IWD: Vulnerabilities of Migrant Women Exacerbated by Inaccessibility to Maternal and Child Health Services

GENEVA – March 8, 2009

Migrant-hosting communities around the world need to provide accessible, acceptable and affordable maternal and child health services for all migrants, irrespective of their legal status, in order to lessen the vulnerability of women to migration, says the International Organization for Migration (IOM).

"Women and girls, especially when forced to migrate or when in an irregular situation, are disproportionately affected by the risks of migration because of their vulnerability to exploitation and violence," says IOM Deputy Director General Ndioro Ndiaye to mark International Women’s Day.

"This vulnerability is being exacerbated to unacceptable levels by the lack of access to appropriate maternal and child health services in particular, which can have a long-term public and social cost."

A lack of access to maternal and child health services can be more susceptible to problems such as premature births and growth and development issues.

A lack of access to maternal and child health services can also perpetuate poor health among migrant communities, which in the long run puts a greater strain on health systems in host societies. Not following an immunization programme can not only impact outbreaks of communicable diseases, but can also affect a child’s access to school.

Babies and children of women who have not had ante-natal care can be more susceptible to problems such as premature births and growth and development issues.

"The fear of deportation is a major barrier for many irregular migrants seeking care since the priority is to stay hidden in society. The best they can hope for in destination countries is emergency care, and maternal and child health doesn’t fall into this bracket until it is too late," Ndiaye adds.

Even when in principle migrant women living and working legally in another country have access to health care, it is not always "migrant friendly". Cultural differences, language barriers and xenophobic attitudes can and do impact a migrant’s ability to get the necessary care she needs.

In East Africa, for example, IOM health staff on the ground cite the lack of such migrant-friendly services promoting reproductive and maternal and child health, including pre and post-natal care, assisted delivery and child survival programmes, as the most pressing issue facing migrant women. Such problems are evident in destination regions such as Europe too.

For displaced women, distance to health facilities is the main stumbling block to reproductive and maternal health services, especially in rural areas. In places like the Mekong Delta, Zimbabwe, as well...
as in Iraq with its 2.8 million internally displaced people, the long distances to the nearest health facility deny many women pre and post-natal help at a time when they are most vulnerable due to the lack of adequate shelter, food and sanitation, resulting in preventable maternal and infant mortality and miscarriages.

In some cases, like Colombia, a lack of information among both displaced people unaware of their right to access health services, and health personnel unaware of their obligation to provide these services, can stop displaced women from getting the help they need.

Among the solutions is establishing and developing existing midwifery and community health skills among migrant communities. This would help spot problems and potential problems in advance and build knowledge about when a patient needs to be referred.

In Iraq and Afghanistan, for example, some of IOM’s responses have included the training of displaced women as traditional birth attendants who can provide these vital midwifery skills.

These kinds of programmes can also be taken into migrant communities in destination countries. A major advantage of doing so would be that these migrant community health workers would understand the social and cultural factors that hinder accessibility to and acceptability of existing health services.

“What will make the greatest difference ultimately is for authorities to provide maternal and child health services, a cornerstone of primary health care, to all migrants. Addressing this need is not just a public health and human rights issue but is also for the common good,” Ndiaye concludes.

By Charlotte Norman

September 19, 2008

A s Canada plans to improve immigration services and processes in order to attract greater numbers of migrants into the country, particularly skilled workers, it has emerged that funding is being directly provided to Women’s immigration centres.

Only recently, Citizenship Immigration and Canada (CIC) announced intentions to fund immigration services in the area of Durham, Canada; an area which is becoming increasingly popular to migrants looking to live and work in Canada.

Now the CIC has announced funding for a Toronto women’s centre that will provide settlement and integration services for an estimated 1,100 immigrants in the local community.

This funding which is estimated at around $5.2 million is intended to go towards providing settlement services -- including referrals to community resources, advice and guidance and employment-related services.

As Canada tries to recruit foreign workers in an attempt to aid the country’s ageing population and skills short labour force, integration services are being given great priority.

Canada has taken the approach to immigration that, merely getting people into the country via revamped visa processes is not where the departments’ duties should end. It has been proven by a number of Canadian studies that those migrants who receive greater integration support tend to progress quicker in jobs which suit their skills set, which in turn benefits the country from an economical perspective.

The settlement services administered are targeted towards helping immigrant women and their families and aim to help such women become self-sufficient in Canadian society.

The news of further funding to women’s institutes follows on from statistics revealed that greater numbers of women are becoming the primary applicants in immigration petitions under programs such as the federal skilled worker program.

Speaking of the funding, Canadian Immigration Minister Diane Finley said ‘Our Government believes in immigration and is committed to helping newcomers and their families succeed. We are also committed to promoting the full participation of women in the economic, social and democratic life of the country.’

She further went on to say that ‘Settlement services give newcomers the help they need to learn one of our official languages, find a job and settle into the community.’

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Cross-border female genital mutilation / cutting (FGM/C) is on the rise in West Africa according to the UN, spurring the need to impose a region-wide law banning the practice, say experts.

Experts from the region met this week to discuss how to eliminate FGM/C across West Africa, at a conference sponsored by the UN Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) in the Burkina Faso capital Ouagadougou.

A study sponsored by UNIFEM to be released in late October 2008 said circumcisers or girls who undergo circumcision are increasingly crossing borders to perform or undergo the procedure and to operate in countries with weaker FGM/C laws, and border police can do little to stop the flow.

"There is a lack of collaboration among governments across borders because the issue is so politically sensitive to manage," said Dieneba Ouedraogo, coordinator of the International Centre for Research Training and Action (CIRFA). As a result, she said governments have shied away from collaborating on policies and legislation or on coming up with a joint communications strategy to try to dissuade people from crossing.

The World Health Organization (WHO) says FGM/C includes all procedures that intentionally alter or injure female genital organs for non-medical reasons. Up to 140 million girls and women worldwide live with the consequences of FGM/C, and three million girls in Africa risk undergoing the procedure each year.

Consequences can include excessive bleeding, problems urinating, childbirth complications and stillbirths. It is mostly carried out on young girls between infancy and 15 years old, according to WHO, and it is generally recognised as a violation of the human rights of girls and women.

Border populations vulnerable

Girls living near borders are most vulnerable to being forcibly moved, said Ouedraogo, particularly if they are living next to countries with weaker anti-FGM/C legislation than their own.

In Mali, where there is legislation relating to FGM/C but it is poorly applied, the prevalence rate is 85 percent, which makes communities living near the border in Burkina Faso, Guinea, Cote d'Ivoire and Senegal vulnerable, said Traoré.

Circumcisers will always travel where they can work with the least restrictions, said Elize Dossou, FGM/C expert at the Benin ministry of family and children's affairs. So, circumcisers travel from Burkina Faso to Niger to circumcise nomad Gourmantché girls, while populations in northern Benin tend to cross the border to be circumcised in Burkina Faso, she said.

Hidden victims

Because of this cross-border movement, the real number of FGM victims is unknown, according to Dossou.

Official FGM/C rates in Benin are 17 percent of women and girls, but she says the real number is higher.

