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# **WORLD CONFERENCE of the UNITED NATIONS DECADE FOR WOMEN:**

## **Equality, Development and Peace**

**Copenhagen, Denmark**

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THE SITUATION OF WOMEN REFUGEES THE WORLD OVER

Prepared by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

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## INTRODUCTION

1. At its thirty-fourth session, the General Assembly adopted resolution 34/161, requesting the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees to submit to the World Conference of the United Nations Decade for Women a report on the situation of women refugees the world over. The present paper has been prepared in response to that request. Its aims are twofold: to identify particular problems concerning women refugees; and to recommend measures to solve those problems.

2. The function of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), as defined by the statute of his Office adopted by the General Assembly in resolution 428 (V), of 14 December 1950, is to provide international protection to refugees and seek permanent solutions to their problems. The Office extends its protection and assistance to all refugees, irrespective of sex, age, religion or political opinion. To ensure that all refugees are given fair and equal treatment, UNHCR has traditionally designed special programmes to help vulnerable refugee groups, such as women, children, the elderly and the handicapped. Today, of the millions of refugees and displaced persons who come under the mandate of the High Commissioner, women constitute a majority caseload in the adult refugee population. In some countries the breakdown of women and children refugees is as high as 90 per cent. However, it is not only because of their relative numbers that UNHCR has seen the need to focus a study on the plight of refugee women; it is also because of the pivotal family role played by a woman. What affects the woman refugee directly affects the rest of her family.

3. The Office of the High Commissioner was established on 1 January 1951 and initially was mainly concerned with the then-existing refugee problems in Europe. Subsequently, the Office has extended its humanitarian activities to refugees in all other continents.

4. Assistance from UNHCR to refugees is financed by voluntary contributions from the international community. With the growing refugee population in the world, UNHCR requirements for the financing of its programmes have increased fourfold from 1975 to 1980. For 1980, the UNHCR assistance programme, which covers the needs of millions of refugees, returnees and displaced persons, initially had an approved budget of \$US 234 million; however, in view of the developments in the refugee situation in the past few months, the financial requirements will exceed \$US 500 million. These requirements cover more than 500 projects in some 60 countries of the five continents.

5. In the light of the objectives of the United Nations Decade for Women, UNHCR has started to study systematically the problems of refugee women. The present report is a first contribution to identifying those problems. It is based on responses to a questionnaire sent to UNHCR branch offices and on information obtained on missions to Africa and Asia undertaken specifically for the purpose, during which discussions were held with government officials, medical personnel, social workers, representatives of voluntary agencies and women refugees themselves.

6. In the past, women have primarily been assisted as part of the group; only in certain cases were special provisions made to meet their particular needs. It is clear, however, that meeting those needs now necessitates a specifically targeted approach if women are to receive fair and equal treatment.

7. There are a host of problems that refugee women and men alike face. However, both in the initial flight and asylum phases and in the integration process, refugee women tend to suffer most from the loss of their roots and the radical change to their way of life.

8. In most societies, the division of roles between men and women is still well established. Men belong to the world of production; they are generally wage earners or engaged in the production of subsistence or marketable goods. Women - even those who work - are essentially responsible for the family: their home is their life and often their whole horizon.

9. In many rural societies, however, women also share with men in working the family land. In certain instances, where men have outside jobs, women assume the entire responsibility of the agricultural workload. Women's status as workers tends to disappear in exile; they become for the first time wholly dependent on the husband (who also finds himself in a dependent position) and on outside assistance.

10. The women's role in the home is completely disrupted with the loss of the household. They still have to perform the tasks of child-care, cleaning, cooking, fetching water and fuel, but in unfamiliar settings where resources are scarce, and often without the support of the extended family. Family welfare depends more heavily than ever on the ability of women to adjust and perform their domestic roles. If they fail in this task because of sickness or malnourishment, the consequences for their family will be hardship and suffering, and for themselves, acute stress. Failure to assist women refugees may thus have disastrous effects on the whole family.

