

Making gender-transformative humanitarian action a reality

THE PARADOX OF CRISES: CREATING SPACE FOR GENDER TRANSFORMATION

Conflicts and crises radically affect social, economic, cultural and political structures. Such events create risks for women, girls and gender diverse people, and can exacerbate existing inequalities. However, the collapse of political and social order can also, paradoxically, create opportunities for change. For example, women can assume leadership responsibilities in peacebuilding and mediation and men may take on greater unpaid care responsibilities when unable to work.

If humanitarian actors prioritize gender equality during and after crises, it may be possible to consolidate some of the positive changes in gender roles that occurred during an upheaval. If, on the other hand, we treat gender equality as an afterthought, we will inadvertently reinforce gender stereotypes causing long-standing patterns of inequality to continue. There is a strong rationale for capitalizing on the juncture created by crises to transform gender norms and address the underlying causes of inequality. This is *gender-transformative humanitarian action*.

Civil society and some humanitarian actors are increasingly arguing for humanitarian organizations to take a more feminist approach to humanitarian aid. Gender-transformative humanitarian action is an important part of a broader feminist approach.

Several donor countries are showing leadership on gender in emergencies. Norway's humanitarian strategy commits to tackling sexual violence in conflict and to integrating a gender perspective into all humanitarian efforts, with a focus on women's rights and participation.¹ Sweden, guided by its feminist foreign policy, aims to strengthen women and girls' right to protection in humanitarian crises and bolster their ability to play an active role in the response to humanitarian crises.²

Most recently, in April 2019, the Canadian government released its new humanitarian policy, entitled: *A Feminist Approach: Gender Equality in Humanitarian Action*.³ The policy commits to "supporting gender-transformative humanitarian action, where and when possible". This

GENDER-TRANSFORMATIVE HUMANITARIAN ACTION AT A GLANCE:

- Changes unequal gender power relations by transforming gender roles;
- Addresses the unique needs and challenges of women and builds on their strengths and capacities;
- Advances gender equality as a primary programming goal;
- Monitors potential backlash since women can experience increased gender-based violence and other repercussions as their status in society rises;
- Recognizes and supports the central role of local women's organizations and movements, who understand local culture and power dynamics and whose activities naturally bridge development, humanitarian and peacebuilding work;
- Takes a long-term view of humanitarian activities, given the long-term nature of change and the protracted and recurring nature of most humanitarian crises;
- Engages men and boys in a way that makes them authentic allies;
- Engages past the male/female gender binary, recognizing that people with different sexual orientations and gender identities experience unequal gender power dynamics too.

brief provides concrete direction on what gender-transformative humanitarian programming looks like, the funding modalities required to operationalize it, and how to ensure it does no harm.

BARRIERS TO GENDER-TRANSFORMATIVE HUMANITARIAN ACTION

Donor priorities and funding modalities shape humanitarian actors' approaches to programming. Therefore, donors have a key role in creating an enabling environment for gender-transformative humanitarian action. However, several factors—related both to donors' internal processes and to the humanitarian system as a whole—prevent donors from funding gender-transformative humanitarian action. These include:

- **Short term funding cycles:** Humanitarian aid tends to prioritize clear, specific, lifesaving projects that focus on immediate needs. This does not match the protracted and recurring nature of most humanitarian crises nor the reality of gender-transformative work, which requires longer timelines and is often undertaken by actors—such as local women's rights organizations—that need long term, flexible and core funding.
- **Structural barriers in the humanitarian system:** Donors prioritize proposals that align with the main sectors of humanitarian action in the UN Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Cluster System. Although some country responses have gender reference/working groups, gender is not a cluster in the IASC system,⁴ which makes it more difficult to fund gender-transformative programming. Furthermore, the current humanitarian architecture, including the IASC, does not systematically include local actors—despite the localization agenda and the commitments in the Grand Bargain and Charter for Change. This means humanitarian funds are largely controlled by large international NGOs (INGOs)⁵ and UN agencies. This does not provide a clear and systematic space for local organizations, including women's rights organizations, to voice their priorities and guide the agenda, as intended by a truly feminist approach.
- **Value for money:** Gender-transformative programs can be expensive and the cost per beneficiary is hard to define at the outset. This, and the need for humanitarian actors to deliver quick and quantifiable

results, are significant barriers for donors who are required to justify their budgets and programming decisions on the basis of humanitarian principles and budget politics.

