

SESSION 2:

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SESSION CONTENT

Celebrating the Strengths of Refugee Women

Who are Refugee Women?

Refugee women come from many different countries, cultures, ethnic backgrounds and class structures. They are mothers, sisters, wives, daughters and grandmothers. Some have fled alone, some with their children, sometimes with elderly parents. Many have left most, if not all, of their family and support systems behind. Many are widowed, others are separated, deserted, or single. Some are educated, others are illiterate. Some have become head of their household for the first time and are facing new responsibilities. Most have been forced to flee their homeland, usually without any personal possessions, money, official papers or passports. They are concerned about their families, about where will they sleep, how will they eat, how will they survive. Sometimes they do not know the whereabouts of their children, husbands and other family members and friends.

Many refugee women have experienced rape and sexual abuse in either their own countries, during their flight or in refugee camps. If they are pregnant at the time of flight they face high risk pregnancies with risk of spontaneous abortion, premature delivery and other obstetric complications. They have faced long journeys into exile, and official harassment or indifference. They know that it is unlikely that they will ever return to their country. They have had no opportunity to say farewells or time to grieve.

Why do Women and Children Flee?

Refugee women flee their countries for the same reasons as men – to escape persecution because of their national, ethnic or social identity or because of their religious beliefs or political opinions. Some women are persecuted for their political activities, for example, they may give shelter or food to those in hiding or convey messages to those underground. Sometimes women flee because they have taken part in armed conflict and guerrilla warfare, or because their husbands have done so.

Some women flee persecutory laws or practices directed at women, often in the name of religion, tradition or culture. In many parts of the world, women who do not live according to the standards imposed on them by their societies, can suffer cruel or inhuman treatment. Their own countries may deprive them of their right to live safely and of the right of self expression. For example, refusing arranged marriages, having sexual relations outside marriage, failing to provide a satisfactory dowry or wearing certain forms of dress can result in persecution and violations of human rights for women. Stoning to death for presumed adultery, forced marriages and honour killings may be carried out with government complicity. This preserves the idea that women are inferior to men and do not deserve equal rights or equal protection of those rights.

The vulnerability of women to human rights violations is worse in situations of armed conflict. Women can suffer abuse whether they are combatants or civilians.

aggressors, including regular army and militia members, irregular forces or members of their own community. This abuse includes forms of sexual abuse, rape, forcible impregnation, sexual slavery, and forced prostitution.

of men. Young women do similar work as their mothers and older women. Many teenage girls are forced to marry, often to older men.

Sexual violence in refugee camps is so common that the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has produced guidelines for prevention of sexual violence and for responses to survivors. Women are raped by men in their own families and communities, as well as by officials and men in neighbouring and local communities. They are often targeted as they collect food rations, water and firewood, and fear of sexual violence prevents women from engaging in income-generating activities. The breakdown of social and community networks in the camps, and the absence of police and legal presence, means that there is simply no protection available for women.

Refugee adolescents, especially girls, are primary targets of sexual violence and exploitation by fighting forces, peacekeepers and others. They may also be exposed to potentially harmful traditional practices such as genital mutilation. They may be recruited to serve with an armed group, coerced into prostitution, physically abused or forced to assume responsibilities for younger siblings and other members of the household. There is a high risk of early, unwanted pregnancy or sexually transmitted infections.

Education Protects Refugee Children

Education as a right for all children is set out in the Convention on the Rights of the Child. However, millions of refugee children, particularly girls, are without education even at primary level. The absence of this right creates a lifelong handicap for a child.

Education is a priority for refugee children as it can contribute to their sense of physical and emotional wellbeing and provide continuity in their lives. Education can provide a secure place to gather where they can be protected from forced labour, military recruitment and sexual exploitation.

Adolescent girls are more likely to miss out on educational opportunities than boys and younger children. They may lack decent clothing or basic essentials such as sanitary towels. Some cultures do not give any importance to educating girls beyond the development of household skills. Some are forced to marry at a young age.

During flight, children can be separated from parents. Often they arrive in asylum countries with adult members of their extended families. Until they are reunited with their parents, they may be as much at risk of forced labour or arranged marriage as unaccompanied children. Yet because they are accompanied by adults, their need to be reunited with their parents is often overlooked.

“At any one time there may be up to 100,000 separated children in Western Europe alone.” (UNHCR, 2002)

More than 300,000 children around the world serve as child soldiers. Most are teenagers, but some are under 10 years of age. Girl soldiers are often forced into sexual slavery. Providing secure schools in asylum countries, and reuniting refugee families can protect children from forced military recruitment.

Article 22 of the United Nations Convention on the *Rights of the Child* grants special protection to refugee children. Refugee children are also entitled to all other human rights granted under the Refugee Convention including the right to life, physical integrity, adequate food and medical

care, education, and to be free from discrimination, exploitation, and abuse.

“A refugee camp – no matter how well it is run – is no place to spend a childhood. But those children who do escape the horrors of war to reach our camps deserve at the very least a safe, decent and secure sanctuary where they are provided with the basic necessities of life. Anything less is nothing at all.”

(High Commissioner Ruud Lubbers in a statement addressing the allegations of exploitation of refugee children in West Africa, 1st March, 2002.)

It is important to underst

SESSION MATERIALS

Celebrating the Strengths of Refugee Women

Key points to be covered - Women refugees 45 Minutes

Play Section 2 “From Horror to Hope” DVD and if required, Sections 4 and 5 “Roads to Refuge” Video clip

NB Presenters may wish to use part 4 of the Roads to Refuge Video clip contained on the DVD as part of this session. Presenters must be familiar with the video material before presenting it to groups as some of the content can be distressing.