11. Moreover, women's role in the family as educators and keepers of cultural values is jeopardized in a context where the language and cultural values are foreign to them. By losing their educational role and by no longer being able to transmit to their children the traditional values of their people, mothers may become isolated from their children who, through school and their adaptability, have less difficulty integrating into the new cultural context.

12. Already vulnerable as a result of these factors, refugee women have other specific problems. In situations often characterized by physical insecurity and the breakdown of law and order or by the absence of social constraints, women and teen-age girls become especially vulnerable to various forms of sexual intimidation and exploitation. This risk is particularly marked in situations where refugee women are dependent on outside assistance and have to compete with others for the benefit of external aid.

13. Social justice would require that women and children had first access to the limited resources, yet in fact assistance tends to reach them last. Thus, while

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many problems are common to all refugees, the social and physical vulnerability of women make them more likely to bear the brunt of deprivation, discrimination and abuse in situations of hardship.

14. The strength and resilience demonstrated by women refugees in the most desperate situations are features that should not be overlooked or minimized. While the father is frequently incapable of assuming sole responsibility for the family, families headed by women have a remarkable capacity to survive as a unit. Because of the central role played by refugee women in their families, it is essential for the international community to take all necessary measures to help them recover their self-esteem and status in the family and in the social group.

## I. INTERNATIONAL PROTECTION

15. The Office discharges its international protection function in two ways: by direct protection activities; and by promotional activities. The former consist essentially of approaching Governments on behalf of specific individuals or groups in order to ensure that they are treated in accordance with internationally accepted standards in regard to matters such as the granting of asylum; prevention of refoulement, or expulsion, and of abusive detention; determination of refugee status; issuance of identity and travel documents and work permits. Within the framework of its protection activities, the Office also seeks to facilitate the reunification of separated refugee families and to promote voluntary repatriation.

16. It is recognized that as regards direct protection activities, women are a particularly vulnerable group. Much remains to be done to ensure that their special needs are taken into account. This applies in particular in the search for asylum, where women face special hazards during their flight and in many instances in their intended country of asylum. For example, both on the high seas and in the territorial waters of various States in South-East Asia, a large number of women have been victims of attacks by pirates. In the course of these attacks, women asylum seekers, including minor girls, have been the victims of physical violence and acts of rape resulting in physical injury and frequently in loss of life or in the abduction of women and girls. The States in the area have sought to take necessary measures to prevent such occurrences, but the problem of piracy and its consequences continue to be very serious. The Office of the High Commissioner maintains regular contact with the States in that area and is closely co-operating with the authorities with a view to preventing these tragic incidents. The Office has placed a fast patrol boat at the disposal of the authorities of Thailand to facilitate their efforts in carrying out the necessary surveillance.

17. The Office has also drawn the attention of the international community to this specific problem. Most recently, the protection of asylum seekers in boats was considered by the Manila Round Table of Asian Experts on the International Protection of Refugees and Displaced Persons. The Round Table adopted a declaration which, inter alia, urged coastal States to take immediately the necessary measures to suppress pirate attacks, to assist persons who are victims of these attacks, and to prosecute those responsible.

18. The Office has been called upon to devote its attention to the special problems of some women asylum seekers who, after their arrival in countries of refuge, find themselves in a particularly vulnerable situation and are subjected to sexual exploitation, rape and prostitution. Efforts are being made, in collaboration with local authorities, to prevent such abuse and to ensure that the perpetrators are apprehended and brought to justice. In a number of cases, UNHCR makes lawyers' services available for this purpose.

19. The promotional activities of UNHCR in the field of international protection include promotion of accession to international legal instruments relating to refugees and the elaboration of new international refugee instruments; and encouraging States to adopt the appropriate legislation or administrative regulations to ensure that standards defined in international refugee instruments are effectively applied. These activities involve efforts to promote greater understanding of the special problems facing refugees - especially those in a particularly vulnerable situation - and of the humanitarian principles established by the international community in this important sphere.

