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WOMEN AND THE NEW HUMANITARIAN AGENDA

REPORT



This event is part of our Development Policy Forum (DPF), which brings together a number of crucial development actors, including the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), the Agence Française de Développement (AFD), the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), the European Investment Bank (EIB), the United Nations and the World Bank to contribute to the global and European conversation on development. Through its activities and publications, the DPF reflects the rapidly-changing global debate on growth and development and seeks to encourage fresh, up-to-date thinking on the multiple challenges facing the development community.

INTRODUCTION

The response to humanitarian crises needs to focus more on women – who are disproportionately represented among the victims – and to give women a greater leadership role.

That was the conclusion of a Friends of Europe Policy Insight on International Women’s Day, which aims to promote a more-inclusive, gender-equal world. The panel focussed on humanitarian crises, where women and children make up over 75 percent of the 125 million people in need of humanitarian assistance worldwide.

The 2016 World Humanitarian Summit in Istanbul was a first step towards recognising the central role of women, calling for greater participation and leadership from women, and for funding to be aligned with the principles of gender equality. But advancing gender equality has always been a struggle – as shown by the election of Donald Trump as US President, and the threat he presents to US funding of gender-related programmes.

“The World Humanitarian Summit was a sign of change,” said **Daniel Seymour**, Humanitarian Coordinator and Deputy Director of Programmes at UN Women. “But recognition of gender equality does not always stick. If we don’t keep working, it seems to fade away. This is a constant, daily, persistent, 24/7 struggle.”

The central problem is that women’s needs in a crisis are often greater than those of men – and are often ignored. “Humanitarian crises do not affect women and men in the same way,” said **Monique Pariat**, European Commission Director General for Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection (ECHO). “So, we need to take into account differences between women and girls, and men and boys. Civilians are at extreme risk during military campaigns and we need facilities to ensure that women are safe from gender-based violence.”

“Women need to participate in the design implementation and evaluation of humanitarian action”

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European Commission Director General for
Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection (ECHO)

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Marcell Shehwaro

Executive Manager of Kesh Malek, blogger and activist from Aleppo

THE NEED FOR A GENDER DIMENSION IN HUMANITARIAN ACTION

Women are at particular risk in the current conflict in Iraq and Syria, Pariat said. In Iraq, the UN estimates there are between 750,000 and 800,000 civilians remaining in western Mosul, of whom 230,000 have been displaced since the beginning of the military operation in October 2016. “Women, children and the elderly require specific protection,” she said. As part of its emergency response, the EU has allocated funds to ensure that safe shelter and gender-sensitive facilities are available to provide protection from gender-based violence and to ensure equal access to lifesaving services.

However, women are also among the first responders in a crisis, helping families and communities to survive and eventually to rebuild. “We tend to think about women as victims - and of course, yes, they are victims of gender-based violence,” said **Shada Islam**, Director of Europe & Geopolitics at Friends of Europe. “But women are also on the front line when it comes to dealing with the impact of humanitarian crises. We need to have more women involved.”

In particular, women should help to ensure that actions meet their specific needs. “Women need to participate in the design implementation and evaluation of humanitarian action,” said Pariat. To make sure that its humanitarian aid is delivered in an appropriate way, the EU has developed gender and age markers. For example, water containers should not be too heavy so that children or elderly women are unable to carry them. In 2015, 89 percent of all EU-funded humanitarian aid projects integrated a gender and age dimension, she said.

UNEXPECTED OPPORTUNITIES DURING CONFLICTS

While crises often aggravate existing gender inequalities, they can also create surprising opportunities for social change, by challenging traditional roles and gender-based discrimination. Yemen is one of the most gender-unequal countries in the world. But a recent study showed that the prolonged conflict there had changed responsibilities and roles: there are now more female-headed households, and men’s role as breadwinner has decreased. “For security reasons, men are also taking over women’s traditional roles, such as fetching water and grazing the livestock,” Pariat said. “Women report greater opportunities for decision making and new space for earning income.”

In Syria, the civil war has generated interest in women’s literacy. Typically, girls in many parts of the country drop out of school after the fourth grade, after learning to read and write. A big reason is early marriage: girls who are married as young as 12 years old. Kesh Malek, a civil society organisation in Aleppo, visited 200 families, and convinced 100 to go back to education. Of these, 13 are early brides being given home schooling. “Sending a teacher to an early bride’s house wouldn’t normally be happening in Syria”, said **Marcell Shehwaro**, Executive Manager of Kesh Malek and a blogger and activist from Aleppo. “Right now, everyone is concerned that the husband may die and she needs to be learning somehow. This is an opportunity that has come through the war that was not there before.”

Kesh Malek is also trying to forge a greater role for women in governance. One local council has only 2 percent women. “2 percent is not a reflection of reality, said Shehwaro. “It is a reflection of laziness and discrimination. When we ask why there are so few women in local governance, we are told about lack of access and security concerns. Let’s drop lack of access as an excuse.” The group is organising courses in governance for better-educated women in the countryside. “After one year, we are going to put them as volunteers in the local council,” she said.

Women are also very underrepresented in civil society groups. Of 1,100 in Syria, just 50 are led by women, Shehwaro said. “It is men who are asking the questions and doing the needs assessments,” she said. “In Syria, men knocking on women’s doors to do questionnaires? It’s not going to happen. So obviously no one is taking enough care on this.” To get more women working in local nongovernment organisations (NGOs), Kesh Malek has launched a programme called “She can do it”, which has trained 200 women on how to write their CVs and has an eventual target of 1,000.

