



Australian Refugee Rights Alliance

"No Compromise on Human Rights"

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LIVELIHOODS AND PROTECTION

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This paper explores the direct link between issues of protection and livelihood opportunities. The absence of livelihoods is a root cause of protection risks for women. While forcibly displaced men and boys also face protection problems, the 2006 UNHCR *Conclusion on Women and Girls at Risk* highlights the particular protection problems women and girls can be exposed to, including sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), abuse and exploitation.¹ Therefore, specific action in favour of women and girls is necessary to ensure they can enjoy protection and assistance on an equal basis with men and boys. Livelihoods help women to realise their potential in achieving a durable solution.

INTRODUCTION

The current system of long-term refugee 'care and maintenance', 'warehousing' or hand-out-based assistance does little to promote self-reliance amongst refugees. In the absence of sound and sustainable alternatives, refugees, particularly women and girls, are forced to live on inadequate food rations, and oftentimes resort to harmful survival strategies.

In its *Strengthening Protection Capacity Project*, UNHCR explored the gendered nature of the relationship between a lack of livelihood opportunities and refugees' vulnerability to exploitation, psychological and physical abuse within camps.² The project recognised that 'Refugee women, in particular, face serious protection problems, including sexual and gender-based violence as well as domestic violence'.

In order to protect refugees and improve their future prospects, the international community in recent years has realised that refugees should be 'assisted to assist themselves'. The UNHCR *Framework for Durable Solutions* puts increasing emphasis on the importance of self-reliance and livelihoods for refugees as a way to improve the quality of asylum but also to prepare refugees for durable solutions.³ It is the aim of this paper to show that the promotion of women's social and economic self-reliance and abilities through income generation and livelihoods can form an effective protection strategy.

Definition

A widely-accepted definition of 'livelihood' is given by Robert Chambers and Gordon Conway.⁴ 'A livelihood comprises the capabilities, assets and activities required for a means of living. A sustainable livelihood allows people to cope with and to recover from stress and shocks, to maintain or enhance their capabilities and assets and to provide sustainable livelihood opportunities for the next generation. It also contributes net benefits to other livelihoods at the local and global levels and in the long and short terms.'

In refugee and displaced contexts, livelihoods cover the range of activities and programmes that work toward, and enhance, self-reliance. These include: non-formal education, vocational and skills training programmes, income generation activities, food-for-work programmes, apprenticeship placement projects, micro-credit schemes, agriculture programmes such as seeds and tools projects and animal disbursement projects, business start-up programmes, self-employment opportunities and job placement programmes.⁵

PROTECTION RISKS

Increasingly lengthy stays in rural camps and depressed urban settings lead to a multitude of protection risks for women and girls. Refugee camps are often located in insecure areas and may be subject to violent attacks. Many lack international attention and resources, as well as adequate food assistance. In urban situations,

women are susceptible to the dangers of working in the streets without protection against theft, rape, abduction, trafficking, sexual abuse and exploitation.

Displacement jeopardises physical security and livelihoods and can change gender roles and relations between the sexes. Often women have to assume new responsibilities for their families' safety and economic well-being if their husbands have not fled with them. Men frequently seek employment elsewhere, or are conscripted into armed forces or armed groups.⁶

When they are impoverished and reliant on assistance from aid agencies for their daily needs, refugee women are unable to live in a dignified manner. Instead, they struggle every day to cover basic needs for themselves and their families.

Negative Coping Mechanisms

Young girls and women in particular adopt negative coping mechanisms in order to survive. These strategies become more frequent when few other options are available. Some are forced to sell off vital belongings such as domestic items, clothes, part of their food rations, etc. Many find themselves obliged to resort to crime, violence, or loans that they are not able to repay. Girls are the first to be removed from school or face early marriage when household livelihoods are at risk.

'Survival Sex'

One of the most frequent means for refugees to survive in a protracted situation is by means of exploitative sexual relationships, either by commercial prostitution or through relationships in which a woman or girl receives goods and gifts from a regular sexual partner. Many are compelled to engage in such 'survival sex' because they lack livelihood options and have no recourse or economic alternatives.⁷ Refugee women and girls are often subject to demands for sexual favours in exchange for offers of protection, documents or assistance. In some instances, humanitarian workers and peacekeepers have ordered sexual favours in return for food or money.

