

Challenging humanitarianism beyond gender as women and women as victims #PressforProgress

Dorothea Hilhorst, Holly Porter and Rachel Gordon argue the lack of inclusivity in gender-targeted humanitarian aid has obscured other realities in which men and women assume different and more complex roles.

At the United Nations (UN) World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) in May 2016, 'achieving greater gender equality and greater inclusivity' was identified as one of the five key areas of humanitarian action. The WHS wanted this to be a watershed moment that would spark a shift toward systematically meeting the needs of women and girls and promoting their role as active decision-makers and leaders.

After more than four decades of discourses on 'gender in development' and a substantive history of evolving international law and practice on women, peace, and security, the WHS marked an important declaration that the humanitarian aid field takes gender seriously. 'Gender' too often has been understood as synonymous with 'women and girls,' neglecting questions of agency, vulnerability, and the dynamic and changing realities of gendered power relations.

The focus on sexual violence has brought significant attention to *some of* the challenges that *many women* face, but has also reproduced a generalised image of women as victims. That idea was already well-embedded in classic views of conflict that see men as aggressors and combatants and women as non-combatant victims. While this depiction is grounded in sad empirical realities, it leads to a kind of tunnel vision that only centres on the suffering of women, viewing them as the *primary* victims and *primarily* as victims. The victim discourse furnishes a rationale for providing women with direly needed assistance, and in fact, women themselves are often keen to play the role of victim to become eligible for aid, backgrounding other aspects of their identity, including their (political) agency. Nonetheless, this focus is problematic in obscuring other realities in which men and women assume different and more complex roles.



Women in Mali pound cereals Image Credit: [Ralf Steinberger](#) via Flickr CC BY 2.0

Humanitarian programmes often seek the participation of women because they (we) are considered the more caring gender. Women are often targeted for aid as a proven means to improve the wellbeing of children, foster more peaceful conditions, and prevent the misdirection of resources. In the process, international aid often aims to also structurally improve the position of women. This is why UNICEF considers engaging women in service delivery as a positive step towards promoting women's rights, and describes it as the '[double dividend of gender equality](#)'. While well-intentioned, all of these assumptions pertaining to women's position and role in humanitarian responses have problematic aspects. These dimensions are what we aimed to unearth and explore in our new special issue of the journal [Disasters](#) on gender, sexuality and violence in humanitarian crises.

What about men?

The attention on women as aid recipients drowns out the voices that are asking: 'What about men?' (not to mention other marginalised gender categories like LGBT communities). Men also cope with specific vulnerabilities, often related to their gender. They are much more often at the receiving end of lethal violence than women, and are frequently victims of sexual violence. When aid is channelled through women, it can lead to a situation where men's vulnerability is forgotten, or where men feel emasculated or disenfranchised from their traditional social roles (see, for example, the contribution by [Holly Ritchie](#) to the special issue). Such situations can have a variety of consequences, ranging from mental health problems among men to the (violent) re-assertion of men and masculinities.

Gender as relations of power

The articles in the special issue bring another layer to this discussion that all too often boxes men and women into stagnant categories. By prioritising these categorical issues that ascribe and assume particular traits as specific to men and women, debates may miss the mark regarding gender as relations of power that, like everything else, are cast into disarray during humanitarian crises. It is well-established that gender roles are interwoven with other social identity markers, and that these intersectional gender relations are, moreover, deeply ingrained in and reproduced by the working of all institutions in society, ranging from the personal between men and women to the working of cultural values, geopolitics, governance practices, and religion. In creating the special issue, we asked: how do humanitarian responses interact with these myriad aspects of gender and other interrelated social identities? And how do humanitarian responses therefore affect gender relations?

Persistence and change

The special issue testifies both to the persistence of gender relations as well as their propensity to change. [Julian Hopwood, Holly Porter, and Nangiyo Saum](#) found a drastic reported change in everyday gender relations in Karamoja, Northern Uganda, especially where women's material resource bases were enhanced, but they raise questions about whether such change is enduring. The economic empowerment of women may spill over positively into other domains of life, or contrarily may undermine goodwill towards women's positions and bring about a violent backlash against them (and against humanitarians)—or both. Likewise, well-meaning interventions can have adverse effects, as [Luedke and Logan](#) found in South Sudan, where a narrow focus on conflict-related sexual violence and recycled (although well-intentioned) responses thereto by international organisations were not only unhelpful, but also ran counter to and undermined local norms that might have protected women.

The instrumentalisation of gender

A final layer that complicates the analysis of and interventions in gender relations is that gender as an issue is often instrumentalised for different purposes. Gender has firmly become part of the high politics of international relations. More locally, an interest in the position of women can, for example, obscure attempts of a government to firm up its grip over local authorities, as [Rebecca Tapscott](#) found in another contribution to the special issue on Northern Uganda. Likewise, [Hilhorst and Douma](#) found that the responses to sexual violence in the DRC were instrumentalised for various purposes by a large range of actors.

Treading carefully

What do these different layers mean for humanitarian action, apart from standing as a reminder that paying attention to women should not result in turning a blind eye to vulnerability and agency of other gender categories? The special issue highlights the dynamic and entangled nature of gender relations, and how humanitarian and political attention to gender adds additional layers to the complexities of gender relations in crisis environments. Aid can often do lots of harm. This does not mean that gender objectives should be abandoned, but that aid actors need to tread carefully and seriously invest in their capacity to carefully monitor the intended and unintended effects of programming on gender relations.

Read the [Disasters Special Issue: Gender, sexuality and violence in humanitarian crises](#) which is open access for the duration for 2018.

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The views expressed in this post are those of the author and in no way reflect those of the Africa at LSE blog, the Firoz Lalji Centre for Africa or the London School of Economics and Political Science.