Introduction

The often cited statistic that as many as 80 per cent of displaced populations are women and children fails to convey the complete devastation that displacement visits upon women and communities in general. Leaving homes, property and community behind, renders women vulnerable to violence, disease and food scarcity, whether women flee willingly or unwillingly. Internally displaced women face additional dangers as they are often invisible to the international community within the borders of countries at war. Camps for refugees and the internally displaced have been criticized for not addressing women’s needs and concerns in their design and procedure. Failure to account for women’s security and health needs can make a camp dangerous and deadly, when it was intended to provide refuge. Nonetheless, UN, governmental and civil society organizations that service displaced women have begun rising to the challenge of including women and gender perspectives at every stage of policy and implementation.
The 1951 Refugee Convention: The 1951 Convention defines a refugee as “any person who:
(1) Has been considered a refugee under the Arrangements of 12 May 1926 and 30 June 1928, the Protocol of 14 September 1939 or the Constitution of the International Refugee Organization;
Decision of non-eligibility taken by the International Refugee Organization during the period of its activities shall not prevent the status of refugee being accorded to persons who fulfil the conditions of paragraph 2 of this section; (2) As a result of events occurring before 1 January 1951 and owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of the country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.
In the case of a person who has more than one nationality, the term “the country of his nationality” shall mean each of the countries of which he is a national, and a person shall not be deemed to be lacking the protection of the country of his nationality if, without any valid reason based on well-founded fear, he has not availed himself of the protection of one of the countries of which he is a national. The Convention goes on to outline the obligations that state parties have to refugees within their border, including providing them with refuge, shelter and basic services. The Convention was drafted in 1951 by a panel, who defined persecution based on race, religion, nationality, membership in political groups or political opinions. This conception of which individual identities can be persecuted excludes gender-based persecution as a legitimate claim for asylum; however, women’s argue that the Geneva Convention can be interpreted so as to include gender-based claims for asylum. More broadly, such a definition conveys blindness to women’s experiences in wartime, especially as women constitute a larger proportion of displaced persons than do men. The 1967 Protocol extended the application of the Convention to the situation of "new refugees", i.e. persons who, while meeting the Convention definition, had become refugees as a result of events that took place after 1 January 1951. ¹

Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs): According to UNHCR, "like refugees, [IDPs] are hapless civilians often caught up in an endless round of civil conflict or persecution. There are an estimated 20-25 million of them around the world and they are known by the clumsy bureaucratic acronym of IDP--an internally displaced person. What is the difference? When a fleeing civilian crosses an international frontier, he or she becomes a refugee and as such receives international protection and help. If a person in similar circumstances is displaced within his or her home country and becomes internally displaced person then assistance and protection is much more problematic. UNHCR currently helps 6.3 million IDPs and a lively international debate is underway on how to more effectively help this group."²

Fact Sheet

▪ Up to eighty percent of displaced people worldwide are women and children. ³
▪ Out of 40 million worldwide, 12 millions are internally displaced persons (IDPs). Internally displaced women face additional risks as there is no international body responsible for their well-being. When states or other actors are unwilling to allow humanitarian access, ID women remain completely out of reach of aid and support. ⁴
▪ Although some women actively choose to leave their home communities, flight is often precipitated by extreme sexual harassment, gender-based violence or severe sex discrimination. Displaced women often face extreme discrimination throughout flight, settlement and return. Women and girls are at high risk for human rights abuses as their homes, communities and support systems disintegrate. ⁵
Displacement does not necessarily occur when women are prepared for it. Women must flee their homes along with their children, or during pregnancy, sometimes giving birth along the way. Many women have the task of finding food and shelter upon arrival.  

Girls and women are often deceived and sexually used because they don't know their rights as refugees and because they can't sustain themselves financially. As well, women are not educated about AIDS and how to protect themselves. UNHCR is embarking on small projects to help refugees get some income to help them become self-reliant and knowledgeable about their human rights.  

