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“In Need of Protection”
Addressing Sexual Assault against Women and
Girls Associated with the Collection of Firewood
in Refugee Camps in Sub Sahara Africa

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Carinne Meyer, October 2005



Mtabila, TANZANIA: “When the afternoon sun begins to sink in Mtabila, the women get ready for their daily trip to the forest. They go to collect firewood to fuel their small cooking pits. They go at night when the 15-kilometre trek is cooler. They go in groups, in the hope it may keep them safer: At least seven women from the camps in this area have been raped while collecting wood in the past three months”¹.

Rationale:

Sexual assault on women and girls is one of the most significant security concerns for females living in refugee and internally displaced person camps in Sub Sahara Africa. Sustained displacement of populations in this region as a result of political instability, armed conflict and natural disasters often leads to an increase in all forms of violence, including rape and SGBV. Women and girls who are forced to flee their homes face the risk of rape which can occur at every stage of the refugee cycle, not only during flight, but also in refugee camps and during reintegration. Female refugees, who make up the majority of refugees and displaced persons, are particularly vulnerable to sexual assault

¹ Nole, Stephanie. “Rape at the End of the World”, December 1999.

when they venture outside the safety of the camp to forage for firewood to be used for cooking or selling.

Living in refugee camps as a result of conflict creates additional barriers to accessing firewood in the form of limited supply and exposure to violence. Women and girls must search farther and farther from the camps as the supply of wood dwindles as a result of the arid environment. Sometimes girls have to walk for 30 kilometers to find enough firewood for a week. Far from assistance, the women and girls have no way to protect themselves from armed attackers.

The presence of armed militia near the camps and the lack of security forces is one of the contributing factors to the protection issues associated with the collection of firewood. Another contributing factor is the dependency on firewood as cooking fuel. Even though the supply is limited around the camps, women still depend on firewood because they lack equally inexpensive and accessible alternatives to firewood as cooking fuel. Another use of firewood is for income generation. Women's opportunities for work have been disrupted as a result of displacement. "Prior to the conflict, the majority of the {women} worked in farming and cultivations, animal raising, making and trading different items... This has changed now and women currently generate a very limited income by collecting and selling firewood"². During displacement, firewood provides a small market for income generation. Other factors include the sudden density of populations in an environment that cannot sustain them. Already arid land cannot produce enough wood for the rapid influx of people. The identification of these and other significant contributing factors is integral in appropriately designing humanitarian responses to this problem.

² UNFPA and UNICEF, "The Effects on Health and Well Being of Women and Girls in Darfur", 2005.

Humanitarian response in these regions is complicated by security concerns and uncooperative governments. The BBC reports that "lots of aid agencies are working in Darfur but they are unable to get access to vast areas - accusing the government of blocking their movements by demanding visas and using other bureaucratic obstacles"³. As a result, security and protection issues associated with the collection of firewood have not been adequately dealt with either in the documentation of the problem nor in the implementation of interventions to prevent it from occurring.

Attaining actual number of reported incidences of sexual assault is also challenging. Due to the lack of a national or international legal structure through which to protect victims and prosecute assailants, the cultural stigmas associated with victims of sexual assault and the lack of specific medical services to deal with rape and sexual assault, women and girls do not report the incidences. Documentation of assaults have improved over the last five years with the increased focus and funding for gender-based violence studies in crisis situations but still the number of cases is grossly under-reported. Despite this, the numbers of assault reported by aid organizations are high enough to conclude that sexual assault particularly when foraging for firewood is a significant protection issue that has not been given enough attention.

In 1998, senior members of Refugees International published an article that stated "that international agencies still do not really know how to deal with the relationship between firewood and rape. Women are 58 percent of the world's adult refugee population. They do not shirk from their responsibilities. The international community

³ British Broadcasting Company, www.BBC.org, "Sudan's Darfur Crisis", 2005.

should protect them”⁴. Seven years later, Sudanese refugee women in Chad, Somali women in Kenya, Rwandan women in Tanzania and many others are facing this same risk.

Strategies implemented by humanitarian organizations to mitigate these attacks include organizing group collection times, offer alternative cooking fuels and build more fuel efficient stoves to lessen the need for firewood. Although some of these interventions have resulted in moderate success in decreasing the rates of sexual assault, the information is not shared between groups and across regions, a consensus has not been met on best practices and the problem continues at alarming levels.

This paper aims to identify successful strategies that have been implemented to prevent sexual assault associated with the collection of firewood. Through review of relevant literature and the collection of best practices by humanitarian organizations, this paper will also identify gaps in current research and suggest areas in need of further study.