According to UNIFEM, families are sending their daughters to circumcisers to perform the practice at an increasingly young age to avoid being caught, which also distorts official figures.

At the meeting, UNIFEM officials called on health ministry and WHO officials, who coordinate annual health and demographic surveys country by country, to specifically target questions relating to girls 14 and under so those who underwent FGM/C would not be overlooked.

Toughen national laws

UNIFEM is also lobbying West African governments to adopt and implement laws to prosecute perpetrators of FGM/C wherever they practice, Cecile Mukarubuga UNIFEM's Senegal-based regional director, told IRIN.

"If all countries legislate or review their laws to cover cross-border practices, I am sure it will eventually eliminate FGM," Marian Tackie of Ghana's Ministry of Women and Children Affairs told IRIN.

Among West African countries, only Ghana has reviewed its legislation to prosecute all perpetrators of FGM/C including those who perform outside the country, she said. In Ghana even the women who participate in the circumcision ceremony by shouting to drown out the screaming of the girls are subject to prosecution.

Most West African countries have some form of indirect or direct anti-FGM/C legislation, but in the majority it is poorly enforced, Tackie said.

But Lamine Traoré, coordinator for a project to eliminate FGM/C in Mali, said unless a region-wide law is applied, "countries which have weaker [anti-FGM/C laws] will become a hub for the practice."

Regional law

Passing a regional law would involve appealing leaders nervous about violations of their sovereignty, said Mukarubuga.

"It is true that border issues are sensitive, but legislation for the rights of women in the region does not violate the sovereignty of countries since it is a regionally integrated zone with mutually complementary economic and social interests, which this law would serve," she explained.

Applying such a law would also require tighter collaboration among border security officials, communities, and social welfare ministries, Mukarubuga said. At the moment, volunteer civilian surveillance teams work in villages along the borders of some West African countries to monitor and report circumcisers to the authorities, but without regional legislation, Dossou said, the border police cannot pursue them across borders.

Progress on this will not be possible unless governments, non-profits and civil society organisations work with religious leaders to try to shift their resistance. UNIFEM has started by setting up a network of 16 traditional leaders in Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) countries to try to raise awareness among families and religious leaders.

"There is still a strong resistance from all sides now, but governments need to do more to confront these traditions," said Traoré.
Afganistan – Zarmina, a beautiful 17-year-old girl, does not have a lot of things that a child of her age usually takes for granted, such as a home, family, friends and - hope. It has been a year since she ran away from human traffickers but the fear that they might find and catch her still haunts her every night.

When Zarmina was born, her parents decided to escape from the intensifying conflict in Afghanistan and to move the whole family to neighbouring Iran. Like many other Afghans in refuge, her father worked as a daily labourer, barely earning enough to support his family. Life became even harder when he died of cancer when Zarmina was seven.

She started weaving carpets with her mother in order to help make ends meet while trying to go to school where she could. But in the end, in her third year of primary education, schooling stopped completely.

Asked if it was hard to work as a child, she says: “It was difficult at first but I got used to it. I was not in the mood to play anyway. I was too sad about my father’s death.”

It was a quiet life with her mother, her father’s first wife and some siblings. “We were so poor and nobody paid attention to us,” she adds.

The years of drudgery took their toll, especially on her mother who died when Zarmina was 15. Relations with her step-mother soured with Zarmina suffering abuse and neglect at her hands.

The little money she earned from carpet weaving was extorted by her step-mother who then forcibly married Zarmina off for the sum of $US 6,000.

Forced marriages are common throughout the country and among the Afghan diaspora. Women rarely make decisions about their own life and girls as young as two years old are sometimes committed for marriage as a way to settle family feuds or debts.

According to the German non-governmental organization, Medica Mondiale, the majority of females (57 per cent) are married before the legal age of 16 with up to 80 per cent of marriages being forced in Afghanistan. Women and girls are often considered to be a mere commodity and those girls who try to escape such control over their lives are ostracized by their families for alleged dishonour and disrespect of Afghan tradition.

Several months after her wedding, Zarmina’s 65-year-old husband brought her back to Afghanistan where they lived as a “normal” married couple.

That was until one day, when about to leave for a visit to relatives in Iran, she found some strange powder in her bag. Suspicious, she asked her husband why he had put a pack of “salt” in her bag. He explained that it was not salt but heroin and that he was planning to transport it to Iran using her bag since the police did not usually search women’s bags.

In recent years, Afghanistan has become the world’s main supplier of illicit opiates, accounting for 93 per cent of world production in 2007 with gross revenues from its trade equivalent to nearly half of the country’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP). The UN Office on Drugs and Crime estimates that between 70 and 90 per cent of the heroin found in Europe has been processed from Afghan opiates mostly smuggled through Iran or Pakistan.

That breadth and depth of drug trafficking has now spilled over into human trafficking. Well-established networks are now certainly linked to human trafficking beyond Afghanistan’s borders.

Afraid that Zarmina might run away and report him to the police, her husband and her brother-in-law locked her up in the house for the next five months. With clients brought to the house, she was forced into prostitution. Her husband told her she had to pay back her debt to him for the money he had paid to marry her. Every time she tried to resist, they beat her, cut her with a knife and threatened to kill her unless she obeyed.

Fed up with her “disobedience” one day, her brother-in-law went to fetch his Kalashnikov. As he stepped out of the house, Zarmina, in a split second decision, seized the moment to escape. A sympathetic neighbour referred her to the Ministry of Women’s Affairs which took her under its custody and has sheltered her since then.

Human trafficking is a crime that can impair a victim’s personality and even destroy a life. As a source, transit and destination country, Afghanistan is no stranger to the phenomenon. According to a recently published IOM survey on human trafficking in the country, numerous factors are making Afghans extremely vulnerable to the crime such as the continuous personal and economic insecurity that decades of conflict have wrought, and with it, the subsequent loss of lives and livelihoods.

There are additional factors such as the common occurrence of violence against women, including forced marriage, that render women particularly vulnerable. Children are another large pool of potential “targets” for trafficking with widespread poverty compelling up to one third of Afghan children to work.

Sadly for Zarmina, all these factors came into play in her story. But the real tragedy is that Zarmina’s experiences aren’t an exception. Traffickers ruthlessly exploit countless other people just like Zarmina, and violate their basic human rights with the full knowledge that this modern-day form of slavery is largely thriving with impunity.

Building on five years of counter-trafficking experience in Afghanistan, IOM currently carries out activities addressing all aspects of prevention, protection and prosecution, with generous contributions from the governments of Italy and the USA. IOM seeks to reduce the exposure of vulnerable people, particularly minors, to the risks of human trafficking and to contribute to the Afghan government’s efforts to strengthen their counter-trafficking response.

Successful cooperation with the government has recently led to the enactment of Afghanistan’s first counter-trafficking legislation, the Law on Combating Kidnapping and Human Trafficking, on 14 July. IOM worked closely with members of the Legislation Department at the Ministry of Justice in drafting the law and provided necessary technical advice through weekly meetings and a series of training activities.
Under the victim assistance component of IOM’s counter-trafficking programme, both foreign nationals trafficked to Afghanistan as well as Afghan victims of internal and cross-border trafficking are identified through IOM’s referral network. They are assisted through the provision of daily necessities such as clothing and food, medical and psychological support as well as reintegration assistance where appropriate. IOM has assisted over 130 victims of trafficking since 2006.

