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**Refugee Families:
Their Relationship to Economic and Social Development**
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Introduction

For most refugee and displaced families, the refugee experience requires continuing response to change, including the need to cope with traumatic new circumstances. Forced to leave their homes because of persecution and violence, the refugee and displaced families must often cope with new environments, new languages, new social and economic roles, new community structures, new inter-familial relationships, and new problems. At the same time, refugee and displaced families generally seek to reconstruct familiar lifestyles as much as is physically and socially possible.

Within this changing context, families play an important role in ensuring the physical safety and economic security of refugees. To help understand the role of the refugee family vis a vis social and economic development, this paper reviews the impact of displacement on the family, describes the role of development in refugee settings, identifying some of the constraints on development strategies, and concludes with comments on the role of the family in refugee and development efforts. A particular focus is development in the context of refugee repatriation, where millions of families may be returning from years of exile to face the challenge of rehabilitation and reconstruction of their homelands.

Impact of Displacement on Family Relationships

Displacement profoundly affects family and community structures, particularly when movements are involuntary responses to violence and abuses. Refugees move not because they wish to make better lives for themselves in other places but because they are forced to leave in order to seek safety elsewhere. The decision to move is often sudden, occurring when families have exhausted all other remedies. Often, it is the disintegration of longstanding family and community resources that triggers the actual decision to flee. The refugees realize that there is little to keep them in their home villages or towns because everything of importance has already been destroyed.

Upon becoming refugees, families must deal with many new living arrangements. Families lose one or more members. Fathers have died in fighting or have joined

government or rebel military forces, leaving women as heads of households. Younger children and older relatives have died of hunger or disease upon the route to refuge. Others die soon after entering a refugee camp, too malnourished to survive even after help is offered. Still more family members succumb to epidemics that overcome crowded encampments in the first weeks and months of the crisis. Families are separated during flight, ending up in different camps or even countries of asylum. Traditional family patterns are thus disrupted, leaving refugees with neither intact nuclear families nor extended ones.

Once in camp, refugees often find themselves living with strangers. Used to small, stable villages, refugees must now cope with large encampments, sometimes with residents numbering in the tens or even hundred thousands. Members of different tribes and clans are expected to live side by side, even if they were traditional enemies. The layout of the encampments will often differ dramatically from the traditional village pattern. People are assigned to specific sites on a first-come, first-served basis. In other situations, refugees and displaced persons from rural areas move to urban centers either in a host country or in their own nation. They often do not know if their stay will be a short one, with return to their homes possible, or an extended one stretching into decades or even longer.

Some are transported thousands of miles away to resettlement countries with completely new cultures and languages. Others choose themselves to seek asylum in Europe or North America. For those among these refugees who come from developing countries, uprootedness means adapting to industrialized societies and the changes in economic and social systems that development brings.

Return to home countries, when political and military conditions permit, may be equally disruptive of family relationships. This year has been called the year of repatriation by the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees, citing the potential for return to so many countries around the world in light of resolution to many civil and regional conflicts. Families separated in exile will be reunited. People who left will be returning to communities and family members that they left behind. Demobilized soldiers will be reuniting with their families.

For refugee women, all of these changes hold particularly difficult ramifications, particularly for maintenance of family and community structures. Uprootedness does not mean the same to all refugees:

"According to the depth of the gap differentiating the roles of women in the refugees' society of origin and in their country of resettlement, refugee women may see a fundamental continuity between their experiences as women at home and those of the women native to their new communities, may come to question their own accustomed position in society as a result of having confronted alternative social patterns, or may experience a sense

of loss as a result of the greatly different reality they now face."¹

Yet, some issues appear to be common to most refugee and displaced women regardless of their location, even if they play out differently in different geographic contexts. First, the women remain responsible for most domestic activities whether in third world camps or industrialized countries. It has been pointed out in studies in several camps that the day-to-day role of women often changes little while the same cannot be said for their husbands who no longer are able to cultivate fields or engage in outside employment. The frustrations experienced by the men can result in increased family tension and potential for violence. The domestic activities of women are time-consuming and, in the refugee context, potentially dangerous. For example, women usually collect water and firewood, both of which may sometimes be found in mine-infested areas.

Second, refugee women worldwide must cope with changes in family structures and roles. As noted above, refugee women often find themselves heads of households, with no husbands or older children to help in the support of the families. In such cases, women must either accept external help, generally through formal international or national assistance systems, or take on new economic roles to support their families by themselves.

