

Feminist perspectives on addressing violence against women and girls: **Finding the balance between scientific and social change goals, approaches and methods**

Executive Summary

Feminist analysis and activism have been instrumental in achieving gains in women's rights, including action to address violence against women and girls (VAWG). Over the past two decades, 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, public health, international peace and security and women's rights issue.


Although the late 1990s and early 2000s witnessed positive developments regarding VAWG, many of these gains are now under threat. In many countries, we are witnessing the erosion of women's human rights to live free from violence and exercise their full and equal rights in all domains; women's movements and women's rights organisations' efforts to address VAWG face mounting challenges. Further evidence of this trend is the shrinking space for women's movements and women's rights work across local, national and global contexts. Addressing these challenges will enable us to regain the momentum and accelerate the transformation necessary for securing women and girls' full and equal rights.

This paper examines the tensions between feminist and technocratic approaches¹ to addressing VAWG in humanitarian settings. We contend that the application of a technocratic approach within the humanitarian system – one that is premised on the application of technical

¹ For the purpose of this paper, feminist approaches are those that view the problem of VAWG as grounded in gender hierarchies and gender inequality. These approaches seek individual and collective empowerment of women and transformation of the social and structural dimensions of women's inequality and subordination. Technocratic approaches, on the other hand, are those that view social problems, including VAWG, as technical or personal problems. They seek to intervene to help individuals, but the approaches serve to maintain or legitimise the existing power structure rather than to transform it.



The Coalition of Feminists for Social Change (COFEM), created in 2017 to reassert a feminist perspective in violence against women and girls (VAWG) work, is a collective of over 80 activists, academics, and practitioners working globally to end VAWG. The *Feminist Perspectives on Addressing Violence Against Women and Girls Series* is a collection of papers written by COFEM members to articulate concerns and aspirations for the shrinking space for feminist analysis in VAWG efforts in development and humanitarian settings.



standards and methods, often by outside experts, and an overreliance on generating “scientific” knowledge – cannot by itself provide solutions to VAWG. Rather, feminist analysis and approaches must be the foundation on which VAWG prevention and response efforts build, and local women’s organisations must be at the forefront of these efforts.

Introduction

As efforts to address VAWG have been assumed by mainstream humanitarian organisations, women’s demands for change – and the transformational dimensions of this work – have become diluted. A focus on efforts to address VAWG within humanitarian settings premised on an overly technocratic approach and reliant on outside technical experts and methods – rather than being grounded in feminist-informed approaches to individual and collective empowerment and transformation – has resulted in de-linking VAWG from its structural drivers and dimensions.

The growing demand for applying “scientific” methods and generating scientific knowledge regarding VAWG – rather than for women’s lived experiences, analyses and actions to address the problem – has compounded this dilution of the goal of transforming patriarchal power relations. Although public health-informed research has generated information on the widespread and pervasive nature of gender-based violence in women and girls’ lives, which has in turn led to greater advocacy and attention to the issue, these kinds of approaches can be problematic when they are not informed by feminist theory and analyses and local women’s experiences and leadership. These challenges include: devaluing the ways in which feminist activists have learned to build theory from practice; ignoring the analyses that have emerged from a holistic understanding of men’s violence against women; and presenting partial views of the full scope of violence women and girls face throughout their lives.

Unless the goal, approach and methods for addressing VAWG are grounded in perspectives and analyses that reflect the structural drivers and dimensions of inequality and violence, and use research perspectives that recognise the central relevance of social and political inequality (specifically in relation to the gender hierarchies that discriminate against women), they are unlikely to contribute much in terms of addressing VAWG. Worse, they may serve to reinforce the power hierarchies of gender, race, class and ability that we are – or should be – seeking to transform to eliminate violence and inequality.

Therefore, we need to strike a careful balance between technical approaches and feminist and women-centred analysis, approaches and methods to ensure the latter underpin and inform all efforts to prevent and respond to VAWG. One of the ways in which we must do this is through ensuring that local and national women’s movements and organisations are at the forefront of humanitarian research, programming and decision-making, and are supported to engage meaningfully in, and lead efforts to, end VAWG in humanitarian settings.

Problem Analysis

Actions to address VAWG have been driven largely by women themselves, inextricably linked to the struggle for women's equality and rights. For decades, feminist groups and organisations have provided services, generated practice-based data on the breadth and depth of violence that women live with, and shared learning and knowledge to support new ways of theorising around violence. This work has served to clarify the ways in which VAWG is both a result and a mechanism of gender inequality. It paved the way to understanding how the spectrum of VAWG is a measure of women's subordination in relation to men and, therefore, a social and political issue.


