Diversity among refugee and IDP populations is often overlooked. Through its Age, Gender and Diversity Mainstreaming Strategy, UNHCR is working to ensure that persons of concern receive equal opportunities to access UNHCR services, regardless of age, sex and background.

When communities are displaced, women, young people, the elderly and minorities are often marginalised. They seldom get a chance to participate in decisions that directly affect their lives, which can put them at greater risk of harm.

Three evaluations of UNHCR’s work with refugee women and children and UNHCR’s community services concluded that the agency did not have enough direct, systematic contact with persons of concern. They reported low participation by refugees in UNHCR programmes, particularly among women and children, a lack of coordination among protection, programme and community services staff, an absence of analysis with partners and an overall lack of accountability. Programmes were fragmented and age and gender issues not addressed in an integrated way.

UNHCR accepted the need to discuss directly with refugee women, men, girls and boys the protection risks they face, the underlying causes and proposed solutions and the capacities of the refugee community to address these issues and to ensure these discussions helped shape UNHCR’s response strategies. In 2004, UNHCR introduced a pilot gender and age mainstreaming project in 14 countries which included:

- participatory assessment with groups of refugee/internally displaced girls, boys and women of different ages
- workshops with staff and partners to integrate findings into organisational planning
- use of multi-functional teams – bringing together programme, community services and protection staff – to implement policies on refugee women and children through a rights- and community-based approach
- placing accountability for in-country age and gender mainstreaming with the Country Representative, UNHCR’s most senior staff member in-country.

Strengthening the voices of refugees in UNHCR planning

by Leslie Groves
In April 2005, the pilot project was evaluated with assistance from staff from the Women’s Commission for Refugee Women and Children and Jesuit Refugee Services. They recommended that mainstreaming continue in the eight countries evaluated and be rolled out widely across UNHCR. Their recommendations have been acted upon. The methodology has been broadened to cover diversity of background, as well as age and gender. Annual participatory assessment exercises have been made compulsory. Responsibility for the roll-out of the methodology to all UNHCR country operations is gradually being handed over from technical specialists to staff of UNHCR’s regional bureaux. Fifty-five UNHCR and three NGO staff, trained as facilitators, will train country staff who will in turn facilitate in-country participatory assessments, follow-up workshops and age, gender and diversity analysis in their own country operations.

By April 2006, multi-functional teams in 52 countries – joined, in most cases, by government, UN and NGO partner agencies – had conducted participatory assessments with separate groups of males and females aged 10-13 and 14-17, 18-40 and over the age of 40. Discussion focused on education, livelihoods, security and protection risks. Analysis of findings is underpinning formulation of UNHCR’s Country Operations Plans and includes targeted action to protect the rights of groups suffering from discrimination. An electronic ‘community of practice’ enables staff to discuss challenges, share good practice and get support from colleagues. An accountability mechanism is also being developed.

**Impact**

Although some countries were already working on gender awareness issues, a large number of staff report that they now look at issues affecting women, men, girls and boys more systematically. By jointly analysing the causes behind the protection risks facing persons of concern, as well as identifying their capacities and skills, the multi-functional teams have been better able to prioritise responses and find appropriate solutions in a participatory manner.

Some concrete examples of impact on work practices are:

- **Improved protection and programming, including advocacy:** In Colombia, planning modules have been modified to incorporate differences by age, gender and other determinants of diversity. In Colombia, Greece, India, Syria and Venezuela, age, gender and diversity mainstreaming has been added to staff work objectives. In Kakuma, Kenya, refugee men report that they have noted “a lot of changes” since the initiative, notably in terms of improved camp security and follow-up on reported security concerns. In Ecuador, a community income generation initiative – established as a result of the assessments – has given refugees a sense of empowerment: “Now we can earn a living and show that we are not just taking from society but giving and creating jobs. This helps combat discrimination.”

- **Improved partnership and team-working:** In Ecuador, government counterparts now employ women to interview women asylum seekers and implementing partners are required to consider age and gender mainstreaming within their proposals. In Syria, a partner reports that they no longer decide ‘for’ but ‘with’ refugees.

- **Greater engagement with people of concern:** Staff in India, Zambia and Benin have held more meetings with women and report that more women have been encouraged to take on leadership roles.

- **Improved communication and outreach:** In India and Syria, reception centres have been altered to allow greater privacy for different groups; in India, separate reception areas have been built for women, children and elderly people. Persons of concern interviewed in different countries said that they now have a better awareness of UNHCR’s mandate and capacity.

- **Greater awareness of protection risks, domestic violence and sexual exploitation (particularly of adolescent girls) and the need to improve protection for the physically and mentally disabled and minority groups and to improve information and communication flows.**

UNHCR has also learned the:

- need to simultaneously use interlinking and mutually reinforcing mechanisms

- need to engage senior management support: support from the High Commissioner downwards has been crucial in the prompt response to the evaluations, facilitating roll-out and ensuring that participatory assessment with diverse groups became a mandatory country planning requirement

- importance of enthusiastic, committed and skilled staff who value the participatory assessment tool as a way to re-connect with persons of concern

- importance of partnerships: sustained donor and NGO interest has been vital in monitoring the process and providing financial and technical support.

“UNHCR’s age and gender mainstreaming process is a historic opportunity to ensure refugee women and children’s place in the decision-making process from the beginning. They are the experts on what will work best to improve their lives and protect their rights and we applaud UNHCR for taking this important new step. We look forward to seeing real changes in the lives of refugee women and children worldwide.” Dale Buscher, director of the Women’s Commission protection and participation programme.
UNHCR: protection and contemporary needs

UNHCR’s institutional response to the protection of internally displaced persons (IDPs) is still seriously inadequate.

Since the 1970s, successive High Commissioners have recognised IDPs as a group with similar needs to those of refugees. In Sri Lanka in the early 1990s, Thorvald Stoltenberg extended UNHCR’s assistance and protection to IDPs who were on the fringe of or beyond UNHCR’s official mandate. His successor, Sadako Ogata, not only endorsed the programme (which had been challenged during the interregnum before she took over leadership of the agency) but also issued a formal directive in which she described situations where IDPs were mixed with refugees as those where “UNHCR should consider taking primary responsibility for the internally displaced, weighing in each case the additional benefit of its involvement in terms of protection and solutions”. Moreover, she subsequently drew attention to “the direct linkage between internal displacement and refugee flows, as the causes of displacement may be indistinguishable, and the only distinction being that the former have not crossed an international frontier.”

Why, with such positive attitudes towards IDPs at the top as well as in the field, has UNHCR’s overall performance been so disappointing? UNHCR’s reluctant and sluggish response to the challenge of IDP protection is but one aspect of its faltering response towards the changing face of global displacement and, more fundamentally, one which reflects the general nature of international institutions, particularly their vulnerability to external pressures when called upon to act in politically sensitive areas.

The agency’s founding fathers well understood the potential institutional pitfalls and decided that the protection mandate should be conferred upon the High Commissioner rather than the agency. This move has been fully vindicated. Without exception, High Commissioners have taken their protection responsibilities very seriously indeed, been able to exert international moral authority and, when necessary, been ready to take on governments to an extent which would have been unlikely if the agency had been structured differently. As a