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## II. ASSISTANCE

20. Though UNHCR is sometimes called upon by Governments to provide emergency relief, its assistance is intended primarily to promote permanent solutions to the problem of refugees through voluntary repatriation, local integration or settlement in another country.

### A. Relief assistance

21. The first concern of the host Government and of the international community is to provide immediate relief, such as food, shelter, blankets, clothing and medical services, to new arrivals. Programmes of relief assistance may be continued in various forms for a number of years to alleviate the burden on the host country, until refugees become self-supporting.

22. At the end of an often nightmarish flight from their homes, refugees may still face great hardships in the initial phase between the time of their arrival and the provision of relief items. Women, children and the aged are those who invariably suffer most in such situations. Being accustomed to keeping a low social profile, women refugees may also be unprepared to assume their role as heads of family on an equal footing with refugee men or to deal with officials. Thus, when relief assistance is made available, women heads of family and young girls may find themselves at the end of the queue for the allocation of shelter, the distribution of food and other basic items.

#### 1. Nutrition

23. Studies made by social workers show that, in many cases, even after adequate supplies of basic and supplementary food (earmarked for vulnerable groups) were theoretically available, women and children continued to suffer from malnutrition. It was observed that in such situations the patterns of distribution, both within the refugee camps and within the refugee family, reflected the discriminatory socio-economic relations prevailing in the refugee groups.

24. It is difficult to make any generalization regarding distribution of food within the camps, as it varies according to the state of organization among the residents and the means of control by the authorities. However, women heads of family are clearly at a disadvantage in situations which require long hours of queuing for supplementary food and other essentials such as water, medicines, etc.

25. For example, it was reported that, in a large camp for Kampuchean refugees in Thailand, powerful refugee leaders effectively controlled the distribution of food and women heads of family had considerable difficulty in obtaining their fair share, whereas in a small camp for Vietnamese refugees in the same country, where the refugees were highly organized, the distribution of basic rations took place equitably.

26. The final stage of food distribution within the family is difficult to observe or control. It has, however, been noted that the widespread cultural

practice of men eating first may result in major health problems for the other members of the family when food is scarce. Relief workers have become familiar with the sight of well-fed men alongside under-fed and sickly women and children. In camps in Bangladesh for refugees from Burma, for instance, the distribution of supplementary food was completely reorganized to give direct benefit to gaunt women and malnourished children.

27. Supplementary feeding for vulnerable refugee groups is usually introduced some time after basic food rations have been established. This delay is caused by the logistical problems of establishing a supplementary feeding programme corresponding to the needs of the group. However, in view of the devastating effect of malnutrition on the health of vulnerable groups, UNHCR is collaborating with the World Food Programme in making special efforts to provide supplementary food at the same time as the basic rations are established. For example, severe malnutrition among Kampuchean women has produced cases of amenorrhoea, with the threat of sterility if it is prolonged; less severe cases of malnutrition have affected Vietnamese and Afghan refugee women, who were unable to breast-feed for more than a few months, thus precipitating the termination of post-partum amenorrhoea - in other words, women who would normally nurse their children for two years or longer lost their traditional way of "spacing" their children.

28. In summary, experience has shown the importance of identifying at an early stage the priority nutritional needs of vulnerable groups and the necessity of establishing an outreach programme to ensure that those groups have effective access to resources.

## 2. Health

29. Most of the diseases found among refugees were prevalent in their country of origin, but old complaints (such as tuberculosis) may flare up again, and new ones (such as measles) can become lethal as a result of malnutrition or poor sanitary conditions. Health conditions in a camp depend upon a large number of factors: food; water; personal hygiene; group hygiene; conditions of living; etc. Recent studies have highlighted the need for an over-all approach to health care in refugee camps: curative, of course, in so far as means are available, but above all preventive, educational, social and environmental.