Gender-based violence (GBV) has been recognised increasingly as a key responsibility for humanitarian action. However, because GBV programming has focused on establishing services for survivors, the political dimension of feminist movement-building and activism to address GBV has been diluted. Some concerns linked to this more technocratic and less transformative approach to addressing GBV in humanitarian settings are discussed below.

Data-driven humanitarianism. Although a public health approach that views GBV as a health issue that should be quantified and resolved by addressing certain risk factors introduced important concepts and tools in VAWG prevention work, it also established VAWG as a problem that requires a particular type of research (i.e. how many people experience what type of violence, perpetrated by whom and under what circumstances). This approach is reflected in an ongoing preoccupation with the collection of prevalence data on VAWG in emergency-affected communities. Arguably, it should not make a difference that a few percent more or fewer women in Central African Republic have been raped by soldiers or beaten by their husbands or both, or that more or fewer girls are at risk of being married to older men in Afghanistan. The GBV community has been clear that data should not be used as a pre-condition for the provision of services and programming to mitigate against further violence.²

In fact, the humanitarian community's demand for different types of quantifiable data may actually prevent GBV specialists from providing life-saving services. In the Syria crisis, for example, requests for on-going and in-depth data collection on GBV to demonstrate need (despite the challenge of collecting this data and the agreed presumption that GBV is occurring in all emergencies) has meant GBV specialists have been unable to dedicate time to training and mentoring local professionals and organisations delivering services to survivors.³ This demand for data ignores – and is even contrary to – feminist socio-political analysis that *predicts* a high probability of violence from men known to women, in their families and communities, as well as fighting forces and armed actors. It also ignores the reality that when quality services exist, data comes through the women and girls utilising those services.

² This position is clearly stated in the Inter-Agency Standing Committee, *Guidelines for Integrating Gender-Based Violence Interventions in Humanitarian Action: Reducing risk, promoting resilience and aiding recovery*, IASC, 2015: <<http://gbvguidelines.org/>>.

³ Personal communication with GBV Specialist providing consultancy services to international organisations in countries affected by the Syria crisis on 4 August 2017.



Standardisation within humanitarianism. Humanitarian assistance has always centred on large-scale and complex logistical operations and processes to meet the food, shelter and medical needs of large displaced populations. Until the mid-nineties, following the Rwandan genocide, in response to crises in Sierra Leone and the Balkans, for example, humanitarian assistance and services were largely unstandardised and “protection” was not a key consideration. Since then, the focus on ensuring organised and accountable humanitarian assistance has led to a proliferation of standards and guidelines for every aspect of humanitarian assistance and protection, including GBV prevention and response.

On the one hand, standards and technical specifications for humanitarian action are important and can help to promote accountability; women and girls in emergency-affected contexts certainly have the right to the highest possible standard of care and support. On the other hand, an over-reliance on technical specifications and “standard operating procedures” that do not seek women’s individual and collective empowerment risk promoting a mechanistic approach to addressing VAWG in humanitarian settings. This results in large international organisations implementing programmes focused on delivery of health, psychosocial, legal, and security sectors in line with standard operating procedures and without sufficient attention to supporting and expanding the work of local actors to advance women’s rights and address VAWG.


Lack of leadership afforded to local women’s groups. In many countries, local women’s groups and organisations working to help women access their rights are often not fully integrated into humanitarian response. (See COFEM Series Paper 1 for further discussion of this issue.) Part of the reason for this is because local organisations often lack capacity to provide the wide-ranging data required by the humanitarian system, are not always familiar with the numerous technical guidelines and tools developed by the international humanitarian community and are unable to absorb large donor funds or comply with bureaucratic emergency financing systems requirements. Evidence suggests, however, that women-centred organisations and activism may be the most important factor in addressing GBV (see Box 1).

Although there is an increasing call for the “localisation” of humanitarian response, we need to be mindful that this does not mean simply forcing upon local actors standard operating procedures for addressing VAWG, but rather capacitating and supporting them

Box 1. Addressing GBV through Feminist Movement Building.

A 2012 global study on VAWG concluded that the presence of a strong and autonomous feminist movement was the single most important factor in catalysing action to recognise and address GBV in a country. Based on data from 70 countries, feminist movements were identified as more important determinants than economic growth or commitment of political parties in action to prevent and respond to GBV.⁴

⁴ Cited in Mama Cash, *Who Counts? An Inclusive Vision for Ending Gender-Based Violence*, Mama Cash, 2013: <http://mamacash.org/content/uploads/2013/06/Mama-Cash-report_Who-Counts.pdf>.



to define local priorities for addressing VAWG and providing them with resources and tools to guide and lead humanitarian efforts to address VAWG. Although this may seem a challenging task, efforts by International Rescue Committee in Democratic Republic of Congo and UNICEF in South Sudan to invest in building capacity of local women's organisations will not only ensure that GBV services are sustainable and viable in the longer term, but that resources – material, intellectual and financial – are transferred to local women's organisations who are key actors in catalysing national action on GBV.