Zarmina is now among those being helped by IOM. After a long silence, she has finally started sharing her experience with the others. Scars are still visible on her hands and perhaps also on many other parts of her body that are covered under clothing. Slipping off her head scarf, Zarmina says: "Look at my short hair. When he got mad, he shaved my head completely. Back then I had no hair at all." Her lack of education, family and home rests heavy on her heart and gives her little hope for the years ahead. When asked about her dream, Zarmina pauses for a while and answers, "When I try to think of myself, I just see no future."

IOM is currently providing her with much-needed counselling. After that, it will help the best it can to give her the chance to finally really begin living.

FEMALE project investigates the lives of women migrants

27 January 2009

The FEMALE project evaluated how third country immigrant women cope with obstacles and strengthen their economic and social integration in Europe. The project partners assessed the women’s experiences, expectations and living conditions over a two-year period. Their results shed new light on the women's experiences of migration and integration. They also raise awareness about how to fuel the women’s economic and social integration, as well as their emancipation. The project was funded by the EU under the Sixth Framework Programme with EUR 973 887.

The FEMALE researchers conducted an international comparative analysis to delve into the migration history, life course perspectives, gender roles and ethnicity of the women migrants as well as their expectations about their old age. The results show that the migration of such women has a huge impact on their family lives and gender roles.

FEMALE used a multi-method approach, conducting 239 interviews with female immigrants from 9 ethnic groups in 8 European countries, and drawing on data from the Population Policy Acceptance Survey (PPA) — which contains information from 21 812 Europeans — to assess what the native population thinks about the migrants and their integration in their host countries. The project also organised one European and eight national focus group discussions on the results of the study. The focus groups consisted of stakeholders, experts and migrants.

According to the researchers, the findings revealed that the destabilisation of family networks occurs frequently, and that women are compelled to adjust their gender role models. Both migrants and natives questioned in the survey said they prefer a ‘modern approach towards gender roles and task division’.

The question of ethnicity highlighted the similarities between the different immigrant groups from diverse ethnic backgrounds. All migrant women involved in the study had got into a social, economic, legal or emotional vacuum, the research team said, adding that the women were made to feel inferior because of their gender.

With respect to the women’s own ageing perspectives, the partners said social isolation and insufficient labour market participation could trigger a number of problems, including the inability to make serious plans for their old age in the host country.

The analysis indicated that negative views on migration issues in the eight participating countries outweigh the positive ones; this is particularly true for eastern European countries compared with western states. The research also highlighted the fact that native populations are especially concerned about competition with migrants on the labour market.

Furthermore, the results showed that migrant women perceive the native populations in a more positive light, and that they believe the natives perceive them positively as well. Most natives believe that migrants should adapt to the host countries.

The study’s findings also underlined the fact that most migrant women aim to become fully integrated in their host countries, and the majority have either become naturalised or plan to do so.

Meanwhile, the focus groups’ members said that migrants have an easier time integrating in their host countries thanks to early labour market participation, which also curtails the migrants’ long-term dependency on social welfare payments.

According to the experts involved in the study, the benefits of migration and integration must be made more visible to society as a whole. ‘There is a need to assist migrant women to foster their independence,’ the focus group panellists said. They added that women migrants would benefit from support that promotes their independence and addresses gender-specific issues, such as labour market disadvantages and childcare, which affect both native and migrant women.

The FEMALE partners said that not only can European institutions and actors play a significant role in defining standards and the framework conditions for effective immigration and integration policies, but the European Parliament and European Commission can help the gender aspects of immigration and integration of women migrants assume a central position in policy formulation.

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Women Migrants Need Protection, Empowerment

By Prime Sarmiento*

MANILA, Oct 28 (IPS) - Filipino domestic worker Joy Romualdo treasures her Sundays not only because it offers her a respite from a week of hard work, but also because she can still remember the time when having a day off was a luxury.

Like many before her from this South-east Asian country, known as the world’s largest exporter of labour, Romualdo migrated to affluent Singapore to be a domestic worker so as to provide a better life for her poor parents.

When she arrived in Singapore, nine years ago, she was prepared to work hard, but did not expect that her employer would be so strict as to forbid her from leaving the household even on weekends.

But after a few years, the thirty-something Romualdo found a new employer - a family of Dutch expatriates - who gave her better wages and working conditions, including the much-valued day off. "I have more freedom
now, I can do anything every Sunday,” she said. “My employers don’t mind because that’s my day off.

Every worker deserves a day off, but not all migrant workers enjoy this right.

There are various United Nations and International Labour Organisation (ILO) conventions and instruments that promote and protect migrants’ rights, but a good number of the 200 million migrants around the world continue to suffer from problems ranging from illegal recruitment, racial discrimination and physical abuse.

Women, who comprise half of the total migrant population, are especially vulnerable.

Yet, migrant workers contribute to their host societies, through their labour, and to their home communities through remittances. This is why members of civil society from different countries, meeting here ahead of a global conference on migration and development, are pushing government agencies to prioritise migrants’ rights and the protection of the rights of women migrant workers.

Issued Tuesday at the end of Civil Society Days of the Second Global Forum on Migration and Development (GFMD), the Joint Civil Society Declaration on Migration, Development and Human Rights called on participating governments - meeting later this week at the government segment of the forum- to protect women’s rights to decent work, health, security and justice.

"International and national regimes must be adopted to recognise and protect the rights of domestic workers and other informal workers, many of whom are women. They (governments) must also promote the empowerment of migrant women and the achievement of gender equality," the statement said.

“We are worried about the invisibility of the female face of labour. Women are usually employed to take care of our families. But they themselves don’t receive the same kind of care in return,” Sharan Burrow, conference chair and president of the International Centre for Trade Union Rights, said at the closing of the civil society discussions ahead of the forum.

Complicating matters is the current global financial crisis, which is likely to lead to higher unemployment rates and poverty levels in many countries. The ILO forecasts that the current credit crunch will result in the loss of some 20 million jobs.

Burrow said that it is migrants, especially women, who will bear the brunt of unemployment. Most of them, employed as domestic workers and caregivers, are likely to lose their jobs, go home and "face poverty and unemployment in their own countries".

According to the U.N. Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), most of these women are employed as unskilled workers and are not fully aware of their rights. This makes them vulnerable to physical and social isolation, sexual harassment, and sexual and physical violence.

Often, too, they are employed in industries that are not regulated by the government, making monitoring of rights difficult, according to Nisha Varia, senior researcher of the women’s rights division at the New York-based Human Rights Watch.

"Migrant women face extra risk. Most women are in domestic work, agriculture or entertainment. These aren’t regulated by the government, so women are more vulnerable to abuse,” Varia said in an interview on the sidelines of the conference.

She added that as more and more women leave their home countries for work, it has become increasingly important for governments all over the world to protect the rights of migrant women.

