

# Gender and forced migration: editorial

by Judy El-Bushra

This issue of *Forced Migration Review* comes at a time when Gender and Development as a body of theoretical and professional practice is at a critical point in its evolution.

**G**ender and Development (GAD) takes as its starting point the idea that the behaviour of men and women is conditioned by social and cultural expectations, rather than by innate or natural differences between the two sexes. These assumed differences result in injustice when they are reflected in differential access to decision-making power or when they carry with them discriminatory attitudes and values.

Assumptions and values about men's and women's roles and behaviours condition men's attitudes towards other men and women's towards other women, as well as the relations between women and men. Assumptions about gender differences operate not only between individuals but also within institutions, including the household, the community, the state, schools and places of employment, including development agencies themselves. It is these institutions which reinforce and perpetuate gender discrimination, and it is these which must be challenged if gender injustice is to be transformed into equality of treatment, opportunity and rights.

## Gender and Development at the crossroads

Gender and Development arose out of a concern that development policies and interventions were tending to take men as being the 'norm', ignoring women's own needs and aspirations and their capacity to act independently. In doing so they were also endangering patterns of food security, wealth creation, markets, socialization practices, cultural expression and political processes by devaluing women's critical contributions to them. The main aim of GAD policy

has been to transform the position of women from one of subordination to one of equality, by recognizing the inessential and transitory nature of the assumptions which underpin that subordination.

Although this aim has been widely adopted by development and humanitarian agencies and by their donors over the last 10 to 15 years, the field of gender and development continues to be a contested one. It is currently under challenge from three separate, though linked, trends. These are: the debate on men and gender, the challenge of making women's rights a reality, and the broadening of focus away from a narrow, economic view of development. The articles in this issue, though written from the specific perspective of gender and forced migration, reflect these debates and contribute to them.

### i. Where do men fit?

The first challenge is a concern to articulate, more firmly and actively than in the past, the position of men within gender-analytical frameworks. This is a reaction to GAD's almost exclusive preoccupation over the last ten years or more with women's needs, interests and rights. If 'gender' implies a web of relationships between women and men, old and young, powerful and powerless, should men not figure, integrally and equally, in the analysis of these relationships? As Simon Turner and Cathrine Brun indicate in this issue, there may be negative consequences for both women and men if they are not. Giving preference to women in assistance programmes may contribute to eroding men's role (as protectors, providers and decision makers, for example) and hence their social position and self-esteem but still not



challenge the dominant gender ideology in which men's and women's roles are both viewed as 'natural'. The situation of displacement is an opportunity for renegotiating gender relations (as well as relationships between generations): an opportunity which may be missed through prioritizing support to either women or men. To make the most of this opportunity, men and women must both 'participate as active partners' (in Brun's phrase) in this renegotiation.

Other related questions, currently reverberating through assistance-providing agencies, are also echoed in the articles in this issue. Does the stress on women prevent us from recognizing discrimination by men against men (older versus younger men, for example, or men from different classes or ethnicities), women against women (when women collude in promoting gender discrimination against each other) and women against men? Can women's rights be supported within a context of broader developmental and humanitarian goals or do men inevitably have to lose when women gain? In short, where do men fit within a gender approach to development?

### ii. Has development promoted or undermined women's rights?

The second trend is a questioning of what GAD has indeed achieved for women. The 'mainstreaming' of gender approaches in development at the level of policy has often led to greater awareness

of women's needs, and a greater level of investment in supporting these. Yet the outcomes have often been palliative in nature, providing women with, for example, additional income, increased mobility or access to services while not confronting the ideological basis of discrimination against them. They have often failed to take into account the power relations in which women are enmeshed, or to give true recognition to women's strengths and capacity to act on their own account.

The attention women have received from development agencies and policy makers has often been too little, too late and too superficial to promote the exercise of their rights. A recent reflection of this state of affairs has been evidenced in the Beijing + 5 consultation process. The consultation (as Srilakshmi Gururaja points out) concluded that, five years since the landmark Beijing International Conference on Women took place, barriers still remain in implementing its provisions.

Assistance providers, both governmental and non-governmental or multilateral, have often been dilatory in approaching abuses of women's rights - indeed of human rights generally. Often (see, for example, Peter Mwangi Kangwaja's remarks on sexual abuse of Sudanese women in Kenya) these are dismissed as belonging in the realm of 'culture' and hence beyond the scope of assistance programmes. This may be true

even where protection is part of the organization's mandate. The politics of agency survival within host countries can dampen the inclination to challenge discriminatory ideologies. However, the agencies concerned may thereby lay themselves open to charges of discrimination through neglect.

While assistance providers have often found it relatively easy to address women's needs as vulnerable victims of war, they have often balked at supporting women in their capacity to be active shapers of their own lives ('seeing women as survivors not victims', in Gururaja's phrase). Why should this be so?

Like Kangwaja, Heaven Crawley (addressing the question from the perspective of asylum claims from women and how they are handled) implies that immigration officials, too, are influenced by their own ethnocentric understanding of gen-

der when dealing with claims from Southern women whom they assume to be poor and badly educated, incapable of confronting actively the social constructions in which their lives are framed.

