



DISSERTATION BRIEF SERIES 2016:05
BEYOND THE BUZZWORDS:

APPROACHES TO GENDER IN HUMANITARIAN AID

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Beyond the Buzzwords: Approaches to Gender in Humanitarian Aid

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Note: A version of this report was previously published as Olivius, E., 2014. *Three Approaches to Gender in Humanitarian Aid. Findings from a Study of Humanitarian Aid to Refugees in Thailand and Bangladesh*. Umeå: Department of Political Science & Umeå Centre for Gender Studies, Umeå University.

The Expert Group for Aid Studies - EBA - is a Government committee analysing and evaluating Swedish international development aid. This report can be downloaded free of charge at www.eba.se

Printed by Elanders Sverige AB
Stockholm 2016

Cover design by Julia Demchenko

Introduction

Considerations of gender have today entered the mainstream of international policymaking and governance to an unprecedented degree. The field of humanitarian aid is no exception; the goal of gender equality is widely endorsed in humanitarian policy texts and field handbooks, and the strategy of gender mainstreaming has been adopted in some form by all United Nations (UN) agencies and many non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in the humanitarian field. The Age, Gender and Diversity Mainstreaming (AGDM) strategy of the United Nations High Commissioner for refugees (UNHCR) is a notable example. Indeed, attention to gender is increasingly seen as essential to fulfilling the humanitarian imperative to save lives and relieve suffering caused by disaster, war and displacement.¹

However, despite the high profile of calls to "address gender issues", "take gender into account", be "gender-sensitive", "mainstream gender" and "promote gender equality" in the rhetoric of humanitarian organizations and donors, it is often less than clear what this means, and what it should mean, in humanitarian field practice. Humanitarian aid programmes are informed by different, sometimes contradictory, understandings of what it means to work with gender in humanitarian aid. Consequently, programmes may easily lead to unintended effects and diverging interpretations may create misunderstandings and tensions between agencies seeking to coordinate their work, and in relation to actors within the communities which receive aid.

Against this backdrop, the aim of this Development Dissertation Brief is to analyse how the meaning of gender is interpreted in humanitarian policy and practice, and to examine how, and for what purposes, gender rhetoric and gender programming are used in humanitarian aid operations. The report draws substantially on my doctoral dissertation *Governing Refugees through Gender Equality: Care, Control, Emancipation* (Olivius 2014a). Such an analysis is relevant both from an academic and a practical perspective. From an academic perspective, it contributes to a literature that explores what happens when strategies and goals originating in feminist theorizing and women's movements, such as gender mainstreaming and gender equality, are integrated in different

¹ For useful reviews of the development of humanitarian gender policy and practice, see Edwards, 2010 and Buscher, 2010. Prominent examples of humanitarian gender policy texts include IASC 2005, 2006; UNHCR, 1990, 2001, 2003, 2008, 2011.

fields of international politics and governance. How does the meaning of concepts and goals change in the encounter with existing organizational mandates and ways of working? What are the effects of programmes informed by the hybrid forms of gender knowledge that result when gender is integrated in new fields of practice? In comparison to fields such as development aid or peacekeeping, humanitarian gender policy and practice is thus far relatively understudied.²

From the perspective of humanitarian policy and practice, this analysis can contribute to clarify and make explicit the ideas and assumptions that inform policies and programmes but are often taken for granted. When some ways of “doing gender” become established, they achieve a status as common sense that make them difficult to question and evaluate in the day to day practice of humanitarian aid workers and their organizations. A critical examination of the state of humanitarian gender knowledge and practice can thereby facilitate reflection on the rationales and objectives of gender programming, whether current programmes achieve what they are meant to, and whether there are more fruitful ways to think about and to work with gender in humanitarian aid work. However, it is not the aim of the report to provide a right answer to the question of what addressing gender *should* mean in humanitarian aid work. Indeed, a general answer to that question is an impossibility; good gender programming will necessarily take different shapes in different operational contexts.

Drawing on an analysis of key humanitarian policy texts and interviews with about 60 humanitarian workers in Thailand and in Bangladesh, this report identifies and analyses some of the most prevalent ways in which gender is understood and acted upon in current humanitarian policy and programming. It outlines three different approaches to gender in humanitarian aid work, referred to as *the basic needs approach*, *the instrumentalist approach* and *the modernization approach*. These approaches rest on different interpretations of the meaning and purpose of addressing gender in humanitarian aid work. Clarifying the ideas underpinning these widespread approaches to gender in humanitarian aid makes it possible to examine their differences and discuss the advantages and limitations of each approach.