Case Study: Conflict in Darfur, Sudan

Protection against attacks and sexual assault for women and girls who travel outside refugee camps in search of firewood can be analyzed in the context of the current humanitarian crisis of Darfur, Sudan. Because the nature of the civil conflict, the arid environment and the patterns of displacement of people are comparable to crisis in other areas of Sub Sahara Africa, the strategies and solutions from Darfur are relevant to humanitarian work throughout the Sub Saharan region.

⁴ Refugees International, www.refugeesinternational.org, “Sudan: Security Forces Attacking Women Seeking Firewood”.

Description of the Crisis in Darfur and the Plight of Women and Girls:

In 2003, the Darfur region of Sudan erupted into civil war. Reports declare that 180,000 people have died and two million have fled their homes. The BBC stated that “the impact on people of the two-year conflict in Sudan's western region of Darfur has been described as the world's worst humanitarian crisis by the United Nations. Sudan's government and the pro-government Arab militias are accused of war crimes against the region's black African population”⁵. The UN has stopped short of calling it genocide.

Sexual assault against women and girls has increased since the conflict began and reports show that over half of the female refugees who have become victims of sexual assault or rape since the conflict began have been attacked specifically when collecting firewood or water outside camp walls.

Between October 2004 and mid-February 2005, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) teams in West and South Darfur treated almost 500 women and girls who had been raped. Eighty-two percent occurred when women left the towns and displaced persons camps in search of firewood, water or grass for animal fodder.” These assaults even occur when women move in groups; “sixty five percent of women who reported [rape] cases were actually in a group when they were attacked”⁶. This percentage of female refugees who are assaulted while collecting wood and water for the survival of themselves and their families is alarming. The problem is clear; the solution is complicated by the violence that continues in Sudan making access to the region to provide assistance difficult and dangerous. Internally displaced populations face violence and conflict everyday; refugees who flee to Chad are not living in much better conditions.

⁵ British Broadcasting Company, www.BBC.org, “Sudan’s Darfur Crisis”, 2005.

⁶ Medecins Sans Frontier, “The Crushing Burden of Rape: Sexual Violence in Darfur”, March 8, 2005.

The conflict in Darfur, up until January 2005, caused the internal displacement of around 4 million people and the migration of more than 500,000 refugees to neighboring countries⁷ – the majority to Chad. The Chadian Government does not have the capacity to care for these people. The Minister of Social Action, Women and Families in Chad was recently quoted saying, “The most difficult thing is to care for women, children and girls. In Chad, previously, there was civil war. Women and children are now refugees in a poor country and this is a problem”⁸. Refugee women and girls fleeing to Chad face the same dangers as those remaining in Sudan. The Janjaweed militia, said to be sponsored by the Sudanese Government, organize border raids on these camps and commit the crimes against women including sexual assault and rape.

In March 2004, ongoing cross-border attacks by the Janjaweed and aerial bombardments on the border areas prompted UNHCR to relocate refugees from the dangerous border areas in Chad to refugee camps a safer distance from the border. This move did provide a relative increase in security for residents but, “the protection needs of the majority of refugees living in spontaneous refugee sites on the dangerous border area are unmet”⁹. The government of Chad has a significant burden to bear in hosting the current number of Sudanese refugee and in anticipation of up to 100,000 additional refugees, UNHCR plans to open at least one more camp in 2005¹⁰. The Chadian

⁷ Global IDP Project, www.idpproject.org, “Sudan: devastation holds back IDP return to south while continuing violence hampers aid operations in Darfur”, October 2005.

⁸ Women’s Commission for Refugee Women and Girls, “Don’t Forget Us: The Education and Gender-Based Violence Protection Needs of Women and Girls in Darfur”, July 2005.

⁹ The Women’s Commission for Refugee Women and Girls, “Lifesaving Reproductive Health Care: Ignored and Neglected”, August 2004, p.2.

¹⁰ The Women’s Commission for Refugee Women and Girls, “Don’t Forget Us: The Education and Gender-Based Violence Protection Needs of Adolescent Girls from Darfur in Chad”, July 2005, p.3.

government and the Sudanese people depend on the international aid community to provide support to them to help care for these people.