In intact families, women must deal with the changes in male/female roles. Women in camps, as stated above, continue to be productive members of the family, but men often find themselves unable to fulfill their traditional productive roles. In industrialized societies, refugee families soon discover that families are unable to become self-supporting with only one person's wages. Women may enter the outside labour market in order to help the family gain financial independence. Refugee men may have a difficult time in accepting either the new role of women or their own inability to support fully their families. This loss of control may result in domestic violence, depression and alcoholism.

Parent/child relationships change as well as a result of uprooting. Younger members of the family are often able to adjust more quickly to the demands of the new situation. In both camps and industrialized societies, the younger people more easily pick up new languages -- either the languages spoken by expatriates in the camps or the language of the new resettlement country. As a result, children including older girls are often able to assume economic roles that are unavailable to their parents. They also become the conduit for information and translators for their parents. In a sense, then, in the refugee situation the children may take on the typical role of the parent, being the force for socializing their elders to a new culture. Inter-generational tensions often result from these changes in role.

Third, refugee women often experience a new role as principal maintainers of the traditional cultural views of family and community relations. The phenomenon of purdah is illustrative. It is perhaps the most striking attempt in a refugee situation to preserve

what are seen as traditional values through the imposition of a specific role on women. Purdah is the Islamic practice that requires that women be secluded and kept separate from unrelated men. In Afghan refugee camps in Pakistan, the use of purdah has been intensified and affects both rural and urban Afghan women who rarely had to practice it in their own homeland. In part purdah is the result of the changed living situation in Pakistan. Women who lived among extended family members in rural Afghanistan were under fewer social restrictions than are women in the refugee villages because the latter are in closer proximity to large numbers of non-family members.

Often, this role as "preservers of the culture" creates intergenerational conflicts for women. In many situations, older refugees are expected to be the preservers of the traditional culture while the younger generation copes with the new life. In some cases, this division of responsibility can lead to tensions between older and younger women, particularly when younger women are unwilling to assume the traditional roles.

"Relations between older and younger generations of women may be especially affected by the refugee experience because of differences in the way each perceives the need to change or to maintain traditional ways of life. In [the camp for Afghan widows in Pakistan], new conflicts between groups have arisen. Many of the younger women, enjoying a first taste of freedom, want to go further in defying tradition. They speak, for example, of the possibility of remaining single after having been widowed, rather than marrying the brothers of their late husbands as is customary. Older women, on the other hand, see themselves -- especially in the absence of men -- as responsible for transmitting traditional practices to the younger generation, and view the younger women's rebellion against remarriage as a threat to the honorable fulfillment of their duty as Afghan, and Islamic, women."²

Fourth, when given the opportunity, refugee women form effective new social systems that provide support for their members and the potential for helping others. Perhaps the most significant thing that one can say about refugee women is that they are resilient and inventive. In the face of these various demanding changes and often limitations in their roles, examples abound of women forming new communities and support systems: an Afghan women's centre in Peshawar, women's farming cooperatives in Somalia, women's self-help groups in France, mutual assistance associations composed of women in the United States. These women-initiated ventures could be vehicles for the fuller participation of families in social and economic development efforts if the resources they have to offer are more effectively tapped.

From Relief to Development

There is substantial interest within the refugee field in moving assistance efforts from a relief orientation towards an emphasis on social and economic development with the aim of enhancing the economic independence of refugees in camps, as well as easing the burden of refugees on their host country. The development-oriented programs have often been justified as a means towards achieving durable solutions for refugees. On the reverse side, it can be argued that many countries will not be able to achieve significant progress in development unless issues raised by the displacement of large proportions of their population are more effectively addressed.

There are three durable solutions to refugee situations -- voluntary return to one's country of origin, settlement in a country of first asylum, and resettlement in a third country. The most desirable is voluntary return to one's country of origin, hopefully after conditions have changed sufficiently to permit peaceful and safe reintegration. Refugees able to go back to their homelands already know the culture and life styles there, which means they can avoid the painful transitions that other refugees must face. Until recently, voluntary repatriation appeared out of the reach of most refugees, many of whom had fled conflicts that had continued for years if not decades. Peace settlements have been negotiated or are about to be signed in many of these countries, holding the prospect for massive return.

Where safe return is unlikely, at least for an extended period of time, the next best option for refugees is settlement in neighboring countries. Neighboring countries often share cultural values and refugees may be able to live with ethnic cousins. Physical and economic conditions are also likely to be similar, thus requiring less need for major adjustment to new circumstances.

