

Civic Education – 15-18 years

Student Resources



Two steps forward, one step back

By the late 1980s, some 6 million Afghan refugees had fled as a result of the Soviet occupation of their homeland. Of these, 3 million, mostly from eastern Afghan provinces, went to Pakistan. Another 3 million, mainly from western provinces, fled to the Islamic Republic of Iran. By March 1995, around half had returned home, including large numbers of women.

Many refugee women returning to their devastated country after up to 16 years in Pakistan and Iran need both the means to become self-reliant - usually in the form of income-generating skills - and the opportunity to exercise those skills. But the great majority of Afghan women refugees came from, and are returning to, conservative rural areas, where opposition to the idea of women earning a living is perhaps as strongly entrenched as anywhere in the world.

"For years I thought that I only have to prove myself as a leader of Afghan women and as a good writer," says Safia Siddiqui, manager of a sewing project run by the Danish Committee for Assistance to Afghanistan, (DACAAR) in Peshawar, at the Pakistan end of the Khyber Pass, through which most Afghan refugees arrived after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. "I could not imagine that I would change my mind and devote my life to another cause - that of making Afghan refugee women self-reliant."

When UNHCR and other agencies first began operating programs for Afghan refugees, the idea of singling out refugee women for special training, which would continue to benefit them upon eventual repatriation, was still in its infancy. According to Else Berglund, a social services officer in UNHCR's Peshawar sub-office, much has changed since then. "In the beginning there were lots of funds which were spent without the idea of sustainability. Now, we have realized this and started many income-generating and self-reliance projects."

In Iran, which received about a quarter of the international assistance given to Pakistan, the situation was very different. Whereas the majority of the refugees in Pakistan were placed in refugee camps administered by the Government of Pakistan in cooperation with a multitude of local and international agencies, in Iran less than 10 percent of the Afghan refugees lived in camps.

According to Stephanie Aquino, a UNHCR field officer in the western Afghan city of Herat, close to the Iranian border, the refugees in Iran were therefore forced to



be more self-reliant. In addition, women refugees living in urban areas were exposed to greater opportunities and faced less disapproval than they had back home in their villages in Afghanistan. They also belonged in the main to different ethnic groups from the refugees in Pakistan (who were predominantly rural Pashtuns - traditionally the most conservative of all the various Afghan social groups).

As a result, many Afghan women in Iran enrolled in vocational courses. One of the most popular of these taught them how to make Iranian-style *gillims* (cotton carpets), a skill which some of them have subsequently turned into enterprises upon returning to Afghanistan.

But in Pakistan the early years created a culture of dependency among refugees. Afghan women were for the most part confined to camps, where their attention was mainly focused on caring for their families in an alien and claustrophobic environment. Nancy Dupree, a well-known scholar of Afghan affairs based in Peshawar, has written about the "acute psychological distress" suffered by women unaccustomed to the lack of private space anywhere in camps.

To add to their pressures, women have faced enormous cultural and political obstacles to becoming self-reliant. "It has been difficult to take men into confidence and to work with men," explains Berglund. "But attitudes do change with time." Working with illiterate female refugees was particularly difficult, remembers Safia Siddiqui, because at first they did not receive permission from their menfolk to participate in programs. "The men would say 'you are spoiling our females.'"

The determination to build something meaningful from the ruins of their lives has characterized the struggle of many Afghan women. Rahila was a refugee in Pakistan for eight years. With her husband jobless and the family dependent on food assistance, she joined an International Rescue Committee (IRC) training program for teachers. Soon she was teaching classes 1-5 at the crowded Nasir Bagh camp outside Peshawar. "I learned how to teach my students well," she recalls with pride, "and what materials should be used to help them learn easily."

Rahila, who has returned with her family to Jalalabad, is no longer allowed to work by her husband now that he is earning an income through his own trading business. He also argues that the "situation is not good" for her to work. Frustrated and saddened by this attitude, she confines her skills to tutoring her own three children at home.

Hava Majeed, chief female education officer at the Swedish Committee for Afghanistan (SCA), sees literacy as a vital factor in long-term development efforts. "If you are illiterate and you need to go to the clinic, you will need people's help, but if you attend literacy courses, you can help yourself."

Similarly, other newly acquired skills such as knitting or tailoring enable some



women to work for money and support whole families - even when the support is not always openly appreciated by men.

A major achievement of UNHCR, the provincial government and NGOs in the refugee camps was the establishment of Basic Health Units (BHUs) which include outreach male and female health workers as well as trained birth attendants. According to one IRC fertility survey among married women in selected camps in 1987, patterns of marital age-specific fertility suggested that the average married woman was likely to have as many as 13.6 children. Back in Afghanistan, this alarming figure was matched with some of the highest maternal mortality rates in the world.

Jamila, who lived in a refugee camp outside Hangu, in Pakistan's North-West Frontier Province, recalls that a Health Education course she took at IRC was "the most important and useful experience in my life." She had lost her first job when the NGO that employed her was shut down because the camp mullahs, or religious leaders, declared its main purpose was to convert people to Christianity.

Once she had completed her health training, Jamila made home visits to vaccinate women and children, and to encourage mothers and traditional birth attendants to pay attention to safe practices during pregnancy and delivery.