Likewise, beyond ILO and UN conventions, Burrow added that what is needed is "the political will to adopt them". Varia added that many countries are not implementing the obligations that they have under these conventions and standards. "Civil society is calling the governments to ensure that their national laws and practices meet international standards," Varia said.

But rights also entail responsibilities. Charito Basa, a well-known Filipino activist on migrants’ rights in Italy, encourages migrant workers to invest in themselves to ensure that they are fully integrated into their host societies - and more able to watch out for their own rights.

"Integration is a two-way street,” she said. She cited the example of Filipino migrant workers in Italy who complain that they cannot find work, but refuse to upgrade their skills and much less learn to speak Italian.

In short, activists say, it is not only states or civil society that must strive to protect migrants’ rights, but the migrants themselves.

This is what Romualdo, the Singapore-based domestic worker, is doing. Two years ago, another Filipino migrant worker referred her to UNIFEM Singapore, which facilitates workshops that seek to empower workers. One of these workshops was on financial literacy and entrepreneurship, which Romualdo attended.

Today, she spends her Sundays volunteering in UNIFEM and planning for a bakery business she plans to set up after she returns to the Philippines for good.

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By Aiko Kikkawa

Head of the Labour Migration Unit
IOM—MRF Manila

September 2008

As early as the 1980’s, in the midst of Asia’s labour migration boom, scholars began documenting a rise in women’s participation in overseas employment. Over the decades, female domestic workers and care workers became the icons of contemporary labour migration. They became breadwinners in their households, sent their children to school and helped their family members and relatives during times of need.

The “feminization of migration” is a concept that is widely observed in many countries. In Indonesia, for example, up to 80 per cent of the migrant workers are women (2006). The service sectors employ the largest number of women as domestic workers and caregivers; jobs that are almost exclusively performed by women migrants. There is no reason to believe that this particular job market will not thrive or continue as destination countries with aging and declining populations will continue to and increasingly depend on foreign workers.

However it is interesting to note that the proportion of female migrants in countries such as the Philippines and Sri Lanka has, in fact, been declining in recent years. In Sri Lanka, the share of woman migrants was as high as 75 per cent in 1997, and then dropped to 67 per cent in 2000, and to 56 per cent in 2006. In the Philippines, where feminization of migration was particularly prominent, only 48 per cent of newly hired

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Reversal of Feminization Trend in Migration out of Asia
The second factor contributing to the reversal or reduction of the feminization trend are the policy changes directly affecting the deployment volume and the destination of female workers. These changes include: a) an introduction of minimum wage for domestic workers by the governments of the Philippines and Sri Lanka, and b) stricter monitoring of the deployment of entertainers to Japan.

The third and the most pervasive and structural factor behind “reverse-feminization” is the increase in skills of the general workforce in the respective origin countries. More women attend secondary and higher education as well as obtain skills training, and equip themselves for more skilled jobs at home and abroad. Therefore fewer women are likely to go abroad for jobs that are primarily concerned with domestic work.

These trends are likely to endure which calls for a review of the strategies for projects and programmes that target migrant workers since there may be more migrant women interested in returning home permanently.

1 This is an excerpt of a presentation made at the International Conference on Gender, Migration and Development
Manila, September 25-26, 2008

2 Reverse feminization in the Philippines and Sri Lanka does not imply that a total number of women in domestic work sectors have declined all together. Rather, the gap created by the reduced participation of woman migrants from countries with generally higher educational opportunities, appears to be filled by women from other countries.

3 The Philippines introduced US$ 400/month minimum wage while Sri Lanka at the rate of US$. Sri Lanka plans to raise the rate to US$200 in the year 2009.

West Africans fight female genital mutilation in France

PARIS, 23 June 2008 (IRIN)

West African immigrant activists have taken their fight against female genital mutilation (FGM) to France where as many as 50,000 immigrant women were registered as having undergone the procedure in 2004, according to the French Institute of Demographic Studies.

Female genital mutilation, a traditional initiation ceremony involving partial or total removal of the external female genitalia for cultural or religious reasons, is practiced in 28 African countries, many of them in West Africa, according to the World Health Organization.

While ongoing struggles against the practice are causing numbers of excisions to diminish across the region, including in Niger, Senegal, Burkina Faso and Guinea, some activists say West Africans living abroad are more likely to put their daughters through the procedure than they would be back home.

“Immigrants have a tendency to cling to their traditions and customs – sometimes even more so than those who stay at home – for fear of losing them or of being socially rejected,” said Khady Koita, a Senegalese immigrant and president of a European network for the prevention of traditional practices harmful to the health of women and children, which operates in France.

Some parents secretly submit their daughters to FGM in ceremonies in France while others send their children home during the school holidays to undergo the excision. There are even instances where relatives or immigrant community members instigate the procedure without the knowledge of the children’s parents, as was the case with Koita’s two girls.

More and more activists in France are mobilising against the practice by raising awareness of its dangers to women and girls in the media, through conferences and debates, and in schools and health-centres in cities which have significant immigrant communities across the country.

Awa Ba, a Senegalese woman and the president of the association of African women in Boulogne-Billancourt, a western suburb of Paris, targets families directly. “Before children leave for home for their school holidays I warn them about the risk of circumcision and I tell the parents that if their daughter has not been circumcised before going and comes back circumcised, I will bring a complaint against them.”

Their efforts are starting to pay off. Though the latest data is hard to find, recent studies say FGM among immigrant groups “has undoubtedly decreased” in France in recent years.

Sophie Soumaré, a Malian immigrant who works with the Women’s Group for the Abolition of Mutilation (GAMS) in Marne, northeast France told IRIN, “The mentality [among immigrant groups] is starting to change and parents understand more and more that the Koran doesn’t promote FGM.”

And it helps that in France activists have the law on their side. FGM falls under Article 222 of the criminal code on violence, carrying prison sentences of up to 20 years for those who carry out the practice and parents who collaborate in it.

Linda Weil-Curiel a lawyer who works with the Commission for the Abolition of Sexual Mutilation has pleaded approximately 100 cases in and around Paris, most of which have resulted in a prison sentence for parents or those carrying out the procedure. One perpetrator, Hawa Gréou from Mali, is said to have taken up the fight against it herself on her release from prison.

Decentralising the fight

But activists are starting to realise that in order to have maximum impact they need to exert their efforts not only in France, but also back home in West Africa.

“It is very important to try to change people’s viewpoint and behaviour in the country of origin as well as the immigration country to get the best results,” said Koita.
To do this she has created La Palabre, an organisation to raise awareness of the dangers of FGM both in France and in Thiès, in central Senegal, where it also plans to run a shelter for girls facing the procedure.

Diaryatou Bah, a France-based Guinean is president of Hopes and Struggles of Women, plans to extend its awareness-raising work to universities and hospitals in Guinea’s capital Conakry, as well as to train local social workers in how to apply Guinean laws banning the practice.

But Somaré realises it takes strength to resist the social and cultural pressures immigrants face when they return home even for short visits. Knowing that many parents are willing to transgress laws when it comes to circumcising their daughters, GAMS tries to link them up with local networks in their country of origin which will help protect their children from excision when they are there.

