GENDER ISSUES IN CONFLICT AND HUMANITARIAN ACTION

Overview

Humanitarian crises can affect women, men, girls and boys in radically different ways; changing social and cultural structures, and redefining women's and men's statuses – in both positive and negative ways. If humanitarian interventions are not planned with gender dynamics in mind, the needs of those most under threat may not be adequately met, and an opportunity to support positive change will be lost. That is why gender equality is central to humanitarian action.

To address the different impacts of conflict and disasters on men, women, boys and girls and promote the potential for positive transformation of gender norms, humanitarian agencies must analyse, plan, and respond to crises in ways that address practical gender needs and promote women's rights. Indeed all actors involved in emergencies – including donors, humanitarian agencies, governments, and civil society organisations – must promote gender equality as part of any response.

Five ways they can achieve this are by:

1. **Mainstreaming gender equality:** basing interventions on gendered analysis of the causes and impacts of crises, the practical needs of women and men, girls and boys, and designing programmes to meet those different needs;

2. **Looking for opportunities to support women and men in ways that contribute to the transformation of gendered power relations:** laying the groundwork for gender equality and greater resilience to crises, by actively supporting women's leadership and by challenging attitudes and beliefs that undermine women's rights (including by engaging with men and boys);

3. **Preventing and responding to gender-based violence/ violence against women and girls**;

4. **Coordinating effectively within the humanitarian system** at international, regional and national levels to ensure gender-sensitive responses are universally shared; and

5. **Promoting the full participation and leadership of women and girls, men and boys,** in all aspects of programming – from planning to evaluation – and investing in the capacity of local organisations with expertise on gender (particularly women's rights organisations).

In conflict-related crises, there are additional imperatives. The promotion of gender equality must be central to the broader efforts to protect civilians and manage and prevent conflict and armed violence. All actors involved in the prevention and management of conflict and its impacts – including donors, governments, UN agencies, civil society, armed forces, and peacekeepers – must:

6. Uphold and strengthen laws, policies and international agreements to advance and protect women's rights in situations of conflict and armed violence, including protection from gender-based violence; and

7. Promote women's full and equal participation and leadership in efforts to prevent, manage, and resolve conflict and build peaceful societies.

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1   Background

Due to the gendered, unequal roles of women and men, disasters and crises impact women, men, girls and boys differently. Disaster mortality rates are higher for women than for men;[1] after the 2004 Asian tsunami, in many villages in Aceh, Indonesia, and in parts of India, females accounted for over 70 per cent of the dead.[2] A study of 141 countries found that more women than men are killed during disasters; particularly in poor communities and at an earlier age.[3]

This inequality starts long before disaster strikes. Women and girls are often more vulnerable to disasters as a result of widespread disadvantages. Their access to and control over resources, both social and economic, are often more limited. Their access to education is also usually lower, and caring responsibilities fall predominantly on their shoulders.

Other causes of vulnerability (such as age, class, ethnicity and disability) may compound gender inequality. Women from marginalized groups may face multiple hardships; pastoral communities, for example, may restrict women to owning less valuable animals.[4] Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender individuals also face systematic discrimination and marginalization.

Men, women, boys and girls are also affected by, and participate in, conflict and violence differently. The majority of combatants are male, and male civilians are often targeted or singled out during massacres; as a result men and boys account for the majority of those killed. In addition, young men are sometimes pressured to obtain cattle to pay bride price and gain status, which can lead to looting and cattle-raiding. Girls and women often face increased risks from displacement, and the increased burden of care-tasks, such as provision of food and water, and caring for the sick and injured.

Gender-based violence (GBV) is rooted in unequal gendered power relations and often increases in times of crisis. This is due to a number of factors, including: a breakdown of law and order leading to impunity for the perpetrators of violence; risks associated with displacement; and the use of rape as a weapon of war. Domestic violence, which can be exacerbated by the availability of weapons, may also increase during and after conflict.[5] Most examples of GBV are **violence against women and girls** (VAWG), but men and boys also suffer instances of GBV

Both during and outside of crises, women can be forced into marriage by cultural pressures and the lack of livelihood opportunities. In emergencies, women and girls are sometimes forced to engage in sex in exchange for money, resources, or access to services and assets.[6] Measures of the impact of armed conflict and violence often focus on fatalities, not, for example, GBV/VAWG, and therefore the experience of girls and women tends to be less visible in determining responses.

