

Grounds for Cautious Optimism

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Abstract

Humanitarian assistance organizations have made considerable strides in addressing gender issues. These efforts have fallen short, however, as organizations fail to adapt and apply a gender perspective consistently and to integrate local and international women into decision-making positions. This comment on Chris Corrin's report on humanitarian assistance in Kosova outlines the reasons for this partial failure, some of which are gender related and others of which are endemic to the humanitarian field. It concludes that the emergence of women activists in conflict areas provides grounds for cautious optimism for future transformative change.

Keywords

gender, humanitarian assistance, war, refugee, Kosovo

The 1995 World Conference on Woman in Beijing catapulted the importance of addressing gender issues to the world stage. For humanitarian organizations, this new awareness resulted in a flurry of policy statements and programmatic changes, all with the avowed desire to integrate gender concerns throughout their humanitarian work. In comparing the policies and practices of humanitarian organizations today with those pre-1993 (a date chosen to reflect preparations for Beijing), one can identify great progress in the ways in which humanitarian organizations respond to women's needs in conflict scenarios and incorporate them in crafting solutions.¹

One of the most important developments, which should not be under-emphasized, has been the adoption by many humanitarian organizations of a gender perspective.² Some humanitarian organizations now specifically direct staff to consider how the different roles, responsibilities, opportunities, and constraints of men and women influence their needs in times of humanitarian crisis as well as the nature of their response. By contrast, the earlier approach taken could be characterized as 'add woman and stir,' reflecting a desire to

solve 'women's' problems by creating 'special' women's programs for their 'special' needs.

This old approach to humanitarian work simply substituted women for men without making space for the skills and insights that women bring to addressing humanitarian issues. In contrast, a gender perspective emphasizes valuing the expertise of women and including women in central decision-making processes in all stages and aspects of humanitarian action. A gender perspective promises more transformative change as, by addressing the socially constructed roles of men and women, it has the potential to expose the very root of exploitation and domination of women and challenges the institutions that perpetuate inequality.³

The adoption of a gender perspective, however, rarely led to transformative institutional and programmatic change. The report on Kosova aptly illustrates the continued failure of humanitarian organizations to address gender concerns fully and consistently and to integrate local and international women in decision-making positions in program formation, adoption, and implementation. The main problem, which Corrin highlights in her report, is that processes of gender mainstreaming were not 'two-way (i.e. happening within international and local structures) and transparent.' While some organizations have examined their own management practices, most of the changes have been focused on overseas activities. And despite well-honed gender policy statements at headquarters and the pronounced desire for programmatic changes, overseas activities continued to approach gender unevenly and largely with the valuing of local expertise.

Some of the reasons for this partial failure are gender-related and others are endemic to the humanitarian field. The Kosova report points to some of these difficulties: lack of agency co-ordination, a paucity of information in relevant languages, and a lack of transparency in funding. There are other problems that could be attributed to the humanitarian field generally but that manifest themselves with particular negative consequences for those concerned with respect to gender issues.

Humanitarian organizations, by design, resist top-down change. Many humanitarian organizations, particularly as a result of changes in recent years, tend to be decentralized, with projects driven more by strong personalities in the field than by headquarters mandates. When staff wish to work on gender issues, they do; when they do not, they find some reason to steer clear of gender. Corrin's example of personnel who fail to take gender seriously is all too common. Humanitarian staff often justifies resistance to taking on gender concerns as 'western issues' that have nothing to do with the populations in need.

The emergency nature of many relief operations - the 'tyranny of the emergency' - also leads to the deprioritizing of gender issues as of lesser urgency. The Kosova example illustrates well the tyranny of the emergency. In the early 1990s, a handful of staff at large humanitarian organizations such as Oxfam and international women's groups such as *Kvinna till Kvinna*



addressed gender in their work in Kosovo. After all-out war broke out in Kosova and, following 'peace,' humanitarian organizations flooded into Kosova, the experience gained through these early efforts at gender-related work in Kosova were almost completely overlooked. The international 'heavy weights' moving into the region wanted to set up their own projects with an emphasis on meeting what they identified as emergency needs. Determined to get something done quickly, they deprioritized gender in their overall programming and, when establishing 'women's programs,' had little time for consultation with local women about their needs, and even less time for incorporating local women's expertise into problem solving.

