



# Making a Living:

## Promoting Economic Opportunities for Refugee Women and Youth

*“There are so many things we’d like to do; we’d like to bottle water and start a laundry soap production [business].”*

Burmese-Karen refugee women in Umpiem refugee camp on the Thailand-Burma border

### The Problem

More than 35 million people are currently displaced by armed conflict and human rights abuses. The majority have limited or no means to provide for themselves and their families. Lack of opportunities leads to wasted potential. Almost completely dependent on international food assistance and often not allowed to work, they are idle and frustrated. This lack of economic opportunities often results in increases in domestic violence and alcohol abuse, with many forced to resort to harmful behavior to survive, such as prostitution and trading sex for food.

Economic programs for refugees and internally displaced people (IDPs) are generally ad hoc and cater to only a small segment of the displaced population. They largely focus on meeting basic survival needs in order to reduce or cut off food rations.

### The Challenge for Women and Young People

Livelihood programs, which refer to specific strategies and activities for developing economic self-reliance, must recognize the changing roles of women and young people during displacement. They may become the family’s primary income earner and may be burdened with an overwhelming workload.

Programs should be tailored to the unique needs of specific groups, such as female heads of household or the disabled. They should provide individuals and families with sustainable income. It is important that opportunities be created that provide access for women and girls to professions that are usually considered “men’s work,” as traditional male occupations tend to carry both higher status and income.

### Our Work

The Women’s Commission for Refugee Women and Children is undertaking a comprehensive three-year initiative in collaboration with humanitarian agencies to transform how livelihood programs are designed and implemented for displaced populations. The project will:

- assess current livelihoods approaches and gaps in services for refugees in diverse settings;
- work with displaced women and young people to identify their needs, ideas and future aspirations;
- promote practical, realistic economic opportunities for refugees that take into account local conditions and constraints;
- identify and document promising practices that build on existing skills, target market needs and build self-reliance beyond basic survival needs;
- partner with field-based agencies to test and implement innovative practices; and
- produce and promote the first-ever comprehensive “how-to” handbook on livelihood programming for use by staff working in refugee situations.

### The Goal

The length of time people live as refugees continues to grow; refugee situations now last, on average, for 17 years. For the social, emotional and economic well-being of displaced women and young people, it is vital to address the issue of how they can make a living more systematically and comprehensively. Without opportunities to make use of or further develop their skills during displacement, women and youth will not be able to fully participate in rebuilding their communities and lives when they return to their homes or settle permanently in a new location.

The Women’s Commission for Refugee Women and Children works to enhance the protection and well-being of displaced women and young people through more targeted, effective and sustainable programs that lead to income generation and self-sufficiency.

To find out more, visit our website: [www.womenscommission.org/livelihoods.php](http://www.womenscommission.org/livelihoods.php)