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Refugee Women and Repatriation: Perspectives from Southeast Asia

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Introduction

Repatriation, which has become the main long-term solution of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), is reflected in the refugee activities in Southeast Asia. However, as the High Commissioner remarked in 1993: "Relatively little has been documented on the specific issues facing women returning to their homes after years in exile" (Forbes-Martin 1992, viii).

In this paper, I hope to contribute some scattered pieces of documentation in an effort to fill this knowledge gap. The paper is mainly empirical and draws on my eighteen months' work experience with UNHCR in Southeast Asia. It is based primarily on observations of and interviews with refugees, asylum seekers, returnees, and the staff of international agencies, governments, and the UNHCR. Knowledge has also been gained from gender-awareness training seminars in the region and the available secondary literature. While the data have been gathered in the context of my profes-

sional activities for UNHCR, the views expressed in this article are entirely my own, and do not necessarily reflect the position of UNHCR.

Contrary to a broad range of evidence, it is still widely assumed in project planning and implementation that refugee assistance reaches everybody equally. Gender is one of the most significant differentiating features in any society or community, and this paper will seek to identify and

analyze those aspects of the repatriation process which have or have not taken gender difference and gender relations sufficiently into consideration.

The following issues related to repatriation will be investigated: have demographic data about the refugee population been produced and used for repatriation planning purposes? Does counselling and information about voluntary repatriation reach

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