

# Firewood, Violence Against Women, and Hard Choices in Kenya

by Mary Anne Fitzgerald  
*Refugees International*

Seven years after escaping the chaos and violence of Somalia's clan warfare, thousands of Somali women continue to encounter rape and assault on a daily basis in their place of refuge. The U.S. Congress has hit on a solution for their protection: the provision of firewood. However, disbursing the \$1.5 million U.S. donation has created other dilemmas.

When interclan fighting engulfed Somalia after the ouster of Mohammed Siad Barre's government in 1991, hundreds of thousands of Somalis fled south to Kenya. Renewed fighting compounded by El Nino floods means that conditions are still too insecure for some 100,000 of these refugees to return home. Instead they are forced to remain in northeast Kenya in the refugee camps of Ifo, Dagahaley and Hagadera. These three camps cluster around Dadaab village where the UNHCR and NGO compound, the district administration offices and the central police post are located.

Even by an African yardstick, Dadaab is remote. Situated in harsh, arid country of low thorn bushes and open plains, it is some 450 kms northeast of Nairobi, 110 kms from the nearest government administrative center of Garissa and only 80 kms from Kenya's border with Somalia. The area is inhabited by nomadic pastoralists who, although Kenyan citizens, are ethnic Somalis.

Somali aspirations for uniting all Somalis under a Somali flag have conspired to make the region historically insecure. There has been a long tradition of banditry in the

area committed by outlaws known as shifta. Northeast Kenya was closed to the general public until 30 years ago. Nothing has changed. Travelers pass at their own risk.

The kaleidoscopic shifting of subclan alliance and opposition that triggers warfare in Somalia is reflected in the complex mix of Somali subclans that exists in the camps. Thus armed robbery, rape and murder occurs on an almost daily basis both within and without the camp boundaries. Providing security has pushed the physical and financial resources of UNHCR and its partner agencies to the limits as they tussle with the dilemma of how to protect the refugees.

The ever-present threat of attack takes its toll on camp staff as well. Aid workers move to and from the camps in a police convoy only at set hours of the day. Vehicles traveling with a special police escort at unscheduled times — and therefore within office hours for the bandits — have literally come under fire. Even inside the camps, staff must be accompanied by a police escort when traveling in a vehicle. Otherwise, the vehicles are at serious risk of being hijacked and the passengers of being robbed at gunpoint.

The most unacceptable manifestation of the unbridled assaults on the refugees is the shockingly high rate of rape amongst women. This March there were 24 attacks on women in which they were not only sexually assaulted but shot, knifed, severely beaten and robbed. Two of the victims were only 10. The eldest was 50. Victims are usually gang-raped.

The aggressors are local Kenyan Somalis shifita, Somali refugees living in the camps and, to a much lesser extent, Somali militias raiding across the border.

Rape is a weapon of war, an act of aggression by one clan or subclan against another. Women who are raped are asked first to which clan or subclan they belong. They are told they will be stabbed if they resist or try to run away. Very often they are beaten with rifle butts to intimidate them into submission.

Rape is a particularly brutal violation in Somali society. It confers the loss of a woman's sexual purity, which is highly valued by Somalis. Hence the tradition of infibulation: the ritual sewing together of a woman's genital labia. In some cases the attackers slit open the women's vaginal openings with a knife before raping them. These women experience excruciating pain in addition to their feelings of shame and guilt. They suffer long-term medical and psychological problems.

Viewed through the prism of Somali culture, rape victims bear the stigma of adulterers. A practice has arisen of binding together the legs of young girls who have been raped and forcing them to remain that way for days in the belief it will restore their virginity. Often women are divorced by their husbands and expelled from the family. Some resort to prostitution in order to survive.

The majority of rape incidents take place when the women go foraging for firewood. Given the sparse vegetation, they are forced to venture up to 10 km beyond the camp perimeters to gather kindling for their cooking fires. As the bandits are armed with automatic weapons and move in groups of up to 15, the women are unable to defend themselves.

