically self-supporting, but to "earn a little extra money."

The RPG Study urged that more serious efforts be made to increase the economic self-reliance of refugee women through building on the full range of economic activities in which women are already endangered. The report also suggests that women could have better access to income-generating projects that are "household projects," i.e., that incor-

porate the skills and experiences of both men and women. However it was recognized that in some refugee groups, women specific projects are essential for overcoming cultural barriers to women's participation in economic activities.

Eve Hall, United Nations Development Program (UNDP), Somalia, in presenting a case study on a project in Somalia commented on a major issue in income-generation:

Refugees and aid workers share the same immediate objective in the development of an income-generating activity: the refugees demonstrably want the income such a scheme aims to provide. But there is a basic conflict between the ultimate objective of aid agencies, which is to create at least some measure of self-reliance through its implementation; and that of the refugees, who do not want to endanger their continued supply of food aid as a result of this additional source of income. Inevitably, the psychological distance which this underlying conflict in ultimate objectives engenders influences the relationship between aid workers and refugees and often causes mistrust.

It is a condition for a participatory approach that the "target groups" and aid workers share major objectives. But it is in this uneasy context of hidden tensions and ultimately conflicting purpose that attempts to encourage refugee participation in project development must be placed. In a situation where "self-reliance" has never properly been defined or coherently planned for; where connected efforts to provide meaningful incomes have reached so few refugees; and where the future remains an unknown quantity over which the refugees have no control, the wisdom of setting "self-reliance" as the primary objective for a productive camp-based activity must be questioned. More realistic objectives would certainly encourage greater confidence in refugees and aid workers — and could give the refugees themselves greater confidence to participate more wholeheartedly in income-earning projects.⁸

Recommendations by the consultation participants on issues of employment and development focused on employment rights, skills training and income-generating projects criteria. Employment was closely linked to protection from exploitation. The need for a study of current

patterns of training and employment of refugee women was stressed.

Refugee Women and Health. One of the major issues of concern in the area of women and health was the politics of food aid and the consequences of politicization on the health of refugee and child. Several examples were cited, e.g. political decisions regarding type of donated food aid, e.g. milk powder, had a profound impact on the health of the recipients.

The use of food as a weapon against civilian and refugee groups was identified as an increasing phenomena. The issue of female circumcision and infibulation was discussed with considerable animation as was the impact of food distribution control in the camps. Angela Barry pointed out how problems of distribution of food supply unintentionally punish the most vulnerable women;

Control of food aid donations/distribution in most refugee camp situations often dictates who controls the monetary power in a community. Refugee camps do not usually evolve with a democratic leadership structure but more often with an economic power hierarchy, very often built around who can manipulate food distribution to his own advantage. Where there is a surplus stock available because of poor registration and depending on the level of surplus, greater power is achieved by a few, often to the detriment of others. This is an irony of food distribution systems, as surplus can cause incentive for trade and withholding of rations to the poorest groups.

The results of food shortages for certain unlucky groups have meant an inability for families to trade food aid for other items necessary to balance the diet. The ration is primarily cereals, oil and dried milk and lacking in vitamin C, iron and other nutrients. Trade is therefore essential to balance the diet. This lack of trade for some has led to dramatic increases of deficiency disease; primarily scurvy and anaemia (vitamin C and iron deficiency respectively). The least advantaged women have been extremely affected by these disease states and their ability to function in a normal capacity and sometimes their very survival has been severely threatened.⁹

A wide variety of health problems ranging from sanitation to trauma, were dis-

cussed at length. A recurring reality which exacerbated almost every problem was the inadequate balance of women health care planners and workers.

Health needs of women refugees in resettlement countries focused on special needs of torture victims and their relatives and on the mental health needs of persons coping in culturally foreign high stress situations. Once again, the enormous and numbing realities — this time, of health problems most of which were so clearly caused by acts of commission or omission by other people — seemed somehow to move deeper into one's consciousness than a thousand articles or TV documentaries. It was because the participants knew whereof they spoke — they have been there, have suffered, have helped. Their words, whether framed in cold statistics or deeply emotive, rang true.

Conclusion. We came away feeling more human, more in touch with ourselves and others; strengthened for the work ahead through the company of other (mostly!) women. A spirit of power and determination prevailed. We received renewed energy to continue what has begun — an effort with, for and by women refugees that has the potential to improve the situations of refugee women wherever they may be.

It was a good event!

¹Eugene Duvey, Deputy High Commissioner, Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, in a welcoming address to participants, Wednesday, November 16, 1988.

²Draft Conclusions, "Root Causes," International Consultation on Refugee Women, November 18, 1988.

³The International Protection of Women Refugees: A Summary of Principal Problems and Issues. Paper submitted to the International Consultation by Anders Johnsson, UNHCR, Geneva.

⁴Guidelines for the Asylum Claims of Women, Marijke Meijer, Consultant, Vluchtelingen Werk, Netherlands.

⁵op. cit. Anders Johnsson.

⁶The Education of Refugee Women with Special Reference to the Case of Great Britain, World University Service, U.K.

⁷The Economic Activities of Refugee Women, Susan Forbes Martin, Refugee Policy Group, October 1988.

⁸The Integrated Refugee Camp Development Project in Somalia, Eve Hall.

⁹Refugee Women Case Study/Somalia, Angela Barry.



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