Analysis of Current Humanitarian Response and Reporting:

The two most comprehensive sources of information on sexual assault of Sudanese women and girls when they leave the camps collect firewood have been published by key international aid actors in this region, UNICEF/UNFPA and the Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children. In 2005, UNICEF/UNFPA published a report entitled *The Effects of Conflict on Health and well-being of Women and Girls in Darfur* and the Women's Commission also completed their research in a paper called *Don't Forget Us: The Education and Gender-Based Violence Protection Needs of Adolescent Girls from Darfur in Chad*. The strengths of these analyses are in the reporting of occurrences, the community-based needs assessment and the recommendations for improved protection.

The findings in the UNICEF/UNFPA report are based on conversations with community members regarding their perceptions of the risks women and girls face as a result of the conflict. The report gives a comprehensive overview of the concerns expressed by the community for their physical and mental recovery, the strategies they have developed to cope with these concerns and the services they feel should be provided and are not currently offered. The situational analysis provides insight to how humanitarian organizations working in the region can better design resources and services that incorporate the responses and recommendation of the displaced population.

In addition, the report documents the perspectives of men women and girls on their living situations and security. They found that refugees reported an “overall sense that the community is helpless and not able to do anything to improve safety and security and that it is the task of international organizations and the Government to ensure their safety” (21). Discussions with community members on security and safety overwhelming pointed to sexual violence and abuse as an existent and serious problem for girls and women. Reports from girls and women are in line with the rest of the documentation of the issues of sexual assault in that “incidents of sexual violence, abuse and abduction are ongoing for them. Again, most recent responses indicate that “most cases of sexual violence are taking place outside of the camps” (6). The major strength of this report is the focus it maintains on documenting the indigenous ways that the community is using to cope with the impact the conflict has on women and girls” (10).

The methodology consisted of focus group discussions that were “geared towards identifying community attitudes, gaps in service and survival mechanisms that women and girls use” (10). Local mechanisms are limited. UNICEF/UNFPA reported that “the only things IDPs feel they can do to try and improve their safety and security is to participate in public demonstrations”. Young girls and adolescents said they had formed committees of four people who walk around the camp and help provide security, but “they would like these groups to have more authority and the means to do this job properly” (22). The girls feel that there are educated and capable people in the camps who can do this. These findings are unique in that they enlist the victims in solving the problems and get at the heart of what it would take to design an appropriate and effective intervention.

The Women's Commission, who engages in progressive and comprehensive research on issues of protection for women and girls, has come out with an important document on gender-based violence in Chad and is engaging in further studies and program designs as a result.

Their report, *The Education and Gender-Based Violence Protection Needs of Adolescent Girls from Darfur in Chad*, discusses research done in 10 out of the 11 internally displaced person camps in Eastern Chad. The document paid specific attention to this issue of firewood collection acknowledging the complications added when refugee populations compete for resources with local populations. The researchers noted that "attacks on girls collecting firewood by host communities are frequent. In addition to competing with refugees for scarce firewood, "local communities resent the basic services the refugees receive, which they lack" (9). This relationship between host country residents and refugees is clearly a contributing factor to the firewood issue and to other security concerns. The Women's Commissions reports that "tensions are increasing" because impoverished refugees are living in close proximity to villages which "are among the poorest in the world" (10).

The Women's Commission report makes some important recommendations for the increased protection of women and girls. It advocates that NGOs and the UN should increasingly include females of all ages in the decision-making and camp management. It also makes the recommendation that aid organizations working in this area have a gender specialist to ensure gender specific project implementation. In terms of sexual assault, the Women's Commission suggests integrating a more in-depth and culturally appropriate health care response. Finally, towards the issue of sexual assault associated with the

collection of firewood, it is suggested that further studies be undergone to identify “simple and safe alternative methods of cooking” to decrease the need to leave the relative safety of the camp.

Interview with Practitioners

In an email interview with Sandra Krause, Director of Reproductive Health at the Women’s Commission, who is embarking on a study of Sudanese refugee women’s protection needs and the link to food and fuel provisions, it was clear that progressive steps toward solutions are being made by the Women’s Commission. Krause and the research team have integrated the current data on sexual assault and its links to collecting firewood for fuel in Darfur and Chad and are proposing programmatic changes to the international aid community to decrease the dependency of refugees on firewood. They believe, as we now all know, that leaving the relative safety of the camps to collect firewood/cooking fuel for their families results in a “critical and preventable risk of sexual violence”. But their study goes further and asserts that “firewood for fuel, the provision of potable water and availability of food to displaced peoples” is inseparably linked to this risk.

