



CARE Policy Discussion Paper - Ways forward on Gender and Women's Participation in Humanitarian Action



*"We as women will be able to break stereotypes around women's roles and responsibilities"
– Asma Abdullah, a humanitarian worker in Azraq camp, Jordan*

Efforts to save lives in times of crisis will be more effective if women are able to participate in humanitarian action, influence humanitarian decision-making and hold humanitarian efforts accountable. Quite simply, more lives will be saved, and the dignity of people in times of crisis enhanced, if we take women's participation, voice and agency in humanitarian action seriously.ⁱ

There are multiple processes currently underway which could help address these issues, if they result in substantive action on the ground by donors, UN agencies, INGOs, local civil society and host governments in countries affected by crisis. This includes:

- Follow-up to the G7 Whistler Declaration on Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women and Girls in Humanitarian Action
- Inter-Agency Standing Committee Gender Accountability Framework and Gender Handbook
- Reporting on gender through the Grand Bargain process
- Follow-up to the 'Putting people first: tackling sexual exploitation, sexual abuse and sexual harassment in the aid sector' summit

Translating these commitments into action will not come automatically or easily. Humanitarian crises are, intrinsically, contexts in which institutions, systems, communities and families – including those involved in humanitarian response – are coping with destruction, violence, displacement and other impacts, which present manifold challenges for efforts on gender equality. But, as the safeguarding incidents recently brought into the spotlight highlight, business as usual is not acceptable.ⁱⁱ Unless the challenges which humanitarian action faces in terms of power imbalance and gender are addressed, then the best policies and procedures will not prevent abuses or strengthen women's access to humanitarian assistance and protection.

Based on CARE International's programmes in over 90 countries around the world, and our efforts to strengthen work on gender in crisis response, we outline the following four priority areas for action:

1. Hold humanitarian coordination and leadership efforts at country-level (especially through Humanitarian Country Teams, UN Humanitarian Response Plans and Clusters) accountable for a systematic and coherent approach to gender in line with new the Inter-Agency Standing Committee

(IASC) Gender Accountability Framework Inconsistent approaches to gender by Humanitarian Coordinators, humanitarian country teams and clusters have led to inconsistent adherence to even basic standards, such as ensuring safe design of water/sanitation facilities or meaningful consultation of women in needs assessments. However, good practices exist and an aligned approach to these has been defined through a new Inter-Agency Standing Committee Gender Accountability Framework, which is due to roll-out over the coming year.ⁱⁱⁱ Donors, UN agencies and NGOs should rally behind this. Priorities should include gender sensitivity (including steps on to address safeguarding and translate Rapid Gender Analysis into programming), GBV risk mitigation and women's participation in UN/NGO Humanitarian Country Teams, clusters, Humanitarian Needs Overviews and Humanitarian Response Plans.

2. Establish multi-year action plans and annual reporting to transform the organisational culture of humanitarian agencies on women's participation and accountability to women in crisis-affected communities

The humanitarian sector has taken important, if nascent steps to address gender-mainstreaming at the project level (eg applying the IASC Gender Marker as prerequisite for funding in UN pooled funds). However, there is now a need to shift beyond the project level to address how humanitarian agencies address gender, power and inclusion at an organisational level. One tangible option to progress this would be for donors to require humanitarian agencies to establish multi-year action plans and annual reporting on gender and organisational change (factoring in aspects of gender parity and diversity at all levels of staffing; as well as a consistent approach across donors to requirements on inclusion and accountability to affected populations). Discussions on strengthening indicators for gender equality under the Grand Bargain and the Call To Action on Protection From GBV in Emergencies could also provide opportunities to catalyse a coherent approach across donors and operational agencies to this (which can be reinforced by the annual reporting cycles in those processes).



