

Chapter 29

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Refugees and Displaced Women



Refugees are people who cross the border of their country into another country because they fear for their survival at home. Displaced people are forced to leave their homes for similar reasons, but remain in their own country. Many refugees and displaced people fear that their government or a group that has gained power threatens their lives because of their ethnic group, religion, nationality, gender identity, sexual orientation, or political views. Also, when environmental disasters destroy access to food or water, people must leave their homes to survive.

Women and girls make up around half of all refugees and displaced people. They need laws that give them economic and social rights to basic resources like food, shelter, clothing, health care, education, and work opportunities. Refugee and displaced women and girls are more likely to experience sexual and physical abuse, sex slavery, and human trafficking, so they need special protection. All refugees and displaced people need protection from armed attacks and forced return to their homes.

This chapter has information on these needs and other challenges to health. It includes ways that outside support and organizing by refugees and displaced people can improve conditions for women in their new communities.

► *Displaced women and girls who are unaccompanied, pregnant, heads of households, disabled, or elderly are more likely to be attacked, abused, or forced into sex work.*

Flight and Arrival

► *Having identity documents from either the United Nations or the authorities in the country of refuge can give refugees some protection against being forced to leave (deported).*

► *More than half of the world's refugees do not live in camps. Many have settled in cities and towns. They face the constant threat of being arrested, trafficked, harassed, discriminated against, and sent back to their home countries against their will.*

The journey to a new place (flight) is often very difficult. Families may be separated. Younger children or older relatives may die from hunger, disease, or violence. Women and girls may be assaulted. These conditions can cause both injury and emotional and physical exhaustion before people arrive at their new home.

Once settled, a family will likely face a situation very different from their old home. People from small communities may find themselves in large, crowded camps that are organized differently from a traditional village or town. Or they may live in cities, trying to avoid capture by government authorities. They may be very far from their old homes, in cultures and environments that are completely new to them.

In addition, these refugees often face:

- a community that does not want them there or does not speak their language.
- difficulty getting new documents like identity papers or work or travel permits.
- fear of being forced to leave their new home.
- danger from war or other nearby violence.
- not knowing if they can ever return to their old home.
- no access to medical care, including mental health services.

These challenges make it difficult for refugees and displaced people to adjust to their new living conditions. Refugees who live in a refugee camp or are recognized by the government of their new country or the United Nations may have some protection and resources. But displaced people do not have these protections.

Basic Needs

In many communities, women are responsible for their families' basic needs: growing and preparing food, collecting water and fuel, managing the home, and maintaining the family's health. But refugees and displaced people must often depend on outside help to meet basic needs. Survival is especially hard when this help is not enough, and some people lack even this help.



Food

During their journey and after they arrive at a new settlement, refugees and displaced people may struggle to get enough *nutritious* food. This is especially dangerous for women and girls, since many may not have had enough food before fleeing (see page 2).



To improve your community's nutrition:

- Get involved in food distribution and preparation.
- Give women the same amount of food as men, and girls the same amount as boys.
- Give the food directly to women. They are more aware of the family's needs and less likely to trade food for weapons or alcohol.
- Make sure people who are pregnant, breastfeeding, malnourished, or sick are the first to get food and give them extra food if possible.
- Make sure people have cooking pots and utensils.
- Share cooking tasks among families in the community. Even if food is prepared in a central place, the community can stay involved and have some control over their diet.

For more ways to improve your nutrition, see Chapter 11, "Eating for Good Health."

► Many refugees and displaced people live with hunger and malnutrition. Women and girls are especially at risk because they are often denied education and work training and often lack any money of their own.

Emergency Food Distribution

Even in emergency situations, food distribution should involve women. This honors the important role women have had in food management. In Kenya, for example, Oxfam has tried to strengthen traditional social roles by distributing food directly to women. Food is distributed in an open place, overseen by an elected committee of elders. Women are encouraged to give their opinions about what is being done. This kind of food distribution will continue until the local food supply improves.

WATER AND FUEL

Refugee and displaced people often have limited access to cooking fuel and water that is safe to drink. Sometimes travel to the areas where they can find water and fuel is dangerous. Because women are often responsible for collecting water and



fuel, washing and cooking, and caring for the sick, these problems make women's lives more difficult.

