

SESSION 2:

CELEBRATING THE STRENGTHS OF REFUGEE WOMEN

Time 1 Hour, 30 Minutes - ✎

“I lost my mother, my father, my brothers and my husband. I ran with my sister and my 2 children. I was raped three times and badly beaten - it was very hard in the camp, - violence not enough food and no school for the children- but we survived and now we are here”

(Somali woman, 2003)



Introduction

As can be seen from the above quotation, women refugees are survivors. Refugee women are carers – and refugee women are resilient.

Eighty percent of the world's refugee populations are women and children. This is often masked by the fact that most of the refugees who manage to reach relatively wealthy countries and apply for asylum, are men.

Women and girls experience conflict, flight and resettlement in different ways from men. This is because of physical realities and traditional roles

and responsibilities. Refugee women are the major caregivers not only to their children but also to older people. In many cases they are also the upholders of culture and the keepers of hope. They take responsibility for maintaining family structures and for seeking solutions to the future. They are also frequently targeted, due to their gender, for rape and sexual violence at all stages of the refugee journey: as a form of persecution, in armed conflict, during flight, and in refugee camps and settlements.

Session Objectives

It is intended that after completing this session, students will be able to:

- explain why the experiences of refugee women are different from that of refugee men
- demonstrate an understanding of the impact of the refugee experience on women and children
- identify issues relating to the protection of refugee children
- recognise the strengths of refugee women, and develop strategies to build on these strengths

PRESENTER'S NOTES

Presenters must read and be familiar with the course material for this session before conducting the training. Section 1, SESSION CONTENT, is background material for the facilitator. This material can also be given as class handouts if required. Section 2, SESSION MATERIALS, includes a suggested running order, a power point presentation, audio visual materials and activities to use when presenting this training session. Small copies of the power point slides are included in the text to indicate where they will be most useful. Larger copies of the PowerPoint slides are printed at the end of the section and can be photocopied as Session Handouts.

SESSION CONTENT

Celebrating the Strengths of Refugee Women

(NB this session is based on parts of the Training Kit, “Roads to Refuge” a joint product of the Migrations Heritage Centre, The NSW Department of Education and Training, and the Centre for Refugee Research (CRR) UNSW. The full kit is available from the CRR.)

The refugee experience is extremely difficult. Yet women refugees the world over (from Europe, Asia, Africa and America) have called on their immense internal strengths and resilience to cope.

In contemporary armed conflict, about 80 percent of the casualties in conflicts are civilians, most of whom are 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 is a common element in the pattern of persecution, terror and *ethnic cleansing* that drives refugee families from their homes.

Civilians have increasingly become the targets of sectarian warfare. In many conflict situations, it is often women who have the responsibility of:

- protecting the family property and livelihood
- caring for elderly, young or sick family members
- keeping their children in school
- supporting family members in detention
- searching for missing family members
- assessing the level of insecurity and danger in order to decide whether it is safe for family members to return

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, gone into hiding, been killed, imprisoned or are fighting.

While entire communities suffer the consequences of armed conflict and terrorism, women and girls are particularly affected because of their sex and their lower status in many societies, which burdens them with extra responsibilities and leaves them vulnerable to sexual and gender based persecution and violence.

Who are Refugee Women?

Refugee women come from many different countries, cultures, ethnic backgrounds and class structures. They are mothers, sisters, wives, daughters and grandmothers. Some have fled alone, some with their children, sometimes with elderly parents. Many have left most, if not all, of their family and support systems behind. Many are widowed, others are separated, deserted, or single. Some are educated, others are illiterate. Some have become head of their household for the first time and are facing new responsibilities. Most have been forced to flee their homeland, usually without any personal possessions, money, official papers or passports. They are concerned about their families, about where will they sleep, how will they eat, how will they survive. Sometimes they do not know the whereabouts of their children, husbands and other family members and friends.

Many refugee women have experienced rape and sexual abuse in either their own countries, during their flight or in refugee camps. If they are pregnant at the time of flight they face high risk pregnancies with risk of spontaneous abortion, premature delivery and other obstetric complications. They have faced long journeys into exile, and official harassment or indifference. They know that it is unlikely that they will ever return to their country. They have had no opportunity to say farewells or time to grieve.

Why do Women and Children Flee?