Activity: Discussion

Brainstorm with participants to identify the key elements of their own and another culture. These can include language, clothing, food, religion, music, literature, family relationships, education, social, political, economic and belief systems, myths, games, laws and courts etc. How important are these things to them? Ask them to consider how difficult it must be to maintain many aspects of culture in a refugee camp as described above and seen on the video. Ask participants to imagine what it would be like to be forced to discard many aspects of their culture as well as to lose their home and their belongings. Discuss the important role that women take in maintaining culturally based behaviours and beliefs in these situations.

Introduction

Refugee women face many challenges as part of the refugee experience. These can undermine their feeling of safety and trust. It is important that when they come to Australia, they are allowed to feel safe again.

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future, not being able to make any plans for their lives, and not knowing if they will ever see their homeland again.

Ask participants to discuss their experience or knowledge of refugee camps in Africa or elsewhere. What are the conditions like for women there? How do they understand the experience of having to spend the next 10 years in a refugee camp like Kakuma? Remind participants that refugees don't know how long they will spend in a camp.

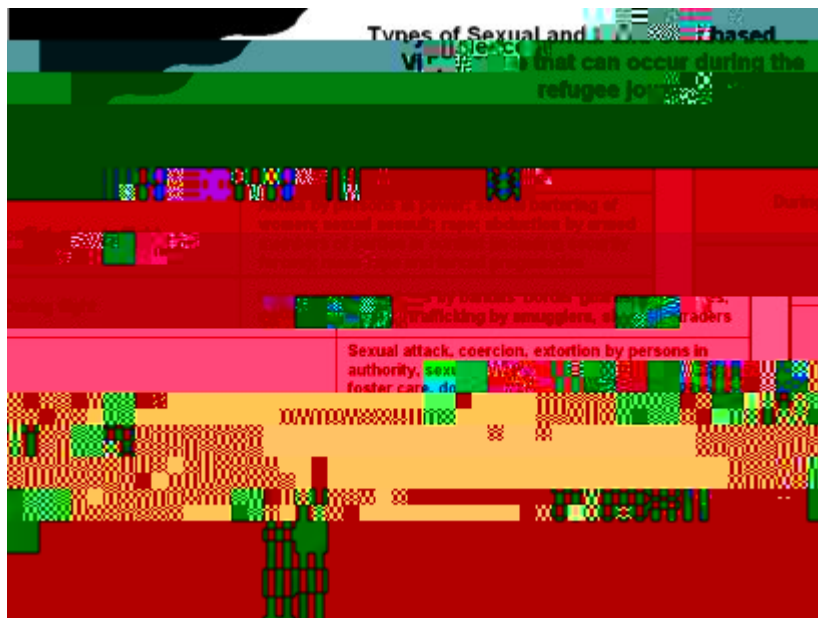
Introduction

One of the saddest things about the experience of refugee women and their older children is the level of sexual violence which they endure. Rape has become a part of modern day warfare. Not all refugee women and girls suffer from sexual violence, but many do, and some become pregnant from those rapes.

Sexual and Gender Based Violence 45 minutes

Key points to be covered

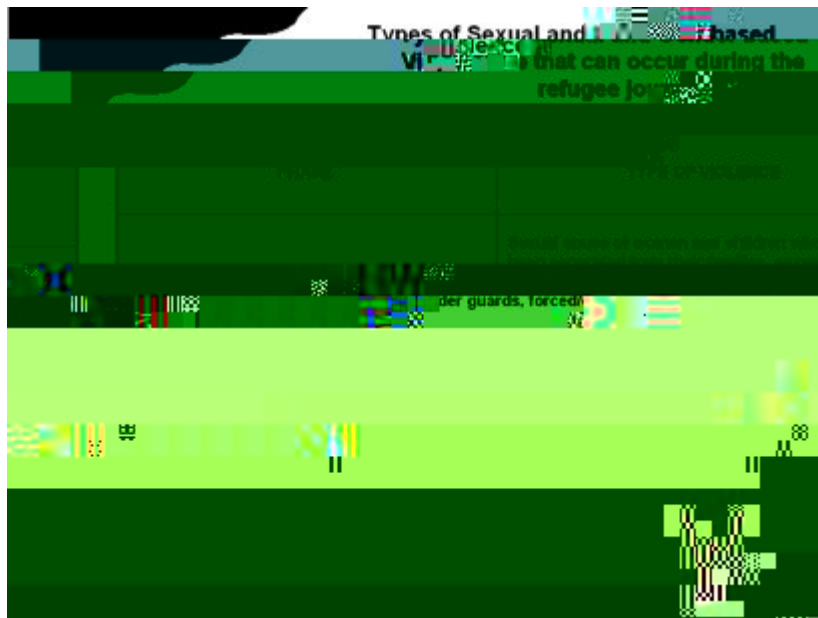
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Kakuma Refugee Camp, Kenya

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Activity: Small group exercise

Ask participants to list what they think the consequences of these experiences might be on the ability of refugee women to resettle successfully and quickly into their new lives in Australia. Share the list with the large groups and discuss the consequences. Brainstorm the sorts of services which will be necessary to properly address these issues with newly arrived refugee communities.

Introduction

While it is important to understand the horrendous experiences which many refugee women survive, it is equally important to understand and celebrate their resilience and their determination to make a new life for themselves and for their families.

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Activity: Small Group Activity

Write a poem or short story honouring refugee women and present it as a poster to the larger group.

OR

Develop and perform a short play for the whole group telling the story of a refugee family and celebrating their survival.

OR

Brainstorm other ways of showing the refugee journey and the critical