- **Administrative barriers:** Donor compliance and funding requirements represent significant burdens for local women's rights organizations who are best placed to do gender-transformative work but often do not have the systems or donor-specific knowledge to manage donor requirements.

In addition to these barriers in the humanitarian system and donor organizations, there are barriers within INGOs. These actors also have to change if humanitarian programming is to be community-led and inspired by feminist principles and values. For example, their approach to partnerships with local women's rights actors is often unequal, with local organizations treated as subcontractors rather than equal partners in all stages of the process. Donors' heavy compliance requirements are therefore transferred onto local organizations and partners, overwhelming their capacity and increasing their program management and administration burden. INGOs' interest in partnering with these organizations is often not matched by a commitment to help them secure the flexible core funding and access the decision-making spaces they need to implement their transformative agendas.

HOW TO MAKE HUMANITARIAN PROGRAMMING GENDER-TRANSFORMATIVE

1. A TWIN-TRACK APPROACH: COMBINING STANDALONE RESOURCES WITH ROBUST MAINSTREAMING

Gender transformation is a long-term process intended to redress systemic gender inequalities and power imbalances. Therefore, gender-transformative change is the cumulative result of several interventions—not a specific set of activities implemented at a specific time. Programming should be seen as a continuum where gender-sensitive and gender-responsive activities are prerequisites for achieving cumulative, gender-transformative goals. Such goals might include giving agency to marginalized women, removing barriers women face in accessing their rights, and transforming unequal

CAPITALIZING ON OPENINGS CREATED BY THE 2004 TSUNAMI TO JUMPSTART LONG-TERM CHANGE:

The massive destruction the Indian Ocean tsunami caused in 2004 created a shortage of skilled professionals. In response, Oxfam designed programs to train and hire women to paint houses, supporting them to enter the paid workforce.⁶ Pairing this with longer-term interventions (such as mentoring the female painters to continue building their careers, connecting them with networks and guilds, giving them seed funding to start their own painting businesses and implementing strategies to address backlash) could have helped move the original intervention across the continuum, from gender-responsive to gender-transformative.

power relations at different levels of society—including within the household.

Evidence from academic research and program experience suggests the most effective way to achieve gender-transformative change is through a ‘twin-track’ approach combining standalone gender equality work with robust gender mainstreaming throughout all sectoral areas. The two approaches are complementary and together can deliver real impacts for women in humanitarian crises.

Standalone gender programming that specifically addresses gender inequality should be a core part of humanitarian responses. Donors committed to gender in emergencies should have dedicated budgets for standalone gender programming in humanitarian response. This would also make it easier for both donors and implementing partners to measure the effectiveness of such programming and share lessons learned.

Mainstreaming gender-transformative approaches into non-gender sectoral programs provides another important opportunity to create a larger enabling environment for gender transformation. Sectoral programs have the added benefit of targeting much larger groups of people than standalone gender interventions and therefore have the potential to have a significant impact.

2. WOMEN’S RIGHTS ACTORS AS KEY PARTNERS

Since gender norms are so context-specific, it is essential for the local population – especially women and girls– to play a meaningful role in shaping gender-transformative humanitarian programs. Local women’s rights actors, who understand local culture and power dynamics, are therefore key partners.

Women’s rights actors recognize and work on the inextricable links between gender inequality and fragility. Indeed, research shows that countries with high levels of gender inequality are significantly more likely to experience conflict and instability than countries where gender relations are more equal. In heavily male-dominant societies, bloodshed and violence are normalized and glorified.⁷ Local women’s rights actors understand that helping women to realize their rights in fragile countries helps prevent conflict and increases the likelihood of sustainable peace. When they are empowered as humanitarian actors, they can connect their humanitarian responses to the gender equality efforts that were already underway before the crisis. Their ability to naturally bridge humanitarian, development and peacebuilding work allows them to effect long-term, gender-transformative change.

BRIDGING THE HUMANITARIAN-DEVELOPMENT-PEACE NEXUS IN CONGO:

SOFEPADI is a coalition of 40 women’s rights organizations that provides medical and psychosocial support to sexual violence survivors in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). They also work on peacebuilding, offering programs to reintegrate survivors into their communities and working with young men to expand their livelihood options and reduce their motivation to join militias. Further, they work to tackle gender inequality more broadly by supporting women to stand as candidates in elections, knowing that countries with more female legislators are less likely to relapse into conflict. Organizations and movements like SOFEPADI naturally bridge the humanitarian- development-peace nexus.

