



The Youngsfield Organization

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Vulnerable Persons at Risk

A number of the people remaining in the Cape Town Safety Sites are considered “vulnerable persons” and in order to assure their well-being, extra protection and consideration should be afforded to them. Identifying and assisting the most vulnerable persons living in these sites should be prioritised considering the imminent closure of the Sites.

The vulnerable persons considered are single mothers and their children, unaccompanied minors and persons suffering from serious mental and physical disabilities. Of special concern are the many abandoned women living in these sites with young children. Many of these IDPs will face serious challenges in finding accommodation and gainful employment. Upon the closure of the Safety Sites they may be left destitute and homeless. Special consideration of the difficulties they face is required in the coming weeks.

Single women and their children require added protection because they have additional needs and face greater risks upon the closure of the safety sites. In compiling this report, it is evident that insufficient attention has been paid to gender sensitive issues including domestic violence and sexual exploitation and some of these women have fallen through the cracks. What is of particular concern are the women that have been abandoned in the safety sites by their husbands, losing their traditional source of protection and support. They are now in a precarious position, both fearful and disempowered and therefore at greater risk of gender based violence, coercion into sexual transactions and homelessness post closure of the safety sites. As single women with young children have greater obstacles to face in terms of reintegration, extra vigilance is required in assuring their successful transition into the local communities. They fear for the safety and security of their families.

Those who suffer from psychological and physical disabilities must also receive due attention. Examination of the circumstances surrounding unaccompanied minors needs to be investigated.

Only those who were brought to the attention of YO volunteers were interviewed and documented and, as a result, this report cannot be considered fully comprehensive. We hope that a summary of our findings will serve to highlight the potential extent of and challenges faced by vulnerable IDP's. As this report focuses specifically on the Youngsfield Safety Site and we believe that the findings can be extrapolated to the possible situation in Harmony and Blue Water that have significantly larger populations. It is imperative that further research is conducted at the other two sites in order to establish the extent of what could become a crisis if not addressed immediately.

Findings:

- We have documented nine abandoned mothers. Between them there are twenty-five children ranging from the age of 10 months to 11 years. Three of these women are between 6 and 9 months pregnant, and four of them cannot speak English.

- We have documented four single mothers, with thirteen children between them, who all face additional obstacles, and we are certain that there are others who have not been brought to our attention. Since researching for this report we have identified two more vulnerable women. One is 8 months pregnant with two children and a husband that is yet to make any plans or attempts to support her. She speaks no English. The other is 6 months pregnant and has five children with ages ranging from 1 to 6. Her husband appears to be in the process of abandoning her and she too speaks no English.
- There are two unaccompanied minors, a 13 year old girl and a 16 year old boy. Both these situations need attention.
- There are two single women who have suffered extreme violent trauma including being raped. These experiences have totally disempowered and psychologically effected them.
- Physical disability seriously challenges three adults and three children and the effects of these illnesses are felt by their families
- Serious psychiatric illness affects two persons in the camp, one of whom suffered a psychotic breakdown in September and was hospitalised in a psychiatric institution.
- We are aware of incidents of domestic violence and the reluctance of many women to speak out about violence due to cultural constructions of shame surrounding abuse.

Conclusions:

Notwithstanding, that all IDP's are to various degrees vulnerable, we conclude in this report that there are 23 adults and 50 children that can be judged especially vulnerable and at increased risk. We judge this to be a significant number of the IDP's still resident at Youngsfield. Considering the high number we found living at the smallest of the safety sites, and our limited capacity to ensure a comprehensive survey, it is imperative that further research is conducted in order to establish the extent of what could become a crisis if not addressed immediately.

We ask that the UNHCR, OCHA, UNICEF and other relevant members of the UN family pay attention, advocate and advise on the plight of these IDP's. This request is further motivated by the questionable rapid assessment project of Home Affairs that has left the status of many undetermined and their futures therefore uncertain.

The UNHCR has acknowledged that the people who manage safety sites are often poorly equipped for identifying and dealing with vulnerable groups and gender issues (UNHCR Policy on Refugee Women and Guidelines on Their Protection: An Assessment of Ten Years of Implementation, *An independent assessment by the Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children* May 2002) The issue of abandoned women living in the Youngsfield Safety Site clearly supports this claim. During the course of our research it was explicitly stated that camp management was unaware of any abandoned women living in the camp.

Recommendations:

- Social workers with appropriate language skills and cultural sensitivity be allocated immediately to professionally assess and assist vulnerable persons.

- Vulnerable people living at Harmony Park and Blue Waters also need to be identified and documented.
- Civil society is galvanized to assist in finding solutions that will prevent the destitution of vulnerable persons. Our survey of availability of shelters for abused and abandoned women has revealed a dire shortage and alternative accommodation needs to be accessed.
- The UNHCR and Provincial government commit to assist and recognize the extent and challenges faced by these vulnerable persons.
- The South African Gender Commission engages in assisting to find solutions to the number of issues that are faced by vulnerable women.

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