

Making work safe for displaced women

Dale Buscher

Displaced women need opportunities to make a living for themselves and their families but these opportunities should not increase their vulnerability. Understanding risk factors and protection strategies allows practitioners to ensure appropriate programme design and implementation.

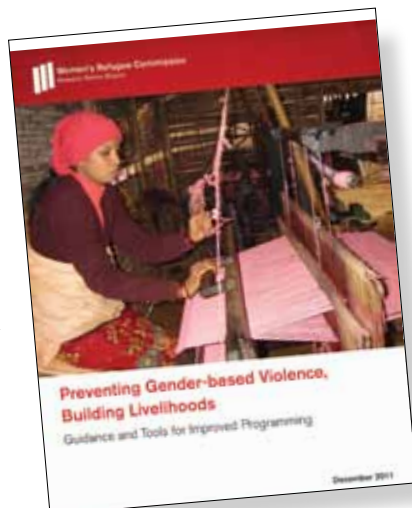
For women refugees, work is frequently a double-edged sword. To meet basic needs, even within a camp, displaced women must often work to feed and educate their children, and displacement can create new opportunities for them to earn money and enter the workforce. Many women, however, face a trade-off between their livelihood and their protection, exposed to new risks by being more mobile in new and insecure environments.

Self-reliance for refugees and internally displaced people (IDPs) is increasingly important as conflicts and displacement drag on. Funding constraints and fear of creating undue dependency push humanitarian actors to promote livelihood opportunities but practitioners seldom assess and plan for the risks that women might then be exposed to.

In studying the links between livelihoods and gender-based violence (GBV), the Women's Refugee Commission (WRC) found that many of the economic opportunities that refugee and IDP women have access to – and that humanitarian practitioners support – expose them to heightened risks, and that few practitioners put an emphasis on the protection and prevention of GBV within their programmes.¹ Instead, programme success is measured by jobs created and income generated, without attention to risks such as exposure to sexual violence, harassment, physical abuse, exploitation and non-payment of wages.

A report published by WRC in December 2011 aims to address the knowledge gap on how to identify the risks associated with livelihood interventions as well as to build awareness around how to make economic programmes safer for women.² The report provides appropriate guidance and tools, and suggests building on the frequently used 'safety mapping' concept as a first step towards a more comprehensive analysis of risks and responses. 'Safety mapping' gives women an opportunity to collectively map their own communities and identify which locations – especially those important to their livelihoods – bring greater risk of harm and what kinds of harm they are likely to be exposed to in those locations.

Historically, the data collection has stopped there.



The WRC, however, encourages additions to this exercise in order to assess multiple risks factors:

- times of day/week/month when risks are heightened
- situations (borrowing money, selling goods, getting stopped by the police, etc) in which harm or violence are likely to increase
- relationships (intimate partner, buyers, vendors) that lead to increased insecurity.

This data is then married with an assessment of the individual's and/or group's 'safety net' – in other words, an analysis of the strength of their social networks (e.g. do they have at least five non-family friends? do they have a safe place to borrow money?) and the protection strategies they employ. When analysed, this data allows practitioners to determine if they should be developing additional protection strategies for their livelihood intervention and with which women.

A good example is in New Delhi, where refugees are not permitted to work legally but are tolerated in the informal economy, the NGO Don Bosco Ashalayam places Burmese women in unregulated small factories in West Delhi.³ Recognising the potential risks that women face in these settings, the Don Bosco staff screen the potential employers to ensure that women are placed in pairs or where other women are already working, and conducts regular monitoring visits to placement sites. The staff also help to negotiate fair wages, working hours and conditions. These efforts significantly reduce the refugee women's risk of exploitation and abuse. The employers comply by transparently agreeing on wages and conditions because they understand that the women have community members behind them and a strong NGO advocate watching their back.

While creating economic opportunities for displaced women is vital for household well-being, humanitarian practitioners have the additional responsibility to ensure that those opportunities are as safe as they can be. The focus needs to be on making it safe for women to work.

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1. Women's Refugee Commission, *Peril or Protection: The Link between Livelihoods and Gender-based Violence*, November 2009. <http://wrc.ms/UeLrFQ>

2. Women's Refugee Commission, *Preventing Gender-based Violence, Building Livelihoods: Guidance and Tools for Improved Programming*, December 2011. <http://wrc.ms/53jGQd> This report is based on research undertaken in Cairo, Kampala, Johannesburg, New Delhi, Ethiopia and Kuala Lumpur, funded by the US Department of State Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration and the NoVo Foundation. For additional guidance please see WRC's e-learning tool at: www.womensrefugeecommission.org/elearning

3. Women's Refugee Commission, *Bright Lights, Big City: Urban Refugees Struggle to Make a Living in New Delhi*, July 2011. <http://wrc.ms/zymKIX>