

# Change for Women's Sake

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*Mench argues changing humanitarian aid policies to benefit women refugees will reduce dependency on foreign aid. Targeting the refugee crisis in Darfur, the author proposes humanitarian assistance is needed specifically for women, granting them access to basic necessities, education/training and income-generating programs. While women refugees tend to be more vulnerable than their male counterparts, if women are taught to be self-sustainable, this would in turn reduce the amount of aid needed as women could provide for themselves and their families. The author reveals the unintended fallacies in many humanitarian assistance programs and outlines beneficial programs as well as makes recommendations for improving current programs for women. [Abstract by editor]*

The ongoing violence in Darfur, Sudan has created millions of refugees and displaced persons, most of whom are women. Current humanitarian aid policies, aimed at men, generally leave women refugees with heavy responsibilities and no means of supporting their families. These women find themselves trapped in a system that often excludes them, a practice that has a variety of negative results. They suffer from poor health, physical and psychological threats, and lack of options for their futures. Humanitarian aid policies should be revised and programs implemented to recognize the unique needs of women refugees and to provide them with access to education, training, and income-generating programs in order to assist them in becoming self-sufficient, thereby reducing dependency on formal aid.

Since 2003, Sudan's Arab government and its Janjaweed militias have been terrorizing Darfur's black African population. They burn villages, destroy crops, slaughter livestock, foul water sources, rape, and kill without restriction. It is estimated that as many as 2.5 - 3 million people are displaced and 3.5 million are dependent on humanitarian food distributions (Wallace). Although the U.N. defines refugees and Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) differently, and these definitions affect aid distribution, most sources agree that both populations exist under the same circumstances for the same reasons. For the purpose of this paper, the term "refugee" will be used as an umbrella term for both people who cross international borders (refugees) and those who do not (IDPs).

Refugee camps throughout the Darfur region have been overwhelmed with people fleeing the violence of the Janjaweed. More than eighty percent of the population of these camps are women (Marlowe 20) who have crossed arduous terrain with their children, often encountering the

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horrors of rape and torture along the way. These women arrive at refugee camps with virtually no possessions, traumatized, afraid, and on the edge of survival (Hermanson 155). Due to the cultural stigma of rape, women may be abandoned by their husbands or shunned by other women for being rape victims or for bearing children of rape (Bonnerjea 6). Once within a camp, women retain traditional female responsibilities of cooking, cleaning, and caring for children. Many women must also accept new, traditionally male responsibilities because they are without male representation. Men are generally absent, either dead or fighting; those that do flee to refugee camps may find themselves unable to support their families, a situation that can lead to domestic abuse and depression. Women are often malnourished, a condition that increases the risk of other health problems, and budget constraints do not normally allow for psychological treatment of the atrocities these women have experienced, yet another contributing factor to the overall poor health of women refugees. Sexual intimidation, physical assault and rape are common, even within the supposed safety of a camp. "Perpetrators of violence against refugee and displaced women [...] include not only military personnel from the host and home countries and resistance forces but male refugees and humanitarian aid personnel as well" (Martin 48). Conflicts arising from the need for women to take on traditionally male responsibilities may cause tension within the camp community, prohibiting women from forming essential friendships and alliances with other women.

Humanitarian aid policies often inadvertently contribute to these problems. Camp registration, administration, distribution, and access to services tend to be through a male representative for each family unit. Those without a husband or male relative are often the last to receive assistance. Refugee women are overwhelmingly under-represented in decision-making and in most camps they are not permitted to participate in camp administration. They are not afforded opportunities for employment and are routinely denied access to training, education, and income-generating programs. This leaves them unable to provide for themselves and their families and, therefore, desperately dependent on external aid. It is a vicious cycle that can only be ended through recognition that women need to be the focus of humanitarian policies, rather than men.

Current aid policies hinder women in a more far-reaching way as well. The male demographic may be so much reduced by current violence that essential, typically male skills may be lost to future generations. Even after the conflict ends, women may not be able to find husbands and those without male relatives will be exceedingly dependent on some type of formal aid unless they are given access to education and skills training programs that prepare them for life independent of aid.

One of the first steps to correcting this situation is to revise the current system of distribution within camps. Equal access to food and services is an important issue for refugee women. "Decisions about food distribution are generally made by international organizations and host countries, often in consultation with the refugee leaders of the camp" (Martin 63). However, women are often excluded from leadership positions and male leaders may have little understanding of the needs and circumstances of the women who cook the food and feed the children. As a result, food distribution procedures and contents of food packages may be inappropriate. The World Food Program (WFP) has recognized this and their guidelines state that "women should take a lead role in the local decision-making committees on food aid management..." (Martin 64). The guidelines also recognize that food packages distributed by humanitarian organizations to men have been diverted or sold to resistance forces (Martin 64). Distribution of food directly to women can reduce many of these problems.

