

Desperate lives: urban refugee women in Malaysia and Egypt

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While the international community is still working out how to identify and best serve them, refugees and IDPs in urban settings are making their own way – often placing themselves at considerable risk.

The future of displacement is clearly urban – and clearly fraught with challenges. The Women's Refugee Commission (WRC) has recently undertaken research into the risks and challenges confronting refugee women in urban areas – as well as the opportunities they gain – as they seek to provide for themselves and their families in settings where international assistance is minimal. The research included urban field assessments covering the plight of Burmese refugee women in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, and of Iraqi, Somali, Sudanese, Eritrean and Ethiopian refugee women in Cairo, Egypt.

Unsafe at home or at work in Kuala Lumpur

Malaysia is host to a large number of migrant workers and an estimated

100,000 refugees and asylum seekers, most of whom are from persecuted Burmese ethnic groups. Forty thousand are registered as refugees with UNHCR.¹

As Malaysia has not signed the 1951 Refugee Convention, refugees have no legal status and no right to work or legal residency. In the eyes of the government, there is no difference between an undocumented worker and a refugee. The Malaysian government initiated a widespread campaign to crack down on undocumented migrants in 2004 and has since reported an “intention to deport more than one million undocumented migrants”² through mass arrests. This initiative has led, on average, to the arrest of 700-800 UNHCR-recognised refugees each month.³

The safety of Burmese refugee women living in Kuala Lumpur is greatly compromised by their attempts to make a living. Whereas in many contexts access to livelihoods brings greater protection against sexual harassment, abuse and exploitation, for a refugee woman in Kuala Lumpur having a job increases her vulnerability to gender-based violence, arrest, detention and extortion.⁴

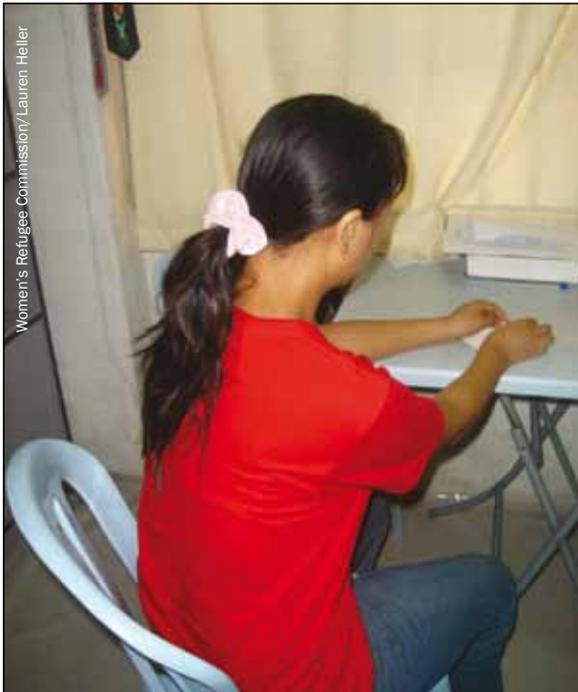
Without status and the right to work in Malaysia, there are few viable economic opportunities open

to refugees. However, because they desperately need work, refugee women often find employment in the informal and less regulated sectors of the economy, such as in restaurants as waitresses and dishwashers.

Without the protection that legal status and documentation provide, refugee women are at the mercy of their employers, who frequently withhold pay or sexually harass and exploit them. If the women were to report the crimes, they would risk arrest and deportation. The Women's Refugee Commission, in fact, found that the women risk arrest every time they leave the house. This impedes their movement, further narrows their work choices, and limits their social and economic interactions. Burmese refugee women report a cycle of repeated arrests, frequent deportations and the recurring payment of bribes to be either released from custody or to re-enter the country.

“We are afraid. Women are getting attacked and arrested coming home late from work. We have problems not getting paid at work. We are afraid of the police. We are constantly hiding. Our children go hungry when we are not paid.”
(Focus group with refugee women, 21 May 2008)

Because of the risks they face leaving their apartments, some refugee women stay home and work cooking and cleaning for male household members, who are generally not related to them but come from the same ethnic group. As many as 25 workers reside in a single apartment and collectively cover the rent for a refugee woman who agrees to tend to their domestic needs. While this protects the women from the potential arrest and deportation she might face while going out, it puts her at risk of sexual exploitation from unrelated male household members who share overcrowded living quarters.



Burmese refugee in Malaysia who was sexually harassed at work and left her job and who is now afraid to seek further employment for fear of sexual harassment and/or arrest.

While some small NGO projects support home-based handicraft production as a means of reducing vulnerability, the projects offer limited skills training, are not market-driven and hence provide little opportunity for sustainable income. Quality and market access are major impediments to scaling up this projects. At present, most buyers are from the NGO and expatriate volunteer community.

Working risks in Cairo

Cairo hosts a highly diverse refugee population that is struggling to survive in a very difficult urban environment with limited assistance. High national unemployment rates and a huge population of unemployed youth plague the local labour market and impede refugee access.

WRC's field assessment trip to Cairo found many of the same challenges and risks that confront refugee women in Kuala Lumpur. While Egypt allows refugees to obtain work permits, securing a work permit is an expensive, lengthy and complicated process that requires an employer sponsor and no competition from a similarly qualified Egyptian candidate. As a result, refugees are forced into unregulated work sectors and occupations with few protections.

The majority of refugee women who work do so as domestic workers in Egyptian households. As this sector is not regulated by Egyptian labour law, a work permit is not required and there is a constant market demand for such labour. However, the lack of regulation creates a risky work environment. Inside the confines of these private homes, refugee women face potential harassment, physical abuse, sexual exploitation and the non-payment of wages. Of the refugee women who cannot find domestic work, some reportedly turn to commercial sex work.⁵ Despite frequent reports of gender-based violence, WRC found few established support services for survivors in Cairo.

Protective elements

The field assessments conducted by WRC did, however, find examples of how refugee women's protection can be enhanced – even in urban



Refugee women working in the Malaika Linen Factory, Cairo.

areas where there is no legal right to work. Protective elements can be built into economic programmes – elements such as accompaniment, requiring codes of conduct for employers, sensitisation campaigns, creating linkages with local women's leadership and political groups, and engaging men – both from the refugee community and also from the host community.

One organisation in Cairo, for example, that trains and places refugee women in Egyptian homes as domestic workers accompanies them on their first day. The NGO records the name and contact details of the employer as well as the agreed payment rate, thereby letting the employer know that the woman has a backup support system and the NGO knows how and where to find the employer should there be problems.

Other successful models includes a private sector initiative, the Malaika Linen Factory, that hires both Egyptian and refugee women to do highly skilled embroidery. The factory offers a 40-day training programme that includes transportation and meal costs for

women participants and is one of the only examples of a private sector company actively recruiting refugee women and integrating them with Egyptian female employees.

Building in these protective elements, though, requires thoughtful planning, understanding the risks faced, assessing the means of reducing risks, and integrating components into the livelihoods intervention to reduce vulnerability. Advocating for and securing legal status for refugees in these environments and their legal right to work would offer the most protection.

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1. Interview with UNHCR, 26 May 2008.

2. Joint NGO Memorandum concerning the crackdown on undocumented migrants, 29 January 2005.

3. See article Nah pp31-3.

4. 'Desperate Lives: Burmese Women Struggle to Make a Living in Malaysia', Women's Refugee Commission, May 2008: http://www.womensrefugeecommission.org/docs/mys_rep.pdf

5. Interview with Refugee Egypt medical staff, 24 July 2008.