



Refugee Women and Kids Need Protection

By Dr. Lorne Foster

Eglantyne Jebb, the 19th century human rights activist and founder of *Save the Children*, once decreed that – “All wars, just or unjust, disastrous or victorious, are waged against the child.”

Two recent studies now bear this out.

In the first report, which continues the principled (Jebbian) tradition of child rights advocacy, *Save the Children's "The State of the World's Mothers 2003,"* confirms that civilians comprise 90 percent of all killed and wounded as a result of armed conflict. Furthermore, of the nearly 50 million people who have been uprooted around the world, 80 percent are women and children. They are especially vulnerable to the devastating consequences of war and displacement and are increasingly targeted by armed elements for murder, abduction, forced military conscription, involuntary servitude and gender-based violence.

The *Save the Children* report focuses on threats to women and children in six critical areas: sexual violence and physical harm, trafficking and prostitution, recruitment of children into the military, psychological trauma, family separation, and abuse of women and children in refugee camps.

The report also features the first-ever *Conflict Protection Scorecard*, which analyzes 40 conflict zones that have experienced war since 1990. Of the 40 conflict zones reviewed, more than half have been in conflict during the past two years while the remaining areas continue to pose severe threats to women and children as a result of war.

According to the *Conflict Protection Scorecard*, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Sierra Leone, Afghanistan, Angola and Burundi rank as the five worst conflict zones for women and children, based on an evaluation of how each country fared on each of the six risk factors.

“While the world’s attention remains riveted on Iraq, there are more than three dozen forgotten armed conflicts around the world that have taken a devastating toll on millions of women and children who have little or no protection against the ravages of war,” said Charles MacCormack, current president and CEO of *Save the Children*. “As dangerous as it has been for mothers and children in Iraq in recent months, life remains even more perilous for women and children in many other conflict zones.”

In a second and parallel report released by the General Accounting Office (GAO), the investigative arm of United States Congress, investigators examined the extent to which relief workers themselves may be a critical risk factor for women and children in war zones.

The GAO claims that millions of women and children fleeing the world's conflicts end up in refugee camps where sexual abuse is pervasive in almost all refugee settings, sometimes by relief workers.

The GAO said a 2001 UN investigation of the issue “concluded that sexual exploitation of refugees by relief workers was a real problem” but “the United Nations has not done enough to fill crucial oversight positions and train relief workers.”

Congressional investigators found that the UN refugee agency, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), gives little training to staff members who deal with refugees. It recommended the agency overhaul the system it uses to deploy protective staff. “Half-steps or partial measures will not solve its staffing problems,” the GAO said.

The UN also does not deploy its people where they are most needed, the report said. This creates a “racial tier-ism” for global refugees. For example, only four per cent of refugees are in Europe, but 22 per cent of those responsible for protecting refugees are there. Conversely, 80 per cent of refugees are in Africa, but only 55 per cent of UN personnel responsible for protecting refugees are on that continent.

“Protection experts acknowledge that a visible field presence of staff is one of the most effective means of preventing harm to refugees,” the GAO said.

The UN High Commissioner for Refugees, on the other hand, told the US Congressional investigators it does not consider major changes necessary. The agency did not dispute the existence of a problem but said it had made a significant effort that “specifically aims at enhancing staff capacity to prevent and respond to sexual and gender-based violence.”

The UNHCR said it has increased programs to prevent sexual abuse, but efforts have been hindered by budget cuts. The agency last year had to cut its budget by \$73 million — about 10 per cent — because several countries did not contribute what they had promised.

All in all, we do now this for sure. The contemporary overview of world conflicts and the plight of global refugees now reveals a strange mixture of child abuse, sexual exploitation and racial tier-ism; which proves that now more than ever the world needs to develop and ensure an integrated strategy for protecting it’s women and children from the ravages of war.