

Preparing for War in Iraq: Making Reproductive Health Care a Priority

Reproductive health care is rarely a priority in emergencies, and crisis preparation for the war in Iraq was no exception. For UN representatives and government officials in neighboring Jordan, little training had been provided to incorporate reproductive health care into plans to respond to a potential influx of refugees from Iraq. That is, until Dr. Henia Dakkak, the Reproductive Health for Refugees Consortium (RHRC) emergency obstetrics technical adviser, came on the scene. The Women's Commission coordinates the RHRC and leads its advocacy efforts.

Although the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) had pre-positioned emergency reproductive health supplies in the region, Dr. Dakkak found during a January 2003 Women's Commission assessment visit to the region that training was needed on the implementation of reproductive health services during the initial phase of an emergency. UNFPA asked Dr. Dakkak to return to train key staff in this area.

During war, pregnant women are particularly vulnerable as hospitals are often difficult to access and those that are reachable must cope with war casualties and dwindling medical supplies. Even before the Iraq war, pregnant Iraqis faced unacceptable levels of risk as a result of a decade of international sanctions that severely



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Dr. Henia Dakkak (center) trains Jordanian officials on preparing for emergency reproductive health needs.

damaged the Iraqi health care system, while increasing poverty and poor nutrition undermined women's health. Maternal mortality had more than tripled since the start of the sanctions.

Dr. Dakkak spent over a month in Jordan and Syria, training health officials from the region, including Iraq, on the importance of rapid response to the reproductive health needs of women in flight. In her trainings, which *(continued on page 6)*

Sharpening Afghan Women's Advocacy Skills

The Afghan Women's Network (AWN), which is supported in part by the Women's Commission, held its first-ever press conference in Kabul, Afghanistan, in March to announce the launch of its website and to celebrate International Women's Day. A new communications coordinator, based in the Women's Commission's Pakistan office, provided AWN with technical training and expertise for the widely attended press event, which may have been the first of its kind for a grassroots women's organization in Afghanistan.

The communications coordinator, Mary Moore, who is supported jointly by the Women's Commission and the

Advocacy Project, helped AWN create its website, www.afghanwomensnetwork.org, which features timely issues regarding Afghan women's rights. The *(continued on page 6)*

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PROTECTION PARTNERS: A Voice for Refugee Women

Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children

An independent organization formed with the assistance of the International Rescue Committee to advocate for the solution of problems affecting refugee women and children.

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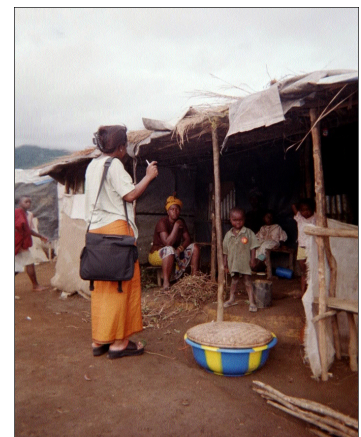
War-affected women, often portrayed solely as victims of human rights and refugee rights violations, are in reality also activists who witness, document, report on and develop remedies for improved protection, often at personal risk. Women who have suffered rape or other abuses are much more likely to discuss these abuses with other women, especially those who understand them and their culture. Ultimately, when the international spotlight and funds have gone, local women and local organizations remain to rebuild their communities.

Through the **Protection Partners Project**, the Women's Commission is collaborating with local partners in Sierra Leone, Colombia and Afghanistan to reinforce their local monitoring and documentation capacities on refugee, internally displaced and returnee populations. With Women's Commission support, the protection partners use this information to push for change in local and international policies and programs, and advocate with UN agencies, international organizations and local decision-makers.

The Women's Commission launched a partnership with the **Afghan Women's Resource Center (AWRC)** to help Afghan women address rights violations and strengthen their safety and security. Since 1989, the AWRC has been raising awareness of the situation of millions of refugees in Pakistan and providing education, health and income generation programs to women and children. The displaced include the more than 1.5 million refugees remaining in Pakistan's camps and urban communities, as well as those who have returned to Afghanistan.

In **Colombia**, the Women's Commission began partnering with **Maria Maria**, a collective of five women with expertise in anthropology, law and journalism. Members provide training, consultation and links with policy-makers for female ex-combatants, the internally displaced and local women's organizations. The Women's Commission is working with Maria Maria to monitor the effectiveness of humanitarian assistance and enforcement of human rights for the country's estimated 2.5 million internally displaced, as well as the ability of neighboring countries such as Ecuador and Venezuela to protect refugees.