Most of these organisations struggle on shoe-string budgets as fighting FGM is often overlooked by local authorities many experts told IRIN, and immigrant community members are often reluctant to be seen as supporting them.

“The biggest difficulty that I have encountered and I believe it is the case for many others, is the lack of funding. Often we are not even paid a living wage to carry out this work,” said Koita.

While local politicians support their efforts in theory, they do not finance them, and “often we only receive a thank-you,” Koita complained. This is just one of the obstacles these women face – the most challenging is opposition from their own friends and families. “Many of my African peers thought ‘white women’ had filled my head with feminist ideas to turn me against my own culture, and that I, in turn, was trying to brainwash their wives,” Somaré said. Many fall out with their families as a result.

But others are luckier. “My family have always been behind me in this struggle,” said Koita, “and that helps me keep it going.”

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The Women’s Refugee Commission undertook a field mission to Jordan from October 25 to November 2, 2008 to follow up on a mission in 2007. Sarah Chownoweth, reproductive health program manager, and Ada Williams Prince, senior advocacy officer, write:

Amman, JORDAN, 2 November 2008

The Iraqi doctor looked us straight into the eyes and said “I would rather be dead than tell anyone I have been raped.” If this woman—a highly educated, successful doctor working for the UN—wouldn’t speak out, who would?

The Women’s Refugee Commission has been in Amman, Jordan for the past week to find out if any improvements have been made for Iraqi refugee women and girls since our last visit in 2007. Although incredible progress has been made by international agencies and the Jordanian government to help Iraqis, women and girls who have survived rape are still under siege.

Three bad options for rape victims

As explained to us by one of Jordan’s foremost female lawyers, women and girls who speak out after being raped have three options: 1) to marry the rapist; 2) to be sent to prison for their own protection from their family; or 3) to be killed by their family for dishonouring them. Of course, this is if they choose to come forward after rape and report the crime at all.

An Iraqi refugee told us, “Iraqi women would report anything, but would not report sexual assault – not even touching…Rape is a death sentence.”

Health providers unaware of post-rape medicines

In Jordan, rape survivors are not provided with life-saving medical care after the assault. Neither health providers nor the general population is familiar with the medicines to prevent pregnancy and HIV transmission. Many doctors, including leaders in the health sector, and most refugees have told us they had no idea such drugs exist. Plus, doctors are required by law to report rape to the police. Even if medical care after sexual violence were available to women and girls, they would not be able to access this care without notifying the authorities. This situation applies to all women and girls in Jordan.

In addition, if an unwed woman becomes pregnant after rape, her child is forcibly taken after birth. These “illegitimate” children are denied birth certificates and are raised in special orphanages.

And if it seems it can’t get any worse, refugees have even more challenges: Iraqis are considered “illegal” in Jordan and the threat of being discovered by the authorities is a constant fear.

Working Iraqi women and girls are at particular risk for sexual violence.

Many families are living in cramped conditions and sleep closely together—which is not normal practice—thus forcing a greater level of physical intimacy. Although Iraqis are not allowed to work in Jordan, some do so illegally in order to support their families. Generally it is women who work outside the home, since men and boys are more likely to be deported. Working illegally as maids, waitresses and in other types of domestic labour, women are particularly vulnerable to sexual abuse by their employers and colleagues. In addition, some women have resorted to sex work in order to provide for their families, putting themselves at high risk of sexual violence. All of this takes place in a climate of complete impunity: women rarely come forward after they have been raped, and rarer still is the successful prosecution of the rapist.

Glimmers of hope

Despite this grim picture, there is hope. The government of Jordan recently restructured its Ministry of Health, which included the establishment of a violence against women unit. National protocols on reproductive health are being developed, which are said to include guidance on care for rape survivors. International agencies are starting to implement and expand gender-based violence programming, with a particular focus on the Iraqi communities. Finally, many phenominal local groups are working to address this issue. In particular, the Noor Al-Hussein Foundation’s Institute for Family for Family and Health and the Jordanian Women’s Union have developed innovative, effective programming to address these sensitive issues. If their work is funded and replicated throughout Jordan, increased safety and justice could be brought to Jordanian and Iraqi women alike.

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PAKISTAN - IOM Teams Provide Psychosocial, Medical Support to Earthquake Survivors

IOM has deployed two medical teams to provide basic medical and psychosocial support to earthquake survivors in affected areas of Balochistan.

The teams are also providing healthcare services to survivors for minor physical ailments, including respiratory infections, as temperatures fall with the onset of winter.

The teams are also conducting basic psychosocial support sessions for children and women, focusing on qualitative assessment of their psychosocial needs, providing guidance and referrals.

“‘The sessions involve active listening so that traumatized people can express themselves and vent their concerns. There are play and drawing activities for children and motivational activities for vulnerable groups, empowering them to focus on the urgent task of temporary shelter building’,” says Dr Bernard Kofi Opare, head of IOM’s Medical Unit in Islamabad.

IOM is also providing logistical support to the Department of Psychiatry of Bolan Medical College for conducting psychiatry sessions for earthquake-affected people.

For further information, please contact Saleem Rehmat at IOM Islamabad. Tel: +92 300 856 03 41. Email: srehammat@iom.int

IRAQ - Training 535 Traditional Birth Attendants

The IDP Programme and implementing partners are in the process of training 535 traditional birth attendants in Baghdad, Najaf, Wasit, Babylon, Diyala and Thi-Qar, of which more than half have received training to date. Training is expected to be complete before the end of the year and is done in coordination with MoH Focal Point for Midwifery Services, the College of Nursing under the Ministry of Higher Education and the Technical Medical Institute.

The training includes a one month intensive Clinical Practice course carried out at teaching hospitals. Each participant will make ten safe deliveries under supervision at designated hospitals. The course stresses the standard practice, following World Health Organization (WHO) and United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) guidelines on midwifery care.

Participants include women with clinical skills and the desire to practice midwifery. 70% of them were among the Internally Displaced and 30% of participants were from host communities. Participants were selected from disadvantaged communities who had initial education which would qualify them for advanced studies, if chosen to pursue in the future.

Geographical distribution and the availability or lack of services were also taken into consideration while selecting the participants.

The aim of the training was to enable participants to become self sufficient, so that they could earn a living. The training would promote health care services and
hygiene practices, family planning, and aim to improve infant and post natal healthcare services by involving the participants in their local communities. The training also helped in to raise awareness among midwives regarding dangerous symptoms that would require advanced medical intervention, through a referral system to the nearest hospitals and Primary Health Care Centers, thus reducing maternal and infant mortality rates.

According to the WHO Consolidated Appeal Process in 2008, the health and nutrition situation in Iraq is declining due to military activities. Gross human rights violations are rampant and other factors like displacement and ethnic tensions which impact women and children at large, are on the rise. Public health programmes, including immunization, maternal and child health care and nutrition programmes have been severely disrupted, which has resulted in severely disrupted, which has resulted in

In Turkey IOM is a full-fledged member of the UN Country Team (UNCT) and takes part in the framework of “projectisation”. In a broader context it deals with the ultimate goal of streamlining migration management within Turkey’s development strategy.