30. In Africa the governmental and non-governmental operational partners of UNHCR have had wide experience in operating maternal and child health clinics in the refugee camps. Supplementary feeding, child health care and nutritional advice have frequently been provided.

31. Since child welfare is the responsibility of women, UNHCR is at present setting up a programme for Kampuchean children in four camps in Thailand, which will include pediatric clinical facilities, special feeding programmes for the under-fives, pre-school centres, primary education and recreational facilities. The programme will undoubtedly also improve the quality of life of mothers in those camps.



32. In Pakistan, UNHCR is establishing, with the assistance of the Ministry of Health, mobile dispensaries for women. The mobile dispensaries will be staffed by women doctors and women health staff, since Afghan refugee women will not allow themselves to be attended by male doctors or make use of local hospitals except in dire circumstances.

33. Family planning has been a neglected area of health for women refugees, partly because such services are not well developed in the countries of asylum (or origin) and partly because the subject is particularly delicate, given social and religious interdictions. Besides, medical opinion is divided on the safety of contraceptive methods, especially for women suffering from malnutrition. One of the effects feared is permanent sterility. On the other hand, a pregnancy may be more dangerous than a contraceptive drug for a woman in poor health.

34. Surveys among Indo-Chinese refugee women have revealed a desire for some means of birth control. Those who obtain jobs in factories in Hong Kong, for example, have a new incentive to postpone their next pregnancy. A voluntary agency that provides medical services in a refugee centre in Indonesia conducted a survey of women over 16 years of age. More than half of them expressed a desire for family planning advice. With the agreement of the Government of Indonesia, a programme has been established and integrated into the local medical services. In the Sudan, there are two family planning groups, operating mostly in urban hospitals. Though on a small scale, their activities benefit refugee women as well as nationals.

35. An appropriate approach to family planning would appear to be to consult women first, through a survey providing full information on the implications of each method, to combine family planning with a nutrition programme and to give medical examinations to women interested in taking contraceptive drugs. In this way, the range of options would be known and women refugees left to make their own - admittedly still difficult - choice.

36. The emergency relief phase is undoubtedly the most trying and painful period for the refugees, who are in an uncertain transitory stage, not knowing what the future will hold. During the emergency phase, relief centres often lack productive occupations. The men may share in the running of the centre, build houses and have opportunities to specialize, while the isolation and boredom of women can bring them to a state of apathy and carelessness about hygiene, sanitation and child care. In extreme cases they lose hope that anything they can do will improve their situation or that of their families.

37. The list of refugee women's requirements is long, but there are rarely any women involved in the administration of the refugee centres, though so much of the organization of the centre and the delivery systems for services has special significance for women. As an obvious example, women on the health committees would have a better idea than men of the most convenient times for maternal and child health services. Increased efforts must therefore be made to bring women refugees into the decision-making process. In addition to the practical advantages, this will help to bring about a climate in which women lose their sense of isolation and acquire a greater degree of assurance and self-confidence.

## B. Durable solutions

### 1. Voluntary repatriation

38. Voluntary repatriation is the preferred solution to a refugee problem and UNHCR seeks to promote it whenever possible. In recent years hundreds of thousands of refugees have been enabled to return home. When requested, UNHCR also assists with the re-establishment upon return - for example, with programmes for refugees from Burma repatriating from Bangladesh, Nicaraguans from Costa Rica and Honduras, Zairians from Angola and Zimbabweans from Botswana, Mozambique and Zambia.

39. However, even voluntary repatriation can give rise to particular problems for women refugees. In many cases their homes and villages may have been destroyed, relatives who did not flee may have been internally displaced within the country and the support of the extended family thus lost.