These things can help:

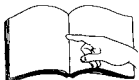
- Learn how to *purify* your water (see page 155).
- Ask aid organizations for lightweight containers to carry water.
- Arrange for the places where water and fuel are collected to be patrolled and safe for everyone. Do not go for water or fuel by yourself.

PROTECTION FROM SEXUAL VIOLENCE

Rape and sexual violence are common when people are forced to leave their homes. This is because:

- People in positions of power, like guards, government authorities, and aid workers, may demand sexual favors for food, protection, legal papers, and other help. Victims may not report this abuse out of fear for their safety. If victims do report abuse, the system often ignores them or blames them, letting the abuse continue.
- Living conditions with many households and individuals crowded together make privacy difficult and sexual harassment and assault more likely.
- Men may become frustrated when they cannot find work. This can be made worse when they see women take on more responsibilities.
- People escaping conflict often move through areas controlled by armed groups who commit abuses, especially against women and girls. Rarely are these abuses punished.
- Long-term residents may use sexual violence to force refugees to settle elsewhere.

► *Sexual violence is a violation of human rights.*



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violence against women, 313

To prevent sexual violence:

- Create spaces apart from men where women and children can safely gather, learn, and simply relax.
- Educate all men and boys in the community—including guards, staff, and health workers—about violence against women and their part in preventing it (see page 324).
- Put women in charge of distributing basic resources, like food, water, and fuel, so they do not have to negotiate for their basic needs.
- Arrange the camp so facilities for basic needs like *latrines* and bathing areas are close by and well lit. Provide more security at night, including women guards.
- With supportive community leaders, organize community meetings to discuss sexual violence and how to prevent it (see page 324). Raise awareness that victims of sexual violence are never at fault.
- Ask for education about alcohol and drug misuse and how it relates to sexual violence.



I wish the latrines were closer to the camp. It isn't safe to go here alone or after dark.

► You may face danger if you have to go a long distance for food, water, fuel, or to use sanitation facilities.

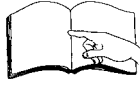
If you are attacked:

- Get a physical exam right away from a woman health worker. Ask for medicines to prevent pregnancy and *sexually transmitted infections (STIs)*, including *HIV*. If you could be pregnant, your health worker should discuss all of your options—*abortion*, adoption, or keeping the baby.
- If you think it is safe to do so, report the attack. Officials may be required to investigate, but you do not have to answer any questions you do not want to, especially about your past sexual history (see page 336).
- Get support by talking about what happened with other survivors of sexual violence and mental health workers, if available. This can help you begin to heal from your experience. Also, see Chapter 19, “Rape and Sexual Assault” and Chapter 27, “Mental Health.”
- In some cultures, rape is seen as the victim’s fault. If your family is angry at you or ashamed that this happened, they may also need *counseling*.
- If you can, move to a safer place, away from your attacker. If it would help, ask family members or friends to move with you.



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Reproductive Health



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There are no family planning services available here. This is a clinic for emergencies.



Refugees and displaced people are often denied proper health care. Health workers may have difficulty reaching displaced persons in dangerous or faraway areas. Or, if services are available, health workers may not know people’s languages or their cultural beliefs and practices that affect health care.

In addition, specific health needs of women and people who can get pregnant are often overlooked. These include:

- **care during pregnancy and birth.** Pregnant people need regular care before giving birth (*prenatal care*) and have better results with birth attendants who understand their traditions around giving birth.



- **family planning.** In many refugee communities, the birth rate is high. Refugees and displaced people often do not have access to *family planning* information or supplies. Crowded refugee camps may offer little privacy to use these methods and no secure, personal spaces to keep them.
- **supplies for menstrual periods.**
- **information about and treatment for STIs including HIV.**

- **regular check-ups to detect serious health problems**, like *cancer, diabetes, and tuberculosis*.
- **safe abortion.** This is often unavailable, especially if the governments or agencies providing health care are against it.
- **enough calcium, iron, folic acid, iodine, and vitamin C** in the diet, especially during pregnancy and breastfeeding.
- **more women health workers to provide care.** Some women cannot be examined by men because cultural beliefs forbid it.

