

Gender Equality and Empowerment for Refugee Women in Return and Reintegration Contexts

This Policy Brief is based on learning from the “I’m Prepared” program, including partners’ monitoring and evaluation, as well as longitudinal research. The program was funded by the Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade Australian Aid program. The research compared a baseline in 2018 of program participants’ experience of gender relations and decision-making about return/reintegration with an assessment of changes in 2019 and 2020. The research explored the contribution of program interventions as well as other factors to influencing any changes experienced by refugee and returnee women.

Community-based protection

Community-based protection (CbP) can strengthen the ability of refugees, particularly women, to anticipate, prepare for, and manage the risks, challenges and opportunities often associated with voluntary repatriation. Risk awareness, combined with individual, family and collective action, results in better informed decision-making, and better preparedness. Ultimately reintegration is more sustainable, through greater self-reliance and resilience, and by reducing the pressure on family, community and government services on return.

The experience of Act for Peace and its partners prior to and during the “I’m Prepared” program indicates that women’s empowerment status sometimes diminishes during the return process. Women refugees are not always involved in key decision-making, and it is common for women to become dependent on family members in the return context. Many of the leadership positions and freedoms gained in the camp environment are not available immediately in the return context.

Within refugee return and reintegration praxis, refugee-led preparedness is rarely a priority, and there is often little focus on gender equality and women’s empowerment. Women can and should play a central role in preparedness and voluntary repatriation.

“I’m Prepared”: Gender Equality and Empowerment for Refugee Women in Return-Reintegration Contexts

Tamil refugees who fled the civil war in Sri Lanka have resided in refugee camps in Tamil Nadu, India, for up to three decades and are now returning to North-East Sri Lanka. After over thirty years of conflict, indigenous Karenni refugees from Kayah state in Myanmar continue to reside in refugee camps inside Thailand. In these contexts, the goal of the “I’m Prepared” program was that ‘Refugee women are empowered through a return and reintegration process that enables full enjoyment of social, economic and political rights. The program had four change pathways:

- (1) Knowledge: Increased informed decision-making and - for those wishing to return - increased preparedness.
- (2) Economic Empowerment: Returnee and local women in areas of return enjoy strengthened economic opportunities and empowerment to enable safe, dignified and sustainable reintegration.
- (3) Leadership: Refugee and returnee women enjoy increased social and political influence, respect through leadership and engagement in family, community-level and broader society in camp settings and areas of return.
- (4) Learning: Development effectiveness of preparedness and return and reintegration programming is strengthened.

Act for Peace (AfP) provided overall management of the program, working with Organization for Eelam / Elangai Refugees (OfERR) in India and Sri Lanka and The Border Consortium (TBC) in Thailand and Myanmar, who in turn partnered with civil society organisations Karenni Women’s Organisation (Thailand and Myanmar), Karenni Refugee Repatriation and Reconstruction Working Group (Myanmar) and Kayah Phu Social Service and Development Association (Myanmar). The Institute for Sustainable Futures, University of Technology Sydney (ISF-UTS) was a research partner for the program.



POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1) Integrate refugee-led preparedness and reintegration, community-based protection, and livelihoods into voluntary repatriation programming to ensure safe, dignified and voluntary repatriation and reintegration.
- 2) Include focus on women refugee leadership and community-based protection mechanisms as part of voluntary repatriation programming.
- 3) Prioritise meaningful participation and leadership of refugee organisations themselves at all levels of refugee protection programs.
- 4) Support women refugee livelihoods, with concern to mitigate systemic barriers to women's economic empowerment.
- 5) Connect refugee organisations to share, learn and build solidarity and action for refugee protection.

1) Integrate refugee-led preparedness, community-based protection, and livelihoods into voluntary repatriation programming to ensure safe, dignified and voluntary repatriation and reintegration

Experience of the “I’m Prepared” program has demonstrated the value of an integrated approach to supporting voluntary repatriation and strengthening gender equality and women’s empowerment outcomes. The program intentionally included focus on building knowledge, enhancing preparedness and supporting women’s livelihoods. This ensures that refugee women themselves own and lead their own protection and preparedness for return and reintegration.

Women refugees who participated in the “I’m Prepared” program described ways that participation in multiple training activities including protection training, livelihood training, gender equality and women’s networks motivated, encouraged and equipped them to take actions to protect themselves and their families in camps and return and reintegration processes. Our research highlighted that women who participated in the program became more informed about key information relevant to their status as refugees, donor support and options for return and reintegration. Women also became more informed about risks and opportunities for protection in camps and as part of return and reintegration processes. Connected activities in both host and home country locations means skills gained in camps are transferrable on return, for example livelihood activities are relevant to both host and home country settings.