Repatriation and permanent settlement in a neighboring country may not be possible for some refugees. In these cases, resettlement to a third country may be necessary both for the protection of the refugees and as the only possible durable solution to their situation.

* The proportion of the population that is uprooted varies from country to country. Some statistics are informative. In Mozambique, almost 25 percent (3.5 million of 15.7 million persons) are displaced inside the country or in neighboring countries; in Afghanistan, about 50 percent (8.6 out of 16 million) are uprooted by the conflict; more than 10 percent of Malawi's population are refugees from Mozambique; by conservative estimate, 20 percent of Somalia's population is uprooted; more than half of Liberia's population is displaced; about one-fifth of El Salvador's population is internally displaced or has moved to Mexico or the United States.

Development-oriented programs for refugees are believed to hold two major advantages. First, there is a perception that these programs will facilitate durable solutions. With greater capacity to provide for themselves, the refugees will be better prepared to return to their countries of origin if conditions permit, or integrate into the local society if settlement in the country of first asylum or third country is possible.

The second aim is to reduce costs. A large part of the funds used in refugee assistance programs support basic care and maintenance including shelter, food and clothing. To the extent that refugees are able to integrate into the host country, the cost to the international community will be minimized.

Development-oriented projects have taken two major forms. First are small-scale projects that address a variety of refugee needs -- such as health care, employment, and education -- with particular attention paid to enhancing the refugees' capacity for economic self-support. The second are large-scale projects to improve the infrastructure of the host country or country of origin (in a repatriation context).

Effective use of development strategies in a refugee setting has been impeded by a number of factors, ranging from the emergency nature of refugee situations to the attitudes of governments regarding this issue.

To be successful, the development orientation must be put in place at the outset of a refugee emergency in order to warrant against dependency. This approach tends to run counter to the immediate demands of the crisis, however, when most organizations are preoccupied with saving lives. In their book on refugee aid and development, Mary Anderson and Peter Woodrow state some principles of assistance:³

"Both relief and development programs should be more concerned with increasing local capacities and reducing vulnerabilities than with providing goods, services, or technical assistance. In fact, goods, services or technical assistance should be provided only insofar as they support sustainable development by increasing local capacities and reducing local vulnerabilities.

The way that such resources are transferred must be held to the same test. Programming must not be solely preoccupied with meeting urgent physical/material needs, but must integrate such needs into efforts that address the social/ organizational and motivational/ attitudinal elements of the situation as well."

Many asylum countries are concerned that development-oriented refugee assistance projects will result in the de facto integration of refugees into the local society. There is concern that greater independence on the part of refugees may lessen international pressure on the country of origin for voluntary repatriation or on donor

countries for contributions to the assistance system. Refugee camps are a reminder to the world community to work toward long-term solutions and to maintain their share of the burden of assisting refugees.

Further, refugees often settle in the poorest areas of their host countries, where local inhabitants also struggle to survive. To complicate matters, sufficient arable land, water and work opportunities for both the local population and the refugees may be in short supply. In such situations, it is not possible to assist refugees without providing similar opportunities for the local inhabitants. Without satisfactory support for their own citizens, the reluctance of host governments to permit refugee development-oriented activities is to be expected. A similar situation arises in repatriation situations, where refugees return to areas that have been destroyed during conflicts. The people who remained behind in these areas may themselves be barely surviving and in need of substantial assistance.

Host countries often put two conditions on development-oriented assistance for refugees: 1) equitable burden-sharing between the international community and the host country; and 2) additionality of assistance provided to refugees. By equitable burden-sharing, the recipient countries mean not only direct assistance to refugees by the international community but also help to local communities in dealing with the negative impacts arising from the presence of the refugees. Additionality of refugee development assistance means that host countries, as well as countries of origin in some cases, generally insist that refugee (or repatriation) assistance be over and above the normal development assistance they would receive if there were no refugees in the country. The host countries, in view of their limited resources, do not feel it is equitable to have to share their development aid with refugees or go into debt on their behalf. Countries of origin may feel that first priority should go to assisting the people who remained behind not those who fled. Donors, on the other hand, point to limited availability of development funds and to the advantages that accrue to countries from integrating refugees into their regular development plans. Refugees can then contribute to the development of the areas in which they live.