The displacement experiences of women and girls often go unnoticed by the international community. The "Lost Boys of Sudan" received a great deal of attention and assistance, whereas their female counterparts went unnoticed. While the boys who roamed the desert for years found themselves in Kenyan refugee camps, the girls often ended up in foster homes where their welfare and their very existence was impossible to track. As a result, the girls’ experiences were invisible to policy makers and their well-being was not taken care of by the international community. The US designated the "Lost Boys and Girls" as a priority caseload for refugee resettlement in 2000 but has so far resettled only 89 girls compared with 3276 boys.  

At least two-thirds of the world's more than 40 million refugees and internally displaced persons have fled their homes in countries that have a severe or significant threat of death or injury from antipersonnel mines. It is impossible to discuss repatriation without first discussing the indiscriminate effects of antipersonnel mines on those who would return to their homes. While women are often mine victims and face gender-specific obstacles to treatment and care, the presence of antipersonnel mines overwhelmingly affects women in their roles as primary caregivers and sustenance providers in many affected countries.  

Displacement often affects already vulnerable segments of the general population. For example, one-third of Colombian IDPs are estimated to be of Indigenous or African descent, representing a much larger proportion than their actual numbers in the society in general. Indigenous women, in particular, are thought to be especially vulnerable to rape by armed actors in Colombia.  

A "protection gap" has often existed in international aid to refugees and IDPs as needs such as food and shelter are provided while security and protection needs are not dealt with. Displaced women are not able to benefit fully from aid when they are under constant threat of assault, rape and other human rights violations.  

Refugee care packages often fail to include sanitary napkins for women and other essential feminine products. The provision of these materials recognizes women’s hygiene needs and supports their dignity.  

Refugees are particularly at risk of HIV infection as wars and conflicts often force them to flee to areas where the virus is prevalent. They are also more exposed to factors that facilitate transmission, including poverty, the disruption of health services and social structure and increases in sexual violence.  

Women and girls who are abducted and thereby forcibly displaced face particular difficulties during repatriation. Often they are rejected by their communities as they are seen to be accomplices to the conflict. Internationally sponsored DDR programmes often fail to abducted, forced or voluntary camp followers as groups in need of targeted reintegration initiatives.  

Refugee receiving countries have been reticent to recognize gender-based persecution, such as the practices of FGC, mass rape and systematic domestic violence, as legitimate grounds for asylum. As in sending countries, officials in receiving countries often lack the training and sensitivity to deal effectively with female victims of violence.
In 2002, the overall number of refugees dropped by 14 percent due to mass repatriations to Afghanistan and Angola. However, the total number of people of concern to UNHCR, including IDPs, recent returnees and refugees increased slightly.  

**Treaties and Institutions**

**The Guiding Principles on Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs):** Created by the Special Representative to the Secretary-General Francis Deng in 1998, the Guiding Principles (GPs) are the first international standard for the protection of IDPs. The GPs consist of thirty principles which define IDPs rights and the obligation of states to IDPs. Although they are not legally-binding, the GPs set out minimum standards for the well-being and empowerment of IDPs. The GPs specify that IDPs must be protected from “rape, mutilation, torture, cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, and other outrages upon personal dignity, such as acts of gender-specific violence, forced prostitution and any form of indecent assault; slavery or any contemporary form of slavery, such as sale into marriage, sexual exploitation, or forced labour of children.” The GPs also say that “special attention should be paid to the health needs of women, including access to female health care providers and services, such as reproductive health care, as well as appropriate counselling for victims of sexual and other abuses.”

**The UN High Commissioner on Refugees (UNHCR):** UNHCR is the UN body that is responsible for the well-being of refugees. UNHCR is mandated to coordinate and lead international action on the protection of refugees and on solutions to refugee problems. Helping Refugees: An Introduction to UNHCR outlines the basic concept, principles and activities of UNHCR.

**UNHCR’s Five Commitments to Refugee Women:**

1. Develop integrated country level strategies to address sexual violence, including domestic violence, against refugee women.

