

Issues of Power and Gender in Complex Emergencies

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Two key issues dramatically affect the lives of women and children caught in the chaos of complex humanitarian emergencies: protection and equal access to relief goods and services. Equal access means that women and girls have the same access and rights to relief items, shelter, health services, access to clean water, sanitation facilities, training, employment, and education opportunities. Protection's role includes safeguarding displaced people—women and girls, in particular—from rape, abduction, forced sexual slavery, genital mutilation, forced marriages, exploitation, torture, and murder.

The Fundamental Right to Basic Human Needs

Conflict is the main reason people become refugees or internally displaced. Women and children comprise an estimated 80 percent of displaced populations. In situations of complex humanitarian emergencies, women assume primary responsibility for the survival of their families. Women keep the social fabric intact by maintaining cultural practices and traditions even during conflict and displacement.

The basic human needs embody the fundamental rights of all people. Basic needs include food, water, shelter, nonfood items (blankets, clothes, cooking pots, etc.), health care sanitation, education, and opportunities for self-support, as well as freedom from persecution.

Power, Gender-Based Violence, and Access to Food

The entry point for preventing abuse and violence against women is the food distribution line. It is there that gender-power relationships are manifested in harmful ways. Food ranks as the most valuable commodity in a refugee camp. Food can be readily sold, traded, or bartered for cash and other items. Power rests with those who control access to food. Women do not enjoy equal access to food in nearly all of the hundreds of refugee and IDP camps I have visited during the past ten years. Sex exploitation scandals¹ in the camps in Guinea, Sierra Leone, and Liberia point to food as the main resource exchanged for sex. Food and other humanitarian relief items provided by the international community fall under the control of men. Poor monitoring by relief agencies permits the sexual exploitation of women and girls. Other men, including international peacekeepers,

military forces, and UN and relief agency employees exploit the severe poverty conditions suffered by the refugees by offering to women and young girls small sums of money or “gifts” in exchange for sex. The majority of the victims of exploitation are females under the age of eighteen—the most vulnerable recipients of humanitarian assistance.

Equal participation in relief programs and services will not guarantee that women will not be pressured into providing sexual services or that they will not be cheated on their rations as they pass through the distribution lines, but the chances of blatant abuse will be lessened with women in decision-making roles and actively engaged.

Refugees versus Internally Displaced Persons

Most conflicts today occur inside the boundaries of the affected country; therefore, the global number of IDPs exceeds that of refugees. In the writer’s experience, refugee and IDP camps are much the same. In general, IDPs receive less international assistance than refugees do for several reasons. IDPs fall under the jurisdiction and responsibility of their own government, although in many situations the government may be the cause of the displacement, or may not have the means to offer support to its displaced citizens. The UNHCR’s mandate does not normally include responsibility for IDPs, although in some cases they take on the task when requested to do so by the UN Secretary-General. International relief agencies may not be operational in IDP camps unless the conflict has high visibility or has gained international attention.

Applying a Gender Analysis in Humanitarian Assistance

What are the major issues of concern to refugee and displaced women and girls? What steps can the assistance community take to address and ensure the rights of women in emergency situations? How can the gap between policy and practices be closed? What can individual humanitarian workers do to ensure the protection of the rights of vulnerable refugees and displaced persons?

Gender analysis requires a basic understanding of the premise upon which gender theory rests. Gender refers to the female and male roles within a given culture. These roles and the expected behaviors of men and women are based on cultural practices formed over time. We cannot study gender by focusing on females or males to the exclusion of the other sex because gender involves dynamic interactions between women and men; to understand gender-power relationships, we must examine those interactions.

As a concept gender often raises more questions than answers. In many cultures the word gender does not translate into local languages and dialects. Although an understanding of gender and the

idea of gender equality has evolved in recent decades, and has become part of the global development and relief vocabulary, in situations of forced mobility, whether caused by conflict or natural disaster, people tend to behave according to the gender norms in their society. Extraordinary events, however, may result in behavior that deviates substantially from social norms or personal standards.

