

Prioritizing Protection and Assistance for Africa's Internally Displaced Women and Children

Erin Mooney, Deputy Director, Brookings-SAIS Project on Internal Displacement

**Ethiopian Community Development Council's 10th National Conference:
"African Refugees: Reexamining Practices, Partnerships and Possibilities"
26 May 2004**

In Africa, and around the world, the overwhelming majority of internally displaced persons are women and children. Yet, responses to internal displacement regularly overlook or de-prioritize their protection, assistance and reintegration needs; sometimes, they even exacerbate them. If IDP women and children are not being protected and assisted, however, this means that *most* IDPs' needs are not being met. Ensuring protection and assistance for internally displaced women and children therefore is not a marginal issue but is central to the effectiveness of any response.

The challenges of doing so can be significant. But allow me today to outline just seven key areas where greater attention could yield important results.

A first and critical step is to gather disaggregated data. Statistics and needs assessments must factor in gender and age and in addition must recognize the particular situation and needs of different groups of IDP women and children, for instance women heads-of-household and unaccompanied minors. Particular attention must be paid to the situation of adolescent girls, who are one of the most vulnerable and neglected groups.

Second, priority must be given to ensuring the protection of IDP women and children. Concrete measures would include:

- Family tracing and reunification to restore the most basic unit of protection, the family.
- Interceding with authorities to stop the recruitment of children into fighting forces. In Liberia, where it is estimated that half of the fighting forces were children, IDP children were particularly vulnerable to abduction and forced recruitment. In Uganda, tens of thousands of children are compelled to flee nightly into urban areas and sleep on the streets in an effort to escape abduction.
- Particular effort must be made to protecting girls and women from sexual violence and abuse, which is rampant. Practical steps would include:
 - Ensuring secure and well-lit latrine areas in IDP camps
 - Providing fuel to women so they don't have to walk to unsafe areas to gather firewood. Currently in Darfur, Sudan, IDP women report that if they leave the vicinity of the camps to collect firewood, they will almost certainly be kidnapped and raped.

- Even something as simple as giving IDP women and girls lanterns and whistles can significantly reduce their vulnerability to sexual assault.
- These and other practical measures are set out in UNHCR's *Guidelines on Preventing and Responding to Sexual Violence against Refugees, Returnees and Displaced Populations*, which now apply to IDP women as well.
- International personnel have a personal responsibility to not engage in sexual exploitation and abuse of those they are supposed to protect and assist. In 2002, a UNHCR-Save the Children report exposed widespread sexual abuse and exploitation by peacekeepers and humanitarian personnel in West Africa. Codes of conduct now exist, but the problem of sexual exploitation by peacekeepers and other international personnel persists; it currently is widespread in Liberia and, as recently exposed, also is rampant in the Democratic Republic of Congo, where UN peacekeepers are sexually exploiting adolescent IDP girls as young as 13. Better training of staff and closer monitoring and enforcement of codes of behaviour are essential.

Third, schooling for IDP children must be made a priority in emergencies. Too often, education is treated as a secondary need, to be addressed once conflicts have subsided. Often, however, conflicts can go on for years or even decades, meaning that many displaced children grow up largely uneducated. In camps or settlements, educational facilities often simply don't exist. Where they do exist, schools typically are makeshift, under-resourced and limited to primary education. In camps I visited in Liberia, half of IDP children had no access to school whatsoever and many of the schools that did exist lacked the most basic supplies, ex. blackboards, chalk or even roofs. Teachers also may be scarce as they too have been uprooted. The Convention on the Rights of the Child stipulates that primary school is supposed to be free; in practice, there are often school fees or material requirements (ex. uniforms) that IDP families can ill-afford. Indeed, IDP children often have to work in order to help ensure their families' survival. However, attending school is, in addition to providing education, one of the most important sources of protection and psycho-social support for children. Much greater efforts are needed to facilitate IDP children's right to education.

Fourth, women must have access to meaningful skills-training and income-generating opportunities. Too often, women have been relegated to activities such as soap-making and tie-dye, which brings in little income. Instead, women, who in displacement situations often become the heads-of-household, need access to economic activity that would enable them to become self-supporting or at least able to meet the daily subsistence needs of their families. Displaced women in a number of countries have shown themselves adept at working in non-traditional activities such as carpentry, masonry, road-building, and appliance repair. Women and adolescent girls must be able, encouraged and supported, for instance with child-care facilities, to participate in such skills-training and employment activities. Women also must have equal access to credit, to enable them to start their own small businesses. Ensuring that women have means of self-sufficiency, it must be underscored, also is critical to reducing their vulnerability to sexual exploitation.

Fifth, millions of IDP women and children have experienced trauma and need psychosocial help. Increasingly, there are programs for child soldiers, but counseling also is needed for other

groups, including girls who were abducted as sexual slaves and face tremendous difficulties in being accepted back into their communities. Programs are needed to help these girls make informed choices and to work with their families and communities in order to facilitate their reintegration.

Sixth, restrictions on women's ability to own, acquire and manage property must be overcome. Widowed women are particularly vulnerable because in a number of countries they are unable to inherit land or property from either their husbands or their parents. This was a significant problem in Rwanda for the many displaced widows seeking to return home after the genocide. Recently in Liberia, and at the urging of local women's groups, national law has been amended to allow women married under customary law to inherit their husband's property. However, efforts are needed to ensure that IDP women are aware of these rights. Due to low literacy, in particular among women, creative dissemination techniques are needed.

Seventh and finally, women and youth must be given the opportunity to become actively involved in the decisions that affect their lives. Too often, it is the men who come forward to speak on behalf of IDP communities despite the fact that men are a small minority of the displaced. This trend was evident, for instance, in efforts earlier this month by human rights monitors to consult with IDPs in Darfur, Sudan. In Liberia, I met with IDP women representatives who did actually have a seat on the camp management committees, but who experienced great difficulty in having their concerns listened to by the men and even in being informed as to when the committee meetings would occur.

Agencies have found involving women in program design and delivery to be particularly efficient and effective, as women are best placed to say what their families need. Moreover, doing so can be critical for women's protection: distribution of aid *by* women directly *to* women has been proven to minimize problems of sexual abuse and exploitation as well as to ensure more equitable distribution of food within the families, where otherwise girls tend to "eat less and eat last". Women and youth can also play an instrumental role in peace processes, as recent experiences in Burundi and Liberia have shown. Their active participation in rebuilding the country is critical.

In conclusion, these are just some key areas in which greater attention to addressing the protection, assistance and reintegration needs of IDP women and children is critical to an effective response to situations of displacement overall. The *Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement* give specific attention to these needs and can be a useful tool in such efforts. Most important, is to prioritize the needs of IDP women and children from the earliest stages of humanitarian and development programming; at present, the prevailing tendency is to consider women and children's needs only once general programs are in place, but programs which in fact are often resistant to such concerns. In the words gender specialist Julie Mertus, it is like adding eggs on top of a cake after it has already started to bake. Here, I would underscore, the results are of course are much more serious as the physical security, well-being and basic human rights of millions of IDP women and children are at stake.