

# The Hope of Darfur



Help is slowly arriving for the brutalized women of Sudan

**H**ER NAME IS SAADIA. OR Ilham. Or Amena. In her vivid *tobe* (shawl), she is beautiful amid the desolation of her new home, a camp for internally displaced persons. She has lost her father or brother(s) or husband to murder or soldiering. Her home has been torched. Violence has driven her from land she once farmed to feed her family. She hasn't eaten a normal meal in two or three years. Her children are malnourished. She has watched some of them die from diseases medical intervention could have prevented. And she has been raped.

The displaced women of Darfur are primary targets of the four-and-a-half-year genocide ravaging western Sudan. It is nearly impossible to overstate their needs—and resilience—in the face of massive suffering.

Like violated women throughout the world, they endure physical injuries, unwanted pregnancies, miscarriages, psychological illness, ostracism by husbands and families, accusations of adultery and more. An estimated 85 percent of Darfuri women have also been subjected to female genital mutilation, making them even more vulnerable to HIV/AIDS and other STDs, childbirth trauma and damage from sexual assault. No comprehensive statistics exist, but aid groups esti-

mate that tens of thousands of women have been raped. Violence against Darfuri women has produced the most severe crisis in female health and human rights in the world today.

Yet after more than four years, no systematic treatment response has been established. Nor have Sudanese women in community-based organizations been prepared, by culture or circumstance, to provide effective rape-crisis intervention on the scale required in the camps. Women's needs remain nearly invisible in the landscape of the Darfur crisis.

The long feminist struggle to provide assistance to rape victims in “developed” countries has produced many effective tools, however. Now, the Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit Darfur Peace and Development Organization ([www.DarfurPeace.org](http://www.DarfurPeace.org)), of which I am a program director, is adapting these tools in a pilot program: The Darfur Women's Center.

The center is being established in phases in Kassab IDP camp near Kutum in North Darfur. It will eventually offer integrated programs supporting women's protection, family income, and physical and psychological health recovery.

One project, the Solar Cooker program, provides locally available materials for construction of low-

▲ Displaced women seeking firewood

tech stoves and training in their use. This reduces the need for women to gather firewood at the high risk of rape (see *Ms.*, Winter 2006-07). Another project, the Women's Handcrafts Cooperative, offers the Darfuri women the chance to create traditional baskets for sale through the Amber Chand Collection ([www.amberchand.com](http://www.amberchand.com)), a Massachusetts-based company marketing products made by women in conflict zones.

In the context of addressing household needs, the women receive professional guidance about trauma resolution: the “stitch and bitch” model of women's-group problem solving. Reproductive-health professionals are part of the team.

Though the number of potential clients is enormous, only a core group of 200 to 300 women can be served currently. But in time they will become agents for change themselves, supporting women's recovery.

In Darfur, logistics challenge every positive initiative, and funding arrives unpredictably. But the center's operation is fueled by the belief that women are the hope of Darfur. Without their endurance, wisdom and energy, no peace is possible.

—SUSAN BURGESS-LENT