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Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-03-663](#), a report to the Ranking Minority Member, Senate Committee on Foreign Relations

Why GAO Did This Study

Women and children refugees, who comprise 80 percent of the estimated 12 million refugees worldwide, are among the world's most vulnerable populations. They are subject to gender-based violence, including physical harm, rape, and unequal access to humanitarian assistance. GAO was asked to (1) assess efforts by the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to protect refugees, especially with regard to women and girls; (2) determine what steps U.N. and international organizations have taken to prevent sexual exploitation of refugee women by humanitarian workers; and (3) describe U.S. government efforts to support adequate protection for vulnerable populations.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that the Secretary of State work to reform UNHCR's staffing system, expand protection training, encourage protection partnering, and maintain focus on combating sexual exploitation of women and girls. State agreed with our recommendations. UNHCR disagreed with fundamentally reforming its staffing system, stating that better instruments for assigning staff and managing vacancies are sufficient remedies. We maintain that UNHCR needs a strategic workforce plan and better staff assignment and rotation policies to ensure that certain vacant duty stations are filled.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-03-663.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact David B. Gootnick, (202) 512-3149, gootnickd@gao.gov.

HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE

Protecting Refugee Women and Girls Remains a Significant Challenge

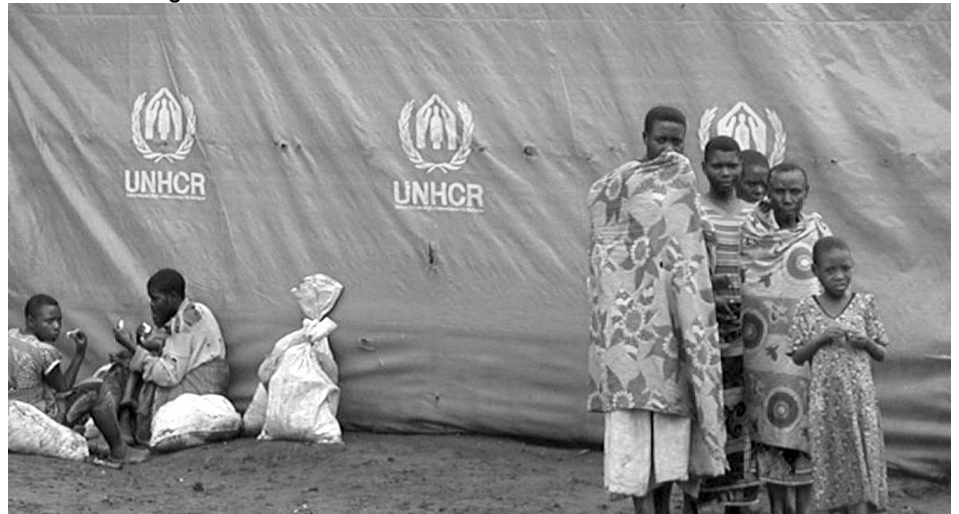
What GAO Found

UNHCR and international organizations have developed guidelines, best practices, and other measures to improve protection of refugee women and girls. However, weaknesses in its staffing process and training limit the effectiveness of these measures. UNHCR lacks a formal strategic workforce plan that links the organization's objectives, resources, and staffing; its staff assignment and rotation policies have resulted in extended vacancies at key protection posts; and it provides little practical training for most UNHCR and implementing partner staff on protection concepts and techniques. UNHCR could also make better use of partnering arrangements with nongovernmental and international organizations to boost its protection capacity.

In response to allegations in 2001 of sexual abuse and exploitation of women and girl refugees by relief workers and peacekeepers, the U.N. and other international organizations introduced policies and procedures to address the problem, such as codes of conduct and mechanisms to report and act on new allegations of abuse of power. While these efforts have raised awareness among workers in refugee settings, international organizations face continuing sexual exploitation of women by relief workers, and the issue remains a real and significant problem.

The U.S. government, through the Department of State, supports the protection of refugees and other vulnerable populations primarily through its funding to international organizations. It is also a strong advocate at the United Nations, within international organizations, and at the country level to increase protection efforts.

Burundian Refugees in Tanzania



Source: GAO.