

Protection of IDP women, children and youth

by Dale Buscher and Carolyn Makinson

The regions of the world characterised by conflict and displacement have relatively high fertility rates and young populations. Women and children thus constitute around 80% of IDP populations. Their specific protection cannot be met without provision of key services.

During conflict, flight and displacement, women and children are at heightened risk. They are more vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. Women and girls are often the systematic target of sexual violence, have special health needs that are often neglected and lack the protection formerly afforded by their families and communities. Children may be separated from those who care for them and put at risk of sexual abuse and exploitation and recruitment into armed forces. Their entire childhoods may be disrupted, with little access to education and few opportunities as they grow older to take on the usual roles and responsibilities of adulthood. While all these issues also affect refugees, research shows that internally displaced women and children usually fare even worse.

Reproductive health

Prior to the 1990s, the reproductive health needs of women and adolescent girls were largely ignored in humanitarian settings. In 2004 the Inter-Agency Working Group (IAWG) on Reproductive Health in Refugee Situations¹ evaluated progress since the landmark International Conference on Population and Development in 1994. Their report found that basic reproductive health services in stable refugee settings were well established, although action against gender-based violence, HIV/AIDS services and safe motherhood interventions were still weak.² The evaluation team had much greater difficulty in obtaining data in IDP settings than in refugee settings, and concluded that services in IDP settings were severely lacking.

The Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children has consistently urged humanitarian actors to undertake a pared-down set of activities, known as the Minimum Initial Service Package (MISP)³, which protect the lives and health of women and girls of reproductive age. The MISP activities prevent and manage the consequences of sexual violence, prevent excess neonatal and maternal mortality and morbidity, reduce HIV transmission, and lay the groundwork for comprehensive services to be implemented at a later date. Despite progress in stable settings, the evaluation showed that, in both refugee and IDP settings, the MISP was rarely implemented at the onset of an emergency.

Gender-based violence

The latest issue of FMR⁴ reflects increased international attention given to gender-based violence (GBV) in refugee, IDP and post-conflict settings. It includes discussion of the risks associated with firewood collection and underlines the close connection between GBV and the absence of opportunities for income generation in humanitarian settings. Traditional harmful practices such as early and forced marriage and female genital cutting are just some of the GBV protection risks faced by displaced girls. The Women's Commission has helped develop tools to allow humanitarian workers plan, implement and monitor programmes to prevent and respond to GBV.⁵

Livelihoods

Lack of economic opportunities place women and adolescent girls in

an extremely vulnerable situation. Economically dependent on others, women and girls suffer domestic violence, trade their bodies for needed cash and commodities and are unable to realise their potential. The lack of livelihood options is far more prevalent in the situation of internal displacement than it is in refugee settings. Little attention has been given to viable income generation activities for IDPs, leaving women and adolescent girls marginalised and economically isolated.

Education

Armed conflict around the world is one of the most formidable obstacles to education. Worldwide, approximately 120 million children are estimated to be out of school. More than half of these children – two-thirds of them girls – are living in countries engaged in or recovering from conflict. Many of those in areas of conflict are doubly disadvantaged by being refugees or internally displaced.⁶

A survey on education in emergencies carried out by the Women's Commission found that in just 10 countries with conflict-induced displacement in 2002, 27 million children had no access to formal schooling.⁷ The vast majority of these (more than 90%) were IDPs. While attendance for all displaced children and youth was staggeringly low, the attendance and retention of displaced female students of all ages continued to lag significantly behind that of males.

Many factors exacerbate the lack of educational opportunities for IDP children and youth, even relative to refugees. The quality of education in IDP camps is generally much lower than the education provided by international agencies in refugee camps. More than one-third of all IDPs remain beyond the reach of UN assistance.



Soldiers escort IDP men and women from Douma camp, Sudan, to collect firewood.

Given that the majority of refugees and IDPs are now displaced for more than a decade, the need for schools and comprehensive education to be provided in the longer term is abundantly clear. Countries such as Afghanistan, Liberia and Sudan now face the challenge of reconstruction with generations of young people – both refugees and IDPs – who have had little access to formal or non-formal education and are, therefore, unable to meaningfully contribute to the rebuilding of their countries.

All children - including those affected by armed conflict and displacement – have the right to education. The

Women's Commission recently published a tool to help organisations working with refugees and IDPs to advocate on their behalf.⁸ The UN Millennium Development Goals will not be attained if the needs of refugee and IDP children continue to be ignored. One important step in the realisation of the right to education is the creation of the Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE), a global open network of NGOs, UN agencies, donors, practitioners, researchers and individuals from affected populations working together to promote access to quality education for all and establish minimum standards.⁹

Conclusion

Protection of internally displaced women, children and youth is inextricably linked to providing what we all need for normality and well-being – health care, education and economic opportunities. While the protection concerns confronting these populations may be much broader

– physical security, access to adequate food and water, appropriate shelter, access to legal protection and a fair system of justice – interventions of the kind outlined here are vital. If they are not offered by the international community, displaced women and children will never be able to live in dignity or be adequately protected.

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2. www.rhrc.org/resources/iawg
3. www.womenscommission.org/pdf/MISP_fact.pdf
4. www.fmreview.org/sexualviolence.htm
5. www.womenscommission.org/reports/gbv_tools.shtml
6. See FMR supplement 'Education & conflict: research, policy & practice', www.fmreview.org/FMRpdfs/EducationSupplement/full.pdf
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