2. Register refugee women individually and provide them with relevant documentation to ensure their individual security, freedom of movement and access to essential services. Refugee women and men are to participate equally in the registration process.

3. Ensure that 50 per cent of representatives in all management communities and other bodies representing refugees to UNHCR in urban, rural and camp setting are women.

4. Ensure refugee women’s direct and indirect participation in the management of food and non-food item distribution so that these goods are directly controlled by adult female household members.

5. The provision of sanitary materials to all women and girls of concern to UNHCR should become a standard practice in UNHCR’s assistance programmes.

**Human Rights Watch:** A refugee is someone with a well-founded fear of persecution on the basis of his or her race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group or political opinion, who is outside of his or her country of nationality and unable or unwilling to return. Refugees are forced from their countries by war, civil conflict, political strife or gross human rights abuses. There were an estimated 14.9 million refugees in the world in 2001 - people who had crossed an international border to seek safety - and at least 22 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) who had been uprooted within their own countries. The global refugee crisis affects every continent and almost every country. In 2001, 78 percent of all refugees came from 10 areas: Afghanistan, Angola, Burma, Burundi, Congo-Kinshasa, Eritrea, Iraq, the Palestinian
tories, Somalia and Sudan. Palestinians are the world's oldest and largest refugee population, and make up more than one fourth of all refugees. Asia hosts 45 percent of all refugees, followed by Africa (30 percent), Europe (19 percent) and North America (5 percent).

**Amnesty International:** A refugee is a person who is outside her country of origin and genuinely risks serious human rights abuses because of who she is or what she believes. She cannot or will not return because her government cannot or will not protect her. Because of the persecution she would face, a refugee is entitled to be protected against forcible return to her country of origin. Even if she is not a refugee, Amnesty International (AI) would also oppose the forcible return of anyone to a country where she can reasonably be expected to be in danger of torture, execution or "disappearance". Likewise, AI opposes return to a country where a person faces the death penalty.

**Tools and Checklists**

- **Oxfam Protection into Practice: An Introduction**
- **UNHCR Guidelines on the Protection of Women Refugees**
- **UNHCR Guidelines on the Prevention of Sexual Violence Against Refugees**
- **UNHCR Refugee Education Tools**
- **UNFPA Training for Reproductive Health in Emergency Situations**
- **UNAIDS/UNHCR/WHO Guidelines for HIV interventions in Emergency Settings**
- **OCHA Handbook for Applying the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement**
- **Women's Commission synopsis of UNHCR Guidelines**
- **Women's Commission Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement**
- **Brookings Institution's Policy Brief on IDP, Security and US Foreign / Emergency Aid**
- **IDP Project Training Module Page**
- **Refugees International Advocacy Page**
- **Human Rights Watch Press Kit on Refugees, Asylum Seekers and IDPs**
- **Development Research Centre on Migration, Globalisation and Poverty Web Portal**
- **Beyond Firewood: Fuel Alternatives and Protection Strategies for Displaced Women and Girls**

In March 2006 the Women’s Commission for Refugee Women and Children published a report highlighting the complex relationship between fuel provision and threats to the security of displaced women and girls. The report states, “the environment that surrounds refugee or internally displaced persons (IDP) camps, particularly in situations of ongoing conflict, is notoriously dangerous. Yet every day, in hundreds of camps around the world, millions of women and girls venture out into this danger, risking rape, assault, abduction, theft, exploitation or even murder, in order to collect enough firewood to cook for their families.”
Internal Displacement: Global Overview of Trends and Developments in 2005

This report includes both thematic and regional overviews of displacement trends in 2005. The chapter on displaced women highlights a number of issues including sexual and gender-based violence, including sexual exploitation and abuse by peacekeeping forces, and the important work undertaken by women’s organizations in response to complex emergencies and the critical impact made by women’s participation in conflict prevention activities.