² For an introduction to the literature on feminism in global governance, see Caglar, G., Prügl, E. and Zvingel (2013). Notable examples in the existing literature on humanitarian gender policy and practice include Hyndman (2000), Turner (2004), Szcapanikova (2005), Fiddian-Qasmiyeh (2010), and Grabska (2011).

Next, a brief overview of the cases and material on which this report is based is provided. This is followed by a presentation of the three approaches to gender in humanitarian aid, and a discussion of their advantages, limitations, and of some areas of contradiction and tension between the different approaches. The report concludes with a discussion of the implications of its findings for humanitarian aid policy and practice.

Cases and material

This report is primarily based on two case studies of humanitarian aid to Burmese refugees in Thailand and in Bangladesh. Both of these contexts can be described as protracted refugee situations, having lasted for decades without any sustainable solution (Adelman 2008). Thus, rather than constituting emergency situations where lives are directly threatened, they resemble situations of rural poverty, or shantytowns, with an unusually high degree of international involvement. In protracted refugee situations, the scope of humanitarian aid is broadened to include the governance of semi-permanent camp societies, the creation of sustainable livelihoods, and the promotion of norms such as democracy and human rights. In some regards, the line between humanitarian aid and development aid is blurred in such circumstances.

A total of 58 interviews with humanitarian workers in Thailand and Bangladesh were conducted by the author. The humanitarian workers interviewed consisted of a mix of international and national staff members and of men and women of various ages. Each interview lasted for approximately one hour, and focused on humanitarian organizations' gender policies and programmes, and the meanings the interviewees attributed to gender as an aspect of their work.

In Thailand, 105,000 refugees who have fled armed conflict and ethnic persecution in Burma live in nine camps along the Thai-Burma border, the majority belonging to the Karen minority (TBC, 2016; South, 2008; Lang 2002). Humanitarian aid and services are mainly provided by a network of about 15 national and international NGOs, and the UNHCR is present in a primarily monitoring role. Further, aid and services are coordinated and partly implemented by the refugees themselves through a system for community-based camp management (Olivius, 2011; Banki and Lang 2008). In Bangladesh, 31,000 refugees belonging to the Muslim Rohingya minority from Western

Burma live in two official refugee camps, Kutupalong and Nayapara. These camps are managed by the Bangladeshi government, and humanitarian aid is provided by UN organizations such as the UNHCR and the World Food Programme (WFP), and a number of international and national NGOs. Additionally, an estimated 200, 000 unregistered Rohingya live in villages in Eastern Bangladesh and in camp-like settlements in the vicinity of the official refugee camps (UNHCR 2015). However, the Bangladeshi government does not authorize provision of humanitarian aid to unregistered refugees outside the official camps (Pittaway, 2008; Lewa 2003; UNHCR 2007). Consequently, this study is focused on humanitarian aid provided to the official camps.

Moreover, the report is also based on an analysis of central humanitarian policy texts on gender. While a large number of policy texts from different (predominantly UN) organizations has been studied as a part of the dissertation project, two texts have been analysed in depth. These are the UNHCR *Handbook for the Protection of Women and Girls* (UNHCR 2008) and the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) *Gender Handbook in Humanitarian Action*, subtitled *Women, Girls, Boys and Men: Different Needs – Equal Opportunities* (IASC 2006). These documents were selected because they are written for a target audience of humanitarian workers engaged in the planning and practical field work of humanitarian aid. The handbooks have the character of comprehensive training manuals, but are also central policy statements of their respective organizations. Their style can be described as practice-oriented and pedagogical, written with the intent of explaining to humanitarian workers how gender is relevant to their work and how they should act to address gender issues. The function of these handbooks as means for the dissemination of knowledge about gender makes them very useful in an analysis seeking to grasp how the meaning of gender in humanitarian aid work is constructed.

It should be noted that “gender programming” in this report refers not only to specific, targeted “gender programmes” but to the way in which organizations and individuals think about and approach gender in their work, consciously or not. Indeed, all humanitarian programmes have gendered effects, regardless of whether gender is an explicit concern of the implementing organization or not. Additionally, it should be noted that this report is primarily focused on how humanitarian organizations approach

gender in their programming – that is, it does not focus on internal organizational processes for achieving gender balance in staff or promote equality within the organization. The foremost reason for this delimitation is that humanitarian policy texts, as well as most interviewees, largely discuss gender and gender equality in relation to programming, not in relation to organizations' internal policies, processes and cultures. Thus, this choice by no means implies that gender is not relevant to the internal life of humanitarian organizations, but should be seen as reflecting dominant ideas about the meaning and relevance of gender in the humanitarian field. Indeed, this indicates that gender issues internal to humanitarian organizations have hitherto been given less attention than gender issues in programming. However, the reasons why this is the case, and its possible implications, fall outside the scope of this report.

