



# Untapped Potential: Displaced Youth

Youth, a stage of life marked by uncertainty, change and challenge, is a time of enormous potential, enthusiasm and energy, when young people make choices based on available opportunities to plan for their transition to adulthood.

Young people displaced by conflict, however, have few opportunities and, as a result, this stage of life is often characterized by idleness, violence and poverty. As the average length of displacement continues to extend, youth are increasingly vulnerable to sexual and economic exploitation and recruitment into armies and militias.

However, despite all the challenges, young people show tremendous resilience and ability to survive.

They are crucial actors in post-conflict reconstruction and in the rebuilding of peaceful, more tolerant communities. They can help other young people through peer-to-peer training. They are the leaders of tomorrow; their rights and needs must be recognized and their skills nurtured and developed to ensure a brighter future.

The Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children undertook participatory research with displaced adolescents between 1999 and 2005. The research findings demonstrated that young people are an untapped resource and that they have few opportunities for secondary and non-formal schooling (only 6 percent of all refugee students, for example, are enrolled in secondary school) or for developing skills that will enable them to get jobs.

Girls and young women have even greater difficulties accessing primary and secondary schooling and non-formal education than boys and young men. Further, the research found that young people have almost

Young women and men have distinct experiences, distinct needs and distinct capacities. Yet their potential as constructive contributors to their societies goes largely unrecognized and unsupported by the international community—at enormous cost to the young people and their communities.

WOMEN'S  
COMMISSION  
for refugee women & children





no opportunities to work or use the skills they possess. They are rarely consulted or allowed to meaningfully participate in decisions affecting their lives. International humanitarian efforts seldom target youth. Youth are, perhaps, the most under-served amongst the displaced.

Meanwhile, too few lessons learned from working with young men and women have been documented and shared and the longer-term impact of programs targeting youth are seldom measured.

Young people aged 10 to 24<sup>1</sup> make up over 33 percent<sup>2</sup> of the world's 35 million displaced by armed conflict — refugees who have fled across an international border and those internally displaced within their own country. As the average length of displacement extends, the consequences of the lack of programs to serve youth escalate. With limited education and few opportunities, they risk becoming a lost generation, unable to contribute to their communities and to the eventual reconstruction of their societies and lives.

Young people have distinct experiences, needs and capacities. Yet their potential as constructive contributors to their societies goes largely unrecognized and unsupported by the international community—at enormous cost to the young people and their communities.

Wasting the potential of youth leads

to rising frustration, anger, disenfranchisement and violence. Limited opportunities for education and ways to earn a living can result in negative coping behaviors including alcohol abuse, violence, early, unprotected sexual activity and prostitution—endangering both themselves and their communities.

Without access to life-saving information, such as on HIV/AIDS prevention or reproductive health, young men and women are at greater risk of engaging in unsafe sexual activity—increasing the chances of unwanted pregnancies and of contracting and spreading sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including HIV/AIDS.

Displaced youth miss out on developing life and livelihood skills, which would normally be honed in their home communities and within their families through informal mentoring. The lack of opportunity for gainful employment severely restricts their chance to play a meaningful role in society.

## What the Women's Commission is doing

Building on the Women's Commission's previous participatory research with youth, as well as current work on education and livelihoods, and based on the priority needs and gaps identified by young people themselves, the Women's



Commission is promoting more attention to and services for displaced youth. The project will:

- ☆ **Conduct a global applied research project on "out-of-school youth,"** which will include mapping their needs, available services, innovative practices and service delivery gaps. The project will identify "good practices" that respond to the needs of refugee, internally displaced and returnee young women and men. Effective methodologies for youth programming will be identified, assessed and widely shared. Project focus will include addressing the needs of diverse groups within the youth population—former combatants, married girls, disabled youth, unaccompanied and separated minors, etc.
- ☆ **Consult and partner with displaced young people** to identify needs and gaps in services and to involve them in project research and advocacy.
- ☆ **Promote integrated education, employment and life skills programs.** Practices covered and promoted will include those that address access and barriers to secondary school attendance, alternative and accelerated learning programs, non-formal educational programs

and life skills projects and how each of these can be coupled with opportunities to develop vocational skills and then directly linked to self-reliance activities. Emphasis will be given to those programs that take a holistic approach.