"My family supported me, my friends and the camp authority admired me, and my husband would look after my daughters while I was on duty," she recalls with some nostalgia. Despite her subsequent work experience with other NGOs in income-generation and mine-awareness projects in Jalalabad, she believes that health education is the most important issue facing her people as they re-build their lives within Afghanistan. The skills she acquired during her health training, she says, are still useful in her daily life at home.

Jamila is not alone in continuing to act on medical training she received while a refugee. IRC's mobile teams inside Afghanistan recently reported that mothers were maintaining their children's immunization records first received in camp clinics in Pakistan.

In 1994, while 100,000 Afghan refugees repatriated from Pakistan - taking the total since the fall of the Najibullah government in April 1992 to around 1.6 million returnees - at least 84,000 new refugees fled the fighting in Kabul and entered Pakistan.

In Nasir Bagh camp, where new sets of mud houses are being built on land that had been levelled for cultivation after the first refugees departed, the Swedish NGO, Radda Barnen, runs a Training Unit. The Unit produces social "animators," who are trained to help people help themselves and encourage active participation in projects. RBTU teams say they have successfully overcome hostility among refugees who initially resented their refusal to impart direct relief assistance.



Dependency is less apparent among these new refugees, probably because urban Afghans - including the women - tend to possess skills that can be more readily utilized in camp life. For example, Huma was a kindergarten teacher in Kabul before landing up in Nasir Bagh. After her arrival, she collected children in the camp herself and started a voluntary school which has now been handed over to IRC. A training center for midwives has also been set up by the widow of a colonel killed during the war.

After the closure of Pakistan's border to new refugees in January 1994, a wave of internally displaced people from Kabul descended on the eastern Afghan city of Jalalabad. Camps were hastily established by UNHCR, ICRC and assisting NGOs in the surrounding desolate area. By the end of the year, these camps already contained 300,000 displaced people, with perhaps another 200,000 living among the local population.

From the start, UNHCR and the other agencies operating in Jalalabad made use of the displaced Kabulis' existing skills. Training also began at an early stage, showing that the historical lesson has been well learned. For example, Save the Children Fund (UK) set up a training program that pays newly trained midwives, or *dais*, to train subsequent batches of trainees in an on-going process run by Afghan women themselves.

Uzra is a midwife trainer currently working with Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF-Holland) in Sar Shahi, the biggest of the Jalalabad camps. She was originally trained in primary health care by the World Health Organization while still a refugee in Pakistan. In 1993 she returned to Kabul, but found herself unable to work because rockets, sniper-fire and aerial bombardment made it too dangerous to leave the house. When her home was destroyed, she and her family were displaced once again, this time ending up in Sar Shahi camp where MSF quickly offered her a job.

Uzra feels she is likely to face more obstacles to her continuing work outside of the camp. She says if she were to return to her native Laghman province, "people would gossip and it would be difficult to do a job."

Some observers caution that women's mobility in the public sphere - always restricted in this segregated society - has become more so since the end of communism and the rise of a dominant conservative rhetoric among the warring political groups.

However, despite the undoubted difficulties facing returnee women, like Rahila and Jamila, who would like to continue working but cannot, stories circulate of other returnee women who have set up carpet-weaving enterprises, private schools, and self-help organizations within their own communities.

Back in Peshawar, Safia Siddiqui feels that not only development programs, but



attitudes have come a long way. "The best lesson I have learned in development is to convert the impossible into the possible." She is optimistic that some valuable social lessons have been learned as well. "Those men who opposed us ten years ago in the camps are now very cooperative and ask us for work."

Whether those lessons and attitudes will survive the return to Afghanistan remains to be seen.

Ayesha Khan

Refugees, feminine plural

In 1991, as desperate people scrambled through mountains of ice and mud to flee Northern Iraq, John Telford was posted to the area as a UNHCR emergency officer. When a few refugees took over food distribution, after days of utter confusion, "we thought we'd achieved a lot," Telford recalls. Later, however, UNHCR staff realized that food was not going to families headed by women. Only then did they notice that all the distributors they had appointed were men. The result: malnutrition, exploitation, suffering.

Telford remembers the shock he felt. "Had that group [of women] stood out in some way - visually or physically, because of their ethnic background, or a religious difference, or whatever - we would have made sure they got food," Telford recalls. "But because they were women, it didn't even occur to us. It didn't even occur to me, I have to admit - to my shame."

Since the Kurdish crisis in 1991, UNHCR's emergency operations have been radically improved. Emergency teams and longer-term field staff receive extensive training to help them identify and respond to the specific needs of refugee women and their children. Multiple policy statements and guidelines have been issued to the field. Unquestionably, UNHCR now pays far more attention to the assistance and protection needs of refugee women and children - who, as every staffer knows, represent the overwhelming majority of refugee caseloads in almost every country.

Still, throughout UNHCR, there are field officers with tales like Telford's to tell - and many more who don't even realize that they do. Well-meaning all, they have nonetheless failed to identify, relate to, grapple with or, finally, solve the often crushing additional burdens that face women refugees.

Sexual violence and exploitation are a shockingly frequent experience for refugees - whether before flight, during it, or while living in camps. But the particular burdens on women include such apparent trivialities as sanitary protection, whose absence can virtually immobilize a woman or adolescent girl. In between, of course, come the disproportionate burdens of child-rearing and domestic tasks; particular education needs for women lacking formal qualifications, who may be alone and responsible for family survival for the first time; and health-care, including contraception.

