



Challenges and Opportunities in Addressing Violence Against Women and Girls in Humanitarian and Development Contexts

Background and Discussion Paper for March 2016 Convening

COFEM

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COFEM

The Coalition of Feminists for Social Change (COFEM) is an informal collective of activists, academics, and practitioners working globally to end violence against women and girls.

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Introduction

The purpose of the upcoming convening is to bring together a group of feminist practitioners and activists to strategize around how to respond to mounting challenges and shrinking space, in work to address violence against women and girls in the humanitarian and development spheres.

This discussion paper provides a brief background and overview of the problem before highlighting some of the ways in which the challenges are manifesting while posing some critical questions to help inform and guide the convening. It draws on a variety of sources, including a set of interviews conducted with meeting participants and other practitioners, academics and activists working these issues, related to women's rights and gender equality¹. It is not intended to provide a comprehensive analysis, but rather as a springboard for stimulating our thinking, discussion and strategizing at the convening.

Background

The shrinking space for women and girl-centred work in humanitarian and development discourse and practice is situated within broader political and historical contexts. While it is not the aim of this paper to go into detail regarding these wider contexts – and indeed all those participating in the convening are well versed in feminist standpoints regarding the oppression, discrimination and violence inherent in girls and women's lives – it is important to make explicit that this convening is grounded in a feminist understanding of violence against women and girls. Such an understanding draws attention to, among other things, the way

in which visible violence is underpinned by invisible violence, the threat of violence and the political, economic and social systems of women's oppression. Those same structural dimensions of women's subordination exist in the context in which we work and also underpin the backlash we are facing in our work². Feminist theory informs how we understand violence as both an outcome of, as well as a deliberate method for maintaining women's subordinate status – it also informs how we seek to work together in this convening and in the future.

Progress has been made in the last three decades in addressing violence against women and girls (VAWG) globally. Feminist analysis and activism have been instrumental in achieving gains in women's rights, including in recognition of and action to address violence against women and girls. A global push by feminists between 1975 – 1995 led to women's rights being acknowledged as human rights, and placed on the public policy agenda in many countries, as well as globally. Strong local, national and international women's movements have brought VAWG, including in armed conflict and natural disasters, into the public domain as a development, women's rights and public health issue.

The late 1990s and early 2000s witnessed positive developments in national and international normative and legal frameworks regarding VAWG, and led to the investment of resources and growth in technical expertise, guidance and standards within humanitarian and

¹ Jeanne Ward interviewed thirty-seven individuals working on

² Although structural violence is the glue that holds patriarchy together, it is often invisible, or not considered violence. It reveals itself when looking at the health, economic, educational and political status of women and girls across the globe: high maternal mortality rates, illiteracy, increased risk of HIV, poverty, lack of political representation and positions of power.

development sectors – yet many of these gains are under threat.

The problem

Many feminist practitioners, academics, and activists are becoming increasingly alarmed by the shrinking space for work on VAWG and by the active undermining of work to centre women and girls in the discourse and practice (in humanitarian and development settings). The shrinking space and undermining are manifesting in multiple ways but are all linked by a depoliticizing of VAWG. This depoliticizing of our work is manifesting in numerous interrelated challenges, including:

- The rise of gender neutrality within humanitarian discourse and practice;³
- The emergence of competition around victimhood;
- A shift from women and girl led movements and activism to a technocratic approach to ending violence;
- Different interpretations of what “gender-based violence” (GBV) entails;
- A lack of clarity about how VAWG intersects with other forms of interpersonal and collective violence; and
- A lack of analysis of how to include men and boys in work to eradicate VAWG in a way that is accountable to women and girls.

³ The problem of gender neutrality is not limited to the humanitarian sphere; see for example the Special Rapporteur on VAW report from 2014, which highlights the problem internationally.

These challenges must be addressed in order that the gains of the past two decades are not lost, and to ensure the momentum to end VAWG continues - before, during and after conflict and disasters. Some of the key issues and critical questions in relation to the challenges are highlighted below.

The rise of gender neutrality

The emergence of gender-neutral language within humanitarian discourse and practice has contributed to the depoliticizing of violence against women and girls and it’s de-linking from the struggle for women’s equality and rights. Key concepts underpinning our understanding of VAWG and the solutions to it have been diluted, co-opted, lost or neutralized.

This has happened in part through the decoupling of key analytical concepts, such as ‘gender’, from analysis of patriarchal power relations and by extension through the decoupling of tools developed to further gender equality, such as gender analysis and gender mainstreaming, from the goals of women’s rights and women’s empowerment. As Meer points out, “gender stripped of ideas of male privilege and female subordination, came to mean that women and men suffered equally the costs of the existing gender order.”⁴

Gender analysis and gender mainstreaming, once key public policy tools for making visible and addressing women’s practical and strategic needs through allocation of state resources, has lost almost all elements of the transformation it was originally intended to catalyse. Taking a gendered approach in

⁴ Struggles for Gender Equality: Reflections on the place of men’s organizations.

humanitarian and development settings now means adding men and boys to policies and programs that previously addressed women's rights. In the new gender neutral construct, targeted initiatives focusing on women are now sometimes viewed as discriminatory against men.⁵ Rather than help to redress the power imbalance between men and women, gender analysis and mainstreaming are instead reinforcing it by eclipsing women and girl's different and specific needs. In this we are shifting further away from one of the fundamental goals of CEDAW: to end all forms of discrimination against women in all aspects of life.

