



REFUGEE GIRLS

THE INVISIBLE FACES OF WAR



WOMEN'S REFUGEE COMMISSION

Cover Photograph:

Sudan: A girl laughs as she skips rope with other girls during playtime at the UNICEF-supported Khorbou Centre Basic School in Juba, capital of Southern Sudan.



**WOMEN'S
REFUGEE
COMMISSION**



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**IN MEMORY OF MARY DIAZ
1960-2004**



Afghan girls sit under trees to study after their tent school was burned down by the Taliban.

FOREWORD

In the course of researching the plight of refugee girls for this book, I had the privilege and honor of getting to know six extraordinary young refugee women: Rose Kingston, Vanthary Dul, Myra Kawthoolei, Mo Nom Tee Kham, Pascasie Nyabirori and Jeannette Nyakirayi. These brave women took time away from their busy lives to sit down and, over the course of many hours, tell their life stories. Although they come from different cultures and regions of the world — from Liberia and Cambodia, from Myanmar and the Democratic Republic of Congo — they have a striking number of things in common. Most of them were caught in war and experienced grim hazards and tragic loss at the epicenter of violence, including the loss of beloved family members. Most of them endured harrowing flights from their home countries as they sought refuge abroad. Even as refugees in foreign countries, finding a safe haven proved extremely difficult for all of them, and they continued to face grave risks and enormous hardship. And although their ultimate resettlement in the United States allowed them to begin their lives anew — for which they are profoundly grateful — peace and contentment remain elusive, when they know that millions of girls and young women displaced by armed fighting are still at risk and continue to suffer throughout the world.

In recounting their stories, my refugee friends may sometimes have experienced a measure of therapeutic catharsis. But deep anguish was also triggered by revisiting their injuries and loss. These brave young women endured this for one reason only: to bring attention to millions of refugee girls still struggling to survive in war-torn countries and refugee camps.

Each of these remarkable young women hopes that you will undertake to learn more about refugee girls around the world, even if it means having to swallow — at least vicariously — some pretty grim facts. None of them spoke in pithy sentences or sound bites. Their stories are far too rich, elaborate and heartfelt to be reduced in such a manner, or even to be fairly recounted within the modest scope and scale of this book. You are strongly encouraged to read their inspirational life stories, in full and in their own words, on the Women's Refugee Commission website, at womensrefugeecommission.org/girlsstories.

The soul and heartbeat found in these pages are thanks to Rose, Vanthary, Myra, Mo Nom, Pascasie and Jeannette.

Lynn Savarese
May 2009



Mary Diaz stood as a pillar of wisdom, strength, grace and fortitude around which the Women's Refugee Commission grew and thrived in its mission to make a difference in the lives of refugee women and children.



Mary Diaz, third from left, with refugee girls from Kosovo in Macedonia.

MARY DIAZ

With her ferocious commitment to defending the rights of women and children displaced by persecution and civil strife, Mary Diaz embodied the truest spirit of benevolence. Mary touched the inner humanity in everyone she met, be they policymakers, celebrities, government officials or young refugee girls from Angola.

Tragically, Mary died at 43, when her power to effect good in the world was at its prime.

Mary was born in Newport News, Virginia, and grew up in Pottstown, Pennsylvania. She graduated from Brown University with a major in international relations and received a master's degree in international education from Harvard University. While pursuing her academic studies, Mary discovered that refugees were her passion; her life mission became dedicated to their protection. While still at Harvard, Mary began working for Catholic Charities in Boston. After graduating, she assumed the position of director of refugee and immigration services there. In 1994, at the age of 33, Mary became executive director of the Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children (now the Women's Refugee Commission), an organization that advocates for the rights of those most often overlooked.

For 10 years, Mary traveled to some of the most dangerous conflict zones in the world, including Afghanistan, Colombia, Haiti, Nepal, Pakistan, Rwanda and Serbia. Concern for her personal safety was always secondary to the afflictions of the world's most vulnerable people and the urgency of pleading their case and demanding action.

Mary was universally admired for her creative leadership as well as her ability to draw international attention by spotlighting refugees' stories from around the world. She rejected the notion that refugee women and children should be portrayed as victims and dependents, instead presenting them as powerful survivors with valuable insights to offer on peace, protection, democratization and reconstruction.

Mary stood as a pillar of wisdom, strength, grace and fortitude around which the Women's Refugee Commission grew and thrived in its mission to make a difference in the lives of refugee women and children. She easily connected with and earned the trust of the people on whose behalf she advocated, absorbing their stories and recounting them for officials she needed to inspire to take action. Mary did not simply lobby for change, she ensured it happened. Her reports on the situation in Bosnia initiated the Clinton administration-backed fund to help refugee women there rebuild their lives. While visiting Tanzania she set in motion a rule change allowing Burundian women, not only the men, to distribute food to fellow refugees. This bold shift in procedure resulted in many more women and children obtaining their rations. The thousands of lives Mary touched and the lifesaving legislation enacted due to her efforts are extraordinary tributes to her.

In 2003, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Ruud Lubbers presented Mary with the UNHCR Award for the Promotion of Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Refugee Women.

Mary believed that the international community has a responsibility to support displaced women and children, stand with them in solidarity and address their needs. It is a sincere hope that this book, which with words and photographs chronicles the lives of refugee girls, adds to our collective understanding of this special and deserving group.

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Liberia: Two girls stand together in the Perry Town camp for internally displaced persons, near Monrovia, the capital. UNICEF has set up a child-friendly space in the camp.

REFUGEE GIRLS: AN INVISIBLE POPULATION

Because of their powerlessness, adolescent girls in refugee situations are more vulnerable to forced marriage, sexual slavery and forms of gender-based violence, among other abuses. They are also the least likely to be offered education and reproductive health care, putting them at greater risk for HIV/AIDS, unwanted pregnancy and unsafe abortions.

*Mary Diaz, in a letter to the New York Times*¹

Girls are rarely featured in the coverage of armed conflict. Given their invisibility, one might assume that girls are somehow spared involvement in war.

Yet, not only are girls commonly targeted in armed conflict, in many ways their lives are more profoundly affected by it than other groups. However, their special needs are frequently overlooked or ignored.

More than 140 million girls live in fragile states affected by armed conflict. Of the 42 million people who have had to flee their homes because of war, 80 percent are women, children and young people. At least 10 million are estimated to be girls and young women.

When war breaks out, people may flee their homes in search of safety. They face harrowing journeys, sometimes taking weeks or months to reach the relative safety of a refugee camp in another country or a camp for internally displaced persons in their own country. They may seek refuge in an urban area, often in slums on the outskirts of a city.

As they flee from war, girls face many dangers, including rape, landmines, gunfire and hunger. They may be recruited into armed forces or captured by traffickers, or they may fall ill. As they try to navigate through the chaos and confusion around them, family members may be left behind. Men and boys may stay and fight, or remain to protect the family's land and possessions.

Once refugees have reached a place of relative safety, they may stay there for years: the average length of time refugees are displaced is now 17 years — a lifetime for those displaced as young children or born during displacement.

War forces girls into unfamiliar roles. A girl not yet in her teens may suddenly find herself in charge of an entire household or forced to provide most of the economic support for her family. A girl who has spent her young life shrouded and kept behind closed doors by her family to ensure her “virtue” may find herself suddenly thrust into a very adult world of sexual exploitation and abuse inflicted by war. Even as a young child, a girl may be spurned and rejected by her family if she has been raped. Or, a daughter's young body might be bartered by her family as a desperate means of getting money, food and other vital goods and services.

