

Session 2 BACKGROUND READINGS

Gender and the Refugee Experience

There are many gendered differences in the experience of refugee girls and boys and these impact on their ability to settle and integrate quickly into Australian society.

Section a REFUGEE GIRLS

The majority of the world's refugees are women and children. Women and girls experience all aspects of conflict, flight and resettlement in different ways from men. In many cases, women and teenage girls in conflict zones and refugee camps are the sole providers and protectors for their families. Their husbands, brothers, sons and fathers have either fled or gone into hiding, been killed, imprisoned or are fighting. Women are the primary caregivers not only to children but also to older people. They are also often the upholders of culture. In the absence of their male relatives they often take the sole responsibility for maintaining family and community structures and for seeking solutions to the future. While entire communities suffer the consequences of armed conflict and terrorism, women and girls are affected because of their gender and their lower status in many societies.

Today, 80% of the casualties in conflicts are civilians, mostly women and children. Women and girls experience a wide range of human rights violations, including torture, brutality and murder, and the destruction of homes and livelihoods. Rape of women and girls is a common element in the pattern of persecution, terror and ethnic cleansing that drives refugee families from their homes.

Section b REFUGEE GIRLS IN CAMPS

Life in refugee camps is often a battle for survival. Food, water and medical treatment are in short supply and often it is the women and girls who go without.

In camps, girls are expected to do the same work as their mothers. They are often held back from school to look after younger siblings. Because there is so little physical security, their chores of collecting water and firewood, and even just visiting toilet blocks, leave them open to rape and attacks. They are often subject to abuse by officials and members of the local populations. At home, domestic violence is often exacerbated by the stress of camp life. Due to the extreme poverty in camps many families force their girl children to marry early, often to older men.

Rape And Sexual Violence

Refugee women and girls, particularly those that head households, are especially vulnerable to sexual exploitation and violence. They may become targets of abuse from different aggressors, including members of the armed forces and members of their own communities. This abuse includes forms of sexual abuse, rape, forcible impregnation, sexual slavery, trafficking and forced prostitution. Girls may be kidnapped and forced to serve as combatants, servants, 'wives' of officers, or members of so-called 'suicide' squads. Rape, torture and other violent types of sexual abuse are increasingly used as tactics of war and terrorism. In addition to the emotional and physical trauma caused by rape, girls suffer shame and disgrace for 'dishonouring' their families. Many girls give birth to the children of their rapists, which often carries the additional stigma of rejection by the community.

Smugglers, border guards and armed forces have all been known to abuse refugee women and girls who are in search of safety. In some cases, the perpetrators of sexual violence are those from whom they expect protection: military guards, camp administrators and refugee men. Sexual violence in refugee camps is so common that the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees has produced guidelines in prevention of sexual violence and response to survivors.

It is known that many of the refugee girls and young women in Australia have survived these experiences. Some refugee families are raising the children of their daughter's rape as if they were their siblings. They do not disclose it and they do not want it known. People only need to know if the weight of the secret becomes too much for the young woman and she seeks help. We must then ensure that it is kept totally confidential, only disclosing it with her permission to other professionals who can assist her.

Section c

REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH NEEDS

Adolescent girls have specific reproductive health needs, exacerbated by poor diet and sexual abuse. In refugee settings, girls have little power to control their sexual and reproductive lives. Forced displacement from homes, exposure to violence, poverty and separations from families and communities cause girls to face extraordinary difficulties that affect their reproductive health. Networks that might have provided protection, help and information disintegrate, leaving young women more vulnerable than ever before. Poor reproductive health is a significant cause of death and disease in camp settings. Lack of quality reproductive health services can lead to high mortality rates among women and girls, who lack access to safe childbirth and emergency obstetric care. Sexual violence often leads to unwanted, early, high-risk pregnancies, unsafe abortions, and an increase in the spread of sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including HIV/AIDS.

