

# Feminist perspectives on addressing violence against women and girls: **Eclipsed: When a broad protection agenda obscures the needs of women and girls**

## 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 how pursuing a broad protection agenda eclipses work with and for women and girls in crises. We argue that by focusing broadly on protection without meaningfully incorporating analyses of gender and power, protection actors fail to understand and meet the needs of vulnerable women and girls. This paper seeks to generate discussion about how to resolve the tension between a broad protection agenda and the specialised attention necessary to more fully address gender-based violence (GBV) in emergencies.



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.



## Introduction

Humanitarian protection is defined as “all activities aimed at obtaining full respect for the right of all individuals, without discrimination, in accordance with the relevant bodies of law.”<sup>1</sup> The primary responsibility to ensure people are protected from harm and that their basic rights are upheld lies with States. When States are unable or unwilling to meet their responsibilities, humanitarian actors play an important role in advancing protection of populations affected by emergencies. This responsibility is reflected and reinforced in the Inter-Agency Standing Committee Principals’ *Statement on the Centrality of Protection in Humanitarian Action*:

Protection of all persons affected and at risk must inform humanitarian decision-making and response, including engagement with States and non-State parties to conflict. It must be central to our preparedness efforts, as part of immediate and life-saving activities, and throughout the duration of humanitarian response and beyond. In practical terms, this means identifying who is at risk . . . taking into account the specific vulnerabilities that underlie these risks, including those experienced by men, women, girls and boys, and groups such as internally displaced persons, older persons, persons with disabilities . . .”<sup>2</sup>

Within the humanitarian architecture, the Global Protection Cluster (GPC) has led the development of guidance and tools on protection programming as well as protection mainstreaming for all organisations, agencies and entities working in emergencies. The GBV Area of Responsibility (AoR), which sits within the GPC’s umbrella, operates on the understanding that:

Protection of all persons affected and at risk must inform humanitarian decision-making and response. During emergencies, systems of protection are weakened and disrupted, and forced displacement and separation of families and communities place women and girls at increased risk of multiple forms of GBV. Addressing GBV from the earliest stages of an emergency is a basic life-saving and protection responsibility.<sup>3</sup>

Thus, while the protection of all persons is of critical importance in humanitarian action, the GBV AoR understands its primary responsibilities as identifying and addressing the needs of women and girls at risk of and affected by GBV and ensuring that GBV is recognised and addressed as a life-saving priority from the earliest stages of humanitarian action. Increasingly, this focus is

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<sup>1</sup> Oxfam, Protection: What is it anyway?, Global Protection Cluster, 2016: <<http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/protection-what-is-it-anyway-600609>>.

<sup>2</sup> Inter-Agency Standing Committee, The Centrality of Protection in Humanitarian Action: Statement by the IASC Principals, 17 December 2013: <[https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/sites/default/files/centrality\\_of\\_protection\\_in\\_humanitarian\\_action\\_statement\\_by\\_iasc\\_princi.pdf](https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/sites/default/files/centrality_of_protection_in_humanitarian_action_statement_by_iasc_princi.pdf)>.

<sup>3</sup> GBV Area of Responsibility, The Need for GBV Prevention and Response Programs, 2014: <<http://gbvaor.net/what-we-do-2/the-need-for-gbv-prevention-and-response-programmes>>.



undermined by a broad protection agenda, whose “inclusive” approach shifts attention away from the needs of women and girls — to the extent of driving some donors, organisations and individuals to reframe GBV priorities away from a focus on women and girls. (See COFEM Series Paper 4 for further discussion of this issue.)

