

Displaced and Refugee Women and Girls at Risk: Problems and Solutions

Reprinted from [Monday Developments](#), June 12, 2006

By Dale Buscher and Megan McKenna

Displaced and Refugee Women and Girls at Risk: Problems and Solutions

Displaced and refugee women and girls are often resilient survivors, courageous protectors and untiring caregivers. But they also face risks unique to their gender and the instability of their lives, including rape and other forms of gender-based violence, forced labor and involuntary recruitment. Women and girls are vulnerable at all stages of displacement: during flight, during displacement and upon return/reintegration. These vulnerabilities must be understood in order to address their needs and to enhance protection.

Displaced girls, because of their age, developmental stage and maturity, can fall prey to exploitation, trafficking, coercion and manipulation. They may not have the power or confidence to say no to risky situations, or may see older men as protectors, providers and "sugar daddies," without fully understanding the risks involved. As such, displaced girls may be susceptible to engaging in sexual relationships in return for money, food or a job. They are less likely than boys to have received education, and may not know about sexually transmitted infections, including HIV/AIDS. Girls are also more vulnerable than boys to mistreatment and recruitment by traffickers. At times they are abducted or recruited by armed factions to serve as cooks, porters, sex slaves, temporary "wives" and combatants. Displaced girls also are often burdened with overwhelming responsibilities: caring for siblings or at times the entire family, and performing laborious domestic chores. As a result, they may be unable to attend school or participate in normal developmental activities that help mitigate their vulnerability.

Refugee and displaced women and girls who live in cities also face significant risks because they often receive little or no assistance. Urban refugees generally live in the poorest areas of a city, on the margins of societies and in cultures they often do not understand. It is much more difficult for assistance providers and human rights workers to identify, monitor and support displaced persons in urban areas than in refugee and displaced persons camps. They may be hidden among already underserved, poor local populations in shantytowns, or scattered over broad, densely populated urban areas with limited infrastructure such as reliable, affordable transportation to assistance agencies. It is also difficult to engage the displaced community in, for example, creating leadership structures and conducting participatory assessments in a concerted and sustained manner. As a result, displaced women and girls are vulnerable to exploitation by landlords, employers and members of the host community who prey on their lack of legal status and support systems.

Research has repeatedly shown that internally displaced persons (IDPs) receive far less attention, fewer resources and subsequently far fewer services than refugees. They do not fall under the protection mandate of a single agency and do not have an international convention that delineates their rights under international law. The Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement are, however, widely accepted as the moral framework for IDP protection. Their situation is further complicated by the issue of state sovereignty, which may impact the ability of international organizations

to assist IDPs when the state, for example, is persecuting or causing displacement and denies access and the delivery of assistance. Often few staff from the international community are present in IDP situations and donor governments have been less generous in their funding of services and programs. IDPs' protection needs are often secondary to their basic survival needs and the results are serious – as the widespread rape of IDP women and girls in Darfur demonstrates.

Halima Muhammed Abakar, a displaced woman who has lived in the Kalma IDP camp in Darfur for three years, explained the routine violence displaced women and girls face. "We have no food, no safety. Yesterday, four women were raped when they went to get firewood. We are so afraid."

While the gender violence in Darfur highlights how difficult it can be to protect the displaced, it also illustrates how much needs to be done to improve the protection of displaced and refugee women and girls worldwide.

Every day, for example, millions of displaced and refugee women and girls in conflict areas must collect and sell firewood in dangerous conditions, and are at risk of rape, assault, abduction, theft and even death. They have no choice – their families depend on firewood for cooking and the income it provides to survive.

This is one protection issue that the international community can address now. The United Nations should consider providing fuel to displaced and refugee families in the early days of an emergency. National and international security forces should provide transportation to firewood collection sites or routinely patrol the routes to them. Humanitarian agencies should promote alternative fuels and fuel-efficient technologies to lessen the need for firewood. These solutions must be coupled with income generation activities so displaced women and girls are not forced into life-threatening situations. All efforts must be coordinated by a single agency and implemented in consultation with refugee and displaced women. This, however, is only part of a much broader strategy to change the attitudes and behaviors of the perpetrators, as well as those of the societies that allow them to go unpunished.

The international community can do a lot to mitigate these and other protection risks, with input from refugee women and girls themselves. They are willing and able to work towards their own protection, but it is up to the international community to do its part so these women and girls can help themselves.

Dale Buscher is Director, Participation and Protection Program, and Megan McKenna is Senior Coordinator, Media Communications, at the Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children. Email comments and questions to Megan McKenna at meganm@womenscommission.org.