Apolitical framing of research questions, methods and analysis. Issues emerging from political inequality cannot be made “neutral” in terms of designing research – from the framing of the research questions, to the methods of data collection, to the processes of analysis. There are decisions to be made at every point in a research process, and these decisions need to be intentional and explicit. Although randomised control trials (RCTs) are held as the “Gold Standard” of research, there are significant issues that are not adequately articulated or addressed within the process, including the need for subject-specialist knowledge and expert analysis and interpretation. The current presumption that RCTs are the highest standard hides the need to examine the assumptions underpinning this type of investigation.

In RCTs, the specificities of the technologies of method are highly prioritised,⁵ while interrogating a theory of violence, for example, is made invisible, thus obscuring issues of external validity based on context. The technologies of method also slice even more thinly the violence under scrutiny, disconnecting the specifics of a violence from the patriarchal constructs around it, making the violence abstracted, discontinuous and separated from the continuum of violences that shape women's lives. Asking women, for example, how many times they have been beaten (with a maximum of 5 as the limit in the research) does not capture the ways in which the threat and potential of violence is ever-present. This type of research reflects a deep complacency about our understanding of causal factors, and a blindness about the role of violence in reinforcing and remaking the gender hierarchies. A focus on quantifiable data, the decontextualising of violence from the meaning it carries, runs the risk of “becoming a new way of reinforcing old prejudices”⁶, separating the violence from its role in deeply oppressive gender dynamics.

If the humanitarian world is serious in our commitment to the safety and freedom of women and girls, we need to re-examine what we mean by “Gold Standard” research; we need to be more honest and explicit about our intent, the kinds of knowledge we consider valid, and the data we are prepared to consider. We need to be explicit about what we mean by violence, and specifically men's violence against women and girls. RCTs are not the only rigorous methods of research investigation, and it is entirely possible to apply more relevant rigorous methods to researching the problem of men's violence against women and girls. It is inadequate to have internal rigour and no external validity. It is inadequate to slice the problem so narrowly that the whole becomes invisible. It is inadequate to exclude the specialist knowledge of women's rights activists and a

⁵ Cartwright, N., 'Are RCTs the gold standard.' *Bioscience*, 2, 2007, pp. 11–20: <<http://dcscience.net/Cartwright-2007.pdf>>.

⁶ Peretti, J., *Done: The secret deals that are changing our world*, Hodder & Stoughton, London, 2017.




long history of feminist research and theorising. If we are serious about addressing the issue of men's violence against women and girls, we need to build on women's knowledge and analysis and expand our repertoire of research tools to ensure that we do not lose sight of the whole. We must guard fiercely against reinforcing the old power hierarchies in communities and our political positions of what can and should be considered "knowledge", and ensure that our work contributes to transformative interventions. We need to situate our research within a context of feminist scholarship, share skills with the practitioners and activists whose knowledge is central to shaping interventions, and generate shared analysis that is both responsive to the immediate need and transformative of gendered social politics.

Implications

Obscuring the problem. Not using feminist understandings of VAWG in humanitarian settings obscures the dynamics of patriarchal oppression and the role of violence in reinforcing inequality. The de-politicised understanding of violence has reinforced a focus on individual behaviours, making invisible the wider socio-political conditions that make this violence both predictable and inevitable. The social hierarchies of gender, and the multiple ways in which women's rights are eroded and denied, contribute to partial attention to the impacts of violence on women, and to research processes that deny feminist scholarship. In this process, language is also neutralised, so that we find ourselves talking about "early marriage", when what we mean is the rape within marriage of adolescent girls by men old enough to be their fathers. We hear about "transactional sex" when what we mean is the sexual exploitation of women and girls by men because men control resources and women and girls do not, and they have little leverage to gain control of them.