Three approaches to gender in humanitarian aid

Below, three approaches to gender in humanitarian aid are outlined and discussed. These three approaches are derived from the analysis of the interviews with humanitarian workers in Thailand and Bangladesh and the humanitarian gender handbooks. The material analysed in the study is not claimed to be representative of the entire international humanitarian aid field, but can be expected to provide insights into relatively broad patterns of humanitarian gender knowledge and practice. Further, the three approaches do not exhaust all existing variation in the analysed material, but highlight the most prevalent ways of understanding and approaching gender in humanitarian aid. In addition, in practice these approaches are not completely separable but may overlap in the thinking of an individual humanitarian worker, or in a particular programme. Thus, the approaches discussed here should be understood as ideal types, characteristic of ideas and understandings that are prominent in contemporary humanitarian policy and practice. Nonetheless, separating them analytically makes it possible to examine their differences and discuss the advantages and limitations of each approach

The basic needs approach

The basic needs approach to gender in humanitarian aid is motivated by the classic humanitarian imperative to save lives and reduce suffering. The purpose of humanitarian

aid, in this interpretation, is to respond to the needs of people affected by emergency and displacement; *“to ensure that they receive the basic necessities of life”* (IASC, 2006:i). To take gender into account thus means to ensure that the basic needs of women and girls as well as men and boys are met. As stated by the IASC, *“[a]s field practitioners, team leaders, and policy-makers our job is to make sure that the assistance and protection we provide meets the needs of all the population equally”* (2006:1).

In practical programming, this approach often leads to a focus on the numbers of male and female beneficiaries reached by, or included in, a particular programme. Monitoring the number of men and women beneficiaries is a central strategy to ensure gender equal access to services and resources. Explaining how gender is addressed in the work of an NGO in Thailand, an interviewee relates that *“we have quotas that have to be filled with equal numbers of males and females”* (Author interview 13). In addition, reporting of gender-segregated beneficiary data is also required by many humanitarian donors, which reinforces the focus on equal access in terms of numbers. Describing their work with a new vocational training centre, an NGO representative in Bangladesh reports that the donor, a UN agency, *“said there must be gender balance, 50-50”* (Author interview 42).

However, humanitarian organizations also seek to ensure equal access through specific actions aimed at making sure women can really access a service. For example, agencies providing health care in Bangladesh work to recruit female medical doctors to make sure women are comfortable seeking healthcare. In Thailand, legal assistance centres are equipped with toys such as crayons to make it easier for women to bring their children with them to the centres.

When discussing what gender equality means, many interviewees relate it to the concepts of equal access and basic needs. As a UN employee in Bangladesh relates, *“I think gender equality is about...is about equal access. Equal access to services and the ability to meet your human rights, to have your basic needs met”* (Author interview 51). This interviewee also exemplifies a common conflation of “human rights” and “basic needs”. While human rights have become central to humanitarian rhetoric, signalling an attempt to frame beneficiaries of aid as right-bearers rather than just people in need of help, the line between a focus on rights and a focus on needs is often blurry in practical programming.

Further, the concepts of protection and vulnerability are central to the basic needs approach to gender. In much humanitarian aid work, vulnerability constitutes the criteria for the allocation of resources. Consequently, those who are the most vulnerable are most in need and require specific assistance in order to be protected. Women are often designated as a “vulnerable group” by humanitarian organizations. Gender is, in this approach, understood as one dimension of vulnerability. Indeed, there is a reluctance to treat gender as an important dimension in itself – attention to gender is seen as legitimate because it constitutes one dimension of vulnerability. An NGO employee in Thailand is representative in this regard: “*if, for instance, we were creating programmes that involved limited resources, we would use the criteria of vulnerability, not gender*” (Author interview 26). As a result, much emphasis is placed on women’s vulnerability, especially to sexual and gender based violence (SGBV). However, an analysis of the causes of SGBV is largely absent, and programs focus on response to cases of SGBV, for example development of standard operating procedures for response, and provision of medical and legal assistance.