"Refugee women and children bear a disproportionate share of the suffering," says High Commissioner Sadako Ogata. But as Senior Coordinator for Refugee Women Ann Howarth-Wiles adds, their needs still do not receive a commensurate portion of the agency's attention and care. "We have a beautiful policy on [refugee] women. We have guidelines. We have everything," notes Wairimu Karago, deputy director of UNHCR's Protection Division. "But all this is only as good as the implementation."



"There are institutional and attitudinal changes that need to take place at UNHCR," says Roberta Cohen, a human rights specialist who recently reviewed UNHCR's policy on women refugees for an in-house evaluation. "The mere enunciation of a policy is not sufficient."

For the evaluation, Cohen - who is currently at the Brookings Institution studying internal displacement - headed a team that visited UNHCR operations in Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Kenya, Malawi, Nicaragua, Mexico, Costa Rica and Thailand. She looked into distribution systems, women's representation on refugee committees, access to female staffers and doctors, measures to prevent sexual violence, intelligent site planning - basic essentials.

"In one place I went, the rainy season was beginning, but there was so little plastic sheeting available that you could count the number of huts that had any," Cohen recalls. "When I spoke to the women, the first issue they brought up was the rain. Enough sheeting had arrived, but the male camp committee put in charge of distribution had sold most of it. The implementing partner said more sheeting was coming in. But had they changed the distribution system? No."

UNHCR policy stipulates that representatives and field officers should be attentive to women's needs in issues as fundamental as site planning and distribution of food and other supplies, as well as obvious specific questions in health care, skills training and education.

Particularly stressed is the need to increase the voice - and thus the power - of women refugees, and the need for UNHCR staff to monitor the application of such principles by NGOs. Camp situations are rarely model democracies, and without representation on refugee committees (or, in deeply resistant societies, separate women's committees), the specific needs of women refugees can be ignored.

"Sometimes women are better at distributing aid than men," observes Rwandese refugee Esther Nyirangororano. "Men neglect things. When men are in charge of giving out plastic sheeting they often forget the weakest people, the old women who can't walk far or the widows. And men don't know anything about malnutrition. It's women who know."

Women are often reluctant to confide in male administrators - even if they ask. "I have walked around camps and seen doctors who have said 'no problems,'" says Marie Lobo, UNHCR's Senior Social Services Officer. "I have then gone into tents and found women who have been raped, who have severe gynecological problems, who are pregnant - who have all kinds of complaints, but who would not go across the road because the NGOs have only male doctors. One lesson is the obvious, enormous need for more female staff in the field. But another is the ostrich approach - if you don't see the problem, it isn't there."

Rape is among the most terrible of the burdens that fall so heavily on refugee



women. Protection is at the heart of UNHCR's mandate. Most concretely, that means protection from assault. Yet refugee women are frequently victimized by sexual attack. Before flight, sexual violence is often a routine element of the persecution of women. During flight, sexual exploitation or violence may be part of their experience with border officials, other refugees, or the local population on either side of the border. In addition, even when women refugees reach safety - even when they are under the protection of UNHCR - women and young girls in refugee camps may be beaten, mutilated, assaulted and raped.

In Rwanda, during the appalling genocide of 1994, a recent report commissioned by the Fondation de France suggests that "virtually every adult woman or girl past puberty who was spared from massacre by the militias had been raped" - along with many younger children. Widows are said to comprise 30 percent of Rwandese women; there are estimates that 2,000-5,000 children may have been born of rape, many immediately abandoned.

Even inside UNHCR refugee camps, Inyumba Aloyisia, Rwanda's Minister for the Family, has stated that "young girls are being kept in refugee camps as sexual hostages by militia and soldiers of the former government." At least two Rwandese returnee girls have claimed to have been confined as sexual slaves in camps inside Zaire - statements they have since retracted.

Attempts by some field-workers to look into the allegations of rape of Rwandese refugee women have, so far, drawn a blank - perhaps at least partly because of the extreme shame felt by rape victims in Rwandese culture. Moreover, not all Rwandese refugees are convinced that rape is a major problem. "I live alone in a *blinde* (hut), and I feel quite safe," says Euphrasie Nyiramajambere, a Rwandese widow who is a member of several refugee organizations in Kibumba, near Goma. "There are so many people close by. If a man tried to come into my *blinde* at night it would be very easy to raise the alarm."

Nonetheless, many other women in the camps around Rwanda manifestly feel unsafe. "The Rwandese women want to be involved in the distribution of food and non-food items," says Maricela Daniel, a regional support officer for refugee children and women based in Kigali, who has long experience in human rights work in former Yugoslavia. "They also tell us to focus on the situation of sick widows and single mothers, who are in a particularly difficult position, and also women who have been abandoned by their husbands, who take with them all the non-food items.

"Also, they are concerned about sexual violence and prostitution in the camps. These are important points. All the conditions for rape and sexual abuse certainly exist in many camps. In some camps, there is still no awareness of the need for representation by women, and women administrators, although this is our policy. But the security situation is very, very challenging in these camps. Women who have worked with us have been threatened. UNHCR is powerless against these other forces."