Refugee Families and Development

One of the major constraints on development activities in a refugee setting is a mind-set that makes refugee families the targets and beneficiaries of aid rather than an active partner in designing and implementing programs. Development concepts regarding popular participation -- "active and meaningful involvement of the masses of people at different levels (a) in the decision-making process for the determination of societal goals and the allocation of resources to achieve them and (b) in the voluntary execution of resulting programmes and projects."⁴ -- are not well understood or accepted within refugee settings. Mechanisms for incorporating the perspectives of refugee

families, particularly where families are women headed households, are all but non-existent in many assistance programs. As one commentator has noted, "refugee participation probably has the worst ratio of rhetoric to reality of any concept in the refugee field."⁵

Constraints on refugee participation include⁶:

- ◆ reluctance of host country governments to permit refugees a role in decision making for fear of losing control and/or encouraging a sense of permanence among refugees involved in self-sufficiency efforts;
- ◆ reluctance of non-governmental organizations, particularly those involved in emergency operations, to establish refugee participation as a priority. NGOs often see community organization as an obstacle rather than support to their work.
- ◆ barriers deriving from the differences in culture and values among host country nationals, expatriate staff and the refugees themselves. These barriers include the more obvious language and cultural barriers that lead to misunderstandings and lack of communication, but also problems of sexism, racism, ethno-centrism and discrimination.
- ◆ conflicts within the refugee population. For example, conflicts between major ethnic groups or political factions can make refugee participation in decision making very difficult when the refugees are unable to agree upon their representatives. Moreover, traditional leaders may be absent or find that their roles and capabilities are limited by the changed circumstances in a refugee camp or settlement.
- ◆ absence of qualified community organizers who can develop participatory programmes that are effective in a refugee setting.

In thinking through the role of the family in development activities, the problems regarding popular participation are compounded by an absence of reliable data about the demographic composition of the refugee population which makes it difficult for program priorities to reflect family concerns. It is estimated that 80 percent of the world's refugees are women and their dependents but we have little concrete data about the situation, needs, or resources of the people behind that statistic.

There are two principal problems with data: accuracy of the statistics and lack of disaggregation by gender and age.

Several mechanisms are used to enumerate refugees and displaced persons. According to the UNHCR Handbook for Emergencies, the most practical time to

register refugees is on arrival, in conjunction, for example, with health screening. Reception centres are common, which allow incoming refugees to be registered and then transferred to a more permanent site. Such a system provides the advantage of being able to not only count arrivals but to obtain specific information about their health status, demographics, nutritional status, etc. The registration can also be used to distribute ration cards to the newcomers. Mass registration efforts are not always warranted, however. Where there is a possibility for quick return to the home country, extended registration procedures may give an impression that it is expected that refugees will be staying for longer periods than are necessary. Where refugees do stay for a protracted period, it is necessary to update the registration figures to take into account subsequent arrivals, departures, and births and deaths, a process that can be time-consuming and costly.

Where registration has not been feasible, a census may be taken using a number of different techniques: for example, counting the number of dwellings, if necessary through the use of aerial photography, or enumerating heads of households. Random sampling of the camp population is sometimes done in order to establish the demographic breakdown of the inhabitants.

Census counts in refugee situations have been notoriously poor. Both overly high and overly low estimates of population can have adverse effects. In Somalia, for example, census counts for years overestimated the population and food rations were geared to the inaccurate count. Donors convinced that the estimates were too high decreased their contributions, leading to a reduction in the number of calories given in each ration. The assumption was that all families had more ration cards than members. This was not in fact the case, however. Those families with an accurate number of ration cards tended to suffer the most from this attempt to deal with the problems in the statistics.⁷

The second problem is the lack of disaggregated data. Each year the UNHCR reports on its activities and proposed program and budget. A profile of each country is presented with numbers of refugees reported. While accurate statistics for all refugees remain a problem as discussed above, the situation is particularly bad regarding gender and age distribution. Of the 47 countries reporting more than 10,000 refugees or asylum seekers, only 18 provided some demographic breakdown of the population. The formats used in these 18 country reports differed significantly, making it difficult to draw firm conclusions about the demographic profile even within these nations. Some reported the proportion of women and children, generally citing percentages of 75-80 percent. Others reported a male/female division but did not indicate what proportion of either group were adults and what proportion were children. In only a few cases were figures given for the proportion of the population who were adult women versus adult men or for adults separate from children. No data were provided on number of two-parent families, number of women headed households or number of male headed households. Nor was information about family size available. Finally, no data were collected on the

educational level, skills, occupation, etc. of families or individual family members.

Despite the absence of data, some observations can be made about the role played by families in the refugee and development context. In three major ways, family serves as a mediating force in refugee situations: in the provision of assistance, in the promotion of economic self-reliance and in the protection of refugees.