The advantage of the basic needs approach is its practical orientation towards the concrete effects of humanitarian programmes for women and for men. It directs attention to gender discrepancies in access to essential resources and services at the most obvious level; for example, if far fewer women and girls access health care, go to school or are given opportunities to earn an income, this is likely to make women and girls’ lives more difficult. Tracking such discrepancies is a necessary first step towards addressing gender inequalities. However, informed by a classic humanitarian commitment to stay “neutral”, this approach to gender lacks an analysis of the dynamics of gender and power that lead to inequalities in access and enjoyment of resources and services, and there is no ambition to change these dynamics. The focus on measuring equal access through counting the numbers of male and female beneficiaries sometimes draws attention away from the gendered dynamics and relations of power behind the numbers. The understanding of why gendered inequalities and differences in access occur is therefore likely to remain limited (Olivius 2013). Accordingly, one may question if it is possible to ensure genuinely equal access to resources and services without understanding, engaging with and modifying existing gender relations, for example social norms about men’s and women’s roles. In addition, programmes informed by this approach have gendered effects, and

shape gender relations whether this is a goal or not. For example, the overwhelming emphasis on women as victims and as particularly vulnerable and in need reproduces these passive images of women and is unlikely to have an empowering effect. The practical and limited scope of the basic needs approach is not well suited to foster awareness of the subtle and often unintended gendered effects of policies and programmes when these effects cannot be directly observed and measured.

The instrumentalist approach

The instrumentalist approach to gender in humanitarian aid rests on an understanding of gender as differences between women and men. Women and men are thought to be differently affected by, and respond in different ways to, emergency and displacement. Consequently, these differences must be understood and taken into account in order to target aid properly and deliver effective humanitarian programmes. In contrast, if gender differences and roles in the beneficiary population are not taken into account it may lead scarce resources to be badly used. As expressed by the IASC Gender Handbook, being sensitive to gender “*is simply about good, common sense programming. Understanding gender differences, inequalities and capacities improves the effectiveness of our humanitarian response*” (IASC, 2006:1). However, in this approach existing gender differences should not only be taken into account in programme design and implementation – they should also be utilized to achieve humanitarian goals in the most efficient way. In particular, women are assumed to possess gender-specific qualities and capacities that are seen as particularly important to harness. By virtue of the reproductive roles women (are expected to) fulfil, they are seen as strategic partners whose active participation facilitates effective and efficient programmes. Humanitarian policy texts describe women in emergency situations as ‘the secret weapon to beat hunger’ (WFP, 2011) and as ‘key actors in influencing the public health of the household’ (IASC 2006:105). Further, as an NGO employee in Thailand explains, women are

“A better investment...they are more likely to put what resources and what improvements happen back into their families, eh, than men. And so to me that has been the driver in NGOs really pushing more on gender issues” (Author interview 54).

This approach and its representation of women as resources for humanitarian aid effectiveness are particularly prevalent in the fields of food and nutrition and hygiene and sanitation. In these sectors, a gender analysis is often used to identify current gender roles and divisions of labour and target programming accordingly. In the area of water, sanitation and hygiene, an NGO worker in Bangladesh explains, women's involvement is essential to programme success:

To have women involved in the programme is a very good way to ensure the sustainability of the project. To enhance the impact of it. To have for example a woman that gets the hygiene promotion messages, that would ensure that they will transmit this knowledge to their children, which is not the case...with men. So it will benefit the whole family (Author interview 47).

Water and sanitation programmes in Thailand are designed with a similar logic in mind; “we know we must target the wife to have a good result”, an NGO worker relates (Author interview 23).

In relation to food and nutrition, humanitarian workers frequently describe women as more family-oriented, cooperative, reliable and less corrupt than men. Therefore, having women involved in the distribution of food and having women collect food rations is seen as an essential strategy to ensure that food resources are put to the best possible use. Indeed, the view that “putting food in the hands of women has always been seen as a way of ensuring that the household eats” is recurrently articulated, in this case by a UN employee in Bangladesh (Author interview 35). Furthermore, women's participation in food distribution is expected to deliver a range of good results, as the reasoning of an NGO worker in Thailand exemplifies:

I think it is accepted as a fact that when women are involved in the distribution of food it is generally more effective, it is more cost effective, and there is less wastage, there is more accurate distribution, there is more transparency and there is sort of better, yeah, just more efficiency in the distribution of food (Author interview 14).