The “I’m Prepared” program was concerned to ensure basic rights of women refugees are met but also that women are empowered and

active in decisions about where to live now and in the future. Taking a holistic perspective of refugee women’s lives means that integrating protection, livelihood and preparedness is essential as part of efforts to strengthen gender equality and women’s empowerment.

2) Include focus on women refugee leadership and community-based protection mechanisms as part of voluntary repatriation programming

Women must have a central role in voluntary repatriation, to ensure that women’s unique and specific rights are upheld – such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). Women’s contribution to families and communities should also be valued and realised.

Our research during the program found women tend to have similar community leadership roles to men in camps. However, our research after the program identified that returned women in Sri Lanka had more limited leadership roles compared to when living in India, which was expected to improve over time once women were better connected with the communities in their places of origin. Also, leadership activities for both women and men were restricted over the last year due to the impacts of COVID-19. These findings highlighted the need for continued support to returned women to ensure gender equality and empowerment in the return and reintegration context.

“The “I’m Prepared” program prioritised preparedness of women in voluntary repatriation programming. This included ensuring that women were informed about the best ways to prepare for return and reintegration through protection training. Women refugees in Thailand cited in our research the importance of protection especially for vulnerable populations and described external organisations to access services. In India, women described learning about the importance of child and women safety, how to access services or support, and being prepared for return. In Sri Lanka, women described learning about preparing documentation for return as well as ensuring protection of women and girls during return and reintegration.

We know from the “I’m Prepared” program that women informed about community-based protection share what they know with others, highlighting the important leadership roles of women within their communities. Women shared what they learnt through their participation in the program with family and neighbours and, to a lesser extent, with others in the community.

Women refugees who participated in the “I’m Prepared” program in Tamil Nadu and northern Thailand often have an active role in decision-making in their families, which the program found can be leveraged to strengthen leadership roles at the community level. We know from our research that the majority of women program participants share decisions with men in their household about where to live in the future. While at the start of the program, some women made decisions separately about how to spend money, at the end of the program most women were sharing decisions about how to spend money with men in their households.

3) Prioritise meaningful participation and leadership of refugee organisations themselves at all levels of refugee protection programs.

A priority focus on refugees' leadership has been one of the enablers for women's empowerment in the "I'm Prepared" program. This leadership operates at the individual, household, community and national/international policy level.

Strengthening leadership supports individuals to build self-confidence and be empowered to take informed decisions and actions for their own protection. With the CbP approach of the "I'm Prepared" program, refugees also became more aware of the strengths and vulnerabilities of their own community members and took collective actions to ensure their protection. For example returnee women, accompanied by Welcome Groups established by the program, met with government officials to advocate for assistance to meet their reintegration needs. These women were effective in receiving resettlement cash assistance for families, and loan support for female-headed households to build their livelihood activities.

In line with the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework and the Global Compact on Refugees' commitment to develop and support meaningful participation and leadership, the "I'm Prepared" program supported refugees to advocate for themselves, claim their rights and hold duty bearers to account. As refugees have an important and unique view on their own context, their perspectives are invaluable to listen to and refugees are best placed to lead voluntary reintegration initiatives according to their own priorities. In the Thailand-Myanmar context, the Karenni Refugee Repatriation and Reconstruction Working Group and Karenni Women's Organisation advocated for peace and policy-level change, as well as supported Karenni refugees on both sides of the border. In the India-Sri Lanka context, OfERR drew on their credibility as a refugee-led organisation to work with the Government of Sri Lanka to increase their willingness and ability to provide the services needed to enable dignified voluntary return.

At the level of national and international policy, the "I'm Prepared" refugee organisation partners were effective in having their voices heard and responded to. Donor supported programs such as "I'm Prepared" benefit from ensuring refugee leadership at all levels, and refugee voices and actions inform voluntary repatriation policy and programs.

4) Support returnee women's livelihoods, with concern to mitigate systemic barriers to women's economic empowerment

Support for women's livelihoods within community-based refugee protection programs can empower women economically and enhance their preparedness.

Livelihoods for refugee women in camp settings in Thailand and India are challenging due to the barriers on mobility and lack of access to markets. In camp settings, the program provided literacy and livelihood skills training to women refugees as part of preparedness for return. Women refugees in India and Thailand applied skills learnt to new and existing economic activities.

In return contexts, the "I'm Prepared" program recognised that most returnees struggle to access productive resources including land, credit and markets and returnee women are especially disadvantaged. Livelihood opportunities that link returnees and local community in areas of return break down barriers between groups and reduce perception that returnees are burdens, which is particularly important where women returnees are dependent on in-laws and unfamiliar return contexts.