Admittedly, it is sometimes challenging to partner with local women’s rights actors since these organizations do not always exist in the remote border areas where refugee camps tend to appear. In these cases, INGOs will need to take a more gradual approach to partnership. This begins by helping to build individual women leaders and providing them with opportunities to connect with other women leaders. When their leadership and movement building is supported, women will often join together organically to address the problems in their communities. These are the beginnings of local women’s rights organizations. INGOs can then provide capacity strengthening according to the local actors’ needs and priorities, and facilitate connections with other local humanitarian actors.

3. PILOTING DIFFERENT WAYS OF WORKING AND FUNDING

Local women’s rights actors are often best suited to tackle gender norms and address women’s needs and challenges. To deliver on gender-transformative change in fragile and crisis-affected settings, these actors need quality funding. This means funding that is long-term, predictable and flexible, allowing women’s rights actors to define their approaches and priorities, and shift them as required. Quality funding should also cover the core costs necessary to sustain organizations such as rent, equipment, salaries, and safety and protection for employees—who frequently face threats for their work in highly patriarchal contexts.

With limited funding and resources available, women’s rights actors frequently have to compete against large INGOs for donor funds. Providing funding on a long-term basis, better-integrating programming across the humanitarian-development-peace nexus and bridging gaps between emergency response and disaster risk reduction and preparedness could help reduce this unfair competition.

The fact that women’s rights organizations tend to be small does limit their ability to respond at the scale required during a crisis. However, the majority of today’s humanitarian situations are protracted. In these contexts, providing quality funding for women’s rights actors is not only possible with the right funding modalities, but also strategic since it can help reduce long-term causes of fragility.

EMPOWERING LOCAL HUMANITARIAN ACTORS IN UGANDA AND BANGLADESH:

Oxfam’s three-year *Empowering Local and National Humanitarian Actors* (ELNHA) pilot program build’s local organizations’ capacity to design, deliver and lead in humanitarian response and preparedness. It disburses unrestricted funds to these local organizations through a grant-like facility. Oxfam understands that working with local groups without a strong gender analysis will lead to continued marginalization for women’s rights organizations in highly patriarchal systems. Therefore, the program uses specific strategies to mobilize, connect, and support women’s rights organizations, including to access the facility’s funds. As a result of this work, local women’s rights organizations who were previously excluded from humanitarian responses have now developed experience and expertise allowing them to capture additional funding from other donors, reach more women, and help shape response priorities. Since the facility’s funds are unrestricted, local actors are not beholden to INGO and donor priorities and can plan responses as they see fit, ensuring linkages with their long-term development and peacebuilding work.

4. PREVENTING AND MITIGATING BACKLASH

A consistent and legitimate concern donors and agencies raise when talking about gender-transformative humanitarian action is the importance of doing no harm. Backlash is often a step in a long-term change process. Backlash increases when progressive social movements are making strides. Power holders become scared of losing their dominant position and try to reassert control through violence.

It is crucial to consider the multiple dimensions of gender inequality when aiming to bring about change and prevent harm. Progress in one realm—such as women’s economic participation—doesn’t automatically mean progress in other areas, such as bodily autonomy, mobility, religious freedom, or political voice.

Transformative strategies need to examine and respond to how women’s empowerment in one area affects their rights in other areas, and how this can continue to constrain their freedoms and generate risks.

It is possible that when there is a risk of backlash, marginalized groups will make choices that ostensibly support the status quo as part of their own safety and survival strategies. For example, women might choose not to participate in an economic empowerment project to avoid violence from their husbands. In these cases, we must understand women’s choices as part of the chain of transformation. It is significant that women were consulted and that they exerted their agency, regardless of the choice or outcome. For women and girls in crises, who are so rarely allowed to decide what is best for them, the act of choosing can be transformative in and of itself.

