

Caritas Internationalis Statement for the UNHCR – NGO Annual Consultations 2010

Caritas says it is a scandal that about 2/3 of the refugees live in protracted refugee situations, meaning that their average length of exile can last up to 20 years. 49 per cent of these persons are women. Protracted refugees live in insecure and remote locations, including camps, rural settlements, and urban centers, where they are dealing with poor living conditions. In 2009, UNHCR listed at least 30 major protracted refugee situations. About 2/3 of refugees are in such a situation, accounting for over 6 million people worldwide.

Caritas asks the international community and relevant stakeholders, including refugees themselves, to work in partnership for the protection of women against violence in camp settings, including access to complaints mechanisms and judicial procedures. Support programs that educate men and women - especially youngsters- about rights, responsibilities and respect for one another should be implemented as well as generally ensuring access to education.

People in camp settings need a perspective and a meaning in life. "Life in the shadow of fear is debilitating and corrosive to the soul"¹. Programs who help women in camp settings providing means to develop their skills, develop economic activities and organize community life will increase their personal stability and confidence in life. At a personal level this helps to develop perspectives for the future, either integrating into the local context, returning back home or resettling into another country. Personal efforts and opportunities must be accompanied by the political will to enforce protection as foreseen in international treaties as well as to provide long term solutions.

PRS mostly occur in the world's poorest and most unstable regions, in which Caritas often works. Many refugees leave Sub-Saharan African countries (including Burundi, Sudan, Somalia, or Liberia) to go to neighbouring countries. Other regions are also heavily affected, with refugees fleeing countries such as Afghanistan, Vietnam, Bhutan, or Burma/Myanmar.

Women's vulnerability is often double or triple: Being a woman, being a refugee with little protection and needing to care for their families. Facilitating their access to livelihood is essential. Due to women's formative role in society, guaranteeing their social and economic well-being could impact entire families.

¹ Forced Migration Review, Issue 33, September 2009: Abebe Feyissa Demo, "Riding on the back of a tortoise"

Women's freedom of movement is frequently limited in PRS, which hinders access to professional or educational opportunities and makes them dependent on different forms of assistance. Access to health care and specifically maternal health care is often limited, putting their health and that of their children at risk. Due to traditional role models women do not participate in the camps' decision making processes, thus they are unable to impact the choices affecting their everyday life.

Caritas India, who mostly supports Sri-Lankan refugees, helps refugee families to live in safe environments through house renovations as well as water and sanitation programs. Adolescent girls and married women have access to health education and counseling in 59 camps.

An often reported problem for women in PRS is that they are victims of emotional, physical, or sexual abuse and violence. They are particularly vulnerable as they frequently have to leave the refugee-camps to secure basic supplies for their families, such as firewood and water. Threats to the refugees' security also originate from tensions with host populations: competition over limited resources can appear when aid gets scarce after the "initial emergency phase" or if the perception of the host population is that refugees are helped better than themselves.

It is generally difficult for women to report on these acts of violence. Complaints mechanisms let alone judicial procedures are often inaccessible to them or ineffective.

Caritas Lebanon provides a safe environment to women and their children, as well as assistance with judicial procedures paired with continuous legal, social and psychological follow-up. A 24/7 operational hotline is also available to all women in need.

With the increasing duration of the situation in both camps and urban settings, helping refugees find a way to earn a living is a major challenge: access to livelihoods can help stabilize the situation of a refugee by limiting their dependency on assistance, helping them to develop a perspective for the future, empowering them as well as protecting them from violence and abuse.

Durable solutions to the issues of women in PRS should thus be based on increasing the participation and leadership roles of women. Throughout the world, Caritas has implemented activities meant to develop refugee women's potential and empower them.

Caritas Benin offers refugee women access to leadership trainings to improve their capacity of reaction facing difficulties. Professional trainings are also organized, such as cooking lessons using local products. An average of 52 refugees benefits from these lessons every year.

Caritas Internationalis, the global confederation of 164 Catholic charities, promotes integral human development. Namely, an integral approach that takes into consideration the wellbeing of the person and of all people in their different dimensions: economic, social, political, cultural, ecological and spiritual – in order to achieve a just society.

The protection, empowerment and integration of female migrants, refugees, asylum seekers, undocumented migrants, trafficked people and other forcibly displaced populations and stateless persons are a key concern for Caritas Internationalis.