

# **Food Security of Refugee and Displaced Women: Best Practices**

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Issue-Specific Briefing Paper  
Humanitarian Assistance in Complex Emergencies  
University of Denver  
2011**

## **Abstract**

*Best practices have evolved in recent decades concerning food security for internally displaced and refugee women. Refugee Women, Susan Martin Forbes' insightful book, first published in 1992, highlights the unique challenges faced by this group of women, urging humanitarians to more effectively meet their needs and better utilize their strengths. In the second edition of the book, published in 2004, she notes that a great deal of progress has been made. Best practices regarding refugee and internally displaced women have continued to evolve since 2004 and the latest edition of the Sphere Standards (2011) clearly emphasizes this population. After explaining the guiding resources and conceptual framework, there is a discussion of best practices for food security among refugee and internally displaced women.*

**(Key words: refugees, gender and food security, food systems)**

## **Introduction:**

This briefing paper discusses best practices that have evolved in recent decades concerning food security for internally displaced and refugee women. *Refugee Women*, Susan Martin Forbes' insightful book, first published in 1992, highlights the unique challenges faced by this group of women, urging humanitarians to more effectively meet their needs and better utilize their strengths. In the second edition of the book, published in 2004, she notes that a great deal of progress has been made. Best practices regarding refugee and internally displaced women have continued to evolve since 2004 and the latest edition of the Sphere Standards (2011) clearly emphasizes this population. After explaining the guiding resources and conceptual framework that shaped this paper, there is a discussion of best practices for food security among refugee and internally displaced women. The best practice section is divided into two sections: general best practices and those associated with specific programs.

## ***Key Resources***

Primary sources include the Sphere standards, reports and guidelines generated by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) and the World Food Program (WFP), and academic and scholarly works including books and journal articles. Of the latter category, Fred Cuny's book *Famine, Conflict and Response: A Basic Guide* and *Refugee Women* by Susan Forbes Martin are pivotal. Finally, class lectures by Professor Peter Van Arsdale of the

University of Denver in the winter quarter of 2011 provide context and inform the conceptual framework and general understanding of food security.

### **Conceptual Framework:**

The following best practices are practical, stemming from on-the-ground experience and observation, embedded within a conceptual framework that reflects the characteristics of the facilitative developmental approach, emphasizing the empowerment of others, following the lead of indigenous persons and respecting the emic felt needs of others. Providing food assistance in a manner that supports the ability of refugee women to retain or attain self-sufficiency is a key priority.

Cultural-materialism and political economy approaches are also relevant in that the best practice for initial investigations into a food insecure situation occurs at the household level, beginning with an understanding of the baseline of resource availability-determining if refugees have access to resources, what they are and if they know how to use them. Cultural understanding of food aid beneficiaries (FAB) is highly valued; specific customs, attitudes and practices are taken into account during planning. Culture is, however, not viewed as some sort of monolithic blob or reified myth.

### ***Primary Actors***

Of course, many actors are involved in refugee and IDP food security, but this paper only focuses on a few of them. The 1951 Refugee Convention identifies a refugee as “someone who has been forced to flee his or her country because of persecution, war, or violence” (Chapter 1, Article 1). A refugee is most likely unable to return home or is afraid to do so. An internally displaced person (IDP) faces the same situation, but has not crossed an international border. Of

the five traditionally recognized humanitarian organizations that include the UN family, donor governments and bilateral arms, International NGOs, the Red Cross/Crescent, and indigenous NGOs, this paper focuses on the UN family response, though the best practices are widely applicable. Finally, academics that investigate, measure, and evaluate past and present practice are important.

### **Food Security and Refugees:**

According to the UNHCR “households are considered to be food secure when they have year-round access to the amount and variety of safe foods that their members need to lead active and healthy lives” (*Strategic Plan for Nutrition and Food Security* 2008, 114). Food security also refers to the ability of a household to secure these needs through their own production, purchases, barter or other means. Food security’s three pillars are availability, access and utilization. Addressing the food security needs of refugee women occurs within the context of relief, aid and development. UNCHR and WFP provided food aid to 7 million refugees and IDPs in 2007, the majority of which were women and their dependents (*Fighting Hunger and Malnutrition among UNHCR PoCs* 2008, 2).