LESSONS LEARNED FROM CHAD BASIN:

Since 2014, CARE has been responding to the humanitarian crisis in the Chad Basin. A 2018 gender impact assessment found CARE’s women’s economic empowerment initiatives had, in some cases, generated tensions within couples. As women became increasingly engaged in community meetings, husbands accused them of abandoning their roles as housewives. This led to increased domestic violence and, in some cases, to divorces. In CARE’s analysis, the reason for this increase in tension was that women’s empowerment took place without involving traditional power holders – their husbands. CARE also noted the importance of conducting ongoing analyses of the unintended effects of such programs, in order to take appropriate corrective actions as soon as possible.⁸

A key part of preventing and mitigating backlash and gender-based violence is ensuring adequate security, law and order in affected areas. There must be properly trained police and security personnel who are accountable for their actions and trusted by the community so women feel comfortable reporting to them. Humanitarian actors should work with these authorities to regularly monitor risks with a gendered lens in order to properly understand the context and adapt quickly to any changes or new threats.

OVERCOMING COMMON RESISTANCES

Staff tasked with exploring how to operationalize gender-transformative programming in humanitarian settings may face several common resistances within their own organizations and their partner organizations. Below are several common concerns and arguments to help overcome them.

1. *“A gender-transformative agenda is not context-sensitive. In some places, talking about gender transformation may jeopardize humanitarian actors’ access to the population.”*

In highly patriarchal contexts, humanitarian actors can adapt their language and approaches in order to gain access to affected areas. For example, they can frame their work around the principles of non-discrimination and neutrality rather than gender equality, women’s empowerment or feminism. However, gender-transformative work is still relevant and possible in these contexts, and indeed crucial to meeting the needs of communities. Even in countries with deeply entrenched gender inequalities, civil society, women, and people of different sexual orientations and identities have a vested interest in working for change. Many people will resist changing their behaviours and beliefs if they think the proposed changes are imposed from the outside. However, we can address this by strengthening local humanitarian leadership, and by presenting local, statistical evidence of gender gaps and showing how they are detrimental to society as a whole.

2. *“Gender transformation is out of scope for humanitarian interventions. We are there to save lives, not to change societies. Gender transformation is development work, not humanitarian work.”*

Moving the needle on gender equality can save lives – for example by helping to reduce the staggering levels of gender-based violence in humanitarian settings, or improving access to crucial reproductive health services. Currently, 500 women and girls die every single day in emergency settings from pregnancy and childbirth related complications.⁹ We must understand the term “saving lives” in a broad sense, acknowledging that gender inequality causes additional risks for women, girls and gender diverse people in humanitarian crises.

Evidence shows that gender roles are not static and crises can create opportunities for change. In protracted crises, humanitarian actors are sometimes present for decades. Humanitarian crises are increasingly protracted, with 89% of humanitarian funding from OECD countries going to protracted crises, and the average displacement situation lasting 17 years.¹⁰ This leaves many opportunities for addressing acute, immediate needs in ways that promote long-term gender equality.

Because of the (short) length of a first phase response, the possibilities for gender-transformation are limited in the early stages of emergencies. However, humanitarian organizations can put in place the basic building blocks of transformation, such as strong community engagement with affected women, and informed partnerships. This lays the groundwork for gender-transformative work in the future.

3. *“There is not enough data or evidence on gender-transformative programming to justify moving forward with this approach.”*

It is true there is little empirical evidence on the effectiveness of gender-transformative programs in humanitarian settings—but this is because this approach is relatively new. Instead of avoiding gender-transformative work entirely, we should seek to build evidence by funding rigorous monitoring and evaluation of gender-responsive and gender-transformative interventions. Furthermore, given the evidence that gender equality is a driver of fragility and conflict,¹¹ and the increasingly protracted nature of crises, it seems irresponsible to limit ourselves to a short-term approach.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO DONORS AND HUMANITARIAN AGENCIES:

ENABLING ENVIRONMENT

- Base all humanitarian work on a solid gender and power analysis, and gender and age disaggregated data. This must go beyond understanding different genders’ varying practical needs and, instead, assess power relations existing between groups in the specific context. Conduct ongoing gender and power analyses since power dynamics change as crises move into new phases.

- Build research and learning objectives on gender equality into humanitarian projects, and create spaces for knowledge exchange.
- Build capacity, within donor bureaucracies and humanitarian organizations, to support gender-transformative change and the leadership of women’s rights actors in humanitarian settings.
- Build individual women’s leadership and capacities, and connect them to each other, especially in contexts where there are few existing local women’s rights actors.
- Build the evidence for gender-transformative programming by piloting initiatives and funding rigorous monitoring and evaluation.
- Enhance coordination and accountability on gender within the global humanitarian architecture. This includes advocating for increased space for local women’s rights organizations’ in response and establishing gender reference/working groups in responses to work across clusters.

