



## Helpdesk Research Report

# Women and girls in forced and protracted displacement

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09.05.2016

### Question

*What are the specific vulnerabilities women and girls face, and/or specific opportunities open to them, in forced and protracted displacement?*

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## 1. Overview

The year 2015 has seen an unprecedented amount of forcibly displaced persons, including those newly forcibly displaced by conflict, violence and human rights violations, and those in situations of protracted displacement, who experience long periods of exile and separation from home. This rapid review looks at the recent available evidence on the specific vulnerabilities and opportunities women and girls face in forced and protracted displacement.<sup>1</sup>

Much of the literature uncovered by this review is based on first hand research and reviews carried out by different humanitarian organisations responding to the ongoing displacement crisis and a number of academics. There is general consensus in this grey and academic literature on the vulnerabilities faced by women and girls in forced and protracted displacement, although less is known about the opportunities they may have and the long-term impacts. Much of the recent evidence available focuses on displaced populations in Europe and countries neighbouring Syria. There is more of a focus on refugees than

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that a focus on women and girls should not neglect the vulnerabilities that men and boys also face (expert comment).

internally displaced persons, although forcible displacement appears to result in similar vulnerabilities for both populations.

Women and girls face specific vulnerabilities during flight as a result of forced displacement, some of which include:

- **Increased risk of sexual and gender based violence:** women and girls fleeing various different countries have been subject to sexual abuse, rape, transactional sex, and human trafficking by armed forces, officials, smugglers, others fleeing, and individuals in countries along the route. Women and girls travelling alone are particularly vulnerable.
- **Difficulties in providing support to populations in transit:** efforts to provide essential services to women and girls in transit are complicated by language barriers and cultural factors, as well as lack of time and privacy to build trust with women, combined with limited numbers of trained personnel, and the rapid movement of populations. Lack of clear information hampers women and girls from accessing services and leaves them vulnerable to smugglers and other opportunists.
- **Lack of gender sensitive services:** response plans have not specifically considered gender which has resulted in a lack of private and secure family-only and women-only accommodation, common areas and separate WASH facilities for women and men in reception centres. This increases the risk of sexual and gender based violence.
- **Pregnancy:** displacement puts pregnant women at higher risk of complications, preterm delivery and even death; while access to contraception can be difficult for women in emergencies.

Upon arrival in host country and during their protracted displacement women and girls face some similar and different vulnerabilities, some of which include:

- **Increased risk of sexual and gender based violence:** in some host countries women and girls face daily sexual exploitation and harassment, which is often linked to economic vulnerability, the breakdown of traditional protection networks, the unsuitable conditions they live in, and objections to changing gender roles. Some of the violence has been perpetrated by humanitarian actors who are supposed to be assisting these vulnerable populations.
- **Increase in child marriage:** displaced girls are often married off by families worried about their safety or for financial reasons, increasing their risk of exploitation and abuse and school dropout.
- **Increased risk of being trafficked:** desperation and the need to seek out alternative means of protection and economic survival can push female refugees into the hands of traffickers. Many end up in several types of abusive situations, including prostitution, domestic slavery, child begging in urban areas, or working in dangerous labour conditions in textile factories and farms.
- **Increased trauma and isolation:** many displaced women and girls are traumatised by their experiences, and the insecure situations many live in create added stress. Syrian refugee women and girls are often extremely isolated.
- **Restricted access to livelihoods:** many displaced women struggle to establish livelihoods, and a harmful coping strategy may be 'survival sex'. The insecure work environment increases the risk of sexual harassment for those displaced women who do work.
- **Lack of gender sensitive humanitarian assistance:** the layout of camps for displaced persons may increase risks for women and girls. Inadequate assistance may result in women prioritising the needs of their husbands and children to the detriment of their own health and well-being. Non-

food items may not meet the specific needs of women and girls and they may engage in transactional sex in order to raise the money needed to buy the appropriate items.

- **Inadequate support for menstrual hygiene management:** without the provision of culturally appropriate sanitary items, women and girls may avoid attending school or engaging in livelihood activities.

Some groups of forcibly displaced women are particularly vulnerable, including displaced adolescent girls; elderly women; disabled women and girls; female household heads; unaccompanied minors; sexual minorities; urban refugee women and girls; and internally displaced women and girls.

A few opportunities for displaced women and girls were identified, including:

- **Changing gender roles and women's empowerment:** for some displaced women from patriarchal societies, the changing gender roles as a result of displacement and the need for them to assume more responsibilities outside the home is empowering; although some find their new responsibilities stressful and some men respond to these changes with violence. The long term impact of female refugee empowerment is still unclear.
- **Initiatives to protect and empower women and girls:** humanitarian organisations have worked on initiatives to tackle the vulnerabilities faced by displaced women and girls, including increased awareness raising about the prevention and mitigation of gender based violence; counselling; vocational training programmes; opportunities to socialise; and targeted services. Such initiatives have the potential to enhance women's confidence; help generate income; give them hope and opportunities; and meet their specific needs. However, such initiatives are often not yet sufficient to meet the needs of displaced women and girls and address their distinct vulnerabilities.
- **Access to services:** Displacement can bring women and girls into contact with services such as schools, markets and health centres, which they may not have had in their place of origin.

## 2. Vulnerabilities faced by women and girls in forced and protracted displacement

UNHCR reports that 2015 is likely to have seen an unprecedented 60 million forcibly displaced persons, with at least five million newly displaced in the first half of 2015.<sup>2</sup> Many of those newly displaced are from Syria.<sup>3</sup> In 2014, nearly four in five of the refugees who fled Syria were reported to be women and children, while female headed households made up more than a quarter of all refugee households (UNHCR, 2014, p. 8). In recent months, increasing numbers of female refugee and asylum seekers are entering Europe (Birchall, 2016, p. 13). They include pregnant and lactating women (including women at late stages of pregnancy), married women (including second or third wives, as well as married adolescent girls), widows, women with disabilities, elderly women, adolescent girls, younger girls, female unaccompanied minors, and single women (Wolfensohn, 2016, p. 13; Eapen et al, 2016, p. 6).

However, some women and girls may be left behind in conflict or transit situations. The disproportionate number of unaccompanied asylum seeking boys in Europe suggests that many girls remain in countries of conflict and instability (Birchall, 2016, p. 18). UNHCR also finds that it is 'likely that people with disabilities,

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/search?page=search&docid=5672c98c34&query=Worldwidedisplacement> Retrieved 9.5.16

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*

and especially women with disabilities, are often among those left behind in countries of origin or transit countries' (Birchall, 2016, p. 18).