Refugee women flee their countries for the same reasons as men – to escape persecution because of their national, ethnic or social identity or because of their religious beliefs or political opinions. Some women are persecuted for their political activities, for example, they may give shelter or food to those in hiding or convey messages to those underground. Sometimes women flee because they have taken part in armed conflict and guerrilla warfare, or because their husbands have done so.

Some women flee persecutory laws or practices directed at women, often in the name of religion, tradition or culture. In many parts of the world, women who do not live according to the standards imposed on them by their societies, can suffer cruel or inhuman treatment. Their own countries may deprive them of their right to live safely and of the right of self expression. For example, refusing arranged marriages, having sexual relations outside marriage, failing to provide a satisfactory dowry or wearing certain forms of dress can result in persecution and violations of human rights for women. Stoning to death for presumed adultery, forced marriages and honour killings may be carried out with government complicity. This preserves the idea that women are inferior to men and do not deserve equal rights or equal protection of those rights.

The vulnerability of women to human rights violations is worse in situations of armed conflict. Women can suffer abuse whether they are combatants or civilians. They may become targets of abuse from different

aggressors, including regular army and militia members, irregular forces or members of their own community. This abuse includes forms of sexual abuse, rape, forcible impregnation, sexual slavery, and forced prostitution. Women may be kidnapped and forced to serve as combatants, servants, 'wives', 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, many women give birth to the children of their rapists. This may carry the additional stigma of marginalisation from the community.

Ongoing sexual violence and physical insecurity

Once refugee women reach a country of first asylum, they do not necessarily find the safety to which they are entitled. Women frequently find that they have escaped violence in conflict or persecution to be confronted by different types of violence, physical hardship and psychological stress. Rape and sexual violence may continue throughout the time spent in refugee camps. Already traumatised by their experiences, they face new fears and pain.

Smugglers, border guards and members of armed groups have all been known to abuse refugee women and children 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.

Life in Refugee Camps

Life in a refugee camp is often crowded and confusing, as terrified and disoriented people arrive in search of food, shelter and protection. Some need medical attention. All need some kind of stable social structure in which to begin to rebuild their lives. In many camps, life is a battle for survival. Camps are often in remote, mainly unoccupied places that are near war zones or disputed boundaries. There is little physical security and privacy.

Food and medical treatment are sometimes in short supply. Women often sacrifice themselves for their children and families. Mothers will go without food and medicine to feed and care for their children. Water may be scarce and clean water even more difficult to obtain. Shelter that is safe, dry, warm and affordable may also be difficult to find. Women bear much of the responsibility for maintaining camp life. They collect water, care for the children and the elderly, gather firewood, and prepare meals. Often women and girls are at risk of attack when they leave the camp to find firewood or tend livestock. They are often subjected to abuse by officials and members of the local population.

Refugee camps are usually organised in ways that discriminate against women. The distribution of food and water is almost always in the hands

of men. Young women do similar work as their mothers and older women. Many teenage girls are forced to marry, often to older men.

Sexual violence in refugee camps is so common that the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has produced guidelines for prevention of sexual violence and for responses to survivors. Women are raped by men in their own families and communities, as well as by officials and men in neighbouring and local communities. They are often targeted as they collect food rations, water and firewood, and fear of sexual violence prevents women from engaging in income-generating activities. The breakdown of social and community networks in the camps, and the absence of police and legal presence, means that there is simply no protection available for women.

Domestic violence is also very common. Families undergo enormous pressure as a result of the atrocities they experience during the refugee journey. Often family members have been lost or killed, and surviving members are severely traumatised. Life in camps puts additional strain on the men, who are unable to provide for their households and feel that their position as heads of family has been usurped. They suffer extreme boredom in the camps, where they often have to wait indefinitely for several years.

These factors all contribute to an increased risk of domestic violence in camp settings. Sadly, the enormous rate of rape also heightens women's vulnerability to domestic violence. In many traditional societies, women are considered to be the holders of the family "honour". Their rape reflects the shaming of the family and sometimes the whole community. It is common for women who have been raped to be abandoned by their husbands or rejected by their communities. This prevents many women from speaking out about their experiences, and seeking medical attention or redress.

Despite the hardships, women play a central economic and social role in camps. They are the life-sustaining force of any refugee community. They have the power to nurture future generations, re-establish the family and culture in exile, and recreate it on return to their homeland. The women who arrive in resettlement countries like Australia are true survivors.