In **Sierra Leone**, the Women's Commission's protection partner has been on board since October 2001 and implemented several activities, including establishing a coalition of local organizations to monitor and advocate on behalf of refugees and documenting the participation of internally displaced women in Sierra Leone's May 2002 elections. *Voting for Peace, Survival and Self-reliance* reported on reasons displaced women voted and what they expected from the new government. The report was shared with members of parliament in Sierra Leone, with a reminder that the Women's Commission will be monitoring the government's responses to meeting the needs of these constituents. ❖



Protection Partner Binta Mansaray interviews displaced women at the Grafton IDP Camp in Freetown, Sierra Leone.

ASYLUM SEEKERS' ACCESS TO U.S. PROTECTION THREATENED

Gaining access to U.S. protection as an asylum seeker has recently become even more difficult. The March 1 transfer of most of the functions of the Immigration and Naturalization Service to the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) is problematic for many reasons, but perhaps the most immediately troubling is the fact that the agency's functions have been separated into three different departments within the DHS.

"The Women's Commission is deeply concerned that this will make the U.S. asylum system even more difficult to navigate and greatly degrade services for asylum seekers," says Wendy Young, director of government relations. "This fragmentation will create confusion, forcing asylum seekers to deal with three different departments, and

exacerbate the already long-standing problems for asylum seekers that were rampant within the INS."

Under DHS, immigration "services" and "enforcement" functions will be divided among three departments.

- The **Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services (BCIS)** conducts the initial interview to determine whether the person's claim is credible and if she should be given the opportunity to apply for asylum.
- The **Bureau of Customs and Border Protection (BCBP)** has the authority to admit the person upon arrival or to return her immediately to her home country.
- The **Bureau of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (BICE)** retains custody of the person and has the power to detain her.

"The DHS will face serious challenges in coordinating the work among its three bureaus and living up to its mandate of protecting asylum seekers from persecution," Young says.

An even more fundamental concern is the conflict between these critical issues and the overall mandate of DHS, which is to combat terrorism. Nowhere is it explicitly charged with the protection of asylum seekers and refugees. As a result, refugee experts fear that the U.S. obligation to protect those fleeing persecution will be sacrificed in the search for national security, rather than balancing these concerns with the need to offer refuge to those escaping human rights abuses. ❖

Operation Liberty Denied

The Women's Commission's concerns about the Department of Homeland Security's mandate over asylum seekers grew with the March 18 launch of the department's **Operation Liberty Shield**, which further eroded the rights and protection of asylum seekers in the United States.

Operation Liberty Shield dictates that nationals from 34 countries, including Iraq, be detained throughout their asylum proceedings, which can take months or even years to complete. Under this unprecedented blanket detention policy, asylum seekers, including women, and possibly even children, would be detained regardless of the merits of their refugee claim.

The Women's Commission has expressed deep alarm that this new policy is discriminatory and a violation of human rights. "Most asylum seekers arrive in the United States having fled armed conflict and human rights abuses in their home countries; many see the U.S. as their last hope for freedom and survival," says Wendy Young, director of government relations. "Operation Liberty Shield sends a dangerous signal to the rest of the world and reflects poorly on a country that prides itself on a respect for human rights." ❖

Unaccompanied Refugee Children: Update

The Women's Commission will continue to monitor the treatment of unaccompanied refugee children, whose care and custody have been newly transferred to the Department of Health and Human Services/Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR).

The Women's Commission played a leading role in transferring their care from INS to an agency with child welfare expertise and will ensure that DHS complies with the change in law by promptly transferring any unaccompanied child it apprehends at a port of entry to ORR. (See *Women's Commission News #29*, Winter 2003 for more on this. Available at www.womenscommission.org.) ❖

Gaining Greater Protection for Children in Armed Conflict

Children in armed conflict around the world received much-needed support from the United Nations in January, when the UN Security Council adopted a new resolution demanding accountability from those who abuse children during war. The UN adopted Resolution 1460 after strong urging and testimony by the Watchlist on Children in Armed Conflict and the Women's Commission.

"This resolution opens the door for the Council to hold those who violate children's security and rights responsible for their actions," says Julia Freedson, coordinator of the Watchlist, which is housed at the Women's Commission. "The next step is to redouble efforts to ensure that the resolution is effectively implemented."

Jane Lowicki, the Women's Commission's senior coordinator of the Children and Adolescents Project, told the Security Council about the dangers refugee youth face from HIV/AIDS. "Adolescents affected by war around the world say repeatedly that HIV/AIDS must be seen as a peace and security issue," Lowicki testified. "Without protection, HIV/AIDS spreads among children and adolescents, undermining their capacity to create peace and stability



Testimony by these young people from Sierra Leone was critical to getting a Security Council resolution passed that demands accountability from those who abuse children during war.

in their lives."