Ignoring local women's expertise. Women's rights activists have an analysis and a perspective that make sense of VAWG in their context, and expert knowledge on women's experiences, assessment of risk, and perspectives that are central to how they approach both services for survivors and models of social change. The fundamental conceptualisation of what this violence is, and what this violence *represents* in terms of patriarchal social norms has profound implications for humanitarian intervention, for research priorities and for the ways in which data and evidence are understood. Women's rights activists start from their multi-layered foundation of practice-based evidence and their far-reaching knowledge of the complexity of women's lives in communities and societies, explained by social discourses, and constrained by the reality of ever-present violence. Their knowledge – and their position as "knowers" – with an analysis of the ways in which patriarchal dynamics are manifest and justified specifically in that context, their perspective that holds all the potential violences, not as separately sliced into ever-decreasing, ever-more-specific categories, but as the web surrounding women's spaces to act, and their recognition of the ways in which patriarchal norms are formed and re-formed, cannot be discarded, devalued, or positioned as non-scientific, non-credible, or as invalid. These are precisely the specialist knowledges and the expert judgements that must inform the presumptions upon which research is based, underpin analysis and make meaning.




Entrenching existing power hierarchies. If we do not foster empowerment and leadership of local women's organisations in humanitarian response to GBV, we will not only disconnect humanitarian efforts from local and regional women-led efforts to address VAWG, but we will reinforce existing inequalities. A shift towards genuine localisation and capacity-building of national actors requires those with control over and power within the humanitarian system to relinquish some of our power, resources and expert status, and be led by national and local women's rights organisations and actors. Moreover, we need to stand in solidarity with the women who have been doing this work for a long time.

Striking a balance. We need to strike a careful balance between technical approaches and ensuring that feminist and women-centred analysis, approaches and methods underpin and inform all efforts to prevent and respond to VAWG in humanitarian settings. GBV research and programming must link efforts to learn about and respond to GBV with feminist movement-building and empowerment of local women's organisations. Even when those organisations have limited organisational and technical capacity, we need to make sure their perspectives, voices and expertise are at the forefront of humanitarian research, programming and decision-making. We also need to ensure that all research on VAWG draws on critical feminist research principles, regardless of the methodology or the approach. These include and are not limited to:

- Placing gender at the centre of social inquiry; making women visible and representing women's perspectives as a major part of feminist critical research;
- Seeing gender as the nucleus of women's perceptions and lives, as shaping consciousness, skills, institutions, and distributions of power and privilege;
- Emphasising women's experiences, which are considered a significant indicator of reality, and offer more validity, particularly in relation to experiences of violence;
- Interrogating social discourses that explain and justify violence and taking account of the vested interests in minimising women's experiences;
- Being pre-occupied with the socio-political constructions of knowing and being known; i.e. *whose knowledge is privileged? What knowledge is privileged?* How is this related to the gender hierarchy and what are the implications?

Recommendations

- **GBV practitioners must educate others regarding feminist and women-centred theorising and analysis regarding VAWG in humanitarian settings and its relationship to gender inequality**, and help ensure that the programming for which they are responsible reflects the social and political dimensions of the work.

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- **International organisations working on GBV in humanitarian settings should make accountable efforts to seek out, be led by and support local women’s organisations already working for gender justice, equality and to address VAWG.** This includes nurturing the development of local women’s organisations to fully participate in humanitarian decision-making and coordination processes and systems. International organisations should also be explicit in how data pertaining to GBV will be used in the service of improving the situation for women and girls.
 - **International GBV actors should recognise that data and external technical experts and toolkits for addressing VAWG are important resources, but they are simply inputs and not the solution to the pervasive inequalities that create and maintain VAWG.** Sustained support for local, national and regional women’s rights organisations is critical to ensure that VAWG work remains grounded in movement-led and social change objectives and that the costs of integrating VAWG within the technocratic sphere do not outweigh the benefits.
 - **The research community should recognise the long history of feminist research, theorising and scholarship, build from existing insights, and learn how to adapt and deploy these methodologies and approaches in their work.** There needs to be a move away from the prioritising of quantitative prevalence surveys, and a focus on the incidents of physical and sexual conflict-related violence, towards more nuanced understanding of the ways in which violence is manifest iterations of patriarchal norms, and the ways in which women and girls navigate these spaces, including a focus on how they manage safety.
 - **Researchers need to recognise and include women’s rights activists and GBV practitioners as expert “knowers”, even if they are not expert “researchers”.** Practice-based evidence has an honourable history in feminist research and we would do well to return to approaches and methodologies that rigorously contextualise the violence we are working on.
 - **Donor organisations should ensure their research agendas, policy directives and funding decisions are grounded in feminist-informed analysis of the problem and responses to VAWG, and reflect a balance between short-term technical interventions, and longer-term social change approaches, informed by the knowledge and experience of women’s rights activists and movements.** They should also insist upon transfer of knowledge, research skills and other expertise to local and national women’s organisations and related civil society actors working to address GBV in humanitarian settings.

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