Gender as a Social Construct

How gender is constructed explains the position of women in society. Women in developing countries negotiate their lives within a gender framework set by their particular cultural groups. As Caroline Moser has rightly noted, when lives drastically change, as in the case of forced migration and conflict, women often lose their negotiated positions of strength and revert to less equitable social statuses.² If gender is about a socially constructed concept that describes how men and women interact within a particular society and how they define their roles in that culture, then gender constructs are brought with refugees in exile along with other remnants of their culture.

The Gender Dimensions of Refugee Life

A review of refugee literature points to a gap in classifying refugees in gendered roles. Development anthropologist Elizabeth Colson called the gap “biased toward undifferentiated people without gender, age, or other defining characteristics.” References to refugees in international agency and media reports often omit reference to gender, age, or other defining characteristics except ethnicity. Media accounts merge refugees into one mass of starving, malnourished people wearing the same bitter, hungry expressions. Such ethnocentric attitudes add to the problems women and children face in the camps. The representation of women refugees³ has been that of passive, dependent homogeneous victims treated as nameless faces in masses of humanity—individuality and personal identity missing. Harrell-Bond (1996) rejected the idea that women refugees are helpless and dependent. Rather she saw their vulnerability stemming from their lack of participation in humanitarian aid upon which their lives so much depended. The categorization of women as helpless victims marginalized them in the sense that they are not afforded respect and, therefore, not afforded the opportunity to become leaders and decision makers in the camps.

The term “victim” evokes images of helplessness and weakness. Images of resourcefulness, stamina, and fortitude must replace the negative depictions of women to support their becoming important members of their societies.

Tools for Gender Analysis

UNHCR uses a planning tool that they promote in field locations for staff training called the People-Oriented Planning (POP) method. POP examines, among other things, who does what, who owns what, and who controls what within a community. In other words, to better understand how the division of labor, economics, and control over resources are broken down by gender.

The POP method uses a simple framework to analyze gender. The three components are (1) Refugee Population Profile and Context Analysis, (2) Activities Analysis, and (3) Use and Control of Resources Analysis. These analytical components can be charted to facilitate useful checklists for field use.

Gender Violence Associated with Conflict and Forced Displacement

Conflict-imperiled women have been subjected to gender-specific abuses, including rape, sexual slavery, and forced marriages to members of various fighting forces. Systematic and widespread rape and other sexual violence have been a hallmark of many internal and external conflicts around the globe. Sexual violence has been directed against women of all ages, including very young girls. Thousands of reported cases include individual and gang rape, sexual assault with objects, and sexual slavery among other violent acts. All parties to armed conflict have committed human rights abuses, however, the international community has paid little attention to gender-specific violations to date.

Gender violence in conflict situations violates the fundamental human right to mental and physical integrity as protected under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights,⁴ the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW),⁵ and the Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment.⁶ Sexual violence is the chief source of fear for displaced women and girls.

Conflict situations greatly increase the violence inflicted upon women and girls—at no other time are they more vulnerable. Frequently during conflicts women not only lack the protection of their families and spouses, but also are under threat by armed soldiers, who may regard them as spoils of war. Even when abuses are not aimed at them personally, women suffer violations of their human rights disproportionately when the normal codes of social conduct are ignored because of conflict. Teenage rebels have ignored custom and social mores by raping women old enough to be their grandmothers.

When Short-Term Coping Equals Long-Term Risks

Both unequal access to food and gender-based violence lead to coping strategies that may endanger women including increasing their exposure to harmful diseases such as HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted infections. These two concerns are among the most critical problems women and girls face when uprooted by circumstances that force them from the relative safety of their homes and villages into temporary living situations fraught with danger and high risk.

What Is Gender-Based Violence?

Gender-based violence refers to violence targeted to people because of their gender, or because of their special roles or responsibilities in their society. In many cases women have sole responsibility for their households. Certain responsibilities of women's gender roles put them at greater risk of injury. Crossing landmine fields or walking near military encampments in the course of their gender-defined task of searching for water and firewood subjects women to maiming, crossfire injuries, and sexual attacks. Gender-based violence may be manifested in several ways: domestic violence, rape, and forced prostitution and marriages. Although rape and other sexual abuses are recognized as serious crimes in humanitarian laws, only recently has the international community addressed these forms of violence as serious infringements of fundamental women's rights.

