

Refugee Women at Risk

A failure of protection – a case for action

If you can find a woman in this camp who has not been raped I will give you a prize!!”

*“But they are all at risk – do you want to resettle every woman in this camp?”
Quote from a Senior Refugee Camp Manager*

INTRODUCTION

In most refugee situations **all** women and girls are at risk of rape and other forms of sexual and gender based violence. Many refugee women and girls experience multiple traumatic events, in situations of conflict, during flight and in countries of first and subsequent asylum. The impact of each event is made worse by ensuing incidents and compounded by lack of adequate protection. This creates extreme levels of risk and vulnerability to further abuse and trauma. Because of resource shortages and lack of effective systems, the international protection system often fails to respond to the needs of these women. This failure has been documented in refugee situations around the world. Most recently it is evident in the protracted refugee situations in Darfur and Chad. This systems failure can lead to further incidences of violence, exploitation, sexual abuse and even death. The UNHCR “Women at Risk” resettlement criteria (UNHCR 2000) was designed to provide a rapid and effective response to these women. Recent research indicates that this program continues to fall far short of its promise.

A case study – one of hundreds similar stories collected during a three year research project

This is the story of a young orphaned woman (17) from Southern Sudan. She has a one year old baby, born of rape by perpetrators in Kakuma Refugee Camp. She is unable to support herself and the baby on the World Food Program food rations and has no income for other basic necessities such as soap and sanitary towels. She has been ostracised by the community because she is a single mother without family support and because she has run away from a forced marriage. Her options for food are either selling sex in a dangerous and violent environment, where often the men who use the desperate women, (incorrectly called “prostitutes”), will beat them and not pay any money. “Sometimes the kinder men give us a few shillings”.

Another option is a so called “marriage” or “protection” by an older man who is likely to be violent, and abandon her whenever she becomes pregnant again. The young woman in question does not want either option and has sought protection from an aid agency in the camp. She has been in “protective custody” for 15 months in a situation where she receives neither education, employment nor social interaction wider than with a small group of women in similar circumstances. She is not even able to attend Church services, which upsets her because she is a devote Christian.

Detailing the compounding risk factors

In documenting her story, it was identified that the risk she faces is comprised of a series of incidents over time which have made her increasingly more vulnerable to violence and human rights abuses. Lack of protection at the time of these incidences has compounded her risk factors. At the present time, lack of adequate protection is the biggest risk factor she faces.

INCIDENT 1: IN HER HOME COUNTRY

When she was 12, her village in Southern Sudan was bombed and her parents were killed. She saw them die. She then ran with her elder brother and neighbours over the mountains into Kenya. On the way, the group was attacked by rebels. Her brother was shot and she thought he was dead, some of the rebels stole his clothes and his shoes. She stayed with the body all night in fear, and in the morning she noticed signs of life. An unknown woman helped them and the brother recovered. They then resumed the journey and reached Kenya.

Risk factors

This first incident left her vulnerable on several counts:

- she saw her parents and siblings killed in a violent manner,
- she was an orphaned single girl,
- she lost her home and everything familiar,
- she endured an horrendous journey to Kenya.

Post traumatic stress disorder is still evident 5 years later. She has never received counselling or assistance to address her grief and shock of what happened to her family.

INCIDENT 2: IN THE COUNTRY OF FIRST ASYLUM

In Kenya, a man who had known her family took her to live with him and his wife (also refugees). She was included on their UNHCR Ration card. Her brother was sent elsewhere so she lost her only remaining relative. She was forced to work as a servant for the family who took her in and she did not attend school. There was seldom enough food to go around. When she was 13, the man arranged a marriage for her with a man of 45, who would pay a dowry for her. She refused to comply, but the proposed husband locked her in a hut and raped her each day for a week. The foster father beat her badly in an attempt make her accept the marriage. She escaped and made her way alone to Nairobi rather than be married against her will to an older man.

