



**THE BROOKINGS-BERN PROJECT
ON INTERNAL DISPLACEMENT**



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**AT THE SEMINAR ON PROTECTION AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH NEEDS OF
REFUGEE AND INTERNALLY DISPLACED WOMEN AND GIRLS**

**HELD PARALLEL TO THE 51ST SESSION OF THE
COMMISSION ON THE STATUS OF WOMEN**

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This meeting is an important reminder that the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women, which is meeting across the street, should give special attention to the plight of the tens of millions of refugee and internally displaced women in more than 100 countries. Most have been uprooted by war, communal violence and human rights abuse and can be found in the most destitute conditions, vulnerable to abuse, and subject to the worst discrimination and marginalization that you will ever see. Although some displaced women quite remarkably show themselves to be resourceful, vibrant and receptive to new opportunities, many others are forced to live in camps and emergency shelters for decades, face discrimination in access to relief, receive limited health care, are subject to sexual exploitation, trafficking and violence, benefit in only small numbers from education and training, and have little or no possibility of participating in meaningful income-generating and employment opportunities. Being separated from their homes and communities, many have to rely on the international community for support. Refugee and internally displaced women and children constitute more than 70 percent of the world's more than 40 million refugees and internally displaced persons. Most can be found in developing countries that do not have the capacity and sometimes the will to meet the needs of the displaced.

Sometimes people ask why refugee and internally displaced women should be given special attention when there are billions of women in the world in difficult circumstances. The answer is that forced displacement is a prima facie case of trauma and vulnerability. Take a moment and picture what it would be like for you if you had to flee from your home because of an imminent threat, or because you were being forced out at gunpoint on ethnic, political, religious, racial grounds, or because you got caught in the middle of a civil war or a natural disaster. You couldn't take many of your belongings with you; you probably would become separated, at least temporarily, from your husband, partner, children, whoever is close to you. You would no longer be able to go to your work or be connected to your neighborhood or community. In fact, the pillars that make up your life – and each one of you know what those pillars are -- would be gone, pretty much in a flash. Nor would you probably have with you the basic documents that could establish your identity. What would you feel? Anyone in this room who has ever felt desperate or dependent on someone else for help, even for a day, will understand what it is to be a refugee or an internally displaced woman. Their plight deserves far more than a few lines or paragraphs in the reports and resolutions of the Commission on the Status of Women.

Women and men displaced inside their own countries are often in a more precarious position than refugees who cross borders. That is because they are subject to the jurisdiction of their own governments and their own governments may be deliberately uprooting them. In some countries, governments and/or insurgent groups directly attack IDP camps, as in Darfur, Sudan, and promote deliberate campaigns of sexual violence, as in the Balkans. There is also no one international organization, like UNHCR in the case of refugees, with specific responsibility for providing protection and assistance to IDPs. Nor is there a legal convention comparable to the Refugee Convention that binds signatories to provide protection for IDPs.

Nonetheless over the past 15 years, progress has been made in addressing the needs of IDPs. In 1998, the Representative of the UN Secretary-General on Internally Displaced Persons introduced into the United Nations Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement. These are the first international standards for IDPs and they set forth the rights of IDPs and the responsibilities of governments and insurgent groups toward these populations. They provide many special protections for displaced women and girls. For example, they prohibit discrimination on grounds of gender as

well as gender specific violence, mutilation, forced prostitution, sale into marriage, sexual exploitation, and forced labor and recruitment of children. They call for women having their own documents and emphasize the importance of ensuring women's access to reproductive health care, female health care providers, and counseling for victims of rape and other abuses. They call for the full and equal participation of women and girls in educational and training programs, and of involving women in the planning and distribution of supplies.

More than 100 heads of state acknowledged the Guiding Principles as an important international framework for the protection of IDPs in the World Summit Outcome Document of 2005. The UN Secretary-General has called upon governments to develop national legislation based on the Principles and a small but growing number of governments have been using the Principles as the basis for their laws and policies on internal displacement. UN agencies and NGOs should continue to use the Guiding Principles as an advocacy tool in promoting the rights of internally displaced women and girls and promote reference to them in the statements and reports of the Commission on the Status of Women.

Beyond standards, a wide array of international organizations and NGOs has come forward to provide assistance, protection and reintegration and development support to IDPs. Although there is no one organization with overall responsibility for IDPs, in 2006, UNHCR agreed to take the lead in the field in IDP protection, camp management and emergency shelter as part of a UN division of labor. The World Food Program, UNICEF and UNDP assumed lead responsibility in their areas of expertise -- nutrition, water and sanitation and early recovery. The purpose is to ensure that UN agencies and their partners provide services for IDPs on a more systematic basis. It is important that NGOs participate in the new arrangements and also monitor them to ensure that they promote greater protection for women and girls.

This year, the Commission on the Status of Women's priority theme is the elimination of all forms of discrimination and violence against the girl child. Let us now look at some specific steps that need to be taken for displaced women and girls. In doing so, I would like to recall an evaluation I undertook more than a decade ago for the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. I led a team that traveled all over the world for a period of several months to look at the plight of refugee women. While there have been many improvements since that time, I still see that many of the same problems I

confronted then continue to be referenced in the NGO statement on refugee and internally displaced women being circulated today at the Commission. Let me highlight five issues while other panelists will cover additional concerns.

