

Addressing the Needs of Displaced Women in Conflict and Post-conflict Situations

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Introduction

In 2007, the Women, Peace, and Security Committee of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and the Center for International Studies of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) collaborated to produce a series of research papers on the needs of women displaced by conflict. These papers provided policy action recommendations for UNFPA and its partners based on current empirical research, comparative analysis, and policy reviews. The recommendations, and the analysis that inspired them, aim to help UNFPA increase the effectiveness of its programming on urgent issues in the nexus of women, conflict, and forced migration. In particular, they offer insights into how UNFPA can address the ways shelter, livelihoods, legal status, and mental health relate to the issues that comprise UNFPA's core mandate, namely, reproductive health, sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), and HIV/AIDS.

In May and June 2007, the papers (virtually all in this volume) were shared with a "knowledge network" made up of UNFPA staff working around the world, with discussion conducted over e-mail to allow broad participation. Participants offered insights and analysis founded in UNFPA's wide practical experience; they also looked ahead to how UNFPA might address these interrelated issues in its work on the ground. Specifically, the knowledge network answered the following questions with regard to each paper:

1. What is your most significant achievement [on the topic in question]?
2. What was the chief obstacle you faced?
3. Based on your experience, what future action should UNFPA undertake [to address effectively the topic in question]?

Perhaps the clearest message to emerge from the discussion was that in situations of armed conflict, UNFPA's traditional areas of concern cannot be addressed in

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isolation from the issues of shelter, livelihoods, and mental health. For UNFPA to implement its mandate effectively, programming must take into account the way all of these issues together can act to compound or alleviate the risks to refugee and internally displaced women.

As it attempts to do this, UNFPA faces certain challenges that recur wherever conflicts erupt: lack of security, impediments to access, paucity of data, and the need to ensure long-term sustainability of programs. The discussion made clear, however, that a number of opportunities and innovations are available to help UNFPA overcome these challenges. These include new ways to address mental health, the creation of women's centers and/or committees, the involvement of men in programming, and multi-sector collaboration. Participants noted furthermore that the legal environment in which UNFPA must operate and the resources that already exist for practitioners present both challenges and opportunities in their own right.

This chapter summarizes these responses from the field, providing dimension to the scholars' chapters and demonstrating anew the interplay between empirical knowledge and field-based practice – particularly, how each can reinforce the other to produce both new knowledge and improved practice, and, one hopes, better policy.

Challenges

Lack of Security

Insecurity is one of the most difficult obstacles for UNFPA to overcome in its work with female refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) at all stages of armed conflict. On the one hand, physical and political insecurity can impede programming by UNFPA and its partners. Lack of security can prevent national and international organizations from being able to reach the populations they are trying to serve, or even maintain day-to-day operations. The tendency of the security situation to degenerate rapidly and with little warning hampers the ability of UNFPA and its partners to respond effectively and fulfill their mandate to protect. Lack of security can distract donor attention from so-called soft issues like reproductive health and SGBV, making it difficult for programs to obtain the human and financial resources they need to succeed in the long term.

Insecurity can also affect women and girls directly: It can prevent women from being able to reach and benefit from UNFPA programs where they are available. The planning of IDP and refugee camps can itself be a cause of insecurity for women and girls – because the camps tend to be planned and built quickly, by men, and needs of females are neglected – although integrating these needs into standard planning practice could alleviate this problem. And displaced women whose livelihoods have been disrupted by conflict can face increased risk of trafficking and sexual exploitation and abuse. It is clear that for UNFPA to fulfill its mandate vis-à-vis Security Council resolution 1325 on women, peace, and security,¹ it must find ways to reach its target populations even in insecure and deteriorating environments.

Impediments to Access

Access, like insecurity, is a multidimensional challenge. IDPs and refugees are all too often displaced to remote areas that are difficult to reach. This has a negative impact on displaced women's ability to obtain consistent, high-quality reproductive health services, emergency obstetric care, and mental health services. It also prevents displaced women from being able to reach, on a regular basis, markets large enough to provide sustainable livelihoods. Remoteness hampers UNFPA's ability to spread essential health-care information. It decreases the likelihood that perpetrators of violence against women will be brought to justice, a particular problem in rural areas where the reach and influence of the security sector are inadequate. Moreover, where IDPs or refugees assimilate into urban environments with easier access to some services and markets, they may nonetheless face problems of access because they cannot benefit from the resources that are made available in a camp environment and are specifically designed for displaced communities.