The Women’s Commission, in their Terms of Reference for this upcoming study, state that the high levels of sexual assault are a “consequence of the scarcity of resources in conflict-affected settings” and result in “women and girl’s daily exodus in search of basic necessities, especially fuel, causing rapid deforestation”. They point out that “deforestation around camps necessitates that women and girls walk further each day increasing in the risk and frequency of rape and other forms of sexual violence”. The risk

exists primarily for women because, as they have found through their surveys and research in Darfur, “families are asked to choose between sending men who are more likely to be killed, or sending women who are ‘only raped’” and so they send the women. Their upcoming project aims to “provide alternative fuel options and firewood collection methods appropriate to the local context for all phases of an emergency to protect displaced women and girls”. Through this study they hope to “develop an advocacy strategy to promote fuel solutions that protects women and girls in all phases of conflict-affected situations.”

The failure of the international aid community, they feel, lies in “the lack of coordination, enforcement and international progress on this issue”. It is in response to this lack of international urgency that has compelled these women and their organization to undertake this project. They hope that their study will have “a direct impact on the quality of life for displaced women and girls and will enable those in the field to share their life-changing work with the rest of the humanitarian community”¹¹.

Identification of Current Strategies for Prevention of Assault during Firewood

Collection:

In December 2000, aid organizations presented their findings on reproductive health of refugees and displaced populations at an inter-agency conference. Staff from CARE reported that when they finally asked refugee men and women what could be done about the risk of sexual assault against women when they leave the camp to collect firewood, many ideas emerged. They suggested “forming vigilance groups to patrol the

¹¹ Women’s Commission *Internal Document*, “Terms of Reference: Refugee Women and Fuel Needs”, September 2005.

camps at night, cleaning up bushes inside camps that could hide perpetrators, asking UNHCR and the police to establish 'safe corridors' for firewood collection, and expanding economic opportunities for women so they would not need to collect firewood or enter into coercive sexual relationships”¹². In 2005, five years later, the international aid community needs to assess what has been done with these reports, what programs have worked and where the gaps in services and protection lay.

In 2003, UNHCR published a comprehensive document that provided specific recommendations for protection strategies of refugees and internally displaced people. These guidelines require aid groups to ensure that displaced women are involved in the planning and implementation of assistance activities. UNHCR based effective strategies on five key objectives:

“Transforming socio-cultural norms, with an emphasis on empowering women and girls; rebuilding family, community structure and support systems; designing effective services and facilities; working with formal and traditional legal systems to ensure that their practices conform to international human rights standards; and monitoring and documenting incidents of sexual and gender based violence”¹³.

These guidelines are respected in the international aid community and used in camp design and layout, programming, and funding allocation. These guidelines were a big step in protecting women against sexual assault and gender based violence during all phases of displacement. They were also a noted success for advocacy groups that felt that internally displaced population have not always been included in UNHCR guidelines.

¹² Reproductive Health for Refugees, “Conference 2000: Findings on Reproductive Health of Refugees And Displaced Populations - Proceeding”, December 5-6, 2000.

¹³ UNHCR, “*Guidelines for Prevention and Response of Sexual and Gender-Based violence Against Refugees, Returnees and Internally Displaced People*”, March 2003.

These guidelines speak generally of sexual assault prevention for refugees, but specific interventions are mentions about protection against assault while collecting firewood.

In addition to the guidelines now available to humanitarian aid groups, other strategies have been suggested and implemented to increase protection during firewood collection in Darfur and Chad. Numerous groups have proposed increasing security forces in and around the camps. The International Women’s Development Agency (IWDA) published recommendations for improving safety for refugee women and stated that “fuel-collection points should be monitored to ensure that they are safe and accessible.”¹⁴ Increasing security forces around the camps has prevented attacks on women. Refugees International (RI) reported that in Darfur, the deployment of gendarmes outside the camps which includes women gendarmes in each unit, have had a positive impact on security. Refugees in other camps feel that these and also **community security patrols** also should be encouraged. Organizations such as Mercy Corps and the International Rescue Committee who are working in that region, have helped women form groups and worked with the African Union to provide security forces to protect women during weekly firewood collection trips since outside camp security is not under these organization’s mandate. Although these group trips have seen some success, there has been difficulty getting commitments from AU forces who, aside from being underfunded and under equipped, are still establishing themselves in the region and do not have much room to maneuver under the Sudanese government. In addition, this is not a sustainable solution and does not address the large problems of insecurity in the country.

¹⁴ International Women’s Development Agency, “Recommendations for Integrating Gender Considerations Into Emergency Operations: FIREWOOD AND FUEL” 2004.