Since 2007, IOM and ILO have been co-chairing the UN Thematic Group on Gender which pulls together all UN residential agencies with UNIFEM recently joining in.

The GTG aims to promote gender mainstreaming as a substantial dimension of the UN work in Turkey, through advocacy and gender friendly projects that enable the UN

Country Team to best address the various imbalances that still exist.

To achieve its goals, the UNCT has launched a high profile Joint Project on Gender Mainstreaming (the UNJP). The project, co-funded by the private sector, donor countries and the UN system itself, aims to enhance gender equality and to foster women’s participation in the public sphere thereby substantially increase women’s political representation both at national and regional levels.

IOM played a significant role in monitoring and steering the project objectives and in backstopping the project team; in particular IOM is involved in advocacy and the decentralization of gender promotion efforts at regional levels, through the formulation of regional gender mainstreaming action plans.

As one of its core tasks, the GTG contributes much needed expertise for monitoring developments within Turkey United Nations Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF). IOM’s work, such as combating human trafficking and making linkages between gender and migration, migration and development to mention some, are valuable to the UNDAF project. IOM is often consulted by the other organizations in the context of migration issues for example on the occasion of the International Migrants Day.

The work and partnership have recently yielded a consortium made up of UNDP, ILO, FAO and IOM. With the advent of this new relationship IOM is now working on an important project under the Spanish funds of the Millennium Development Goal to promote employment among young and under privileged migrants, while a second proposal on gender mainstreaming has narrowly missed the target to get funding.

As a result, the ties of IOM with the UN strengthen. A “cross-fertilization” that benefits both and even more importantly benefits gender and migration which reiterates our common agenda. This further shows how important it is to build partnerships.

ARMENIA— IOM and UNDP jointly mark International Day for the Abolition of Slavery as part of Sixteen Days of Activism against Gender Violence

On December 2, 2008, The International Day for the Abolition of Slavery, IOM and UNDP jointly marked in Yerevan, Armenia, Sixteen Days of Activism against Gender Based Violence (25.11.08 – 10.12.08). IOM actively participated together with the UN Agencies represented in Armenia to mark the occasion.

Since trafficking in human beings is considered a modern form of slavery, the event jointly organized by the Armenian Government, UNDP and IOM, addressed the issue of combating human trafficking in Armenia and worldwide. The importance of raising awareness and consciousness about the dangers of human trafficking in Armenia was noted. The event was organized for representatives of the Government, NGO-s, media, and international organizations. Since the event was organized under the auspices of the Sixteen Days of Activism against Gender based Violence, special emphasis was placed on combating trafficking of women and girls.

Mr. Dirk Boberg, UNDP Deputy Resident Representative, and Ms. Eleonora Virapyan, Chief Specialist of Women’s Issues Division of the Family, Women and Children Issues Department of the Ministry of Social and Labor Issues of the Republic of Armenia, and Ms. Ilona Ter-Minasyan, Head of Office of
IOM in Armenia, spoke at the event. The importance of cooperation among organizations to combat human trafficking was stressed. IOM and UNDP co-chaired (together with OSCE) the International Organizations Working Group on Counter-Trafficking. IOM and UNDP also collaborated on various projects and activities. The recent IOM/UNDP collaboration in a counter-trafficking project was referred to as an example. IOM helped build the capacities of the newly established Labour Migrant Support Points as well as organize a large-scale information campaign, including production and airing of public service announcements. IOM and UNDP had also collaborated in other counter-trafficking projects in Armenia. Inspired by the various efforts, a play “Performance against Trafficking of Women from Armenia”, was written and its theatre performance toured Armenia. The IOM Armenia Head of Office also spoke about IOM’s activities related to gender and migration as well as about the diverse assistance IOM provides to trafficked persons, including return and reintegration assistance, and its prevention works, including the free consultations by the Migration Resource Center, public awareness campaigns and measures, etc. IOM’s work with female migrants and women in general was also touched upon.

IOM Mission in Armenia had organized an exhibition of posters on counter-trafficking produced by various IOM Missions, for the participants. In addition, the public service announcements produced by IOM Mission in Armenia on Labour Exploitation and Trafficking in Humans were presented to the audience for the first time. Recent IOM Armenia publications such as: “Legal Guide for a Temporary Labour Migrant to the Russian Federation” and “Legal Guide for a Temporary Labour Migrant to the United Arab Emirates” were distributed to the audience. Additionally, the event was followed by a press-conference and covered largely by both broadcast and print media and got a lot of attention.

For more information please contact Ms. Kristina Galstyan, IOM Armenia Media Focal Point/ Gender Focal Point at kgalstyan@iom.am or IOM Mission in Armenia at iom@iom.am.

KENYA—Youth Graduation at the Eastleigh Community Wellness Centre

The IOM Eastleigh Community Wellness Centre continues to serve undocumented migrants and host communities in Nairobi.

Highlights of the centre’s November 2008 activities included the monthly child immunization campaign and the successful training of 15 youth peer educators on female genital mutilation, HIV/AIDS, and primary health care.

The training was co-facilitated by IOM and Cherish Others, an NGO dedicated to improve the livelihoods of resource-poor communities through information sharing, education, and working to reduce HIV prevalence in affected communities. The students gave presentations on lessons learned, and certificates and decorative shirts were presented to participants. IOM and Cherish Others will continue to offer this programme, with the second group already registered.

ECUADOR - IOM Pilot Programme for Immediate Response to Gender-Based Violence

Through the campaign, IOM organized trainings for the police, medical staff, military forces, the

19 December 2008

As part of its Emergency Assistance Programme for Persons in Search of International Protection, IOM has launched a campaign to create and strengthen local inter-agency and social capacity to prevent, recognize and respond quickly to Gender-Based Violence (GBV).

The campaign, underway in San Lorenzo, in the province of Esmeraldas, has benefitted some 700 Colombians who have crossed into Ecuador in search of international protection.

San Lorenzo, located in north-eastern Ecuador, is considered one of the most vulnerable regions of the country due to the spill over effect of the Colombian conflict, which results in large numbers of Colombians arriving in search of international protection.

In order to improve the human rights situation related to gender-based violence, IOM and the American Red Cross, in partnership with the Colombian Red Cross, formed a partnership to prevent and respond to situations of GBV against Colombian women and children and other persons in search of international protection. The programme was also designed to reach members of the local community.

The programme has created anti-GBV networks, care posts, intensive training and protection centres for the victims. So far, 2,028 persons (1,417 women and 611 men) active in neighbourhood and women’s organizations, including Colombian refugees and asylum applicants and the local community, have received training.

A “Care Route”, or service referral system, was established with support from the National Institute for Children and the Family, the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, the National Police, the National Commissary’s Office, the Office of the Attorney General, the Municipal Social Fund, the Afro-Ecuadorian Women’s Movement, and the Divine Providence Hospital.