The main advantage of the instrumentalist approach is the largely positive and active images of women that it conveys. Women are described as strategic humanitarian partners, important actors and key stakeholders, and their participation in the planning, design and implementation of humanitarian programmes is encouraged and described as essential to aid effectiveness. In contrast to an often overwhelming focus on women as victims and as particularly vulnerable individuals in humanitarian aid, this approach emphasises women's agency and ability to impact their communities. However, women's participation is not primarily represented as an issue of equality, justice or power; rather, it is discussed in terms of the contribution it can make towards the achievement of humanitarian goals such as public health or food security. Women's inclusion in matters that affect their lives is not seen as an important end in itself, but rather as a resource that humanitarian organizations should utilize better in order to achieve other goals. The emphasis on women's participation as the solution to a range of problems can also increase women's workload as it makes them responsible for addressing complex issues such as child malnutrition or poor health, the causes of which often lie far beyond their control (Olivius 2014b).

In addition, women's usefulness is closely related to their performance of traditionally female reproductive roles. The aim of the instrumental approach is not to transform traditional gender relations and power dynamics in pursuit of gender equality – rather the focus is on utilizing women's difference and women's reproductive roles to improve humanitarian effectiveness. This way of using strategies such as gender analysis and gender mainstreaming is far from the feminist intent that originally informed them, and tends to naturalize and reaffirm existing gender inequalities and gender norms.

The modernization approach

The modernization approach to gender in humanitarian aid is based on an understanding of gender as structural relations of power rooted in the cultural, social, economic and political systems of the communities that are assisted by humanitarian organizations. Further, societies and communities affected by conflicts or disasters are described as less developed, traditional, or backward. Thus, the modernization approach represents gender inequality, discrimination and violence as symptoms of underdevelopment that can be

overcome through the transformation of traditional societies into modern, democratic societies with liberal values. The pursuit of gender equality is therefore both necessary to the protection of women in situations of emergency, and to the achievement of development, peace and security in the long term. In this approach, addressing gender in humanitarian aid entails a commitment to a project of societal transformation far beyond the immediate delivery of effective, life-saving aid. In humanitarian gender handbooks the link between promotion of gender equality in emergencies and the achievement of development in the long term is emphasized. For example, “*gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls are essential preconditions for development, peace, and security*” (UNHCR, 2008: 22). Further, situations of emergency and displacement are described as “windows of opportunity” for social change:

[G]ender equality is a critical step towards achieving sustainable development. Crisis situations radically affect social and cultural structures, changing women’s and men’s status. They often provide a window of opportunity for addressing gender-based discrimination and rights violations (IASC, 2006: 6).

From this perspective, humanitarian organizations are well positioned to seize the opportunity to lay an early foundation for the reconstruction of better societies after crises. Emergencies can thereby be a good time for “*teaching new skills and values, such as peace, tolerance, conflict resolution, democracy, human rights and environmental conservation*” – values apparently assumed to be absent in crisis-affected societies (IASC, 2006: 50). In this approach, humanitarians are seen as having a responsibility to contribute to rebuilding more developed and more peaceful societies. The promotion of gender equality is one important aspect of this endeavour. Thus, this understanding aligns the role of humanitarian aid closely with a broader project of liberal peacebuilding and state building.

The modernization approach often informs programmes geared towards changing refugees’ attitudes and beliefs relating to gender, often with a strong focus on sexual and gender based violence. In Bangladesh, a description of SGBV as an expression of underdevelopment is very common among the interviewees. Consequently, addressing SGBV requires education to change the cultural norms and practices of the refugees. The

link between gender inequality and underdevelopment is clear in the following NGO worker's description of Rohingya society:

The refugee's religious and social background from their ancestral homes across the border is a very backward looking, orthodox Muslim society. The society, social norms, culture and tradition is the root, and they bring this along. It is a very male-dominated society. And an uneducated society in general...The scenario of gender inequality is very clear if you only walk through the camps. Women are less active, women are restricted to the house, the domestic sphere...It is a less progressive society (Author interview 42).

In Thailand, a range of efforts to change norms and practices in the refugee camps are described as efforts to develop and modernize the refugee population. In the area of education, advocacy for changed rules related to pregnant girls' schooling is understood as a project of convincing refugees that human rights norms, as interpreted by humanitarian workers, take precedence over culture (Author interview 2). Reforms to make camp governance systems more accountable and gender representative are described as needed to make refugees "*develop and face up to life today*" (Author interview 9). Exemplifying a common way of thinking, an NGO worker describes efforts to promote gender equality in the Thai camps as a conflict of "*traditional values versus international standards*" (Author interview 24).