Data Collection

Insecurity and impediments to access, alongside other obstacles, make data collection a challenge in itself. Although necessary to provide a solid foundation for good programs, to serve as a baseline against which to measure the success of those programs, and to provide information for policy makers and researchers, data that is disaggregated by sex and that focuses specifically on refugee and IDP women is often incomplete or absent. Although data collection is an institutional priority for UNFPA, the organization lacks the capacity to support reliable data collection and analysis in conflict settings.

It is hampered on the one hand by the insecurity faced by both researchers and sources, and on the other by the challenges inherent in collecting information on displaced populations – challenges that include difficulty of access (particularly where the displaced have assimilated into urban environments) and the possibility of repeated displacement. Underreporting of SGBV, particularly in conflict situations, impedes knowledge of the extent to which such violence occurs; along with a lack of forensic evidence that can be used in court, such underreporting can help to create a culture of impunity for perpetrators, as well as hinder appropriate protection and response from UNFPA and its partners.

Long-Term Sustainability

The long-term sustainability of programs that support women displaced by conflict is at once necessary and difficult to ensure, and is itself undermined by insecurity, paucity of data, and the many impediments to access that arise during and after conflict, including weakened or absent infrastructure. A major challenge UNFPA

will need to address, alongside its partners, is the apparent contradiction inherent in conflict-related work: whereas programs that respond to conflict are generally seen as temporary measures to respond to a temporary emergency, displacement is too often a long-term condition requiring a long-term response – a “development” rather than an “emergency” response. Psychosocial support services, for example, should be available in the long term to be truly effective, yet many are provided by NGOs rather than governments and thus are difficult to maintain for an adequate length of time. Camps for the displaced, and the shelter they offer, are designed to be temporary, but displacement is increasingly a state that persists for decades. And while “make work” projects can provide some psychosocial benefit, they do little to create sustainable livelihoods, which, as Dale Buscher writes, are those that can “cope with and recover from stress and shocks, maintain or enhance [their] capabilities and assets, and provide sustainable livelihood opportunities for the next generation” (Buscher, *Women, Work, and War*) In light of these contradictions, the traditional model of conflict-related emergency programming must be revised.

Opportunities and Innovations

Alongside the challenges are new strategies that participants in the knowledge network highlighted that UNFPA might use to ensure its effectiveness in addressing the needs of women displaced by conflict as they relate to reproductive health, SGBV, and HIV/AIDS.

Women’s Centers and/or Committees

The establishment of women’s centers and/or committees in refugee or IDP camps and conflict-affected areas can fulfill a variety of needs and provide a number of services to women displaced by conflict. Women’s centers can consolidate reproductive health and referral services, skills training, childcare, and/or psychosocial health services; act as a locus for information and awareness-raising campaigns; and provide a safe space for women to gather in order to avail themselves of these various services and support each other.

Examples of such programs already exist. In Sri Lanka, UNFPA brought women together for “women’s story circles” in which women shared their experiences of SGBV. These forums served a dual function: first, as a safe and supportive environment in which women could deal with traumatic incidents; and second, as a means to collect data that could later be used for advocacy and action. In Darfur, UNFPA supported a local NGO to establish a women’s center that would be run on profits from the sale of firewood purchased in safe locations. In addition to providing skills training to support sustainable livelihoods, the centre also served a protective role by reducing the need for women to collect firewood in unsafe areas.² In Timor-Leste, UNFPA supported the establishment of women’s committees in IDP camps. These committees created a safe space for women to discuss the

issues important to them and provided a strong platform from which women could raise these issues with camp managers. In all of these cases, in addition to the services and networks they provided, these centers and committees gave women the opportunity and skills to empower themselves and helped them take an active role in bettering their lives, even in the face of the instability and insecurity that arise from war.