At the same time, the unexpected new roles and responsibilities thrust upon girls during conflict confer a significant measure of independence for the first time in their lives. They may have access to education and skills training for the first time when they become refugees. Regular health care may be available, which may not have been true in their former lives. There is potential, in fact, for these new life patterns to be transformative.

This book is an attempt to tell the untold story of the millions of refugee girls whose voices are almost never heard. While much of the refugee experience for girls is difficult and depressing to read about, refugee girls are resilient and strong. Their lives are not easy, yet they strive to make the most of the opportunities they are offered.



Girls, like these Afghan refugees in Pakistan, are resilient despite all the problems they face.

“COLLATERAL VIOLENCE” SUFFERED BY GIRLS

Alphonsine and her family were returning to their house when Alphonsine stepped on an unseen mine The explosion had smashed Alphonsine’s legs and fractured her left forearm. We had to amputate both legs above the knee.

Surgeon for EMERGENCY, Rwanda²

When Mariatu was 12 years old, young rebels in Sierra Leone captured her and cut off both her hands. Today, at 22, Mariatu is a college student in Canada, where she is studying to become a counselor for abused women and children. She hopes to work for the United Nations, raising awareness of the impact of war on children, and to run her own foundation to raise money for homes for abused women and children in Sierra Leone.

Women’s Refugee Commission 2009 Voices of Courage honoree

Civilian injuries and deaths greatly exceed military fatalities in all war-torn regions today. Wherever armed forces are fighting among or near civilian populations, countless civilians — men, women, girls and boys — suffer. In the past decade, more than two million children have been killed in armed conflict, while six million have been injured and more than one million have been orphaned or separated from their families.

Landmines wreak special havoc, and are one of the most common causes of injury to children caught in war zones. Approximately 110 million active landmines lie scattered in more than 60 countries. Placed on the ground by fighters or dropped over vast areas by planes and helicopters, these small plastic explosive devices, sometimes designed to look like toys, kill or maim more than 2,000 people a month. One out of three landmine victims is under the age of 15.

Landmines, guns and bombs kill girls and boys. But because of their gender, girls caught in the crossfire of war are frequently subject to an additional dimension of violence and violation. The United Nations Secretary-General stated in an October 2002 report on women, peace and security that “[t]he differential impact of armed conflict and specific vulnerabilities of women [and girls] can be seen in all phases of displacement.”



Two-year-old Heba takes her first steps with prosthetic limbs, in Damascus, Syria.

Girls and women fleeing conflict are routinely ambushed when walking through fields and deserts, villages and towns, on what is often a long route to refuge. Without money or other resources, displaced women and girls attempting to flee may be compelled to exchange sex in return for safe passage, food, shelter and other resources.

Reliable statistics on gender-based violence are impossible to come by. Gender-based violence — including sexual violence and exploitation, trafficking, forced and early marriage and female genital mutilation — threatens girls in conflict regions throughout the world. These specific acts of victimization have a distinct and debilitating impact on girls' daily lives, preventing them from attending school or participating in public life, or leaving their homes at all.

Government and rebel soldiers, with their guns, knives and other weapons, perpetrate most of the sexual violence against girls and women in conflict-affected regions. But armed conflict permits other perpetrators of abuse and violence against girls to act with impunity as well.

Opportunities for sexual violence and exploitation during conflict are rife: random rape, abduction into armed militias or robbery by bandits. Girls and women fleeing conflict are routinely ambushed when walking through fields and deserts, villages and towns, on what is often a long route to refuge. Without money or other resources, displaced women and girls attempting to flee may be compelled to exchange sex in return for safe passage, food, shelter and other resources. They may also turn to smugglers to assist in their escape, which presents its own set of dire consequences.

When refugee girls reach their destination, the threat of sexual violence and exploitation is rarely eradicated from their lives. If they are in an urban setting, they generally do not have access to assistance and protection by governments or humanitarian organizations, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation by local residents.

Girls in refugee camps — run by international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) under the auspices of the United Nations — are also at risk of sexual violence. Camps are often located in or near areas of active conflict, limiting their ability to offer real refuge from violence. When they are located near towns or urban centers, local residents may enter the camps and harass the refugee population.

Even United Nations peacekeepers have been found guilty of abusing girls in many countries, including East Timor, Bosnia, Chad and Nepal. In response to queries regarding allegations of sexual abuse by UN peacekeeping operations, the UN Secretariat received 105 reports of allegations, 45 percent involving sex with minors and 15 percent involving rape or sexual assault.

GIRLS AS TARGETS AND INSTRUMENTS OF WAR

One day she was with her two daughters when they were all, at the same time, raped by three of the fighters Listening to the screams of her youngest daughter, she was powerless to do anything as slowly the voice of her 10-year-old girl became silent. The young girl died from the assault.

Gertrude Garway, gender-based violence program officer, International Rescue Committee, Liberia

Men and boys are still more likely than women and girls to carry weapons and be parties to warring factions. But girls and women — generally unarmed and not direct parties to warring factions — suffer significant conflict-related casualties resulting primarily from being made calculated targets of violence and aggression. Those at war seek to disempower and humiliate their enemy. Many fighting forces have found that there is no better way to accomplish this objective than by targeting and raping women and girls.

Gender-based violence, in its most horrific form, is used as a calculated strategic device of war. When sexual violence is employed as a military stratagem and an instrument of war, the types of violence deployed are calculated to maximize horror and demoralization. Targeting young girls achieves this most simply and effectively. They are not armed. They pose no physical threat. And targeting them, both government soldiers and rebel groups have found, can be a very effective means of intimidating and humiliating, terrorizing and demoralizing an entire population. The younger the victim, the greater the impact. For example, human rights organizations have documented rape and sexual violence used to terrorize and displace rural communities throughout the Darfur region of Sudan, where girls as young as seven and eight years old have been victims.

Forced impregnation has also been deployed in recent conflicts in East Timor, Kosovo and Rwanda, where tens of thousands of girls have suffered the trauma of being raped repeatedly and impregnated by their violators. In Rwanda, babies born from this kind of rape are called “enfants du mauvais souvenir” (“children of bad memories”) or “devil’s children.” In Kosovo, they are called “children of shame.”



Displaced girls like this girl in Darfur, Sudan, are vulnerable to many threats.



This girl is carrying a toy gun, but many girls who are conscripted as child soldiers carry—and use—real weapons.

With the right help, former child soldiers, girls and boys, who participate in well-run disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) programs and have access to education or skills training, can rejoin their families and become valuable members of their communities.

FIGHTING ISN'T JUST FOR BOYS: GIRLS GO TO WAR

I'm a 14-year-old girl fighting with rebel troops in Sri Lanka, who kidnapped me when I was only eight. I didn't know why I had to fight government soldiers. A rebel leader told me that I had to kill as many soldiers as possible for independence. I just want to be a good girl and have a normal life.

14-year-old girl, Sri Lanka³

I was captured in Lofa County by government forces. The forces beat me, they held me and kept me in the bush. I was tied with my arms kept still and was raped there. I was 14 years old After the rape I was used in the fighting to carry medicine.

Evelyn, recruited in Liberia by government forces at age 14⁴

There are at least 300,000 child soldiers in the world today. One in three is a girl.

In Liberia, children as young as seven have been found in combat, while in Cambodia, a survey of wounded soldiers found that 20 percent of them were between the ages of 10 and 14 when recruited. Since 2002, the Lord's Resistance Army, a rebel group in northern Uganda, has abducted more than 8,400 children, many of whom have been forced to attack their own families, neighbors and villages.

One major study estimated that between 1990 and 2003, girls were part of fighting forces in 55 countries.⁵ Human Rights Watch has estimated that in Colombia, up to 20 percent of paramilitary forces are child soldiers — roughly 11,000 to 14,000 children — and anywhere from one quarter to one half of them are “recruited” girls, some as young as eight years old.