In terms of addressing refugee's need for firewood, UNHCR suggests planting **fast-growing trees** close to IDP settlements. This recommendation is not widely used but has a lot of potential. Green technology has produced faster growing trees that can survive in arid climates. This technique is being used other places in Africa as a response to deforestation. International environmental and agricultural groups are linking with local partners to implement tree growing projects which have seen much success in neighboring countries.

There is not adequate research to guide the establishment of fast growing fuelwood plantations near Sudanese Refugee camps in Darfur and Chad. It is important to carry out trials on different soils in order to obtain the technical and economic data that could lead to a larger scale study. UNHCR has proposed a project will that assess the performance of a range of fuelwood species in arid climates. UNHCR's Engineering and Environmental Services Division has undertaken research in this areas with some model projects and continues to contribute important research to fast-growing tree planting as fuelwood for refugees. But this issue should be looked at carefully with attention on the firewood plantations becoming incentives for displaced people to stay in the camps instead of returning to their homes when that time comes.

Another way to come at the problem is by increasing the efficiency of firewood use which can be accomplished through the use of **fuel efficient stoves**. RI stated in a recent article that "by reducing the need for wood and emission of smoke, a switch to simple, more fuel-efficient stoves could ease environmental stress and improve health, while reducing the time women spend collecting wood". The stoves are made from "a combination of water, mud and either donkey dung or grass, require much less fuel than

do the traditional three-stone stoves”, which results in less frequent wood foraging missions¹⁵. These stoves are cheap and easy to make and decrease the need for firewood foraging from once a week to once every three weeks.

The article reported that the UN published an inter-agency report that documented the important contribution of fuel efficient stove (FES) programs and stated that “a number of NGOs have ramped up their FES programs and, as a result, approximately 50,000 women in Darfur have been trained on how to make fuel-efficient stoves and are using those stoves for all of their cooking needs.”

The FES programs have been well-received by Darfurian women who have found that “apart from saving wood, improving health and decreasing the risk of fire and burns... the new stoves save cooking time, improve the taste of their food and, in reducing the amount of smoke, makes the “kitchen” a much cleaner and more comfortable environment in which to cook”. These stoves are not expensive, approximately one dollar per unit, most of which goes toward training since they are made entirely from inexpensive indigenous organic materials. In addition, RI stated that “with further technical adjustments to the design, it is possible to greatly improve the efficiency of the stoves that are presently being promoted and, at the same time, make them lighter and more durable”¹⁶.

Although the UN has fully endorsed FES programs, some NGOs are reluctant to implement them because they feel they are overwhelmed with meeting basic needs and that FES programs are gender-based violence prevention strategies that worked when

¹⁵ Refugees International, “Sudan: Rapidly Expand the Use of Fuel-Efficient Stoves in Darfur”, October 24, 2005.

¹⁶ *ibid*

women were collecting firewood for personal consumption and that now women are collecting for income generation. But in some camps, training and building of stoves has been so efficient that women have been able to build surplus stoves that they can then sell to other families in the camps and to outside communities who would also benefit from fuel efficiency.

RI reports that FES program implementers and recipients who say that women spend fifty percent less time on wood collection. The article states that “stove programs have been implemented on an ad hoc and episodic basis by interested NGOs without sufficient attention being given to such issues as regional prioritization and the amount of coverage needed within a given region to maximize the benefits that FES programs”.

Additionally, RI believes that “the enormous benefits that those programs can bring in relation to their cost...dictates that the international community [should] promote them not solely—or even principally—as a GBV protection measure, but as a vital piece of a holistic response to the urgent environmental and humanitarian issues confronting the conflict-affected peoples of Darfur”¹⁷. Another recommendation from the IWDA is that material and food assistance should be designed with fuel efficiency in mind, for instance, “through the provision of short-cooking beans providing the same nutritional value than versions requiring double or triple the amount of cooking time”¹⁸.

Humanitarian groups have created programming to respond to the **physical and mental health impacts** of sexual assault on women and girls. UNICEF and IRC have organized Child-Friendly Spaces which serves as meeting point for children and young

¹⁷ *ibid*

¹⁸ IWDA, “Recommendation for Integrating Gender Considerations into Emergency Operations: Fuel and Firewood”, May 2005.

people and serve as venues where rape of young girls can be addressed. These areas are being scaled up to include previously un-reached regions. Other kind of gender-based violence programming is offered in many of the camps in the forms for reproductive health care specific to sexual assault and counseling programs.