New Ways to Address Mental Health

By providing women a positive outlet and facilitating their active participation in the decisions that affect them most, the centers and committees mentioned above may have contributed positively to the mental health of the women they were created to serve. The new approach to mental health discussed by the knowledge network separates pathology from well-being, and emphasizes the latter. Mental well-being has a significant cultural component and may be understood differently by women and men. UNFPA can help to promote such well-being among the women it serves by supporting strategies that bring out their inherent human resilience. This can be done through a variety of complementary strategies, such as those outlined above, to address the problems faced by women and girls and relieve some of the anxieties causing mental distress. Ensuring sustainable livelihoods, for example, can remove the stress of financial instability (and idleness) and thereby increase mental well-being. Involving communities alongside individuals in recovery processes recognizes that personal empowerment and collective empowerment are interrelated. Transitional justice processes, post-conflict reintegration, addressing HIV/AIDS, and coping with SGBV are all areas in which communities can support (or impede) individual recovery and mental well-being. Where tradition and religion do not promote harmful practices or human rights abuses, they can be powerful tools in helping women find the strength within themselves.

Increasing Men's Involvement

The strategies that might be used to support women's well-being can of course have a similar impact on men, and thus have an indirect but important effect on women's lives. This may explain, at least partly, why the idea of involving men in programs aimed at supporting conflict-displaced women arose in the context of nearly every issue the knowledge network discussed. Participants noted first that where men are part of the problem, they can and must be part of the solution. Where, for example, men are perpetrators of SGBV, or carriers of HIV/AIDS, or ignorant of what HIV is and how it can be stopped from spreading, solutions to these issues as they affect women cannot be found without working with men. However, participants also stressed that just as it is crucial not to see women as merely passive victims of violence, the opposite is also true: men must not be seen as merely perpetrators of violence. Engaging men in addressing SGBV and educating men on their

role in halting the spread of HIV/AIDS acknowledges and encourages their positive contribution. Moreover, men, like women, are traumatized by conflict and forced migration and everything these entail. It has often been observed that men have difficulty coping with the bereavement, enforced idleness, economic insecurity, and possible gender-role reversals that result from conflict and displacement, and that many blame these factors for their violent behavior towards their wives and daughters. It is possible that offering men and boys (civilians as well as ex-combatants) the kinds of training and support described above for women could help break the cycle of violence that often follows conflict, and in the short term could relieve family and community tensions created by the perception of unequal treatment. Finally, men can also use their power in the community as religious, civil, and military leaders, as teachers, as fathers – in short, as gatekeepers of society – to contribute positively to gender equality, protection, and prevention. Men are thus important potential partners in UNFPA's programs to women's full enjoyment of their human rights.

Multi-Sector Collaboration

The knowledge network placed considerable importance on multi-sector collaboration as a key strategy in addressing the nexus of livelihoods, shelter, mental health, SGBV, reproductive health, and HIV/AIDS in situations of armed conflict. UNFPA must develop and foster strong partnerships at multiple levels simultaneously: with governments, particularly on issues pertaining to the IDPs they are responsible for protecting; with other UN agencies, either through the mechanisms established to facilitate collaboration or, failing that, through determined and consistent ad hoc efforts; with local civil society (broadly conceived) and international NGOs; and, like this knowledge network begins to do, with UNFPA staff worldwide, to share experience, strengthen intervention, increase effectiveness, and widen participation. Not only are there best practices and lessons learned to be shared among all these actors, but the knowledge and expertise each would bring to such partnerships are essential to designing successful programmes and policies.

Areas Where Opportunities and Challenges Coincide

It is to be expected that with issues as complex and interrelated as those UNFPA and its partners must confront when addressing the nexus of women, conflict, and forced migration, some of the challenges the organization must face can present opportunities at the same time.

The Legal Environment

The legislative environment that provides the backdrop to UNFPA's work in conflict-affected countries is one of these areas where opportunities and challenges

collide. On the one hand, solutions to the problems UNFPA is trying to address are hampered by numerous factors: gender-blind legislation; national laws and policies that ignore IDPs; uncertain timelines for the promulgation of important laws (e.g., on domestic violence); unfair land tenure and inheritance laws, restricting women's ability to establish sustainable housing; implementing parties' (e.g., judges, or police) ignorance of legislation actually in place; slow or dysfunctional formal justice systems that undermine trust; and underreporting of sexual violence crimes. On the other hand, UNFPA has a long-standing and unique position from which to support governments to promulgate laws sensitive to the needs and rights of women in general, and displaced women in particular. The organization is also in a position to bring displaced women into the legislative process so they can shape the laws that most affect them. And it has an important role to play in ensuring that relevant actors have the knowledge and capacity to implement existing legislation.

