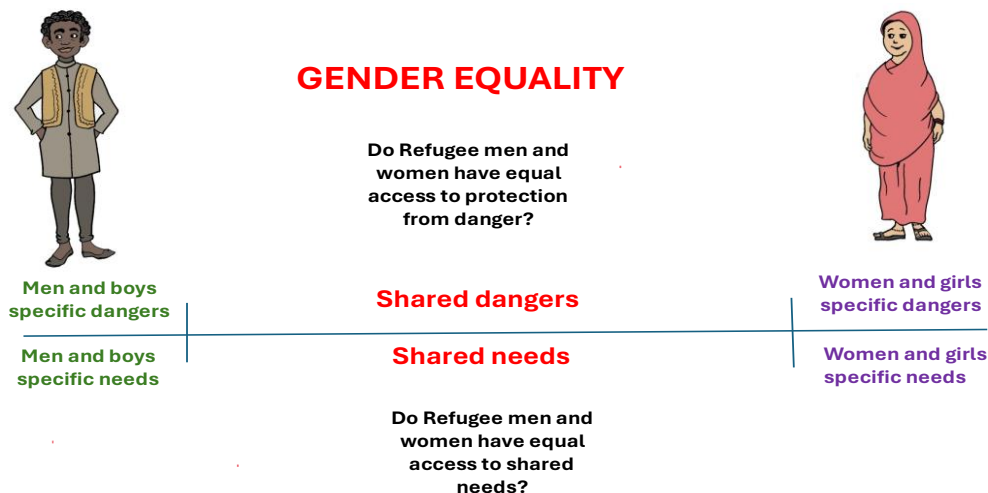


Module 3: Background Reading on How Gender inequality impacts on Refugee Women and WRLOs

A Focus on Refugee Women and Girls

(The following is an excerpt from a paper written for the World Refugee Council by Eileen Pittaway and Linda Bartolomei)



The question is often asked: “Why such a focus on women and girls — surely men and boys are just as important?” The needs of both groups are equally important, *but different*, and without effective policy frameworks and tools, these differences are not recognized. There is a male bias in refugee policy, an assumption that women’s needs will be automatically covered by addressing needs articulated for and by men. However, if these differing needs are not articulated, they are often not addressed (Oosterveld 2017; Callamard 2002).

It is appalling to hear of the millions of young refugees without access to secondary or tertiary education. But without disaggregating the numbers by gender, it is not evident that the majority of these young people are adolescent girls and the different barriers they face are left unacknowledged. Many girls do not have access to sanitary materials and thus miss school one week per month; some are forced to have sex with teachers in exchange for grades and school books (DeJong et al. 2017; UNHCR 2017a; Hassel and Krause 2017). “Survival sex” is seen as the only option for single women living alone on a single person’s rations in a camp, or paying rent in an urban area (Anani 2013; Pittaway 2003). Many single young men take dangerous journeys to seek asylum, as a result of forced recruitment into terrorist groups; they face human rights abuses, including rape (Freccero et al. 2017; UNHCR 2017b). Gender affects every stage of the refugee journey, from reception to durable solutions. Unless these realities are acknowledged, there will be a failure to develop effective responses to meet the different needs of refugee women and girls, men and boys.

However, without diminishing the lack of rights and suffering of many women in the Global South, for many refugee women, the impact of this inequality is more damaging than for women residing in their own countries. They endure rape and sexual abuse at every stage of the refugee journey. Refugee women and girls have little access to protection or justice systems, and perpetrators operate with impunity. In many places there are no reproductive health services. They have even less access to education and employment than most women in host communities, and, most

importantly, they have lost their homes, families and support networks. This is not to argue that refugee women should be privileged over women and girls in host communities, but rather that to achieve justice and adequate protection for refugees, the needs of both groups must be addressed equally (United Nations Development Programme 2016).

Refugee Women and Girls: A Vulnerable Minority?

For far too long, the prevailing discourse about refugee women and girls has been about a “vulnerable minority.” This has been reinforced by media stories and fundraising advertisements that depict them as pathetic and hopeless (Alhayek 2014). Women and girls are not a vulnerable group per se, nor are they a “minority,” constituting more than 50 percent of the diverse groups within refugee populations. While sharing with men and boys the same basic needs for food, water, shelter, sanitation and security, they do have additional and significantly different needs. The most important difference is that of endemic and often systematic SGBV against women and girls. Men and boys also are victims of SGBV, and again this generates the need for different and appropriate responses (Freedman 2016; Krause 2015).

