

# Reproductive health care in refugee settings



“Reproductive health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity in all matters relating to the reproductive system and to its functions and processes. Reproductive health therefore implies that people are able to have a satisfying and safe sex life and that they have the capability to reproduce and the freedom to decide if, when and how often to do so.”

**Programme of Action, International Conference on Population and Development, Cairo, September 1994**



Worldwide, it has been estimated that there are currently 35 million refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs)<sup>1</sup>. Three out of every four refugees are under the protection of host countries in the developing world, placing increased pressure on welfare and social services which already operate on limited resources.

Until very recently, reproductive health care has been a neglected area of relief work, despite the fact that poor reproductive health is a significant cause of death and disease in camp settings once emergency health needs have been met. Lack of quality reproductive health services can lead to high mortality rates among women and children, an increase in the spread of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) including HIV/AIDS, an increase in unsafe abortions, and increased morbidity related to high fertility rates and poor birth spacing.

Women bear the greatest burden of reproductive ill-health, as well as a disproportionate amount of the hardship that affects families in refugee settings. It is imperative that a lack of comprehensive reproductive health services does not add to the suffering of refugee women.

It cannot be stressed enough that reproductive health care for refugees is not a luxury, but a necessity which saves lives and reduces illness. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees has recognised the importance of reproductive health, stating that, “While food, water and shelter remain a priority, reproductive health care is among the crucial elements that give refugees basic human welfare and dignity that is their right.”

## Key facts

- 120-150 million women who want to limit or space their pregnancies are still without the means to do so effectively<sup>2</sup>
- one in four adult women in the developing world suffers from acute or chronic conditions related to pregnancy<sup>3</sup>
- of the women of reproductive age in a refugee population, an estimated 20% will be pregnant at any one time<sup>4</sup>
- an average of 80% of refugees are women and children.<sup>5</sup>

## What can be done?

Reproductive health entails much more than the skeleton maternal and child health services currently provided in some refugee settings. An effective programme of reproductive health care is sensitive to the different needs of men and women, and of different age groups; it must be accessible and available to single women, widows, older women, adolescents and men.

Reproductive health for refugees covers the following technical areas:

- safe motherhood
- protection from sexual and gender violence
- family planning
- prevention and treatment of STIs and HIV/AIDS
- emergency obstetrics care, including the treatment of abortion-related complications.

## Technical resources

### References

<sup>1</sup> The State of World Population, UNFPA 2000

<sup>2</sup> The State of World Population, UNFPA, 1997

<sup>3</sup> Safe Motherhood and The World Bank, The World Bank, 1999

<sup>4</sup> Sexual Health Exchange, Issue 2, SAFAIDS, 2000

<sup>5</sup> The State of World Population, UNFPA, 2000

**Note:** The term 'refugee' officially describes a person who has crossed an international border, while an 'internally displaced person' (IDP) has had to leave her home but has remained in her own country. For the purposes of this factsheet, 'refugee' is used here to refer to both groups.

## Reproductive rights

The rights of refugees to full reproductive health services are encoded in a variety of human rights instruments and other documents reflecting international consensus, including:

- The Universal Declaration of Human Rights Art. 16 (1)
- The Convention on the Rights of the Child, Art. 24 (2)
- The Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (1979) states:  
*Parties shall take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in the field of health care in order to ensure, on a basis of equality of men and women, access to health care services, including those relating to family planning.*



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## Further reading

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