Given the security situation in Zaire's Goma camps, currently sheltering 722,000 refugees, adequate investigation of the issue may well be impossible. According to Betsy Greve, a protection officer in Goma, UNHCR does plan to give small cash stipends to a network of women refugees who will visit other refugees, sector by sector, to gather information on sexual violence, nutrition and other family issues. Greve says that women's committees often exist, but despite UNHCR's instructions, NGOs sometimes fail to invite them to consultative meetings.

"There are so many issues in the camps, and so much chaos," explains Joel Boutroue, team leader of UNHCR's operation in Goma. "We are acutely understaffed. The protection unit has been working full time on organizing repatriation... I don't know if the problem of rape is widespread. I don't think it has been a major problem; if it were, I think I would know."

"When rape is not on the agenda, this is not always because rape is not a problem," observes Serge Male, UNHCR's senior epidemiologist. "Sometimes it's where staff haven't asked enough questions." Male has been working to get appropriate attention in the field for rape and reproductive health needs - a move that, he says, will require joint work by protection and community services officers.

Eventually, Male would like to see health services organized to deal with gynecological problems as well as malaria; treating complications resulting from genital mutilation of baby girls as easily as cholera; and providing female examiners, trauma counselling and contraceptive advice.

Male points out that the September 1994 International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo recognized that "reproductive health care and family planning are vital human rights." UNHCR and the U.N. Fund for Population Activities (UNFPA) have embarked on a series of joint activities to promote reproductive health in as many refugee situations as possible, and are developing a relevant, practical guidance manual for the field.

UNHCR has already developed formal guidelines on preventing and responding to sexual violence, based on detailed recommendations by field workers experienced with the rape and piracy attacks on Vietnamese boat-people, rapes of Somali women in Kenya, or the 'ethnic cleansing' rapes of Bosnian women. The guidelines aim to provide field workers with practical, non-specialist advice on the medical, psychological and legal ramifications of sexual violence. They are also intended to dispel the discomfort of many refugee workers with such acts - or any tendency to dismiss them as an inevitable by-product of social breakdown and war.

It is possible to prevent rape - not just treat the victims. In 1993, the incidence of rape was reported to be alarmingly high at camps for Somali refugees in Kenya, which were located in isolated areas plagued by bandits and Somali militia. Hundreds of women were raped in night raids, or while foraging for firewood. UNHCR set up a pilot project to improve protection. The camps were fenced with



thorn-bushes and protected by expanded patrols. Vulnerable women were relocated to safer areas. Community outreach was expanded. A number of victims of violence, suffering from acute ostracism, were relocated to other refugee camps or given quicker opportunities for resettlement abroad.

Similarly, in Cote d'Ivoire, field workers found women refugees risking attack in the forest because they could not bring themselves to use latrines that had been placed alongside those for men, in the center of the encampment. U.N. Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women Radhika Coomaraswamy highlights the link between clever camp design and better security. "Poorly lit camps, latrines at unsafe distances, and lack of privacy all create tense and hostile living conditions for women," she recently told NGOs.

"It's not just attacks on women - it's security in general," points out Yvette Stevens, chief of UNHCR's Program and Technical Support Section. "Take lighting. Sometimes administrative buildings are lit, or warehouses. But you hardly ever find lighting where refugees are - not even a strip of solar lighting near the latrines. I remember once, in Zimbabwe, we spent the night in a refugee camp, at a time when there were reports that RENAMO might cross the border. We went outside and it was dark - jet black - and I thought, what if RENAMO comes tonight?"

"A camp is not just a physical environment; it is a social framework," concurs Wolfgang Neumann, UNHCR's senior physical planner. "Any number of details make the difference between a bearable life and a life that is unbearable." Well-designed camps can alleviate the problems of camp security. They can also improve women's health. "Look at washing facilities," Neumann says. "Are we ready to pay for a concrete platform, so that women are not standing up to their knees in mud when they wash? Is there a runoff area around the washing hole? Or is the washing area a breeding ground for mosquitos? Of course, a camp that really considers women's issues, children's issues, and protection of the environment will cost far more money. And that is usually the problem. Many of these things just cannot be done for the same price."

But improving assistance to refugee women is not just a question of funds. It is fundamentally about the attitude of staff members - most importantly, field officers and representatives. Wairimu Karago spent four years as UNHCR Representative in Zimbabwe. "I believed very strongly that we needed to address [women's and children's] issues," Karago says. "I couldn't pretend I didn't have time: this was a stable refugee situation. I called a meeting of the whole office and I said 'Here are the guidelines on women, and on children, and we are going to go through them. We are going to do a needs assessment in the camps, and, in a very organized way, we are going to implement these guidelines.'" Karago insisted on bringing the issue up at every meeting with government and NGOs, and, she says, "made people accountable for this issue. I followed it up. I made it clear someone was interested. I drilled it into people's heads that this was an issue. I had very supportive staff, and we made it work."



One initiative, which encountered considerable resistance, was Karago's plan to train women refugees to make their own sanitary towels and underwear - a skill clearly useful to any woman between the ages of 15 and 50. In Zimbabwe, as in many other operations, women refugees were not issued sanitary towels free. They also had little money.