Practical Tools

Similarly, knowledge network participants noted that while many checklists, guidelines, and other practical tools already exist, few practitioners either know about or use them. Part of the challenge UNFPA faces is thus to ensure that its staff and partners are aware of the resources available to them as they grapple with these issues, and to support them to use these resources in ways appropriate to the local context. At the same time, there are significant deficits in knowledge and experience – whether among governments, NGOs, or the UN – on how to address these issues effectively and in a way that reflects their interconnectedness. UNFPA has much to contribute to the development of “how to” tools that will offer practical help to policy makers and other actors, such as work plans, step-by-step guidelines for action (where these do not already exist), and concrete examples upon which to build future policies and programs. These were felt to be a very important next step, despite being missing from some of the papers discussed in the knowledge network; it is a step that must, however, be driven by the practitioners on the ground in order to take their experience fully into account.

Conclusion

The challenges raised by the knowledge network and by the issues addressed here are clearly daunting. But the profusion of recommendations and ideas that came from this discussion and the energy and passion of the participants are positive signs that these challenges can be overcome. As one participant noted, windows of opportunity do open as a result of conflict and crisis. The massing of displaced men, women, and children in IDP and refugee camps, for example, and their close interactions with NGOs and humanitarian agencies, create an environment in which education campaigns could potentially flourish.³ Out of conflict, opportunities arise for women to be empowered economically and politically. These windows are often

small, and open for a just short time. Taking advantage of them is difficult and hampered by lack of funding, human resources, and security. But the opportunities are there; what is needed is the flexibility, creativity, and ability to take advantage of them when they do arise.

These opportunities include the experience, resilience, and determination of displaced women themselves. Strengthening their capacity to respond to the issues they face in times of war, and after wars have ended, is one way to build sustainability into the community. One of the messages participants in the knowledge network articulated most forcefully was that women must be involved at every stage of UNFPA's programming, not just as beneficiaries, but as designers and implementers of programs, as drafters of legislation, as advisors to camp managers, as midwives and service providers, as researchers – as agents of their own future. Women's ability and desire to play an active, powerful, and central role in the decisions and actions that affect their lives – whether in times of peace or in times of war – are among the most important assets available to UNFPA. The organization's efforts to assist and protect women forcibly displaced by conflict cannot succeed if the contributions these women bring to the table themselves are overlooked or cast aside. It is UNFPA's responsibility and challenge not just to support women to fully enjoy their human rights, but also to recognize their agency in securing and defending those rights.

Notes

1. Resolution 1325 requests and urges all UN agencies, the Secretary General, and the Member States to take action to ensure “the protection, rights and the particular needs of women, as well as on the importance of involving women in all peacekeeping and peace-building measures,” among other related responsibilities. The resolution refers to the Beijing Declaration and Platform, to which UNFPA adheres. The resolution is an effective tool for the advancement of women, which is one of the UNFPA Strategic Plan's goals – to achieve gender equality and empowerment of women so they can exercise their rights, particularly their reproductive health rights, and live free from discrimination. For the full text of 1325, see http://www.un.org/events/res_1325e.pdf.
2. UNFPA found that women continued to put themselves at risk collecting firewood despite the sale of safe alternative fuel because the firewood could be sold and provide another source of much-needed income. This complication highlights the complex way in which livelihoods and SGBV are connected, and underlines the need for UNFPA to analyse these relationships carefully in order to address them successfully.
3. These could pay particular attention to children, particularly since, as Elzbieta Godziak noted, boys who get into violent situations at an early age, before they have been socialized to know right from wrong, continue to engage in violence later in life. Godziak cited research to this effect during a 22 June 2007 working group session that was part of the UNFPA Expert Group Meeting in Hammamet, Tunisia, 21–25 June 2007.

References

- Dale Buscher, “Sustainability of Livelihoods for Women and their Children in Situations of Armed Conflict,” this volume.