ENHANCING REFUGEE PROTECTION

Programmes that assist refugee women to regain sustainable livelihoods can alleviate their need to resort to illicit or damaging survival strategies. Such programmes can play an important part in reducing protection risks, provided they are tailored to local conditions and match targeted market needs for generating work and income.

Rights-Based Approach

There is a tendency to approach the issue of livelihoods and self-reliance from a technical perspective. However, it is important to note that many refugees cannot establish or maintain their livelihoods because they cannot exercise the rights to which they are entitled under international human rights, humanitarian law and/or refugee law. Attempts to develop sustainable livelihoods are often obstructed by limited freedom of movement, no access to land or capital; and the obligation to work for exploitative wages.⁸ There is therefore a need to link the question of livelihoods with the issues of rights and protection.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

There is a direct link between issues of protection and livelihoods, and the international community needs to take a far more rights-based approach when dealing with existing problems. Empowering women, fostering livelihoods, and enhancing their capacities and opportunities during displacement are critical to avoiding exploitation and achieving food security. Livelihoods help equip and capacitate refugees to achieve one of the durable solutions: voluntary repatriation, local integration or resettlement. As the 2008 *UNHCR Handbook for the Protection of Women and Girls* states, 'When women and girls are self-reliant, they are better able to use their skills and experience wherever they are.'⁹

Recommendations

States, UNHCR and humanitarian partners must do more to promote women's access to skills training, education, vocational training, credit and employment opportunities, job placements, agricultural, and income-generating projects and microfinance institutions, focussing specific activities on women, such as business skills training courses for women only.

Livelihood programmes must be tailored to the specific circumstances under which the displaced are living – whether in camps where freedom of movement is restricted, in depressed urban areas or in harsh, inhospitable and isolated environments with limited agricultural potential. Programmes must take into consideration people's experience, knowledge, skills and future aspirations.

In addition, efforts must be made to ensure refugees are accorded their civil and socioeconomic rights under international law. The most important elements in facilitating the attainment of self-reliance are the full enjoyment of the rights to freedom of movement, access to employment markets, self-employment and education. The international community must support host government reviews of laws, policies and regulations relating to refugee employment, discrimination, taxation and legal support.¹⁰

All actors involved in refugee protection must ensure that refugee women and girls, as well as the host communities, participate in the design and development of self-reliance programmes.

ABOUT ARRA

ARRA: Australian Refugee Rights Alliance is a consortium of Australian Non Government Organisations attending the UNHCR Annual Consultations with NGOs and the Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme. Its members advocate for change at the international level.

¹ UNHCR (2006) 'Conclusion on Women and Girls at Risk' 6 October, 2006, no. 105 (LVII).

² UNHCR (2008) 'Strengthening Protection Capacity Project' (General Briefing Note) March 2008.

³ UNHCR (2003) 'Framework for Durable Solutions for Refugees and People of Concern' 1 May 2003.

⁴ Chambers, R., and G. Conway (1992) 'Sustainable Rural Livelihoods' IDS Discussion Paper no. 296, University of Sussex Institute of Development Studies, Brighton, UK: 7.

⁵ WCRWC (2008) 'Making a Living: Promoting Economic Opportunities for Refugee Women and Youth' January 2008

⁶ UNHCR (2008) 'UNHCR Handbook for the Protection of Women and Girls' January 2008.

⁷ De Vriese, M. (2006) 'Refugee Livelihoods: A Review of the Evidence' UNHCR EPAU, Geneva, February 2006, WCRWC 'Displaced Women and Girls at Risk: Risk Factors, Protection Solutions and Resource Tools' February 2006.

⁸ Crisp, J. (2003) 'UNHCR, Refugee Livelihoods and Self-Reliance: A Brief History' Paper presented at UNHCR Executive Committee Meeting, Geneva, 22 December 2003; Smith, M. (2004) 'Warehousing Refugees: A Denial of Rights, a Waste of Humanity' *World Refugee Survey*.

⁹ UNHCR (2008) 'UNHCR Handbook for the Protection of Women and Girls' January 2008.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, at 312.