Another area humanitarian organizations need to consider is the content of the food packages. Women are particularly affected by deficiencies in iron, calcium, iodine, and vitamin C. Pregnant and lactating women are at an even greater risk (Martin 65). At the Otash camp just outside Nyala, south Darfur, the "food basket" given to those who come to the WFP distribution point contains sorghum, high-nutrition corn-soya blend, lentils, vegetable oil, salt and sugar (Casella). Food rations do not generally include meat, fish, vegetables, fruit, and other food needed for a balanced diet. Humanitarian organizations generally expect that refugees will barter part of their ration for other food or that they will grow vegetables, raise livestock or work in order to purchase additional food items. However, living in one of the driest regions of the world, refugees from Darfur may not have the resources available to make cultivation or livestock feasible. As Martin points out, "refugees often settled in the poorest areas of their host countries, where local inhabitants also struggled to survive. To complicate matters, sufficient arable land, water, and work opportunities for both the local population and the refugees were often in short supply" (122). Not surprisingly then, it is quite common for women to find themselves with few options outside of exchanging sex for food. Although dietary traditions of the refugees need to be a consideration, development of military-style Meals-Ready-to-Eat (MREs) may be an option to be explored. These revisions alone would vastly improve the physical health of refugee women.

Clean water and fuel for cooking and heating are also essentials that may not be available within the confines of refugee camps, and women who venture outside the perimeter are at risk of physical harm from local people hostile to refugee intrusion, bandits, and the Janjaweed. While the African Union claims to be providing security, they are just as often accused of exploiting women who must travel outside the confines of camps. The abuse may be outright rape or may be subtle offers of protection, documents or assistance in exchange for safe passage or, more commonly, sexual favors (Martin 49). Security in every aspect needs to be addressed and those found guilty of exploiting refugees in any manner should be held responsible for their actions and punished accordingly.

The benefits of refugee participation in camp administration have been clearly demonstrated as well. "Psychologists have pointed out that participation builds self-esteem, rebuilds self-confidence, reduces feelings of isolation, and reduces lethargy, depression, and despondency" (Martin 18). It has been proven that refugee participation is cost-effective, leads to self-sufficiency, and promotes protection. Yet, in refugee camps where women are by far the majority, most women are unable to participate in any aspect of camp administration. Lack of language skills and cultural views of women's roles are often cited as barriers but Western ideas and misunderstandings have also been identified as problems (Martin 19). In many cases, it may be a matter of the refugees, and women themselves, overcoming or changing cultural ideas in order to accommodate a new way of life. Women should be encouraged – by other women if necessary – to become actively involved in the refugee community. Not only will the women benefit but the entire population as well. Also, skills developed through active participation within camps can be utilized when these women relocate.

In spite of the brutal life they have been forced into, women do not have to just be victims in Darfur. Demand exists in almost every camp, by men and women alike, for educational and vocational programs. Often, the demand far outweighs availability and waiting lists for these opportunities can number in the hundreds. Some camps have implemented culturally acceptable, income-generating programs for women with minor success. Most of these programs involve the production of handicrafts, ceramics or soap-making – items which can be sold or traded within the camp or in the local economy. However, these programs do not always utilize local materials and

generally do not provide sufficient income for women without male representation (Martin 92). In South Darfur, an area where mat and basket weaving are traditional sources of income, a weaving program has been implemented with great success. Using readily available materials, women with weaving experience teach women without; girls learn to weave from their mothers or from other women. Roughly two mats per day are produced by each woman and these mats are then purchased by the camp and used to build living shelters and camp facilities. Weaving is done at a Community Center, a place where women can gather and offer each other support in a non-intrusive manner. Ties are strengthened within families and communities as women work together, and personal relationships are formed among women (Hermanson 157). This program provides women with a source of income, portable skills, and emotional bonds with other women within the refugee camp. It provides benefits in other ways as well, including a reduced dependency on humanitarian aid, improved quality of life for all camp residents, and a decrease in domestic violence.

Another positive example of women's involvement in camp management comes from Solumuna camp, run by the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF). The camp is run by a People's Assembly which is elected by camp dwellers. The majority of the Assembly members are women, reflecting the majority of the camp population. Women raise chickens and work on small gardens. They organize literacy classes as well as a few production projects, including a small factory which makes sanitary towels for women. The experience of the women refugees has led to changes in their outlook for the future. Some have discovered hidden talents and others now see themselves as having a role in the future of their country (Bonnerjea 13). These types of programs should be implemented in as many camps as possible.

