



Sudanese women waiting for counselling outside a tent at Abushouk camp near El Fasher, Darfur. (Photo: Finbarr O' Reilly)

Internally Displaced Women

The Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement explicitly provide for protection for women. Provisions in favour of displaced women are guided by two core issues: first, to safeguard them from gender-specific violence, and second, to uphold their rights to equal access to services and participation in assistance programmes³¹. The gap between these standards and reality remained abysmal in 2005 for most displaced women and girls.

There is a lack of reliable statistics on gender-based violence in countries undergoing internal displacement. Violations are generally not reported during conflicts, and many post-conflict epidemiological surveys do not include questions on sexual violence because they are too sensitive³². The work of organisations collecting information on abuses has also been hindered. In May 2005 for example, two Médecins sans Frontières (MSF) employees were arrested in Sudan, following the publication of a report documenting some 500 cases of rapes in Darfur. They were charged with capital crimes before being released due to international pressure.

However, widespread sexual abuse of displaced and other women was still documented in at least a third of the countries undergoing internal displacement in 2005, the majority of them in sub-Saharan Africa. Victims of violations have often contracted HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases.

Displaced women in countries like Burundi, the DRC, Liberia, Uganda, Somalia and Sudan were more at risk of becoming victims of gender-based violence than other women in 2005. In Uganda and in Sudan, displaced women who worked in the fields, or collected water and firewood outside the camps, repeatedly fell prey to sexual abuse. In Burundi, displaced widows reportedly often had no choice but to resort to multiple sexual relations and polygamy in order to support themselves and their children. In the DRC, despite the relative improvement of the security situation throughout the country, MSF reported in March 2005 that each week, 40 raped girls and women sought its help in Bunia, the capital of the war-torn Ituri district, but that many more never reached the humanitarian organisation³³.

In several other countries, such as Côte d'Ivoire, Iraq and Zimbabwe, there is no indication that incidence of sexual violence among displaced women was higher than among other women in 2005. Many reports point out, however, that conflicts have had a negative impact on women's security in general. In Iraq for example, fear of harassment, abduction and rape has prevented displaced and other women from moving freely, and has therefore restricted their access to education, work and health services.

Displaced women in Darfur: risking their lives every day

In Darfur, many women and girls experienced gender-based violence when their homes were attacked, and then again once they reached IDP camps. Like other women, displaced women are responsible for collecting firewood and providing fuel for their families. The risk of sexual assault has increased as displaced women have had to venture further and further from the camps, since the surrounding vegetation was increasingly depleted. Despite the security risk it represents, firewood collection has been the only livelihood strategy available to them, to supplement the rations handed out by humanitarian organisations.

Source: UNIFEM, September 2005, Fuel Provision and Gender-Based Violence: Fuel-efficiency as a prevention strategy, by Stephanie Ziebell

Sexual violence against displaced and other women was perpetrated in 2005 by regular armed forces, armed non-state actors, criminals and private citizens. Abuses have generally been perpetrated with total impunity. In Liberia, an encouraging step toward bringing those responsible to justice was the adoption by the transitional parliament in December 2005 of a law making rape a felony of the first degree, punishable by life imprisonment. In Sudan, the government in 2005 established a state committee on combating gender-based violence in southern Darfur and offered training to law enforcement agencies to better investigate cases of violations occurring in the region. In eastern DRC, Darfur and northern Uganda, the rape of displaced and other women is among the war crimes allegations investigated by the International Criminal Court. It remains to be seen whether these various measures will have any impact on the life of displaced and other women.

Over the past few years, international peacekeepers have repeatedly committed sexual abuses against displaced women, particularly in Burundi, the DRC, Liberia and Côte d'Ivoire. In 2005, the UN Office of Internal Oversight Services reported that it had found a pattern of sexual exploitation by peacekeeping personnel in the DRC, and requested the concerned troop-contributing countries to take swift disciplinary action. Acknowledging the extent of the problem, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan announced in November 2005 a forthcoming proposal for a comprehensive, system-wide strategy for providing assistance to victims of sexual exploitation and abuse by UN staff and related personnel³⁴.

Despite their pressing needs, displaced women were in general unable to access reproductive health services³⁵ in at least a third of the countries undergoing internal displacement in 2005. Some women displaced in camps, such as in Burundi and Liberia, however, had access to basic health services. The main reasons for the difficulty in accessing these services were prohibitive fees, lack of healthcare infrastructure and insecurity. As a result, many displaced women have been relying on traditional health workers. Many victims of sexual abuse have also not sought treatment in clinics due to stigma and shame.

In societies undergoing internal displacement, the empowerment of women is particularly challenging, as women often work in dangerous environments and with very limited resources. Still, women's organisations of every continent carried out initiatives to promote the rights of displaced and other women in 2005. In Iraq, numerous associations working for women's rights have been formed since 2004, including groups that focus on the protection of women from violence. In the Philippines, the Mindanao Commission on Women, an NGO made up of Christian and Muslim women leaders from the conflict-affected Mindanao Island, have attracted considerable attention to the plight of their region. Women's organisations in eastern DRC offer psychological and material support to displaced and other women victims of sexual abuses. In Colombia, hundreds of organisations, including women's groups, work with and for IDPs, although the majority of them have very little resources. The Bosnian Women's Initiative has been developing projects involving displaced, returnees and other women to foster integration and reconciliation. At the regional level, the Mano River Women's Peace Network promotes the involvement of women of Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea in conflict prevention and resolution, and draws the attention of national leaders to the issue of violence against women and girls.

Over the last few years, humanitarian organisations have paid increased attention to the specific needs of displaced women. One of the latest significant initiatives was the publication in September 2005 of the "Guidelines for Gender-based Violence Interventions in Humanitarian Emergencies" by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee, a body comprised of UN humanitarian agencies and NGOs. The Guidelines aim to provide practical advice on how to ensure that humanitarian programmes for displaced populations are safe and do not directly or indirectly increase women's and girls' risk of sexual violence. They also detail what response services should be in place to meet the needs of survivors/victims of sexual violence³⁶.