## Problem Analysis

**Obscuring rather than revealing the needs of women and girls.** In order to facilitate a broad protection response, UNHCR has developed and is implementing an age, gender and diversity mainstreaming (AGDM) approach which “seeks to ensure that all persons of concern enjoy their rights on an equal footing and are able to participate fully in the decisions that affect their lives and the lives of their family members and communities.”<sup>4</sup> Similarly, the International Committee of the Red Cross launched one of the first frameworks to measure capacities for protection specialists;<sup>5</sup> one of the key actions included is “Putting the affected population, communities and individuals *at the centre of protection activities*.”<sup>6</sup> Although, theoretically, these broad protection priorities and approaches seek to ensure attention to the needs of various individuals and groups, on a practical level, such a broad approach can, at times, obscure the needs of specific sub-populations, such as women and girls.

In addition, humanitarian actors need to balance individual rights and what the community prioritises for itself (including *whose* rights the community prioritises) can mean failing to fully consider the needs and perspectives of women and girls — because they are often the most invisible and their contributions to their families, communities and broader societies can be overlooked. Engaging women and girls directly to ensure their voices are heard often requires additional resources and time, because women and girls are harder to reach. Often, even when they are reached, the humanitarian community ignores their needs. (See Box 1).

**Promotion of gender neutrality.** To facilitate an inclusive approach that is the foundation of broad protection programming, protection guidance and methods may promote “gender-sensitive” approaches as ways to analyse and address the differential needs of men, women, girls and boys.<sup>7</sup> Although seemingly innocuous, both the discourse and practice of “gender sensitivity”

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<sup>4</sup> United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Age, Gender and Diversity Policy: Working with people and communities for equality and protection, UNHCR, 2011. <<http://www.unhcr.org/protection/women/4e7757449/unhcr-age-gender-diversity-policy-working-people-communities-equality-protection.html>>.

<sup>5</sup> International Commission of the Red Cross and Red Crescent, *Professional Standards for Protection Work: Carried out by Humanitarian and Human Rights Actors in Armed Conflict and Other Situations of Violence*, ICRC, Geneva, 2009; <<http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/B0687FCBBD8E82E852576810057E6BE-ICRC-ProtectionStandards-Nov2009.pdf>>.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. p. 25. Emphasis added.

<sup>7</sup> The Global Protection Cluster website notes: “Gender equality in humanitarian action is about effectively reaching all segments of the affected population. Women, girls, boys and men play distinct roles within the family and community, and have different levels of access to power and resources. Humanitarian actors must therefore design programmes to meet the needs of male and female regardless of age and ensure that all have safe and equal access to humanitarian assistance. To achieve this, they must be consulted and actively participate in needs assessments and decision-making processes.” See ECHO, ‘Gender: Different needs, adapted assistance’, ECHO Factsheet, 2017: <[http://ec.europa.eu/echo/files/aid/countries/factsheets/thematic/gender\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/echo/files/aid/countries/factsheets/thematic/gender_en.pdf)>.



represents a dissociation of “gender” from its articulation of patriarchal power relations. It also distances gender analysis and mainstreaming from their purpose of addressing the practical and strategic needs of women and girls, especially their equality and empowerment. In this approach, gender programming is undertaken not because a thorough analysis of gender power imbalances has been completed, but because of a simple analysis that what one group has, the other must have too.

Important discussions about gender justice and male privilege can get lost in acronyms such as “WGBM” (women, girls, boys and men). This trend contrasts the recommendations in the GBV AoR Core Competency Framework, which requires that anyone who works on GBV in emergencies “believes in gender equality and applies, promotes and integrates gender analysis into humanitarian programming”<sup>8</sup> as central, underscoring the importance of understanding and committing space to listen to and address how the safety, rights and welfare of women and girls is informed by the gender-based discrimination they experience.

