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# The Situation of Refugee Women Worldwide

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by Joanna Manganara\*

## Numbers

Of the some 15 million refugees worldwide at least 75% are women and children. In some countries women and children constitute 90% of refugees.

## Who's Helping the Refugees

Governments, especially those of the host country, take responsibility in the first instance for refugees. In addition various organisations work to assist them.

The office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) is the only organisation mandated by the international community to protect refugees worldwide. It does so by providing legal protection and by furnishing food, shelter, medical aid, education, and training.

It also sets durable solutions to their problems, that is voluntary repatriation, integration in their country of asylum or resettlement in a third country. Twice awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, UNCR celebrated its fortieth anniversary in 1991.

Set up in 1949 the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) provides health, education, relief and social services to the 2.3 million Palestine Refugees in Jordan, Lebanon, the Syrian Arab Republic and the occupied territories of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

The UN Border Relief Operation set up in 1982 assists some 300,000 Cambodians living along the Thai-Cambodian border. Other organisations which cooperate in assistance activities include the UN Children's Fund, UN Development Program, World Food Organisation, WHO, Red Cross, and International Organisation of Migration.

**FACTORS TO BE TAKEN INTO ACCOUNT WHEN PLANNING IN REFUGEE SITUATIONS WHICH PARTICULARLY AFFECT WOMEN.**

Traditionally organisations working

with refugees have been primarily relief oriented, focusing on a rapid response to providing for the basic needs of the population. This approach has tended to emphasise external decision-making rather than building on the resources and encouraging the participation of the beneficiaries.

Increasingly, however, relief organisations have recognised the need to involve the target population even in the early stages of an emergency in order to reduce possible dependency and encourage self-reliance should the emergency evolve into a long-term situation.

## a) The Need for Women's Participation

Since women and their children represent the vast majority of refugees, programmes can be effective only if they are planned in consultation with them and with an understanding of their needs. But too often women are not included when decisions are made that affect the future of refugees. The same is true for decisions on the management of refugee programme assistance.

For that reason the UNHCR has adopted a policy of mainstreaming, integrating the resources and needs of refugee women in all aspects of programme planning and implementation.

What exactly is the meaning of mainstreaming? Women refugees should participate at all levels of project and programme development from the initial identification of resources and needs to the evaluation stage.

What exactly is the meaning of special needs? In many circumstances both men and women refugees experience the same difficulties. But there are situations in which refugee women face special problems and are even more at risk simply because they are women.

One of the gravest hazards is the violation of their physical safety. While both men and women refugees are victims of atrocities, the problems of refugee women during flight are particularly

acute. They have often been attacked, raped or killed by soldiers, rebels, border guards and others with whom they come in contact.

**b) The second major factor** essential to refugee situations is that of **protection**. Nationals in their home country generally benefit from the rights of being a citizen and the social stability and protection of the family structure. Refugees have, in many cases, lost this protection and may become entirely reliant on external agencies to ensure protection of every basic human right.

Assistance and development activities should contribute to protection activities. For example training and functional literacy classes provide refugees with skills which will enable them to become more eligible for employment and therefore less vulnerable to exploitation. Well-planned accommodation and establishment of refugee committees can provide physical protection for the most vulnerable groups.

Particular efforts must be made to ensure that whenever possible the development opportunities provided to refugees also benefit nationals in order to encourage constructive community relations and minimise potential tensions.

**c) The third factor has to do with changes in the socioeconomic roles of women and men in refugee situations.**

In the refugee context the socioeconomic roles of men and women have been disrupted and are constantly evolving through the various stages of becoming a refugee. Therefore a major factor in planning for refugees is the concept of change and specifically the implications of these socioeconomic role changes to the development process. It is also essential to consciously plan towards the expected durable solution.

Particular examples to illustrate the dynamics of change: Refugees who are convinced that their situation is temporary will find it difficult to be motivated by

an activity which does not appear to be relevant to their own expectations for the future.

Development planners usually identify community leaders among the target population to assist in planning activities. In the refugee context traditional leaders may still be fighting, have been killed in the country of origin, or are employed elsewhere.