There is a danger in focusing only on the vulnerabilities of women and girls, as it can create a discourse of helpless victims. There has been a movement in the past decade to change this focus and to recognize the strengths of refugee women and girls: they are also resilient and have immense social capital and capabilities. Despite the layers of discrimination, they are not merely passive victims. In many camps and refugee sites, women run crèches (daycares) for children, arrange care for orphaned or lost children, provide safe spaces for women who have experienced SGBV, manage scarce rations to ensure that families are fed, run small businesses to support their families, organize basic schools, and provide protection (Bartolomei et al. 2016; Olivius 2014). Much of this work is done without funding or external support. In the absence of men, women take on all roles in the family and community. Women have formal skills, as well as a wide range of informal skills, and have a huge capacity. They are also capable of keen analysis of the problems experienced in camps and cities, and of formulating potential solutions. However, because of their minority status, and the discourse of vulnerability, their capacities, skills and abilities often go unrecognized. Women are silenced by limited access to representation at every level, by culture, tokenism, gender stereotypes and lack of funding for targeted programs. Therefore, to focus only on strengths is to ignore the widespread challenges, discrimination and abuse that refugee women and girls survive. They are simultaneously strong and resourceful, victims and marginalized. They usually survive, despite the vulnerable situations in which they find themselves. An adequate response involves addressing structural vulnerabilities that result from pervasive gender inequalities, as well as creating opportunities for strengths to be capitalized.

The policy of gender mainstreaming was specifically developed to address these structural gender inequalities (UN Women 2014). It is underpinned by “the recognition that gender differences shape policy processes and outcomes” (True 2003:369) and aims to ensure that the different concerns of men and woman are fully reflected in “the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes in all political, economic and societal spheres so that women and men benefit equally, and inequality is not perpetuated. The ultimate goal is to achieve gender equality” (ECOSOC 1997, 3). However, despite some progress in this area, gender concerns have not consistently translated into policies or practices needed to support meaningful social change (UNHCR 2018b; True 2003). It is clear that without the political will and resources to develop and implement policy and practices to address the structural vulnerabilities that underpin pervasive gender inequalities, gender mainstreaming will continue to flounder. (<https://www.cigionline.org/publications/rhetoric-reality-achieving-gender-equality-refugee-women-and-girls>).

Implications for WRLOs

While we can identify some of the most obvious structural barriers which impact on Women's Refugee Led Organisations, (See *Module 1, Session 2*), **Gender inequalities** also cause major barriers for WRLOs. Some women and girls have never had the opportunity to attend school and are pre-literate. Some do not speak the language of their host country. Few have had the opportunity to learn English, which is the dominant language used in the Humanitarian field. Many refugee women lack access and opportunity to attend education and training about human rights, gender equality, sexual and gender-based violence, and other life skills. They are also excluded from practical courses such as how to run organisations and projects. Culture, family responsibilities, socio-economic circumstances and literacy levels also can pose barriers to participation. These gender inequalities must be addressed along with the structural issues. Despite the fact that many pre-literate women with little or no formal education are leaders in their communities, and provide family and community support, their contribution is often overlooked. This was clearly observed in their roles as first responders in the COVID-19 pandemic, where women, many without any formal training or support, stepped forward and filled the void left by humanitarian aid workers who were often not allowed into camps or communities.

Through no fault of their own, some highly competent women lack the information, training or support to meet the expectations of donors to meet sophisticated complex guidelines and financial accountability. They lack opportunity and experience to run WRLOs at a level which will enable them to compete for funding and meet the often-excessive requirements placed on funding by donors. To fulfill the commitments made in the GCR this must be addressed.

While fully accepting that all organisations must be efficient and accountable for funding equal to any other recipient, it would appear that, at times, accountability measures placed on refugee-led projects exceed what is expected from other NGOs.

References and Further Reading

Pittaway. E and Bartolomei. L (2018) *From Rhetoric to Reality: Achieving Gender Equality for Refugee Women and Girls*, WRC Research Paper No. 3, World Refugee Council Research Paper Series- <https://www.cigionline.org/publications/rhetoric-reality-achieving-gender-equality-refugee-women-and-girls>