**The dangers of an “inclusive” perspective.**

The emergence of gender-neutral language within humanitarian discourse and practice has also contributed to some actors delinking the violence perpetrated against women and girls from their struggles for equality and rights. The misunderstanding that men and boys experience violence for the same reasons as women and girls, and require the same response for care, betrays our understanding that violence against women and girls is caused by the gender-subordinate positions girls and women occupy in societies the world over. It has led to scenarios in which

**Box 1.** In one example from post-earthquake Nepal, the absence of accountability to, and dialogue with, women and girls in affected populations meant that even though women and girls requested repeatedly in multi-sectoral assessments that menstrual hygiene be prioritised, they did not receive sufficient sanitary supplies. In Nepal, women and girls are put at risk of sexual violence by the harmful practice of *chhaupadi*, where girls are forced to live outside of the house while menstruating. Girls who slept elsewhere while menstruating were more than twice as likely to report they had been raped since the earthquake than other girls. Discussions with the broader “community” did not highlight this issue because women and girls’ needs were not identified as priority by decision makers – both in the local community and the international humanitarian community. Failing to account for gender-based power imbalances in designing and implementing humanitarian programming means that women and girls remain at risk and/or without safe and appropriate response services in the short- term, and that opportunities to lay the groundwork for longer-term prevention work are lost.

<sup>8</sup> GBV AoR, Core Competencies for GBV Program Managers and Coordinators in Humanitarian Settings, 2015: <<http://gbvaor.net/?get=005885%7C2015/04/Core-Competencies.pdf>>.



men and boys are simply added to existing GBV policies, frameworks and programs originally developed to address women and girls' rights and needs. (See COFEM Series Paper 2 for further discussion.) As one GBV expert explains:

The idea that men and boys can simply be added to policies, documents and frameworks that aim to address VAWG is simplistic and problematic. It does not help build knowledge or understanding of the causes and consequences of sexualised and gendered violence against men and boys in conflict and disaster-affected settings, nor does it contribute to the development of good practice in responding to violence, which requires evidence-based and theory-driven frameworks. Although there may be similarities between different forms of gendered and sexualised violence experienced by men and women, they are not the same. The causes, dynamics and outcomes of violence against women are different from those of violence against men.<sup>9</sup>

This misunderstanding within protection programming becomes visible when, for example, women and girls' safe spaces are not respected. These safe spaces are an integral component of survivor-centred approaches that do not require disclosure to receive services, while also providing confidential opportunities for survivors to seek further support.<sup>10</sup> (See Box 2.) Mixed-gender youth or community centres may serve certain purposes yet do not address this need. In discussions with women and girls accessing these spaces, they have shared the risks they face when speaking up and out, and report how they are silenced in mixed spaces. This points to the need for specialised protection actors to design and develop targeted programming to address the needs of men and boys in humanitarian response. Although there has been research on child protection and women's protection, there has not been as much evidence around the specific causes, determinants and outcomes of violence directed at males, nor how best how to reach or support them. Although GBV services do support services for males (e.g. Clinical Management of Rape trainings to health actors on how to provide care and support to both female and male survivors), simply replicating GBV services designed for women and girls will not necessarily ensure that men and boys will seek treatment or receive appropriate care and support.

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<sup>9</sup> Read-Hamilton, S., 'Gender-Based Violence: A confused and contested term', *Humanitarian Practice Network Magazine*, No. 60, Humanitarian Policy Group, Overseas Development Institute, London, 2014: <<http://odihpn.org/magazine/gender-based-violence-a-confused-and-contested-term/>>.

<sup>10</sup> See UNFPA, *Women and Girl Safe Spaces: A guidance note based on lessons learned from the Syria crisis*, UNFPA Syria Hub, 2015: <<http://www.unfpa.org/resources/women-girls-safe-spaces-guidance-note-based-lessons-learned-syrian-crisis> and HealthNetTPO and UNICEF South Sudan, *Promoting Positive Environments for Women and Girls Friendly Spaces in South Sudan*, UNICEF, Juba, 2016: <[www.healthnettpo.org/files/1480/guidelines-for-women-and-girls-friendly-spaces-in-south-sudan-1.pdf](http://www.healthnettpo.org/files/1480/guidelines-for-women-and-girls-friendly-spaces-in-south-sudan-1.pdf)>.