FUNDING

- Increase funds for gender (with both gender-responsive and gender-transformative elements) within larger sectoral programs and/or funding mechanisms.
- Increase flexible, multiyear, funding to make more room for experimental approaches that allow for innovation, trial, error and change.
- Provide flexible, long-term and core funding to local women’s rights actors, who are best-placed to deliver gender-transformative interventions.
- Invest in capacity development for local women’s rights actors—especially in the systems and processes they need to access more funding and meet donor compliance requirements.
- Support standalone gender programming in fragile and emergency contexts.
- Cover the costs of women’s equal and meaningful participation in programs, to address cultural barriers such as the need for male accompaniment.

BACKLASH

- Ground all gender-transformative interventions in a holistic power and gender analysis, inclusive of men and boys, religious leaders and women power holders (e.g. mothers-in-law). Expand community-based engagement with these groups to reach culturally accepted solutions and help everyone see the benefits of increasing women’s social status.
- Partner with, and follow the lead of, local women’s rights actors when undertaking gender-transformative work, as they have the best understanding of attitudes, power dynamics and risks faced.
- Ensure consistent and constructive engagement with authorities. This includes reporting imminent threats, conducting ongoing advocacy on access to justice, and helping program participants understand their rights and the services available to them.
- Create safe and neutral spaces for community-level discussions, where participants can talk about gender issues without fear of reprisal.

MORE INFORMATION:

For further reading, and more information on how Oxfam defines several concepts in this paper, see:

- [Protected and Powerful: Putting Resources and Decision Making Power in the Hands of Women in Conflict](#)
- [A Feminist Approach to Localization: How Canada can Support the Leadership of Women’s Rights Actors in Humanitarian Settings](#)

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NOTES:

- 1 Norway’s Humanitarian Strategy: An effective and integrated approach: https://www.regjeringen.no/globalassets/departementene/ud/dokumenter/hum/hum_strategy.pdf
- 2 Handbook: Sweden’s feminist foreign policy (p. 82): <https://www.government.se/4a7853/contentassets/fc115607a4ad4bca913cd8d11c2339dc/handbook---swedens-feminist-foreign-policy>
- 3 Global Affairs Canada. A Feminist Approach: Gender Equality in Humanitarian Action: https://www.international.gc.ca/world-monde/issues_development-enjeux_developpement/priorities-priorites/fiap_humanitarian-action-humanitaire_paif.aspx?lang=eng
- 4 That being said, The IASC’s commitment to gender equality and empowerment is clearly articulated in its 2017 Policy on Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women and Girls in Humanitarian Action. The Policy sets out the measures for integrating gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls into all its preparedness, response and recovery efforts.
- 5 At Oxfam, we recognize that we are one of the large INGOs discussed in this paper, and that we too must make changes to our ways of working. This is why the report includes not only recommendations for the donors, but also for ourselves and our INGO peers.
- 6 Oxfam International Tsunami Fund, Second year report (2006): https://www.oxfam.org.nz/sites/default/files/reports/3116_tsunami_engNEW.pdf
- 7 D.L. Bowen, V.M. Hudson, and P.L. Nielsen. (2015). State Fragility and Structural Gender Inequality in Family Law: An Empirical Investigation. *Laws*, 4(4), 654–72.
- 8 CARE, Evaluation d’impact Genre de la réponse de CARE à la crise du Bassin du Lac Tchad au Cameroun, Niger et Tchad, Aout 2018
- 9 CARE International. Why access to sexual and reproductive health in emergencies is life-saving: <https://insights.careinternational.org.uk/development-blog/why-access-to-sexual-and-reproductive-health-in-emergencies-is-life-saving>
- 10 OCHA. An end in sight: Multi-year planning to meet and reduce humanitarian needs in protracted crises: <https://www.unocha.org/sites/unocha/files/An%20end%20in%20sight%20Multi%20Year%20Planning.pdf>
- 11 Oxfam Canada. Protected and Powerful: Putting Resources and Decision Making Power in the Hands of Women in Conflict: <https://www.oxfam.ca/publication/protected-and-powerful/>



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