



OI Policy Compendium Note on Gender Issues in Conflict and Humanitarian Crises

Overview: Oxfam International's position on gender issues in conflict and humanitarian crises

Oxfam International recognises the existence of gender inequality in all societies and the need for agencies involved in humanitarian response to analyse, plan, and respond to crises in ways that promote **gender equality** and protect women from gender-based violence.

Oxfam believes that success in doing this will depend upon:

Undertaking a gendered analysis of all situations in which conflict and humanitarian crisis response takes place, and using this analysis to underpin all planning and programme implementation in order to promote gender justice and the rights of women.

Adopting and adhering to a policy of zero tolerance of all sexual abuse and violence directed at women and girls, men and boys, from all parties – combatants, civil society, peacekeeping forces and humanitarian workers.

The willingness of UN agencies, the international humanitarian community, governments, and international financial institutions to promote women's leadership and active participation at all levels of decision-making in responses to conflict and humanitarian crisis, and reconstruction. Empowering women will require enhancing women's influence in the key decisions that shape their lives in three distinct areas: the household; the workplace; and the political sphere. This should include implementing agreements and policies promoting gender parity, notably UN Resolution 1325 and the UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women (1993).

Strengthening the women's rights and gender justice architecture of the UN. This can best be delivered by a transformed UNIFEM which incorporates the UN Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW) and Office of the Special Adviser on Gender Issues (OSAGI), to be led by an Under Secretary General, with a broad mandate to support gender justice and women's rights throughout the UN system, and the resources to enact this mandate.

1. Background

"As study after study has taught us, there is no tool for development more effective than the empowerment of women. No other policy is as likely to raise economic productivity or to reduce child and maternal mortality. No other policy is as sure to improve nutrition and promote health, including the prevention of HIV/AIDS. No other policy is as powerful in increasing the chances of education for the next generation."¹

During a crisis, such as armed conflict or natural disasters, institutions and systems for physical and social protection may be weakened or destroyed. Police, legal, health, education, and social services are often disrupted; many people flee, and those who remain may not have the capacity or the equipment to work. Families and communities are often separated, which results in a further breakdown of community

¹ Kofi Annan. Former Secretary General of the UN in, UNICEF (2006) *The State of the World's Children 2007. Women and Children: The Double Dividend of Gender Equality*, New York: UNICEF

norms and systems.² Institutions involved in humanitarian response aim to respond to all the needs of women and men, girls and boys, caught up in crisis and its aftermath. Such needs differ and have specific gender dimensions.

Women, girls, men and boys have immediate, 'practical' needs particularly in humanitarian crises. They also have longer-term 'strategic' needs linked to changing the circumstances of their lives and realising their human rights. Practical needs of women may include needs associated with their roles as caretakers, needs for food, shelter, water and safety. Strategic needs, however are needs for more control over their lives, needs for property rights, for political participation to help shape public decisions and for a safe space for women outside the household, for example women's centres offering social and economic support as well as safety. Practical needs focus on the immediate **condition** of women and men. Strategic needs concern their relative **position** in relation to each other; in effect strategic needs are about resolving gender-based inequalities.³

Women's traditional gender role as carers and providers for families means they are best-placed to advise agencies on appropriate planning of sanitation, water, feeding, and health-care services. Yet humanitarian responses often fail to appreciate both the importance of women's existing role and their capacity and desire to play an equal role in leadership and decision-making at all levels of society. Women should be empowered to offer their expert input into all aspects of programme response from planning to implementation. This requires assertive capacity-building programmes (also in working with partners), built-in mechanisms for stakeholders – in particular women – to voice their opinions, increased transparency and provision of information on response objectives and processes, the provision of information to communities – especially women – in order that they may claim their rights and clearly understand what voice and role they might have in humanitarian operations, and extra support for families with the objective to create a space for women to claim their role in disaster responses without over-burdening women or incurring unacceptable opportunity risks. It also requires gender-specific post-disaster or -conflict trauma counselling.