The advantage of the modernization approach is its understanding of gender as a social and relational phenomenon, whereas the basic needs approach and the instrumental approach tend to see gender differences as fixed characteristics attached to individuals. In the modernization approach, gender is linked to a structural understanding of power, and it is suggested that the promotion of gender equality involves the transformation of cultural, socio-economic and political systems. This analysis is arguably necessary to develop an understanding of the causes and dynamics of gender inequality in a particular context. Efforts to ensure gender balance without an understanding of the underlying power dynamics can easily be merely cosmetic, or lead to unintended effects because the social context for the intervention is poorly understood.

Nevertheless, the modernization approach also has weaknesses. It constructs a link between gender inequality, underdevelopment and beneficiaries of aid on the one hand, and gender equality, modernity, and humanitarian actors on the other hand. Based on this simplified binary, humanitarian actors are assumed to be the “good guys” who promote gender equality and beneficiary populations are cast as the “bad guys” who perpetuate gender inequality, discrimination and violence (Olivius 2016). This polarized image is obviously not consistent with reality. For example, in the Thai camps several refugee women’s organizations and other refugee actors’ work to increase women’s political participation, raise awareness of women’s rights and combat violence against women. Despite this, many humanitarians still assume refugee culture and refugee actors in general to be obstacles to gender equality. As a result, humanitarians often fail to recognize the important role of local actors as agents of change towards gender equality. In Thailand, this has led to considerable tension between refugee organizations and humanitarian organizations working with SGBV programmes (Olivius 2011, 2014c).

Needless to say, describing local actors as culturally underdeveloped and morally inferior does not make for respectful dialogue and cooperation. Rather, when gender equality is mobilized as a symbol in a cultural conflict it tends to reinforce resistance to everything that is perceived as external propositions for change. Indeed, in Bangladesh efforts to promote gender equality have met resistance because they have been perceived as attempts to “westernize” the refugees (Olivius, forthcoming 2016). Further, an assumption that gender inequality originates only in the culture of the beneficiary population draws attention away from the possible ways in which humanitarian practices and attitudes can contribute to inequality. Consequently, the focus on inequalities emanating from the norms and practices of beneficiaries of aid may preclude critical examination of potentially problematic norms and practices within the humanitarian community.

Areas of contradiction and tension

The three approaches to gender in humanitarian aid that have been outlined above build on different conceptions of what gender is, and how it is relevant in humanitarian aid work. Accordingly, the three approaches differ in their focus, envision the goals of

humanitarian gender policy and programming in different ways, and have different advantages and limitations. The typical characteristics of each approach are summarized in table 1 below.

Table 1. Summary of the three approaches to gender in humanitarian aid

	Basic needs approach	Instrumental approach	Developmental approach
Understanding of gender	One dimension of vulnerability	Differences between women and men	Power relations rooted in culture
Key concepts	Equal access Vulnerability Protection	Women as resources Effectiveness Results	Culture Emergency as window of opportunity
Goals	Equal access and protection for women and men	Effective humanitarian aid	Gender equality Development Stability, democracy, peace
Advantages	Attention to concrete discrepancies in the effects of aid for women and men	Emphasis on women as actors and women’s participation	Relational understanding of gender and power Transformative ambition
Limitations and problems	Reproduces women’s vulnerability & victimhood Superficial focus on numbers	Reaffirms existing gender roles & norms Gender equality not assigned intrinsic value	Beneficiary populations seen as culturally inferior – resistance & conflict Neglect of local actors as agents of change

While the differences between the approaches need not necessarily lead to different programmatic prescriptions, they may in many cases have very different implications for how and why practical humanitarian gender work should be carried out. In particular, the three approaches to gender in humanitarian aid outlined in this report have different primary goals, different time perspectives, and different views on social change.

Different primary goals

The most fundamental tension between the approaches derives from their different understandings of what the main goal of humanitarian gender policy and programming is. Why should gender be addressed, and what objectives should be pursued? From the

perspective of the basic needs approach, the goal of addressing gender in humanitarian aid is to ensure equal access to the tangible resources and services that are essential to the survival and welfare of refugees. The instrumental approach shifts the focus from individual refugee needs to the effectiveness and efficiency of the humanitarian operation. Taking gender difference into account is here understood as a key strategy for optimizing aid effectiveness. The goals of the modernization approach entail more far-reaching ambitions for social change towards gender equality, not only in the immediate situation where humanitarian aid is delivered but also in the longer term perspective, where gender equality is seen as one necessary aspect of a process of development and modernization of crisis-affected societies.

