

The importance of prioritising women's protection in war zones



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PEACEBUILDING

partnering for the protection of **refugee' women**

War-affected women are often portrayed as victims of human rights and refugee rights violations. But they are also activists who witness, document, report on and develop remedies for improved protection, often at personal risk. Women who have suffered rape and other abuses are much more likely to discuss these abuses with other women, especially those who understand them and their culture. Ultimately, when the international spotlight and the funds have gone, local women and their organisations remain to rebuild their communities.

Through its Protection Partners project, the Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children collaborates with local partners in several areas around the world, to reinforce their local monitoring and advocacy capacities for refugee, internally displaced and returnee populations. With Women's Commission support, the protection partners push for change in local and international policies and programmes, and work closely with UN agencies, international organisations and local decision-makers.

Broadening the Scope

Refugee women's protection needs have been gaining attention world-wide particularly since the early 1990s. A few examples include:

- ▲ The UNHCR Guidelines on the Protection of Refugee Women (1991) and its Commitments to Refugee Women (2001);
- ▲ UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security (2000) and subsequent reports by the UN Secretary-General (2002) and UNIFEM, such as *Women, War and Peace* (2002);
- ▲ The Draft Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (July 2003);
- ▲ The US General Accounting Office's report, 'Humanitarian Assistance: Protecting Refugee Women and Girls Remains a Significant Challenge' (May 2003).

Clearly, a momentum is building towards ensuring that women's protection is in the minds of a wide range of actors, from UN Security Council members to those delivering assistance to refugees



UNHCR

and the internally displaced. What is often overlooked is the key role that partnerships between international and local actors can play in addressing and sustaining the protection needs of at-risk populations. Partnerships must be re-conceived to integrate women's protection at the grassroots level so that real change can be achieved and sustained.

Partnering: From Implementing Agency to Protection Partner

Traditionally, partnerships between local groups and international actors, i.e., UN agencies and international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), are too often based on fulfilling what are perceived as the most immediate needs of at-risk populations. Local groups are engaged as 'implementing agencies' for example in food delivery and physical reconstruction. Women's groups are often excluded from partnerships because their focus is on other areas or because they lack capacity.

Effective protection encompasses a range of activities through which refugee and IDP rights are secured, and legal issues, physical security and access to assistance are addressed. An enabling environment must also be created so that at-risk populations can take the lead in their own economic and social development.² For refugee women this means ensuring access to decision-making, freedom of movement, gaining redress for violations, skills training and education, and individual documentation, among many other rights.

One model for implementing agencies to draw from is the Women's Commission's work in Sierra Leone, Pakistan/Afghanistan and Colombia, where its local partners determine the protection agenda. In Sierra Leone, the Women's Commission has worked since 2001 with a local activist who identified several gaps in assistance efforts for women. Among her first discoveries, she found that women and girls involved in the war were being excluded from the disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) process because they were not ex-combatants; instead they were sex slaves, porters, cooks, etc. Ensuring that

they received protection and assistance became the rallying point for our joint advocacy – at the local and international levels. The partner's work complemented the mandates of the UN, INGOs and the government of Sierra Leone, all of whom were involved in the DDR programme in different ways. As a local protection monitor, her approach cut across a multitude of actors, and resulted in more opportunities for these women and girls, thus ensuring a better chance for a peaceful future for Sierra Leone.

In a second example, the Women's Commission partner documented the participation of internally displaced women in Sierra Leone's 2002 elections. The report, 'Voting for Peace, Survival and Self-reliance', explored IDP women's access to the polls, identified reasons why they voted, what they voted for and what they expected from the new government. The report was shared with the country's Members of Parliament, together with the assurance that the Women's Commission and its local partner would be monitoring and supporting the government's responses in meeting these commitments. An upcoming Women's Commission report will address women's shelter, housing, inheritance and property rights, which were a major concern of those interviewed. The goal of the report is to advance the voters' concerns, and support the progress of the government.

The above demonstrates that working through local women and women's groups is often one of the best ways to get information on protection gaps and how to address them.

Moreover, an effective partnership gives both the local and international group legitimacy in advancing protection. International actors are more often in a position to act as a liaison connecting the local group with the host government and relevant international entities. They can also help local women's groups build coalitions within the country, for example by bringing together a refugee group and a host country women's rights organisation, or by encouraging the host country group to take on refugee women's issues. This has been achieved in other partner sites.

Conclusion

The abuse allegations made in the West African sexual exploitation crisis³ were a wake-up call for the international community. The good news is that progress is being made in areas such as staff training, and the establishment of codes of conduct and mechanisms for accountability.

Moreover, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Ruud Lubbers, recently identified innovations in partnerships, especially with NGOs, as among the agency's top priorities for this year. In Resolution 1325, the UNSC expresses its willingness to ensure that their missions include consultations with local and international women's groups. The UN Secretary-General's report includes numerous recommendations calling for consultation with women's groups and networks in gathering information and addressing protection issues.

But consultations are only part of the solution. What is not yet clear is whether these institutions

are engaging women's groups in a way that maximises their ability to identify gaps in protection, seek solutions and ensure that interventions are appropriate. A clear road map and more innovative strategies for partnering with women's groups will reinforce recent gains and pave the way for more comprehensive protection for women world-wide. 

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Endnote

- 1 In this article, the term 'refugee' includes refugees, returnees, internally displaced persons (IDPs) and resettled populations.
- 2 This definition is adapted from the Protection Unit of the International Rescue Committee. The International Committee of the Red Cross's (ICRC) definition of protection is: "all activities aimed at ensuring full respect for the rights of the individual in accordance with the letter and the spirit of the relevant bodies of law, i.e. human rights law, international humanitarian law and refugee law. Human rights and humanitarian organizations must conduct these activities in an impartial manner (not on the basis of race, national or ethnic origin, language or gender.)" ICRC, Strengthening Protection, 31 December 2001.
- 3 Identified by a report from UNHCR and Save the Children UK, 'Note for Implementing and Operational Partners on Sexual Violence and Exploitation: The Experience of Refugee Children in Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone based on Initial Findings and Recommendations from Assessment Mission 22 October-30 November 2001', February 2002.