This challenge was addressed through group-based market-led economic activity in areas of return in Myanmar and Sri Lanka where women returnees helped and supported each other, and were linked to local business people including male champions who supported them to access markets. The program also provided assistance and income development initiatives in Sri Lanka and Myanmar for returnee women and local women, with end-of-program monitoring by partners finding that 75% of women who participated in these activities reported increased incomes.

To fully realise the potential of their livelihood skills and efforts, barriers to women's mobility and work opportunities need to be addressed. In both Thailand and India, women valued the livelihood training and were able to apply a range of skills such as sewing, raising animals and growing vegetables within the camps. Women and men's incomes were similar, supplemented by humanitarian support. However, women in Thailand only reported decreased confidence in livelihood opportunities during the three years they participated in the program. Persistent constraints on livelihoods include insufficient farming land, limited natural resources and a narrow market for trade, and the challenges in the refugee camps were exacerbated by the impacts of COVID-19. Income disparity persisted between women and men in India and Sri Lanka due to cultural norms and barriers within their context.



The experience of the "I'm Prepared" program demonstrates that economic empowerment is a long-term goal that relies not only on building women's livelihood and entrepreneurship skills, but also on transformation of gender roles in the home and in the labour market.

5) Connect refugee organisations to share, learn and build solidarity and action for refugee protection

Refugee organisations that are connected are able to share experiences with each other, explore what works in different contexts and generate ideas about CbP best practice. Our experience of the "I'm Prepared" program demonstrates the value of connecting refugee organisations. During the three-year program, the four partners had various initiatives to connect and learn together. Teleconferences were held to discuss specific areas of the program and experiences in program implementation, such as livelihood activities and women's economic empowerment, or gender equality training. These conversations provided an opportunity to learn about the specific initiatives of each partner, how activities were contextualised to different camp conditions and the change outcomes being achieved.

Another key activity of the "I'm Prepared" program was a mid-program reflection held in Thailand in March 2019 which brought together representatives from all four partners across the four country contexts. The reflection meetings of program partners offered an opportunity to share experiences about different program activities and importantly revealed the effects of cultural, social and political contexts on refugee preparedness and women's empowerment in refugee return and reintegration. The learning event included a visit to a refugee camp on the Thai-Myanmar border. The culmination of the week-long partner reflection meetings was an external Learning Event which was attended by 17 organisations including refugee networks, civil society organisations, NGOs and donor agencies to discuss and learn from each other's program practices in the same operational contexts.

Connections across diverse cultures and geographies also creates opportunities to build solidarity between refugee communities. The "I'm Prepared" program has brought together global refugee populations and importantly refugee-led organisations. Connected refugee-led organisations are stronger together in efforts to realise refugee human rights.

Implications for policy, programming and research

Facilitate refugees' right to return in safety and dignity, through meaningful participation of refugees and coordination of support provided by international actors

National and international actors should engage and partner with organisations led by women refugees. Decision-making capacity and relevant knowledge to inform regional and international dialogues on refugee protection should be valued. In line with the Global Compact on Refugees', focus on enhancing refugee self-reliance, meaningful refugee participation and leadership is both an end in itself, and a means to achieve system level change. This better meets the priorities of refugees.

Donors should fund programs which aim to uphold refugees' right to return and support the ability and willingness of countries of origin to uphold their responsibilities to their returning citizens. The meaning of 'the right to return' should be elaborated through better articulation of the responsibilities of countries of origin. Inclusive governance should be prioritised to ensure active participation of returned refugees in governance and that they are afforded appropriate government services from the state.

Development actors should assume responsibility alongside national state actors and be engaged earlier in preparedness and reintegration of refugees. As part of the Global Compact on Refugees' call to support conditions in countries of origin for safe and dignified return, international coordination is required to sequence immediate humanitarian assistance for returnees with longer-term reintegration strategies and services. While UNHCR has a role to play in backstopping assistance to refugees, community-based protection activities are central to long-term protection of refugee rights.

Promote women's empowerment and gender equality through continued support to refugee and returnee women and promoting systems-level change

Recognising the long-term nature of gender transformation and women's empowerment, voluntary repatriation programming should include continued support to refugee and returnee women. In particular, programs should address different spheres of change: women claiming meaningful leadership roles; civic freedoms and rights; as well as economic independence.

Economic empowerment programs need to address the root causes of disenfranchisement such as access to land, credit, and markets. As well as connecting with women champions in the local business community, returnees could collaborate with women-led civil society organisations which specialise on labour rights issues and could support advocacy for systems-level change.

Conduct further research to monitor impact in refugee protection programs and understand full benefits of refugee-led return, preparedness and reintegration

The "I'm Prepared" research demonstrated the value of applied research to inform program planning and implementation. Informed by their experience in "I'm Prepared", partners will continue learning about refugee experiences of preparedness and reintegration, and monitoring the impact of program interventions.

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