## **2.1 Vulnerabilities during flight**

The vulnerabilities faced by women and girls differ slightly during flight and once in host country due to the differing nature of the context, which often includes rapid movement across countries. Research by UN Women looking at the humanitarian response in Serbia and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia suggests that refugee women and girls face 'specific challenges and protection risks in transit, including family separation, psychosocial stress and trauma, health complications (particularly for pregnant women), physical harm and injury, and risks of exploitation and gender based violence' (Wolfensohn, 2016, p. 2).

### ***Sexual and gender based violence***

Many female refugees are fleeing sexual and gender based violence, as well as experiencing it during flight and in their destination country (Wolfensohn, 2016, p. 2; Eapen et al, 2016, p. 6; Birchall, 2016, p. 19, Krause, 2015). Research by Krause (2015) based on a case study of Uganda for instance suggests that the persistent violence experienced by women and girls (and men) during conflict, flight, and displacement are not separate cases but part of a continuum of violence. Many of the women fleeing El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras as a result of extreme levels of violence reported being sexually and physically abused and extorted by the people smugglers when they fled to the United States (UNHCR, 2015, p. 2, 4, 6, 43-44). Krause (2015, p. 16) finds three significant factors in each stage: gendered power structures, ineffective or insufficient law enforcement, and traumatic events.

Research carried out by UNHCR, UNFPA and Women's Refugee Commission found that throughout the journey from their country of origin to Greece, women and girl refugees face grave protection risks, including violence and exploitation such as rape, transactional sex, human and organ trafficking (Eapen et al, 2016, p. 7-8; Hersh and Obser, 2016a, p. 3). Women and girls travelling alone are particularly vulnerable and face high risks of sexual violence by smugglers, criminal groups and individuals in countries along the route (Birchall, 2016, p. 19; Krause, 2015, p. 10; Wolfensohn, 2016, p. 14; Eapen et al, 2016, p. 7). Those travelling without male family members who depend on smugglers and have limited funds are at increased risk of sexual exploitation or trafficking (Wolfensohn, 2016, p. 14). Routine sexual violence has been perpetrated by border and security staff in detention centres in Libya and Morocco (Birchall, 2016, p. 20). Evidence from the Democratic Republic of Congo also indicates that violence, especially sexual assault, is a risk during flight, with the perpetrators including armed force personnel and others fleeing (Krause, 2015, p. 9, 10). Research carried out by Refugees International found that many female refugees from the recent crisis in Burundi experienced sexual and gender based violence during their flight to safety, including rape, sexual assault, physical assault, and forced marriage (Vigaud-Walsh, 2015, p. 3, 5).

The lack of clear information and inability to access interpreters, especially female interpreters, hampers women and girls from accessing services and leaves them vulnerable to smugglers and other opportunists (Hersh and Obser, 2016b, p. 1, 8). Smugglers, gangs and traffickers hang out around transit camps in some European countries and promise faster or safer passage, often at inflated costs or in ways which compromise refugee's safety (Hersh and Obser, 2016b, p. 8). Women and girls are 'needlessly exposed to multiple forms of violence and exploitation from these criminals' as a result of a lack of understanding of the route (Hersh and Obser, 2016b, p. 8). The risks of exploitation by front line workers in exchange for aid increase as stays become longer (Wolfensohn, 2016, p. 30).

Research in Serbia and Slovenia by Women's Refugee Commission found that 'protection risks for women, girls and other vulnerable groups are present at every stage of the European refugee migration; and at every point where risk could be mitigated, the opportunity to do so is squandered' (Hersh and Obser, 2016b, p. 1). Research in Europe suggests that the nature of the transient situation (lack of time and privacy to build trust) and communication barriers make it harder to identify victims of sexual and gender based violence and trafficking, but has also been used as an excuse for lack of gender based violence specific services (Wolfensohn, 2016, p. 29; Hersh and Obser, 2016b, p. 9). In addition, many aid workers lack specialised training on protection or gender based violence, while burn-out due to overwork impedes their ability to identify vulnerable individuals in mass population movements (Wolfensohn, 2016, p. 29; Hersh and Obser, 2016b, p. 6). In Serbia and Slovenia, Women's Refugee Commission found that there is virtually no consideration of gender based violence along the route to ensure a safe environment, identify survivors and provide services to them (Hersh and Obser, 2016b, p. 4, 9). A similar lack of capacity to support refugee survivors of sexual and gender based violence in Europe was noted in a study by UNHCR, UNFPA and Women's Refugee Commission (Eapen et al, 2016, p. 7, 11). In Serbia and Slovenia, local organisations that might have been able to support women have not been allowed to work in transit sites (Hersh and Obser, 2016b, p. 10).

### ***Lack of gender sensitive services for transient populations***

Research in the transit counties of Serbia and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia for those fleeing countries such as Syria and Afghanistan found that response plans did not specifically incorporate a gender analysis or demonstrate a particularly gender-sensitive response, as well as being relatively weak on protection and not specifically addressing gender based violence issues (Wolfensohn, 2016, p. 17). Efforts were being made to overcome language and cultural barriers in communicating with refugee women in order to assess the relevance of services and refine them accordingly (Wolfensohn, 2016, p. 20). As people have to wait outside reception centres to be registered many women and children are left exposed to the elements with no shelter, lights or basic services and face increased risk (Wolfensohn, 2016, p. 22-23). In addition, lack of crowd control at reception centres can also mean that women and children are pushed to the side by single men trying to get to the front of the line (Wolfensohn, 2016, p. 23, 26; Eapen et al, 2016, p. 10).

Many facilities do not meet the Sphere minimum standards for humanitarian response which include private and secure family-only and women only accommodation, common areas and separate WASH facilities for women and men (Wolfensohn, 2016, p. 24; Eapen et al, 2016, p. 9; Hersh and Obser, 2016b, p. 6). This increases the risk of sexual and gender based violence (Eapen et al, 2016, p. 9). In some instances agencies have prioritised food distribution for women and children, which ended up disadvantaging men who had limited or no access to food parcels (Wolfensohn, 2016, p. 26). Moreover, some women eligible for fast tracking in registration and transportation lines face increased protection risks as a result of separation from their larger (protective) group,<sup>4</sup> while others may not want to be fast tracked for the same reason (Wolfensohn, 2016, p. 28).