In addition to presenting dangers and barriers to meeting basic needs, crises radically affect social, cultural, and political structures across private and public spheres. While such events create risk and can exacerbate inequalities, they can also provide opportunities for change. Crises can challenge discriminatory gender norms and unequal power relations, enabling women and men to reflect on existing gender roles, and to value the traditional roles differently. For example, in conflict situations women can assume prominent roles in peace building and mediation, and men may take on greater care responsibilities.

Promoting women's leadership and participation in humanitarian programmes and policy-making spaces is critical to ensure that responses support women in their efforts to challenge gender inequality. Women and girls are not simply victims of crises, but have ambitions, expertise, and skills. It is also critical to engage men and boys in challenging the attitudes and beliefs that undermine women's rights, and to promote positive masculinities and acceptance of gender equality.

There are a number of laws, policies and agreements in place to advance and protect women's rights in times of 'peace', and in conflict and humanitarian situations. These include the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), which guarantees women the exercise of all human rights and fundamental freedoms on a basis of equality with men;[7] general provisions under international law; the specific criminalization of rape and other forms of sexual violence;[8] and a raft of UN Security Council resolutions on Women, Peace and Security.[9] These resolutions are framed around four pillars:

• **Prevention** of conflict;

• **Protection** of women and girls from conflict-related abuses;

• **Participation** of women in efforts to manage conflict; and

• Gender sensitive **relief and recovery**.[10]

They confirm existing international law and call for a mechanism to hold UN institutions and states accountable for policies to end impunity for sexual and gender-based violence.

See Oxfam's other Humanitarian Policy Notes on peacekeeping, national security forces, and supporting civil society for further information on Oxfam's policy positions in those areas relating to the promotion of gender equality.[11]

2. Oxfam's policy positions

(i)   Mainstreaming gender equality: basing interventions on gendered analysis of the causes and impacts of crises, the practical needs of women, men, girls and boys, and designing programmes to meet those different needs

Humanitarian actors should carry out a rigorous and context-specific gender analysis of the populations they set out to support. These should be integrated into the humanitarian needs assessments and sector assessments, and situational analyses, as well as in contingency planning and disaster risk reduction initiatives prior to crises. These analyses will examine the relationship between men and women – their roles, access to and control over resources, as well as perspectives, capacities, and constraints relative to each other.

Any analysis should not only inform immediate responses that meet the different needs of women and men, but should also identify specific measures to prevent, mitigate and respond to GBV and vulnerability caused by gender inequality as well as the vital efforts to reduce the risk of conflicts and disasters. The international Hyogo Framework for Action, focused on reducing the risk of disasters, includes a priority aspiration that a 'gender perspective should be integrated into all disaster risk management policies, plans and decision-making processes, including those related to risk assessment, early warning, information management, and education and training'.[12]

Gender-sensitive baseline information – both qualitative and quantitative – should be collected at household and community level. Sex- and age-disaggregated data, as well as data on other social determinants of vulnerability, should be collected and analyzed routinely, in order to target assistance towards those most at risk.

Efforts to integrate gender equality into humanitarian responses should be monitored (including through relevant indicators) through strong accountability mechanisms throughout the response and supported through transparent budgeting processes.