"We did a survey in the camps as part of our needs assessment," says Karago. "The participation rate of menstruating girls and women in schools, skills training, and other activities was falling, because they had no protection and thus could not travel far from home. What they needed was reusable cloth."

The skills-training program taught women to make their own towels - and provided a women-only forum that could address other issues and pass on other messages from UNHCR to the wider community. But after a year the funds faded, and the program died. "The women were delighted, it was useful, and we fought to keep it," says Karago, regretfully. "But these things happen."

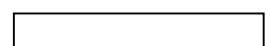
"This sort of thing should not happen," responds Ann Howarth-Wiles. "Such activities should not be dependent on ear-marked funds. They should be considered essential."

Women bleed one week in four. This is probably news to no-one. In extreme situations, a woman refugee with an acute sense of embarrassment or culturally imposed restrictions, who is relying on a rag, may not leave her house during that time to get food or firewood, or to take her child to a clinic.

Nonetheless, few UNHCR operations have, to date, grasped the need to supply sanitary protection. Of course, many women refugees use cloths, as they would in their traditional communities. But in camps, their supplies of cloths are scarce, they may not be able to wash them in private, and help from the extended family is limited.

"Field officers on the ground have a lot of leeway," comments Janet Lim, chief of UNHCR's Emergency Preparedness and Response Section. "Any program officer can work sanitary towels into a budget, and I think no-one would question it. But because it's never done, no-one ever does it. The field staff has to be made aware of the consequences of not meeting this need - all the more so because they are not immediately obvious."

"I went once on a high-powered inter-agency mission - five men and me - to former Yugoslavia," confides Lobo. "And we went around and asked if there were any problems, and everyone said no. And I said 'Wait, let me talk to the women'. And the issues came up. No sanitary towels. No proper, private bathing space to wash. Gynecological problems. No underwear. These were things they had never said. Talking about underwear to a man - of course, they'd never said it. So we insisted that sanitary towels be put in family packs, along with underwear and other personal items. I kept insisting - 'This is routine, they have to have it.' Our



male colleagues made a fuss. 'Imagine opening up a family pack and finding sanitary towels!' they said. As if it were something horrifying, something outrageous - not something completely normal."

Family packs in Yugoslavia do now contain sanitary towels. But many staffers are far from satisfied with the gains made to date. "If you raise the question of sanitary towels, you get little embarrassed giggles and they trivialize the whole issue," Howarth-Wiles says. "And I keep seeing how consultant physical planners haven't addressed the issues of toilets - putting men and women side by side - or create washing areas without any private area where women can wash their cloth sanitary pads. In many ways, the message is still not getting through."

Of course, in many ways, it is now getting through. UNHCR is beginning to come to grips with women's issues. Progress has been spectacular in some areas - in Central America, for example. There, specifically designed micro-development projects train women in non-traditional skills like bee-keeping and threshing, to improve their access to the income-generating economy, and NGOs have been issued specific targets for women to benefit from 50 percent of wage-earning, income-generating and training opportunities - for equal pay. Where staff focus on violations of women's rights as closely as they do on other protection issues, the benefits for the refugees themselves can be immense.

"We were 11,000 refugees all together, most of us women," says Maria Eugenia, a Salvadorian who returned from Honduras in the late 1980s. "In exile, we became very united, of necessity, although we did not know each other. In every camp we had a women's committee and worked to solve the problems we faced. We had to organize to get our rights. The men received good shoes but because we were just women we only had rubber thongs.

"We stated our problems and tried to find solutions. People started to learn skills. We had chicken farms and different types of workshops, making clothes and shoes... When we left Salvador we had no committees or any type of organization. Here, outside in the countryside, peasant women were ignored. We could not vote, even; we had no voice. And now, thanks to UNHCR, and to our organization while we were refugees, we are being heard."

Ruth Marshall



Do we really care?

"We could have done more, and we could have done better. We have achieved some things. But we've still got a long way to go."

This is how Ann Howarth-Wiles, UNHCR's coordinator for refugee women, summarizes the past five years of UNHCR policy towards those who represent - together with their children - almost 80 percent of the world's refugees.

Too harsh a judgment?

The problems of refugee women are too often relegated to second-rank priority. There is always something more pressing to do than to deal with the difficulties that women, in particular, encounter in refugee situations. Often, it seems, only a crisis - such as the mass rapes of women in ex-Yugoslavia or in Somalia - can spark action, when simple prevention could have avoided suffering.

A decade ago, UNHCR began to realize that refugee women were not benefiting fully from the protection and assistance that was their right. To evaluate and analyze the gaps in its programs for refugee women, UNHCR set up a working group, comprising mostly women of junior rank.

It soon became apparent that, without any malicious intent, UNHCR had been overlooking the specific needs of a large part of the refugee population. Refugee women were largely left out, despite the fact that they had manifestly greater needs. Many had fled alone or with just their children - their husbands either dead, fighting or prisoners of war.

"Women were never deliberately marginalized," said Howarth-Wiles. "But our information came from the leaders of refugee committees that were exclusively male. Many aspects of daily life escaped us, such as a woman's need for wood as fuel, or for cooking."

UNHCR did not undertake this change alone. A large number of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) had also begun analyzing their failure to grasp issues affecting refugee women, and had come to similar conclusions. In 1988, several major NGOs held a seminar and published the first working guide for meeting the specific needs of refugee women.

