# Sheltering displaced persons from sexual and gender-based violence

Julie Freccero

**Providing a variety of safe shelter types, each with its own unique strengths and limitations, within a single area could help meet the diverse and changing needs of survivors of sexual and gender-based violence.**

Men, women and children risk sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) in situations of conflict and emergency and during the process of flight. Even once they are settled, in displacement camps or urban areas, their individual insecurity often increases, due to factors such as, for example, the breakdown of family and community ties, shifting gender roles, and limited access to resources, police protection and adequate housing.

The health and psychosocial needs of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) fleeing SGBV can also be urgent and complex, resulting from the individual or collective harms they have suffered. Yet guidance on the provision of safe shelter to those fleeing SGBV is surprisingly limited. The Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Guidelines for Gender-Based Violence Interventions in Humanitarian Settings offer the most detailed guidance.[1] However, their brief discussion of safe shelter focuses only on camp settings, and lacks concrete examples of possible models and of ways to extend protection to marginalised groups.

To address this gap, in late 2011 the Sexual Violence Program of the Human Rights Center at the University of California, Berkeley, undertook the 'Safe Haven' study of safe shelters serving refugees, IDPs and other forced migrants in four countries: Colombia, Haiti, Kenya and Thailand.

The individual safe shelter programmes included in the study serve either adult survivors of SGBV or adults and children combined. They are run by government, international NGOs or local civil society organisations and vary widely in physical form, size and capacity. Some were designed specifically to serve refugees or IDPs, while others primarily served the mainstream population but were open to serving displaced persons. In the course of the study, researchers developed a typology of safe shelter models serving refugees and other displaced persons:
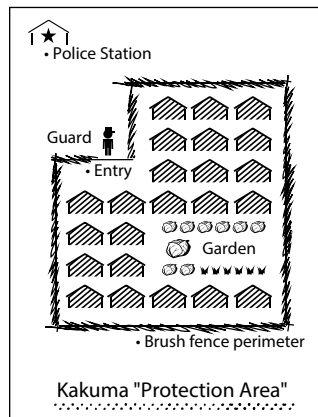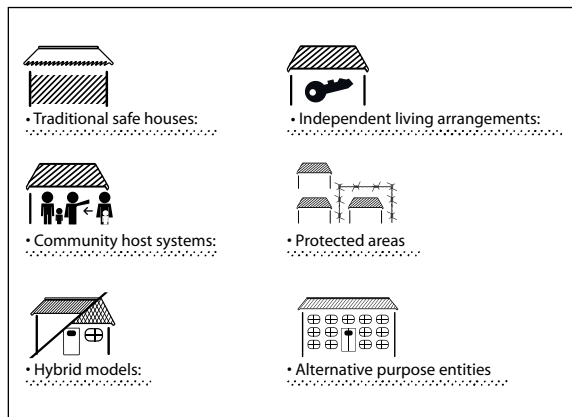
- **Traditional safe houses**: survivors live together in a common structure, with staff overseeing operation of the accommodation.

- **Independent living arrangements**: staff arrange for survivors to be housed in separate accommodations (e.g. independent flats or hotel rooms) that were not built specially for safe shelter purposes.

- **Community hosting arrangements**: survivors temporarily live in the homes of selected community members.

- **Protected areas**: survivors live in their own homes in a protected, enclosed subsection of a refugee or IDP camp.

- **Alternative purpose entities**: survivors stay in a setting designed to provide services unrelated to safe shelter (e.g. a police station, hospital clinic or church).

There were also hybrids that combine elements of the above models.[2]

## Traditional safe houses

The safe house was by far the most common. In general, traditional safe houses are beneficial to residents with greater security needs, offering measures such as guards, gates, confidential locations and rules governing residents' movement and visitors. However, this comes at the expense of community engagement, mobility and independence.

Extreme examples are the shelters for high-risk IDPs in Colombia fleeing conflict-

Shelter Types Key: symbols representing each shelter type as defined in the Safe Haven study.

related violence. Residents of these shelters reported feeling locked in or imprisoned due to the rigid security protocols, police patrols and armed escorts accompanying survivors to outside services. Exceptions are the traditional safe houses run by grassroots women's and migrants' rights organisations in Thailand, which are often attached to a community centre offering resources, information and social activities. This variation of traditional safe house seems to strike an effective balance between security and resident empowerment.

Traditional safe houses also bring strangers to live in close proximity, which can result in conflicts related to cleanliness, shared resources, unequal power dynamics or pre-existing animosity towards members of other cultural and ethnic groups.