Mary, a CARE midwife, talks to refugees from South Sudan at Imvepi settlement, Uganda

3. Develop a 'Common Donor Approach to Funding Gender in Humanitarian Action' to address the chronic gaps in response to the gendered impacts of humanitarian crises, including gender-based violence prevention and response, sexual and reproductive health and work on women's voice and participation. Experience demonstrates that work on gender in humanitarian response is often the first thing which donors ask agencies to cut when they negotiate programme funding. Furthermore, specific gendered humanitarian needs are also chronically under-resourced – including GBV response (in particular child marriage and intimate partner violence), support for consistent and full provision of the Minimum Initial Services Package for Reproductive Health (MISP) and programmes to support women's

voice in humanitarian accountability processes. There have also been some encouraging developments, which could be built on – such as steps to undertake inter-agency Rapid Gender Assessments (RGAs), which can be used to prioritise gender issues across different sectors of the response.^{iv} Tools like RGAs can contribute to a more nuanced gender analysis than provided for by sex-disaggregated data, including attention to inter-sectional factors that shape the vulnerability and agency of different sections of the crisis-affected population.

To address the gaps and build on promising practices such as these, donors should agree a ‘common donor approach to gender in emergencies budgeting’; recognising that work on gender requires dedicated expertise and specialised programming to support the delivery of wider gender-sensitive humanitarian programmes. Under the Cash Workstream of the Grand Bargain, donors have developed a ‘Common Approach to Cash’ to catalyse an aligned approach amongst donors to cash programming. Efforts on gender in humanitarian action would be greatly enhanced by a similar exercise, and – in the wake of donor efforts to align their funding approaches under the Grand Bargain, Call To Action on Protection From GBV in Emergencies and on safeguarding, the time has come for a similar ‘Common Donor Approach to Gender in Humanitarian Action.’

4. Establish systematic ways to engage both women in crisis-affected communities and local women’s groups meaningfully in humanitarian decision-making and accountability processes (eg through their input to and validation of HNOs, HRPs and AAP efforts), and increase multi-year, flexible core funding to local women’s rights organisations in humanitarian contexts. Women’s participation in humanitarian action should not get reduced to ad-hoc events pegged to moments like International Women’s Day or investment in individual NGOs, it requires systematic changes in the ways that humanitarian action is designed, implemented, monitored and held accountable. Too often, discussions on gender in needs assessment or accountability to affected populations (AAP) remain stuck at the level of promoting basic sex- and age-related disaggregation of data (SADD). As important as SADD is, we believe that women and girls priorities will remain marginalised in these processes in the absence of dedicated, stand-alone efforts to support their meaningful participation and voice. Promising pilots, such as CARE’s work to establish refugee women leadership councils in Jordan, should be supported, learning documented and good practices scaled-up.

Local women’s groups can also play important roles in protection and assistance, but this is often under-recognised and under-supported.^v Humanitarian Coordinators, HCTs and clusters should adopt and implement the ‘participation and leadership’ indicator outlined in the IASC Gender Accountability Framework on creating “common platforms” with local women’s groups. This could involve a more systematic approach to engaging them in input to, and validation of, inter-agency needs assessments (eg UN Humanitarian Needs Overview / HNOs), UN Humanitarian Response Plans (HRPs) and Accountability to Affected Populations (AAP) strategies. Donors can enable this by providing multi-year funding on gender equality in humanitarian action to enable more strategic partnership approaches. In terms of funding, our CSO partners emphasise the importance of multi-year, flexible funding opportunities which listen to their priorities and invest in their core capacities, as opposed to short-term project funding. They also criticise the tendency amongst donors to impose fads as well as reporting or publicity requirements that risk undermining their independence, legitimacy and safety (eg approaches by some donors to countering violent extremism, which risk instrumentalising women activists).

ⁱ <https://g7.gc.ca/en/g7-presidency/themes/investing-growth-works-everyone/g7-ministerial-meeting/g7-development-ministers-meeting-chairs-summary/whistler-declaration-gender-equality-empowerment-women-girls-humanitarian-action/>

ⁱⁱ <https://insights.careinternational.org.uk/development-blog/what-follows-today-s-safeguarding-summit-ways-forward-on-gender-and-safeguarding-in-humanitarian-action>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/gender-and-humanitarian-action/documents-public/iasc-policy-and-accountability-framework-gender>

^{iv} <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/gender-and-humanitarian-action/content/iasc-gender-handbook-humanitarian-action-2017>

^v <https://insights.careinternational.org.uk/publications/she-is-a-humanitarian>