> **Gender analysis in Lebanon (2013)**
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> Oxfam partner ABAAD's assessment looked at the gendered effects of the conflict in Syria on Syrian and Palestinian refugees in Lebanon. This including their:
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> - **Access to and control over resources and services**: including income, cash and remittances, food, and health and reproductive healthcare;
> - **Perception and aspiration**: of women and men, boys and girls towards their role in refugee settlements;
> - **Practices and participation**: including the gendered division of labour, and the extent women and men are engaged at the household and community level, based on their gendered roles;
> - **Protection and safety**: analyzing the threats to the safety and well-being of women and men, and how they cope. The threats included GBV and forced early marriage; and
> - **Power and decision making**: including women's and men's roles in earnings, reproduction, controlling budgets, decision making, marriage and divorce practices before coming to Lebanon, compared to what they experience as refugees.
>
> This information was used to develop recommendations for humanitarian practitioners and donors to design gender-sensitive programming to address these shifting gender roles, as well as help minimize tensions among refugees and between them and host communities.
>
> Source: C. Harvey, R. Garwood, and R. El-Masri (2013) 'Shifting Sands: Changing gender roles among refugees in Lebanon', Beirut: ABAAD and Oxford: Oxfam, http://oxf.am/UvE

(ii)   Looking for opportunities to support women and men in ways that contribute to the transformation of gendered power relations

Aid and support can be given in ways which challenge prejudice about women's roles and capabilities by, for example:

- Increasing women's access to livelihoods – including those that challenge assumptions on a gendered division of labour;

- Increasing their roles in household and community decision making; and

- Alleviating the unequal burden of domestic labour and childcare.

Building gender equality in this way will often require the active support of men, to mitigate the risk of any backlash. It will also need to tackle vulnerabilities as well as immediate impacts, as part of an integrated programme to build resilience to future crises. Overcoming inequalities that make many women more vulnerable to crises is a vital part of building this resilience.[13]

(iii)   Preventing and responding to GBV/VAWG

Humanitarian responses should meet 'safe programming' standards for women and girls, as well as men and boys, in order to directly tackle risks. In addition, responses should ensure access to good quality, safe, and confidential services for survivors of sexual and gender-based violence from the very first stages, either as stand-alone programmes or by integrating this into other services. Interventions must not only respond to and prevent the immediate risks of GBV/VAWG, but complement efforts to tackle their root causes, in recovery and transition strategies. This means supporting local organizations with expertise, including women's rights organizations, to challenge attitudes and holding duty bearers to account. It also means tackling the legacy of GBV against men, as well as women. Oxfam research in 2013 on masculinities in conflict suggests that failure to do so can be a catalyst not only for more violence *against women*, but possibly also future conflicts as well.[14]

(iv) **Coordinating effectively within the humanitarian system** at international, regional, and national levels to ensure gender-sensitive responses are universally shared

In 1999 the UN Inter-Agency Standing Committee, the primary mechanism for the coordination of humanitarian agencies, issued a Policy Statement on the Integration of a Gender Perspective in Humanitarian Assistance. This has since been bolstered by a variety of tools, such as the gender marker (which measures whether humanitarian projects are mainstreaming gender) and the deployment of Gender Standby Capacity (GenCap) advisors to train and support humanitarian staff.[15]

Under the Cluster System, introduced in 2005, a lead organization or UN agency coordinates the response in a particular sector, such as water, sanitation and hygiene. While there is no gender cluster, gender concerns should be integrated into the work of each cluster. In practice, the Protection Cluster often acts as a 'home' for gender issues, with a sub-cluster on GBV.[16] The cluster system at the global and national levels should prioritize gender equality in all sectors, not simply in the protection cluster. UN Humanitarian Coordinators should ensure that they incorporate gender equality targets within response strategies.

West Sumatra earthquake (2009)

One of Oxfam's advocacy priorities in the earthquake response was for a gender working group to be established, to ensure the participation of women's groups in the post-disaster coordination and that their immediate and longer-term strategic needs were met. Oxfam worked with the UNFPA and national and international actors to encourage local civil society organizations to establish a gender sub-cluster, which became very active within the protection cluster. This group benefitted greatly from the arrival of the Yogya gender group, which had been formed to share best practices adopted after the tsunami in Aceh and earthquake in Jogjakarta. The two groups combined to form the Gender Working Group, whose members held lobby meetings with provincial officials to influence the provincial government to promote gender equality.

