



# The Hidden Side of the Famine: Violence Against Women and Girls Fleeing Somalia

*Hagadera Refugee Camp, Dadaab*

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Famine in Somalia has led to a crisis situation in the Horn of Africa as populations flee the worst drought in almost six decades. While violence against women and girls is often associated with war, natural disasters can bring equally severe risks. As they flee Somalia to safety, women and girls are passing areas where armed groups and bandits roam – only to arrive in crowded and potentially dangerous camps. The protection aspects of this crisis are acute and life-threatening, yet have been largely ignored.

The UN has indicated that on average 1,200 Somalis are arriving in Kenya's Dadaab refugee camp each day. The three camps in Dadaab – Ifo, Dagahaley and Hagadera – were built for 90,000 and are now hosting four times that population. As the camp services buckle under the strain of growing numbers, competition for basic goods and amenities pose severe risks to women and girls. For female refugees arriving in recent weeks, the situation is dire. Housed in outskirts areas of the established camps, they live in ad-hoc settlements that lack security, safe spaces for women and girls, and basic services such as water and latrines.

## Violence Against Women and Girls:

A July 2011 IRC assessment reveals that women and girls fleeing to Dadaab are facing pervasive and severe threats of violence, both enroute and in the camps. Single women, female-headed households and adolescent girls are most at risk.

**Rape and sexual violence** were identified as the most pressing concern for women and girls while fleeing Somalia and as an ongoing, though lesser, concern in the camps. In June 2011, IRC's GBV program witnessed a fourfold increase in reporting of sexual violence compared with figures from January to May, many referred from the reception centre in Hagadera.

**Intimate partner violence (IPV), early marriage and survival sex** were identified as other forms of violence perpetrated against women and girls currently living the camp attributed in part to growing insecurity and the pressure on existing services. New arrivals, many of them female headed households, are living precariously in tents and makeshift *tukuls* in the outskirts areas.

**Reluctance to report:** Survivors often do not get critical, life-saving care because they don't feel they can safely report. Many fear their families will blame them, communities will reject them as "unmarriageable" or out of feelings of shame.



## **Refuge or Risk: Protection Concerns for Women and Girls in the Camps**

**Waiting for Registration:** On June 6th, a reception centre was opened within each of the camps to receive new arrivals, provide health screening, assess vulnerability and supply food rations prior to going to Ifo for full registration. Long waits for registration are also creating bottlenecks in getting food, goods and shelter to new arrivals, heightening risks for women and girls.

**Unsafe spaces:** Newly arrived women and girls are living in poorly lit, insecure, unplanned outskirts areas of the camps in shelters that do not have locks and leave them exposed to theft, break-ins and harassment. Single women and girls make up the bulk of those living in tents and makeshift shelters, without any guaranteed security. Women and girls identified chronic threats of attack in their tents and tukuls at night.

“Some women and girls were attacked by gangsters, had their things taken from them, were raped and came to the camp naked”

“So many things happened, it’s hard to remember all of them” -*Women from focus groups*

**Limited assistance:** While lack of goods and services is affecting many in Dadaab, women and girls have had particularly limited access to basic assistance. For many single women and girls, getting water, food, shelter and other materials is risky as distribution points are marked by theft and violence. With backlogs in registration for the

thousands streaming in, initial food rations provided to new arrivals are inadequate. Other provisions such as cooking utensils, jerry cans, blankets and stoves are also limited and **no distributions at reception include hygiene and sanitary materials for women and girls.**

**Firewood Collection:** The risks associated with firewood collection are well documented in Dadaab and strategies to ensure women’s and girls’ safety in getting fuel have been put in place. Yet many of these strategies have not been extended to new arrivals, and the resource shortages have placed pressure on women and girls to seek firewood far from the camps. Recently arrived women consistently and repeatedly indicated that firewood collection was a key risk factor for sexual violence.

“In the forest, there are men with guns who will not care if you are old, pregnant or sick, they will rape you without consideration”

**No information on services:** Few recently arrived women and girls that IRC spoke with had any knowledge of existing services for those who had experienced violence, and did not know where in Dadaab to report security problems. In fact new arrivals didn’t have basic information on many services within the camp including security, protection, and shelter. This puts women and girls at grave risk of sexual exploitation and abuse as well as survival sex, in particular as registration delays limit access to goods.

### **Recommendations to UN agencies and humanitarian organizations:**

UN and humanitarian agencies must provide a safe environment for women and girls fleeing Somalia and prioritize their protection.

1. **Meet women’s and girls’ specific needs through distributions:** This should include basic clothing, hygiene and sanitary materials and items to mitigate against violence including whistles and flashlights.
2. **Strengthen GBV services to accommodate new arrivals:** This includes scaling up existing services and adapting referral pathways to provide the new refugee population with access to comprehensive, safe and confidential GBV support services.
3. **Deliver age-appropriate emotional support to adolescent girls and ensure appropriate support for girl child survivors.**

4. **Put in place GBV prevention and risk mitigation measures across sectors:** Other sectors including WASH, camp management, security, food and NFI distribution must take prevention and risk mitigation actions to minimize potential risks and violence to women and girls. In particular, address risks around latrines and firewood collection and ensure women and girls have access to shelter. UNHCR, as protection lead, should continue take a lead role in advocating across sectors for better prevention and response measures.