Men refuse to collect firewood, saying they will be shot dead if they do. The women say they suffer from a living death as rape victims.

"If you go out of the camp very near, there is a man standing there with a gun. If you go to run, he shoots you. If you stay, he rapes you. Some of us are taken from our houses at night. Some of us are taken in the bush when we look for firewood. We are not safe, night or day. If we don't get security, we won't survive," said Saynab Haleys Bu-ul, chairwoman of the Anti-Rape Committee at Ifo Camp.

Relations between the local community and the refugees are poor. Conflict over scarce resources, such as firewood, heightens local hostility towards refugees and triggers intimidation, including rape.

It is against this background that a Women Victims of Violence (WVV) program was established in 1993. Its genesis lay in a survey on sexual violence that showed that in the six-month period beginning February 1993, 192 cases of rape were documented amongst Somali refugees. Victims were reluctant to talk to police and medical authorities because they did not want it publicly known that they had been raped. UNHCR officials believed that

the incidence of rape could have been as much as 10 times greater than the cases that were reported.

The WVV program was designed to establish a support system for rape victims and introduce deterrent measures to reduce the incidence of rape. UNHCR, with financial assistance from the donor community, established a system of counseling and medical services for rape victims. Refugees trained by CARE and UNHCR accompanied the women when reporting incidents to the police and receiving medical attention. These same counselors provided trauma counseling for the women and counseled their families, particularly the husbands, with regard to tolerance and acceptance of the rape victims' circumstances. Women were given new clothes as many were so poor that they had no alternative but to continue to wear the clothes they had on at the time of the assault.

Live thorn fencing was planted around the 120 km camp perimeters to keep bandits at bay. UNHCR strengthened the capacity of the police through the donation of equipment such as vehicles. UNHCR also contracted FIDA, a women lawyer's organization, to assist refugee women to seek legal redress. These measures helped to reduce the number of rapes significantly.

However, the WVV program, despite its success, has been eliminated because of budgetary shortfalls. Since then, the incidence of rape has risen sharply.

The introduction in April of a mobile court to sit at Dadaab is unlikely to deter the bandits from rape. Low police morale, combined with a gender prejudice that relegates rape to the category of petty crime, means that there is scant incentive to arrest and prosecute rapists. Not a single case of rape has been brought before the court so the bandits continue to assault women, knowing they can do so with impunity.

Although UNHCR has recently committed further equipment and vehicles to the police force, it is unrealistic to expect the police to eliminate banditry in the area. However, the Somali clan elders, chiefs and subchiefs could exert influence over the bandits' activities. Problems involving conflict or redress in Somalia are routinely ironed out by appealing to clan elders to resolve the matter. Working through the hierarchical clan system could yield results amongst the Kenyan Somalis, too, as the clan affiliations are the same. However, clan elders will only respond to this suggestion if there is a financial incentive.

That incentive has presented itself in the form of a \$1.5 million grant from the U.S. to be used for the purchase of firewood. The funding for firewood supplies was envisaged as a way of preventing the women from needing to collect kindling in the bush, the time when they are most at risk of being assaulted. The project is being led by GTZ, the agency responsible for environmental issues at Dadaab, on the basis that firewood will be handed out in return for environmentally friendly work. However, this act of heartfelt generosity has presented multi-faceted dilemmas to UNHCR and GTZ staffers.

**W**ho should supply the firewood? Local and refugee Somalis currently collect wood and transport it back by wheelbarrow or donkey to sell in the camps on the open market. But no survey has been conducted to reassure the donors that they could supply wood in sufficiently large amounts. Instead, this May, the supply tender for the 3-month pilot project phase was awarded to a firewood merchant from the Rift Valley near Nairobi. This is so far away that transport costs, which include paying for a police escort, are eight times the cost of the wood.

