



Displaced Women and Girls at Risk: Identifying Risk Factors and Taking Steps to Prevent Abuse

Women and girls at risk: women and girls whose rights, safety and well-being are at risk of being seriously compromised on the basis of their gender. They may be at risk of sexual and gender-based violence, persecution, social exclusion, detention, extreme poverty, *refoulement* (forced return) and other potentially life-threatening situations and violations. These and other risks may be present pre-flight—in their home countries—during flight, in their country of displacement or upon return to their country of origin. The presence of an adult male family member or guardian does not, in and of itself, guarantee their safety, although unaccompanied women and girls may face increased risks to their protection and well-being.

“The differential impact of armed conflict and specific vulnerabilities of women can be seen in all phases of displacement.”

UN Secretary General,
October 2002.

The experiences of women and girls during flight, in exile and post-conflict are significantly different from those of men. Displaced women and girls hold their families together under the most difficult and inhumane circumstances and do so while at increased risk to their safety and well-being—risks that include rape, beatings, torture, hunger and abandonment.

Violations of human rights and protection risks can be factors that lead to displacement. They have an impact on women’s and girls’ decisions to flee, on their time during displacement—whether internally or across an interna-

tionally recognized border—and during return and reintegration.

This synopsis is based on the Women’s Commission for Refugee Women and Children’s report *Displaced Women and Girls At Risk: Risk Factors, Protection Solutions and Resource Tools*, which builds on research and materials produced by the University of New South Wales’ Centre for Refugee Research.

The Women’s Commission report and this synopsis aim to broaden the understanding of field-based practitioners in the humanitarian community about women and girls at risk as a means to help clarify (1) what the risks factors are and (2) actions to take. This will help them more effectively address the protection needs and solutions of

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“The danger is the same, near or far, but there’s no wood nearby. When we are there getting the wood, local people sometimes take the girls’ clothes off and do bad things. ... At the place where we get the firewood they tell us, ‘Line up one by one.’ They say, ‘Stand two by two,’ and they take us off like that and then they rape us. Sometimes this happens until evening. We have told the police, but the police say ‘Stay in your tent and nothing will happen.’”

Women’s Commission interview with refugee girls, Mille camp, Chad, January 16, 2005.

women and girls, while promoting their rights and recognizing the contributions women and girls themselves can make.

Many of the protection risks facing displaced women and girls are the same or similar before they flee, and during the flight, displacement, return and reintegration phases that women and girls go through during the life cycle of displacement. Community involvement in risk identification, prevention and intervention are the most successful means of reducing the protection risks faced by displaced women and girls. Women and girls must be involved in their own protection, and their communities—including the men—must be similarly engaged. To be most effective, these community-based responses should be supported by additional interventions, such as the provision of security personnel, the presence of female staff and the availability of health, livelihood and education programs. It is, however, only through individual assessments of those at risk and personalized responses that we can adequately address the unique protection concerns facing women and girls.



“Refugee women...reported that when documentation and ration cards have been issued, they were most often given to male heads of household. This can make women dependent on men for access to basic goods and services, and the lack of their individual identification increases the potential for exploitation of women. As a result, refugee women may also face undue restricted freedom of movement.”

From: *Respect our Rights: Partnership for Equality, Report on the Dialogue with Refugee Women*, UNHCR and the Women’s Commission for Refugee Women and Children, Geneva, Switzerland, June 20-22, 2001, p. 10.



CHECK LISTS:

Identifying Women and Girls at Risk and Taking Steps to Protect Them

Women and Girls at Risk: Criteria for Identification

The identification of women and girls at risk is difficult and labor intensive. It requires a thorough knowledge of the community and an assessment of protection risks. The following criteria provide some guidance as to whom humanitarian workers should be aware of, assess and monitor:

- Rape victim/survivor
- Mixed marriage/relationship (across ethnic, religious or clan lines) when conflict is inter-ethnic, inter-racial, inter-religious or inter-clan
- Female head of household
- Unaccompanied and separated girls
- In same-sex relationship
- Widow
- Single woman alone
- Trauma/torture survivor
- Victim of gender-based violence, including domestic abuse
- Victim or potential victim of harmful traditional practices, such as FGM
- HIV-positive
- Physical, mental or medical disability
- Victim of trafficking
- Lack of male, familial or community support systems
- Escaping forced or early marriage
- Victim of frequent harassment and intimidation
- Former combatant, forced laborer or sex slave with armed factions
- Victim of coerced family planning practices—forced abortion or sterilization—or at risk of such

External Risk Factors

While the criteria for identification do not, in and of themselves, make abuse inevitable, women and girls who fall into one or more of the cited criteria, and also face one or more of the following risk factors, may be at high risk of abuse. These risk factors may lead to displacement, plague women and girls during displacement and continue to be problematic in the context of return and reintegration. Women and girls may face multiple risks and the risks may change over time during the period of displacement. The risks may change as women and girls move from displacement to return.

- Armed conflict
- Human rights violations
- Poverty
- Inequality/social exclusion of women
- Discrimination/marginalization of women and/or ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities
- Gender-based violence
- Physical insecurity
- Recruitment by armed factions
- Food insecurity
- Lack of documentation
- Insecure areas for firewood collection
- Abuses by persons in positions of authority
- Harmful traditional practices (early marriage, female genital cutting, honor killing, infanticide)
- Lack of educational opportunities
- Loss of traditional male role
- Trafficking for sexual or exploitative labor purposes
- Child labor
- Family separation
- Traditional systems of justice that do not abide by international legal norms and standards
- Traditional leadership structures that do not give voice to women and youth
- Breakdown of community structures, values and morals
- Lack of presence of female and international humanitarian staff
- Lack of opportunities to participate in peace building and reconstruction
- Lack of male and community support systems
- Unemployment/unregulated or harmful work
- Inequitable land, inheritance and property rights
- Landmines and unexploded ordnance



What Can We Do to Protect Women and Girls at Risk?

Mitigating identified risks may require different strategies and approaches depending on the community, the context of their displacement and available resources. We can, however, collectively enhance the protection of displaced women and girls through a variety of actions:

- Including women and girls in the identification of risks and proposed solutions
- Ensuring that all solutions are community based
- Deploying security personnel in/around camps, border areas and impacted host communities
- Recruiting and deploying female staff in all agencies providing assistance
- Ensuring that camp layout and the placement of water points and essential services enhance protection and safe access
- Establishing protected areas or safe houses, if appropriate, for short-term, immediate protection
- Registering all displaced individuals and providing all women and girls with their own identity documents
- Ensuring equal access for women and girls to health care, education, training programs and income generation activities
- Ensuring the safe provision of firewood and/or fuel alternatives
- Ensuring appropriate, timely legal responses for serious crimes committed against women and girls
- Establishing Codes of Conduct
- for humanitarian and security personnel
- Putting regular monitoring mechanisms in place
- Relocating women and girls to safe areas, including outside of camps, when necessary for their protection
- Ensuring that asylum claims recognize gender persecution
- Resettling women and girls at risk to a third country if it is the only available safe durable solution
- Pursuing all durable solutions early and simultaneously in order to mitigate risks that evolve as displacement becomes protracted
- Linking with national development plans to ensure inclusion of displaced and locally integrating populations
- Including host communities in refugee/IDP assistance and services in mitigating discrimination, resentment and the targeting of the displaced for criminal activities
- Developing educational programs that promote tolerance between all affected communities
- Ensuring that human rights legislation is in place and in practice
- Developing mechanisms to share cross-border/country of origin information with all segments of the displaced community and to ensure that women are able to make independent decisions about if and when to return
- Establishing effective return monitoring mechanisms
- Engaging local civil society groups in protection, reconstruction and peace building
- Negotiating the participation of women and youth in leadership and decision-making structures both during displacement and in communities and countries of return
- Ensuring that equitable property, inheritance and child custody laws are in place in countries of return
- Implementing programs for ex-combatants that include women and girls who participated in any capacity
- Ensuring that transitional systems of justice are in place in post-conflict return situations
- Providing economic opportunities for women and girls throughout the cycle of displacement so that they are not forced to resort to negative coping strategies, such as transactional sex
- Providing educational opportunities for children and youth that ensure equal access for girls and boys
- Providing health services that address the specific health needs of women and girls
- Implementing landmine awareness education programs

For a copy of the report *Displaced Women and Girls At Risk: Risk Factors, Protection Solutions and Resource Tools*, go to <http://www.womenscommission.org/pdf/WomRisk.pdf>