Ways to improve the health of women and people who can get pregnant

Becoming a link between health services and your refugee community is a great way to improve health care for everyone. You can help the staff understand your community's traditions and needs, and request changes. For example:

- Ask the clinic to be open longer at least one day a week, and for women health workers to be available on that day.
- Ask a midwife or birth attendant from your community to explain your customs around birth to the health workers.
- If health workers do not understand your language, find someone who can translate for them.
- Ask for classes on family planning, HIV, STIs, prenatal care, birth, and nutrition. Remind health center staff that people will need a private area for discussion.
- Request extra food and *vitamin* pills for people who are pregnant or breastfeeding.
- Request that health workers from your community receive training in treating the health needs of women and people who can get pregnant.



Becoming a health worker

Many clinics in cities and refugee camps train refugees to be health workers, birth attendants, and health educators, since they speak the refugees' languages and could improve the health of the community.

In Camp Kakuma in northern Kenya, for example, southern Sudanese refugee



women are very involved in health care. They are being trained so they can work in both southern Sudan and Kenya when they leave the camp. Sara Elija, a refugee from the Sudan, says her new role as a trainer of traditional birth attendants has given her hope for work when she is no longer a refugee.

Mental Health



► *People must be able to cope with sudden and forced change so they and their families can survive.*

CAUSES OF MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS

Refugee and displaced people often have mental health problems, such as feeling extreme sadness, loss of pleasure from anything, or very low energy (depression), feeling nervous or worried (anxiety), or feeling unable to get over horrible things that happened in the past (severe reaction to trauma). These can be caused by:

- **Loss of home.** Home is where people feel safe, secure, and connected to their community. The loss of a woman's authority in her home may be especially painful.
- **Loss of family and community support.** Many displaced women must take on new responsibilities, sometimes becoming head of the family and providing loved ones with security. Doing this without their network of emotional and physical support can cause them to feel afraid and alone.
- **Witnessing or experiencing violence.**
- **Loss of independence and useful work.** Refugees and displaced people often have a hard time finding work in their new home. Many women still have the job of caring for their families, but many of the ways they did that, like growing crops, cooking meals, weaving and other crafts, may no longer be possible to do. This can cause feelings of uselessness and hopelessness.
- **Crowded living.** Living in an overcrowded setting prevents people from having privacy, affects their relationships (often leading to conflict), and can cause stress, anxiety, and trouble sleeping.
- **Difficulty mourning or grieving.** There are many things to grieve when people are forced to leave their homes: loss of community, work, loved ones, and life as one knew it. When fleeing and traveling in dangerous conditions, refugees and displaced people often do not get to say goodbye or mourn in traditional ways, making it harder to accept these losses.

For information about signs of mental health problems including depression, anxiety, and severe reactions to trauma, and ways to help yourself and help others, see Chapter 27, "Mental Health."

WORKING FOR BETTER MENTAL HEALTH

The best way to prevent mental health problems from worsening is to talk with others about feelings, worries, and concerns. Here are some suggestions for encouraging people in your community to listen to and support each other:

- **Organize activities that let people spend time together**, such as nutrition, *literacy* classes, child care, or other needed activities. Make extra efforts to include people who seem afraid, uninterested, or unable to get involved. Organized child care is important so women can participate in activities. Try to find ways children can participate in activities too.



helping relationships

A group of Guatemalan refugee women who felt a deep loss when they left their land worked together to plant vegetables and flowers. This helped them feel close to the earth and part of a community again, and it provided some food for their families.



- **Organize support groups** to help those in your community going through similar experiences. People may feel motivated to meet with others about their same age or who share similar issues. You might ask for help from a local health worker to get it started.
- **Work with others to find ways to grieve and mourn.** You may be able to adapt some of your traditional rituals to your new situation. It can be helpful to grieve as a group in whatever ways you can.
- **Find local mental health resources.** Find out if there are trained mental health workers or counselors who can help people having mental health problems or who can help you learn counseling skills. It is also important to learn what to do if there is a mental health emergency.