Protecting Refugee Children

Refugee children are among the most vulnerable children in the world. They are vulnerable to hazardous labour exploitation, physical abuse, denial of education, sexual violence and exploitation, cross-border attacks, militarisation of refugee camps and recruitment as child soldiers. They may have lost members of their family, including witnessing their deaths. They may not know where their relatives are. They are physically and psychologically less able than adults to provide for their own needs or to protect themselves from harm.

Refugee adolescents, especially girls, are primary targets of sexual violence and exploitation by fighting forces, peacekeepers and others. They may also be exposed to potentially harmful traditional practices such as genital mutilation. They may be recruited to serve with an armed group, coerced into prostitution, physically abused or forced to assume responsibilities for younger siblings and other members of the household. There is a high risk of early, unwanted pregnancy or sexually transmitted infections.

Education Protects Refugee Children

Education as a right for all children is set out in the Convention on the Rights of the Child. However, millions of refugee children, particularly girls, are without education even at primary level. The absence of this right creates a lifelong handicap for a child.

Education is a priority for refugee children as it can contribute to their sense of physical and emotional wellbeing and provide continuity in their lives. Education can provide a secure place to gather where they can be protected from forced labour, military recruitment and sexual exploitation.

Adolescent girls are more likely to miss out on educational opportunities than boys and younger children. They may lack decent clothing or basic essentials such as sanitary towels. Some cultures do not give any importance to educating girls beyond the development of household skills. Some are forced to marry at a young age.

During flight, children can be separated from parents. Often they arrive in asylum countries with adult members of their extended families. Until they are reunited with their parents, they may be as much at risk of forced labour or arranged marriage as unaccompanied children. Yet because they are accompanied by adults, their need to be reunited with their parents is often overlooked.

“At any one time there may be up to 100,000 separated children in Western Europe alone.” (UNHCR, 2002)

More than 300,000 children around the world serve as child soldiers. Most are teenagers, but some are under 10 years of age. Girl soldiers are often forced into sexual slavery. Providing secure schools in asylum countries, and reuniting refugee families can protect children from forced military recruitment.

Article 22 of the United Nations Convention on the *Rights of the Child* grants special protection to refugee children. Refugee children are also entitled to all other human rights granted under the Refugee Convention including the right to life, physical integrity, adequate food and medical

care, education, and to be free from discrimination, exploitation, and abuse.

“A refugee camp - no matter how well it is run - is no place to spend a childhood. But those children who do escape the horrors of war to reach our camps deserve at the very least a safe, decent and secure sanctuary where they are provided with the basic necessities of life. Anything less is nothing at all.”

(High Commissioner Ruud Lubbers in a statement addressing the allegations of exploitation of refugee children in West Africa, 1st March, 2002.)

It is important to understand the hardships and violence experienced by many refugee women and children in order to provide effective services to assist them to rebuild their lives. This is the case whether they settle in their country of first asylum, return home or resettle in a developed country. The most important lesson to learn about refugee women is that they have great strength, courage and the will to succeed wherever they go. They play a crucial role in providing a future for their children and for healing the wounds of conflict and persecution. Their vital role has to be recognised and supported.

Resources

Books/Documents

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees 1995,
Sexual Violence Against Refugees: Guidelines on Prevention and Response, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Geneva.

Websites

www.eldis.ids.ac.uk

Search under *Convention on the Rights of the Child*.

www.unicef.org

United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund.

www.crr.unsw.edu.au

Centre for Refugee Research, University of New South Wales.

www.ancorw.org.au

Australian National Council on Refugee Women.

www.unhcr.ch

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

Search under *statistics for women and children*.

SESSION MATERIALS

Celebrating the Strengths of Refugee Women

Key points to be covered - Women refugees 45 Minutes

Play Section 2 “From Horror to Hope” DVD and if required, Sections 4 and 5 “Roads to Refuge” Video clip



NB Presenters may wish to use part 4 of the Roads to Refuge Video clip contained on the DVD as part of this session. Presenters must be familiar with the video material before presenting it to groups as some of the content can be distressing.

Introduction

Remind participants that many refugees come from countries which still have very patriarchal societies. Women from these countries are often not used to being the head of a family and making major decisions. It is something they have to learn quickly as their old life disappears. They call on their inherent resilience and strengths to adapt to and cope with the new order.

