

Letter from the field

The experience of refugees in Oru refugee camp, Nigeria.



A reader of FMR, Kehinde Okanlawon, in Ile Ife, Nigeria, recently wrote to the FMR Editors:

"FMR aroused my consciousness about issues relating to the reproductive health of refugees and I decided to go to the Oru refugee camp in Ogun State to volunteer as a peer educator and work in the area of health communication in the camp." Kehinde had read in FMR about the Minimum Initial Service Package (MISP) for Reproductive Health in Crisis Situations and is now MISP-certified. He and some fellow students have written about refugees in Oru:

Oru refugee camp has hosted refugees for about 20 years. For many years there was a regular supply of contraceptives, given free to refugees, but this stopped when the camp clinic closed in 2005. Condoms are still available in the camp but women have to visit hospitals in the host community five kilometres away to get contraception – which is not free of charge.

The importance of contraceptives in poor settings such as refugee camps cannot be over-emphasized. Contraceptive use can prevent unwanted pregnancies, unsafe abortions, complications during pregnancy and maternal mortality. The availability of contraceptives and their consistent use by refugees can enlarge the choices of women in the camp. It can help reduce teenage pregnancy which has been identified as a big problem in Oru camp. It can help adolescents postpone child-bearing and enable refugees to choose to have fewer, well spaced out and healthier children. Not least, in the face of the pandemic of STIs including HIV/AIDS, condoms can help prevent these diseases.

With poverty a stark reality in the camp, some parents encourage their daughters to engage in prostitution.

"My mother would tell me that I should not come back home without bringing food and money, knowing full well that I don't have a job or any source of livelihood. You are our only hope of survival, she would say. My mother obviously expects me to sell my body for money," said a 24-year-old female refugee.

Refugees – especially women and girls – need skills and economic opportunities that can provide a source of livelihood for them. For example, hairdressing skills have been instrumental in empowering some of them to make choices in their personal lives. Female students of the University in the host community come to have their hair braided and plaited in the camp and many refugee women earn a living from this. This has offered an alternative to abusive marriages for some, while it has helped others to gain greater respect and autonomy within their homes. "I came to this camp six years ago with my husband, who is now unable to work after becoming disabled during the war in Liberia," says a mother of three. "I can now earn enough to buy food and some other basic items for my family and pay medical bills."

This is extracted from a longer article entitled 'The experience of refugees in Oru refugee camp, Nigeria' co-written by: Kehinde Okanlawon (okanlawon_kehinde@yahoo.com), a student of Obafemi Awolowo University and volunteer peer educator on Reproductive Health Issues in Oru; Titilayo Ayotunde (networthlinks@yahoo.co.uk), a PhD candidate and researcher in Obafemi Awolowo University; Agbaje Opeyemi (demogbaje2008@yahoo.com), a student of Obafemi Awolowo University, and Mantue S Reeves (mspirit@yahoo.com), a Liberian refugee resident in Oru refugee camp for the last five years, a former volunteer for the Red Cross in the camp and currently a student of Obafemi Awolowo University.