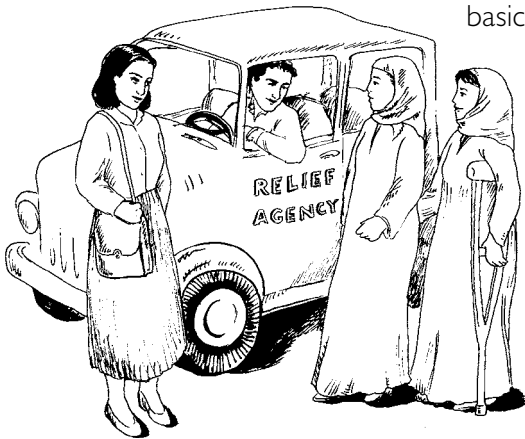
starting a support group

The destruction of homes, families, and communities is very traumatic. Sometimes refugees and displaced people become so affected by these terrible experiences that they cannot work, eat, and sleep in a normal way for a long time. Women need special support and understanding to help them recover and to begin to trust other people again. For more information on how to help people recovering from trauma, see page 430. For more information on helping someone who has been raped, see page 334.

Women as Leaders



► *Developing programs without consulting the women they will serve makes the programs less effective.*



Women should be involved in all plans and decisions that affect refugees and displaced people, and encouraged to become leaders in their new communities. This draws on existing skills and builds self-esteem, self-sufficiency, and safety, while reducing feelings of loneliness and depression. It also helps those who provide services to understand people's needs and make programs more effective.

Here are some ways women can take leadership:

- Participate in planning the way the settlement is arranged—for example, where the latrines, gardens, and food, fuel, and water distribution points are located.
- Organize separate meetings for women and men about safety, basic needs, nutrition, and community involvement.



- Be aware of tensions that may be caused by the increasing involvement of women and girls, and talk to men in the community and camp leadership to encourage these changes.
- Help with campaigns to spread relevant information to the community about activities, training programs, and events.
- Organize community trainings and activities on nutrition, reading classes, health issues, sports, and music.

- Organize child care programs. Child care is an important way to help women participate in activities where they can talk with others about community needs and problems.
- Organize schools for children. The United Nations says that all refugee children have the right to an education, but few programs are available. Classes are sometimes overcrowded or there may be a shortage of teachers.



When we arrived in Honduras, we were weak from hiding in the hills and walking long distances to reach safety. There were many sick and malnourished children and old people with us. There was no food here for us, so the women all worked together to organize nutrition centers. Then we got the local parish to bring us some extra food for the centers, and we began to plant vegetables and raise chickens, goats, and rabbits to add to the food we prepared. Our projects have grown, and now we can give every family a few eggs, a little bit of meat, and some vegetables at least once a month.

We needed to repair our clothing and shoes, so we organized workshops and convinced the agencies to bring us a few sewing machines and tools. Some of the women had worked as seamstresses, and an older man knew how to make shoes, so they taught others their skills. We are proud of what we have achieved here—we have shown that women can do more than cook.

The agencies trained us to become health and nutrition workers and to raise livestock. We have learned to add, subtract, and plan our expenses to manage these projects ourselves. Because of our experience with these projects, many women are now leaders in the camp, and when we return to our country, we will be able to run community projects and businesses.

—Aleyda, a Salvadoran refugee in Colomoncagua, Honduras

WAYS TO EARN A LIVING

Refugee and displaced women often find it hard to get enough work to support their families. They may lack the skills needed to work in their new home or find it difficult to get a work permit. But even in these situations, there is often some work women can do.

For example, some refugee women do domestic work in people's homes or work as health workers in organizations that provide aid. Sometimes these organizations also give women money to start projects in traditional women's activities, like handicrafts. But since it can be hard to support a family with these activities, women should also try to find out about larger projects—like planting trees or building shelters—that pay more. If women are given plots of land, they can grow food for their families or to sell. And if a woman has the training, she may be able to work in a trade or small business.

I'm glad they give us food, but there are other things that I need to buy for my family.

I know how to make dresses... Maybe we could set up a workshop?



► The help refugees and displaced women receive is often not enough to meet their families' needs. Women may be able to earn more by working together.