While the goals of equal access, effective aid and the transformation of unequal gender relations, understood as part of a process of development, may in some cases be entirely compatible, they may as well point in different directions and thus have different implications for humanitarian gender programming. For example, programmes that seek to engage mothers to address child malnutrition or improve household hygiene may be well designed to contribute to the goal of aid effectiveness, as they utilize the reproductive roles that women in many cases already perform to disseminate information and implement humanitarian programmes. However, targeting women in their capacity as mothers and carers reaffirms a traditional and highly unequal gendered division of labour, and this programme would therefore conflict with the goal of transforming unequal gender relations. Whether it would contribute to make access to humanitarian services and resources more equal is not at all clear.

Different time perspectives

As indicated above, the three approaches do not share a single understanding of the relevant time frame for humanitarian gender policy and programming. The basic needs approach and the instrumental approach are both focused on the practical, immediate delivery of aid in the short-term, while the modernization approach links the delivery of aid and the promotion of gender equality to a wider, longer-term agenda for societal change in pursuit of development, peace and security. This tension can be seen as one

expression of current debates about the focus and scope of humanitarian aid work.³ Naturally these two time perspectives have different implications for the focus of humanitarian gender programming.

Different views on social change

Closely linked to differences in primary goals and time perspectives are different conceptions of the role of humanitarian aid work in relation to the promotion of social change, in particular changes in gender relations. The basic needs approach lacks an explicit analysis of gender in terms of relations of power, and thus it also lacks an explicit ambition to transform gender relations. The commitment to humanitarian principles of neutrality and non-interventions is often interpreted as foreclosing active attempts at “social engineering” by humanitarian agencies. Nonetheless, it is entirely possible that efforts to ensure equal access in its most basic sense can contribute to more profound changes in gender relations. Indeed, all aid programmes affect gender relations in one way or another, but this insight is often missing in the basic needs approach.

The instrumental approach does not primarily ask what humanitarian programmes can do to improve women’s status, but what the inclusion of women can do to facilitate effective implementation of humanitarian programmes. Thus, there is no transformative ambition – more equal gender relations are not the main objective. As many programmes in the areas of food, nutrition, hygiene and sanitation illustrate, existing unequal gender relations may in fact be useful vehicles for effective and efficient programme implementation.

The modernization approach is the only one where transformation of unequal gender relations is a goal in its own right. Gender is linked to a structural understanding of power, and it is suggested that the promotion of gender equality involves the transformation of cultural, socio-economic and political systems. This description is broadly consistent with a feminist analysis, but the envisioned process of societal change towards gender equality is problematically situated within a framework of liberal peacebuilding and development. Gender inequality becomes a symbol of the inferiority of ‘less developed’ societies, and humanitarian agencies are thereby positioned as competent

³These debates are usefully outlined in Barnett, 2005 and Barnett and Weiss, 2008.

gender equality promoters while the role of local actors is neglected, and sometimes even resisted (Olivius 2014c). In addition, this construction obscures the possible complicity of humanitarian workers and humanitarian aid practices in perpetuating inequality in emergency contexts.

What is the potential of humanitarian gender policies and programmes that contain these contradictions? The argument of this report is that clarifying the differences and tensions between currently prevalent approaches to gender in humanitarian aid can serve as an entry point for reflection and dialogue about the meaning, purpose and effects of humanitarian gender policies and programmes, and thereby facilitate the development of practices that draw on the advantages of each approach but go beyond their limitations. This theme is developed in the final section of the report.

Implications for humanitarian aid policy and practice

The purpose of this report is to provide a basis for discussion about the meaning and purpose of humanitarian gender policy and programming through identifying and analysing some of the most prevalent ways in which gender is understood and acted upon in current humanitarian policy and programming. Clarifying the ideas underpinning these widespread approaches to gender in humanitarian aid makes it possible to examine their differences and discuss the advantages and limitations of each approach, and develop new and potentially more fruitful ways of thinking about and addressing gender in humanitarian aid work. A key recommendation that emerges from this report is therefore that humanitarian organizations need to devote time for conscious reflection and discussion about how and why gender should be addressed in their programmes, and how current field practices align with the stated goals of the organization. As this report has made clear, it is not self-evident what it means to address gender in humanitarian aid work. When the ideas that inform gender programming as well as the purposes of gender programming are left unspoken, confusion and misunderstandings are likely to result, and the effects of programmes that are poorly thought through can be unpredictable. Thus, in order to develop and implement programmes in a more reflective way, it could be useful to discuss questions such as:

- What is the primary goal of addressing gender in this programme or area of work? What are the problems that need to be addressed?
- How could the programme contribute to achieve this goal and address these problems?
- How can the programme be expected to affect gender relations?