Rape is a deliberate tactic used in war to dehumanize and dishonor not only women but also husbands, families, communities, or ethnic groups. The humiliation and degradation of rape are only compounded by the impunity of the perpetrators. The incidence of rape against refugee and internally displaced women is higher than what is actually reported. Women IDPs are often reluctant to report rape for fear of retribution from the perpetrators. Other forms of sexual coercion are rife in refugee and IDP settings where young girls may be abducted and forced into marriage or prostitution. Awareness of the problem and special programs are needed to reduce the likelihood of such occurrences.

What Constitutes Vulnerability?

In general, the greater the mobility of displaced women and girls, the greater their vulnerability. Program interventions in emergency situations need to pay special attention when women become highly mobile. War-affected women often find themselves without male household members who under normal circumstances would provide protection to them and their children. When people are forced to flee their homes and seek refuge they often escape with only the clothes they are wearing. Women are usually the ones who must secure the household's necessities, including food, water, and cooking fuel.

In situations of forced migration women without husbands or fathers in their households are more vulnerable to abuse than women with male adults present in the home. Since most emergency situations today are the results of conflict, in many refugee settings women outnumber men. In war zones many men die in conflict, become prisoners, or actively engage in ongoing fighting. Vulnerability also increases during periods of food shortages and scarcity.

Who Is Responsible for Protection?

In the case of refugees, the host state is responsible for the protection of refugees (under the 1951 Refugee Convention obligation). However, the responsibility for protection is also an international one that calls on assistance from UN agencies and NGOs as well as host communities. UNHCR is the primary UN agency with a mandate to provide for the protecting of refugees. Other UN agencies who have taken on protection issues for both refugees and internally displaced people are UNICEF, WFP, WHO, UNDP, and OCHA.

Why Is Response to Sexual and Gender-Based Violence So Inadequate?

Implementing agencies often lack clear and coherent policies regarding gender issues. Even when international organizations' headquarters endorse strong gender policies, the field offices often do not implement programs. This can be due in part to the high rate of staff turnover that makes it difficult to provide sufficient training on critical issues. The tendency to compartmentalize sector activities in the field leads to vertical programming that does not integrate well into other sectors. Gender issues crosscut through all sectors.

Inexperienced Western fieldworkers are sometimes intimidated by unfamiliar cultural practices. Their ignorance creates fear to the extent that they may not respond to events they would not tolerate in their Western environments. Domestic violence is a huge problem in camps. Women are seriously injured and even murdered, but relief workers are reluctant to interfere in household conflict. They may not recognize cases of child abuse or exploitation of child labor. Large poor families sometimes send their older children out to fend for themselves in order to reduce the number of mouths to feed. Some of those children become virtual slaves for their employers.

Cultural Relativism

"It's cultural, there is nothing we can do," is a response often heard from aid workers to excuse themselves from responding to cases of human rights abuse. Humanitarian organizations that work with refugees or IDPs in various cultural settings must be prepared to address misconceptions

regarding cultural practices. Assistance agencies must take action to educate their local and international staff about human rights, refugee laws, UN conventions and resolutions, agency policies, and operating practices in order to combat harmful practices that violate international standards. Agencies must clearly state their policies, and staff must be held accountable for carrying out their agencies' policies and intended practices. One of the founding principles of human rights law is that it is not culturally relative—basic human rights are universally applicable as a matter of law.

Most NGOs working in refugee or IDP camps do not consider protection to be their responsibility. Women and girls are insecure and at risk of sexual abuse and exploitation from the time they leave their homes, during the exodus, and ongoing during their refuge in camps. Border guards, police, and military factions demand sexual favors of women in transit. Once inside refugee camps women may fear venturing out of their shelters because of harassment or sexual assaults. In a large IDP camp outside of Herat, Afghanistan, women were afraid to visit feeding centers or health posts because of the number of sexual assaults that took place in those locations.