## Implications

### **Broad protection approaches fail to meet the immediate needs of women and girls.**

When broad protection approaches support undifferentiated investigation of all people's needs, i.e. using protection assessments to ascertain *whether*, instead of *how*, women and girls constitute an "at risk" group, these approaches can fail to identify and address women and girls' limited access to resources, rights, and remedies. This can delay crucial start-up funding for GBV programming, leaving women and girls without support or services. In one of many examples, in the 2013 Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines, Refugees International found that the humanitarian response "failed to fully incorporate gender and GBV dimensions in the early stages of the response, which affected each cluster's ability to effectively assist its target populations."<sup>12</sup>

### **After a decade of hard-won progress, humanitarian response actors risk losing sight of women and girls' priorities.**

Failing to engage women and girls about their concerns limits humanitarian capacity to understand what their protection priorities are.<sup>13</sup> Often protection agendas highlight the concern of conflict-related sexual violence, yet when GBV actors conduct assessments with women and girls, those consulted point consistently to the violence they experience from men known to them, often within their own homes and communities. In some

**Box 2.** UNHCR's 2003 GBV guidance notes that a fundamental aspect of VAWG is its root in power imbalances and structural inequality between men and women.<sup>11</sup> This is a core reason why best practices include separate spaces for women and girls where they can move and speak freely. Nevertheless, in the 2016 refugee response in Greece, during a regional workshop on GBV, an international NGO's protection officers were observed arguing with local women's organisations that men should receive the same services as women in the same spaces. These staff argued that because there were women's safe spaces and men also experienced violence, it was "unfair" that men did not have any services to support them. The local women's organisations pointed out that the only way to effectively reach women was by creating women-only spaces, which would be severely compromised or even rendered useless by inviting men into them. Men and boys' need for services can be addressed without minimising the space and attention necessary to safely address women and girls' needs.

<sup>11</sup> UNHCR's *SGBV against Refugees, Returnees and IDP Guidelines for Prevention and Response* guidance document notes: "While gender inequality and discrimination are the root causes of sexual and gender-based violence, various other factors determine the type and extent of violence in each setting." May 2003, p. 21: <<http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/protection/women/3f696bcc4/sexual-gender-based-violence-against-refugees-returnees-internally-displaced.htm>>.

<sup>12</sup> Hersh, M., 'Philippines: Emergency Response Fails Women and Girls', *Refugees International Field Report*, 2014, p. 1: <<http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Philippines%20GBV%20New%20Approach%20letterhead.pdf>>.

<sup>13</sup> In Chad, a group of 8 Darfuri women refugees spoke out in the Farchana Manifesto about the violence committed against them by Darfuri men and Chadian authorities inside the camps, which was ignored by protection actors: <<http://www.intlawgrlls.com/2009/02/womanifesto-from-darfur.html>>.



instances when GBV actors have advocated for attention and funding to intimate partner violence as a priority protection concern,<sup>14</sup> protection actors have argued that this is a “cultural issue,” implying that it is inevitable and does not deserve attention from the international protection community.<sup>15</sup> In other instances, protection approaches may employ gender-blind data collection, which means that women and girls do not get asked about their priorities. We cannot truly claim to protect women and girls if we fail to listen to and address their priorities.

**Reducing the already limited space and resources devoted to women and girls.** A protection agenda that promotes the inclusion of all forms of interpersonal violence under the GBV umbrella, regardless of whether they are “based on socially ascribed (i.e. gender) differences between males and females”, undermines the tools and frameworks developed to make visible and support women and girls’ practical and strategic needs.<sup>16</sup> These new approaches are not in line with what GBV experts consider good practice, nor are they in line with landmark institutional commitments from donors and others through initiatives such as the Call to Action.<sup>17</sup> Promoting a generalist discourse also risks diverting funding from programming that focuses specifically on women and girls. (See COFEM Series Paper 4 for further discussion of this issue.)