Since October 2005, IOM’s Emergency Assistance Programme has provided assistance to Colombians fleeing their country due to the violence of illegal armed groups and in need of international protection. The programme, funded by the US Department of State’s Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration (PRM), covers Colombia’s border areas with Ecuador, Panama and Venezuela. Ecuador has the largest number of registered Colombian refugees. According to UNHCR, there are 20,000 persons with refugee status and 37,000 asylum seekers; but it estimates that there are some 130,000 persons in
January 04, 2009

This shelter is a joint initiative of IOM, the Syrian Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor (MOSAL) and local NGOs, UNICEF, the Government of Netherlands and the US Government (PRM) are the prime donors. This initiative is particularly significant as it was a result of the first workshop in the Arab World (held in September 2005) to raise awareness on counter-trafficking issues in Damascus. This event raised interest in the Syrian Government to consider introducing new anti-trafficking measures including the need to set up a shelter for victims of trafficking, and gave a strong impetus for launching a committee to prepare an anti-trafficking bill.

According to an MoU with IOM covering the entire project, MOSAL provided the premises for the shelter and IOM supervised in its execution.

This shelter is meant to provide trafficked persons a temporary safe place to stay, offer some individual psychosocial support and provide life skills development. On the other hand it would provide direct livelihood assistance to potential vulnerable groups of Iraqi women and children and other nationalities. The other expected significant outcomes of the shelter will be: an establishment of governmental and non-governmental networks of social assistance and referral systems plus the building of NGO capacities on shelter management.

For further information, please contact Mrs. Laila Tomeh, IOM Damascus, Tel: 00 963 11 6121370, email: ltomeh@iom.int

9 January 2009

OM and the provincial government of Huambo have inaugurated phase one of a two-phase project to rehabilitate a health care centre, a junior school and a canteen in Bailundo.

The facilities, which are run by a Catholic mission, the community of St Joseph of Cluny, serve 26 villages with a population of some 7,000 in an area badly damaged during Angola’s civil war. Many of the villagers are former refugees, including a large number of vulnerable women and orphaned children, who returned to the area in 2006.

The project will expand the health centre, which currently includes a pharmacy and a laboratory and focuses on reproductive health and pediatrics, to treat a variety of common diseases including diabetes, hepatitis, tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS, according to community head Sister Mary Adelino.

The canteen will also expand to promote income-generating activities for women, providing vocational training in cooking, tailoring, and computer studies.

“The war destroyed this place, as it was taken over by the military,” says community member Sister Ana Maria Malica. “We returned in 1992, and started operating the health centre in 1994. In 1995, we started receiving poor children and orphans in the school. But we were running on almost no resources and the structures were almost completely run down. There are a lot of poor villages around Bailundo and a lot of orphans. With the new health centre and school, we will be able to help 1,000 children a year.”

For more information please contact Rui Oliveira Reis at IOM Huambo. Email: roreis@iom.int
NICARAGUA – Video News Release on Human Trafficking in Nicaragua

20 January 2009

A new IOM video is available to broadcasters today highlighting the challenges of combating human trafficking in Nicaragua and in helping victims to recover and reintegrate post-rescue.

The Central American country is mainly a country of origin for women and children trafficked for sexual exploitation and forced labour, both within the country and across borders. Women and young girls are trafficked for sexual exploitation primarily to El Salvador with smaller numbers trafficked to Costa Rica, Guatemala, Mexico, Honduras, Venezuela, Spain and the United States.

Internal trafficking comprises mainly of children trafficked for forced labour in construction, agriculture, fishing, and domestic servitude.

However, images of a police raid on an illegal massage parlour in the capital, Managua, and available in the IOM video, reveal that women and minors are also victims of internal trafficking for sexual exploitation. Nevertheless, Nicaraguan special crimes police say they have little idea of the true scale of this problem.

“The moment we close one of those illegal massage houses, another one pops up somewhere in the city,” states Deputy Commissioner Felipe Ruiz Mercado, of Nicaragua’s National Police Special Crimes Unit.

Police also explain that it is difficult to bring traffickers to justice as victims are often very young and too afraid to testify against their captors.

“The traffickers are usually very powerful and rich,” says Monica Moreno Sequeira, Special Investigator of the National Police.

Between January and November 2007, Nicaragua’s National Police apprehended 43 suspected traffickers and achieved convictions in only two cases. One woman, convicted of trafficking women to Spain, is serving a nine-year sentence.

IOM, which provides vital assistance to many Nicaraguan victims of trafficking from Chinandega, a poor agricultural area northwest of the capital, Managua, has compiled some shocking facts based on the experiences of those the Organization is helping.

- 70% of victims are between 13 and 19 years of age
- 86% were trafficked for sexual exploitation
- 50% of victims live in female headed households
- 100% of the victims reported experiencing family violence
- 90% had endured rape or other abuse prior to becoming a victim
- 70% were trafficked to El Salvador, 15% to Costa Rica, 10% to Guatemala and 5% to Honduras.
- 80% of the victims were treated for Sexually Transmitted Diseases
- 90% reported using drugs and/or alcohol while in captivity
- 80% were recruited by friends or acquaintances; 10% by family members

The IOM project, the only one in Central America and which focuses on the reintroduction of victims of trafficking, is working with local authorities and civil society in Chinandega to strengthen the local support network so that victims returning home can receive the medical and psychosocial assistance needed.

Brenda de Trinidad, IOM Counter Trafficking Focal Point in Nicaragua, says many of the young women return home in a very fragile psychological state.

“In spite of being in the mud, fallen, isolated, humiliated and almost dead, we need to help them stand up, make the right decisions, help their children and find ways to prevent this from happening again,” she says.

A 16 year-old girl who had been trafficked for sexual exploitation told IOM: “I had to stay there, take drugs, be with men. I felt so bad, so bad in my heart. A girl who was there, I think she had been there so long, she was haunted and had lost her will to live.”

De Trinidad says one of the things that hurt victims most is feeling that they have nothing, including a job. Funded by the US Department of State Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration (PRM), a key component of the IOM project is to provide victims with vocational training to help them get jobs and start new lives.

For more information please contact Niurka Pineiro, Tel: + 1 202 255 8866, email: npineiro@iom.int or Berta Fernandez, IOM Nicaragua, Tel: + 505 278 95 69, email: bfernandez@iom.int

The script and video which is available in natural sound with sound bites in Spanish, can be downloaded from the IOM website http://xml.194.162.230.14/iom/downloadB.asp?Clip_ID=1233

THAILAND – IOM, UNICEF Launch Migrant Child Rights Package

27 January 2009

IOM has launched a package of educational materials designed to raise awareness of migrant children’s rights in Thai schools and among youth workers.

The “Child Rights Package,” which is part of a UNICEF-funded project: Promoting the Livelihoods of Migrant Children and Their Families in Tsunami-Affected Provinces, consists of a comic book, a DVD animation, a card game, a children’s edition of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and a poster.

It aims to raise awareness of children’s rights - focusing on migrant children and their families - to reduce stigma and discrimination towards them in Thai host communities.

While Thailand is a signatory of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the rights of migrant children are in theory protected under the law, in practice they remain vulnerable, according to IOM Thailand Chief of Mission, Monique Filsnoel.
With help from IOM, two Palestinians married to Filipino women have safely arrived in the Philippines from Gaza to rejoin their families.

