

# Reproductive Health in Conflict and Emergencies

[R]eproductive rights embrace certain human rights that are already recognized in national laws, international human rights documents and other consensus documents. These rights rest on the recognition of the basic right of all couples and individuals to decide freely and responsibly the number, spacing and timing of their children and to have the information and means to do so, and the right to attain the highest standard of sexual and reproductive health. It also includes their right to make decisions concerning reproduction free of discrimination, coercion and violence, as expressed in human rights documents.

- Paragraph 7.3 of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) Programme of Action

## What is Reproductive Health (RH)?

Reproductive health (RH) is a state of physical, emotional and social well-being in regard to one's reproductive system. RH means that people are able to have a safe and enjoyable sex life and that they can decide to have children if, when and how often they wish to do so.

## Who are the beneficiaries of RH initiatives?

- women and girls
- men and boys
- adolescents and young adults
- families and communities

## Why look at RH in conflict and emergencies?

Women and girls in conflict face extraordinary difficulties that affect their RH. They are vulnerable to rape and other forms of sexual violence by armed groups. They also face increased risk of exploitation.

Due to systematic and exceptionally violent gang rape, doctors in the **Democratic Republic of Congo** now classify vaginal destruction as a war crime. Thousands of Congolese girls and women suffer from **vaginal fistula—tissue tears in the vagina, bladder and rectum**—after surviving brutal rapes. A survey of rape survivors in one region revealed that 91 percent suffered from one or several rape-related illnesses. (Amnesty International 2004, Save the Children 2005)

Lack of quality RH services can lead to high mortality rates among women and children, an increase in the spread of sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including HIV/AIDS, an increase in unsafe abortions and more disabilities related to high fertility rates and poor birth spacing. Women and girls fleeing conflict also lack access to safe childbirth services.

**Afghanistan** has one of the highest maternal mortality rates in the world with **a woman dying of pregnancy-related causes every 27 minutes**. Ninety-two percent of Afghan women give birth without the assistance of a skilled birth attendant, and 98 percent of women do not use modern contraception. (UNFPA, 2006)

## What difference could early RH interventions in emergencies make?

Priority RH activities prevent and reduce:

- maternal and infant death;
- sexual violence and the resulting unwanted pregnancies and unsafe abortions;
- disability; and
- the spread of STIs including HIV/AIDS.

For example, RH services can help survivors of sexual violence by ensuring appropriate medical care including emergency contraception, post-exposure prophylaxis for HIV transmission, prevention of other STIs and psychosocial support.



Photographs courtesy of: Patrick Robitaille / CARE Canada 2006 | Nelson Turquel / CARE Timor Leste | Jason Sanqster / CARE 2005 | Joel Bergeron

*Reproductive health care should be available in all situations and be based on the needs and expressed demands of refugees, particularly women, with full respect for the various religious and ethical values and cultural backgrounds of the refugees while also conforming with universally recognized international human rights.*

*-Reproductive Health in Refugee Situations: An Inter-agency Field Manual*

### How is RH provided in emergencies?

The Minimum Initial Service Package (MISP) for RH is a set of *priority* RH activities that should be implemented at the beginning of every crisis. At the onset of an emergency, it is critical that implementation of the MISP is prioritized in order to save lives and prevent illness, especially among women and girls.

### What does the MISP consist of?

*Identifying someone to coordinate the activities of the MISP.*

*Preventing sexual violence and providing care to survivors by:* ensuring systems are in place to protect displaced populations, particularly women and girls, from sexual violence and ensuring medical services, including psychosocial support, are available for survivors of sexual violence.

*Reducing the transmission of HIV/AIDS by:* following infection control guidelines; guaranteeing the availability of free condoms; and ensuring that blood for transfusion is safe.

*Preventing maternal and infant death and disability by:* providing clean delivery supplies such as soap, plastic sheets, clean razor blades, clean string for tying umbilical cords; and establishing a referral system to manage complications in pregnancy and delivery.

*Planning to provide comprehensive RH care by:* collecting basic background information; identifying sites where RH services can be delivered in the future; evaluating staff and training practices; identifying where/how reproductive health supplies are bought and assessing monthly drug consumption.

### What can you do?

You can start by learning more about how conflict and emergency situations impact the lives of girls and women by reading and researching, participating in events, joining networks of practitioners, and writing to your government representatives.

You can raise awareness about the rights of girls and women affected by conflict, including their reproductive health rights, through promoting the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security, the Beijing Platform for Action, and the United Nations International Conference on Population and Development.

### Want to learn more?

- Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children's reproductive health program: [www.womenscommission.org/projects/rh/index.shtml](http://www.womenscommission.org/projects/rh/index.shtml)
- The Reproductive Health Response in Conflict (RHRC) Consortium: [www.rhrc.org](http://www.rhrc.org)
- The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA): [www.unfpa.org](http://www.unfpa.org)
- Get certified in the Minimum Initial Service Package (MISP) for Reproductive Health Distance Learning Module: [www.rhrc.org/MISP](http://www.rhrc.org/MISP)

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