UNHCR, UNFPA and Women's Refugee Commission also found a dearth of services which specifically meet the needs of women and girls, such as separate distribution lines for food, separate WASH facilities, separate accommodation for specific groups, including single women and female-headed households, and for families (Eapen et al, 2016, p. 10; see also Hersh and Obser, 2016b, p. 6). In Serbia and Slovenia, some refugee women and girls admitted to refusing water and food to avoid using the latrines as they perceived

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<sup>4</sup> Women and girls travelling through Europe from countries such as Syria and Afghanistan tend to travel in extended family or kinship groups, which include neighbours or friends, rather than completely alone (Wolfensohn, 2016, p. 14).

them as unsafe and unsuitable (Hersh and Obser, 2016b, p. 6). Female refugees may also be reluctant to receive health care from male doctors (Wolfensohn, 2016, p. 32).

### ***Pregnant women and the risk of pregnancy***

Women who are pregnant or fall pregnant during forced displacement often encounter problems as a result of difficulties accessing natal and neo-natal care (Rohwerder, 2014, p. 6). The experience of physical and psychological stress puts pregnant forcibly displaced women at higher risk of complications, preterm delivery and even death (Eapen et al, 2016, p. 11). Research by UN Women found that many pregnant women refugees and asylum seekers in Europe are refusing to stop for urgently needed medical care because they do not wish to miss the next train to the border or risk being separated from their group, which in several cases has led to miscarriages (Wolfensohn, 2016, p. 12; see also Eapen et al, 2016, p. 11). Pregnant women and new mothers who are forcibly displaced may struggle to access clean delivery kits, breast and bottle feeding supplies, diapers, and suitable clothing for mothers and babies (Rohwerder, 2014, p. 7). However, access to contraception can be difficult for women in emergencies (Rohwerder, 2014, p. 6).

## **2.2 Vulnerabilities in host country**

Women and girls face similar and different vulnerabilities after arriving in host countries or communities, both when living in camps or outside of them. Many women and girls end up in protracted displacement in these host locations.

### ***Sexual and gender based violence***

Research carried out in Syria, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey indicates that women and girls feel that one of the biggest challenges they face is the 'daily reality of sexual exploitation and harassment' which leaves them feeling constantly fearful and exhausted (Lehmann et al, 2014, p. 2, 7; El-Masri et al, 2013, p. 4). Exposure to sexual and gender based violence is 'strongly linked with economic vulnerability', although policies and programmes tend to underestimate this (Hidalgo et al, 2015, p. 106). A report on sexual and gender based violence experienced by Syrian refugees in Jordan in 2015 found that the breakdown of traditional protection networks has increased vulnerability to sexual and gender based violence (SGBV SWG, 2015, p. 1).

Congolese refugees in Uganda experienced high rates of sexual and gender based violence in camps and the pervasive situation suggests that a culture of sexual and gender based violence exists in the refugee settlements (Krause, 2015, p. 10, 13). Similar experiences of sexual and gender based violence were found in Tanzanian refugee camps for Burundian refugees (Vigaud-Walsh, 2015, p. 3, 5). Violence in the camps was perpetrated by both strangers and those known to the refugees, in public and private spaces, with domestic violence being common (Krause, 2015, p. 11, 13; Vigaud-Walsh, 2015, p. 5). Sometimes women are denied access to resources such as shelter, economic benefits, support, and school fees for children etc. by their spouse or family members and in-laws (Krause, 2015, p. 12). Violence may occur as a result of 'limitations, traditional cultural beliefs about gender relations, drug consumption, insufficient law enforcement, and traumatic events and its effects' (Krause, 2015, p. 16). Women in refugee camps are vulnerable to attack in the communal latrines and wash areas, especially in the dark (Rohwerder, 2014, p. 7). In addition, the need to travel outside refugee camps to gather firewood for cooking puts women and girls at risk of attack (Rohwerder, 2014, p. 8).

Upon arrival in Europe, reception sites for refugees largely fail to meet minimum standards for sexual and gender based violence risk mitigation and there is limited access to response services for sexual and gender based violence survivors (Birchall, 2016, p. 19). Research by Women's Refugee Commission in Germany and Sweden found that the 'magnitude and speed of the migration led to short-term solutions that do not address, and in some cases perpetuate, the risks of violence women and girls experience along the route' (Hersh and Obser, 2016a, p. 1). In Germany and Sweden, overwhelmed by the unprecedented numbers, the needs of women and girls often go unaddressed in the accommodation centres where asylum seekers must live while their claims are being processed and many do not have separate living spaces or latrines and showers (Hersh and Obser, 2016a, p. 1, 3, 7). This makes women and girls vulnerable to rape, assault and other violence in these facilities (Hersh and Obser, 2016a, p. 1, 7). Boredom and stress caused by long waits in reception centres have led to increased domestic violence (Hersh and Obser, 2016a, p. 7). For asylum-seeking women and girls, 'alone in a foreign country, and with uncertain immigration status, it can be a daunting prospect to leave a partner, even if he is abusive' (Hersh and Obser, 2016a, p. 9). As primary caretakers of children and other family members in need, women face difficulties in taking up opportunities such as courses and activities (Hersh and Obser, 2016a, p. 7).

Women's Refugee Commission found that there are no standard processes to identify and support gender based violence survivors in either Germany or Sweden and vulnerable women and girls are falling through the cracks (Hersh and Obser, 2016a, p. 1, 5, 9). Gaps in psychosocial services make it difficult for traumatised asylum seekers to access mental healthcare and impacts on their ability to navigate the asylum process (Hersh and Obser, 2016a, p. 11). There have also been reports of sexual and gender based violence perpetrated by staff of accommodation centres, including security guards or volunteers (Hersh and Obser, 2016a, p. 7). Private contractors running reception and accommodation centres have been accused of lacking the expertise to run these centres (Hersh and Obser, 2016a, p. 6).

