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Gender-Transformative Change in Humanitarianism: A View from Inside

White Paper

January 2021

The Women's Refugee Commission (WRC) improves the lives and protects the rights of women, children, and youth displaced by conflict and crisis. We research their needs, identify solutions, and advocate for programs and policies to strengthen their resilience and drive change in humanitarian practice.

Acknowledgments

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Executive Summary

In 2015, in Goal 5 of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (the Sustainable Development Goals), the international community committed to achieving gender equality. This was recognized not only as a matter of human rights, but also as the foundation for a peaceful, prosperous, and sustainable world. Achieving this goal, and the broader goal of leaving no one behind, means prioritizing action for the most marginalized members of our society, including women, children, youth, older people, people with disabilities, LGBTQI+ people, indigenous people, migrants, and people who have been forcibly displaced.

We are living in a time of unprecedented humanitarian need, with more people displaced by conflict and crises than ever before. Yet the global humanitarian system is widely considered to be unfit for purpose. We need a systemic change to humanitarian response: a shift from an inherently externally driven (often by the Global North) approach to one that is led by crisis-affected communities, particularly women, people of color, and other historically marginalized groups. It is time for humanitarian actors to engage in the processes and interventions needed to create equitable, inclusive, and sustainable change.

In 2020, the Women's Refugee Commission (WRC) studied how the experts who are charged with addressing gender inequality and creating gender transformative change in humanitarian response assess how well the system is doing. We focused primarily on staff in global north-based international organizations, which currently hold most of the resources—and power—to set the priorities and agenda for the humanitarian system. The research examined three key questions: 1. How well are humanitarian organizations doing on creating inclusive gender-transformative change? 2. What are the key factors to consider in creating gender-transformative change in humanitarian response? 3. What should humanitarian organizations do to advance gender-transformative change? The study included an analytic desk review of specialized and gray literature, and key informant interviews with 50 gender and humanitarian experts in 25 organizations.

This study finds that a gender-transformative agenda must happen *within* humanitarian organizations in order for the operational work they do to actually achieve inclusive gender transformative outcomes. This internal organizational change must, importantly, center on hiring staff—especially leaders—with the capacity for and commitment to gender-transformative change. This change also rests on the creation of a culture of and systems for accountability to transformative processes and outcomes. The study highlights the need for donors as well as operational humanitarian actors to shift power and resources to actors in affected contexts and communities, especially to women-led civil society and movements, with attention to not only the amount of money but also the type of funding. The research revealed strong calls for attention to intersecting gendered inequalities, and an understanding of longer and integrated processes of change (the humanitarian–development–peace nexus).

This is not a call for a technical fix. The humanitarian system is awash in well-meaning gender policies and tools. These are largely seen by gender experts as at best generic, neglecting power differentials, different local contexts, and sectoral fields. These technical approaches enable powerful actors to avoid the political work needed to create equitable and inclusive humanitarian response and impact.

The humanitarian sector must recognize that gender equality is a critical part of humanitarian response, not an add-on. This requires the capacity, the skills, and the political will to shift power. It means hiring staff, especially leadership, who have the commitment and the skills needed to create equitable and inclusive change. It means that organizational work and internal accountability to equity and inclusion is understood as central to creating gender equitable and inclusive impact through operations. It means that donors must step up their commitment to, and funding for, gender equality.

The global movements for an anti-racist and just humanitarian response provide the momentum, accountability, and opportunity for those who hold power to do the necessary internal and external work.

Study Focus

This research examines three key questions:

1. How well are humanitarian organizations doing on creating inclusive gender-transformative change?

2. What are the key factors to consider in creating gender-transformative change in humanitarian response?

3. What should humanitarian organizations do to advance gender-transformative change?

The study included an analytic review of the literature, and key informant interviews with 50 gender and humanitarian experts in 25 organizations. The research was conducted in 2020.