First is the need to collect increased information. While information about refugee women has become more plentiful, statistics and needs assessments about internally displaced women remain scanty, with little provided about adolescent girls, who are one of the more vulnerable and neglected groups among the displaced. In areas of countries controlled by insurgent groups, the plight of displaced women and girls is often invisible to the international community. Yet child recruitment, sexual slavery and other serious abuses often go on in these areas. To gain more information, strengthened partnerships are needed with local NGOs and church groups who may have access to these areas. Stronger international advocacy is needed with governments that deny or restrict UN access to these areas. And more international training programs are needed for non-state actors, especially in international standards toward women and girls.

Second, greater investment is needed in schooling for displaced children. While increased numbers of refugee children have schooling today, schooling for internally displaced children is still often treated as a luxury to be addressed once conflicts have subsided or ended. But conflicts can go on for years, which means that millions of displaced children grow up with little or no education. This is not only shortsighted with regard to development goals but undermines children's protection. Education gives shape and structure to children's lives and can be a haven of security when everything else around is in chaos. For children who have lost limbs or who have been the victims of violence, integration into schools may be their first step toward recovery. In Angola, adolescent girls who left IDP camps without education or training often had to resort to prostitution to survive.

When it comes to schooling, displaced girls face particular obstacles, making it incumbent on international agencies to take measures to facilitate their participation. For example, by hiring more female teachers, promoting safety for girls enrolled in school programs, and organizing special literacy and training programs for girls who have to drop out of school to work or do domestic chores. It should be noted that when displaced women have access to meaningful income generation programs and credit, it can enable them to acquire the money needed to pay for school and training fees for themselves

and their daughters. Girls also face cultural constraints but a word of caution here. I recall being told by UN staff that the reason the schools in the Afghan refugee camps had so few girls was because of different cultural values. But after spending several days talking to Afghan refugee women, I did not find one who did not want her daughter in school. The cultural values to which the staff were sensitive turned out to be the views of the more traditional and more vocal elements of the male refugee population who had come to dominate the camps. The UN and other humanitarian agencies must give higher priority to international standards.

Third, special measures are needed to increase protection for girls in camps. It has become almost commonplace to insist on refugee and IDP camp designs that include secure and well-lit latrines and water points, that pay attention to where single or unaccompanied girls are located, and that ensure that women do not have to go too far for firewood. It also is regularly recommended that sex education and reproductive health programs be included, that there be locks on bathing facilities, that women and girls be given lanterns and whistles, and that camp committees be set up with women's active participation to prevent sexual violence. Yet in each new emergency it cannot be taken for granted that these measures will be carried out. While refugee programming does now regularly include reproductive health programs and the combating of gender-based violence, gaps in practice still exist. This is especially true when it comes to internally displaced women and girls. One of the results is a high degree of violence and a high percentage of HIV/AIDS and sexually transmitted diseases in IDP camps. To improve how reproductive health is addressed in the field, Columbia University and Marie Stopes International are launching a major new initiative called the Comprehensive Reproductive Health in Crises Program. To reduce the rapes and violence against IDP women and girls searching for firewood, the Women's Commission is conducting a new study to examine alternate forms of fuels, transport possibilities, and patrols by peacekeepers and/or police in camp settings.

Fourth, displaced girls need special protections from peacekeepers and international staff of UN agencies and NGOs who may exploit young girls and women and trade sex for food. In 2002, a UNHCR-Save the Children report exposed widespread sexual abuse and exploitation by peacekeepers and humanitarian personnel in West Africa. This has also been the case in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, while practices of exploitation also occurred earlier in the Balkans. On January 2, 2007, the

UK *Daily Telegraph* reported that in Juba, South Sudan, at least 20 children, some as young as 12, said they had been forced to have sex, often in official UN vehicles, by UN peacekeepers who had been deployed to help stabilize the region. To be sure, the UN has a zero tolerance policy, but it is also clear that better vetting and increased training are needed of peacekeepers and humanitarian staff, that they should be held to codes of conduct, that more women peacekeepers and police should be deployed, that women should be in charge of distributing food and supplies to reduce exploitation, and that more effective complaints mechanisms and disciplinary measures should be set up in cases of abuse. Promoting women's access to economic opportunities should also reduce their vulnerability to exploitation. But there is the problem of attitude. I shall never forget what a senior UN official said to me: "What's so terrible about rape? You don't die from it." This seeming acceptance of sexual violence as a regrettable but unavoidable part of refugee and displaced persons' lives regularly interferes with steps to prevent and address it and needs to be combated. One important step forward is the Statute of the International Criminal Court, which defines systematic rape, sexual slavery and other forms of sexual violence as a crime against humanity and a war crime.

Fifth, greater attention must be paid to the psychological needs of displaced children. Millions have experienced trauma and need some form of psychological help. In Sierra Leone, approximately 50,000 children were left orphaned, unaccompanied or in displaced persons camps, and tens of thousands of children were abducted as laborers or sex slaves by the rebel forces. Psychological counseling and rehabilitation facilities are needed and the capacity to train local professionals. Fortunately, there are growing numbers of programs for boys who became child soldiers. But more programs are needed for girls who were forced to be sexual slaves, who became pregnant because of rape, and who are not accepted back into their communities. Many other displaced children as well suffer from depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder. Surely, the time has come to systematically integrate mental health services into the humanitarian assistance programs provided in post-conflict situations. They will not only help the children cope and face a better future but will contribute to the overall success of return and reintegration.

To conclude, significant progress has been made in placing the issue of discrimination and violence against displaced girls on the international agenda but there remains a long way to go in addressing the problem. The

concerns of refugee and IDP women and girls must regularly be brought to the attention of the Commission on the Status of Women with the clear expectation that action be taken.