Another campaign to introduce anti-harassment policies in schools. “For the last five years, half the education in Syria has been supported by international NGOs,” Shehwaro said. “If we had created anti-harassment policies during this time, removing them in the future would have been a scandal. But we didn’t. So we need to build things that, if they are cancelled in future, it will be a huge scandal. If there is no policy against harassment in school, putting a new one will be a struggle later on when the situation is easy and we have central education back. Through the chaos, there are opportunities to do things where no one is looking.”

“Civil society and women’s groups are actually the ones who are preventing Syria from falling apart”

Oula Ramadan

Syrian human rights activist and Executive Director of the Badael Foundation

NEEDED: STRONGER CIVIL SOCIETY

One civil society group in Syria was struggling to find ways to counter the recruitment of children into the army. This was a very risky activity: “Who is recruiting children? It is the armed group controlling the region,” said **Oula Ramadan**, a Syrian human rights activist and Executive Director of the Badael Foundation, a Syrian NGO that has been providing support to women’s activist groups. “So, if civil society groups announce this, they will all be under risk of arrest or kidnapping.”

The solution was to provide a literacy course – mainly for mothers of the children who might be forced to start fighting. “Throughout the literacy courses they provided information on child recruitment and the consequences of it,” said Ramadan. “Of course, the armed groups in the region have no problem with literacy courses for women...”

Much of the media coverage of Syria is devoted to the conflict, and tends to overlook the work on the ground to empower women and develop civil society, Ramadan said. “In the media, everyone is interested in covering the fight and who is fighting whom, and what Assad or armed groups have done,” she said. “They don’t cover enough the initiatives that bring a bit of hope. What we have seen over the years is that civil society and women’s groups are actually the ones who are preventing Syria from falling apart through their activities.”

But after the fighting, international NGOs will likely depart. “The people who are left will be Syrian people,” said Ramadan. “So we need to pay more attention to the local actors. The main challenge to NGOs and women’s groups now is the security situation. There is no way we can meet this, so all we can do is influence the political process.”

“In the 1994 earthquake in Japan, 1,000 more women died than men. The women who passed away were single, elderly and poor women – living in non-earthquake-proof houses ”

Yumiko Tanaka

Senior Adviser for Gender and Development at the Japan International Cooperation

WHY NATURAL DISASTERS KILL MORE WOMEN

Gender also has a big impact when natural disasters strike, as women are often vulnerable in social and economic terms, said **Yumiko Tanaka**, Senior Adviser for Gender and Development at the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA). “The basic gender issues we have to deal with are the same with conflicts and disaster-risk reduction,” she said. “We should put more focus on the coping capacity of women and other marginalised groups in society. Policies and institutional setups are not so gender-responsive, and gender mainstreaming has not been done very much. We must involve women more to build resilience to disasters and conflicts.”

One example of the need for grassroots-level change came when a huge cyclone struck Bangladesh in the early 1990s. More than 90 percent of the dead were women and girls, and the reasons illustrated the myriad ways they have been made vulnerable.

When the cyclone struck, women could not abandon their care duties – for children, the elderly and cattle. They had a relatively low rate of literacy, so could not understand written warnings about potential disasters. Because they traditionally eat last, they were not as well-nourished or healthy as men, making them weaker and less able to escape. Cultural or religious norms meant that, as girls, they had not been allowed to learn how to swim or climb trees – important means of survival when a flood hits. And it is hard to swim in a sari. Mosques could not be turned into temporary shelters, because women are not allowed to enter. And women’s subordinate social position prevented them from getting information first-hand and from making quick decisions themselves.

“This is just the example of Bangladesh, but these things happen in many Muslim countries in Asia and in remote rural areas,” Tanaka said. “And this is not just in developing areas. In the 1994 earthquake in Japan, 1,000 more women died than men. The women who passed away were single, elderly and poor women – living in non-earthquake-proof houses. They were relatively poor because Japan’s social security system is biased against single, elderly women. That’s why many of them passed away.”

A STRONGER MOVEMENT TO EMPOWER WOMEN

Last year’s World Humanitarian Summit made commitments on women in five areas, said Seymour: empowering women and girls as change agents, access to sexual and reproductive rights, gender-based violence, gender response in humanitarian action and compliance with norms and standards. One priority for future crisis response is gender-focussed needs assessment. “In reality, if UN Women has not done a needs assessment to provide humanitarian support, it hasn’t got done,” Seymour said. “The post-disaster needs assessment after the Nepal earthquake in 2015 was the first ever to have a dedicated gender chapter. We need to do much better

in making sure that we build gender into our understanding of a crisis.”

Another issue is the increasing tendency to donate money rather than things. While there are good reasons to do this, “There are different ways cash can be given, and cash can work better or worse for women and girls,” he said. “If you don’t target it at women, who do you think gets most of the benefits of cash assistance?” Also, as women are often the first responders on the ground, they need more direct support, he said.

While progress has been made, it is always vulnerable, and Trump’s election victory is widely seen as a threat to progress: “There are concerns all around about a possible retreat on the gender agenda now.”

However, Trump also appears to have given the women’s movement an unexpected boost. “What I am seeing now is a galvanizing of the women’s movement that I have never seen in my professional lifetime at least,” Seymour said. “There has never been so much energy and it is so inspiring – in particular because there are so many young people there. That gives me a lot of cause for optimism. This is a movement that has been strongest when it’s pushed the hardest, and that’s definitely where we are right now.”

In one sense, said Islam, “Trump is a possible gift: He’s made us more aware of how fragile certain of our so-called *acquis* are.”

CONCLUSION

Women need to be given a greater role in responding to humanitarian crises, whether these result from conflicts or natural disasters. This will help humanitarian actors better address their needs and those of other vulnerable groups. Particular effort must be put into civil society actors in affected countries, as only these are able to produce long-term social changes. Though there has been much progress in recent years, there is always the risk of backsliding if constant efforts are not made.

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Shada Islam
Director of Europe & Geopolitics
at Friends of Europe



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