Assistance provided through family units tends to be more effective in ensuring that 1) the aid reaches those needing it; and 2) that it can serve not only immediate needs but longer-term development objectives as well. To use food assistance as an example: access to food is a key issue for refugee families. Malnutrition is the leading cause of death in refugee situations. It is also a key factor in determining whether refugees will be able to become self-reliant over the long term. Decisions about food distribution are generally made by international organizations and host countries in consultation with the male leaders of the camps.

Yet, these male leaders may have little understanding of the needs and circumstances of those who cook the food or feed their families -- the women. As a result, the food distribution procedures and contents may be inappropriate. Food that is inconsistent with the dietary traditions of the refugees and displaced persons may be provided. Or, food may be offered that requires preparation that cannot be readily accomplished in the camp setting. These problems are further compounded by cultural practices among some refugee and displaced populations that require that men be fed first. Where supplies are limited, women and children may not receive adequate food.

Male control of food supplies, a practice often at odds with cultural views of family roles, occurs in refugee settings because food is one of the few resources available to refugees. In some circumstances, food is diverted to resistance forces or for sale on the black market, with women and children suffering as a result. In other situations, food has been used as a weapon by both government and resistance forces which have blocked distribution to civilian populations, particularly displaced persons. In still other cases, male distributors of food and other items have required sexual favors in exchange for the assistance goods.

Distribution of food directly to women can reduce some of these problems. In the camps along the Thai-Cambodian border, for example, the U.N. Border Relief Operation (UNBRO) provided rations on a family-by-family basis, giving the food directly to women and girls over the age of eight. This policy succeeded in reducing the diversion of food to the military and improved the nutritional status of the family members.

Beyond the provision of assistance, the family as an economic unit is invaluable to efforts of refugees to become economically self-reliant. Few refugee families can become self-supporting without contributions from more than one family member. The experiences of refugees resettled in the United States is illustrative, though not confined

to industrialized countries. Research has shown that one wage-earner is seldom sufficient for a family to become independent of reliance on public assistance programs. When refugee women and older children also begin to contribute to the household income, the entire family improves its economic standing. Often, a family orientation is in keeping with cultural concepts about economic life -- that is, assumptions that all members of the family will be involved in the economic activities of the unit.

Finally, families play an important role in protection of refugees. The most vulnerable populations in refugee camps are unaccompanied minors and women. They tend to be subject to abuses because they do not have the family support mechanisms for their protection. Examples abound where unaccompanied women have been forced to establish sexual arrangements with a man in order to obtain assistance. The flip side of this issue is that unaccompanied male adolescents tend to be involved in intra-refugee community problems. Without family supports and control, they may seek violent means to obtain the assistance they require. Where the physical safety and security of refugees is questionable, it is difficult to think about longer-term development because the focus of refugees tends to be on survival. Yet, development -- particularly as it helps refugee women and children become self-reliant -- may be the best mechanism available in providing refugee families the means for their own protection.

Beyond the improvement in programming for refugees that a new emphasis on families would portend, greater recognition of the impact of displacement on families would hold the potential for improving development efforts. Many of the least developed countries have experienced significant uprooting of their populations because of civil conflict and other forms of violence. Some of these countries are entering new periods of peace and reconciliation that will permit new development efforts to be undertaken. Traditional development approaches -- particularly those emphasizing community-based development models -- may not be particularly useful in these places, however, because of the disruption to community and family life that the conflicts and subsequent displacement caused. Given the major challenges facing these countries in the years ahead, the time is ripe for rethinking development in the context of the changing and sometimes traumatic family relationships engendered by the political and military experiences of the past decades.

NOTES

1. Sharon Krummel (n.d.) "Refugee Women and the Experience of Cultural Uprooting," Geneva: Refugee Service, World Council of Churches.
2. Ibid, p. 8.
3. Anderson and Woodrow, Rising From the Ashes, p.97.
4. U.N. Department of Economic and Social Affairs (1975) Popular Participation in Decision Making for Development (New York: United Nations) p. 4.
5. Lance Clark (1987) "Refugee Participation: Changing 'Talk into Action,'" Washington, D.C.: Refugee Policy Group, p.1.
6. Fred C. Cuny (1987) "Refugee Participation in Emergency Relief Operations," Washington, D.C.: Refugee Policy Group.
7. Angela Berry (1989) "Refugee Women Case-Study -- Somalia," in Ninette Kelly (1989) Working With Refugee Women: A Practical Guide, Geneva: International NGO Working Group on Refugee Women.