The Inter-Agency Standing Committee Task Force on Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (2011, p. 34) found that some humanitarian actors had engaged in sexual exploitation and abuse of refugees and internally displaced women and children. It found underreporting of allegations of sexual abuse by aid workers (Inter-Agency Standing Committee Task Force on Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse, 2011, p. 34). Research in neighbouring countries found that Syrian refugee women also report experiencing harassment and exploitation by 'individuals charged with delivering humanitarian aid or by those in positions of relative economic and/or political power in their own communities' (Lehmann et al, 2014, p. 7; Zaatari, 2014, p. 9; UNHCR, 2014, p. 50-51). The greatest fear of those abused by landlords or employers, is losing their income or their home (Lehmann et al, 2014, p. 8). Much more needs to be done to protect affected populations from this form of sexual exploitation and abuse (Inter-Agency Standing Committee Task Force on Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse, 2011, p. 34).

### ***Child marriage***

Research has shown that Syrian refugee girls are marrying earlier as a result of social norms which suggest this will give them economic security and protect them from sexual assault (Birchall, 2016, p. 25-26; Boswall and Al Akash, 2015, p. 207). This cuts their education short and those who subsequently divorce or are abandoned live in shame (Birchall, 2016, p. 26; Boswall and Al Akash, 2015, p. 207). Research on Congolese refugees in Uganda also found that refugee girls faced early and forced marriages (Krause, 2015, p. 12). Early marriage contributes to increased vulnerability to exploitation and abuse, exposure to sexually transmitted diseases, unwanted pregnancy and subsequent unsafe abortion, maternal death, and potential impairment or longer-term disability (Paik, 2014, p. 4).

## ***Trafficking***

Protracted refugee situations in which refugees are confined to camps 'causes them to become dependent on international assistance for basic survival needs, prevents them from achieving economic self-reliance, and exposes them to human rights abuses' (Seltzer, 2013, p. 279). (Seltzer, 2013, p. 279). Seltzer (2013, p. 287) finds that 'the long-established camps that are characteristic of protracted refugee situations are havens for criminal networks who seek to establish themselves and gain a community's trust in order to set the vulnerable people up to be trafficked'. Attempts to improve their situation, without recourse to legitimate migration programmes, results in many people falling victim to human traffickers (Seltzer, 2013, p. 280). Research carried out in refugee camps in Thailand, a situation of protracted displacement for Burmese refugees, suggests that the lack of law and order or police protection in these long-term refugee camps, along with the presence of large numbers of helpless people, particularly women and separated children, creates a pool of readily available supply for those who want to exploit them.

Displaced populations are more vulnerable to trafficking for a number of reasons. Conflict zones breed and nourish patterns and economies of human trafficking in places where the abduction and "sale" of women and girls represents a valuable source of income for warring parties (Seltzer, 2013, p. 281). The experience of traumas, such as rape and loss of family members, results in people being less self-protected, and heightens the risk that they will fall into the hands of human traffickers (Seltzer, 2013, p. 281). The loss of family, community, and social networks during displacement also increases vulnerability to trafficking (Seltzer, 2013, p. 281). Unaccompanied children are especially vulnerable to traffickers (Seltzer, 2013, p. 281). Women and girls who do not have access to education, economic and property rights, or political processes, features of the refugee experience, are well documented to be more likely to fall victim to traffickers (Seltzer, 2013, p. 282). Desperation and the need to seek out alternative means of protection and economic survival can push female refugees into the hands of traffickers who promise economic opportunities, or lead some women to engage in "survival sex" (instances in which sex is traded for food, shelter, or protection) (Seltzer, 2013, p. 282). Prostitution is sometimes one of the only ways refugee women and children can survive (Seltzer, 2013, p. 282). Women and girls are lured out of refugee camps by traffickers promising domestic or waitressing jobs and are forced into sexual slavery (Seltzer, 2013, p. 288). The trafficking risks for refugee women are exacerbated by the presence of international actors such as UN peacekeeping personnel (Seltzer, 2013, p. 282). After being trafficked men, women, and children can end up in several types of abusive situations, including prostitution, domestic slavery, child begging in urban areas, or working in dangerous labour conditions in textile factories and farms (Seltzer, 2013, p. 286). Fear of deportation keeps trafficked refugees in desperate situations (Seltzer, 2013, p. 288).

## ***Female genital mutilation***

The small amount of research looking at female genital mutilation in emergencies found that in Mali, for example, displaced families felt under pressure to perform female genital mutilation on their daughters as a result of being ostracised by the host community among whom it was common (Ryan et al, 2014, p. 3). In Nigeria, displaced women and girls reported being forced to have female genital mutilation to prepare them for prostitution which was their only means of survival (Ryan et al, 2014, p. 4).

## ***Trauma and isolation***

Many survivors of sexual and gender based violence continue to be traumatised by their experiences upon arrival in receiving/destination countries (UNHCR, 2015, p. 5; Krause, 2015, p. 15). Some Syrian refugee girls and women in Jordan interviewed for a study were found have daily suicidal thoughts as a result of living with the traumatic memories of the events leading up to their flight and concern and grief for loved ones lost or still in Syria (Boswall and Al Akash, 2015, p. 213). Many female refugees in Europe suffer from



high levels of psychosocial stress and trauma as a result of what they have experienced in country of origin and during their flight, and the stress of the journey may lead to inter-familial violence (Wolfensohn, 2016, p. 15). However, adequate support is not available (Wolfensohn, 2016, p. 28). The experience of detention also exacerbated the traumas suffered at home or in flight for some women (UNHCR, 2015, p. 47). A study looking at refugee integration in the UK found that ‘women refugees fared less well in terms of emotional and physical health than their male counterparts’ (Birchall, 2016, p. 24).

An ethnographic study of the experiences of protracted displacement of Syrian refugee women and girls in Northern Jordan found that many were living with enormous psychological pressure and suffering from high levels of stress (Boswall and Al Akash, 2015, p. 203). This is compounded by the fact that 86 per cent of Syrian families in Jordan are thought to be living below the national poverty line, with costs of basic needs a concern (Boswall and Al Akash, 2015, p. 204). Financial insecurity has led to greater emotional pressures on families, and incidents of gender based violence, in particular early marriages and intimate partner violence, have increased (Boswall and Al Akash, 2015, p. 204).