Sometimes girls caught in war-torn regions choose to enlist for protection in response to threats of violence. Among Liberian girl ex-combatants, the number one reason given for joining a fighting force was for protection from sexual violence. A number of Liberian girls reported joining fighting forces after government forces had killed their parents and raped the girls in their families.

Girls sometimes join the fighting forces because they passionately believe in the cause they are fighting for. Voluntary enlistment by children is hardly the norm,

however. Most girls who end up as members of armed groups are either abducted or physically coerced. Many are raped and sexually assaulted at the time of their abduction. Although their abductors are more likely to be rebel forces, thousands of girl soldiers are also recruited into service by government troops.

Boys and girls may both receive weapons and military training and engage in frontline combat, and both are often sent ahead to demine contaminated areas. They frequently participate in raids to steal food and other supplies, and to abduct other children. Both may work as porters, helping to carry food, weapons and loot, as their armed groups tend to be constantly on the move. And both are often put to work in illicit commercial operations, such as mineral mines, rubber plantations and logging operations, as well as forced to act as human “mules,” carrying weapons, gems, drugs and other illicit goods.

But because of their gender, girls are frequently expected to provide an additional service to armed groups. They serve as sex slaves, their young bodies offered up as inexpensive rewards. In conflict regions throughout the world, girl soldiers are commonly divided up and allocated to soldiers and rebels to serve as their “wives.”

Child combatants — boys and girls alike — suffer chronic and severe physical and mental health problems and injuries. Many child combatants are regularly supplied with opiates, marijuana, cocaine and other drugs to make them more malleable and fearless.

Girl combatants face unique health issues because of the sexual violence they experience. Health complications arising from pregnancy, delivery, abortion or miscarriage, often aggravated by the absence of any health care as well as an acute lack of knowledge about reproductive health on the part of young girl soldiers, are common. Girls are also susceptible to contracting HIV and other sexually transmitted infections.

Large numbers of girl soldiers become girl mothers. They are forced to fight with infants on their backs, their babies heavily drugged to ensure that they remain quiet. Girl soldier mothers who return from military captivity face rejection and stigmatization by their families and communities, and threats and abuses against them and their children. They are less likely to return to school and have their children attend school. Their prospects for marriage are reduced. In addition, they are often excluded from rehabilitation and reintegration programs, which help children adjust to civilian life and help ensure they are accepted by their families and communities.

Former girl soldiers, especially those who bear children, are among the most invisible of girls.

Yet, with the right help, former child soldiers, girls and boys, who participate in well-run disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) programs and have access to education or skills training can rejoin their families and become valuable members of their communities. Some success has been reported when nongovernmental organizations work closely with community leaders, stressing forgiveness for, and acceptance of, children who had been forced into their roles as soldiers. Traditional cleansing and healing ceremonies also appear to increase community acceptance of, and trust in, the children.

GIRLS FOR SALE

Two young girls picked up in an immigration raid were transferred to a shelter One of the girls revealed that she was recruited by a relative of the restaurant owner, was forced to work at the restaurant even though other work had been promised, had been pressured sexually and endured conditions of debt bondage.

Michelle Brané, Women's Refugee Commission, director, detention and asylum program⁶

Trafficking of human beings is believed to be the third largest source of money for organized crime, after arms and drugs. Experts estimate that globally at least 1.8 million children, primarily young girls, are exploited in the sex industry each year. Annual profits from human trafficking have been estimated at five to seven billion dollars.

It is no surprise that traffickers flock to conflict-affected regions. Traffickers know that children can be abducted with impunity amid the chaos of armed fighting, as well as in illegal border crossings as their families attempt escape. Traffickers also take advantage of the lack of viable income-generation options for refugees in camps, making refugees especially easy prey.

The abduction and “sale” of girls can become an important income source, in particular for war lords, rebels and guerillas. Rebels may enslave girls and send them to live in labor camps around mines or drug-growing plantations, which are central pillars of war economies and sources of funding for war lords. Fighters in government military forces, paramilitaries and rebel militias also constitute a large group of customers for prostitution, which is made possible by trafficking young girls and women. The deployment of peacekeeping forces in Sierra Leone, Kosovo and Bosnia was known to have created large local sex markets.

Children — and girls in particular — are ideal for trafficking. Having no bargaining power whatsoever, young girls require no payment, are cheap to maintain and can be easily manipulated. With threats of physical beatings, withholding of food and water or other punishment, they can be made to work seven days a week while forced to sleep on the floor.

No matter how bad the work or conditions, young girls rarely dare to escape. Threats, beatings and being locked up serve as powerful deterrents. A child trapped in a country not her own, often unable to speak the language of that country, knowing no one other than her captors and clueless as to where to find help, is unlikely to attempt escape.

Even if there is still some sort of home or community to return to, both the trafficker and the girl are fully aware of the attached social stigma and subsequent rejection that will follow her home, rendering her unlikely to return there.

The devastating impact of trafficking on individual victims — who often suffer physical and emotional abuse, rape, theft and even death — is incalculable. Victims of trafficking often find themselves enslaved in isolation in foreign countries thousands of miles from their homes, without even the small comfort of similarly situated peers nearby with whom they can share their misery.

DEFENDING THE FAMILY HONOR

Many girls are forced to marry at early ages by their parents because of poverty. Their husbands are much older than them Men marry many wives and have dozens of children and they cannot afford to care for them.

Abibatu, a teenager in Sierra Leone

In many fragile regions, the dominant culture tends to be patriarchal, with a strong gender imbalance in the rights and duties of its citizens. When fighting breaks out, these imbalances may grow still more extreme. Often, daughters and sisters are the shattered victims of war-bred violent impulses and behaviors.

Honor killings are found to increase dramatically in wartime. Girls and young women are the principal victims. Desperate families feel pressure to arrange early marriages for their daughters and sisters — sometimes as a means of protecting them from random sexual violence, often so that there is one less mouth to feed and, possibly, to accrue some financial gains from the marriage. To ensure the desirability of daughters and sisters to prospective grooms and their



In refugee camps, many are forced to share small, rudimentary shelters which offer little privacy and are often far from a water source or latrines.

Honor killings are one means of handling daughters and sisters who have lost their “virtue,” whether as a result of rape or through a consensual, but non-approved, relationship.

families, girls are increasingly expected to adhere to ever-stricter notions of modesty, virtue and compliance, and family members are quick to impose harsh measures to protect and preserve their chastity.

Honor killings are one means of handling daughters and sisters who have lost their “virtue,” whether as a result of rape or through a consensual, but non-approved, relationship. If the girl is not killed to regain the family’s honor, families will frequently opt not to report sexual assault to authorities or to seek medical treatment for injuries caused by rape, in order to avoid the catastrophic effects of social stigma.

In deciding to conceal their injuries rather than reporting them and obtaining medical assistance, girls are at risk of still more violence and more harm. Perpetrators who are never accused or punished or made to suffer any adverse consequences are free to continue to inflict harm with complete impunity. The cost to girls who are condemned to live with often severe physical and psychological injuries without any treatment or help is incalculable.

Early betrothal is the norm in many regions of the world, even in the absence of conflict. Financial hardship resulting from conflict, however, puts additional pressure on families to marry off their daughters at earlier and earlier ages in order to secure a bride price, or at least reduce the number of dependents they must support. In its visits to refugee camps in Chad, the Women’s Refugee Commission found that Darfuri refugee girls were married, on average, between the age of 14 and 18. Bride prices gave families an incentive to marry off their daughters early so that they no longer had to support them and could instead collect payment for them.