Risk factors:

- Trauma associated with the loss of her brother
- Mistreatment by foster family
- Fear of forced marriage
- Rape and beating
- Lack of education

INCIDENT 3:

She found her way to Nairobi and lived for a while with refugees in the slums. While she was there she was severely raped by a group of men and hospitalised. Her case

again came to the attention of UNHCR who arranged for her to go to Kakuma and be fostered by a new family.

Risk Factors

A child alone the Nairobi slums.

Severe case of multiple rapes with its attendant consequences.

INCIDENT 4

At first the new arrangement worked but after about a year, the teenage sons of the foster family started to rape her at night. She complained to the mother, who called her a prostitute and put her out of the house and the comparative safety of the compound. By that time she was pregnant by one of the three sons.

Risk Factors

- Lack of monitoring of foster arrangements leading to further sexual abuse
- Placement of girl child into a family of adolescent boys

INCIDENT 5

She was given shelter in the camp and her own ration card and lived with some other single women until the baby was born. Some of these women were forced to sell sex for food and basic necessities and that also made the group more vulnerable. They were constantly harassed by men and boys in the camp, and by the local Turkana men who knew where the single women were housed. Once the baby was born, an older man in the community offered to take her as his ‘wife” but she declined. He then starting harassing and following her, and she was afraid that her would abduct and rape her. The community offered no support and refused to act against the man when she approached the community leaders for help.

Risk factors

- Lack of community support
- Inadequacy of safe housing and living arrangements for single women
- “Shaming” factor of being known to have been raped
- Inadequate rations
- Fear of being forced to sell sex
- Fear of being forced to co-habit with a violent man she does not like
- Fear of further pregnancy

INCIDENT 6

She was eventually put into protective custody but there was no resolution to her problem in the immediate future. The only solution offered was another relocation with other single women. She is very afraid to take this offer as she knows that there is no guarantee of safety and that she has no means of generating any additional income to support herself and her child.

Risk Factors

- Loss of self esteem and “institutionalisation” occurring because of forced “protective custody”
- Lack of access to education and social support systems such as the church.
- Lack of durable solution leading to depression and loss of hope

END RESULT

This young woman is a woman at extreme and unacceptable risk

She is now in a situation where resettlement is probably the only durable solution. Resettlement will be extremely difficult for this young woman. She does not speak English. She has not attended school since she was 12. She is carrying unresolved issues from a number of serious traumatic incidences. Her ability to trust adults and anyone in authority is seriously eroded. It is likely that even in resettlement her own community will reject her. Amazingly she is still extremely resilient and determined to build a life for herself and her child. She has fought to maintain her independence and not to accept “marriage” as a way out of her situation

She will need substantial support from a range of committed service providers in a new country. With adequate support she will undoubtedly survive and thrive. Without it, it is likely she will not cope and will not succeed in her new country. Protection will have totally failed her and her child.

What can be done?

Sadly, there are still some decision makers who do not regard rape and sexual abuse as sufficient grounds for special protection measures. Comments such as “only rape...” “rape is part of their culture” “those women expect to get beaten” and “they don’t experience it like we do” compound the problem and maintain a discourse and culture which minimises criminal acts’. The silence over the sexual abuse and lack of protection for refugee women and girls must be broken. It must be acknowledged as a major abuse of human rights’

Governments and UNHCR have to instigate new measures to ensure that women and girls are adequately protected, and that those who have endured such abuse receive the services which are their right. Please help break the silence and assist refugee women and girls to achieve safety and justice. This needs political will and advocacy. Governments have to commit resources, perpetrators need to know that they will not escape with impunity. Work to achieve this is currently underway, with the support of UNHCR. For details see www.crr.unsw.edu.au. The rape has to stop.

This is article on the outcomes of a research project in Kenya, Thailand and Sri Lanka undertaken by Eileen Pittaway and Linda Bartolomei, Centre for Refugee Research, University of New South Wales, Australia from 2003 – 2005.