Many Syrian refugee women and girls are extremely isolated, including as a result of the changing social fabric of families, which was embedded in reciprocal gendered roles and responsibilities (Boswall and Al Akash, 2015, p. 204). In 2013 it was found that nearly half of the women and girls in camps in Jordan rarely left their homes and many women feel like their home is a prison (Boswall and Al Akash, 2015, p. 210). Women living in urban areas, more conservative areas and communities, recently widowed women, divorced women, and women and girls fearing harassment, have reported restricted movements (SGBV SWG, 2015, p. 2; Hidalgo et al, 2015, p. 36; Lehmann et al, 2014, p. 7; Zaatari, 2014, p. 5). Sexual harassment on their way to school has prevented some girls from attending (SGBV SWG, 2015, p. 3; Zaatari, 2014, p. 5). Restricted movement also limits women and girls’ ability to access goods and services, and means they are far less likely to participate in social and economic activities (Zaatari, 2014, p. 13; Lehmann et al, 2014, p. 8).

Many Syrian refugees have started to accustom themselves to the fact that theirs will be a protracted displacement and they may never return to Syria (Boswall and Al Akash, 2015, p. 212). Some women and girls, generally those who are more educated and younger, have started to develop new coping mechanisms and their sense of isolation was reduced through the creation of new social networks in Jordan (Boswall and Al Akash, 2015, p. 212, 213). However, many others were ‘unable to develop their own effective coping mechanisms, and the financial and psychological implications of this protracted exile continues to profoundly diminish their wellbeing, both on a day-to-day basis and for their long term future’ (Boswall and Al Akash, 2015, p. 212). Contact with their families still in Syria helped reduce some Syrian refugee women’s isolation and contributes to their well-being (Boswall and Al Akash, 2015, p. 213).

Boswall and Al Akash (2015, p. 213) suggest that helping these women and girls to develop their social networks and reduce their vulnerability and isolation requires culturally sensitive solutions. For example, many women interviewed felt that communal activities offered by local and international NGOs designed to bring relief from the sadness, create opportunities for social networking and sometimes, with the added possibility of generating income, were considered inappropriate out of respect and consideration for those still suffering in Syria (Boswall and Al Akash, 2015, p. 210).

### ***Lack of support for asylum claims***

Recent research looking at the situation of women and girls in the current European refugee crisis has highlighted the lack appropriate psychosocial, legal and language support for women and girl asylum seekers to help them prove their claims (Birchall, 2016, p. 22; Hersh and Obser, 2016a, p. 1, 12; Hersh and

Obser, 2016b, p. 12). In some countries vulnerable groups such as pregnant women and children are held in detention centres despite the detention of children being shown to have clearly detrimental psychosocial and developmental impacts and long term consequences (Birchall, 2016, p. 22). Restrictions on family reunification have left women and their children stranded in conflict zones or encouraged to undertake the dangerous journey to Europe to join their husbands, fathers and brothers who went ahead (Hersh and Obser, 2016a, p. 13; Hersh and Obser, 2016b, p. 11).

### ***Access to livelihoods***

Research into Syrian refugee women in neighbouring countries found that Syrian women face substantial barriers to establishing livelihoods (Buecher and Aniyamuzaala, 2016, p. 5). CARE research finds that this includes difficulty finding “suitable” livelihood options that do not expose them to (sexual) harassment, put at risk the “honour” of the woman or her husband, are compatible with childcare and other household and care responsibilities, and, preferably, in sectors considered “feminine” (Buecher and Aniyamuzaala, 2016, p. 5). Some women also lack the skills needed to create livelihoods and feel overwhelmed and exhausted (Buecher and Aniyamuzaala, 2016, p. 5). In neighbouring countries, many Syrian refugee women resort to very informal, small-scale income-generating opportunities they can do from home (Buecher and Aniyamuzaala, 2016, p. 5). A harmful coping strategy is survival sex as a result of ‘desperation to earn money and/or goods to ease financial pressure from the increased cost of living in Lebanon’ (Charles and Denman, 2013, p. 106).

The difficulties of accessing legal residency, work permits, legal recourse, together with prejudice from host communities, creates an environment conducive to (sexual) harassment and sometimes also sexual exploitation in the workplace (Buecher and Aniyamuzaala, 2016, p. 5). Women also experience harassment on the way to work (Buecher and Aniyamuzaala, 2016, p. 5). The changing economic balance of power between the sexes and the related feeling of emasculation that men may experience increased the risk of domestic violence (Buecher and Aniyamuzaala, 2016, p. 5).

### ***Gender sensitive humanitarian assistance***

Refugee registration cards and humanitarian assistance in the name of male heads of household creates disadvantages for women, especially in the event of widowhood or if they want to divorce (Bermudez et al, 2014, p. 64). In Lebanon, widowed and other single women and female-headed households are often excluded from receiving assistance because of gaps in targeting of cash or rent payments (focused on male heads of households), while cultural norms often prevent them from going to register by themselves (El-Masri et al, 2013, p. 5, 6, 31).

There is some over-lap between issues in transit camps and in long-term camps for displaced persons. Women in refugee camps face specific vulnerabilities, with research in refugee camps in Tanzania finding that women and girls felt unsafe in showers, latrines, and their own shelters (Vigaud-Walsh, 2015, p. 5). Some also identified the areas where food and non-food item distributions take place as unsafe, especially when distributions were carried out late in the day and women and girls had to walk home in the dark (Vigaud-Walsh, 2015, p. 6). The camp’s perimeter and beyond was considered the most dangerous area, with firewood collection considered the most dangerous activity (Vigaud-Walsh, 2015, p. 7, 10). Overcrowding in shelters created problems for women and girls such as theft, lack of privacy, tensions, and domestic violence (Vigaud-Walsh, 2015, p. 6). WASH facilities did not meet minimum humanitarian standards and there were reports of sexual violence occurring in or en route to/from the latrines and/or showers, and on the walk to the river outside the camp (Vigaud-Walsh, 2015, p. 6).

Those leading the response to Burundian refugees in Tanzania were reported to not fully appreciate the importance of minimum standards to reduce the risk of gender based violence, or know how to implement them (Vigaud-Walsh, 2015, p. 10). Accountability to the complaints of women and girls appears to be very weak (Vigaud-Walsh, 2015, p. 11). The rapid onset of the emergency meant humanitarian agencies struggled to respond adequately which increased the risk and incidence of gender based violence for Burundian refugee women and girls (Vigaud-Walsh, 2015, p. 11-12).