**Failure to support transformative social change.** Conflict and natural disasters can open space to transform gender-based power relations and address the increased VAWG they give rise to. Analysing power and gender imbalances on an ongoing basis is key to ensuring that we do not unintentionally contribute to gender inequality, a root cause of GBV. For those who lack a feminist understanding of gender and the goals of gender mainstreaming, it is easy to see how targeted initiatives that focus on women and girls may be mistakenly seen as discriminatory against men and boys. And yet, the reality is that gender-neutral language and gender inclusive approaches are other ways that broad protection approaches reinforce gender inequality by obscuring the different and specific needs of women and girls. Such gender-neutral responses are not aimed at challenging the prevailing male-centred paradigm and, in the process, lose their transformative power and their ability to challenge gender inequality on structural and institutional levels.<sup>18</sup> Such de-politicisation also risks defining women and girls mostly as victims, and less as agents of change, keeping unequal power within dominant gender relations intact.

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<sup>14</sup> For more information on how intimate partner violence is overlooked in humanitarian emergencies, see e.g. <[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jhumka-gupta/the-private-wars-of-women\\_1\\_b\\_4768653.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jhumka-gupta/the-private-wars-of-women_1_b_4768653.html)>.

<sup>15</sup> Whether intentionally or not, UNHCR’s SGBV Strategy reinforces this when it explains why it uses the term SGBV: Although the terms GBV and SGBV are often used interchangeably, UNHCR consciously uses the latter to emphasise the urgency of protection interventions that address the criminal character and disruptive consequences of sexual violence for victims/survivors and their families. See UNHCR, *Action against Sexual and Gender-Based Violence: An Updated Strategy*, 2011: <<http://www.unhcr.org/4e1d5aba9.pdf>>.

<sup>16</sup> Inter-Agency Standing Committee, *Guidelines for Integrating Gender-Based Violence Interventions in Humanitarian Action*, 2015, p. 5: <<http://gbvguidelines.org/en/home>>.

<sup>17</sup> The Call to Action initiative gathers 66 partners including 12 EU Member States. See US. Department of State, *Call to Action on Protection from Gender-Based Violence in Emergencies - The Action Plan, 2016-2020*, 2015: <<https://www.state.gov/j/prm/policyissues/issues/c68699.htm>>.

<sup>18</sup> For more discussion, see: <<https://cassandracomplexblog.wordpress.com/2015/08/29/lets-get-with-it-sexism-and-gender-equality-mainstreaming-in-the-humanitarian-sector/>>.



## Recommendations

Rather than promoting competing or even opposing agendas, the principles of complementarity and coordination among various actors should be the key principles to ensure that vulnerable populations are understood and have their specific needs addressed. As such, we recommend the following:

- **The international community should recognise how a broad protection agenda reduces the limited space and resources allocated to women and girls.** A protection agenda that is gender neutral is not aligned with good practice and will further restrict the already limited space for women and girls. It undermines the tools and frameworks developed to make visible and further women and girls' practical and strategic needs. All actors should champion targeted approaches to address the rights and needs of women and girls as aligned with relevant IASC gender policy and the broader UN mandate on Women, Peace and Security.
- **Protection practitioners should become familiar with and utilise field-tested tools to identify and meet the specific needs of women and girls.** Identifying these risks and needs can also promote information gathering about, and programming for, other protection concerns specific to different populations.
- **Protection practitioners should engage GBV experts in every phase and work with these experts on funding decisions, programme design and monitoring and evaluation.** Ensuring that human resources incorporate the GBV AoR Core Competency Framework will help to ensure that GBV-related interventions reflect an understanding of the gender dynamics and hierarchies in diverse communities, and a commitment to listening to and ensuring the meaningful participation of women and girls in humanitarian assistance and protection efforts affecting them.
- **Protection actors should seek to solidify alliances, partnerships and common objectives with those working to address VAWG in crisis settings.** Analysis of power and gender imbalances should happen on an on-going basis to ensure all efforts – whether undertaken by donors, (I)NGOs, UN agencies, international organisations and/or State actors – avoid contributing unintentionally to gender inequality.

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