Under an agreement with the Philippines government which offered to evacuate all Filipino nationals from the conflict zone, IOM stepped in to cover the cost of evacuating the two men, who are married with children.

IOM Regional Representative for East Asia Charles Harns, who met the families at Ninoy Aquino International Airport, praised the Philippines government’s efforts to evacuate its citizens and said that IOM could offer similar support to up to 20 Palestinian spouses married to Filipinos.

IOM Manila is in contact with the Embassies of the Philippines in Amman, Cairo and Tel Aviv and with IOM offices in the region to cope with similar requests to reunite families, should they arise.

For more information please contact Joanna Dabao at IOM Manila. Email: jdabao@iom.int, Tel: +63.2.8481260.
A 7,578 kilometre trip from Burkina Faso to Haiti to help those in need

By Niurka Piñeiro
IOM Regional Public Information Officer
Washington

As the IOM Regional Public Information Officer covering the Western Hemisphere, I recently visited Haiti to report on IOM’s Emergency Operations in response to the devastation caused by four tropical storms that hit the island earlier this year. I met Salome Kombere, IOM Emergency Relief Operations Officer, in Gonaïves, in the midst of a large distribution to persons who had been forced to flee their homes after the floods that destroyed a large part of the city and left it encased in mud. I was impressed by her focus and dedication and, as a trained journalist, I naturally wanted to hear her story.

Q: Salome, do you find it more difficult as a woman to work in emergencies settings?
A: Of course working in emergencies situations is more challenging, but not only for a woman. My male colleagues are also far away from their families. I think we are all impacted by the stories of the people we help and the distance from our families. But that is the nature of our work.

Q: Does your outlook as a woman help when working in emergency operations, like the one in Gonaïves, where you see so many people suffering?
A: Of course my sensitivity as a woman helps me to empathize with the victims, but when the job calls for rigor and strength to make sure things get done, I do not hesitate. I made the choice to work in the field of humanitarian assistance, because I love this work. After finishing my secondary education I started to prepare for this work. In university I studied Social Science; so it’s not fate that has brought me here. I love what I do, I love my work. I am totally motivated.

Q: This love and dedication is evident Salome. So what do you feel at the end of a hard, long and hot day, as today?
A: My greatest satisfaction is to feel that my work has contributed to bringing some solace to those who have suffered and need help to get back on their feet.

Q: Do you sometimes feel discriminated or relegated by the male colleagues?
A: Well, it is a fact that the majority of staff working in emergency operations are normally male, so although these types of attitudes are not allowed in organizations such as IOM, the discrimination is done with such finesse that one must experience it first-hand in order to understand it. But I don’t let this get in the way of the job at hand. When I think about it, I realize why male colleagues react this way. In general, men all over the world are bought up to have a superiority complex over women. And depending on the place where one is at the moment, the attitude can be more or less pronounced. Clashes are inevitable; especially in emergencies when everyone is under pressure and we come from different cultures. But what works for me is to let go of my inferiority complex, by demonstrating my knowledge and skills through my work. I have always tried to stay above all of that and rise to the work at hand, everything else comes a distant second.
Q: Have you had assignments where you were hesitant or felt you were not ready prepared for the task?

A: In May 2006 I was skeptical of accepting a job with the IOM team in Sudan because my weak English. So I always carried my French-English dictionary in my bag. Of course it took me longer to finish my reports, so I worked longer hours. But today I am happy to say that my English has improved and I can work in both languages. And while in Sudan I had to train a local staff who spoke Arabic. I did not speak a word of Arabic and his English was worse than mine, so I trained this person by doing the task myself so that they could learn by seeing. And my message got though loud and clear!

Q: Do you miss your family?

A: Of course I miss my family, especially my children because I live with them. But my male colleagues miss their families just as much. But my children are always with me, physically apart, but together all the time. We speak on the telephone very often.

Q: How many years have you been with IOM and where have you been posted?

A: I joined IOM in May 2003 and was National Operations Officer in Burkina Faso for three years. During that time I organized and was in charge of the returns of Third Country Nationals from Cote d’Ivoire. I also provided training to the authorities on the handling of emergency situations, including management of camps for internally displaced populations. During those three years I traveled on Mission to Mali and Guinea Bissau for the repatriation of refugees form Sierra Leone.

In May of 2006 I was posted in Juba, South Sudan, where I worked on the return by air of Congolese refugees.

Later that year, in October, I went to Kadugli in Central Sudan where I coordinated the convoys taking IDPs home to South Sudan.

In November 2007 and still in Sudan, I worked in Tamboura, on the border with the Central African Republic, where I organized the return by air of Sudanese refugees who had been living in Mboki refugee camp.

I stayed in Sudan until April 2008, working in Kadugli and Juba on the return of refugees and internally displaced, as well as managing a transit center set up for these movements.

During my time in Sudan I also provided camp management and movement training for local staff and conducted roads assessments to ensure that the movements could take place and that villages were ready to receive the returnees.

And now I am here in Gonaives, Haiti working on this emergency operation.

Q: So after living in so many places, with such tough living conditions and precarious security what do message do you have for the brave women working with IOM.

A: My message is for all women, those in Africa, my country and all over the world: We make up are 53 per cent of the world’s population, and so this world cannot advance without our participation. Let go of all prejudices, because against all odds and in all walks of life, we have to be there, making sure we all build a world where equality and justice reign supreme.

But I also have a message for all men: Thank you from the bottom of my heart from fighting alongside women to attain that objective.

Finally, I want to thank all those women who work for international organizations in hardship posts far away from their families. I know that many times we are forgotten and therefore unable to advance in our careers. It is from you that I draw my inspiration to do the best job possible to help all those in need.
Recommended reading

Gender in Agriculture Sourcebook
Publication by the World Bank, FAO and IFAD

Many references to migration and contains two sections on
• Remittance transfer services
• Coastal migration and mobility


Gender and Migration: Similarities and disparities among women and men in the immigrant population
Publication by Statistics Norway.

The report gathers part of the data available on women and men with immigrant backgrounds in Norway collected by Statistics Norway.

http://www.ssb.no/english/subjects/00/02/10/rapp_200810_en/rapp_200810_en.pdf

Re/integration of trafficked persons: handling ‘difficult’ cases
A joint publication of the King Baudouin Foundation and the NEXUS Institute to Combat Human Trafficking Vienna, Austria

Developed in the context of the King Baudouin Foundation’s trafficking assistance programme in South-Eastern Europe, the Trafficking Victims Re/integration Programme (TVRP).


Gender Perspectives: Integrating Disaster Risk Reduction into Climate Change Adaptation—Good Practices and Lessons Learned
Publication by United Nations, Secretariat of the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction

Points out the vital nexus between women’s experiences of natural resource management, climate change adaptation and disaster risk reduction, and how they can come together to make whole communities strong and sustainable.

Link

Engaging Boys and Men in GBV Prevention and Reproductive Health in Conflict and Emergency-Response Settings: A Workshop Module

This module is designed to build the skills of staff working to engage boys and men in gender-based violence (GBV) prevention and reproductive health (RH) in conflict and other emergency-response settings.