Methods

The data collection involved a desk review of specialized and gray literature, and key informant interviews. The main key words used to identify relevant literature were:

Analysis	*Gender*	*Intersectional/Intersectionality*
Approach	*Gender-Based Violence*	*Livelihoods*
Cash	*Girls*	*Movement*
Change	*Guideline*	*Policy*
COVID-19	*Handbook*	*Resilience*
Development	*Health*	*Response*
Emergency	*Humanitarian*	*Self-Reliance*
Empowerment	*Human Rights*	*Tool/Toolkit*
Feminist/Feminism	*Inclusive/Inclusion*	*Transformative/Transformation*
Framework	*Indicator*	*Women*

WRC conducted 50 key informant interviews with headquarter and field staff to explore organizational and implementing practices. Consulted practitioners are currently working or have previously worked at the following organizations:

CARE International

Equilo

Girl Effect

Global Affairs Canada

IASC

ICRC

OCHA (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs)

Oxfam

Plan International UK

Sierra Leone Urban Research Center

Syria Resilience Consortium

UNHCR

UNICEF

UN Women

The interviews lasted between 30 and 90 minutes. They were held virtually and were semi-structured and open-ended. WRC recorded interviews with verbal consent for ease of data analysis. Remarks have been anonymized, and all data is confidential. All interviewees will be referred to by the type of organization they currently work for to protect anonymity. For example, INGO for international nongovernmental organization, instead of naming the organization.

Introduction: Shifting humanitarianism to inclusive gender-transformative change

Through its 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the international community commits to achieving gender equality, not only as a matter of human rights but as the foundation for a "peaceful, prosperous, and sustainable world."[1] This requires "leaving no one behind" by prioritizing action for the most marginalized members of our society, including women, children, youth, older people, people with disabilities, LGBTQI+ people, indigenous people, migrants, and people who have been forcibly displaced."[2]

However, lasting and inclusive change, referred to here as **inclusive gender-transformative change (IGTC),** can only be realized if policymakers and practitioners move beyond the individual and start addressing the structural and root causes that perpetuate inequality.[3] In addition, efforts to achieve and maintain justice, equality, and peace must be centered around the well-being, capacities, and perspectives of the most marginalized.[4] It is in this context of global priorities and unprecedented humanitarian need that the international humanitarian system, which was set up to deliver emergency relief, assistance, and protection in times of crises, has been deemed unfit for purpose.[5] While crises have grown in frequency, scope, scale, and complexity, the global aid architecture has not been able to adapt to shifting demands.[6] Emergency response persists over several years, reaches too few people, and remains top down rather than demand driven. Similarly, assistance is heavily underfunded and resources are inefficiently allocated.[7] Reforms are urgently needed to overhaul the (post-)colonial power structures of the Western humanitarian construct, and to create institutional incentives to make responses more effective and people-centered.[8] Humanitarian actors have attended to needs, particularly fundamental material needs such as food and shelter, while being reluctant to engage in the processes and interventions needed to create equitable, inclusive, and sustained change.[9] This paper examines how well the humanitarian system is doing on delivering on inclusive gender transformative change, and makes recommendations for a way forward.

Question 1: What are humanitarian organizations doing to create gender-transformative change?

1.1. Global context

Widening structural inequalities determine the impact of humanitarian responses to crises and displacement, which are increasingly frequent and protracted. To deliver on the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly the focus on **leaving no one behind,** humanitarian actors must purposefully address intersectional inequalities and marginalization. Gender inequality is central to this.

There is debate in the humanitarian sector about the mandate and possibility of engaging in gender-transformative work in all phases of the humanitarian response and in all humanitarian contexts.[10] We argue that the humanitarian mandate to deliver lifesaving interventions in times of crisis must be informed by this perspective, irrespective of the phase of the response. This is because if we are not actively engaging in creating IGTC then we are, however unwittingly, contributing to maintaining systemic barriers to equity and the fulfillment of human rights for all. In other words, there is no such thing as a neutral intervention.

To shift humanitarian response toward contributing to IGTC, we know that the allocation of resources, structures, and systems of power must be addressed.[11] As the current impact and response to the COVID-19 pandemic shows, IGTC requires an understanding of intersecting gendered inequities and marginalizations, and an approach that engages with the realities and self-determination of those most affected.[12] There is a need for a ***systemic change to humanitarian response***: to shift from an inherently externally driven (often by the Global North) approach to one that is led by crisis-affected communities, particularly women, people of color, and other historically marginalized groups who are most profoundly affected by structural exclusion and inequalities. For many, a ***feminist approach*** (see side bar) is needed to achieve IGTC. Such an approach excavates and challenges the systemic inequalities, based on gender, race, social class, ethnicity, disability, religion, age, sexual orientation, and gender identity, alongside other axes of marginalization, that shape the experience of and responses to crises and displacement.