Use PowerPoint Number 10

REFUGEE WOMEN AND CHILDREN

80% of the world's refugees are women and their children

Most people in refugee camps are women and children

Men are often away fighting or are killed or are in prison

Women have to support their families and keep their culture alive

Rape and sexual violence frequently occur in refugee camps



Activity: Discussion



Brainstorm with participants to identify the key elements of their own and another culture. These can include language, clothing, food, religion, music, literature, family relationships, education, social, political, economic and belief systems, myths, games, laws and courts etc. How important are these things to them? Ask them to consider how difficult it must be to maintain many aspects of culture in a refugee camp as described above and seen on the video. Ask participants to imagine what it would be like to be forced to discard many aspects of their culture as well as to lose their home and their belongings. Discuss the important role that women take in maintaining culturally based behaviours and beliefs in these situations.

Introduction

Refugee women face many challenges as part of the refugee experience. These can undermine their feeling of safety and trust. It is important that when they come to Australia, they are allowed to feel safe again.

Use PowerPoint Number 11



Activity: Discussion



Despite the violence and the hardships they endure, refugees often report that the worst thing of all about being a refugee is not knowing about the

future, not being able to make any plans for their lives, and not knowing if they will ever see their homeland again.

Ask participants to discuss their experience or knowledge of refugee camps in Africa or elsewhere. What are the conditions like for women there? How do they understand the experience of having to spend the next 10 years in a refugee camp like Kakuma? Remind participants that refugees don't know how long they will spend in a camp.

Introduction

One of the saddest things about the experience of refugee women and their older children is the level of sexual violence which they endure. Rape has become a part of modern day warfare. Not all refugee women and girls suffer from sexual violence, but many do, and some become pregnant from those rapes.

Sexual and Gender Based Violence

45 minutes

Key points to be covered

Use PowerPoint Number 12



Types of Sexual and Gender based Violence that can occur during the refugee journey

| PHASE | TYPE OF VIOLENCE |
|----------------------------------|---|
| During conflict, prior to flight | Abuse by persons in power: sexual bartering of women; sexual assault; rape; abduction by armed members of parties in conflict (including security forces); mass rape and forced pregnancies |
| During flight | Sexual attacks by bandits' border guards, pirates, capture for trafficking by smugglers, slave traders |
| In country of asylum | Sexual attack, coercion, extortion by persons in authority, sexual abuse of separated children in foster care, domestic violence, sexual assault when in transit facilities, collecting wood or water, sex for survival/forced prostitution, sexual exploitation of persons seeking legal status in asylum country , or access to assistance and resources, resumption of harmful traditional practices |





Kakuma Refugee Camp, Kenya

Use PowerPoint Number 13



| Types of Sexual and Gender based Violence that can occur during the refugee journey | |
|--|--|
| PHASE | TYPE OF VIOLENCE |
| During repatriation | Sexual abuse of women and children who have been separated from their families, sexual abuse by persons in power, sexual attacks, rape by bandits, border guards, forced/coerced repatriation |
| During Reintegration | Sexual abuse against against returnees as a form of retribution; sexual extortion in order to regularise legal status; exclusion from decision making processes; documentation and right to recover/own property |



Activity: Small group exercise



Ask participants to list what they think the consequences of these experiences might be on the ability of refugee women to resettle successfully and quickly into their new lives in Australia. Share the list with the large groups and discuss the consequences. Brainstorm the sorts of services which will be necessary to properly address these issues with newly arrived refugee communities.

Introduction

While it is important to understand the horrendous experiences which many refugee women survive, it is equally important to understand and celebrate their resilience and their determination to make a new life for themselves and for their families.

Use PowerPoint Number 14



**THE STRENGTHS OF
REFUGEE WOMEN**

- Care for their children and grandchildren
- Keep their families together and their culture alive
- Develop flexible and creative new ways of coping with life
- Play a central economic and social role in refugee camps, and when they return to their countries or resettle in a new country
- Value education and knowledge
- Work to ensure a good future for their children



Activity: Small Group Activity



Write a poem or short story honouring refugee women and present it as a poster to the larger group.

OR

Develop and perform a short play for the whole group telling the story of a refugee family and celebrating their survival.

OR

Brainstorm other ways of showing the refugee journey and the critical place of women as protectors of the family.