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Urban realities for displaced young women and girls

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Growing numbers of IDPs live in informal settlements in major Afghan urban centres but the ways in which displaced young women and girls are vulnerable in such settings are not well enough understood or addressed.

Common assumptions would support a belief that urban women and girls should generally be more able to access services and social opportunities compared to their pre-displacement rural place of origin, owing to more progressive urban attitudes and the wider availability of education services (and service providers) in the main, more secure, urban centres. New research, however, suggests otherwise.¹ Displaced young women and girls in urban settlements across Kabul, Kandahar and Jalalabad were revealed to face significantly more and qualitatively different challenges in terms of access to education, health and employment than their male counterparts; most striking was the significant loss of freedom and social capital, and extreme marginalisation experienced by them.

Marginalisation and isolation: Displaced young women and girls are often kept in seclusion and are frequently not allowed to venture far or often outside the house; this drastically reduces access to education, health care and livelihood opportunities. During interviews, only 40% of respondents said women and girls could gain permission to leave the house in order to visit friends. At least one third said that they had to be in the company of a male family member to venture out at all. Cultural obstacles appeared to be a driving factor in this marginalisation and isolation, with conservative norms seemingly deeply entrenched in the urban informal settlements.

"We miss the outside world so much, and feel like prisoners here. Prison is better; at least you are fed well." (24-year-old woman)

Loss of networks: Since women are not permitted to venture outside their homes, they cannot seek assistance from others. Young

women frequently lamented their inability to share their burdens with other women in their neighbourhood and community, or to build networks within their informal settlement communities. Neighbours often threaten families with eviction should they violate the community's social norms and grant women and girls freedoms (including education).

"All day we have almost nothing to do. If we were allowed to get education and get acquainted with others, we might work in cultural and political fields... the only thing we do is that the girls from the adjoining tents come together and complain about the life we are having – nothing beyond that." (25-year-old woman)

Distress and depression: As a result of their situation, a number of urban displaced young women and girls appear to be suffering from severe depression and often speak of preferring death to their current life. Some IDPs mentioned the lack of mental health assistance, with no individual or organisation that people suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder or other psychological disorders (including individuals considering self-harm) could turn to.

Targeting support

Many young women and girls highlighted their feelings of shame at being displaced and frequently compared their present plight with the more comfortable lives they led in their rural home towns and villages. The over-riding feeling is one of oppression, lack of opportunity and inability to find a way out. Many young women also questioned the point of interviews if no one is going to provide assistance, and young female IDPs from Kandahar claimed that when assistance did come, it was brought by men and given to men.

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To better address the specific vulnerabilities of young women and girls in urban settings, we recommend that all IDP assessments include a component on mental health needs (with fast-track referrals identified for those at heightened risk). Non-specialised humanitarian staff, including local staff, must be sensitised and trained to identify mental health care issues and understand how to refer cases appropriately. Gender analysis should be mainstreamed into assessments and response strategies for informal settlements, and women and girls should be targeted for a mixed package of assistance, from specialised psychosocial support services, increased community and family support through to provision of basic services.

Humanitarian actors should explore how to restart formal or informal education provision as early in the displacement cycle as possible, including, for example, home-

based vocational training and livelihood-support activities. And coordination and advocacy for IDPs in urban settings need to expand, which in turn requires systematic profiling of urban IDP populations and their needs and the establishment of referral and response mechanisms.

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1. The Norwegian Refugee Council and The Liaison Office report on urban displaced youth in Afghanistan will be published in mid 2014. All interviews with the displaced young women and girls were done by women/girls from the surrounding area. Permission was obtained firstly from elders to do interviews among their community in the informal settlements and secondly from male family members to speak with the women/girls in their family.