Section d

REFUGEE BOYS

Refugee boys and men often lose their fathers and other significant male role models. There are more women than men in nearly all refugee camps in the world. Boys experience a loss of cultural identity which defines how boys and men should behave. In many cultures it is the role of elder men to instruct and socialise the young men in their communities, teaching them their roles and providing strong authority to ensure that the young men obey the rules and respect the structures of their society. Many refugee boys do not have this opportunity to be guided by an elder. The elders are not there. The male role models they see are often militia and corrupt officials. Culture can also be corrupted. It is difficult to maintain culture in horrendous camps when you have been there for 15 years. The violence which is prevalent in camps becomes a “norm” in their lives. They are forced to defend themselves and their families from violence. Many young men are forced to take adult responsibilities at a very early age, caring for siblings and sometime for their mother and grandparents. Boys and young men express guilt that they have not been able to protect their female relatives from rape and sexual abuse. Their fathers and uncles often experience the same guilt. Paradoxically, at a time when violence against the family is a major threat, domestic violence often escalates and refugee boys suffer the horror of this violence and learn new and negative roles.

Section e

CHILD SOLDIERS

It is estimated that more than 300 000 children around the world are currently serving as child soldiers. Most are teenagers, but some are under 10 years of age. Sometimes they “choose” to enter the armed forces, because their normal childhoods and schooling have been so badly disrupted that there’s nothing else to do, or they want to avenge the deaths of their family members. Some children become soldiers so that they will get enough to eat, or because their families have been killed and they have nowhere else to go. Others are abducted and forced into slavery. Boys and girls are made to do forced labour and be combatants, and girls are used as sex slaves and ‘wives’ for officers.

The conditions child soldiers endure are extremely harsh, especially those that are held as slaves. They suffer horrendous physical abuse and are made to commit atrocities that include killing their own parents. They themselves are tortured and killed if they disobey orders. In addition to tangible losses such as home, possessions, friends, and family members, child soldiers may lose trust in authority figures who are unable to provide for their basic needs, or who themselves are perpetrators of violence. Child soldiers can lose their moral perspective and come to believe that looting is not the same as stealing, or that killing for political reasons may be justified. Girls are continually raped and frequently fall pregnant. In some places they have a nearly 100% rate of sexually transmitted diseases.

The problems these children face in rehabilitation are immense. They have witnessed, experienced and carried out some of the most extreme atrocities

known to humanity. The torture and trauma, lack of parental love, lack of schooling, malnutrition, and poor health these children suffer enormously impairs their psychosocial development. They have great difficulty fitting back in to their communities, girl soldiers in particular, because they are often stigmatised and so ashamed of being raped and bearing children of the enemy (McKay & Wessells, 2004).

If ex-child soldiers come to resettlement countries, they need a lot of specialist support and services to make the transition into normal life. They require a lot of understanding and an environment of safety and encouragement.

Section f

SEPARATED CHILDREN

Many children are separated from their families during conflict. Villages and towns are bombed and people flee in chaos. Parents are imprisoned or killed. Children are kidnapped by the military and by traffickers.

Separated children are particularly vulnerable to exploitation and human rights abuses, including forced labour, arranged marriage, and sexual exploitation. Even if they are with adult members of their extended family they are still considered to be at much higher risk than children who are able to remain with their parents. They have suffered severe traumatisation and need to be reunited with their parents if at all possible. They also need special support in resettlement, including trusting, safe relationships with adults who can provide a role model for them. Many refugee young people have the sole responsibility of raising their younger siblings.

Section g

INADEQUATE EDUCATION

Both boys and girls share the experience of inadequate and often sporadic schooling. Most refugee camps have schools, and this can create false assumptions about the education levels of the newly arrived refugees. Many camps only have primary schools. Schools are usually understaffed with a student teacher ratios of up to 100:1. There are few text books, or even basics such as pencils and paper. Teachers are often not formally qualified, and many have only finished primary school themselves. In many camps, the teaching style is authoritarian and based on rote learning.

Girls have unequal access to education. Home duties take precedence to schooling. Girls collect water, walk kilometres to gather wood, stand in long food queues, and often have to care for younger siblings or family members. Culture usually dictates that these are women's tasks, and the boys go to the school. As the girls get older, they are even less likely to access schooling

CONCLUSION

These issues are difficult to discuss – we are often scared to “label” students, or to assume that they have all had these experiences. At this point in time, the majority of the refugee children and young people who are coming to Australia have shared these experiences or have family members who have.

We have to develop ways to talk about it so that the students know that we are not judging them and that we can be trusted. We need to send messages which say that we understand, and that there is help available. We may need to develop ways of distributing information in such a way that the students can access it anonymously and can keep control of when they will disclose and to whom.