Already the contract has hit snags. Fully aware that regular weekly trips to Dadaab make the trucks an easy target for ambush, the contractor resigned, and then reconsidered but raised the price. Meanwhile, angry Dadaab entrepreneurs have protested to GTZ that they should have been awarded the tender. There are fears that their exclusion from the tender process might trigger greater hostility towards the refugees and prompt further acts of intimidation — such as rape.

**M**ost difficult of all is deciding who should receive the firewood. This “Sophie’s Choice” places an extraordinary moral burden on the shoulders of the Dadaab aid personnel. During the pilot project, it is likely that a “vulnerable” group comprising elderly women, the disabled and single-head families will be the beneficiaries. In this way, the \$1.5 million grant to buy firewood will last for about 3 years — but the majority of women in the camps will still have to gather firewood and still be at risk of assault and rape.

***Refugees International* disagrees with the proposed policy of providing only “vulnerables” with firewood. All women and young girls in the refugee camps are equally vulnerable and should receive firewood. All share the same risk of being brutally attacked if they must gather firewood.**

To reduce assaults on women at the Dadaab camps it will be necessary to provide a wider distribution of firewood than is contemplated under the pilot project. However, if most women in the camps receive firewood, the \$1.5 million will last only about one year. To continue the program will require a longer term solution and additional funding.

GTZ, a German NGO, works as the Dadaab partner for environmental issues and was appointed the implementing agency for this project. They are considering a project for local Kenyans to grow plantations of *Acacia colei* or other tree species. GTZ would buy the firewood harvests and distribute them to refugees maintaining the live thorn fencing that protects the camps or other agro-forestry projects. The trees may take up to four years to mature until the first harvest, so interim funding of about \$6 million is required to purchase firewood for this four-year period.

Long-term planning for Dadaab is necessary, because the Somali refugees are not likely to be able to leave the

camps any time soon. In seven years there has been little or no progress made in terms of stability or security in Somalia, and fighting has recently reached a new height. There is no prospect of repatriation of the refugees in the near future.

Therefore, in accordance with UNHCR’s Guidelines on the Protection of Refugee Women, adopted July 1991, *Refugees International* recommends:

- \* GTZ work through the existing market system at Dadaab and issues tenders for the supply of firewood to local Kenyan Somalis for the expenditure of the initial \$1.5 million grant;
- \* The choice of who should receive firewood devolve to environmental, women’s and other groups of refugees with assistance from camp personnel;
- \* Negotiations be conducted with clan elders to curb banditry as a *quid pro quo* for the financial benefits that will devolve to the local community from the firewood project;
- \* GTZ implement a project for local Kenyan Somalis to grow plantations of *Acacia colei* or other suitable tree species. GTZ would buy the firewood harvests and distribute them to refugees in return for work such as maintaining the live thorn fencing that surrounds the camps;
- \* UNHCR seek funding of \$6 million to procure firewood supplies so that all women are beneficiaries during the four years it takes for the trees to mature to harvest;
- \* A female gynecologist be posted to Dadaab to treat rape victims;
- \* A FIDA lawyer be retained to conduct workshops with police, government officials, doctors and aid workers on the legal rights and medical and counseling needs of rape victims. This lawyer should also assist in the judicial process of prosecutions for rape;
- \* CARE re-establishes its abolished post of Women and Children’s Officer to supervise the treatment of rape victims;
- \* Three positions are created to provide a professional counselor in each camp to counsel rape victims and to train CARE and refugee counselors;
- \* Two trucks be provided for a free shuttle service between the camps and Dadaab town, with priority given to women, children, and other vulnerable groups;
- \* A position of field officer be created to implement and supervise the shuttle service and the firewood project; and
- \* A transmitter-receiver system be installed in the MSF-Belgium compound and the 3 camp hospitals. As the police will not escort people after dark, this would enable personnel in the camps to consult with a doctor on medical emergencies that occur at night.