Source: C. Harvey and I. Smyth (2012) 'Post-Earthquake Response and Reconstruction: Gender-sensitive advocacy in Indonesia', Oxfam, http://oxf.am/UvR

(v) **Promoting the full participation and leadership of women and girls, men and boys, in all aspects of programming** – from planning to evaluation – and investing in the capacity of local organizations with expertise on gender (including women's rights organizations)

Women's traditional roles as carers and providers for families means they are well placed to advise agencies on appropriate sanitation, water, feeding, and health care services. Yet humanitarian responses often fail to appreciate both the importance and opportunity of women's existing roles and their capacity to play an equal role in leadership and decision making.

Special measures should be taken to remove barriers facing women and girls seeking to access facilities and services and who wish to participate in the response (such as limited mobility, cultural restrictions or lack of time). Women should also be involved in decision making on the placement and design of services, such as water, sanitation, food and shelter facilities, and advocating for effective and appropriate security. Examples of food distribution measures include creating 'safe spaces' and separate queues for women, and timings which enable them to return home before nightfall.

Humanitarian agencies should also invest in the capacity of local organizations with expertise on gender, including women's rights organizations, to help ensure they have appropriate policies, staff commitment and expertise to promote gender equality themselves.

(vi) Uphold and strengthen laws, policies and international agreements to advance and protect women's rights in situations of conflict and armed violence, including protection from GBV/VAWG

The accountability, professionalism, and effectiveness of national security and police forces, particularly in conflict contexts and post-conflict transitions, is essential to protecting civilians from violence and crime, including GBV/VAWG. A gender-sensitive approach must be consistently applied to security sector reform efforts, including assessing threats specific to men and women, boys and girls, and designing and evaluating responses to any action taken.

Holding duty bearers to account on their responsibilities to protect citizens will be very different in fragile states to working in countries with fully functioning state structures. Increasing the number of women in police and military services can help, for example in societies where it has not been culturally appropriate for women to raise security concerns with men. But both male and female members of the security forces need training in gender and security. National authorities should put in place incentives to recruit women, such as assistance with accommodation and childcare, and must ensure women within security forces are protected from harassment and sexual assault. Female staff must be provided with training and opportunities for promotion to enable them to play a meaningful – not just symbolic – role in security services.

(vii) Promote women's full and equal participation and leadership in efforts to prevent, manage and resolve conflict and build peaceful societies

All responsible stakeholders, including UN agencies, governments, and peacekeeping missions, should fully implement UNSC Resolutions 1325 and related subsequent resolutions.[17] These call for women's involvement in peace-making, peace-building and post-conflict reconstruction, and address impunity towards sexual and gender-based violence. This is a strong part of Oxfam's advocacy in particular countries, such as Afghanistan. Ahead of the 2011 Bonn Conference on the country's future, for example, Oxfam called not only for 'a strong contingent of women' in the Afghan delegation, but for the Afghan government and international community to offer specific guarantees for women's rights well beyond 2014.[18] Two years later this call remains as vital as ever.

3 Oxfam's commitments to increasing the promotion of gender equality in humanitarian responses

Oxfam is committed to putting women's rights at the heart of everything it does. To do so in conflicts and humanitarian crises it is dedicated to:

- **Improving its capacity in line with Oxfam's Minimum Standards for Gender in Emergencies,**[19] which support staff and partners to understand the gendered impacts of crises, meet needs of women, men, boys and girls, as well as seek opportunities for transformative change. In addition to the issues raised in this note, these standards cover internal requirements for Oxfam in terms of staffing, policies, and gender-sensitive leadership;

- **Working with women's rights organizations** as local, national and global partners to increase their capacity in crisis preparedness and response, and support the empowerment of women in preparedness, risk reduction and response;

- **Striving, where possible, to integrate humanitarian and development programming** to build resilience and reduce future vulnerabilities to disaster, which are often gender-specific, as well as meet basic needs;

- **Ensuring the participation of and consultation with women, men, girls and boys**; and

- **Holding institutions to account** by elevating women's voices in advocacy and campaigning to promote gender equality and women's participation within responses and key political and policy-making spaces.