Marriage and schooling are almost always mutually exclusive. Girls who marry young may never know what it feels like to be autonomous or independent. Crippled by these limitations, they are much less equipped to be able to complete their education, learn a skill or earn a living. Child marriage is not only a consequence of poverty, it is also one of its principal causes.

Girls who marry young are at greater risk of physical violence at the hands of their husbands and in-laws, due to the inherent age and power differences. Girl brides forced to have intercourse before they have started menstruating suffer tremendous health risks. Sierra Leone, where early forced marriages are common, has the highest maternal mortality rate in the world, with a lifetime risk of maternal death at one in eight.⁸

CLOSE QUARTERS: LIFE IN A REFUGEE CAMP

The locals threaten us, they come inside the camp and drink. They come near my home, every day they come. I can't count how many, ages 16 to 25. Boys from the camp learn from them and imitate them. They speak filthy words. They do illegal acts to us. Even to small girls. In my sector there was a case involving a three- or four-year-old girl baby.

Shanti, a Bhutanese refugee teenager, Nepal⁹

Our refugee life is quite different from life in our country. In the refugee camp in Thailand, our house is made of bamboo and the roof is made of leaves. We don't have any spaces between the houses . . . [S]o in the early morning when we get up we hear different voices and sounds, for instance, the sound of dogs, pigs, birds, cocks and people cutting wood or bamboo. We have no electricity, so we have to burn a fire so that we can cook. Some people can grow vegetables if they got a space at the back.

S.N., a 20-year-old Karenni refugee from Burma

Refugee camps vary tremendously in size and overall condition. With populations ranging from a few thousand to almost a hundred thousand, camps may be located at the edges of towns or cities, or in some of the most desolate and inhospitable regions on Earth.

Some camps are reasonably well organized. Others — forced into existence quickly to accommodate sudden large influxes of people — are makeshift and haphazard. Depending on availability, mud, sticks, stones, plastic sheeting, metal sheets or bamboo fronds are used to construct shelters, or tents are provided by international organizations. Sometimes, shelter may consist of subdivided abandoned warehouses, former factories, abandoned public buildings or unused train cars.

Camps are designed to address temporary emergency conditions. Tents and other shelter materials provided are of limited durability, and are inadequate to protect refugees from long seasons of extreme heat or cold or rain. Infestations of scorpions, snakes, malaria-carrying and dengue-infected mosquitoes, rats and



TOP: A Roma girl with her younger brother in the Stankovic II Refugee Camp in Macedonia, run by CARE.



BOTTOM: A family from Darfur in a refugee camp in Chad.

other animal pests are common in camps. Cooking often relies on open fires in crowded conditions; open flames may cause fires, and smoke inhalation causes respiratory infections, especially in young children.

Camps are frequently severely overcrowded. Unrelated families, sometimes from groups that have traditionally been seen as the enemy, may be forced to live in close quarters; several families may have to share a very small living space, with little or no privacy. Camps are usually poorly lit, and night patrols absent or untrustworthy. Too often, food and water, latrines, schools and health clinics are located far from the living quarters, forcing girls to make trips fraught with danger to fulfill their basic needs.

Latrines are generally squeezed in wherever space can be found, at distances that are either too far to be easily accessible or too close to be environmentally safe. If they are too far from dwellings, or the lines for their use are too long, refugees will

not use them and human waste will end up being disposed of indiscriminately around the camp, posing major sanitation risks to the community. If latrines — often little more than a pit in the ground covered by a concrete slab with a hole in it, enclosed in a flimsy structure — are too close to tents or water supplies, contamination and sanitation issues again arise.

With the length of time people spend as refugees now averaging 17 years, many camps gradually become more like villages, with more substantial shelters, stores, schools and clinics. However, they are never an ideal place for children to grow up in, and refugees yearn to return home or find a permanent solution to their situation.



Refugees and temporary shelters crowd the landscape at the Iridimi Refugee Camp near Iriba, Chad.

THE HAZARDS OF COOKING A MEAL

Internally displaced women and girls in Darfur are at risk of rape, harassment and other forms of violence every time they leave the camps to collect wood.

Erin Patrick, Women's Refugee Commission, senior program officer, fuel and firewood initiative¹⁰

Nemat, a 21-year-old ... left the camp with three friends to get firewood to cook with. In the early afternoon a group of men in uniforms caught and gang-raped her. "They said, 'You are black people. We want to wipe you out,'" Nemat recalled.

Nicholas Kristof, the New York Times¹¹

In most developing countries, girls are responsible for the care of younger siblings and meal preparation, as well as fetching firewood and water and other household chores. These responsibilities often become more onerous — and dangerous — in conflict situations.

Collecting firewood for cooking is one of the major occupations for girls living in refugee camps. They have little choice; the food rations made available to their families — often beans or rice — cannot be eaten unless cooked, and most families have no income to purchase alternative food or cooking fuel. In their search for firewood, women and girls are often forced to leave the relative safety of camp perimeters, and as firewood becomes increasingly scarce, they have to travel ever-greater distances. Girls and women in the Abu Shouk camp in North Darfur, for example, were forced to start their search for firewood before dawn if there was to be any hope of feeding their families later in the day. Walking in small groups in different directions, these girls and women typically traveled six miles or more just to find a single tree. When trees could not be found, they resorted to digging by hand in the hard clay to find pieces of roots that might be combustible.

In Darfur, as in other regions throughout the world, one of the gravest risks faced by girls collecting firewood is sexual assault by armed men. Women and girls collecting firewood in Darfur are prime targets of military and security forces and the government-backed Janjaweed militia, which are all aware of



Girls are at risk of sexual assault when they collect wood for cooking or to sell.

these early-morning treks into the wilderness and take full advantage of the absence of any kind of rule of law to assault them. Men and boys do not leave the camps to collect firewood as they might be killed; women and girls are “only raped.”

Firewood-related violence can be reduced in several ways, including providing appropriate cooking fuel along with food, and using alternative, non-wood-burning stoves. If safer ways of making money other than selling wood are available, girls will not need to leave camps to gather wood to sell.



When girls, like these girls in Ouaddai, Chad, have to spend many hours collecting firewood, they have little time for school or other activities.

ALL WE WANT IS TO GO TO SCHOOL

A generation without education is doomed. We need assurance, we need to be heard and to participate, we need a future. We have a *right* to education and we want to go to school.

Betty, 17, a displaced girl, northern Uganda¹²

When war strikes, school attendance plummets. In some countries, girls' education is not just a casualty in a conflict, but an actual target. Afghanistan is the most obvious example, with recent reports of teachers being shot or decapitated for teaching girls, and parents being warned not to send their daughters to school. Girls on their way to school have had acid thrown in their faces by Taliban forces. Many schools have been burned to the ground, and many girl students have died.

Even where children make it to refugee camps, schooling can remain elusive. Four years into the protracted crisis in Darfur, education was still not viewed as a priority by the international community.

In some refugee settings, children do not have access even to primary education, and the schools that do exist are severely overcrowded, with as many as 100 children in a classroom. Appropriately trained teachers and basic school supplies are scarce. Teachers' salaries are often the most contentious issue — too little to live on and inconsistently paid. As limited resources are stretched and the quality of education suffers, many young people leave school without the necessary skills and confidence to make sound life choices.

While it is important to expand access to quality primary education for girls, it is by no means enough; girls also need to attend secondary school. The benefits of secondary education for girls are vast and well documented, and include increased economic opportunities and planning for smaller and healthier families. However, many donors and relief agencies view secondary school as a luxury, entitled to no funding at all. Sometimes, the only chance of any secondary education depends on being able to afford transportation and fees required to attend school in the nearest town. Very few refugees can afford these costs. Meanwhile, non-formal education and vocational training for adolescent refugees are often not seen as a priority. The programs that are available are not always relevant. For example, participants



Refugee classrooms are often overcrowded. Sometimes there are no classrooms, and students meet in the open.