Gender equality is a critical step towards achieving sustainable development. Crisis situations radically affect social and cultural structures, changing women and men's status. If humanitarian interventions are not planned with gender equality in mind, the opportunity to support and promote equality in livelihoods between men and women can be lost.⁴ In crisis and disaster situations there can arise significant opportunities to challenge the unequal relationships in human societies which render particular marginalised groups, including women, especially vulnerable to specific forms of abuse, suffering, and impoverishment. Here, too, the key is the leadership and participation of women in policy formulation, to ensure that responses are founded on a commitment to supporting women in their own efforts to challenge structural gender inequality.

2. Oxfam International's position

Oxfam International (OI) welcomes the various commitments of institutions and agencies to challenge gender inequality, and promote women's rights, in all aspects of their work. These commitments should now be implemented fully, with formal obligations and agreements, to ensure improved field responses.

In particular:

Gender analysis informing quality response

² IASC (2005) 'Guidelines for Gender-based Violence Interventions in Humanitarian Settings: Focusing on Prevention and Response to Sexual Violence in Emergencies', Geneva: IASC

³ IASC (2006) 'Gender Handbook in Humanitarian Action: Women, girls, boys and men: Different Needs – Equal Opportunities', Geneva: IASC

⁴ *ibid*

To ensure their responses are appropriate and effective, humanitarian agencies should carry out a rigorous and context-specific gender analysis of the populations they set out to support. This analysis should be integrated in humanitarian needs assessments and in all sector assessments or situational analyses. Gender analysis examines the relationship between females and males. It examines their roles, their access to and control over resources, and the constraints they face relative to each other. Sex and age-disaggregated data should be collected and analysed routinely to understand the impact of the humanitarian response on the total population. Agencies should provide resources for baseline studies, and ongoing monitoring and evaluation, to gain a full picture of gender relations within communities.

Humanitarian response must consciously aim to increase women's control over essential resources, but ensure this does not increase risks related to gender-based violence and abuse.

Humanitarian actors should consciously seek opportunities to support women in ways that lead to the transformation of gender power relations. Aid and support can be given in ways which challenge prejudice about women's capabilities, enable them to use their talents and knowledge for the good of themselves, families, and communities, and enhance their security and well-being. In many instances, attempting to integrate principles of equality into programmes requires the active involvement and support of men.

Capturing, synthesising, and sharing best practice

A critical element in agency responses is to criticise constructively work which has not gone so well, and to synthesise and share good practice. For example, in Oxfam's flood response in Gonaives, Haiti (2004), women and men were trained and carried out water testing in pairs. In the response to the 2005 Pakistan earthquake, Oxfam built on this good practice of attracting an equal number of women and men to cash-for-work programmes, and encouraged men to work beside their sisters and wives, who were expected, due to *purdah*, to be accompanied by a man.

Oxfam is presently further developing its expertise in preventing and dealing with the impact of sexual and gender-based violence in humanitarian crisis situations. Oxfam will start with a few pilots to become centres of expertise in this area for other programmes to learn from.

Oxfam International is also preparing a Humanitarian Learning Plan that incorporates gender and Gender Based Violence (GBV) issues training for humanitarian situations. Oxfam's country humanitarian staff participates in the IASC Subgroup on Gender in Humanitarian Response's roll-out of the GBV guidelines in Uganda, Colombia and Pakistan.

Gender budgeting

Gender budgeting is a well-established means of assessing progress in implementing commitments to focus on gender justice and the rights of women, by tracking resources allocated to these goals. All involved in conflict and humanitarian response should undertake gender budgeting.

Protection from gender-based violence

Experience shows that gender-based violence escalates in times of crisis. Rape and sexual violence often increase in intensity and frequency at times of crisis and displacement. They are widely used by combatants as a conscious strategy of war. Women and girls have the right to be protected from all forms of gender-based violence affecting them, including domestic violence, rape, sexual violence and slavery, and forced impregnation. Gender-based violence, including sexual violence, is perpetrated primarily by males against women and girls. Men and boys are also vulnerable to sexual violence,

particularly when they are subjected to torture and/or detention. Nevertheless, the majority of survivors of sexual violence are females.⁵ Governments, UN agencies, and other institutions should:

- Undertake advocacy and lobbying work, independently or in coalition with other actors, to support the implementation and enforcement of relevant laws and agreements prohibiting such violence.
- Constantly upgrade and develop their organisational expertise on preventing and responding to sexual and gender-based violence.