Four adolescents from Sierra Leone who helped research the Women's Commission report, *Precious Resources*, testified via videotape to the Security Council.

The Security Council resolution included the Women's Commission's recommendations to educate, train and monitor peacekeeping forces and other UN staff about HIV/AIDS.

Women's Commission helps Secure Scholarships for Ugandan Adolescents

Two hundred Ugandan adolescents are receiving vital education thanks in part to advocacy efforts by the Children and Adolescents Project. The **Acholi Education Initiative** was established to respond to the need for adolescent education uncovered by the Women's Commission and will provide secondary education scholarships for 200 war-affected adolescents in northern Uganda, with an emphasis on girls. Participants will also be given conflict management and human rights training. The program will last four years and is supported by the Royal Danish Embassy.

Adolescent researchers who participated in the Women's Commission's 2001 report on young people in Uganda helped develop the initiative and are on the project's steering committee.

United States Urged to Take Action on Child Soldiers

The Women's Commission is calling on the United States to help end the 17-year war in northern Uganda. "The need could not be greater," Jane Lowicki, senior coordinator, Children and Adolescents Project, told members of the Congressional Human Rights Caucus in February. "Forced

recruitment and other abuses against children and their families by the rebels have dramatically increased over the past year. The humanitarian crisis has reached new heights and child protection new lows as a result of the Ugandan military offensive, Operation Iron Fist."

Throughout the war, the rebel group fighting the Ugandan government, the Lord's Resistance Army, has abducted more than 16,000 children, who are then forced to fight against the government.

Lowicki urged the United States to lead an effort to secure the appointment of a special envoy for abducted children in northern Uganda and to undertake diplomacy to help end the war. She also stressed the need to monitor U.S. support to the region and for continued humanitarian assistance.

Angelina Atyam Talks; Oprah Listens

Angelina Atyam, the Women's Commission's collaborative partner in northern Uganda, appeared on The Oprah Winfrey Show in March, thanks to the work of the Women's Commission. Angelina is chair of the Concerned Parents Association, which advocates for the release of the thousands of children abducted by the rebel group, the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), and for an end to the 17-year civil war. Angelina's own daughter was kidnapped in 1996 at age 14; Angelina hasn't seen her since.

Angelina described her efforts to gain release for the children and her own painful choice in refusing the rebels' offer to release her daughter if she would stop her advocacy efforts. Angelina refused the offer, saying, "All those children are my children now." The Women's Commission website appeared on the Oprah show's website. ❖

BIDEN BILL WILL PROTECT WOMEN AND CHILDREN IN ARMED CONFLICT

A new bill designed to protect women and children in armed conflict was introduced in May by Senator Joe Biden (D-DE). The **Women and Children in Armed Conflict Protection Act of 2003** will ensure that the U.S. government makes the protection of women and children a priority in all stages of conflict. The safety and security of those affected by war has traditionally taken a back seat to the more traditional humanitarian assistance focused on food, medical care and shelter. Without protection from violence and exploitation, however, women's and children's lives remain at great risk during and following conflict.

"For far too long, women and children, particularly refugees and the internally displaced, have been denied critical protection during and after conflict," says Darla Silva, Washington liaison for the Women's

Commission. "The Women and Children in Armed Conflict Protection Act of 2003 will go a long way to change that by specifically addressing the safety and security needs of these women and children."

Civilians comprise 90 percent of all those killed and wounded as a result of armed conflict. In addition, of the nearly 50 million people who have been uprooted around the world, some 80 percent are women and children. They are especially vulnerable to the devastating consequences of war and displacement and are increasingly targeted by armed elements for murder, abduction, forced military conscription, involuntary servitude and gender-based violence.

The Women and Children in Armed Conflict Protection Act of 2003 requires the United States to develop an integrated strategy for protecting women and children during conflict and to report on this

strategy to Congress. A protection coordinator would be responsible for overseeing these efforts.

Humanitarian aid agencies would be required to adopt a code of conduct to prevent sexual exploitation to be eligible for U.S. assistance. The bill authorizes \$45 million in additional funds for initiatives to prevent, detect and respond to gender-based violence and exploitation in armed conflict.

