

FOSTERING STRENGTH AND INCLUSION: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE GENDER LENS IN DISPLACEMENT SETTINGS

THE ISSUE

FROM CRISIS TO RECOVERY: WOMEN'S ROLE IN HUMANITARIAN ACTION



Women, in particular, commonly experience multiple trauma and sexual assaults during displacement. 50 percent of the world's nearly 110 million refugees, internally displaced, or stateless populations are women and girls. Photo: © ELIE GARDNER/RELIEF INTERNATIONAL

Clara¹, a citizen of South Sudan, was living in Sudan with her three children, having fled her home some time ago. When war broke out in Sudan in April 2023, Clara was forced to return to South Sudan. Clara and her children are now living in a camp at the border. Upon arriving in the camp, Clara told the medical staff that she had been the victim of intimate partner violence in her marriage and was subject to a serious sexual assault by armed militia on her displacement journey. Clara received medical care in the health facility. She agreed to meet with a female psychologist. Clara has been receiving psychosocial support from a female trauma specialist. After several support sessions, Clara confided in the psychologist that a male resident of the camp was regularly sexually assaulting her.

Although this story is fictitious, Clara's story is all too real and all too common. During times of crisis, upheaval, and displacement, people of all genders are significantly more vulnerable to sexual violence and exploitation. How humanitarian and development agencies address this risk, and respond when we learn about such events, is critical. It is particularly important to consider gender in our response.

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Gender² matters in development and humanitarian action. Ensuring that we design and implement services using a gender lens is as critical as providing lifesaving medicine or healthcare itself. A gender lens takes the existing differences between genders into account when analysing a situation or developing a specific programme. While each of us bears some risk of sexual violence, exploitation, and exclusion, 50 years of research and experience have taught us that situations of upheaval exaggerate gender inequalities and make people additionally vulnerable to gender-based violence (GBV).

Women are disproportionately displaced during conflicts. Take a recent example. Since April 2023, about 5.8 million people have been displaced inside Sudan or have fled to neighbouring countries, half of whom are children. Women make up 69 per cent of the internally displaced persons (IDPs), including those in war zones, and data from Chad indicates that 90 per cent of the refugees crossing

1. Clara's story is fictional but reflects typical scenarios in which the author has been involved at Relief International.

2. Gender refers to socially constructed roles, characteristics, expectations and behaviours assigned to men and women. One's gender may or may not match the sex assigned at birth or correspond to binary categories of man/male and woman/female. Gender is also intersectional, meaning it cannot be properly understood in isolation, as it interacts with other systems of oppression to produce unique rather than cumulative forms of disadvantage. When we refer to “women” we refer to anyone who identifies as female.

the borders are women and girls³. In neighbouring South Sudan, prior to the recent crisis, the vast majority (more than 83 per cent) of those fleeing South Sudan were women and children. Children make up 65 per cent of the total South Sudanese refugee population; many have been separated from their parents and are traveling alone.

Given this context, it is vitally important that medical and psychological services are delivered with careful consideration of the gender and history of those receiving care. This will encourage and enable survivors as they seek help, as well as ensure that survivors are able to rebuild trust in systems. When survivors share their experiences and/or seek help, humanitarian actors need to understand their underlying vulnerabilities and the risks associated with those vulnerabilities.

In the case example, Clara is female, a lone parent, and displaced. Each of these factors is a vulnerability that should be considered when assessing risks. For instance, being female and alone puts Clara at far greater risk than if she were with a male spouse, brother, or father. Add to this the fact that she is forced to migrate away from the home she knows, where she has a community around her for protection and comfort, and we see the risk of being harmed to rise exponentially. Thus, a correct assessment of risk will support more effective protective actions.

Survivors must also retain a degree of control over the information that they have shared so that they can gain physical and psychological safety. Taking into account the survivor's perspective is vital in achieving physical safety, meaning that the survivor is no longer exposed to the risk of physical assault, measures have been taken to remove the threat posed by the perpetrator and/or the survivor has been moved to a safe location, and she has received appropriate medical attention and is physically safe. Psychological safety takes place when the survivor knows she is physically safe and can begin to process the trauma. For displaced people, psychological safety can be difficult to achieve as the trauma is compounded by a sense of continuing insecurity in other aspects of their lives.

Organizations should have a safeguarding specialist or focal point on board. This expert can work with the survivor and her advocate, assist in assessing risks for the survivor based on their gender and other factors, and ensure that appropriate action is taken.

In situations that are similar to Clara's, Relief International safeguarding specialists work to connect the survivor to a female psychologist. The psychologist would work to build a trusting relationship with the survivor over several sessions and ultimately create a sense of psychological safety for her. In a similar case we managed, the survivor's physical environment remained unsafe, because sexual violence was an ever-present threat; but her sense of psychological safety enabled her to disclose the violence she



Relief International works closely with refugee and host communities to build safe shelters and social

had experienced and begin to work through her trauma.

Sometimes, a survivor's trauma is additionally complicated by her having experienced multiple traumas. The woman herself may have been a victim of direct violence, or she may have witnessed or have knowledge of her children having been victims of sexual violence. Women in such a situation would be highly likely to experience complex Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Complex PTSD has a profound impact in a displacement situation, in which physical safety and basic necessities like nutrition, water, and shelter are compromised layers of additional trauma. Altogether, the possibility of recovery can be remote.

While we should avoid the tropes often applied to female survivors – that they are either helpless victims or incredibly resilient – it is right to acknowledge that displacement also can provide opportunities for women. Survival, recovery, and thriving are possible. In new environments, women can access livelihoods that were previously unavailable to them culturally and economically. When they are not displaced, women tend to retain more traditional roles such as mother and caretaker, while men provide the main source of income. Yet, when there is societal upheaval, as with conflict, the men go to fight, leaving the women to work and earn income.

To mitigate the risks of GBV, which disproportionately affects women globally, Relief International works closely with refugee, host communities and partner agencies to build safe shelters and social spaces for women. Our health-care professionals bolster GBV and mental health referral mechanisms between the community, primary health clinics, and hospitals, strengthening the healthcare system's ability to act as the foundation for resilience in communities affected by conflict, climate change, and disaster. Our local teams work to sensitize communities on the importance of combatting GBV, conducting culturally sensitive awareness sessions about female genital mutilation, sexual violence, child marriage and other topics. In doing this work, we have found that displaced women, like Clara, are already resilient; they just need support to recover and mitigate the chances of having to experience gender-based violence on a repeat basis.

Justine Skeats, Global Safeguarding Lead
Relief International⁴

3. UNOCHA Sudan Situation Report 12 November 2023

4. Relief International is a humanitarian aid agency that partners with communities affected by conflict, climate change and disaster to save lives, build greater resilience, and promote long-term health and well-being. More about us can be found at www.ri.org.