UNIFEM Action

Drawing from experience in Guatemala, Uganda and Zambia, UNIFEM provided advice to the All-Party Burundi Women’s Peace Conference on reconstruction issues such as repatriation, resettlement and reintegration of refugees. UNIFEM collaborated with AFRICARE to support a four-month reconciliation program for women IDPs, returnees and women who had stayed in their communities in Gitega and Kausi, Burundi.

In 2002, UNIFEM’s networking and advocacy in Georgia resulted in greater participation of internally displaced women in peace-building. For instance, for the first time, “Women’s Public Diplomacy” meetings were held in South Ossetia and also in Abkhazia with internally displaced women from Tbilisi, Georgia, local authorities, the UN Observer Mission and CIS peacekeepers. Activities aimed at increasing women’s participation in conflict resolution and peace-building also included capacity-building through a number of trainings for women leaders in negotiation and conflict resolution skills. UNIFEM has helped women’s organisations in the Southern Caucasus organise themselves into national and regional networks. This year saw the creation of a “Coalition for UN Security Council Resolution 1325” in Azerbaijan with a network of local branches and the “National Network of Women IDPs” in Azerbaijan. In Armenia, UNIFEM facilitated the setting up of the Syunik Peace Club and Women’s Coalition. To create regional links between these new and existing women’s organisations working for peace, UNIFEM also supported a meeting of women leaders in Tbilisi at which the Southern Caucasus Regional Coalition “Women for Peace” was established.

In South America, UNIFEM is forging strong relationships with other UN agencies to improve the protection of women refugees affected by the Colombian civil war. To address the growing needs of the refugees, in January 2003, UNIFEM and the UNHCR in Ecuador signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to strengthen collaboration between the two agencies with regard to addressing the situation of Colombian women refugees living in Ecuador, including through joint pilot projects. This is particularly important since there has been a recent sharp increase in the number of refugee asylum applications from Colombian refugees, half of which are filed from the Ecuadorian border province of Sucumbios.

UNIFEM held a workshop in June 2003 for over 90 participants connecting women members of peace organisations with women from the National Assembly, Senate, the Implementation Monitoring Committee (IMC) of the Arusha Peace Agreement, ministries and key players on IDP and refugee issues. The workshop was designed to identify key facts relating to women and conflict, and to identify ways to promote women’s role in peace-building within their respective areas of professional responsibility. In addition, UNIFEM continued its work with a group of women within the IMC tasked with monitoring the implementation of the peace agreement. The next step of this on-going capacity-building effort is to help IMC analyse the constraints that it faces in implementing the gender provision of the peace agreement.

UN Resources

United Nations Development Fund for Women

304 East 45th Street New York, NY10017 Tel: 212 906 6400 Fax: 212 906 6705
Security Council resolution 1325: (2000) The Security Council urges member states to increase their support for gender-sensitive training programs undertaken by relevant funds and programmes, including UNHCR. The SC calls on all actors to consider the particular repatriation, resettlement and reconstruction needs of women and girls. The SC calls on all actors to respect the humanitarian nature of refugee camps and settlements and to take into account the needs of women in their design.

UNHCR: An Assessment of Ten Years of Policy on Refugee Women
UNHCR’s Global Report 2002 highlights UNHCR achievements and setbacks with regards to regional and global programming.
UNHCR also support sports recreation activities for girls as means of increasing self-confidence and improving the atmosphere in camps.  

UNHCR Refugee Women photo gallery
UNFPA supports emergency reproductive supplies and services to displaced women. UNFPA engages in the "double emergency" of displacement and HIV/AIDS both through service provision and advocacy. They produced a report entitled "The Trajectory of Life as Internally Displaced Persons In Angola".

WHO Refugees Page
IRIN Web Special on Internal Displacement

Recommendations

Recommendations on Women and Displacement made by the Independent Experts and other Actors, Institutions and Organizations:

On Refugee and Displaced Women the Experts call for:

1. Strengthening of United Nations field operations for internally displaced women, and those bodies that support a field-based presence. Protection officers from all relevant bodies, including the Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), should be deployed immediately if a State cannot or will not protect displaced populations or is indeed responsible for their displacement.