Of course, there are many obstacles to implementation of programs such as these. The most obvious, and most difficult to overcome, is lack of funding. However, sources agree that management of available funds and resources has primarily been done by men from Western countries that lack sufficient understanding of African culture and the needs of the women they are responsible for. This can result in misdirection of funds, the continuation of policies that target men, and inappropriate or culturally unacceptable programs. Recognition of this and of the problems and issues being faced by women is slowly leading to change. As more and more women from developed countries learn about the difficulties their African counterparts are encountering, they are becoming involved. Organizations such as Global Grassroots and the Women Waging Peace Network have developed in response to the need for advocates of women refugees. Some, like Global Grassroots, assist women victims of conflict and genocide in developing and funding business ideas (Wallace). Others, like Women Waging Peace, are involved in the peacemaking process with a special emphasis on the participation of women. Both of these organizations, as well as all those like them, reduce the burden on the humanitarian community by focusing their resources and efforts to specific problems faced by refugees. It is an interesting side effect that the conflict in Darfur could potentially affect more developed countries, like the US, by creating business and volunteer opportunities such as these.

Another obstacle to change originates within the international aid community itself. As Hermanson states, "Within the humanitarian community there is lively debate concerning the degree to which other than life-saving interventions should be made..." (156). In other words, some agencies question whether it is the responsibility of humanitarian organizations to provide services beyond immediate survival issues. While this argument does have some merit, it is a sad fact that until organizations like Global Grassroots have established firm international connections

and stable resources, there simply is no one else in a position to provide desperately needed education and skills training and these refugees cannot wait.

In some instances there may be some reluctance on the part of refugee women to commit to programs offered within the camp. Often, any employment opportunities within the camp result in an adjustment to ration amounts. Refugee women will typically pass on the employment because they do not want to give up something guaranteed for something with potential. They also may not want to commit what few resources or finances they do have to learn a skill that will not benefit them when they leave the camp. And culture is always a consideration, especially for women. Even in extreme situations, refugees are cautious about taking on roles that may be in direct conflict with their traditional culture. For these reasons, any revisions to humanitarian policies and any programs developed for refugees must be created with sensitivity and with the involvement of the women who will be directly affected.

The consequences of not making any changes to the current system are potentially life-threatening. Women in refugee camps who feel that the international community cares nothing for their welfare are at a higher risk for depression, continued poor health, and a lifetime of shame, humiliation, and isolation. Trapped within their own countries with no means of supporting themselves and their families, they will continue to be dependent on formal aid programs for food, shelter, and medical care. Becoming a refugee involves many dislocations and abrupt changes in life. At a minimum, refugee women face emotional problems and difficulties in adjustment resulting from loss of family and community support. More serious mental health problems are not uncommon, arising from torture and sexual abuse. Without changes that provide access to treatment, “survivors of traumatic events will continue to suffer from anxiety, intrusive thoughts, disassociation or psychic numbing, hyper-alertness, sleeping and eating disorders” (Martin 69). These women are a valuable resource with potential to make great contributions to their communities and perhaps even to the world. Without access to education, skills training, language development, and social programs, this potential will languish and eventually be lost.

Alternatively, if changes are made to humanitarian aid policies, refugee women can be “the life-sustaining force of any refugee community” (Martin viii). Changes in policies that allow women access to education, skills training, health care, proper nutrition, and socialization will result in a healthier population when the conflict in Darfur finally ends. Acquiring skills is not simply a way for refugees to pass the time until they can return home. Rather, it is an investment in their future and the future of their countries. Refugee women, given the opportunity, have developed their own ideas into businesses, become actively involved in refugee camp administration, and have remained involved in political, social, and economic groups once they returned home. They have proven themselves to be resilient and adaptive, able to heal one another, and willing to forge new paths toward their futures. Women have made “substantial contributions to the development of their communities...” (Martin 10). By providing opportunities in education and livelihoods, humanitarian organizations will be laying the foundation for self-sufficiency and thereby decreasing the burden on the international aid community.

Refugee and displaced women are at a far greater disadvantage than their male counterparts. While their domestic responsibilities generally remain the same once they reach the relative safety of a camp, many women also face the added burden of assuming responsibilities that are traditionally male. Commonly, those women who do take on male roles find themselves at odds with the dictates of their culture. Women without male representation are routinely

denied access to medical care, adequate nutrition, education, and income-generating activities. Additionally, women are at a far greater risk for physical violence, exploitation, malnourishment, and other health problems. Although these issues are slowly being recognized, humanitarian organizations still adhere to policies that provide preferentially to men rather than women in every aspect. Until the international aid community recognizes that the majority of refugees are females, with completely different needs than male refugees, these women will continue to be dependent on humanitarian assistance rather than on themselves. There have been a number of programs developed by women refugees for the benefit of women refugees. The majority of these programs have been quite successful, proving that given the opportunity and the means, refugee women can be a positive force both within the refugee environment and in their home communities. By changing current humanitarian policies to better address the unique needs of women, rather than men, the international aid community can ensure the future success of Darfurian refugees by providing them with the means to be self-sufficient.

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