Also in 1988, then Deputy High Commissioner Eugene Dewey asked the Canadian government for help. Canada, with its international reputation for development programs aimed at women, seemed best placed to assist UNHCR to effect a sea change.



Canada agreed to pay the first three years' salary for a coordinator. UNHCR would provide administrative support. In 1989, UNHCR's first Coordinator for Refugee Women was named, with the task of sensitizing staff to the particular burdens confronting refugee women - and to respond to them more effectively.

"For the first four months, I had no secretary," Howarth-Wiles recalls. "Finally, I got one - part time. That's when I realized I was going to have to fight, and that the battle was far from won, even inside the organization."

The hardest battles were yet to come. In fact, they are still raging.

Within a year, a policy on women refugees was developed and a training program had been set up, with financing from the United States and Canada. "People-oriented planning" (POP) was designed to encourage staff to perceive, and address, the needs of all refugees - men, the elderly, children and women.

"A training program focused only on the needs of women would have been of little interest," explains Howarth-Wiles. "No one would have cared. Moreover, I felt my mandate was wider - that it should include all refugees, in order that our programs should be really effective."

POP has constantly changed over the years. Needs have altered, as the shift in geopolitics has led new populations of refugees to flee. Programs set up to cover the needs of refugee women in Africa did not necessarily meet the needs of refugee women in Europe - whose numbers today almost equal those in Africa.

Today, POP is UNHCR's major training program. In recent years, more than 990 staff members have participated in 50 courses.

In 1990, UNHCR published a general policy on refugee women, and the next year issued its Guidelines on the Protection of Refugee Women.

But progress has been slower than expected.

The main obstacle remains a lack of motivation. "Changing the attitudes of staff members toward the needs of refugee women, to improve our track record, is the heaviest challenge," notes Howarth-Wiles. "Making everyone feel responsible - and making everyone realize that this is not an isolated problem - is the main hurdle. There are some very blinkered, very male chauvinist elements within the staff, even at the highest level."

Even today, staff members will almost unanimously turn to the Senior Coordinator for Refugee Women to obtain information on women refugees in a particular situation - although their problems should be the business of every staff member.

"A program officer should have an answer to questions on the problems of women, just as he or she has answers to questions about food tonnage, number



of tents, number of refugees, health, security and so on," Howarth-Wiles said. "Unfortunately, this is rarely the case."

When camps are designed and mapped out, the needs of women should be automatically integrated into planning. Much suffering could be avoided if, from the outset, all camps were designed so that the most vulnerable - single women or single mothers - are more easily protected. Many might escape the sexual violence to which they too often fall prey when they are obligated to live far from others, or to walk for miles in search of wood.

"Unfortunately, all this depends on the good sense and the good will of the staff in the field," Howarth-Wiles notes.

Where the staff are highly motivated, UNHCR programs have taken into account the specific problems of refugee women. Thus - among others - Guatemalan refugee women in Mexico, Mozambican refugee women in Malawi and Zimbabwe, Afghan women in Pakistan or returnee women in Cambodia have benefited from well-designed programs and thoughtful assistance.

In other operations, where staff have been less motivated, much less has been accomplished.

"The only tool at our disposal to sensitize the staff is a training program which is not mandatory, but optional," observes Howarth-Wiles. "Moreover, for lack of resources, we are giving fewer courses today than we once did - especially considering the increase in staff, with successive crises in former Yugoslavia, in the former Soviet Union, and in Rwanda and Burundi. And yet we have the cheapest training program in the whole organization."

In addition, there remain a number of tenacious taboos. According to a 1993 in-house evaluation of UNHCR's policy on refugee women, many staff members still feel that rape and sexual violence may be regrettable, but remain essentially inevitable incidents in refugee life.

"Within this agency, there are two opposing attitudes," says Howarth-Wiles. "There are people who believe that the organization should not interfere with refugee customs. According to this school, we are not there to change people's culture or mind-set, and we should respect the traditions of refugees, whether this means the veil, forced marriage, failure to educate girls, genital mutilation, or lack of access to family planning. To this school, I respond that respect for human rights is also part of UNHCR's mission."

"Our work consists of aiding refugees to adapt to a new life," she continued. "When a woman flees, leaving a family in which she had been totally dependent, and finds herself alone in a foreign country, she needs help to assume her new role."

Such help should, of course, be given with care. "Of course we need restraint,"



says Howarth-Wiles. "We aren't here to impose anything. But we are here to propose alternatives, so that refugee women have a choice."

In Mexico, programs for Guatemalan women have been particularly successful. Critics who once worried that the future of such women would be compromised when they returned home - integrating into an environment that traditionally paid scant attention to the rights of women - have been silenced by the refugee women themselves. "They say they need no such paternalism - that it's *their* problem," says Howarth-Wiles. "It's *their* responsibility."

Attitudes inside UNHCR change slowly, but they are changing. "When I arrived at the agency, if I talked about rape in the camps, people shrugged," recalls Howarth-Wiles. "Some staff members even told me that rape never happened in refugee camps. Or, about genital mutilation, they would respond that this was a cultural issue."

Accounts of brutal rape in Bosnia, which sparked outrage worldwide, lifted many barriers. No one can now deny that such acts occurred.