### iii. A deeper and more inclusive gender analysis framework

The third trend is a growing appreciation that increasing women's access to economic security and to sources of income, long the focus of SAOD projects, is too narrow a goal. Not only does it not take into account men's gendered roles, as suggested above, but it also fails to recognize the full range of women's contributions to society and of their needs and interests.

Understanding and promoting sustainable livelihoods involves recognizing and supporting women's roles in agriculture, animal husbandry, commerce and in the distribution and consumption of food and other benefits within the household and community. Despite decades of evidence of women's contribution to food production globally, development and humanitarian agencies still tend to focus their investment in crops and production systems managed by men. Similarly, the technical, social, economic and political

skills which women apply when contributing to complex systems of food security are often overlooked. A relatively under-researched area in

this context is women's contribution to the maintenance of genetic diversity of crops and production systems in post-disaster contexts (see Monica Trujillo's article).

More broadly, agencies have only relatively recently begun to acknowledge that the non-material aspects of people's lives play as great a part as their economic success. These non-material aspects include their personal and sexual relationships, their reproductive and mental health, their self-esteem and the respect they receive from others, and their capacity for political involvement and activism. Gururaja's overview describes a number of projects taking this broad perspective. The existence of such projects is evidence of progress away from a humanitarian model concerned mainly with shelter, food and income but still falls short of constituting a comprehensive model.

## The gender dimensions of forced migration

Looking at forced migration from a gender perspective provides insight into a number of issues relating to the planning and implementation of humanitarian assistance. As Gururaja suggests, conflict and disasters impact differently on men and women. It cannot be assumed that their needs and interests are the same, nor that those of women or of men are the same everywhere. A gender approach then requires project planning to be based on an understanding of the varied contexts in which interventions are implemented. An important conclusion emerging from this collection is the danger of taking a broad-brush approach to the design of assistance programmes and of deploying models and guidelines which are insensitive to local contexts or uninformed by research and analysis of these contexts.

The articles in this issue have relevance for four important questions in particular: the impact of interventions on processes of social change, the management of camps for refugees and displaced persons, sexual violence against women, and the implementation of international conventions and guidelines on the rights of (especially women) refugees and IDPs.

### i. Assistance programmes and their impact on social change

How do gender roles and relationships shift under the pressure of rapid upheavals? Some general trends can be observed: there is a tendency for women to take on more and different roles as providers and protectors of families, to draw confidence and determination from these experiences, and to develop their political consciousness and agency. On the other hand, men often find themselves at a loose end, unable to re-establish their position as respected decision makers.

This tendency for women to take on new roles is often given conscious encouragement by aid providers, as demonstrated by the Burundi and Sri Lanka cases described here, in the hope that by doing so the opportunity can be taken to build more equitable power relations in future. Is such optimism justified? The cases quoted in this issue throw doubt on the capacity of the international community to influence gender

## *conflict and disasters impact differently on men and women*

relations in a positive and lasting way. For example, advancing women's interests at a superficial, women-focused level which fails to challenge overall paradigms of gender difference leaves women with new roles to fulfil but no institutional leverage to fulfil them effectively, as both Turner and Brun show.

What is also clear from these accounts, however, is that post-crisis interventions are equally unlikely to be neutral in their impact on the changing position and condition of men and women, and may indeed reinforce patriarchal institutions (as Kagwanja describes) which constrain women's human rights for protection. To the extent that official technical assistance ignores production systems managed by women (as with the agricultural systems described by Trujillo) this may have long-term consequences for both food security and women's capacity to manage their own affairs. Gururaja points to an important conclusion: the necessity of social and gender research into displaced communities as a basis for planning and implementation of assistance programmes.

## ii. Agency and participation and the challenge to management

Management of assistance programmes is influenced critically by the attitudes and values of the humanitarian profession. While protection of the vulnerable is a major factor in humanitarian policy and in the motivation of agency personnel, this needs at the same time to be balanced by a recognition that displaced people are individuals with their own histories, skills, strengths and capacities, and with sets of personal and social relations which crisis will not easily erode.

The notion of vulnerability has figured highly in humanitarian discourse for years. It has had particular implications for displaced women, children and the disabled, who are often categorized as 'vulnerable groups'. 'Victim' may well be an appropriate word for those women and men who have suffered rape, for example, and the attendant multiple crises of physical and psychological injury, and rejection by families, communities and legal systems. Yet the use of the word, denying as it does the

resilience and determination of those who have undergone such experiences, predisposes assistance programmes towards offering palliative care rather than confronting underlying systemic injustices. Using it may lead to extending the notion of 'victimhood' to all women or to all displaced people, or all of a particular ethnicity or class. Such 'victims' are seen as being prone to the 'dependency syndrome' mentioned by Turner, addicted to assistance and an eternal charge on the international community.

