

THE STOCKHOLM FORUM ON GENDER EQUALITY

# APPLYING FEMINIST APPROACHES IN HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE

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## OVERVIEW

Feminist analysis and activism have been instrumental in achieving gains in women's rights, particularly around addressing gender-based violence (GBV) globally. Over the past two decades, women's movements have insisted that gender equality and GBV be addressed in humanitarian emergencies, including in armed conflict, refugee crises and natural disasters. Although the late 1990s and early 2000s witnessed advances in this agenda, many of these gains are now under threat. In many countries, we are witnessing the erosion of women's human rights to live free from violence and exercise their full and equal rights in all domains. Feminist humanitarians are becoming increasingly alarmed by the shrinking space for their work and by the active undermining of work that centres on women and girls in both discourse and practice. As efforts to address GBV have been assumed by mainstream humanitarian organisations, women's demands for change – and the transformational dimensions of this work – have become diluted.

Using examples from the Syrian refugee crisis in Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, Turkey, and Europe, the Rohingya humanitarian emergency in Myanmar and Bangladesh, humanitarian emergencies in South Sudan, Somalia, and the Democratic Republic of Congo, and other places, the speakers discussed the problem with a 'gender-neutral' approach, the need for more programming centring on women and girls in humanitarian emergencies, why 'competing victimhood' is undermining years of best practice, and how the international community can support GBV survivors in humanitarian emergencies.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

### Where are we?

We urgently need a discussion amongst researchers on feminist perspective addressing violence on women and girls.

After the earthquake in Nepal, media reported that it was difficult to find gender assessors. A grassroots organization had worked on capacity-building projects before and was in touch with some women who were very active in assisting and working with humanitarian issues. Yet on an international level it wasn't perceived this way.

#### International Medical Corps:

International Medical Corps has been looking at funding priorities within humanitarian response with a feminist perspective to gender analysis. She looked at donor strategies, government funding policies, and pooled funding mechanisms. The time limitation was calls for proposals from 2008–2017.

She wanted to see if women's and girls' needs were prioritised, and the key findings were that protection of women and girls is underfunded compared to other sectors. There is a problem with recognition of GBV as a human rights issue.

Almost all calls focused on GBV weren't attentive to specific needs of women and girls but were emphasised on other sectors such as health and nutrition. There were a lot of emphasis and attention to male survivors of crises. There was no clear justification why.

A sound analysis on different forms of violence needs to be focused on forming survival tactics.

Globally, women and girls affected by violence seek help in women-based centres, but there have been calls to open this up to men too, which is not really favourable.

#### International Rescue Committee:

Population movement from Myanmar to Bangladesh – women in refugee camps in Bangladesh. There is long-term discrimination against the population, and women and girls experience harm in this context. Violence specific to women and girls include child- and forced marriages, sexual violence, trafficking, and intimate partner violence.

These women have had no access to education and have had to navigate through severe levels of insecurity to provide for their families. They suffer from child marriage and financial hardship. The discrimination is institutionalised.

#### Women's Refugee Committee:

Global multi-stakeholders are currently starting an initiative to transform the way humanitarian actors address GBV to ensure that every humanitarian organisation is including GBV mitigation and support. [www.cotaactiongbv.com](http://www.cotaactiongbv.com)

In 2013 they launched a road map to get them from where they were to where they wanted to steer the organisation. Goals of the organisation have been to mitigate GBV risk, gender equality and that empowerment of women and girls is key in humanitarian actions.

#### Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency:

It's important to say that we need to get the work done on the ground. Sweden is incorporating gender into the discussion and prioritising this through core funding.

One of the reasons Sweden has decided to mainstream and have a strategy to work with girls and women is to get boys and men on board on how we plan to address gender.

Abortion is a taboo in humanitarian settings, and it is difficult to convince humanitarian communities about the importance of the issue. No resources are given to data collection on abortion in humanitarian settings. How many women are dying from unsafe abortions and how many women are undergoing it?

### What are we doing?

Communities and beneficiaries are trained on the prevention of gender abuse and we are investing more in women and girls with a focus on creating safe spaces.

We have a focus on psycho-social trauma, both long term and short term in humanitarian crises. We need, however, to have a feminist-focused trauma approach.

When addressing GBV issues amongst communities in Iraq we found the cultural context challenging. Women and girls were not prioritised in matters of security. There have been recent reports from women and girls leading to some progress and change. There is more investment in staff and capacity-building as well as in creating safe access points for girls to speak up. Having women talk to other women in safe places is effective in ensuring more responses, approaches and reporting.

The issues have more visibility now. The UN has been made more aware of these issues due to the crimes made by humanitarian workers.

Most organisations on the ground are not adequately supported when it comes to these issues. It's the international organisations that receive funding.

### Where do we go from here?

A power dynamic between the global north and the global south has to be reached. Interventions are not owned by the people who they are directed to. We should evaluate these models and create a balance between those who have the power - money and resources - and those who have the knowledge on the ground. There should be a localisation agenda involving feminist organisations.

We need a decentralised call to action on a national and local level with national and local partners in order to empower organisations that fight for women's rights locally. Local organisations using the local language add more value. The money needs to be moved to local organisations. If we empower local actors, this will lead to real change. We need to invest in women rights movements, especially the local ones on the ground.

It's key to understand cultural context in mitigation, e.g., young girls growing up being told not to talk about problems with strangers. Most GBV happens when a woman is trying to fulfil certain basic needs, and we need to map where the needs are, for example at the river where women go to get water.

A lot of funding is going to humanitarian responses and there needs to be a shift to other issues such as WASH and GBV for which women are recipients. Link long-term support and experiences to humanitarian assistance. ■

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