Refugees and IDPs live in a variety of settings. They may integrate into rural or urban settings, settle in loose groups or live in defined refugee camps. Some camps are open and refugees are permitted to come and go while others are closed. The majority of camp-based populations are in protracted situations in Africa. Each environment impacts food security of refugees and IDPs. Refugees who live in a situation of partial or complete dependence over decades are often unable to meet their own food needs due to lack of land, skills, training, or key inputs. Women frequently experience gender based violence during the transitory phases and may be responsible for the welfare of their children without the support of a male family

member, a significant loss in many cultures. Women and children often usually comprise the majority of food aid beneficiaries (FAB).

### **Best Practices:**

#### ***Registration and Assessment***

Women should receive their own identity and ration cards ensuring that they are not dependent on men for either status as a refugee/IDP or to secure food rations. Rates of familial abandonment by men rises in displaced settings and men have often been killed in conflict or are away fighting. Many refugee and IDP women are acting as heads of household and issuing individual identification and ration cards acknowledges this condition and lowers rates of abuse related to obtaining food.

#### ***Participation***

According to Cuny, “No program of assistance for displaced people will succeed unless it is designed to involve women in decision making at all levels” (1999, 126). While certain practices or programs are usually preferred for refugee and IDP women, their participation is vital for creating a program that best meets their needs. For example, when providing general rations in a camp setting dry rations are typically preferred to wet meaning that FAB take rations home to prepare food there rather than eating prepared meals in a communal setting at the distribution station. Martin notes, “with the full participation of women in decisions on communal cooking, however, [wet rations] can serve the purpose of increasing community cohesion” (2004, 63).

Martha Thompson and Deborah Eade provide a case study illustrating this in their chapter entitles “Women and War: Protection through Empowerment in El Salvador.” El

Salvadorian civil war in the 1980s and 1990s resulted in a large number of female refugees and IDPs living in camps in El Salvador and Honduras. These women came from a very “machismo” culture in which they had little opportunity to contribute as leaders within society. When the camps were first established Thompson and Eade report that there were no women section leaders. However, women’s participation was valued and encouraged and by the time the refugees returned, women held many positions of leadership, up to the highest levels. This allowed women a significant role in camp design, including the distribution of food aid. In one camp, meals for everyone were prepared in communal kitchens and women took turns preparing and serving the food. Although wet rations aren’t considered ideal, in this case they provided women with the time for community organization and leadership development. When they left the camps, the women went on to play a significant role in reclaiming their human rights and in repopulation movements (Thompson and Eade, 2007).

Participation in program development and administration facilitated the transition from victim to protagonist. This case study illustrates another of the principles promoted by Cuny, namely that relief and development are intricately linked and that emergencies can be a catalyst for positive change within a society

### ***Distribution Systems***

Rations can be distributed through the local government, traditional leaders, directly, or through groups and committees. According to the UNHCR *Guidelines on the Protection of Refugee Women*, UNHCR staff should “consult with refugee women regarding all decisions about food and other distribution [and] designate refugee women as the initial point of contact for emergency and longer-term food distribution.” Women are usually more familiar with traditional food systems, responsible for much of the agricultural burden and all cooking

responsibilities, so they have a better understanding of their community's food needs.

Additionally, food distribution through male networks is more prone to being diverted to resistance forces, or for sale on the black market. There are also instances of male distributors requiring sexual favors in exchange for food. When food is distributed through women's networks, general levels of malnutrition are lower than when they are distributed through male networks.

In some cases, directly dispersing food to women places them at a greater security risk in that violent groups may attack or rob them in order to control their food rations. It is important to consider the general security situation of women when designing distribution systems. Security is also a concern when determining the length of time between distributions. If rations are distributed rather infrequently, women may become greater targets, as robbing them will result in greater gain for parties interested in acquiring their food rations by force. On the other hand, if the environment is safe for women, infrequent distribution intervals may be best, so that women don't have to take more time away from their daily lives than is needed. Regardless of the interval determined, the Sphere Minimum Standards in Food Security, Nutrition and Food Aid emphasize the importance of maintaining supply chains and consistent dispersals as shortages may increase tensions and the risk that women may be unable to obtain their ration or have it taken from them by force when the delivery finally arrives (2011, 170).

### ***Communication***

It is important that all FAB understand the rationing system being used, especially the difference between equitable and equal rations. For example, if pregnant or breastfeeding women receive supplementary feedings, an equitable ration in light of their additional nutritional

needs, all program participants should understand that, though unequal, this process is fair. Thorough communication can help protect women receiving supplementary rations.