It is essential therefore to carefully identify counterparts within the community and not make assumptions based on a traditional breakdown of responsibilities in the society which may no longer exist. This is particularly important when female heads of households may have been forced by circumstances to take more active roles in community leadership.

Planners should be proactive in encouraging these efforts to self-help rather than imposing their own understanding of the former traditional culture which may relegate women to marginal activities which have little relevance to their new situation.

Example: If a development planner discusses shelter construction with men in the new community based on their assumption of the traditional role she/he will likely not have the benefit of hearing the particular concerns of the women who now may represent the majority of the community and who will continue in the refugee setting, obviously with variables created by the new location, and often with additional responsibilities related to income generating due to becoming a single head of household.

Development planners must address this factor with sensitivity. Women may now have to construct the shelter themselves in the absence of their husbands.

The changed economic situation of the refugees creates the necessity for well-targeted skills training. For example, traditional pastoralists may find themselves as refugees in a predominantly urban setting. In this case the development planner has a particularly difficult challenge. Not only must appropriate income generating skills be taught in their way of life, they must then be prepared adequately for a durable solution which may once again alter this lifestyle.

In addition to the disorientation which may come from a rapid transition in lifestyle, the situation of refugees can be further complicated by trauma resulting from exposure to conflict situations. A child who is withdrawn cannot take advantage of education opportunities.

Social tension may be created by new and confusing family roles. Men who may have traditionally been responsible

for cultivation may find themselves idle in a refugee camp which has no land available for agriculture. This enforced idleness over a long period sometimes results in frustration and subsequent family violence, often directed at women and children.

Development planners who identify income generating activities only in terms of their economic rate of return must also add the therapeutic factor when planning for refugees.

Activities traditionally carried out by women —Home and childcare, water and firewood collection, food preparation— will continue in the refugee setting, obviously with variables created by the new location, and often with additional responsibilities related to income generating due to becoming a single head of household.

Development planners must address this factor with sensitivity in order to assist the whole society and not add to potential tension within the family.

This last example illustrates the linkage between social **economic changes** and the second major factor in refugee situation: **protection**.

Unlike participants in national development projects, refugees can be almost entirely dependent on the refugee administrative structure. This can sometimes put them in a particularly vulnerable position. For example, women may be asked for sexual favours in return for basic necessities.

There is a tendency among those planners who do take protection into consideration to assume that the traditional structure will take care of its most vulnerable members. However, a society in crisis cannot be expected to function traditionally and special efforts must be made to involve the refugee community in identifying its most vulnerable population and planning assistance for them.

The organisational structure of development projects should keep the protection aspect in mind and build in checks which will promote it as much as possible. For example, women can be involved in food distribution and can be encouraged to form committees where they have opportunity to share protection problems and propose solutions. Counselling services can assist in identifying potential sources of harassment. Well planned and located accommodation and sanitation services can reduce exposure to sexual assault.

Development agencies must therefore ensure that their planned intervention contributes to, or at least does not have a negative impact on, the protection mechanisms of the refugee population.

**d)** The last factor **unique to planning** in the refugees setting is that the **majority of the population is usually women** and their dependent children, often with a large proportion of female heads of households.

This last factor is closely related to the previous one on the changes of the socioeconomic roles of refugees.

The shortage of men may force women into nontraditional activities, create a greater need for childcare, and ultimately may create difficulties for women in readjusting to their home country if that society has maintained the traditional social structure and division of labour in their absence.

In some societies the shortage of men resulting from conflict may force women into polygamous marriages or other arrangements for economic reasons, and/or mothers may encourage daughters to marry at an earlier age in order to reduce their own burden of caring for many dependents.

This possibility must be kept in mind in a female majority society and options for alternative means of support should be identified as a priority for single women, particularly those responsible for dependents.

**In conclusion**, it must be noted that this developmental approach in assisting refugees is realised in a very limited scale. One reason is lack of funds. Another is that donor channels for the most part follow the traditional relief/emergency aid approach which cannot be applied to longer term refugee development oriented activities.

For the reasons mentioned above the international community should make concerted efforts to include refugees generally, and refugee women in particular, in the mainstream of development programmes.

Women NGOs should actively lobby in favour of a developmental approach in assisting refugees and more particularly refugee women.

They should also look after the respect of their human rights.

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