"With the changed nature of warfare, the protection of women and children in conflict must be addressed in tandem with other basic humanitarian needs," Silva says. "Too many women and children are suffering, even dying, needlessly from violence and abuse committed during conflict and the international community has turned a blind eye. Protection must be an integral part of humanitarian assistance in the 21st century and this bill will help make this happen." ❖

Connecticut Connects with Burmese Refugee Women and Children

When members of the First Congregational Church of Old Lyme, Connecticut, helped resettle a young Karen (an ethnic group in Southeast Asia) woman and her two children in their community, they were shocked to hear the harrowing details of her family's escape from the jungles of Burma and the equally dangerous life they faced as refugees in Thailand. Eager to do more, the church asked Women's Commission board member Faye Richardson to find a project that would allow them to assist other Burmese women and children caught in the same situation.

By coincidence, the Women's Commission had just received a proposal from a courageous group of women in Mae Sot, Thailand, who were determined to open a safe house for refugee women who had

been abandoned or widowed or had escaped brothels after having been trafficked from Burma. The group, Social Action for Women (SAW), needed \$10,765 for a year's funding. After the church's initial contribution, Richardson was able to supplement the rest from a small group of concerned people in her community.

During the first year:

- The safe house provided protection, shelter, food and medical care to 41 homeless Burmese women and girls who were living in physical danger and had nowhere to go for help. In addition, it offered literacy classes and sewing lessons that led to jobs in local factories.
- The safe house expanded, and more than 20 orphaned and abandoned children were taken in.

- SAW mobile clinics treated and provided vital health education to more than 2,000 women and children.
- SAW volunteers trained 50 traditional birth attendants in areas where medical assistance is unavailable, and conducted 10 adolescent reproductive health trainings for Burmese girls at risk for unwanted pregnancies and HIV/AIDS.

Richardson reports that her church and neighbors are in their second year of support for SAW. "We are awed by the courage and determination of the SAW women," she says. "We are thrilled by the positive impact that a relatively small amount of money can have on the lives of people who have so little." ❖

Afghanistan (continued from page 1)

coordinator was hired at the request of AWN to bolster its ability to promote the rights and protection of Afghan women and girls through media and communications. Established in 1996, AWN is a network of over 1,200 Afghan women, including lawyers, doctors and teachers, and members of local women's organizations.



Mary Moore, communications coordinator (right) trains Afghan women in the finer points of advocacy and media outreach.

Moore has helped AWN staff in Peshawar, Pakistan, and Kabul hone journalism skills to strengthen the organization's newsletter and website. She also designed a communications strategy with AWN which included the launch of a bi-weekly magazine to be translated into local languages. ❖

Iraq (continued from page 1)

brought together more than 100 senior government, UN and NGO officials, Dr. Dakkak emphasized the need for these services at the onset of an emergency in order to prevent excessive maternal death and disability, gender-based violence and sexually transmitted infections, including HIV/AIDS. These emergency activities are part of the Minimum Initial Service Package (MISP), which the Women's Commission is helping to integrate into all humanitarian assistance.

Filling a Gap

"For many, it was their first reproductive health training and the first time they realized that reproductive health care means more than simply family planning," Dr. Dakkak said. "Participants acknowledged that emergency reproductive health training had been neglected in the region."

Dr. Dakkak also helped lay the groundwork for future cooperation. "Coordination between government officials, the UN and NGOs has always been lacking in emergency response plans," Dr. Dakkak said. "The trainings were the first time that many participants, including doctors and emergency workers, could ask government officials about their emergency strategies. Similarly,

government officials were able to learn more about the needs of field staff." Dr. Dakkak also helped establish a regional database of refugee health information to further this collaboration.

"As a result of the trainings, UNFPA, NGOs and government officials in the region better understand the components of effective reproductive health response in emergencies and how best to work together," Dr. Dakkak said. "This will no doubt lead to better care for women in the region once peace has returned." ❖

Towards More Services for Survivors of Gender-based Violence

Those working to combat gender-based violence (GBV) in refugee settings have another tool that will lead to better assistance for survivors of GBV. The [Gender-based Violence Tools Manual for Assessment and Program Design, Monitoring and Evaluation](#) was created for GBV program planners and managers to facilitate the collection of much-needed data on GBV, which is sorely lacking. This will "increase the documentation and therefore the ability to advocate for funding," according to Julia Matthews, reproductive health project manager for the Women's Commission. "This in turn will mean more services and resources for survivors," she says.