Critical questions

- How do we re-politicize and reinvigorate feminist perspectives on and approaches to VAWG and to gender equality, in humanitarian and development spaces?
- Have key gender analysis and mainstreaming concepts and tools lost their utility? Should we abandon them or work to reclaim and reassert them from a feminist informed standpoint?
- Should we be making a stronger argument for the language of gender equity to be as important as gender equality?

The emergence of competitive victimhood

One outcome of the rise of gender neutrality has been the promotion of competition around victimhood within the

⁵ See the IASC Gender Marker for an example.

humanitarian sphere. Increasingly men are being framed as equal victims of patriarchy and gender-based violence – one recently released set of international guidelines notes “it is clear that domestic violence is a significant threat to the security of men”⁶. While men's experiences of violence, such as conflict related sexual violence, are important issues in their own right, yet they are being framed in relation to women's experiences of violence, and in that manner undermine the focus on women and girls. Rather than complementing work on violence against women, a growing literature on men as victims of patriarchy and of gender-based violence⁷ is thus serving to undermine this work. Gender is being described as a binary as opposed to a hierarchy with a presumption of reversible equivalency. For example, at a 2014 presentation on sexual violence against men and boys, the presenter suggested the impacts of sexual violence are much worse for men than for women and girls because it is so ‘emasculating’.

Some literature even implies that feminism eclipses the problem of violence against men; in one article feminists are accused of enabling patriarchy by hiding violence against men. As well as being the unwitting tools of patriarchy against less powerful men, feminists are accused of failing to account for violence against men⁸.

Instead of exploring the shared and common elements of our work, where they exist, and working in solidarity and partnership with those championing issues of violence and oppression against other groups, practitioners increasingly

⁶ DCAF (2014) *Preventing and Responding to Sexual and Domestic Violence Against Men*, p. 22.

⁷ See for example the work of Stemple, Carpenter, Dolan.

⁸ Dolan, C (2014). *Has patriarchy been stealing the feminists clothes*, IDS Bulletin; Javaid, A. (2014) *Feminism, masculinity and male rape: Bringing male rape out of the closet*, *Journal of Gender Studies*.

must justify why it is important and necessary to maintain a focus on women and girls.

Critical questions

- How we can ensure that VAWG continues to be a priority issue and is not eclipsed by other interests?
- How do we push back to reclaim space for women and girls in a way which is proactive, rather than reactive, and not displacing the needs and rights of others affected by violence?

A shift from women and girl led movements and activism to a technocratic approach to ending violence

One outcome of the rise of gender neutrality has been the depoliticizing of VAWG work has been a move away from a social transformation focus of efforts to address VAWG, driven by women-led activism and demands for change, towards a technocratic approach, premised on the use of experts which overlooks the feminist principle that women and girls are the experts on their own lives. This shift has been enabled in part by the predominance of a public health model in VAWG work internationally, which while introducing important concepts and tools in prevention work, has led to a focus on VAW as a technical rather than a social problem⁹. A

⁹ One example is the shift to medical language such as 'psychological first aid' and 'trauma-informed' to describe approaches to working with women or girls who have been raped – for decades, feminist informed approaches to healing and empowerment have been the cornerstone of rape crisis and domestic violence work but are being displaced in the humanitarian sector.

critical issue moving forward is how we can make sure that VAWG work remains grounded in movement-led and social change objectives and that costs of integrating VAWG within the technocratic sphere do not outweigh the benefits – both to the cause, but also to those working within the humanitarian and development bureaucracies.

Critical questions

- How do we manage the tensions between the technocratic approach to VAWG (that has particularly emerged in the humanitarian sector) and making sure the politics of VAWG and women's rights are not eroded from this work and it remains connected to the broader VAWG and women's rights movements?
- How can we balance the tensions between working 'in the system' and working to disrupt it?
- How do we support others working in unfriendly or hostile organisations and bureaucracies?

