



GENDER, PEACE & SECURITY IN BRIEF #2

How can we bridge the gap between humanitarian aid and peacebuilding?

Sarah Martin & Devanna de la Puente
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INTRODUCTION

As with many international policies in post-conflict countries around the world, many displaced men and women live in a “grey zone.” They have survived conflict but are still in need of assistance in order to live. As peacebuilding takes place in their communities, they struggle to meet their needs through a patchwork of humanitarian and development actors – often leaving them scrambling to get vital support in order to put their lives, their families, and their communities back together. Women, especially displaced women, are often overlooked during this time. Despite the presence of peace dialogues and agreements, women may still experience violence, and find themselves excluded from the peace negotiation table and ignored, in humanitarian response.

Services to support women living in “post-conflict settings” are often provided by humanitarian actors – those working a system designed to deliver short-term relief for disaster and war-affected people who were expected to return home relatively quickly.

The humanitarian system focuses on essential services – food, water, shelter, emergency healthcare and basic sanitation delivered to gender-neutral “people” living in camps. Despite efforts to integrate gender awareness into humanitarian response, it still lags behind, and true participation of displaced women is rare.

STATE OF THE ART

Despite many years of advocacy and action to implement the women, peace and security (WPS) agenda and to mainstream gender in peacebuilding, peacekeeping, recovery and reconciliation initiatives, displaced women often remain neglected by humanitarian, peacebuilding and development actors – relegated to the “orphan pillar” of Relief and Recovery, falling between the cracks of humanitarian and development work.

It’s a vicious cycle, as the humanitarian sector, by failing to incorporate women’s specific needs and interests into their response, also encourages post-conflict and development actors to continue the trend – excluding displaced women from the planning of their own futures. Local women’s organizations who can amplify the voices of these displaced women are always underfunded and often excluded in the important community work in peacebuilding and development. They are the overlooked actors that can bridge the divide between humanitarian and development and implement the women, peace and security agenda.

This was recognized at the World Humanitarian Summit where the UN Secretary-General reinforced the need to address this issue by stating, “Full and equal participation by women and girls in civil, political, economic and social spheres and in decision-making at all levels must become the standard to which all actors, including the United Nations, are held

accountable in their development and humanitarian programming and funding.”¹

The common factor in all three agendas (humanitarian, peacebuilding and development) is that without women, there is no peace, there is no effective humanitarian response and there will be no sustainable development.

However, despite the lofty World Humanitarian Summit commitments and UN Security Council Resolution 2122 (2013), there is still very little action on the ground to increase the support and participation of women’s organizations. We continue to fail to ensure that either global women’s organizations or local women’s organizations have long-term continued access to the resources and funding that they need for sustainable work or space at the decision-making tables to promote this agenda in humanitarian action and peacebuilding. In a 2017 Oxfam report, the humanitarian community and donors in Iraq, the Occupied Palestinian Territories and Yemen were accused of inadvertently causing a near disappearance of gender equality work in these countries because local women’s organizations have had to prioritize responding to humanitarian needs.² Donors and international non-governmental organizations have

1 United Nations General Assembly, “One Humanity: Shared Responsibility- Report of the United Nations Secretary-General for the World Humanitarian Summit (A/70/709),” (New York: United Nations, 2 February 2016): 26.

2 Kristine Anderson et al., “Now is the Time: Research on Gender Justice, Conflict and Fragility in the Middle East and North Africa,” (Oxfam and International Alert, 2017). Available at: <https://www.oxfam.org/en/research/now-time-research-gender-justice-conflict-and-fragility-middle-east-and-north-africa>.

exerted a disproportionate influence on the priorities of local women’s organizations and the type of work and opportunities they pursue, with most organizations reportedly finding it difficult to pursue their own agendas and strategies if they did not line up with donor priorities.³

Development actors also fail to capitalize on opportunities to align with humanitarians where they could coordinate and bring the voices of women from hard to reach communities into the dialogue, such as in the cases of Myanmar and Sri Lanka. The development agenda, with its framework in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), promotes gender equality through a number of its goals, including Goal 5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls. However, there is no target under this goal, nor under Goal 16 on Promoting just, peaceful and inclusive societies, that specifically references women and girls living in conflict situations. This means that the humanitarian agenda is not adequately included in the development architecture.⁴ As one woman activist said in Colombia “(Women’s organizations) have survived war but we don’t know if we will survive peace. Whichever organization survives peace, those are the one who will remain for the future.” Without dedicated

3 Ibid.

4 H. Alowis, et al., “Gender-Responsive Humanitarian Intervention in the Aftermath of Conflict: The Humanitarian-Development Continuum,” The United Arab Emirates Panel Series on Women, Peace, and Security, (New York: Permanent Mission of the United Arab Emirates to the United Nations and Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security, 2015). Available at: https://www.un.int/uae/sites/www.un.int/files/United%20Arab%20Emirates/uae_gi-wps_publication_2015.pdf.

resources, it is difficult for women's organizations to meaningfully participate in the implementation of peace. Despite global commitments, their work increases significantly, yet their resources remain the same or decrease.