40. The men generally readapt more quickly than the women. Where male employment opportunities are not readily available, this is an obvious lack and likely to be covered in the rehabilitation programme. Since the social horizons of the men are wider than the home itself, their readjustment is less dependent on the restoration or recreation of the family base so essential to the women. But for women refugees, who have measured the deprivations of exile against memories of their life before fleeing, finding their home and the traditional references of family life destroyed can be a traumatic experience. Rebuilding their lives takes time and requires special measures. In Nicaragua, for example, 25 per cent of the adult women repatriants were de facto heads of family. A small proportion of them were unmarried mothers. These families needed particular assistance if their reintegration was not to lag behind that of the other repatriants.

41. Material assistance will be necessary in order to help re-establish the repatriants, rebuild their homes, schools and communities, and provide seeds and food until the next harvest. For the women, similar difficulties to those they faced in obtaining fair access to relief aid in the refugee camps risk being compounded by the dispersal of repatriants on their return. The particular problems of women who head a family unit become acute when re-establishment assistance is, as is often the case, predicated on the existence of a male wage earner in the family. For the international community and media, a refugee problem is too easily seen as solved once the actual repatriation has taken place, but the women in particular may need continuing and specifically targeted assistance for some time thereafter.

42. The UNHCR programmes for refugees after repatriation are naturally elaborated in full co-operation with the Government of the country of origin, and as a complement to its national services. The aim is to assist in the re-establishment of the home and of economic self-sufficiency as quickly as possible, while at the same time helping as necessary in the reconstruction of community services such as education, health and water supply. Specific help for women must be carefully planned, with special attention to domestic needs and education. Thus, for example, the UNHCR programme in Zimbabwe provides self-help schemes for the rebuilding of traditional dwellings and a set of basic domestic utensils,

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equipment and supplies. A garden-vegetable seeds packet is given to the repatriated refugees so that they may grow limited vegetable supplies pending the next main harvest. Women may be directly affected by the lost educational opportunities of their children, and the reopening, repair and re-equipment of schools is a priority in the Zimbabwe programme as in other repatriation operations.

## 2. Local integration

43. When early voluntary repatriation cannot be foreseen, UNHCR seeks to promote the integration of refugees in their country of first asylum where possible. The aim is that refugees should quickly become self-supporting and eventually enjoy the same rights and obligations as nationals. Such a solution has obvious advantages: the refugees are in what is generally a broadly familiar environment, not too far removed from their home country to which they can easily return when circumstances permit. Thus Southern Sudanese refugees who had become largely self-supporting at M'Boki (Central African Republic) were able to repatriate voluntarily, just as Mozambican refugees in rural settlements Mputa and Matekwe (United Republic of Tanzania) or Zimbabweans at Dukwe (Botswana) were able to return home when minority rule ended in their countries.

44. Local integration in developed countries has tended to be on an individual or family basis, and into existing social structures. Little direct assistance has been sought from UNHCR, and the extent to which the problems of women refugees are solved is in part a reflection of the situation of women nationals in that society. Group rural integration programmes have, however, been the general rule in developing countries, though an increasing number of refugees now converge on the towns.

### (a) Urban integration

45. Integration of refugees in urban areas depends on their ability to share employment and educational opportunities with nationals. Since employment opportunities and public resources are scarce in most countries of asylum - particularly in developing countries - refugees, even the educated minority, may have to take the lowest paid and most menial jobs. Hampered by children and family responsibilities, refugee mothers find themselves even further restricted in their choice by limited opportunities to investigate job possibilities.

46. In order to facilitate the integration of urban refugees, counselling services have been established when warranted by the existence of substantial urban caseloads. These services provide guidance in such fields as health, social welfare, employment and education. Where necessary, they make material assistance available to those in need. They aim to help refugees analyse their own situation in light of the resources available to help them and thereby to promote their self-sufficiency. Women refugees often find themselves at a disadvantage in respect of counselling for a number of reasons: ignorance; lack of experience in asking for help; doubt as to whether anyone can help them; lack of time because of their domestic and child care responsibilities. They may not be used to being vocal, pushing themselves forward and generally making themselves noticed by others.