The manual was produced by the Reproductive Health for Refugees Consortium. The Consortium is administered in part by the Women's Commission. For a copy of the tools manual, contact Julia Matthews at juliam@womenscommission.org, 212.551.3112. ❖

Staff Updates

The Women's Commission is pleased to welcome two new staff members. [Mary Moore](#) joined us as communications coordinator in Pakistan, in a six-month posting. (See related article, page 1.) [Karen Resnick](#) is working as temporary part-time editor/writer while communications director [Diana Quick](#) works part-time from England. We also bid farewell to three winter interns — [Lipika Goyal](#), [Kirsten Lundgren](#) and [Lillie Walsh](#).

CREATIVE DONORS BOOST FUNDS

Using the Voices of Youth to Effect Change

A new youth advocacy group in northern Virginia has chosen the Women's Commission as the main source for its research and outreach efforts, as well as a beneficiary of its fundraising.

Youth Advocacy and Awareness (YAA), a group of high school girls that works to empower youth to effect change on a variety of international and domestic issues, selected the Women's Commission because of its work helping refugee youth to become their own advocates.

After one of the co-chairs of the YAA stayed up all night reading the Women's Commission report *Precious Resources: Adolescents in the Reconstruction of Sierra Leone*, she and other YAA members were determined to help. YAA decided to sponsor a fundraiser to benefit the advocacy efforts of youth in Sierra Leone.

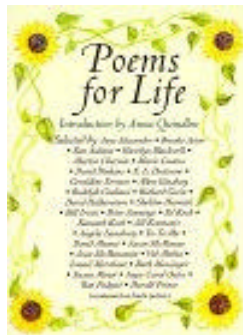


YAA sponsored a bake sale to benefit the Women's Commission's **Eleanor Bellows Pillsbury** (EBP) Fund. With their "unparalleled cooking skills," YAA convinced numerous young people to donate money and buy goods. By the end of the day, YAA had raised more than \$400 for the fund; 98 percent of the proceeds came from youth.

YAA says it is encouraged by the message of hope that many young

people in Sierra Leone are spreading within their communities and around the world with their message, "Wan Salone!" (One Sierra Leone!). YAA would like to add, "One Youth!"

A Gift that Keeps on Giving



It has been more than eight years, but the resourcefulness and dedication of a group of schoolchildren continue to help refugee women and children and the work of the Women's Commission.

It was 1995 when fifth-grade students at the **Nightingale Bamford School** in New York City combined their interest in poetry with a school social service requirement and compiled the anthology *Poems for Life*. The students wrote letters to various celebrities, from Allen Ginsburg to Yo-Yo Ma, asking them to submit their favorite poem, along with an explanation of why they chose it.

The school donated all the proceeds from the book, which includes submissions by 50 personalities, to the Women's Commission. The Women's Commission continues to collect royalties to this day.

Helping With Humor

Producer Rebecca Kirkland was working in California on two one-act comedies that dealt with women's issues and wanted to contribute a portion of the proceeds to an organization that helps women. Having just seen the Los Angeles reading of *Necessary Targets* by Eve Ensler, she decided that the Women's Commission was a perfect fit. Kirkland wrote a profile of the Women's Commission for her show's program book and had brochures on hand for the audience. For every ticket that was purchased at the three sold-out performances, Kirkland donated a portion of the proceeds to the Women's Commission. ❖

New Challenge Grant!

Last year, our donors responded generously to a \$150,000 Challenge Grant from an anonymous donor, matching it in full and providing the Women's Commission with essential program funding.

In appreciation of the commitment of our donors, and with an understanding of the challenges that the current economic environment poses for the Women's Commission, **our anonymous donor has made a new Challenge Grant of \$150,000 for 2003.**

The Women's Commission depends on the support and encouragement of our individual donors. Please help us match this new challenge in 2003.

How to donate: Please visit www.womenscommission.org and [click on donate](#), or contact Roxanne Saucier at roxannes@womenscommission.org.



WOMEN'S COMMISSION MISSION STATEMENT

The Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children recently updated its mission statement.

The Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children works to improve the lives and defend the rights of refugee and internally displaced women, children and adolescents.

We advocate for their inclusion and participation in programs of humanitarian assistance and protection.

We provide technical expertise and policy advice to donors and organizations that work with refugees and the displaced.

We make recommendations to policy makers based on rigorous research and information gathered on fact-finding missions.

We join with refugee women, children and adolescents to ensure that their voices are heard from the community level to the highest councils of governments and international organizations.

We do this in the conviction that their empowerment is the surest route to the greater well-being of all forcibly displaced people.

The Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children is an independent affiliate of the International Rescue Committee. The Commission was founded in 1989.

The Reproductive Health for Refugees Consortium announces

Conference 2003: Reproductive Health From Disaster to Development

October 7-8, 2003

Brussels, Belgium.

Online registration and updates at
www.rhrc.org



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