Explanation of the Recommendation: Since there is no single agency within the United Nations mandated to provide for internally displaced persons, raising funds, setting up and coordinating the aid programmes they need can take time. Humanitarian agencies of the United Nations can only assist displaced people if their country allows them access. Some armed opposition groups may refuse access, afraid that their human rights violations will be exposed, even if a government has promised help to people in need. The question of who provides protection and assistance, and when, is hotly debated. In accordance with international law, the obligation to protect internally displaced persons lies first and foremost with the government of the country concerned. Armed opposition groups also have legal and moral responsibilities not to assault civilians or subject them to human rights abuses and to protect the rights of the displaced people in the territories under their control. The Secretary-General, with the support of other relevant agencies, has created an Internal Displacement Unit within the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) that has called for increased attention to protection issues, including rapid
deployment of protection officers in displacement situations, but there has been disappointing response.

**Responsible Entities:** OCHA, UNHCR, OHCHR, UNICEF, UNFPA, ICRC, WFP, WHO, UNDP

**Ideas for Implementation:** Inter-Agency collaboration could result in a harmonization of training and preparation approaches for a larger force of protection officers within each agency ready to be deployed on short notice. OHCHR should take the lead in this process. Given the repeated assaults on displaced persons, UN member states should put in place measures to ensure that armed opposition groups are held accountable for gross human rights violations against IDPs, in violation of international law. In order to resolve the question of who should take responsibility for IDPs, humanitarian agencies in the field should establish a lead agency in each conflict situation to deal specifically with IDPs. In addition, each agency should appoint and IDP focal point for improved coordination. Organizations/agencies responsible for providing protection and assistance to IDPs should carry out their obligations. Agencies should ensure that the decisions of the Executive Committees (IASC, ECHA) are executed and give account as such. The General Assembly should adopt a resolution establishing [or expanding the scope of an existing] Trust Fund for the deployment of Protection Officers or their equivalents. Donor Governments are encouraged to provide the funds required for this purpose. UNIFEM may strengthen its institutional collaboration with the IDP unit in OCHA, through a secondment of gender experts, to ensure and provide technical assistance that gender is reflected in humanitarian assistance to IDP women.

2. Governments to adhere to the UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, and incorporate them into national laws to ensure protection, assistance and humanitarian access to internally displaced persons within their territory.

**Explanation of the Recommendation:** In response to the vast numbers and needs of internally displaced persons, the UN Secretary-General in 1992 appointed a Special Representative on Internally Displaced Persons, Dr. Francis M. Deng, to develop a framework to protect their rights. In collaboration with a team of international legal experts, Deng developed the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement. One of the hallmarks of the principles is the call for specific recognition of the needs of women. They acknowledge the situation of female heads of households, emphasize women’s physical and psycho-social needs, reaffirm their need for access to basic services, and call for their participation in education and training programmes. Over the past five years, humanitarian agencies have promoted the Guiding Principles and used them as a framework for providing assistance and protection to the internally displaced. In addition, a number of countries with internally displaced populations, including Burundi, Colombia and Georgia, have indicated their willingness to use the Principles and to adapt national laws to reflect them. Yet, when it comes to the vast majority of the internally displaced, the Guiding Principles are not implemented. In the Experts’ view, these Principles are a useful tool that must be adhered to and implemented by all States. Beyond that, these Guiding Principles should be enshrined in a binding international instrument, although many of its elements are covered in international humanitarian and human rights law.

**Entities Responsible:** Governments, Humanitarian NGOs, UN Agencies, Legal Experts

**Ideas for Implementation:** Ratification of treaties on the national level often takes a long time due to the need to harmonize national laws to the standards contained in the international treaty. This process becomes easier as some governments generate model statutes and internal reform processes. The UN could convene interaction between those governments that have incorporated
the Guiding Principles and those preparing to do so, or could collect case studies and make best practices available. In order to avoid the problem of displacement, governments should spare no efforts to address the root causes of displacement. UN agencies programmes and policies can assist governments in addressing the root causes and in facilitating services to the displaced.