TOP: IRC school, Guinea.

MIDDLE: Tanah Pasir School, Aceh, Indonesia.

BOTTOM: Afghanistan.

often do not develop skills that they can use locally, and programs therefore do not lead to employment or opportunities to earn an income.

Worldwide, only six percent of all refugee students are enrolled in secondary school, and of those, girls' enrollment remains especially low — from 18 percent of total enrollment in Kenya to 48 percent in Thailand. Refugee girls typically attend school in far smaller numbers than boys, and as the level of education increases, this disparity grows.

For too long, education has not been considered a priority issue in humanitarian emergencies. Children traumatized by conflict and displacement are missing the opportunity for structure, stability and a sense of normalcy and hope for a better future that schooling provides. Schools can be places where life-saving information, such as landmine awareness and HIV/AIDS prevention, is taught. Because so many “emergencies” are now protracted and refugees can live in camps for many years, it is even more critical that education be integrated into any humanitarian response. Without access to secondary school or vocational training, thousands of displaced teens are forced to sit idle in camps without constructive activities to fill their time. Their growing frustration and despair can fuel and perpetuate more violence and more insecurity.

When refugee girls do go to school, safety issues are pervasive. Girls are especially vulnerable to sexual harassment when walking, often long distances, to and from school. Fears that their daughters will be “spoiled” while at school and become “damaged goods” for marriage prompt many parents to keep their daughters at home. Sexual harassment within schools adversely affects girls' school attendance. Teachers — overwhelmingly male — at times abuse their authority by extracting sexual favors in exchange for grades or basic school items.

Families thrown into extreme poverty as a result of conflict often require their daughters to withdraw from school and to make other sacrifices for the family's functioning and survival. When mothers are forced to find work outside the home, older daughters are expected to care for siblings and do additional household chores in their absence. As a result, they must stay home from school.

For poor families, even modest costs associated with educating a child — for example, school supplies and suitable clothing — may amount to a huge percentage of family income. Impoverished families are less likely to view the costs of educating a daughter as an investment with beneficial return, as girls often marry young and are expected thereafter to devote themselves exclusively to their husband and his family. Sons, on the other hand, are often expected to care for and support their own parents and immediate family over the long term. “Son preference” is the norm in many stable countries, but is even more pronounced in times of crisis when there is less money to pay for all costs of school attendance.

For the most part, girls who marry young are forced to leave school; their husbands or in-laws frequently insist that they stay home to help with household chores. Early motherhood often means the end of a girl's education. Young mothers may be barred from attending school because of exclusionary policies and social stigma, and may have no extended family available to provide childcare.

Many refugee girls drop out of school each month when they have their menstrual period. Research studies across 30 African countries have documented that where no private toilet facilities are available at school, the majority of girls will not attend school when they have their period because they have no adequate way to take care of personal hygiene.

Although many refugee girls do not have the opportunity to go to school, others are able to attend classes, especially at the elementary level, for the first time when they are in a refugee camp. Emergencies can provide opportunities to work with displaced communities for social transformation.¹³ Organizations and networks such as the Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE) are leading the charge to ensure that all children who are affected by armed conflict are able to go to — and stay in — school.



After they were displaced, some girls in Darfur had the opportunity to go to school for the first time.



A 12-year-old girl (right) who lives at the Abu Shouk camp for displaced people near the city of El Fasher, capital of North Darfur State, relates how she was separated from two friends while on a mission to gather firewood, and raped by government soldiers. Although the incident was reported to police, no follow-up action was taken.

THEIR BODIES ARE NOT THEIR OWN

I am sleeping every night with a hungry stomach. I choose to sleep with a soldier who is HIV-positive who provides me with food. I know eventually I would contract HIV but at least I continue to live another few years with food in my stomach.

Young woman, northern Uganda¹⁴

My sister is only 15 years old but every night she goes out to have sex with humanitarian workers and peacekeepers for money. I tried to stop her before but I have given up since I do not have anything to give her. We all rely on the money she gets to support the family.

17-year-old young man, Liberia¹⁵

As displaced families fall into a downward spiral of insecurity and poverty, they sometimes determine that they have no alternative but to barter their daughters' bodies to survive. Sexually exploitative relationships become a principal survival mechanism for many girls and their families made desperate by prolonged conflict.

In a groundbreaking investigation undertaken by the United Nations in 2001 to assess the scope and nature of gender-based violence and exploitation occurring in refugee camps throughout Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea, investigators found that the single greatest protection issue affecting entire refugee populations, and especially young girls, was sexual violence and exploitation.

The study found that girls, typically between 13 and 18 years old, were involved in sexually exploitative relations, with the youngest reported girl being five years old. The study also found that although the girls often knew that sexual exploitation violated their fundamental human rights, they felt trapped in their situation and unable to leave. Parents who took part in the study often knew that their daughters were involved in sexually exploitative relationships, but felt that they did not have alternatives, as they were not otherwise able to provide for them. In many instances, parents were instrumental in pushing their daughters into such relationships.

The study found that sexual exploitation cropped up in connection with obtaining goods and services of every kind: in the distribution of ration cards, food and water; in the provision of oil, fuel, medicine, medical services and other social services; in the provision of plastic sheeting and tarpaulins needed for shelter; in the availability of transport; in the awarding of educational supplies and scholarships; in the procurement of registration for repatriation; and in the receipt of desperately needed loans.

Typically, the compensation received in exploitative sexual transactions involving refugee girls is paltry. Girls have little or no negotiating power; the exploiter sets the rate as well as the type of consideration to be received. Payment is often made in kind rather than cash, for example, a bar of soap, a plastic sheet or a pair of shoes.

While many families are pressured to place their daughters in exploitative sexual situations, others are driven to do anything that promotes their daughters as desirable and marriageable and enhances their value. In many parts of the world, what gives a young girl greatest value is her virginity, fidelity and cleanliness.

In many regions, the primary method employed by a family to ensure a daughter's virginity and fidelity is female genital mutilation (FGM). The practice of FGM can take on special urgency during conflict. Not only does it enhance the desirability of a girl as a marriage prospect, it also helps families avoid the risk of scorn and rejection they might otherwise face by failing to embrace important cultural traditions that are under threat in conflict.

The health consequences of FGM are often severe. Immediate physical effects may include severe pain, shock and hemorrhaging — and sometimes death. There is also a high risk of local and chronic infection.

The United Nations has called for an end to the practice of FGM,¹⁶ and while it is common in refugee settings, such situations also provide an opportunity for education about the harmful effects of the practice. For example, refugees working for international humanitarian agencies might become peer educators and discourage fellow refugees from carrying out FGM on their daughters.

Ethiopia has been successful in its efforts to end the practice of FGM. A network of more than 40 NGOs, grassroots groups, government agencies and international organizations have partnered in an anti-FGM campaign that has resulted in significant decreases in the practice.¹⁷



Many children in protracted refugee situations, such as Afghans in Pakistan, spend their entire childhood living in refugee camps.



Early motherhood is common in refugee settings, where reproductive health services are often not available, especially at the beginning of a crisis.

A UNICEF survey found that girls in war-torn southern Sudan in 2004 were more likely to die in pregnancy and childbirth than to finish primary school.

NOT ONLY MEASLES: SPECIAL HEALTH RISKS FOR GIRLS

Yatta, 17, was confused about family planning methods due to misinformation she received from her friends [S]he did not use a family planning method and became pregnant. As a result, she had an unsafe abortion and consequently nearly lost her life.