47. As an example, in the Sudan, which has the largest urban refugee population in Africa, UNHCR counselling services in Khartoum serve a clientele that is 70 per cent male. While many of the men will nominally be representing their families, much of the potential benefit to women is lost. The UNHCR Office at Khartoum has sought to remedy this situation with the Ministry of Social Affairs, which has seconded outreach social workers to the refugee counselling services who will seek out families in greatest need of material and other assistance. Moreover, the Sudan Council of Churches has formed women's centres, for both refugee and non-refugee women, which offer vocational training in handicrafts, sewing and embroidery, and spinning. Adult literacy and child care training courses are also provided. The large concentration of refugees at Khartoum and Port Sudan have put pressure on the national health and education services, and plans are being made to establish a new refugee semi-urban settlement adjacent to Port Sudan. The settlement is expected to generate much of its own employment opportunities and markets and to have its own communal services.

48. Latin American refugees are typically from urban backgrounds. In general, it has been observed that those women who had not shared in their husband's past political activities resented being uprooted and had particular difficulty in adapting to refugee life. On the other hand, those women who were politically active tended to integrate more easily into new societies.

49. The economic position of Assyrian refugees in Lebanon is precarious and typical of that of many urban caseloads. Since most of the refugees are of rural background, they do not have the skills demanded in an urban environment. Sixty per cent of the refugee women supplement their husbands' earnings by working as domestic servants. Families headed by women are among the poorest. Although there is no official discrimination against girls in the field of education, many of them are forced to abandon their studies to replace their working mothers at home.

50. The importance of the local employment market in helping refugees to become self-supporting is highlighted by the example of Vietnamese refugees in Hong Kong. Although the refugees are awaiting resettlement, a high proportion manage to obtain jobs, mainly in factories and restaurants (60-70 per cent of women and 50-60 per cent of men). Women are thus contributing to the family's self-sufficiency. Counselling services are available to help them deal with special problems which they may be facing.

51. A trend has developed towards establishing programmes which will benefit both refugees and nationals in urban areas. Such "mixed" centres for women, for maternal/child health and for day-care bring refugee women and children into closer contact with non-refugees help to reduce their sense of isolation in new surroundings and certainly facilitate their durable integration into a community.

#### (b) Rural integration

52. Hundreds of thousands of refugees have found hope of a new life in rural settlements, particularly in Africa, where generous asylum practices have made rural integration the most common solution. Populations on either side of a frontier often belong to similar ethnic groups, speak similar languages and have

common traditions. In such circumstances some spontaneous, unorganized integration may occur. Women refugees will face at least the same problems they face in their own country, but assistance is not easily brought to such groups. Furthermore, if numbers are small, needs may be met as in an extended family, and international action that highlights the existence of such refugees can even be counter-productive.

53. The general policy of Governments of asylum is to remove large influxes from the border area. The risks of cross-border raids or reprisals and the consequent aggravation of international tensions are thereby reduced. This policy, fully endorsed by UNHCR, does however, increase the problems faced by women refugees. Well away from the frontier, the rural settlement environment is less likely to be familiar: new mores, new agricultural patterns and a foreign language will all accentuate the disruption of family life and the isolation and disorientation felt most particularly by the refugee woman.

54. The policies of Governments towards their own rural populations naturally include plans for those to whom they offer permanent asylum. Rural resettlement programmes of UNHCR seek to bring the refugees to the general standard of living of the local population. This may, however, initially heighten the sense of alienation felt by women refugees, since unfamiliar customs impinge on an already fragmented family life. To facilitate the integration of refugees, UNHCR has often provided benefits to nationals - for example, common irrigation schemes, improved roads and shared community services.

55. The allocation of land is a first consideration. In the Sudan refugee families headed by women are allocated land much closer to their village than the men. At Ulyankulu (United Republic of Tanzania), a rural settlement run on a co-operative basis with communal facilities, handicapped and vulnerable families were allocated plots close to those facilities. Special help was given by the community in clearing plots.