Research by Norwegian Refugee Council with displaced communities in Afghanistan, Ecuador, Lebanon, Liberia, Palestine (Gaza), and South Sudan found that women's housing, land and property rights are often neglected in humanitarian response (Bermudez et al, 2014, p. 8). In Ecuador, for instance, Colombian refugee women and asylum seekers encountered discrimination and xenophobia when looking for housing which resulted in women living in poor quality, overcrowded housing (Bermudez et al, 2014, p. 25).

Lack of services and facilities affects women more than men. Syrian refugee women in neighbouring countries were found to have prioritised 'the needs of their husbands and children, often to the detriment of their own health and well-being' (Anderson et al, 2013, p. 8, 21; Lehmann et al, 2014, p. 20; El-Masri et al, 2013, p. 5, 20). As a result, inadequate water sources and sanitation facilities, for example, affects them disproportionately (El-Masri et al, 2013, p. 6, 27). Moreover, women's time and work burden is increased due to limited water supplies as a result of their gendered responsibility for washing and cleaning (El-Masri et al, 2013, p. 6).

Clothing provided as part of non-food items to female refugees may not be culturally appropriate (Rohwerder, 2014, p. 6). For example, some women have been provided with inappropriate underwear or even no underwear at all (Rohwerder, 2014, p. 6). The ability of women to go out in public and access essential services in some Muslim contexts may be dependent on having headscarves and sarongs: they may only have one change of clothing or have lost them during their flight (Rohwerder, 2014, p. 6).

In some refugee contexts the provision of household items is very important to female refugees because household management is seen as a woman's responsibility and the loss of these items during their displacement adds to women's burdens when they reach their place of refuge (Rohwerder, 2014, p. 6). Women and girls may need to engage in transactional sex in order to raise money to buy items to meet their basic needs where they are not provided (Rohwerder, 2014, p. 7).

### ***Menstrual hygiene management***

Women and girls in forced and protracted displacement may struggle to meet their menstrual hygiene needs (Rohwerder, 2014, p. 4). A study in the Democratic Republic of Congo found that without the provision of culturally appropriate sanitary items, women tend to avoid leaving camp and engaging in livelihood activities while they have their period (Rohwerder, 2014, p. 4). This has a negative impact on their economic and social lives (Rohwerder, 2014, p. 4). Girls have been reluctant to go to school as a result of the shame and discomfort they felt as a result of not having adequate sanitary items (Rohwerder, 2014, p. 4). In many situations of forced and protracted displacement, adequate sanitary items and methods of distribution, disposal or washing are not provided by humanitarian agencies (Rohwerder, 2014, p. 4-5; Wolfensohn, 2016, p. 27; Hersh and Obser, 2016b, p. 7). The specific needs of girls or women with disabilities or menstrual disorders, those who have had the most severe forms of female genital mutilation or cutting, with additional challenges such as incontinence or fistula, and post-natal mothers are frequently overlooked (Rohwerder, 2014, p. 5). In addition, the needs of elderly or disabled refugees for adult diapers are also frequently not met (Rohwerder, 2014, p. 5).

## 2.3 Groups with specific concerns

Research by Women's Refugee Commission in a number of different countries and by HIAS in Chad, Kenya, South Africa and Uganda found that certain groups of forcibly displaced women are particularly vulnerable to sexual and gender based violence and other issues (Buscher, 2006; Levitan and Millo, 2014). In addition, women are often the primary caretakers for children and disabled and elderly family members, which further increases their need for protection and support (Wolfensohn, 2016, p. 2).

### *Displaced girls*

Research by Women's Refugee Commission found that girls who are separated from their families, married, or have a disability, or any combination of these circumstances, face an increased risk of all forms of abuse and hardship (Paik, 2014, p. 4). Girls may lack the assertiveness to stand up for themselves and say "no" to risky situations (Buscher, 2006, p. 4). They may see older men as protectors and providers without understanding the risks involved and may, hence, be particularly susceptible to transactional sexual relationships (Buscher, 2006, p. 4).

Displaced girls often take on increased responsibilities in caring for dependents, carrying out household chores, and engaging in livelihood activities with detrimental impact on their education and physical safety (Paik, 2014, p. 4; Buscher, 2006, p. 4). Syrian refugee adolescent girls have been forced as a result of dire economic conditions to assume livelihoods-related responsibilities early, including care for older persons or sick people, or to get married early to reduce the economic burdens on their family (Buecher and Aniyamuzaala, 2016, p. 5). Girls in protracted displacement have been found to be even less likely to attend school than boys (Birchall, 2016, p. 25; Krause, 2015, p. 12; Buecher and Aniyamuzaala, 2016, p. 5). Missing out on school will have a long-term impact on their futures (Boswall and Al Akash, 2015, p. 212).

These circumstances restrict girls' mobility, visibility, and access to lifesaving services and their isolation means adolescent girls are often invisible to humanitarian relief efforts (Paik, 2014, p. 4). For instance, Syrian adolescent girls experience 'staggering physical and social isolation' as families fear for the safety of girls and restrict their movement, education, and social opportunities (Mercy Corps, 2014, p. 8). Adolescent girls are often pressured to stay indoors for their safety, while some are required to work inside or outside the home to support their family, and thus lack psychosocial support, education and skills building programmes (Mercy Corps, 2014, p. 2). Many girls are working double shifts, first outside the home and then domestically, which further increases isolation (Mercy Corps, 2014, p. 12).

The tendency to lump adolescent girls in with women and children does not acknowledge their different needs and life experience, while youth programmes often mostly benefit male youth (Paik, 2014, p. 4).

### *Displaced elderly women*

Older refugee women, particularly those who are widowed or are without male family members, or physically fragile or suffering from chronic health problems, are particularly vulnerable, with lone older women at risk because of both their age and perceived lack of protection (Levitan and Millo, 2014, p. 18; Buscher, 2006, p. 4). With few opportunities to support themselves due to physical limitations, older refugee women – particularly those without family members to support them – are sometimes forced into survival sex work or begging, and/or live in poor, violent neighbourhoods, all of which expose them to sexual or gender based violence (Levitan and Millo, 2014, p. 19). They may be marginalised further by mobility problems and health concerns which can make access to services and programmes difficult (Buscher, 2006, p. 4-5). Service providers rarely recognise that older refugees may be vulnerable to sexual and gender based violence making it harder for them to receive support (Levitan and Millo, 2014, p. 19).