3. Refugee and internally displaced women to play a key role in camp planning, management and decision-making so that gender issues are taken into account in all aspects, especially resource distribution, security and protection.

**Explanation of the Recommendation:** Camps for displaced people offer help in desperate situations. But camps can become extremely dangerous places for women. In most camps, there are not enough protection officers or female staff. As a result, domestic violence increases and women and girls face sexual violence and discrimination in the distribution of everything from food to soap to plastic sheeting. UNHCR, as the key agency for refugees, and all other agencies working in refugee or internally displaced camps should deliberately include women in all decision-making opportunities to learn about and deliver their needs, which would help to protect them from exploitation.

**Entities Responsible:** UNHCR, UNFPA, UNICEF, OCHA, UNFPA, Humanitarian NGOs

**Ideas for Implementation:** At the camp planning stage, women should be consulted as to the position and design of camps. After establishment of the camp, various methods have been used to engage, empower and include refugee and displaced populations in the decision-making processes of camps, with varying degrees of success. Better use of checklists and training opportunities for those managing camps should be used to enhance the gender sensitivity of staff and the voices of women in decision-making. UNIFEM’s MOU with UNHCR will strengthen technical assistance to ensure that empowerment of displaced women in camp situations is sustainable and that the design and management of camps are gender sensitive. In addition, an MOU with the WFP will address the specific issues regarding food distribution.

4. Women to be involved in all aspects of repatriation and resettlement planning and implementation. Special measures should be put in place to ensure women’s security in this process and to ensure voluntary, unhindered repatriation, and that it takes place under conditions of safety and dignity, with full respect for human rights and the rule of law.

**Explanation of the Recommendation:** The hope of many refugees and internally displaced persons is to return home and repatriation is the preferred option of host countries. But that may not be possible due to ongoing violence, landmines and fear of the people fled from who have not been punished and continue to live in the villages and communities to which the women want to go back. Aside from safety concerns, many widows and female heads of households have no way to support themselves if they return home. Because women in some countries cannot inherit land or other property from either their husbands or their parents, unless they have sons they have no way to hold on to property that might help support them.

**Entities Responsible:** National Governments, UNHCR, ICRC, Humanitarian NGOs

**Ideas for Implementation:** Assign a gender adviser within UN missions and implementing UN agencies to provide advice and guidance for repatriation and resettlement and to address the special needs of women. Defense and security forces should be trained by government, UN and experts from the ICRC to understand their responsibilities to women and children and to guarantee their protection from harm.
5. All asylum policies to be reformed to take into account gender-based political persecution. Women, regardless of marital status, should be eligible for asylum and entitled to individual interview and assessment procedures.

**Explanation of the Recommendation:** There are very few nations that make it easy for asylum seekers, and almost all make it harder for women and children than for men. Even at the first step, interviewers and interpreters are often men who have little experience in understanding the special needs of women asylum seekers. Some countries register a male head of a refugee household without providing any residency protection to the family. If the man abandons the family or is otherwise not present, the wife will have a hard time proving that she and their children are legally in the country

**Entities Responsible:** All 191 member states of the United Nations, Border patrol, Police, Immigration agency staff

**Ideas for Implementation:** The review and reform of national immigration policies to include gender-based political persecution. Training for all those assessing applications for asylum on the basis of political persecution.

**The Secretary General Recommends in his 2000 report, Women, Peace and Security:**

Condemn all violations of the human rights of women and girls in situations of armed conflict; take all necessary measures to bring an end to such violations; and call upon all parties involved in conflict to adhere at all times to their obligations under principles of international humanitarian law, human rights law and refugee law, in particular in regard to women and girls.

Address the special needs of girls affected by armed conflict in the design of recovery assistance programmes, in particular girls who are heads of households, internally displaced, refugees, unaccompanied, separated, or orphaned, as well as girls who have been sexually exploited and used as combatants, including through the allocation of sufficient resources.

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