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**Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women
and to the special session of the General Assembly entitled
“Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace
for the twenty-first century”: implementation of strategic
objectives and action in critical areas of concern and
further actions and initiatives**

Statement submitted by Asylum Access, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.



Statement

Introduction

Increased access to the Millennium Development Goals is necessary for refugee women and girls to access their rights

According to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), there are nearly 8 million women and girl refugees in the world today, with the number increasing as major international conflicts prolong. Nearly half of the 15.4 million refugees live in encampments, the other half living mostly on the fringes of urban centres. These refugees will remain in their displaced state for a growing average of 17 years.

Despite the fact that 81 per cent of refugees reside in developing countries, there has been limited international attention devoted to the human rights and development needs of refugees beyond access to humanitarian aid.

Displacement has serious implications on the civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights of refugees, including their access to health, employment, education, shelter and security. Female refugees are exposed to even greater barriers to accessing fundamental rights as a result of sexual and gender-based discrimination and violence.

Women and girl refugee populations are no longer subject to the protection of their country of origin and often have limited access to rights and protection in their country of refuge. This gap in protection can be more specifically addressed through the targeted application of the Millennium Development Goals to address the human rights and development needs of the forcibly displaced.

General recommendations

Asylum Access supports ongoing work to meet the needs of growing refugee populations. The international community should ensure the realization of the Millennium Development Goals for female refugee populations by:

- Promoting access to legal status and corresponding rights for refugee populations.
- Increasing initiatives geared towards the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals for female refugee populations.
- Increasing reporting on refugee populations in annual reports on the Millennium Development Goals.
- Integrating refugee populations into national poverty reduction strategy papers.
- Implementing a rights-based approach in poverty reduction strategies.
- Increasing initiatives that encourage female refugee populations to understand and assert their fundamental rights.

Goal 1: eradicate extreme poverty and hunger

Relevance to female refugee populations

Poverty in this instance indicates a lack of income as well as inadequate access to health, education, participation and security. Extreme poverty in these terms is a defining characteristic of the vast majority of the world's refugee populations. In fact, half of all refugees are confined to refugee camps, where they are routinely denied access to employment and freedom of movement. Faced with these restrictions, refugees depend upon aid to meet basic needs. The human rights violations that flow from encampment are exacerbated in female refugee populations, who are exposed to exploitation and sexual and gender-based violence.

The freedom of movement enjoyed outside camps exposes women to a higher risk of abuse and exploitation. Non-encamped refugees are frequently denied the right to work, along with social services and other aid. The British House of Lords, in *Limbuela v. Secretary of State for the Home Department*, has called this simultaneous denial of work rights and social assistance inhuman and degrading treatment.

Female non-encamped refugees forced to work in unprotected labour markets may be exposed to domestic slavery and human trafficking as a consequence of their vulnerability. This threat of revictimization of refugee women was recently reported as a major concern for the Rohingya refugee population in Thailand.

Goal-specific recommendations

The reduction of extreme poverty for female refugee populations may be best achieved through economic empowerment and the promotion of self-reliance. This requires the following undertakings:

- Refugees need access to safe, lawful employment, allowing for income generation to cover essential needs and reduce harassment, discrimination, exploitation and intimidation.
- For encamped refugees, a strategy is needed to transition camps into settlements that permit movement, integration and self-sufficiency.
- The inclusion of all refugees, both within and outside camps, into long-term development plans of host countries.

Goal 2: achieve universal primary education

Relevance to female refugee populations

The right to universal primary education is enshrined within the 1951 Refugee Convention (art. 22), the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (art. 10), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (arts. 23, 24, 28, 29, 32, 33), and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (art. 13). Despite the protection of education in international law, the majority of refugee youth experience disruption to their schooling as a result of their displacement.

As discussed in the 2008 Millennium Development Goals annual report, access to education for refugees in camps falls short of international human rights standards. After examining 114 refugee camps in 27 countries, the report concluded

that only 6 out of 10 camps have achieved full primary school enrolment, one in five refugee children is not part of a formal education system, and girls are at risk of dropping out because of safety concerns, poverty or early marriage.

For refugees outside camps, families report financial barriers to attendance at primary school, including both the need for children to generate income and difficulty in paying school-related fees, including tuition, books, supplies and uniforms.

Goal-specific recommendations

To realize the right to primary education, a combination of measures to promote access and overcome barriers is needed:

- Governments should ensure that primary education is available, accessible, acceptable and adaptable to all refugee children, particularly refugee girls.
- Financial barriers to primary education, including various fees, should be waived for vulnerable populations, including refugee children.

Goal 3: promote gender equality and empower women

Relevance to female refugee populations

Gender equality and the empowerment of female refugee populations require full inclusion into legal, political, economic, social and cultural systems. However, refugees are frequently denied access to lawful status, or status is associated with extremely limited access to rights.

In one example, the United Republic of Tanzania has welcomed large numbers of refugees but ties refugee status to the condition of living indefinitely in a closed camp, with limited exceptions. This restriction on access to rights means that women and girls are given few opportunities to access education, employment, national judicial systems and other empowerment opportunities.

The exclusion of female refugees from society in camps and urban settings allows for little or no opportunity to access or assert basic fundamental rights and participate in decision-making processes, further enforcing marginalization.

Goal-specific recommendations

- Ensure that female refugees have access to lawful refugee status in the host country and that this status confers access to political, economic, social and cultural rights.
- Develop and promote initiatives to increase female refugees' leadership and participation in decision-making processes.

Goals 4 to 6: health-related Goals

Relevance to female refugee populations

The challenges and circumstances unique to refugee women and children significantly increase their risk of child mortality, poor maternal health and exposure to infectious diseases, such as HIV/AIDS.

In August 2013, UNHCR reported that child mortality rates for Somali refugees at an Ethiopian camp had reached an alarming level, with an average of 10 children dying each day, since the facility opened in June. Acute malnutrition, inadequate access to health services, and a lack of knowledge surrounding health issues are all contributing factors to increased rates of child mortality within camps.

Access to maternal health for refugees, both within and outside camps, is severely limited. The loss of income and lack of access to quality health services, including emergency obstetric care, increase the risk of maternal death or injury among refugee women.

Emergencies linked to displacement, such as food insecurity, poverty, and exposure to rape and sexual violence, increase female refugees' vulnerability to HIV and other diseases. The lack of economic opportunities and the legal right to work for women refugees often means that women are forced to trade sex to meet their basic survival needs, exposing them to sexually transmitted diseases.

Goal-specific recommendations

In order to combat child mortality, maternal health and exposure to infectious diseases, such as HIV/AIDS and malaria, the Commission should adopt the following:

- Ensure universal access to reproductive health services, including family planning and sexual health services, through national strategies and programmes inclusive of female refugees.
 - Female refugees should be made aware of their right to access health services.
 - Increase reproductive health education for female refugees to raise awareness about maternal health, family planning, female genital mutilation, sexually transmitted diseases and HIV/AIDS.
 - Increase support to female refugees living with HIV/AIDS and other infectious diseases.
 - Increase the training of attendants in camps to assist mothers during childbirth, and have caesarean sections readily available to prevent mothers and their infants from dying needlessly.
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