

The Anatomy of Rape.

Rebuilding dignity in the face of shame and dishonour

This paper is based on 18 years of field experience in Asia, Africa, and Australia, researching the rape and sexual abuse of refugee and IDP women and girls in conflict situations, camps and urban refugee settings. These actions are often based on notions of depriving women of “honour” and thus shaming individuals, families and communities. In some cases it is used as a form of ethnic cleansing. Reports continue to be received from around the globe, documenting unprecedented levels of systematised rape, survival sex, trafficking, forced and under-aged “marriage”, extreme poverty, and social disenfranchisement of female-headed refugee and IDP households. Women and girls suffer from the devastating physical, psychological and social effects from repeated rape and threat of rape and other forms of sexual and gender based violence. These include sexually transmitted diseases, unwanted pregnancies, shame, trauma, and depression, rejection by community, infanticide and suicide. The paper seeks to provide some insights into these phenomena. It argues that the imposed identity label of ‘refugee women’ and the oppressions subsumed within that label are a key element in the failure of protection of refugee women, perpetuating the discourse which confers impunity and social tolerance on perpetrators of sexual violence. The intersection and compounding effect of these dual identities as both women and refugees can explain their extreme vulnerability to gender based and sexual violence by actors who are confident of legal impunity and social acceptance. The paper offers ways of addressing the squeal of this experience through a number of approaches. These include the recognition and enhancement of refugee capabilities and resilience, community education, community participation in generating solutions, and enhanced international protection mechanisms.