On March 7, International Women's Day, UNHCR published its first guidelines for preventing and responding to sexual violence against refugees.

In Kenya, UNHCR has established a special program for refugee women who have suffered sexual violence. Several camps have been re-designed, and victims and their families can receive special medical and psychological care. The program has been tested, and could be reproduced in almost any camp, anywhere. It remains, however, an exception.

Genital mutilation has long been a taboo. "When I brought it up, people would tell me it was too delicate an issue," notes Howarth-Wiles. Meanwhile, UNICEF and the World Health Organization took a strong stand against the practice, and today UNHCR has set up an education program in a camp for Somali refugees in northern Ethiopia to discourage mutilation. The pilot program is aimed at religious leaders, midwives and health care professionals and could be reproduced elsewhere. So far, it too is an exception.

Much remains to be done and UNHCR is far from its goal of covering all the needs of refugee women. To be sure, the goal is not an easy one. In crisis situations, with refugees arriving in conditions of dramatic suffering, the obstacles are numerous and field staff are often reduced to doing the best they can with what little they've got - in terms of staff and funding.

But it is also a fact that most women refugees live in more stable conditions. And many of them need much more attention.

Christiane Berthiaume



Outside, looking in

Five years ago, Terry Morel got a revealing look at how Guatemalan women were traditionally kept on the outside looking in.

Morel, UNHCR's focal point for women and children refugees in Mexico's southern Chiapas state, recalled a 1990 meeting on income-generating projects for refugees sponsored by UNHCR and the Mexican Commission for Aid to Refugees (COMAR).

"We were meeting in the school of one refugee camp, a small bamboo shelter," Morel said. "About half an hour into the meeting, I realized that all the women in the camp were standing outside the building looking in at us through the bamboo walls. They were trying to understand what was happening. But they did not dare to enter, nor to participate. Nobody invited them either. I realized then that we could not afford to exclude half the refugee labor force from these projects."

After generations of living on the fringes, Guatemalan women are finally standing up for their rights. And in the forefront are refugee women who benefitted from UNHCR-sponsored education and training programs covering all aspects of human and gender rights.

"Back in Guatemala, we didn't even know we had any rights because we had no education. We were ignorant," said Aura Suchite de Rosa, a 23-year-old refugee living in a small camp in Campeche, another of the three southern Mexican states hosting refugees.

Suchite de Rosa is one of the new generation of Guatemalan women, confident that they can make a difference when they go home. She knows she is fortunate to have received at least some education, unlike many of the older women in her camp who can barely talk when approached by strangers. They smile nervously and hide their faces. They think they are too old to learn to speak Spanish, or if they do speak Spanish, too old to learn to write it and read it. They think their place is in the kitchen, beside their wood stoves.

How can they help it? Guatemalan refugee women are carrying the heavy burden of an ancient tradition of discrimination. Before fleeing to Mexico in the 1980s, these indigenous women thought it was normal to be kidnapped by men who wanted to marry them; to be beaten if meals were not prepared on time; to give their own food to the males in the family; to be pulled out of school at an early

age so they could take care of their younger siblings; to ignore their own health



while nursing their large families.

In UNHCR's early years in Mexico, the problems of Guatemalan refugee women were not so obvious for the simple reason that they refused to talk about personal matters. Now, 12 years later, they have only just begun to share the pain they experienced, including sexual abuse at the hands of the military.

Refugee settlements in the states of Quintana Roo and Campeche were designed as small, self-contained villages with their own schools, clinics and other necessities. But in remote, mountainous Chiapas, there are some 120 camps and spontaneous settlements scattered along the Mexican-Guatemalan border. Some of them are very difficult to reach. The refugees come from six different ethnic groups, each with its own language. Most of the women in the Chiapas camps, unlike the men, never learned to speak Spanish. COMAR and UNHCR designed income-generating projects for the women. But it was not easy to get them involved - they lacked the confidence to take on a business.

Then, four factors coincided to boost the gender focus approach.

- First, the International Conference on Central American Refugees (CIREFCA) established a framework for cooperation with NGOs.
- Second, CIAM, a Central American NGO specializing in women's issues, arrived in Chiapas and helped focus attention on the problem.
- Third, UNHCR Mexico began an in-depth evaluation of the problems faced by Guatemalan women refugees in preparation for the first regional forum on refugee and repatriated women (FOREFEM) in Guatemala in 1992. The resulting guidelines were later incorporated in the CIREFCA approach.
- Fourth, and most important, Guatemalan refugee women established their own organization, Mama Maquin. "One day we realized we were an important part of our people and we concluded that only by organizing ourselves would we be listened to and respected," said Reina Montejo, a Mama Maquin member.

With the help of Mama Maquin, UNHCR was able to cover all refugee camps no matter what language the women spoke. The first public activity of Mama Maquin was to carry out a survey of women's needs in Chiapas. Almost 900 women of different ages and origin were interviewed in 60 camps to determine their main problems and to decide priorities.

The survey results were quite depressing. "I was shocked by the women's low level of self-esteem," recalled Terry Morel. "All of them considered themselves too old, useless or too tired. They were not interested in training activities. They suffered from malnutrition and were very sad."

