

Women's centres: spaces of empowerment in Darfur

by Carmen Lowry

Survivors of sexual assault need emotional support, safe and private spaces for healing and access to resources, information and networks.

The International Rescue Committee (IRC) operates ten Women's Centres in Darfur to try to meet their needs. These Centres – in South, North and West Darfur – allow women to access the resources, support and referral processes vital for survivors of sexual violence. In situations where rape is used as a weapon of war, the actual experience of rape and other forms of sexual violence is one that is shared collectively. Women are often attacked in groups. Yet without recognised and accessible safe spaces – environments where disclosure and sharing are encouraged and facilitated – survivors will often not talk about their collective experience of violation. The Women's Centres try to create an environment where survivors feel welcome and safe. As

women share their individual stories, the barriers to seeking assistance – shame, fear of being ostracised, fear of being singled out – break down as women realise that they are not alone in their experience.

Each Centre has a team of facilitators to explain the services available and provide immediate counselling if necessary. Trained case workers are available to listen to a survivor's story and concerns, map out her choices and help her access the resources and services she needs.

The Women's Centres also provide activities to help build skills and foster greater self-reliance. Each centre offers a range of activities such as literacy classes, skills-building classes, emotional support activities and opportunities for social interaction such as dancing, drumming and singing. The Women's Centres regularly offer information sessions on topics – requested by the women – such as reproductive health, legal rights, childcare, camp management

and education. By drawing on staff from different sectors and different agencies to present these sessions, they have the added benefit of encouraging collaboration among agencies and clarifying sectoral roles in the camps. Women's Centres play a vital role in facilitating information exchange, providing women with access to resources and promoting direct linkages between the women and other actors who have the power to influence the physical environment and quality of life for IDP women and their families.

Centre facilitators engage with women to build trust and encourage them to share their experiences and to rest from the demanding tasks of daily survival in the camps. In this way, the survivor-focused and survivor-supportive Women's Centres become spaces of empowerment. To enhance this sense of empowerment, ownership of and responsibility for the Centres must be shared among the different women involved – international and national staff, host and displaced communities, educated women from Khartoum and women with no formal education from isolated villages in Darfur.

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