Humanitarian responses should take all possible steps to protect women from sexual exploitation and abuse by humanitarian workers and peacekeepers, adopting and fully implementing a policy of zero tolerance.

Services for survivors should minimise harmful after-effects of the gender-based violence. Services should aim to enable survivors to regain physical, mental, and psychosocial health. Post-conflict responses should challenge social stigmatisation and the ostracism of survivors, and support them to re-enter their marriages, families and communities. Where this fails, survivors should receive support to rebuild their lives and livelihoods with dignity to the maximum extent possible.

Upholding women's right to full and equal participation and leadership

The full and equal participation of women, and women's organisations, in all activities is critical due to their existing role as primary carers for families, and their potential as leaders in society. Humanitarian responses should involve women and women's organisations as leaders and active participants in programme design, planning, and implementation. They may also promote women's participation in non-traditional livelihoods activities.

All parties, including UN agencies, governments, international financial institutions, and all others, should fully implement UN Resolution 1325, which calls for women's equal participation in all peace-building and post-conflict reconstruction.

Agencies should do everything possible to minimise the threat to women when they do participate in different activities. This involves a) ensuring alternative arrangements are in place to enable women to spare the time to participate and lead; and b) supporting and challenging men and women to reject attitudes and beliefs which prevent women's leadership, and accept that equal participation can bring wider social benefits.

Supporting long-term transformation of gendered economic and social roles

Programmes should invite women to participate in non-traditional paid work, challenging beliefs about their role in families and communities.

The opportunity cost of this participation should be minimised by:

- Organising interventions which enable women with significant caring responsibilities to take up leadership positions – for example, community day-care for young children;
- Ensuring men's assent and support for this work by carrying out activities emphasising the rationale for women's participation and the benefits of gender justice to family and community.

International commitments and agreements

OI welcomes UN Resolution 1325, calling for gender parity in all decision-making on conflict, peace building, and reconstruction, in recognition of women's vital contribution to promoting peace processes

⁵ IASC (2005) 'Guidelines for Gender-based Violence Interventions in Humanitarian Settings: Focusing on Prevention and Response to Sexual Violence in Emergencies', Geneva: IASC

throughout the world. It also welcomes the new Peacebuilding Commission and calls for this body to be founded from the outset on the principles of Resolution 1325.

OI upholds the UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women (1993), and urges all state and civil-society actors to ensure that their activities curtail rather than add to the threat of violence against women.⁶

OI welcomes the plans to strengthen the UN's capacity on women's rights and gender justice. The 'Oslo Consensus' recommends strengthening the women's rights and gender justice architecture of the UN. Oxfam believes that this can best be delivered by a transformed UNIFEM which incorporates DAW and OSAGI, led by an Under Secretary-General. The new women's rights entity should:

- Conduct policy development and undertake advocacy on substantive issues of gender justice and women's rights, with a comprehensive mandate dedicated to the full range of women's concerns derived from CEDAW⁷, the Beijing Platform for Action and other relevant conventions and/or documents
- Implement targeted programmes at field level, providing high-quality substantive expertise on the gender dimensions of a range of issues, and have the capacity and resources to conduct and shape UN operational activities
- Develop monitoring and accountability capacities on gender mainstreaming, with the authority necessary to ensure accountability throughout the UN system.

Finally, OI welcomes the increasing use in analysis and programming of the concept of 'Gender Based Violence' (GBV), which provides a new tool for baseline research, planning, and impact assessment. It focuses on the reasons for violence against women, which are found in unequal power relationships between women and men. It also provides a lens through which to understand men's vulnerability to violence committed against them by other men.

⁶ The UN Declaration defines violence against women as 'any act of gender based violence that results in, or is likely to result in physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life'. Accordingly, 'violence against women encompasses but is not limited to the following:

- a) Physical, sexual and psychological violence occurring in the family, including battering, sexual abuse of female children in the household, dowry related violence, marital rape, female genital mutilation and other traditional practices harmful to women, non-spousal violence and violence related to exploitation;
- b) Physical, sexual and psychological violence occurring within the general community, including rape, sexual abuse, sexual harassment and intimidation at work, in educational institutions and elsewhere, trafficking in women and forced prostitution; physical, sexual and psychological violence perpetrated or condoned by the State, wherever it occurs' (Articles 1 and 2).

⁷ The UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women.