Yatta lived in Sinje refugee camp, Liberia¹⁸

The health of all civilians suffers during war. Shootings, explosions and fires result in huge numbers of civilian casualties. Beyond direct war-related injuries and deaths, countless people uprooted by war become ill.

Inadequate food, hygiene and sanitation result in disease. The most common health problems plaguing refugee camps, in addition to malnutrition, are infectious diseases such as malaria, diarrhea and acute respiratory infections. Simple colds can rapidly turn into deadly upper respiratory infections such as pneumonia, a frequent cause of death. Measles is another leading killer of refugee children.

Children — boys and girls alike — are more at risk than any other group of contracting illnesses and suffering greater harm as a result of being ill. However, refugee girls suffer additional grave health issues unique to them that too often go unaddressed in the allocation of scarce health resources.

As discussed above, gender-based violence is the single most harmful issue affecting displaced girls. The diseases and injuries, both physical and psychological, resulting from these violations are often devastating. Worldwide, violence against women is as serious a cause of death and incapacity as cancer, and a greater cause of ill health than traffic accidents and malaria combined.¹⁹

Girls who have been sexually assaulted may suffer from internal bleeding as a result of severe tears to their vaginas. Fistulas (tears in the walls separating internal organs such as the vagina, bladder and rectum) are common results of sexual violence for young girls who have not yet physically matured. Girls with fistula often suffer family and community rejection and are forced to stay at a distance because of uncontrolled leakage of urine and feces. A fistula can

be corrected only through surgery, which is often unaffordable or otherwise unavailable to most girl victims.

Exceptionally high rates of early pregnancy and childbirth have been documented in some refugee settings. Data from a clinic on the Thai-Burma border in 2003 showed that 13 percent of 337 patients receiving care for complication of abortion were adolescents. A study of adolescent pregnancies in Congolese refugee camps in Tanzania found that almost 30 percent of all births at one health facility involved girls between the ages of 14 and 18.

UNICEF reports that more girls and women die from childbirth complications in developing countries than from any other cause. Girls under 16 are five times more likely to die in childbirth than women in their twenties, and teenage girls are twice as likely to die as women in their twenties. A UN survey found that girls in war-torn southern Sudan in 2004 were more likely to die in pregnancy and childbirth than to finish primary school.²⁰

Displaced girls experience high rates of unsafe abortions. Adolescents account for an estimated five million of the 20 million unsafe abortions occurring every year, which continue to be a major cause of maternal death.

The consequences of sexual violence and exploitation, including early motherhood and unsafe abortion, create enormous health risks to girls. Rarely, however, is it part of emergency response to provide the special kinds of health care most needed by girls with these specific health issues. Reproductive and maternal health is often viewed as “nonessential” humanitarian assistance and consequently underfunded.

But there are hopeful examples of programming that is focusing on the health needs of girls and adolescents. For example, the Straight Talk Foundation’s Gulu Youth Centre in northern Uganda reaches out to young people through youth clubs and peer educators. The center offers recreation such as volleyball and basketball; entertainment with music and dancing; health education through radio; and free sexual and reproductive health services, including family planning and testing and treatment for sexually transmitted infections. The center’s success shows the importance of youth-friendly services in the effort to increase young people’s use of health services, the need to work with community members to enhance understanding for young people’s unique issues and the value of addressing the particular needs of displaced young people.



Girls, like this one in Sierra Leone, are often responsible for caring for younger siblings, which means they cannot attend school.



A refugee girl's options for earning a living are limited, and may include selling produce in the market, as here in Sierra Leone.

MAKING A LIVING

In the morning, I fetch water, sweep and pray. Then I go to find a job for the day. Usually I pound rice. I work all day, until evening. I get no food, only 400 to 500 [francs]. Sometimes they don't even pay me until the next day, so I have to go back. I will be in the sun until evening. I feel pain all over my body ... I don't go to school ... I want to work. I live with my grandmother and she is very old. I need to take care of her.

Sierra Leonean refugee girl, 14, in a camp in Guinea²¹

Livelihoods, the means of making a living, are vital for daily sustenance and provide the foundation for a hopeful future. Livelihoods programs for refugees include non-formal education, vocational education and skills training programs, income generation activities, food-for-work programs, apprenticeship placement projects, microcredit schemes and agricultural programs.

While the challenges and constraints of making a living are daunting for refugees, girls and their families are resilient and resourceful.

As mentioned earlier, refugee girls are often responsible for daily activities that help sustain their household, such as collecting water and firewood, cooking and caring for siblings. As a result, they are often unable to go to school or take advantage of livelihoods training, limiting their choices for work.

Girls are often exposed to sexual violence and exploitation. Viable, safe and dignified economic options reduce girls' vulnerability to exploitation and serve as a protective tool in the fight against gender-based violence, unwanted pregnancies and subsequent unsafe abortions, and HIV/AIDS. Displacement often leads to changes in gender roles that can open up options that may previously have been unavailable to girls.

Refugee girls and young women want increased access to economic opportunities. When asked about their needs, they consistently emphasize and prioritize their desire for income-generating work. When provided with the necessary support, refugee girls can learn new skills or use existing ones to earn a dignified living, whether they are displaced, returning home or resettled.

Well-designed livelihoods programs can help displaced people become more self-reliant, preparing them for the future and giving them hope that their lives will, in fact, improve in the future. For example, in Sierra Leone, Liberia and Guinea, the International Rescue Committee’s CYCLE program (Countering Youth and Child Labor through Education) aims to prevent and respond to exploitative child labor by taking children and adolescents out of dangerous labor, such as mining and prostitution, and putting them into school or skills training programs. Its strengths include its holistic approach, community involvement, ongoing monitoring and provision of starter kits, which contain tools or supplies needed to get established in a trade. CYCLE also relies on many local partners to participate, thus building local capacity and increasing sustainability.²²

Prioritizing safe livelihood strategies that will enable employment in the local market can help prevent adolescents’ conscription into military forces, prostitution and other exploitative labor practices, greatly improving the likelihood for lasting peace.



Women and girls are often encouraged to develop skills such as sewing and craftwork, which are less lucrative than more typically “male” skills, such as carpentry. Livelihoods programs for refugees need to be based on market needs.



Twenty-four Afghan squatter families lived in former stores in Shamshatoo Camp, Afghanistan, after they returned from Pakistan.

Even if an individual woman or girl has a strong claim that should entitle her to resettlement, her claim can be overridden or superseded by a husband's or father's claim or through procedures that determine asylum status for an entire group.

FINDING A PERMANENT HOME

Everyone says “yes, yes, yes” [about including the girls in resettlement], but then no one has taken any significant action.

U.S. government official, speaking about how few Sudanese girls have been resettled in the United States²³

There are three “durable solutions” for refugees. The most common solution is repatriation, voluntary return to their home country. Alternatively, they may seek to establish lawful residence in the country where they have sought refuge, integrating with the local community. Or, they may seek resettlement in a third country.

VOLUNTARY REPATRIATION

Girls and women are rarely given the opportunity to participate in discussions in which repatriation decisions are made. They may not be given vital information regarding their home country's political and economic situation, which would allow them to make their own informed decision.

While life as a refugee is far from ideal, for refugee girls a return to their country of origin might mean giving up many of the rights and privileges they enjoyed while living as a refugee, including access to education, food and water, health care and whatever physical protection may have been offered in enclosed and guarded refugee camps. Upon return to their home country, girls and women are often expected to return to traditional roles.