Different interpretations of what "gender-based violence" (GBV) entails

Different interpretations of gender-based violence (GBV) has led to contested perspectives on what does and doesn't constitute gendered violence under this umbrella, and how it should be addressed. While historically the term gender-based violence has been used to underscore how VAWG is grounded in gendered power relations where women

occupied a subordinate position, it is increasingly used to describe a host of different forms of violence. The space that was once reserved for attention to and action on violence that women and girls face is now crowded with multiple forms of violence deemed to have a gendered dimension, regardless of whether the violence is grounded in sexuality, gender identity, gender relations, gender norms, etc. This is highly problematic as it is squeezing the already limited a space and resources for women and girls. In addition to encroaching on space and resources, this inclusion of all forms of violence with any perceived gender dimension under the GBV umbrella is serving to undermine the tools and frameworks developed to further women's practical and strategic needs in relation to this issue. An alarming example of this is the insertion of 'men and boys' into policy documents and other tools aimed at addressing violence against women.

Critical questions

- How do we address the challenges with language most effectively? Since we must continue to work with the language of GBV, can we reclaim it to describe the problem of VAWG?
- How can we navigate the problematic language and conceptualization of issues surrounding gender and 'GBV' to redefine the issue and space for VAWG work and women's rights?

A lack of clarity about how VAWG intersects with other forms of interpersonal and collective violence

Related to confusion around what gender-based violence is or isn't, there has emerged a lack of clarity about how VAWG intersects with other forms of interpersonal and collective violence and how it intersects with different strands of violence prevention and social justice work. This has led in turn to confusion and a lack of consensus around the similarities in and differences between VAWG work and work to address sexual and other violence perpetrated against children, men, and LGBTQ individuals, effectively creating competition between different strands of work to prevent and respond to forms of violence.

As an example, there is confusion surrounding and some tension between work to address VAW and work to address violence against children (VAC), in the humanitarian sector. To some extent this has emerged from a lack of analysis on the intersections of VAW and VAC, as well as from the different standpoints of both areas of work.¹¹ The relationship between VAW and VAC are complex: some forms of violence against children are forms of violence against women; the effects of violence on women who are mothers can significantly harm the health and well-being of their children; children exposed to intimate partner violence are secondary victims of this violence; some forms of violence against children are grounded in the same power relations as violence against women. Further, children's rights and well-being are intrinsically linked to those of women. Yet to date the interrelationships and differences between VAW and VAC have not yet

been explored¹². Rather than establishing solid alliances, partnerships, and common objectives for social change in the areas where this and other social justice and social change work overlaps, there is fragmentation and a lack of solidarity.

Critical questions

- How should we better make explicit the connections and distinctions between VAWG work and other social justice and anti-violence working humanitarian settings?
- How do we continue to demand attention to women's and girl's needs and rights whilst identifying and partnering with other social justice movements?

A lack of analysis of how to include men and boys in work to eradicate VAWG in a way that is accountable to women and girls

In both development and humanitarian settings there is a parallel process going on between women's networks and organisations that have been working on ending violence against women and girls for decades and the newer organisations dedicated to male engagement. It is problematic that so much work that is happening with men and boys is being undertaken in parallel to work with and by women. It ignores that fact that even the most well-intentioned men have a vested interest in maintaining a status quo that affords them significant power.

Organisations working with men are framing the issue of VAWG in multiple problematic ways. For example: defining

violence as physical and sexual acts and incidents, and gender dynamics as essentially an interpersonal issue; assuming that encouraging men and boys to express their vulnerability or to become better fathers, ill translates into women and girls being safer in the household and other community.

The approaches being adopted are male-centred, male-identified, and male-dominated; at the core, they are about men. Without a feminist informed analysis and guidance from women, these efforts risk reinforcing patriarchal social relations. When men's organisations make it explicit that the beneficiaries of their work are men and boys, who are oppressed by gender, we find ourselves in a position where women's interests, women's entitlements and women's lived experiences are off the agenda; this is about men¹⁰.

Additionally, there are complex and challenging issues inherent in work with men and boys to end VAWG that are being overlooked. This is contributing to shifting the emphasis away from women and girls, as well as actually increasing the risk that women and girls face. One example is a new policy of the Ugandan Ministry of Health on engaging men in antenatal care, which resulted women seeking care without their husbands being placed at the back of the queue or being chastised by health care staff. In some cases, women were sent away with a warning that services won't be given without a man.

In some regions of the world the influx of resources for work with men has resulted in a rapid expansion of men's groups.

¹⁰ Allan G. Johnson (2005) *The Gender Knot: Unravelling Our Patriarchal Legacy*.

This has fostered the growth of a plethora of organizations working with men and boys with little to no conceptual or political understanding of gender, women's rights or accountability to the women's movement. In effect, working with men and boys as a strategy for ending VAWG is not being implemented as originally intended, but has become a goal in and of itself with scant little attention to the content of that programming. Without guidance from women and girls, what might seem like good ideas risk having harmful consequences for women and girls.

Critical questions

- How do we create real opportunities for women to guide programming with men?
- How do we include men and boys in work to eradicate VAWG in a way that is accountable to women and girls, and that contributes to deconstructing rather than reinforcing the oppressive power relations that lie at the core of the problem?
- How do we ensure that programming with men and boys remains true to purpose of preventing violence against women and girls?