

Humanitarian action and the transformation of gender relations

Melinda Wells and Geeta Kuttiparambil

There is value in creating space within a humanitarian response to invest in interventions that go beyond addressing the immediate risks and needs. This is particularly the case in relation to women's empowerment.

When the Women and Girls Oasis Centre opened in Za'atari refugee camp in Jordan in late 2012, it was a dusty, barren plot, surrounded by prefabricated trailers and a fence. By the end of 2014, the Oasis compound was filled with colourful murals, hanging plants grew out of pots made from recycled water bottles, and the sounds of children shouting, playing and learning drifted from the windows of the children's centre. Women work, chat, drink coffee, cry, comfort, tease and laugh.

Almost all the women who came to the Oasis had been forced by the conflict in Syria to become the heads of their households. Having survived the brutality of the conflict, they were faced with the new and overwhelming responsibilities of life in exile. Few felt equipped to meet this challenge. Life in Za'atari, as many of the women told us, presents a major contrast to a life in Syria defined by culturally prescribed gender roles.

In humanitarian settings, responses targeting women and adolescent girls are often limited to aspects of reproductive health and protection and response to gender-based violence (GBV). Yet a proactive approach creating physical space for women can be a critical catalyst to women claiming more social and political space as well. Where this type of approach has been taken, there are encouraging stories of women refugees developing and articulating individual and collective strategies to address their needs. Women also express an increased confidence in their ability to meet the challenges they will face in displacement over the medium and long term.

Vulnerability and empowerment

Humanitarian crises increase risks for displaced individuals and families in a number of areas, including vulnerability

to all forms of GBV, forced recruitment and labour exploitation, including child labour. Women and girls across all age groups are most at risk. This is due to a number of factors including the separation of families, breakdown of law and order and traditional protection systems, and the inability of displaced people to meet their most basic needs, resulting in the adoption of potentially harmful coping strategies. While prevention and response interventions that address protection issues are critical, it is important to consider the opportunities that such massive shocks can also create. For example, sudden displacement may offer the possibility for a woman to leave an abusive partner, to adopt new roles as she is compelled to support her family in unexpected ways, or to find her voice as she steps forward to advocate for solutions to the new challenges facing her family or her community.

Yet the language of empowerment is not consistently adopted in humanitarian scenarios and gender equality is often put aside as a development issue. It is vital to recognise the criticality of women's empowerment in humanitarian action and of physical, social and political space for refugee women to be prioritised through programmes such as the Oasis. This type of programme emphasises dialogue with women about their needs and aspirations, and results in interventions that take a longer-term view to addressing critical protection, participation and livelihood objectives.

The Oasis has allowed for multiple narratives which go well beyond an analysis of risk and vulnerability to look at capacity and at ways of promoting and supporting mutually reinforcing coping strategies. This is especially relevant when considering the

May 2016

www.fmreview.org/solutions

physical and social architecture of space for women and girl refugees. In addition to the specific protection issues that they face as a result of their sex, they also need self-reliance and civic engagement mechanisms that facilitate their participation in community life and decision making. With this comprehensive approach, women begin to rebuild self-confidence that may have been eroded by the often forceful separation from their traditional roles.

According to a recent report by UNHCR (the UN Refugee Agency), 145,000 Syrian refugee women now run their households alone¹ and this is the case of many of the women in Za'atari. Despite this evidence, humanitarian strategies consistently – and unacceptably – categorise women and girls as ‘vulnerable’, without clearly articulating definitions of vulnerability.

Programmes like the Women and Girls Oasis do not identify affected people as only ‘displaced’ but bring in their capacities and previous aspirations, as lawyers, teachers, counsellors, doctors, engineers. This model uses the response to immediate protection and safety needs as a stepping-stone to interventions that help shift women’s self-perception regarding their ability to cope with their circumstances, and provides a place where women can more fully explore their capacities and aspirations.

Participation and decision making

In the Oasis, Syrian refugee women are offered information, referral and support to prevent and respond to sexual and gender-based violence. Classes and information sessions are offered, aimed at enhancing life skills, including literacy, language training, health and well-being. As a result of a participant skills assessment, tailoring and hairdressing workshops have also been established. The Syrian women volunteer in these workshops, which, in turn, offer free services to residents of the camp. This provides participants with the opportunity to develop or strengthen their marketable skills while gaining the satisfaction of providing valued services to their community. Finally, programme participants are offered

civic participation training and follow-up mentoring. This training is tailored specifically to refugee women, facilitating the development of strategies and leadership skills for mobilising action on issues of concern within their community.

The goal of safe spaces like the Women and Girls Oasis is to provide the conditions under which women and girls can raise their voices or play a role in community decision making. Participation in decision-making structures is key to accountability commitments in humanitarian response. Yet often we fail miserably to deliver meaningfully on women’s leadership and participation, citing cultural factors or urgency as barriers. Refugee decision making in such a setting often seems elusive or even a luxury, but women at the Oasis say they want the opportunity to define their lives, their needs and their aspirations and many of the women link their participation in the programme to a restored sense of dignity. Similarly, they report that, in their context, committees structured around the concept of a 50% gender balance do not achieve the presumed goal of equal participation of women and men due to cultural roles that dictate the interactions between men and women, and, in some cases, to overt intimidation by male members leading the women to withdraw.

To ensure that community decision-making structures are defined by women’s terms of engagement and that their voices are heard across the agencies in Za’atari, the lead agencies for camp management and community mobilisation have tapped into the Oasis resources to host women’s committees. It is critical to make a distinction between situations where women are not participating, and the assumption that women do not wish to participate. While participation of women, overall, in Za’atari camp committee structures is low, a group of women approached the Oasis staff requesting that, in addition to Arabic literacy, they also receive English classes so that they could better argue their case with the largely English-speaking decision-makers in the humanitarian community.

www.fmreview.org/solutions

May 2016

This is not the story of victims but, rather, of women survivors who are supported in taking steps towards constructing a new world and life for themselves and their families. It should not be forgotten that many of these women were professionals before they became refugees. These women tell us they do not want to be defined solely as victims or aid recipients but rather as women actively engaged in a process of establishing new strategies for moving forward in the face of their current circumstances. Post-conflict recovery approaches need to

create space for women's empowerment to allow this narrative to fully unfold.

Melinda Wells melindawells@gmail.com

Gender and humanitarian policy advisor

Geeta Kuttiparambil grits71@hotmail.com

Member of the GenCap and NORCAP rosters

The views expressed in this article are the views of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of their respective organisations.

1. UNHCR (2014) *Woman Alone: The fight for survival by Syria's refugee women*

http://womanalone.unhcr.org/mobile/#_ga=1.72256083.1140573610.1389696781

