

# Shifting community views: reducing stigma in Dadaab

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**Among the greatest protection risks facing refugees with disabilities in Dadaab are discrimination and stigmatisation.**

Dadaab refugee camp is made up of three separate camps approximately 80 km from the Somali border. As of February 2010 it is the largest contained refugee complex in the world, housing 261,167 registered refugees, 246,646 of whom are Somali. 9,141 registered households in Dadaab include a person living with a disability.

One of the most obvious problems facing people living with disabilities in Dadaab is the hot, sandy, often flooded and overcrowded nature of the area. An orthopaedic technologist working with Handicap International in Dadaab explains: “The sand and heat in Dadaab make living with a physical disability very challenging. Even tricycle wheelchairs fitted with special wheels are very difficult to use ... and the disabled person ends up having to be pushed by several people. As for prosthetics, they wear out quickly in this climate. Refugees might use them minimally at home but they do not use them to travel any significant distance. This drastically limits a person’s mobility, independence and dignity.”

Significant measures have been taken to ensure that persons with disabilities have easy access to agency field offices, UNHCR registration and verification exercises, WFP food distributions, and so on, but day-to-day functioning remains difficult for most disabled refugees in Dadaab. However, the most significant issue facing refugees with disabilities in the camps is not usually the limitations caused by their physical impairment but rather the views of the rest of the community towards them.

Handicap International’s Rehabilitation Team Leader has noted: “Contrary to what many people think, Somali mothers and

sometimes fathers are extremely caring and protective of their children with disabilities. The children are well taken care of, clean and loved. The problem comes with the rest of the community. Discrimination and stigmatisation are the biggest challenges we face in Dadaab when working with the disabled.”

## Blessing or curse?

According to traditional ideas, some Somalis believe that a disability is a blessing from Allah and should be appreciated. Many others, however, believe that an impairment is a punishment in response to behaviour of the parents which has offended Allah. A third possible explanation given by some refugees in the camp is that the person with the disability would harm people if physically able to do so, and therefore Allah curses him or her with a debilitating condition as a way of protecting the community.

Persons with disabilities, especially children, often face frequent protection problems including being beaten, stoned and facing verbal abuse. Often mothers who give birth to children with impairments are abandoned by their husbands who take the other children with them, leaving the mother alone with the disabled child. Alarmingly, in Dadaab some of these mothers tie their children to trees when they have to fetch water or conduct other activities. The idea in doing so is to protect children from hurting themselves or running away. In reality, however, these children often become an even easier target for the rest of the community. While unable to escape they are often stoned, beaten and burned, and sometimes sexually abused.

## Addressing protection concerns

Agencies working in Dadaab are trying to curb this habit. Handicap

International staff visit households in the camps to identify people with disabilities and look out for instances of human rights abuses such as children being tied to trees or confined to the house. When they identify a protection issue such as those listed above, they refer the case to CARE and Save the Children who provide counselling and conduct home visits. Some of these cases are then subsequently referred to UNHCR in order to provide additional support and protection solutions.

Options, however, are limited which is why changing the perception of the community towards persons with disabilities needs to be one of the highest priorities.

UNHCR and NGOs are including refugees with disabilities in camp committees, sectoral planning meetings, Parent Teacher Associations and their own staff. In regard to the specific issue of abandoned mothers, youth groups are encouraging neighbours to watch over disabled children if their mothers have to leave, and HI plans to create day-care centres where children can be supervised by others for a short period of time. These efforts, though limited, have already helped provide some means of protection for disabled persons, especially children. As such they need to be financially supported and enhanced.

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The views reflected in this article are her own personal views and do not necessarily reflect the views of either Mapendo International or UNHCR.