In last year's August monthly report from Darfur, UNICEF said that although prevention and response programs have focused on **enhancing coordination**, a common observation is that "the response to sexual violence efforts have focused on training and/or getting victims to reports incidents – while little emphasis was placed on fostering a protective environments in which women and girls want to report violence." The report recommended that more focus for continued programming should increase services for victims¹⁹. In the most recent report, training of trainer to deal with the psycho-social aspects of gender-based violence has been embraced and enhanced. The September 2005 report states that 205 trainers from 40 organizations have been trained in providing emotional support to survivors in seven locations through the three Darfur states. Those trainers have then provided training to 407 community-based volunteers²⁰.

Another aspect of both prevention and response to sexual assault is the **training of police** to deal with this sensitive issue. Recognizing the scope of sexual abuse in Darfur, UNICEF and the Ministry of Social Welfare began a training course for police to prepare them to deal with the sexual abuse of children and women in Darfur. In July and August, almost 80 police officers (over a quarter of whom were women) were trained by police trainers from Jordan. The Khartoum Police now plan to extend this training to another

¹⁹ UNICEF, Humanitarian Action, Darfur, Sudan: Monthly Report, November 2004.

²⁰ UNICEF, Darfur Emergency, August – September 2005 Monthly Report.

1,000 Sudanese police officers. In addition, UNICEF is training local trainers within the African Union force on child rights, child protection and child exploitation²¹.

The implementation of programs that create **alternate ways to make money** are another aspect of interventions that respond to women's dependency on firewood. The creation of income-generating projects can be undertaken by international organization and by the Government of Sudan. One way this has been done is through the establishment of women's centers in camps where vocational training, income generation and literacy programs can be held for women and girls. These centers must be designed with specific and diverse skills training in mind in order to properly address this issue and effectively build the capacity of enough women in enough different skill-based activities and markets.

In an effort to respond on a macro level, the World Food Program has undergone research on and is designing programs that tie in environmental conservation and income generation – two causal factors of sexual assault when collecting firewood. They propose to “establish nurseries for fruit and multi-purpose seedling production [along with] the introduction of fuel-efficient stoves to decrease the demand on firewood and limit deforestation”²². In addition, the Food and Agriculture Organization will train selected IDPs and vulnerable households in these areas.

The International Rescue Committee has implemented similar projects that address women's dependency on firewood for income generating under their Women's Self-Reliance Program. These programs provide “vocational skills training to establish

²¹ *ibid*

²² World Food Program, Sudan Annual Needs Assessment, January 2005

viable income generating activities; self-help and credit schemes to assist women to form and establish group saving schemes to start and run small businesses”²³.

A final aspect of prevention and protection of women refugees is the **enhancement of community knowledge** on these issues so that they can participate in the prevention system. The International Rescue Committee has implemented “empowerment training on gender awareness, health, leadership, legal awareness, peace-building, human rights and the importance of women working together”. They have also integrated gender training for men to improve gender equity. These aspects of long-term sustainable prevention are vital and necessary in any comprehensive approach to this issue.

Recommendations and Conclusion

Although Sudan signed a peace agreement in January 2005, violence in the country and specifically violence against women has not decreased. The future of the North/South peace agreement ended 21 years of civil war in Sudan but its fate is uncertain and there have been many threats to peace. Reconstruction of areas destroyed by this civil war is a massive challenge. Millions of men, women and children remain internally displaced or refugees as conflict continues in Darfur and is brewing in the East. International organizations whose mandates put them in the role of service providers and protection agents for these refugees and internally displaced populations have their work cut out for them – and there is no clear end in sight. Sustainable solutions to the problems of protection are vital in providing protection for a generation of young women and girls who are growing up during this crisis.

²³ International Rescue Committee, The IRC in North Sudan, www.theirc.org.

The aid community and the UN are continuing to research gender-based violence and the specific concerns for protection around the collection of firewood and increases in documentation and research is noted in the last two years (2004 and 2005). Challenges include improving systems for reporting sexual assault, improving coordination amongst humanitarian groups, and encouraging a multi-sectoral approach to finding solutions. Fast growing trees near internally displaced camps with training and seedlings that they can take with them when they return home may be a feasible solution that would also address issue of deforestation and desertification in these arid regions. Fuel efficient stoves have real potential and need to be implemented on a larger scale. The creation of alternative income generation activities is also an important step not simply in relinquishing women's dependency on firewood but in empowering them to participate in family decision-making. These three contributing factors to sexual assault require commitment to community-based research and international coordination in order to provide women with a safer way to feed their families and protect their lives.