56. A primary objective of a rural settlement is of course food self-sufficiency, which families headed by women are clearly disadvantaged in attaining. Moreover, it is evident that many of the problems already identified above, when considering "relief assistance" to women refugees, and some under "voluntary repatriation" also obtain in rural settlements, particularly in the critical early stages. Again, therefore, special measures are necessary if fair and equal opportunities for women are to be provided.

57. Supplementary food assistance may be necessary not just for the pregnant or lactating mothers and the children but also for the women in general and especially for the families they head, after the settlement as a whole has attained basic food self-sufficiency. Such self-sufficiency may not be completely possible for these families, and it may be necessary to promote alternative sources of livelihood - for example, traditional handicrafts, as for refugees in Somalia, or the home manufacture of clothes and school uniforms, as in Zambia. The products can then be sold or exchanged for food. The general encouragement of self-help in a society in which there are sufficient opportunities of this sort for women is an important counter to apathy and despair. In some Tanzanian

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settlements women work and control the communal vegetable gardens. Such co-operative endeavours and interdependence in economic activities benefit women refugees, especially heads of families, for it is demonstrably in the interests of all that each member or family of the settlement contribute efficiently and effectively.

58. Special measures are of course necessary to provide maternity and child care through rural clinics and preventive health education. Such clinics are a standard component of any rural settlement. Broader guidance may be necessary for women. In Somalia, refugee women are being trained as instructors to staff 160 centres where women and older girls will be given courses in a range of domestic subjects including hygiene, sanitation, prenatal and child care, nutrition and food storage and preparation. Simple day-care facilities are also being provided in the Somali camps, and may be an important factor in promoting the self-sufficiency of refugee families, particularly those headed by women. More generally, the community spirit that was an integral and natural part of village life before the flight and which helped sustain the women may need to be actively fostered in the settlement.

(c) Educational opportunities

59. Education plays a key part in the successful integration of refugees into new societies and in their attainment of economic self-sufficiency. While the emphasis is on full participation in national schemes, supplemented by special facilities such as language training, more specific measures may be necessary in order to provide for the educational needs of refugees in rural and urban centres.

60. Educational assistance from UNHCR is naturally available to male and female refugees on an equal basis. The Office insists on equal opportunities for refugee boys and girls even if the socio-cultural system in the country of asylum favours male nationals. Counselling advice stresses to refugee women the importance of availing themselves of educational opportunities and of encouraging their female as well as male children to do likewise. The need for new knowledge and skills for the women is emphasized. In Africa, where the majority of the beneficiaries of UNHCR educational projects are, UNHCR seeks to ensure that courses offered to refugees include ones that are not only easily accessible to the women but also relate directly to future employment prospects. Similarly, UNHCR efforts to secure educational placement offers in other countries concentrate on the practical applications of the knowledge to be acquired.

61. The degree of participation by women refugees in educational projects varies, but the trend is generally positive. In the 1974/75 academic year the percentage of women and girls among refugee students was 15 1/2 per cent; for 1979/80 it was 26 per cent. Special efforts have been made for refugees from southern Africa: 32 1/2 per cent of South African refugees benefiting from UNHCR educational assistance are women or girls, and for Namibian refugees the figure is 50 per cent. There is evidence that where refugees seek asylum in groups and family units, male and female children do take broadly equal advantage of educational opportunities. Though these indications are satisfactory, the cardinal importance

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of full and relevant educational opportunities for women refugees requires that present efforts be intensified. Education offers a practical way for women refugees to help redress their many disadvantages.

### 3. Resettlement

62. Where neither voluntary repatriation nor local integration into the country of asylum is a practical solution, refugees may have to be resettled in third countries. The majority of resettlement opportunities have been provided in developed countries and have benefited refugees from Indo-China and Latin America. Government services, often with national voluntary agencies, undertake the integration of the refugees and the UNHCR role is generally confined to assisting refugees in obtaining the necessary resettlement opportunities and helping prepare them for their new life.