In many countries, traditional custom as well as inheritance and property law prohibit females from inheriting or owning land or other valuable property. Upon repatriation, women and girls may face immediate destitution if they cannot claim the right to the family home or land when male relatives have been killed or abandoned the family. A girl's only hope at escaping total destitution may be to seek out relationships with men based on extreme dependencies. She may be left with little choice but to engage in commercial sex work, subject herself to exploitative labor practices and relationships, or marry against her will.



Living in a refugee camp is far from ideal, but returning to the home country can also be difficult.

Returning refugee girls may also face the additional hardship of ostracism and condemnation by their home communities. Girls who return with children born out of wedlock, or with the stain of rape or sexually transmitted infections, or with a history of abduction or service in armed militias are often shunned.

While a refugee often yearns to return home, starting again from scratch in a country that may be entirely foreign to her and may still be in a state of chaos is not an easy solution.

LOCAL INTEGRATION

When refugees have lived outside their countries of origin for an extended period, they may conclude that it makes more sense to secure permanent residency in the country where they are living. However, most countries sheltering refugees are not able to offer the level of protection required to ensure girls against further violations of their human rights. Often, the country of refuge is extremely poor and may itself be caught up in or recovering from internal conflict and hostilities. A country unable to provide basic services to even its own citizens will be neither eager nor willing to permit the integration of refugees into its communities.

In cases where few of the basic resources essential for the recovery and well-being of refugee girls are likely to be available, local integration, settling permanently in the community where they have been refugees, is a difficult path.

RESETTLEMENT

Resettlement in a third country, usually located in the West, may offer the greatest hope and security to many refugee girls. However, girls seeking resettlement also face obstacles. Only for the smallest handful of refugees is permanent resettlement a realistic option. Less than one percent of all refugees are resettled annually.

Even if an individual woman or girl has a strong claim that should entitle her to resettlement, her claim can be overridden or superseded by a husband's or father's claim or through procedures that determine asylum status for an entire group.

Countries also often impose conditions in resettlement decisions that girls and women are less likely to meet. Some countries favor claimants with certain socioeconomic profiles and select refugees for resettlement based in whole or in part on their labor skills, their self-sufficiency or integration potential. Women and girls tend to fare especially poorly when such criteria are applied in resettlement decisions.

Within the past decade, the United Nations and over a half dozen countries have come to recognize that resettlement may be the only realistic option for protecting girls and women and ensuring their long-term well-being. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees has established a "Women at Risk Program," which aims to identify refugee women and girls who are at extreme risk and to fast track their resettlement in one of seven developed countries that have agreed to implement the program. Thus far, however, the annual quotas agreed to by each participating country are met only rarely.

Girls who resettle often thrive, becoming fully integrated into their new country, gaining an education and employment, and often acting as liaison between older members of the family and the community.

SEEKING ASYLUM, FINDING BARRIERS

I am frustrated from being locked up for almost a year. I really can't stand being locked up anymore. I don't need therapy. I need to go home. I haven't spoken to my mother in months. Her phone is cut off.

A., interviewed by Michelle Brané, director, detention and asylum program, Women's Refugee Commission, at a center used to detain children seeking asylum in San Antonio, Texas²⁴

Asylum is a form of protection entitling refugees who have been persecuted or face the threat of persecution in their home country to seek residence in another country. Seeking and securing asylum is a challenge for anyone, but especially for children and even more so for girls.

Children very often have great difficulty establishing that their experiences should count as a “well-founded fear of persecution” (based, for example, on religion, political opinion or race), which forms the legal basis of an asylum claim. The human rights violations that children commonly suffer, including recruitment as child soldiers, trafficking and sexual exploitation, are not traditionally considered “persecution” and therefore fail to provide valid bases for securing asylum. In addition, few children have access to information about how and where to apply for asylum, or know what rights they have and what remedies might be available to them. Children are often unable to articulate their experiences in the framework of an asylum claim.

Most children seeking asylum in the United States must undergo the entire process — which can take months or even years — without a single adult assigned to help them through the process. In the United States, asylum seekers have the right to hire an attorney, but not at government expense. Children, however, do not have the right to a guardian, an adult volunteer or pro bono attorney who will help guide them through the asylum process. The majority of children are forced to represent themselves in court without an attorney or adult to help them.

Children seeking asylum are often treated no better than criminals. They may be separated from their families at the border and placed in separate detention facilities, where they may be locked up for days, weeks, months and even years



This former medium-security prison in Taylor, Texas, is used to detain immigrant families, including young children. Following advocacy by the Women's Refugee Commission and others, the concertina wire was removed, but the fence remains.

Girls in many cultures are taught never to have eye contact with men. When they appear before a male immigration judge, they may avoid looking at him and thus not appear credible.

while their asylum claim is pending. They are sometimes detained with their families, in jail-like facilities.

In an extensive investigation of conditions for children seeking asylum in the United States who are held in detention, the Women's Refugee Commission found that conditions can be dire. Girls almost always experience harrowing journeys before they are apprehended or come forward seeking asylum. Most have been assaulted or raped during their journey. Conditions at Border Patrol stations are particularly difficult. Girls report being held in cells with adult males. They say they are given inadequate food, very limited access to medical care and almost no opportunities for physical activity.

Girls and women seeking asylum based on gender-based persecution face a unique set of obstacles. International refugee law does not specifically recognize gender-based persecution as a valid reason to claim refugee status. However, in 2002, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees released a set of international guidelines affirming that international customary law recognizes that refugees' consideration for status covers "gender-related claims," including sexual violence, domestic violence, trafficking, forced abortion, female genital mutilation, honor killings and forced marriage. And yet, despite these formal clarifications, officials continue to favor narrow definitions of what constitutes a refugee. They remain reluctant to recognize gender-related persecution as grounds for asylum — especially when the persecution is perpetrated by private citizens.

Girls in many cultures are taught never to have eye contact with men. When they appear before a male immigration judge, they may avoid looking at him and thus not appear credible. It is difficult for girls who are suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder to recount their ordeal in a manner that will be deemed convincing. This inability to present a coherent, consistent case may put a girl's asylum case in jeopardy.

Nongovernmental organizations have had some success working with governments to improve conditions for children held in immigration detention, and continue to press for more child-friendly policies and practices that will minimize the number of children detained. Alternatives, such as group homes and fostering, have proved more humane.

Despite all the obstacles girls face in seeking asylum, it is an essential option for girls who cannot find safety in their own countries.

WHY THERE IS CAUSE FOR GREAT HOPE

Thanks to vocational training activities, women who were once dormant are now active. Because of the training, women are able to find jobs.

Lucy, director of Women's Self-Help Development Organization in Juba, Southern Sudan²⁵

We used to send our boys to school, but now we know the benefits of education and will send our girls to school too.

Women's health educator program, Aweil Town, Southern Sudan²⁶

Even as the horrors confronting girls caught in conflict come into sharper focus, the humanitarian community is also learning that these same girls can be extraordinarily powerful agents for promoting good health, stability and prosperity. What these girls need to help break cycles of despair and replace them with cycles of prosperity for themselves and their communities is breathtakingly straightforward. These girls are astonishingly resilient. Like girls everywhere, they often are full of hope, energy and determination. What they need more than anything is adequate health care and education. Prioritizing their special needs in education²⁷ and health care can transform not only their lives, but whole societies and nations.

The evidence for this proposition is overwhelming. Even for a problem as intractable as the AIDS epidemic, we know that the education of girls will best mitigate the spread of the disease. Research shows that giving young people a complete primary education cuts their risk of HIV infection in half.²⁸ In a classroom, girls can be taught what is necessary to promote greater self-protection, as well as how to recognize and dispel myths about the disease.