- ☆ **Encourage donors and humanitarian organizations to place youth higher on the international agenda** and to provide more attention, funding and targeted programs for young women and men that create opportunities, hope and meaningful futures.
- ☆ **Feed into global research on appropriate livelihoods<sup>3</sup> for displaced women and youth.** This project seeks to transform the way livelihood programs are designed and implemented in order to make them more successful, effective and inclusive of the needs and capacities of displaced young men and women. The project will delineate the types of livelihood interventions available; assist in identifying which interventions are most appropriate in which contexts and with which populations; provide guidance on design and implementation of programs; and include the development of tools and promising practices.

"Income generating activities are critical. If not, people in the camps will be socialized into dependency."  
 Jesuit Refugee Service Representative, North Darfur, June 2006

"We want to learn computer. We want to learn electronics. Our thinking and our ideas cannot develop staying in this camp."  
 Ethnic Karen refugee youth from Burma in the Umpiem refugee camp in Thailand, June 2006





"I am the mother of nine. I am illiterate. I cannot read or write. I send all my children to school—even the girls. People ask me why I send the girls and I say I am an example of an uneducated woman."

A Somali refugee woman, married at 15, now divorced, in the Dadaab refugee camp, Kenya, July 2006

"Before coming here [youth center in Secali camp] I had never been to school. Here I am learning Arabic, numbers and basic English. It makes me feel very good coming here. I want to learn. It is important for my future to become a doctor or a teacher."

Amal, age 17, attends the International Rescue Committee youth center in Secali Camp in South Darfur. June 2006



## Women's Commission Resources

*Listening to Youth: The Experiences of Young People in Northern Uganda*, June 2007.

*From the Ground Up: Education and Livelihoods in Southern Sudan*, January 2007.

*Education in Darfur: A Critical Component of Humanitarian Response*, December 2006.

*Help Us Help Ourselves: Education in the Conflict to Post-Conflict Transition in Liberia*, March 2006.

*Fact Sheet on Adolescent Girls Affected by Armed Conflict*, January 2006.

*Don't Forget Us: The Education and Gender-Based Violence Protection Needs of Adolescent Girls from Darfur in Chad*, July 2005.

*Youth Speak Out: New Voices on the Protection and Participation of Young People Affected by Armed Conflict*, January 2005.

*Global Survey on Education in Emergencies*, February 2004.

*A Resource List for Adolescent Reproductive Health Programming in Conflict Settings*, December 2003.

*Partnering with Local Organizations to Support the Reproductive Health of Adolescent Refugees: A Three-Year Analysis*, October 2003.

*Precious Resources: Adolescents in the Reconstruction of Sierra Leone*, October 2002.

*Unseen Millions: The Catastrophe of*

*Displacement in Colombia: Children and Adolescents at Risk*, March 2002.

*Untapped Potential: Adolescents Affected by Armed Conflict*, January 2002.

*Working with Young Refugees to Ensure Their Reproductive Health and Well-Being: It's Their Right and Our Duty*, (with UNHCR), 2002.

*Against All Odds: Surviving the War on Adolescents. Promoting the Protection and Capacity of Ugandan and Sudanese Adolescents in Northern Uganda*, October 2001.

*Making the Choice for a Better Life: Promoting the Protection and Capacity of Kosovo's Youth*, January 2001.

## Notes:

<sup>1</sup> The definition of young people varies across cultures and from setting to setting. 10 - 24 is the age grouping for young people as defined by UNFPA and WHO and is the most widely accepted definition. For the purposes of the Women's Commission's work, some flexibility will be applied as appropriate to local culture and practice. We use the terms youth and young people interchangeably.

<sup>2</sup> While absolute figures are not available for displaced populations, the Population Reference Bureau reports that 33% of the population of African countries is between 10 and 24 and one can assume that the figures amongst the displaced are similar. Refer to: <http://www.prb.org/pdf06/WorldsYouth2006DataSheet.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> A "livelihood" refers to the capabilities, assets and strategies that people use to make a living; that is, to achieve food security and income security through a variety of economic activities.

Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children  
122 East 42nd Street, New York, NY 10168-1289  
212.551.3115 Fax: 212.551.3180  
[wcrwc@womenscommission.org](mailto:wcrwc@womenscommission.org)  
[www.womenscommission.org](http://www.womenscommission.org)

Photo credits: Matthew Emry, Jane Lowicki, Julia Matthews, Megan McKenna, Holly Myers, Juliet Young, Women's Commission.