63. Special action has been taken by UNHCR to secure appropriate resettlement opportunities for refugee women who are single mothers or widows. Special care is also taken to ensure that unaccompanied children are not resettled before the possibilities of family reunion with mothers or close relatives in the country of asylum are exhausted. Countries of potential admission are encouraged to provide separate quotas for vulnerable categories of refugees. However, the polygamous household situation that can cause great distress to women refugees, has proved more difficult to resolve; many resettlement countries are not prepared to admit such families in their entirety.

64. Resettlement often poses major difficulties for the refugees, who have to adjust to totally new life-styles and an economic, social and cultural environment that has no common ground with their past experiences. The necessary adaptation is particularly difficult for many refugee women. For example, those used to the support of an extended family may experience an acute sense of isolation in a society where the language is strange and a nuclear family unit the norm.

65. In these circumstances, measures to prepare refugees for resettlement assume particular importance. General orientation programmes on life in the new country, language training and vocational training are organized prior to the departure of the refugees from the camps in the countries of first asylum. As has been seen in other contexts, women refugees may be reluctant to participate in such courses - for example, as a result of traditional social reticence or demands of the family. Special efforts to encourage the attendance of refugee women - and especially heads of families - are essential if the women are not to start their new lives already at a disadvantage.

### III. ASSISTANCE TO DISPLACED PERSONS

66. In recent years, the High Commissioner has been asked by the Secretary-General of the United Nations to assist displaced persons in several countries. Large material assistance programmes were implemented on behalf of persons internally displaced in Angola, Guinea-Bissau, Lebanon and Mozambique, the Lao People's Democratic Republic, Viet Nam and Cyprus. The current programme in Zimbabwe also benefits the internally displaced. A number of the conditions found among refugee caseloads and groups of returnees apply to these displaced persons. Although as nationals in their own country, they will not have required legal protection in the same way that refugees do, their material assistance needs may be similar. It is in the initial stages of reintegration, following efforts to return the people to their villages of origin, that UNHCR assistance has been provided. Family reunion is often an essential component of such programmes. As in other situations, families headed by women are especially vulnerable. They risk being allotted inferior housing and land and being overlooked in the distribution of agricultural tools. These women may be ill-equipped to claim the social welfare benefits that are rightfully theirs. In general the problems identified and measures suggested for women under "voluntary repatriation" apply to the women among the internally displaced.



#### IV. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

67. The present report has sought to show the particular vulnerability of women refugees and to suggest ways whereby their problems may be solved. For this to be done successfully, and for women refugees to receive treatment that is indeed fair and equal, a superficial absence of discrimination against women refugees is not sufficient. Their condition demands positive measures that favour them specifically. Prevailing attitudes to women within a society will of course be felt by women refugees, but the existence of those attitudes must not serve as an excuse for inaction. Whatever the lot of women in a country of origin or asylum, the circumstances of life conspire against women refugees, introducing new and aggravating old disadvantages.

68. Many problems and difficulties have been identified, and practical recommendations have been made to solve them. Because of the pivotal role of women in the family, failure to resolve the special problems and difficulties that face women refugees will injure the whole family - even the whole community - and not just its female members. Such failure will indirectly increase the burden on the country of asylum and the international community.

69. The problems of women refugees have only recently come to receive attention. Nevertheless, the dimensions of the problems are already clear, as is the onus on the international community. More detailed studies and research are required of those who work for refugees, and the results must be widely shared.

70. In summary, specific action is needed to meet the needs of women refugees. This action should be comprehensive in scope and encourage the self-reliance of women refugees and their own active role in overcoming their problems with the necessary outside assistance. Access to this assistance, in all its forms, must be guaranteed for all women who need it, just as counselling and community services, particularly for urban refugees, must reach out to the women who need them. Refugee women themselves must be closely involved in elaborating the solutions that meet their needs.

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