### ***Displaced women and girls with disabilities***

Research by Women’s Refugee Commission in seven countries found that women and girls with disabilities face increased vulnerability to violence in forced and protracted displacement settings (Birchall, 2016, p. 19). Stigma, isolation, discrimination and exploitation result in disabled refugees being particularly vulnerable to sexual and gender based violence and having limited opportunities to mitigate risks of further violence (Levitan and Millo, 2014, p. 22). Women with disabilities may be targeted by displaced or host community men and youth because they are seen to be less able to protect themselves (Buscher, 2006, p. 5). Many disabled refugee women interviewed in Chad, Kenya, South Africa and Uganda had become pregnant as a result of their experiences of sexual and gender based violence and almost all survivors experienced serious physical and emotional aftereffects (Levitan and Millo, 2014, p. 22). A study by the Women’s Refugee Commission in Jordan found that women and girls with physical and intellectual disabilities in Zaatari Refugee Camp had experienced sexual violence; while the wives of men with disabilities were sexually harassed when in public places in urban settings (WRC, 2013, p. 1). Lack of accessible schools results in housebound disabled children who are particularly vulnerable to sexual and gender based violence (Levitan and Millo, 2014, p. 24). In addition, they may be the last to receive food and other humanitarian assistance from family or other caretakers (Buscher, 2006, p. 5).

### ***Female headed households***

Research in neighbouring countries found that Styrian refugee female headed households were particularly vulnerable, with many of the female household heads facing ‘a daily struggle to find enough money to pay the rent, buy food and basic items, or access services such as health care’ (UNHCR, 2014, p. 10). Shelter is a major concern as, ‘landlords are sometimes more reluctant to let to female heads of household than other refugees, worried that they will pose a financial risk’ (UNHCR, 2014, p. 17). Female headed households had less access to work opportunities than those headed by men (UNHCR, 2014, p. 30). Survival sex and child labour are among the negative coping mechanisms some women resort to (UNHCR, 2014, p. 37-40; SGBV SWG, 2015, p. 2).

### ***Unaccompanied minors***

Research by Women’s Refugee Commission looking at the ongoing refugee crisis in Europe found that family members are frequently separated along the route through Greece and the Balkans, leaving many unaccompanied children travelling on their own (Hersh and Obser, 2016b, p. 11). These girls and boys are an especially vulnerable population (Hersh and Obser, 2016b, p. 11).

### ***Sexual minorities***

Sexual minorities, including lesbians and transgender women, are also particularly vulnerable to sexual and gender based violence at the hands of private citizens and public officials alike (Levitan and Millo, 2014, p. 34; see also UNHCR, 2015, p. 44).

### ***Urban refugee women and girls***

Displaced women and girls in urban areas may be more vulnerable as it is more difficult in urban settings for assistance providers and human rights activists to identify, monitor and support displaced persons (Buscher, 2006, p. 5). The urban displaced may be marginalised and vulnerable to exploitation by landlords, employers and host community members, who may prey on their lack of legal status and lack of support systems (Buscher, 2006, p. 5).

### *Internally displaced women and girls*

Internally displaced persons receive far less attention, fewer resources, and consequently far fewer services than refugees and as such, internally displaced women and girls experience significant risks to their safety and well-being (Buscher, 2006, p. 5).

## **3. Opportunities for women and girls in forced and protracted displacement**

### *Changing gender roles and women's empowerment*

Displacement can give female refugees the opportunity to assume different gender roles (Jabbar and Zaza, 2015, p. 9; Charles and Denman, 2013, p. 103). An extensive literature review and research in a refugee camp in Uganda suggests that forced displacement may lead to women's empowerment as refugees from mainly patriarchal and male-dominated societies renegotiate and redefine gender relations while in camps and settlements (Krause, 2014). Krause (2014, p. 46) makes five inferences from her research: i) dislocation, the new living contexts and refugee assistance impact on gender relations and the social status of women; ii) women's empowerment is more likely to be achieved in settlements than in camps; iii) structurally equal access to resources can lead to women's empowerment while cultural change requires self-initiative and ownership; iv) the social role and status of women is always connected with men; and v) all interventions should be gender-sensitive in refugee camps and settlements.

Women in a refugee camp in Uganda had more choices over their lives and decisions than before their forced displacement, and therefore gained power (Krause, 2014, p. 46). Krause (2014, p. 46) notes that the process of women's empowerment is connected to both the process of dislocation and the refugee protection and assistance programmes in refugee camps and settlements. Equal access to land was shown to positively impact on women's social status, as were livelihood opportunities (Krause, 2014, p. 46). Evidence from this camp suggests that some interventions, such as girl child education programmes and women's political participation, have little success if imposing different cultural ideas onto the refugee population (Krause, 2014, p. 47). Moreover, sexual and gender based violence persisted and was used to subordinate some women (Krause, 2014, p. 46- 47). Krause (2014, p. 47) suggests this indicates that just focusing on women's empowerment can leave men feeling left out which may cause some to attempt to regain power through violence. Krause (2014, p. 47-48) also cautions that male victims should not be neglected and gender should not be equated to just mean women. Further research is needed to discover the lasting impact of female refugee empowerment, especially after refugee repatriation (Krause, 2014, p. 48).

Research conducted into the Syrian refugee crisis has found that this period of forced and protracted displacement has resulted in a shift in gender roles and responsibilities (Buecher and Aniyamuzaala, 2016, p. 4). Women increasingly participate in decision-making on income and expenses and assume responsibilities outside the home, while men have lost their traditional role as (sole) breadwinner and decision-maker (Buecher and Aniyamuzaala, 2016, p. 4). Up to a third of all Syrian refugee households are female-headed and in others men may lack residence or work permits or have an injury or disability which prevents them earning a livelihood (Buecher and Aniyamuzaala, 2016, p. 4). Women and children are less likely than men to be asked for proof of residency or work permits, and thus sometimes find it easier to move and find work (Buecher and Aniyamuzaala, 2016, p. 4). As a result women are increasingly assuming responsibility for generating an income and ensuring that the family's basic needs are met, while continuing to care for children, and other persons in need of special care (Buecher and Aniyamuzaala, 2016, p. 4).

Nevertheless, data indicates that the income of female-headed households tends to be below that of male-headed households (Buecher and Aniyamuzaala, 2016, p. 5).