While UN Women has an extensive network of grassroots women's organizations that could be meaningfully involved in humanitarian response, UN Women itself has received limited funds to respond in humanitarian emergencies and is often side-lined in humanitarian response by other long-standing humanitarian actors.⁵ UN inter-agency competition over resources and mandates only exacerbates the situation and makes it more difficult to comprehensively integrate gender into humanitarian action.

Building the capacity of humanitarians to work more closely with local women's organizations is a key way of ensuring that women can participate.

However, humanitarians often limit their interactions with local women's organizations because it is seen as work more relevant to the development sector. However, humanitarian services that are set up in times of crises can end up becoming part of long-term development work if coordinated with local women's activists. In Myanmar, ten years post-cyclone Nargis, the

5 J. Sandler, A. Rao and R. Eyben, "Strategies of Feminist Bureaucrats: United Nations Experiences," IDS Working Papers 397 (2012): 1-35.

women's safe spaces set up during the cyclone response have morphed into women's community centers and are now used as women's safe spaces for displaced women returning to Myanmar following peace agreements. Humanitarian coordination mechanisms established in the cyclone response also became a network of local women's organizations that have now engaged the government in responding to women's rights in the transition to democracy.⁶

In the 2016 European refugee response to Syrian and Afghan refugees from Turkey to Greece up through the Balkan route to Germany and Sweden, local anti-trafficking women's organizations were engaged to screen refugees for gender-based violence (GBV) and offer services. Many of these organizations were formed from women's organizations that established before and during the Balkans conflict in the 1990s. The author facilitated a nine-country, 22-agency regional training to introduce the international basics on setting up safe houses, understanding the gendered needs of refugees and training local organizations to advocate on behalf of refugees.⁷ By linking domestic violence initiatives, anti-trafficking groups and refugee/humanitarian actors in future

6 The Gender Equality Network in Myanmar arose from coordination in the humanitarian response to Cyclone Nargis in 2008, which was created to specifically focus on multi-sectoral and cross-cutting issues faced by women in cyclone-affected areas. The Women's Protection Technical Working Group evolved to the Gender Equality Network that is now a major actor in incorporating women into the peace and security discussions in Myanmar.

7 S. Martin, "Europe Refugee Crisis: Balkans regional workshop on gender-based violence," (Belgrade: International Rescue Committee, 2016).

humanitarian emergencies, there can be more capacity to respond to the needs of women and girls. At the same time, the structures to support women and girls living in these countries will be strengthened.

It is critical to improve coordination to bring humanitarians and peacebuilders together through processes that oblige them to join efforts to support the humanitarian to peacebuilding and recovery continuum while promoting gender equality as a priority.

Problematically, peacebuilding actors and humanitarian actors and service providers seldom see the need for collaboration in their struggles to improve women's participation, yet they interact with the same women on the ground. The gender experts working on women, peace and security often sit in the development sector, while gender and gender-based violence experts working in humanitarian action sit in different offices and interact in humanitarian coordination mechanisms. While the same agency may work on the same issues in the same countries, they do not always communicate within or with others.

CONCLUSIONS

The international community, bilateral donors and non-governmental organisations working in conflict and crisis contexts cannot wait until the peace process starts to try to bring women to the table. Humanitarian

action and its precursor, disaster risk reduction and disaster preparedness are the first steps in addressing the needs of the displaced. If that fails to meet the needs of women and girls, it can further entrench inequality and impede sustainable development for years to come. Engaging and promoting local women's organizations to lead in every step of the way is the key to success. Local women's participation must remain central to all humanitarian action. Displaced women and girls are already acting as leaders in their families and communities to keep the family together. They must be more formally engaged as leaders and agents of change, not just seen as victims or passive recipients of aid who need to be protected. The humanitarian community must start listening to women and girls and the local women's organizations that represent them. Women and girls must also be given the tools and resources to facilitate their meaningful participation in relief, recovery and peacebuilding. Only then, will the women, peace and security agenda be able to reach its full potential.

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www.genderassociations.com
contact@genderassociations.com

Editing: Leigh Tomppert
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GAIC - Gender Associations International Consulting GmbH
Amtsgericht Charlottenburg | HRB 204659 | Sitz: Berlin
Director: Nicola Popovic