Participation by the displaced (and especially women) in the management of camps is one approach which aims to break down 'victimhood'. However, questions must be asked (as Turner does) about who benefits most from this approach. Do the displaced gain dignity and self-esteem from it or is it a management tool? Over and above that, prioritizing women in camp management may serve neither women nor men well, since it both excludes men and, if carried out at a superficial level, fails to capitalize on women's capacities and agency.

*Dinka refugee returning from Ethiopia to Sudan.*



### iii. Sexual violence

Major assistance providers such as UNHCR have relatively recently recognized rape and other forms of sexual violence (such as forced marriage) as being a significant phenomenon affecting refugee and displaced communities, and one which needs to be addressed by assistance programmes in practical ways as part of the protection mandate. Attention has been paid to issues such as camp layout and lighting and the provision of services and support to raped women. Much of the impetus for this attention came from UNHCR-sponsored initiatives among Somali and Sudanese refugees in Kenya, referred to by Kagwanja.

Kagwanja's article seeks to deepen the understanding of the phenomenon by linking its high incidence in the Kenyan context to underlying gender and ethnic discrimination, both within the refugee communities and within the Kenyan state, and even echoed in the assistance community. However, the issue of sexual violence raises other fundamental questions.

First, how can the apparent increase in sexual violence in situations of conflict be explained? What factors are inherent in conflict which trigger this response? Effective assistance measures depend on a deeper understanding of the phenomenon in general.

Secondly, there is a widespread assumption (reflected in the articles in this volume) that rape and sexual violence are inflicted by men on women, even though evidence shows male rape to be a significant feature of many conflicts. This too has implications for assistance programmes: if support for raped women has been insufficient, support for raped men is virtually non-existent.

Thirdly, why has it been so difficult for sexual violence to be recognized, in terms of global policy, as a push-factor in displacement and hence grounds for asylum? A particular aspect of this (and one rarely acknowledged) is the issue of homophobic discrimination, both as a push-factor in countries of refugee origin and in asylum countries. Homophobia is indeed rarely regarded as a 'gender issue' at all, even though it is a prime example of the 'socially and culturally constructed expectations' of men's and women's behaviour on which gender analysis is founded. The association of 'gender discrimination' with

issues of women's rights (referred to above) has blinded many assistance providers to its deeper implications.

### iv. International legal frameworks and standards

A number of international legal frameworks, drawn essentially from the UN Charter on Human Rights, have been developed to guide international responses to refugee and displaced people's rights (see Gururaja's article for references to key examples). These have been accompanied by codes of conduct, good practice guidelines and training programmes.

Implementation, however, lags behind, partly because interpretations of agreed policy vary in different cultural and political contexts and have to be re-made in each context. Crawley and Kagwanja, examining this question from two different viewpoints, suggest that ethnic and gender ideologies of discrimination may underpin both the policy and the practice of asylum and protection. However, Nathalia Berkowitz' note on the UK gender guidelines suggests that constructive lobbying can bring about significant changes in both attitudes and practice.

### Conclusion

The articles in this issue demonstrate some of the insights that a gender approach can offer to the planning and implementation of assistance programmes in support of displaced communities and individuals. Such an approach can ensure that women's practical needs, easy to overlook, become more visible, and that their own efforts to improve their social position can be supported. It can help assistance agencies to gain improved understanding of the social, economic and political impacts of their choices of action and investment. Mainstreaming gender analysis into international legal frameworks and agencies forms the basis of accountability by the international community towards the displaced, and can help identify biases which institutions must confront in their own attitudes and practice.

Yet, as the examples quoted here show, gaps and contradictions appear in practice, prompting the question: is gender still a useful concept? Has it been used so widely, and to represent so many differing perspectives, that its currency has

become debased? Has the fundamental meaning of gender (as social constructions of masculinity and femininity) been swept aside in the search for policy prescriptions? And, in the process, is it in danger of failing both women and men?

If 'gender' is to be rescued as a useful project for development, it needs time and resources to be invested in research in order to understand how it works in different social, economic and political contexts. It needs to be re-politicized and understood as a factor of contested identities, both of women and of men. Most importantly, if gender is to continue to be a relevant concept, it needs to be understood as having meaning for both men and women, old and young, settled and displaced, North and South: in other words, as an expression of **human** identity and **human** aspirations.

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## is gender still a useful concept?

## Research update

**Refugee voices in Europe**  
Refugees from former Yugoslavia in Italy and the Netherlands - experiences of integration (with focus on role of gender)

**April 1999 - May 2001**

Researcher: Dr Maja Korac,  
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The main aim of this research is to analyse the social conditions of refugees and explore their experiences of integration in the process of refugee settlement, with a special focus on the role of gender. The project takes the form of a comparative study of exile communities from former Yugoslavia in Italy and the Netherlands. It addresses the following issues: i) the social conditions of refugees from former Yugoslavia in the two EU countries; ii) the nature of 'successful integration' as desired by the refugees themselves; iii) the policy contexts and their relation to the needs and expectations of refugees. Findings of the overall comparative study will be completed by the end of May 2001. (Funded by Lisa Gilad Initiative and ECRE)

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