What Steps Can Be Taken to Increase Protection?

Structural

Changes in camp layout and structures will increase protection and reduce the risk of violence against women and girls living in camps. Such measures include providing lighting, especially around water collection points and latrines; locating latrines safe distances from shelters or setting up smaller latrines to be shared by four to five families; changes in camp layout of latrines and water pumps to less secluded locations; employing women as guards; establishing women's "safe haven houses;" and setting up community night watches.

Protection overlaps into all sectors within camp settings—health, education, income generation, shelter, water, and sanitation. Because of severe water shortages in camps, women often must stand in line for hours both before dawn and after dark for water. Many are attacked or forced to provide sex in exchange for water.

Awareness-Raising

Humanitarian agencies can support women and help build their capacity to survive with dignity. Agencies can help prevent gender violence by raising awareness about gender-based violence within the affected community by providing rights-based programming and by working to prevent physical and psychological abuses associated with forced displacement. The UNHCR *Guidelines on the*

Protection of Refugee Women and Sexual Violence against Refugees: Guidelines on Prevention and Response are excellent resources. These guidelines should be more widely implemented by international and local agencies.

Basic everyday chores become risky when women have to venture outside camps in search of firewood or water. Some refugee and IDP sites provide truck-loads of firewood within the camps. Another approach engages the labor of refugee men to cut wood to supply roadside wood depots. These solutions can be expensive and require donor funding but they provide some protection.

Loss of Social and Cultural Ties

Displaced women generally lack community support. The disintegration of community unity increases the vulnerability of women and children and weakens their coping mechanisms. Women and adolescent girls become easy targets for abuse when they are separated from normal support systems, husbands, and other male family members.

Skills Training and Income-Generation Activities

After basic needs are met and protection ensured, people need assistance to get them on the road to self-sufficiency. Women especially need opportunities to learn how to support themselves so they do not have to resort to harmful and degrading practices. The desperate need of refugee women heads of households to secure food for their children can push women into prostitution. Humanitarian agencies should be aware of the coping strategies of women without male household contributors and help women make healthy choices. The most important help organizations can provide to women is to ensure equal access to all resources offered in the camp. Skills training and income generation are vitally important to improving conditions and in helping to empower women and decrease vulnerability.

Protection Under the Law

International and local organizations cannot protect the rights of people under their care without understanding the basics of international human rights and refugee laws. The Geneva Conventions, put into effect in 1950, are the core of international humanitarian law. Humanitarian law is also referred to as the law of armed conflict and covers the wounded and sick in the armed forces, treatment of prisoners of war, and the protection of civilians in time of war—Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions.

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) was adopted by the U.N. General Assembly in 1979 and took effect in 1981.

Discrimination against women violates the principles of equality of rights and respect for human dignity, is an obstacle to the participation of women on equal terms with men in the political, social, economic, and cultural life of their countries ... and makes more difficult the full development of the potentialities of women in the service of their countries and humanity.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) went into effect in 1990. The CRC definition of a child is “Every human being under the age of eighteen.”

Both CEDAW and CRC merge civil and political rights with economic, social, and cultural rights, including the rights to life, nationality, expression, association, assembly and thought, conscience, and religion.

International Response to Gender Violence

The UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women’s post was created in 1994 in the wake of crimes committed against women in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The post involves fact-finding missions around the world and reporting findings to the UN High Commissioner on Human Rights, but the post has no enforcement power. The UN can only expose and use diplomatic measures against such practices.

Repatriation and Reintegration

Women from the affected communities should be involved in determining the postconflict needs of women and girls, and they must be fully taken into account in the formulation of repatriation and resettlement plans, as well as during the demobilization and disarmament process.

Rehabilitation and reintegration programs must take into account the wide extent of sexual assault and rape and formulate programs to address the specific needs of survivors. Special initiatives must be developed to ensure that the security and subsistence concerns of war widows and other female heads of household are addressed.