Such fundamental questions are often overlooked in practical, day-to-day humanitarian work, but hold great potential to spur reflection and dialogue that can foster a clearer shared understanding of the meaning and purpose of gender programming within and between agencies.

Further, it cannot be taken for granted that all efforts to take gender into account are efforts to promote gender equality. As the instrumental approach illustrates, gender awareness can be useful in the pursuit of aid effectiveness as well as gender equality. While none of these goals are unimportant, it is vital to be clear about what a certain programme is meant to achieve. In addition, gender equality is endorsed as an important goal intrinsic to a good humanitarian response in key humanitarian policy instruments and guiding principles. For example, the IASC Gender Handbook states that the promotion of gender equality “*is a shared responsibility of all humanitarian actors*” (IASC, 2006: i). It is therefore important to ensure that gender programming is not exclusively used to promote other goals than gender equality, and especially to ensure that these other goals do not counteract efforts to promote gender equality. It is important to be aware that humanitarian programmes, as well as the situation of emergency or displacement itself, always reshapes gender relations and contributes to social change in one way or the other, and consistently seek to do so towards greater equality rather than the opposite.

In order to promote gender equality more effectively, a number of lessons could be drawn from the advantages and limitations of each of the three approaches discussed in this report. All three approaches have strengths that new practices could build upon, but all three also have limitations and problematic implications that humanitarian agencies should seek to overcome through careful reflection on the purposes, practices and effects of gender programming. The advantages and limitations of each approach are summarized in table 1 above.

The strength of the basic needs approach is its practical orientation, drawing attention to tangible, concrete discrepancies in access to aid and in the effects of aid for women and men. This is a necessary basic level of good gender programming. The strength of the instrumental approach is its emphasis on women beneficiaries of aid as important actors whose involvement and participation is essential, not merely a “vulnerable group” in need of special assistance. The strength of the modernization approach is its analysis of gender and power as relational, socially constructed and variable across time and space, and its commitment to transform unequal gender relations and structures of power. Taken together, these strengths provides a good starting point for analysis of gendered needs and problems in specific field contexts and for the development of appropriate programmes that can ensure that aid promotes equality and does not reproduce existing unequal gender relations.

However, the three ways of understanding and working with gender that have been discussed in this report are also underpinned by a number of problematic assumptions and have a number of problematic effects. The basic needs approach tends to target women primarily on the basis of their (assumed) vulnerability, and the sometimes superficial focus on measuring equal access in terms of numbers can prevent deeper analysis of gendered injustices and lead to programmes with only cosmetic effects. In the instrumentalist approach, women’s participation is seen as a resource for the achievement of other goals, not as a right that is important in itself. Thus, gender analysis and programmes that seek to increase women’s participation become tools for improving the effectiveness of humanitarian aid, not tools for the improvement of gender equality. The analysis of gender and power in the modernization approach is problematically linked to a broader agenda for liberal peacebuilding, which tends to construct a cultural hierarchy where gender inequality becomes a symbol of the “less developed” status of beneficiary populations. This easily leads to conflict and resistance when gender equality is perceived as foreign, and obscures the important role played by local actors, such as refugee women’s organizations, in promoting gender equality. Becoming aware of these often implicit assumptions that underpin established ways of working is a necessary first step towards overcoming their problematic effects. In so doing, it is particularly important to bear in mind that gendered relations, inequalities and needs are not uniform across the

diverse contexts where humanitarian aid is delivered. International policies and handbooks cannot replace careful contextual analysis as a basis for programme design. For this reason, it is also especially essential to shed the incorrect assumption that aid agencies know better than local populations what the problems and needs that gender programming should address and the changes it should seek to achieve are. In current practice, working with local partners often means expecting them to implement programmes designed by others. Instead, listening to local actors and their interpretations of problems, needs and goals should be given priority.

In summary, building on the strengths of existing approaches to gender in humanitarian aid while consciously seeking to overcome their limitations holds great potential for more reflective humanitarian gender policy and programming that more effectively contributes to greater gender equality in situations of emergency and displacement.

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