Educating girls also dramatically reduces infant mortality. Experts have calculated that each additional year of a mother's schooling cuts infant mortality rates by five to 10 percent, and that in Africa, children of mothers who received five years of primary education were 40 percent more likely to live beyond the age of five.²⁹

Educated mothers are more likely to seek prenatal care and have births attended by trained health care workers, and are more likely to understand and follow their



Refugee children are hungry to learn, even in difficult circumstances. Here, stolen moments in Afghanistan.



Families make great sacrifices to send their daughters to school. Even when education is free, families must pay for uniforms and supplies.

recommendations. Education helps mothers learn what children need to stay healthy and how best to provide them with adequate nutrition and hygiene. Promoting education for girls is the single most effective way to encourage and achieve healthier families.³⁰

Girls with schooling are more likely to delay marriage, as well as their first sexual encounters and the birth of their first child. They are also more likely to use contraceptives and family planning methods to space pregnancies at healthy intervals and are more likely to have fewer children overall.³¹

Education also provides girls with more opportunities to work and earn income outside the home, thereby empowering them to stand on a more equal footing with boys and men. Education gives girls greater authority over their bodies and the fundamental decisions most affecting them. Educated girls know to say “no” — to recruiting soldiers, traffickers and other predators and exploiters.

Educated girls not only improve their own welfare, but also the well-being of their children and families, thus transforming societies as a whole. Mothers who have been deprived of education themselves are often less able to appreciate the importance of education. Numerous studies support the powerful link between a mother’s education and its direct effect on a child’s enrollment and educational attainment.

Girls’ education has yet another transformative role to play within the realm of education itself. Special priority should be given to educating girls sufficiently to enable them to become teachers. The presence of female teachers has been shown to significantly improve enrollment, retention and achievement for girls.³²

Education can play a vital role in promoting peace and stability, and in preventing fragile states from falling back into conflict. Educating refugee youth during their displacement provides a critical foundation for rebuilding successful economic, social and political systems upon their eventual return home. Appropriate education engenders the values needed to achieve tolerance, peace, democracy, conflict resolution and human rights, which are paramount to building a strong, peaceful society. Educating girls so that they are more fully engaged in political processes also ensures that social and health issues most critical to the well-being of families and communities will be prioritized.³³

Given the irrefutable evidence supporting the benefits of educating girls, education should become a priority in emergency relief efforts within refugee communities. Unfortunately, however, many of today’s major humanitarian aid donors still balk at the idea of allocating relief funds for the education of children, as they do not view it as life-saving or life-sustaining.

In its visits to 10 refugee camps in Chad in 2005, the Women’s Refugee Commission found that in more than half of the camps, refugee communities had started schools on their own, even before the arrival of any humanitarian aid workers. Many refugee girls aged 11 to 18 were enrolled in school for the very first time. The Women’s Refugee Commission saw teenage girls with their hands raised, straining, eager to answer questions posed by teachers, thrilled to be in school. These stories illustrate how crisis and displacement can sometimes create windows of opportunity.

Recognition of these important possibilities for refugee girls is also growing within the international community. In 2004, the Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies developed for the first time a set of global *Minimum Standards for Education in Emergencies, Chronic Crises and Early Reconstruction*. The *Minimum Standards* serve as both a handbook and an expression of commitment, and are devoted to the concept that all individuals — children, adolescents and adults — have a right to quality education in emergencies. The *Minimum Standards* also create a common language and universal framework for improving the development of appropriate and quality education of refugee girls.

WOMEN'S REFUGEE COMMISSION: WORKING TO IMPROVE THE LIVES OF DISPLACED GIRLS EVERYWHERE

I am so happy with your visit; even though you don't provide direct materials and support, you help to identify long-term solutions in Darfur that can be shared around the world.

Joseph Akwoe, Sudan Council of Churches, Nyala, South Darfur³⁴

For 20 years, the Women's Refugee Commission (formerly the Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children) has been working vigorously to improve the lives of refugee girls. We have identified issues affecting refugee girls, undertaken research and made recommendations to international agencies, including the United Nations and international NGOs, and donors to develop programs for girls that take maximum advantage of the opportunity for change within refugee communities. These programs are designed with a special focus on how best to provide education, vocational training and vital emergency health care while removing the various roadblocks that impede progress or implementation. Some of our major accomplishments are outlined below.



Learning a skill gives a girl an opportunity to earn a living and makes her less dependent on assistance from international organizations.

In 2004, the Women's Refugee Commission published a *Global Survey on Education in Emergencies*, the first of its kind, which comprehensively laid out the issues and proposed solutions to address educational needs. To further raise awareness of everyone's right to an education, we subsequently created *Your Right to Education: A Handbook for Refugees and Displaced Communities*, an illustrated book for displaced communities around the world. In response to the chronic shortage of teachers, we are now addressing the issue of teacher compensation, working with other organizations to develop international guidelines.

In 2008 we began a major new initiative focusing on vocational training and livelihoods opportunities for displaced youth who are not in school, to ensure that young women and men are more appropriately prepared for safe, dignified work during and after displacement.

While we know that certain aspects of reproductive health care are well developed in long-term refugee settings, in new emergencies basic standards for reproductive health care are often still not met, including for girls and young women. For this reason, the Women's Refugee Commission is encouraging wide use of the Minimal Initial Service

Package (MISP), a set of priority reproductive health activities to be implemented at the beginning of a crisis, to be used at the onset of every emergency. And we have developed a distance-learning module to help humanitarian workers implement all activities of the MISP, which will save lives and prevent illness.

With so many refugee girls marrying at a young age and exposed to sexual violence, it is essential that they have access to reproductive health services. We are a member of the Reproductive Health Access, Information, and Services in Emergencies (RAISE) Initiative, which was developed to address the many remaining gaps in emergency reproductive health care, particularly family planning and emergency obstetric care. We have conducted pilot training courses and are field testing and widely disseminating materials to community-based groups and international organizations in a variety of languages and formats.

We also support two adolescent reproductive health networks of community-based organizations on the Thai-Burma border, which address adolescent reproductive health for internally displaced people in Burma, in refugee camps along the border and among migrant Burmese workers in Thailand.

We believe that safe, inexpensive cooking fuel is as essential as food and water in emergencies. Our “Get Beyond Firewood” campaign is pushing for solutions to reduce the violence faced by millions of women and girls during firewood collection. We have led international efforts to develop guidelines that will help reduce refugees’ reliance on firewood for cooking, and we hosted the first-ever international research conference dedicated to firewood and alternative cooking fuels in humanitarian settings.

Through our detention and asylum program in the United States we have been successful in changing conditions for immigrant families held in detention. We are now working to ensure that unaccompanied girls in immigration custody are held in appropriate conditions, with access to education and health care, and that girls apprehended at the borders are screened to assess whether they have been trafficked or assaulted or are in fear of being returned to their country of origin, and whether they need specialized services. Girls who reach the United States in search of safety and protection have overcome great hurdles and hardships, but their journey is far from over. However, with access to asylum, education and medical services, they have great hopes for a better future.

There’s still much to do. You, too, can support refugee girls, by taking to heart the realities of their lives and demanding that their needs be addressed and that their hopes and aspirations be honored. You can take action at our website, womensrefugeecommission.org. By supporting the Women’s Refugee Commission, you can help change the world for refugee girls.

Read refugee girls’ stories and learn more about the issues affecting them at
womensrefugeecommission.org.

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The Women's Refugee Commission advocates vigorously for laws, policies and programs to improve the lives and protect the rights of refugee and displaced women, children and young people — bringing about lasting, measurable change.

Our vision is a world in which refugee, internally displaced, returnee and asylum-seeking women, children and adolescents are safe, healthy and self-reliant.

Find out more at womensrefugeecommission.org.



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