In Kosova as in the rest of the world, humanitarian efforts are hindered by the nature of staffing of humanitarian work. Even if some staff enthusiastically addresses gender issues, their organizations do not back them up with serious institutional commitments that outlast rapid personnel turnover in emergencies. While some organizations have developed institutional tools for addressing gender issues that can survive staff changes, many more have not yet done so. In addition, all humanitarian projects with long-term goals (such as advancing gender equity) are stifled by the nature of the funding humanitarian projects. The donor-driven, results-oriented nature of humanitarian aid penalizes gender projects, as improvements with respect to gender do not lend themselves to predominantly quantitative measurements demanded by large donors.

All of these factors have limited the impacts of positive change on gender issues in the humanitarian field. Nonetheless, there are grounds for cautious optimism. Corrin's report shows us that, despite all the missteps of the international community, the current is moving in the right direction. Many humanitarian personnel, consultants, constituents, and donors continue to push for gender-related programs and for better inclusion of local women in decision making. Positive change has also come about in response to the increased reporting on abuses against women by human rights organizations and by media coverage of wartime sexual violence. Many members of the media have learned from their mistakes dealing with women victims of war violence in Bosnia and now approach the issue of sexual violence more sensitively and better co-ordinate their reportage of such issues with social service providers and local women's groups.

Moreover, international legal mechanisms, which are not mentioned in the Kosova report, are rapidly evolving in ways beneficial to the humanitarian field. International law now provides a firm basis for recognizing women's rights and human rights and wartime sexual violence as a violation of humanitarian law. The mandates and programmatic work of humanitarian organizations increasingly incorporate a human rights framework that helps them to identify and address gender inequities. While many humanitarian organizations continue to set themselves apart from the human rights framework, many more are at least drawing from the human rights paradigm and better co-ordinating with human rights staff at intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations.

The most important indication that we are moving in the right direction is illustrated by the very writing of the Kosova report and its publication in this journal. Women continue to organize and demand a voice in humanitarian decision making. Advocates may be dismayed by the failure of many humanitarian organizations to learn from their mistakes and their obstinate refusal to listen to local women and value their expertise. But, as this report testifies, they do not give up. Instead, advocates continue to find creative ways to thrive. This is true on both the international and local level. Corrin identifies fifteen indigenous Kosovar NGOs working to support women's needs. Not only is this a higher number than ten years past, but also the activities of the most active organizations have become more effective at addressing local needs. The number of local women with expertise on gender issues has grown as has their networking with regional and international advocates. The forging of alliances of war-affected women within their communities and regions and with networks in the international community is increasingly a force in combating the destructiveness of war and tackling deeply rooted inequities in power relations that spark conflicts.

The larger analysis of Kosova illustrates vividly that women are not just the victims of combat and the beneficiaries of humanitarian efforts but also the engines of resistance and key problem solvers in their communities. While only a handful of Kosovar Albanian women held key positions in the political bodies of the Albanian parallel society such as the League for Democratic Kosova (LDK), Albanian women, like Serbian women in Belgrade, have long been among the central leaders of human rights organizations and community social services. While some prominent Kosovar Albanian women were in the 1990s highly visible ambassadors abroad, many more worked quietly at home. The contribution of these 'quiet women' (who are rarely literally quiet) in the years of 1989-95 should not be undervalued.

Today the women of Kosova continue to play an important role in the reconstruction of their societies. At times, they are overlooked and undervalued by international agencies and agencies attempt to impose their own, often misguided projects upon them. Nonetheless, they continue to assert their agency. To put it bluntly, the women of Kosova are not mere objects to be 'done upon' by international actors. They are their own subjects and they are finding a way to use their contacts with the international community to improve their own societies. Transformative social change will never be had in Kosova or anywhere else but for the contribution of local women.

Notes

- 1 See Mertus (1999).
- 2 For an operative definition of gender perspective, see the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, Report of the Secretary-General (1996).
- 3 See Beth Woroniuk et al. (1997: 1).

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