Oxfam's Strategic Plan for 2013-19 aims to ensure that: 'By 2019, the different impact of conflict and disasters on men and women, and their differing needs, are recognized and addressed by duty bearers and humanitarian organizations, leading to greater gender justice and respect for women's rights in crisis affected countries.'[20]

Notes

[1] F. Gell (2010) 'Gender, Disaster Risk Reduction and Climate Change Adaptation: A Learning Companion', Oxford: Oxfam, http://oxf.am/wko

[2] Oxfam (2005) 'The Tsunami's impact on women', Oxfam Briefing Note, Oxford: Oxfam, http://oxf.am/wkJ

[3] E. Neumayer and T. Pluemper (2007) 'The gendered nature of natural disasters: The impact of catastrophic events on the gender gap in life expectancy, 1981– 2002', *Annals of the American Association of Geographers,* 97(3), pp. 551-566, http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1111/j.1467-8306.2007.00563.x#.Une4p3A72go

[4] I. Smyth (2012) 'Gender Sensitive Response and Recovery: An Overview', Oxford: Oxfam, p2, http://oxf.am/wk3

[5] Amnesty International, IANSA, Oxfam (2005) 'The Impact of Guns on Women's Lives', Oxford: Oxfam, p.44, http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/the-impact-of-guns-on-womens-lives-112463

[6] See, for example, International Rescue Committee (2012), 'Syrian Women & Girls: Fleeing Death, Facing Ongoing Threats and Humiliation', http://www.eldis.org/go/topics/resource-guides/gender/conflict-and-emergencies&id=63829&type=Document#.Une8tnA72go

[7] Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (1979), Articles 2 and 3, http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/

[8] Most countries have criminalized rape and other forms of GBV through national legal systems. The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court makes it clear that rape and other forms of sexual violence are crimes against humanity when committed as part of a widespread and systematic attack against any civilian population; and that those who have committed rape and other forms of sexual violence can be tried for war crimes. See Art 7(1)(g) and Art 8(2)(b)(xxii) respectively.

[9] These include UN Security Council Resolution 1325 agreed in 2000, followed 1820, 1888, 1889, 1960, 2106 and 2122 (available at: http://www.peacewomen.org/security_council_monitor/)

[10] UNSCR 1325

[11] Oxfam's Humanitarian Policy Notes are available at: http://oxf.am/Uvb and at http://www.oxfam.org/en/policy/humanitarian-policy-notes

[12] United Nations (2007) 'Hyogo Framework for Action 2005-2015: Building the resilience of nations and communities to disasters', p4, http://www.unisdr.org/we/inform/publications/1037

[13] D. Hillier and G. Castillo (2013) 'No Accident: Resilience and the inequality of risk', Oxford: Oxfam, http://oxf.am/UNg

[14] For further information on Oxfam's policy position on VAWG in emergencies, see: Oxfam (2013) 'Violence Against Women and Girls in Emergencies', Oxford: Oxfam, http://www.oxfam.org/en/policy/humanitarian-policy-notes

[15] I. Smyth (2012) *op. cit.*

[16] J. Hoare, I. Smyth and C. Sweetman (2012) 'Introduction: Post disaster Humanitarian Work', *Gender and Development*, 20(2), July 2012, http://oxf.am/wkw

[17] For more information on this see: http://www.un.org/womenwatch/osagi/wps/#resolution

[18] L. Hancock and O.A. Nemat (2011), 'A Place at the Table: Safeguarding Women's Rights in Afghanistan', Oxford: Oxfam, http://oxf.am/wk5

[19] Oxfam (2013) 'Minimum Standards for Gender in Emergencies', Oxford: Oxfam, http://oxf.am/w5E

[20] Oxfam (2012) 'The Power of People against Poverty: Oxfam Strategic Plan 2013-2019', http://www.oxfam.org/sites/www.oxfam.org/files/oxfam-strategic-plan-2013-2019.pdf

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