

UN General Assembly Resolution*

Relating to Refugee and Displaced Women

The General Assembly,

HAVING CONSIDERED the resolutions and recommendations of the Program of Action of the World Conference of the United Nations Decade for Women relating to refugee and displaced women (A/CONF.94/35), of concern to the High Commissioner for Refugees,

RECOGNIZING that the problems of refugees and displaced persons affect every continent and place special burden on developing countries,

The mandate of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees as defined by the General Assembly 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 programs to help vulnerable refugee groups, such as children, the elderly and the handicapped. In recent years, the specific needs of refugee women have been increasingly addressed.

AWARE that the increasingly serious situations of refugees and displaced persons place heavy social and economic burdens on those countries which provide asylum, relief or rehabilitation,

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. Programs 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.

NOTING also with great concern that women and children constitute the majority of refugees and displaced persons in

most areas,

Today, of the millions of refugees and displaced persons who come under the mandate of the High Commissioner, women constitute a majority in the adult refugee population. In some countries the proportion 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 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.

RECOGNIZING that the needs of refugee and displaced women as mothers and as women who have sole responsibility for the support of their families require a constructive recognition by all parties to their relief and rehabilitation,

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.

RECOGNIZING ALSO the particular vulnerability of refugee and displaced women to intimidation, exploitation, physical and sexual abuse,

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 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. In situations often characterized by physical insecurity and the breakdown of law and order or by the absence of social constraints, women and teenage girls become especially vulnerable to various forms of sexual intimidation and exploitation.

AWARE that the special problems of refugee and displaced women have to date not been fully studied,

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. The strength and resilience demonstrated by women refugees in 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.

STRONGLY EMPHASIZING the need for increased support from the international community for the large number of refugees and displaced persons,

1. REQUESTS all States to co-operate with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in order to assure full protection of the well-being of women and children in particular, in accordance with their legal rights under international law and national legislation;

2. CALLS UPON all States and aid-donors providing immediate relief to refugees and displaced persons to endeavour to lessen the special vulnerability of women in these circumstances, by ensuring their access to emergency relief and to health programs, and their active participation in decision-making in centres or camps for refugees or displaced persons;

3. URGES the international community to provide urgent and adequate assistance to all refugee and displaced women and to developing countries providing asylum or rehabilitation, especially the least developed and most seriously affected countries;

4. FURTHER CALLS UPON all States and aid-donors assisting in the rehabilitation, resettlement or repatriation of refugees and displaced persons to rec-

ognize the pivotal role of the mother in the family, and thus in the provision of family welfare, to ensure women's rights to physical safety and to facilitate their access to counselling services and material assistance;

5. URGES the High Commissioner to work with host country governments to encourage the participation of women, including refugee women, in the administration of refugee assistance programs, notably the provision of essential food, shelter and medical services in asylum countries and to promote their participation in training and orientation programs in asylum and resettlement countries;

6. URGES the High Commissioner to draw upon the expertise of all concerned United Nations bodies and, in consultation with concerned countries, to carry out detailed studies and research to determine the extent to which refugee and displaced women are especially vulnerable and to formulate and implement programs and projects based upon the results of these studies;

7. RECOMMENDS that the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees co-ordinate with the interested United Nations agencies and non-governmental organizations the collection and analysis of data and the conduct of research and case studies on the critical needs of refugee and displaced women;

8. FURTHER RECOMMENDS that the High Commissioner ensure that the number of women at all levels on his staff, and particularly in the field, is increased and that a high-level staff position is designated as a co-ordinator for women's programs.

The High Commissioner for Refugees has taken action which reflects his deep concern for the situation of refugee women around the world. He continues to co-operate fully with member states to ensure the international protection and welfare of all refugees, with special emphasis for the particular needs of women refugees and children.

In addition, the High Commissioner has consulted with and worked alongside those interested United Nations agencies

and non-governmental organizations to formulate and implement assistance programs taking into consideration the specific needs of refugee women.

The High Commissioner has made efforts to increase the number of women at all levels on his staff and has designated a staff position as co-ordinator for women's programs.

*Taken from a UNHCR report "The Situation of Refugee Women the World Over" and a resolution adopted by the United Nations General Assembly at its 35th Session, 11 December 1980.

SUDHA COOMARASAMY

Seeking Refuge ...

I want to fly
but have no wings.
I want to build
a cosy nest — all my own
but do not have
even dried up sticks.
My life melts away
in dependence and obligation.
Every kind deed —
reminds me of my stateless state.
I seek refuge from —
being a refugee.

(December 1985, London, U.K.)

Ingratitude?

I know what animals feel like
that have freely roamed the forest.
Food may have been scarce —
forest fire, flood and drought
may have daily threatened their lives,
but, they breathed the air of freedom.

The animal lovers redeemed us,
from uncertainties and,
the violence of the forest.
But now —
We pace within 6' X 10' rooms,
wait for our regulated feed times,
and time-tables fresh air quotas.

These humans are so organized
that every flap of wings or wag of tail
is computerized.
Instead of instinct, now machines
dictate
their every minute action.

(London, U.K., March 1986)