### ***Nutritional Education***

Two primary areas of education important to refugee and displaced women are general nutrition and breastfeeding. Learning about general nutritional guidelines provides women with the tools needed to make informed decisions about ration usage, including barter for fresh vegetables or animal source products as rations often contain more grain or cereal than is needed. The 2007 UNHCR/WFP Joint Assessment Report noted that for Cameroun, in addition to generalized education available to all, gender-specific programming for women is also needed (17) Cooking demonstrations are helpful.

If women are not infected with HIV/AIDS breastfeeding is the healthiest option for their babies, however many communities (especially in Africa) bottle-feed instead. Educating women about the health benefits associated with breastfeeding and providing breastfeeding instruction should be prioritized. In cases of extreme malnourishment mothers' breast milk may have dried up. In these cases, special breastfeeding centers can be established in which breastfeeding coaches help women re-lactate.

### ***Utilization***

Food security isn't merely about having access to food. It is important to consider utensils, fuel needs, and cooking times in food aid programs. When distributing dry rations it is important to determine whether or not households have access to the utensils needed to prepare their food. If not, utensils should be provided as well. Cooking times are also an important consideration. If foods with excessively long cooking times are distributed, women may be



forced to spend a great deal of time collecting fuel. Fuel collection can be a dangerous activity, especially when women are forced to stray far from populated areas, exposing themselves to risk of rape. Some refugee camps are surrounded by landmines and as women and children are usually responsible for collecting firewood, they are the most frequent mine victims as well. In such cases it may be appropriate to provide households with fuel in addition to food rations.

### ***Diversification***

Diversification of diet can be encouraged through activities like gardening, tending livestock, and income-support projects. In some cultures women already have expertise in these areas and in others training may need to be provided. It is very important to ensure that raising livestock does not turn into a health hazard if refugees or IDPs are living in cramped quarters. Activities that diversify food sources are also important steps toward self-sufficiency. Cuny writes that women should be included in all of these tasks and more “so long as their tasks do not involve heavy labor” (1999, 137). Although addressing the importance of providing nutritionally diverse foods that meet the micronutrient needs of women is beyond the scope of this briefing paper, its importance should be noted.<sup>i</sup>

The following table describes specific programs and how they can be targeted to women. This is not an exhaustive list, rather focusing on select key programs.

<b>Project</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Best Practices</b>
General Rations	Distribution of free food to all households in an area, usually used in a context that includes a large number of newly displaced refugees or IDPs.	Targeted assistance is generally preferred, but they are helpful when there are a lot of vulnerable women and children who have lost their productive family members.
Food for Work	Food rations given as payment for work.	It is important that these programs are not automatically geared toward men

		<p>and that women engage in meaningful/marketable work beyond simple handicrafts.</p> <p>Appropriate in contexts where women are more likely to control the use of food than cash.</p> <p>It should strive to move women from the informal to formal sector.</p>
Food for Training	Food rations given as an incentive for participation in a vocational training or education program.	Good for women with little to no previous access to education or vocational training so that women can diversify their skill set and transition into the workforce.
School feeding programs	Provide nutritionally balanced and fortified meals to children at school, and offer take-home rations to compensate parents for sending their children to school.	This incentive can be particularly important for female-headed households who may struggle being able to send children to school while meeting their needs.
Supplementary feeding	Distribution of food to supplement the nutrients available from the basic/general diet.	Best used to supplement the needs of special populations including pregnant and breastfeeding women or adolescent girls.

**Conclusion:**

Recent decades have seen a great shift toward acknowledging the unique needs of refugee and displaced women. Much of this positive change is due to the work of Susan Forbes Martin. Involving women in planning and distribution is key, though registration, communication, utilization and education are also important areas of consideration. Several best practices have been identified within specific programs as well. Appropriately including women in food for work programs may be one of the most significant programmatic shifts for many women. Focusing on the needs of women helps aid providers to better meet the needs of the population in general.

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<sup>i</sup> For more information on micronutrient needs, Drorbaugh's article "Micronutrient Deficiencies in Food Aid Beneficiaries: A Review of Seven African Countries identifies common micronutrient deficiencies and includes helpful recommendations and best practices. The *Sphere Handbook* and *UNHCR's Strategic Plan for Nutrition and Food Security* also clearly identify best practices in the field. For a report addressing this topic as it has played out in the

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field, *Fighting Hunger and Malnutrition among UNHCR PoCs: Summary of 2007 JAMs and Nutrition Surveys* provides a great deal of practical insight in a variety of contexts.