Mama Maquin, UNHCR and COMAR decided to introduce projects to reinforce the women's self-esteem. Most activities focused on training, health, education, and human rights projects. A radio program produced and directed by the refugee women was aired for free by a local radio station.

But getting men to accept the women's projects wasn't easy. "We knew we were



going to face problems with our brothers, and we were right," said Marisela Lucas, a Mama Maquin leader. "Most of them did not want us organized."

In addition, the women faced much resistance from an unexpected front - other women. Among other things, they were very embarrassed discussing topics such as reproduction in public. Nevertheless, little by little, the women began to appreciate each other and themselves. "I found out that I am a person too, that I have human rights too," said Silvia Velazquez, a refugee at La Laguna settlement in Quintana Roo.

To date, some 8,000 women in Mexico and Guatemala have participated in the activities of Mama Maquin and similar organizations that soon followed, including Madre Tierra (Mother Earth), Ixmucane (the Mayan grandmother goddess) and Flores Unidas.

But convincing Guatemalan men of the value of these women's activities remains difficult because it challenges traditional male perceptions. In some cases, women have had to assume a double workload - carrying out their household chores as well as their new responsibilities in various projects ranging from running small bakeries to market gardening. But some men have accepted the new roles taken on by their wives.

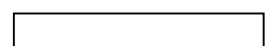
"My husband helps me at home, but I know a guy who prefers to go to the river at midnight to wash the clothes rather than be seen helping his wife when she is away in a meeting," said Angelica Gonzalez, a leader of Madre Tierra.

Sometimes, it is easier to persuade a husband to accept the changed role than to convince his mother or sisters. "They laugh at my husband, saying he is a fool manipulated by a woman," said Gonzalez.

Although the women's organizations have gained a certain degree of visibility and acceptance, they have not made much headway against traditional male power structures. "It is a matter of power and it is hard to share the power," said Morel. Or, as Angelica Gonzalez puts it: "We want to break the chains that bind us - while the men say we should stay at home, why do you want to go out?"

The women's organizations emphasize that their activities are aimed at promoting the voluntary repatriation program that has already helped some 18,000 Guatemalans return home. In this context, their work has been successful and the women's groups have become indispensable partners both before and during the repatriation movements. They educate prospective returnees on what to expect and they distribute food and other assistance during the trip back.

In addition, women are now taking part in periodic scouting trips back to Guatemala to seek land for prospective returnee communities, the first step in any repatriation movement. A few have even been accepted on the executive boards of new returnee cooperatives in Guatemala, while others been given their



own land. Even so, most refugee and returnee organizations remain male-dominated.

A visible result of the awareness campaigns developed by refugee women is an increase in legal complaints against men. Nearly half the complaints addressed by protection officials in Mexico involve accusations of sexual harassment, rape or domestic violence. Gender violence *per se* is not a new phenomenon. What has changed is the willingness of women to report such cases.

So far, most of the projects implemented by the refugees and funded by UNHCR are aimed at providing the most basic and urgent needs, and do not address the more fundamental obstacles that prevent women from taking a more active role in the development process.

For example, only a small fraction of teachers and trainers are female. Except for midwives, most of the health promoters are male as well. And unlike male health promoters, who receive a small payment for their work, midwives receive no money. In El Porvenir settlement in Chiapas, midwives complain that their work is taken for granted.

The women have plenty of work to do before and during the repatriation movements, and they are not content to sit back and let the men take over once they get back home.

Most of the returnees are members of collectives and they must build new villages from scratch - houses, churches, schools, markets, water and sanitation systems, roads, everything. And they have to do it in a sometimes hostile environment. In the Ixcan area, near the Mexican border, for example, the military and the guerrillas are still in conflict. Sometimes, this conflict puts women in a unique role as mediator and protector.

"This area is full of soldiers," said Carmen Salazar, a returnee to Tercer Pueblo. "Because of the danger, we women have to join men and support them.

"The army burned our houses and crops in August 1982 and established a military camp in the urban zone of the cooperative. When we came back, they were still occupying our land. So, I organized a women's demonstration demanding their withdrawal in December 1993."

After months of negotiations, the army withdrew from the land in April 1994, enabling the returnees to move in.

"The army is like a husband who beats you a lot but still wants you to love him," said Salazar, who owns her own plot of land. Her field, a 90-minute walk from her home, remains unplowed a year after her arrival in Tercer Pueblo. With the security situation still unsettled, her oldest son is afraid to work in such a remote place.



Military aircraft continue to fly overhead around Tercer Pueblo, frightening the children. Sometimes, gunfire is heard in the surrounding hills. Salazar and her neighbors just want to get on with their lives.

"The army is here because the guerrillas are here," she said. "So, if there were no guerrillas, there would be no army. We now know that fighting is not a solution to our problems. So why don't the army commanders and the guerrilla commanders just go to a stadium far from Ixcán and fight there and leave us alone in peace?"

Guatemalan women know the road to peace and prosperity is a difficult one. But they are unwilling to turn back, to go back to the old ways, because the refugee experience has changed them.

"We are not the same," declared Gregoria Suchite, an Ixmucane leader preparing to return home. "We do not want to go back to Guatemala just to keep pigs in our backyard, living as we always did. We women have participated in the planning of our future cooperative. I never imagined we could do that."

Sandra Garcia