A study in the Zaatari Refugee Camp also found that women are no longer as dependent on their spouses because they have become breadwinners, while their role as decision makers gave them a higher community profile (Jabbar and Zaza, 2015, p. 9). Their involvement in vocational programmes also helped to change mind-sets around gender roles (Jabbar and Zaza, 2015, p. 9). For many women, these new responsibilities, which are at odds with their traditional gendered social roles, have created intense levels of stress (El-Masri et al, 2013, p. 1, 14). This is compounded by the hostility they experience from their men as a result of these changes (El-Masri et al, 2013, p. 14; Charles and Denman, 2013, p. 104). For some women, however, these changes were empowering (Anderson et al, 2013, p. 13). However, an Oxfam study in Lebanon warns that ‘the potential for longer-term changes to women’s lives resulting from the increased self-confidence that some women experienced is limited, as men still wield more power in the household’ (El-Masri et al, 2013, p. 4, 16).

In Turkey, research indicates that some women engaged in positive coping mechanisms which include consistent engagement in rewarding social interaction and participation in enjoyable pastimes outside the home (Anderson et al, 2013, p. 24-26). For some of them, the move to Turkey had expanded their social network (Anderson et al, 2013, p. 24). Refugees who had an increased sense of agency in their lives demonstrated higher levels of resilience (Anderson et al, 2013, p. 26). Some women engaged in activist work, promoting Syrian women’s political participation (Anderson et al, 2013, p. 17).

## **Initiatives to protect and empower women and girls**

Humanitarian organisations have developed a range of guidelines and strategies to tackle the protection issues faced by women and girls in forced and protracted displacement, including UNHCR’s Handbook for the Protection of Women and Girls; UNHCR’s Age, Gender and Diversity Policy, Mainstreaming Plan, and Accountability Framework; the Inter-Agency Standing Committee Gender Handbook in Humanitarian Action; the Inter-Agency Standing Committee Guidelines for Gender-based Violence Interventions in Humanitarian Settings; the Inter-Agency Standing Committee Gender Marker tool; and the European Commission’s Gender-Age Marker for Humanitarian Action (Birchall, 2016, p. 41-43).

Various different initiatives have been put in place to address sexual and gender based violence, and promote the empowerment of women and girls in forced and protracted displacement (Birchall, 2016, p. 44-46). These include training by IOM to build the knowledge, skills and attitudes of national authorities and camp management staff around the prevention and mitigation of gender based violence (Birchall, 2016, p. 44). Initiatives in Jordan work with Syrian refugee women and girls to provide counselling and training courses, and use creative strategies to address issues such as gender based violence and early marriage (Birchall, 2016, p. 45). The Living Peace programme in the Democratic Republic of Congo works with displaced men and their partners to break the cycle of traumatised men inflicting further violence on their partners and communities (Birchall, 2016, p. 45). It has improved attitudes and behaviour towards women and children, reduced men’s alcohol use, reduced sexual violence, improved men’s control of their frustration and aggression, lead to greater income sharing by men with their partners, happier children, and improved health outcomes (Birchall, 2016, p. 45).

An evaluation of a vocational training programme, the ‘Women and Girls Oasis’ at the Zaatari Refugee Camp, found that such programmes can enhance women’s confidence and self-esteem; improve their business and entrepreneurial skills; help generate income to build a better life for their families; and give them hope and opportunities (Jabbar and Zaza, 2015). The International Rescue Committee’s experience

across countries in the region also indicates that ‘women’s economic activities are most safe and impactful when paired with social activities’, which help them rebuild social connections and networks (Lehmann et al, 2014, p. 8).

Research by UN Women looking at the humanitarian response in Serbia and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia found many positive examples of targeted efforts to respond to the specific needs, priorities and protection risks of refugee women and girls (Wolfensohn, 2016, p. 3). They include the systematic collection of and reporting on sex- and age-disaggregated data through the asylum registration system; the establishment of mobile protection teams to identify vulnerable groups and facilities to fast track them; the distribution of targeted non-food items (NFIs) such as dignity kits and women’s clothing; the availability of targeted services in reception and transit centres including gynaecological health care, child-friendly and mother/baby-friendly spaces and psychosocial support; in some cases, the existence of women-only spaces within shelter facilities; and the availability of sex-segregated toilets and showers (Wolfensohn, 2016, p. 3).

However, such initiatives are not yet sufficient to meet the needs of displaced women and girls and address their distinct vulnerabilities (Wolfensohn, 2016, p. 3). Registration systems have weak linkages to protection systems and are not systematically identifying at risk groups (Wolfensohn, 2016, p. 3). The response to sexual and gender based violence needs to be strengthened (Wolfensohn, 2016, p. 3). In many places targeted services for women and girls are limited or missing, including: systematic protection monitoring, gender based violence prevention and response services, targeted psychosocial support and trauma counselling, women-only spaces, and full-time gynaecological services on site in transit and reception centres (Wolfensohn, 2016, p. 3). In addition, some sector specific services do not yet have adequate provisions in place to ensure that women and girls and men and boys can access and benefit from them equally (Wolfensohn, 2016, p. 3).

### ***Initiatives aimed at girls***

Evidence gathered by Women’s Refugee Commission suggests that investing in girls’ economic and social empowerment can reduce their risks of experiencing violence, while displacement situations often lead to shifting gender roles that open up possibilities for positive social change (Paik, 2014, p. 1). Specific initiatives are needed for adolescent girls, for whom direct employment may not be age appropriate, but who would benefit from building employment readiness skills (Paik, 2014, p. 1). The programmes should be tailored to the ages and skills needs of different girls (Paik, 2014, p. 2). Furthermore, girls need safe spaces to call their own which can be a platform for building girls’ social networks, knowledge, and skills (Paik, 2014, p. 1-2). Mentoring and leadership roles can create positive changes for girls and their communities (Paik, 2014, p. 2). Men and boys need to be involved as partners and allies for gender equality to be achieved (Paik, 2014, p. 2).

### **Access to services**

Displacement can bring women and girls into contact with services such as schools, water pumps, markets and health centres, which they may not have had in their place of origin, as was the case in South Sudan for example (Bermudez et al, 2014, p. 31).



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## Key websites

- Women's Refugee Commission:  
<https://www.womensrefugeecommission.org/>

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## Suggested citation

Rohwerder, B. (2016). *Women and girls in forced and protracted displacement* (GSDRC Helpdesk Research Report 1364). Birmingham, UK: GSDRC, University of Birmingham.

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