### Independent living arrangements

These arrangements are useful in allowing more freedom and independence than other models. They also seem to provide more confidential or comfortable options for members of some marginalised groups who have specific needs or do not feel comfortable being housed with the general population. In Kenya, one programme houses LGBT[3] refugees with protection concerns in low-profile private apartments around Nairobi, where they can live inconspicuously in the general community. However, they were safe only as long as they did not outwardly

identify as LGBT. Informants in Thailand noted that, given the gender norm that "men can protect themselves" and the stigma attached to men using safe shelters, an independent living arrangement model may be more accessible to and culturally appropriate for men and teenage boys.

The main limitation of independent living arrangements was the lack of any real security provision at housing sites. Scattered housing can also be isolating and unable to provide the social support that many find essential to recovery.

### Community host arrangements

The community host system, in which survivors stay in the homes of volunteers, is an emerging protection strategy. These programmes offer survivors the comfort of a home setting and the ability to stay within their own communities, which can help them to maintain supportive relationships with friends and family and ease the reintegration process. It also fosters a network of survivor advocates within the community.

In Dadaab refugee camp in Kenya, two community host systems run by international NGOs temporarily place survivors in the homes of community leaders and volunteers. In a camp setting, this model allows for a community-based option that neither cuts people off from their normal support networks nor raises their expectations of long-term stays or resettlement.

Community host systems are less resource-intensive and they also provide an option for those who may not want to take the extreme step of leaving the community, even temporarily. However, such systems may not be suitable for survivors with high security risks, particularly in a closed camp setting where it is not possible to move to another area secretly. Host families in Colombia expressed concerns about their own safety when housing people in volatile situations with minimal security, and some noted that it had a negative impact on their own family dynamics. In Kenya, survivors and volunteer hosts were occasionally attacked, and in other instances potential hosts simply refused to accept survivors because they feared for their own safety. These programmes also depend on a community's awareness of women's rights and approval of survivors seeking protection.



Safe Haven shelter in Dadaab refugee camp in Kenya, 2011.

### Protected areas
Protected areas are closed-off sections of a refugee camp with enhanced security, where at-risk individuals can live with their families in their own homes among other families in need of protection. In Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya, for example, the protected area is enclosed by a wire-mesh fence covered in thorny branches that shield residents from view. Two security guards work at the gate and a nearby police station enhances security.

However, this model posed challenges similar to those associated with traditional safe houses, including a focus on security at the expense of connection to the community and tensions resulting from strangers of diverse backgrounds living together in a congested space.

### Alternative purpose entities
Alternative purpose entities can provide important protection options on a short-term, emergency basis, such as beds in health clinics in Kenya and Thailand, and housing at boarding schools in refugee camps in Kenya and Thailand. In Kenya, a community-run detention centre for offenders – known as The Sudanese Cell – doubles up as a safe space for survivors.

The primary limitation of alternative purpose entities is that they are simply not oriented to address the complex needs of survivors. In certain cases, they could provide temporary security but could not address medical or psychosocial needs. In other cases, the reverse was true. Findings suggest that these models should be used only as a short-term, last resort for sheltering survivors in emergency situations.

### A diversity of options
This typology of safe shelter models can be useful in building an evidence base for more effective shelter protection and it can serve as a framework for analysing trends and understanding the strengths and limitations of different programme types. The study identified a number of critical factors for the success of safe shelter programmes, regardless of type. These include:

- how the community perceives the shelter
- the provision of adequate security and psychosocial support for both residents and staff

- a survivor-centred approach in which survivors are involved in all levels of decision making

- the development of transition strategies for residents to be able to move on as early as possible.

- a shelter's level of coordination with other shelters and other service providers in the area.

Having a diversity of safe shelter options available is ideal to accommodate the range of security needs as well as individuals' desire for independence and community connection. Understanding the diversity of possible programme models – and making this range available within a single camp or community – can enable survivors to transfer to more appropriate safe shelters as their needs and preferences evolve. More in-depth, rigorous evaluation of safe shelter programmes is urgently needed to confirm which models work well in different circumstances.

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1. http://interagencystandingcommittee.org/system/files/legacy_files/tfgender_GBVGuidelines2005.pdf
These Guidelines are currently in the process of revision.

2. In the full reports of the Safe Haven series a sixth category of 'hybrid models' is also discussed.

3. Lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender.