



Livelihoods in displacement settings: What does it mean for Women? What does it mean for Youth?" Commission on the Status of Women, 55th Session Summary of Side Event

The priority theme of the 55th session of the Commission on the Status of Women was "Access and participation of women and girls in education, training, science and technology, including for the promotion of women's equal access to full employment and decent work". In conjunction with the 55th session, the Permanent Mission of the Principality of Liechtenstein and the Permanent Mission of Canada hosted a discussion with the Women's Refugee Commission on "Livelihoods in displacement settings: What does it mean for Women? What does it mean for Youth?" The event expanded on the Women's Refugee Commission's report "[Peril or Protection: The Link between Livelihoods and Gender-Based Violence in Displacement Settings](#)" which was first launched at the Permanent Mission of Liechtenstein in January 2010.

Swen Dornig from the Permanent Mission of Liechtenstein opened the discussion with a brief overview of the many challenges facing displaced persons. There are more than 40 million people currently displaced by conflict and the average length of displacement is 17 years. Most displaced persons live in extremely difficult conditions and are often entirely dependent on the international humanitarian system for the most basic level of food, shelter, health care and education. Many refugees cannot legally work in their country of asylum. The international community has recognized the importance of providing economic opportunities during displacement but has struggled to develop safe and effective livelihoods programs.

This event provided an opportunity for policymakers and practitioners to learn from the Women's Refugee Commission which has been engaged in a multi-year initiative to improve livelihoods programming in humanitarian settings, particularly for women and youth.

Economic and Protection Challenges for Displaced Women

Many displaced women lack any kind of meaningful safety net. They have few resources and may be separated from or have lost family members who were wage earners. If they cannot legally work, displaced women are at high risk of exploitation and abuse and may resort to harmful survival strategies including prostitution or "survival sex".

As reported by Jina Krause-Vilmar, senior program officer at the Women's Refugee Commission, refugee women in Cairo, for example, often work in the unregulated informal economy as domestic workers. Many recount instances of abuse at the hands of their employers, ranging from verbal and physical abuse, to withholding their pay or forcing them to work very long hours.

Somali women in Ethiopia borrow commodities—sugar, cigarettes and tomatoes—from male shopkeepers to sell in the camps. If the women cannot repay the loans on time, they face harassment and extortion. In Nairobi, refugee women must pay bribes to police in order to hawk their goods on the streets.

The Women's Refugee Commission has also found that in some circumstances, domestic violence increases when refugee women take on more responsibilities and become wage earners, while refugee men find they have lost power, status and the ability to provide for their families. The shift in family dynamics may challenge established gender norms and heighten the risks for women.

The challenge is to ensure access to meaningful economic opportunities that do not increase vulnerability. This requires a comprehensive approach to livelihoods programming for women that builds protection into the design of livelihoods initiatives, and recognizes the importance of addressing related issues including entrenched gender inequalities and discrimination, impunity issues and weak justice systems.

The key lessons the Women's Refugee Commission has learned in its work on livelihoods for displaced women include:

- Women's economic empowerment cannot be fully realized without addressing the underlying causes of gender inequality and women's limited access to legal rights and protection.
- Protection strategies must be built into livelihood programs and these programs must provide tangible economic opportunities—meaning they are based on a sound understanding of the local economy and are market driven and sustainable.
- Engaging men and boys, including through inclusive discussion on gender norms, is a key component of a comprehensive protection strategy.
- The international community and donors must advocate with national governments to honor refugees' right to work and should support impoverished local communities so that both refugees and host communities can better provide for their families.
- The relationship between livelihoods and heightened risks of gender-based violence needs to be better understood through the program evaluations and the development of a strong evidence base.

Economic and Protection Challenges for Displaced Youth

Josh Chaffin, a senior program officer at the Women's Refugee Commission, moved the discussion to the particular challenges that displaced young people struggle with every day. Relatively little attention or resources have been devoted to the needs of displaced youth. More extensive research is required to understand how best to address their needs. The Women's Refugee Commission is, however, developing a picture of the challenges displaced youth face and the steps that should be taken to improve youth programming.

Most youth in the developing world are economically active. This is true as well in humanitarian settings, where many young people are also out of school. The difficulties of living in displaced communities, combined with a lack of education and economic opportunities, often leave displaced youth ill-equipped for the transition to adulthood.

Displaced young people who manage to find employment typically work under harsh conditions. They usually work very long days in the informal sector where they may be mistreated and not paid regularly. The sex trade is often a tragic option for desperate young people.

Investing in these young people is investing in a better future for communities affected by conflict. Because displaced youth may feel that school is not relevant to their lives, or they simply don't have the luxury of not working, they need formal and non-formal education programs that are tailored to their needs. This mix of formal and non-formal education is critical. Programmers must make a concerted effort to encourage school attendance and give special attention to the barriers to girls' attendance, including unsafe schools or unsafe travel to school. Vocational training programs need to be market driven and lead to employment. Protection considerations must also be fully integrated into economic programming for youth so that young people are safe in the workplace.

Initial findings from the Women's Refugee Commission's work include:

- Humanitarian programmers must develop formal and non-formal education programs that are relevant to the lives and the needs of displaced youth.
- Effective programs for displaced youth should include three key components: basic education, life skills and employability skills.
- Targeted programs are required to reach traditionally marginalized populations. For example, as few as 15% of youth economic empowerment programs around the world specifically target girls.
- More data is needed on best practices, and additional funding should be provided for monitoring and evaluation in order to build the evidence base on youth livelihoods.

The program closed with information on livelihoods-related tools and resources available from the Women's Refugee Commission. Practitioners and policymakers interested in tools and guidance on effective livelihoods programming in humanitarian settings can access the Women's Refugee Commission's manual on Building Livelihoods at:

http://www.womensrefugeecommission.org/reports/cat_view/68-reports/80-livelihoods?start=10

and our Market Assessment Toolkit for Vocational Training Providers and Youth at:

http://www.womensrefugeecommission.org/reports/cat_view/68-reports/70-youth?start=10.