NGOs and UN agencies can provide valuable assistance by sharing their program reports, lessons learned, and experiences of working with refugee and IDP populations with agencies dealing with repatriation and reintegration of the same population. To date such collaboration and cooperation have not occurred effectively.

Governments in IDP countries and all parties should abide by and ensure enforcement of the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement introduced by the United Nations in 1998.

Governments must adopt effective measures to guarantee that the particular security concerns of women and children displaced by the conflict are met, including measures against rape and other gender-based violence. Governments and the international community should take immediate action to ensure that IDPs have access to basic services, particularly in regard to food, shelter, health, education, and protection.

Gender-Based Violence Management in Refugee and IDP Camps

The physical structure and design of camps should be done in consultation with the displaced with the input and guidance from women. Full participation of refugee women in planning and providing services is essential. Female community leaders should play significant roles in camp management, especially regarding protection, the allocation and layout of shelter, and in setting up safe havens for at-risk women and girls. Women beneficiaries should be involved in setting up mechanisms to meet the needs of unaccompanied adolescents, the elderly, and the disabled.

Women should be properly registered and should carry their own documentation. Female-headed households should be regularly spot-checked to assess food security and shelter. Latrines, water sources, clothes washing, and bathing facilities should be central, secured with locks, and well lighted. Female security guards should be stationed at locations frequented by women and children.

Ensuring Compliance by Local NGOs and Refugee Camp Officials

International NGOs and UN agencies should not assume that local NGO partners understand gender equity or international human rights and humanitarian laws. Therefore, their services should be monitored and their activities spot-checked to ensure that women have equal access to entitlements and that gender-based violence or exploitation of vulnerable people does not occur. Monitoring, supervision, and training must be done at the point nearest to service delivery because that is where violations occur. Visual, unannounced, spot-checking by experience staff is the best deterrent to abuses during distributions of food and nonfood items, at wood and fuel distribution points, and at water collection sites. Large illustrative posters strategically placed at distributions points are also very helpful in reminding women and other beneficiaries of their rights but also in reminding male staff to respect the rights of women and the rules and policies of the organization they work for.

International NGOs and UN agencies can promote gender equality by requiring local NGO implementing partners to hire gender-balanced staff. International organizations should insist that

women are represented on refugee management teams in appropriate percentages based on the population of the camps. Unless women participate in camp management their voices and concerns will not be heard. Neither literacy nor the ability to speak English should be requirements for active participation in camp management. Those skills would not be required for women to participate in civil society in their home villages and towns.

Suggestions for Field-Based Relief Workers

All fieldworkers need training in gender awareness, human rights laws, and the convention on the rights of the child. Field staff—international and national—must be able to recognize exploitation and abuse of women and children and know what correct actions to take.

Fieldworkers are well positioned to make tremendous differences in the lives of women and children in emergency situations. Once fieldworkers understand the issues and know how to recognize the signs of gender-based violence and child abuse, they can be the best advocates for change.

Conclusion

The source of much of the suffering of women and children in emergency situations stems from their lack of access to food and other entitled resources and services provided for refugees and IDPs. When refugee women heads-of-households receive the basic items to which they are entitled—food rations, plastics sheeting, pots and pans, blankets, equal job and training opportunities—they are much less likely to enter into sexual bartering or to accept exploitative and abusive living arrangements with inappropriate partners. Not only are such coping measures harmful to women but also they represent violations to the rights of women. The denial of equal access to food and other entitlements goes against the policies of the United Nations, international NGOs, and donors who provide with assistance to refugees and IDPs.

Women refugees' voices are too rarely heard. They have little say in camp management, design, or operations, and yet women and children make up approximately 80 percent of the population in most camps. Women in refugee and IDP camps are less likely to be selected as camp managers, leaders, or community educators and trainers than men because fewer women speak English, and hiring English speakers is a convenience to international workers—not a requirement for efficiency.

A gender perspective must pervade all activities in humanitarian assistance. International and local organizations' staff need to be trained in gender principles so they may be sensitive to and understand the different roles, rights, and obligations men, women, and children hold in the cultural groups with which they work. The “gender-blindness” of refugee aid must end.