1.2. What is being done?

While there is discomfort and even opposition to engaging in IGTC in humanitarian response, especially in the emergency phase, there is also a strong agreement within the humanitarian sector that programming *should* promote gender equality and women's rights. We know that women and girls face particular challenges during and after crises, and that emergencies exacerbate pre-existing inequalities; women and girls suffer disproportionately from increased insecurity, unpaid care work, mortality, and gender-based violence, as well as limited access to livelihoods, education, and healthcare, including sexual and reproductive health services.[13] Consequently, there is a consensus that humanitarians must mitigate potential negative effects. The failure to counter gendered protection risks is against the "do no harm" principle. It renders humanitarian response ineffective and inefficient, and can hamper long-term recovery and development efforts (KII-Donor government; KII-INGO; KII-INGO-1; KII-INGO-2; KII-UN; KII-CSO).[14]

Feminist Approach

"A feminist approach is one that goes beyond targeting women and girls to address the root causes of gender inequality. These causes persist through unequal power relations between women and men, as well as the patriarchal norms and structures that shape societies. A feminist approach to humanitarian action must be transformative in that it seeks to change these power dynamics. Such an approach should also be intersectional, taking into account the multiple forms of discrimination that different women, in all their diversity, face.

"Importantly, a feminist approach involves supporting women's agency and decision making by moving beyond seeing them as beneficiaries to recognize, value and support their leadership. It should also reconsider traditional hierarchical notions of leadership to recognize the different ways that leadership must be exercised to create more equal structures as well as place more emphasis on collective organizing.

"A key aspect of a feminist approach to localization is how partnerships with women's rights actors are formed and managed. Both the localization agenda and a feminist approach call for more equal partnerships between international, national and local actors, which at the moment are very unequal."[1]

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1   Oxfam Canada, *A Feminist Approach to Localization: How Can Canada Support the Leadership of Women' Rights Actors in Humanitarian Action* (Feminist Aid and Foreign Policy Series, June 2018), p. 15, https://www.oxfam.ca/publication/a-feminist-approach-to-localization-how-canada-can-support-the-leadership-of-womens-rights-actors-in-humanitarian-action/.

While insights have yet to translate into sustained change at the multiple levels required, the commitment to gender equality has resulted in widespread adoption of gender mainstreaming policies and guidance for practitioners (see Appendix). The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the lead agency of the Global Protection Cluster, has had mixed success in bringing its more intersectional "Age, Gender, and Diversity" approach to the wider humanitarian system.[15] The operationalization of gender and/or intersectional policies is not contributing to lasting shifts that adequately address the specific needs of women and girls.[16] System-wide policy developments, such as the IASC Policy and Accountability Framework,[17] the New Way of Working,[18] and the Grand Bargain,[19] demonstrate that the humanitarian sector is still trying to ensure gender-sensitive programming.[20] The forthcoming Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation on Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women and Girls indicates a commitment to understanding in depth if and how the humanitarian sector is delivering on advancing gender equality work.

1.3. Translating policy into practice: The use of gender tools

To strengthen gender work, the humanitarian field has created system-wide references and tools that aim to apply global guidance to practice, such as the IASC Gender Policy Handbook[21] and the Gender and Age Marker.[22] It is important to acknowledge that gender work, gender equality work, and gender-transformative work can be quite distinct. This analysis focuses on the tools referenced by the interviewees in this study. These tools are intended to accomplish tasks that fall largely into two categories. The first is **gender mainstreaming**, which aims to incorporate gender considerations in other sectoral work, such as economic empowerment. The underlying assumption is that gender is not de facto central to every kind of work at every phase of humanitarian engagement. The second is **gender tracking**, which focuses on ensuring that program planners use gender as a key category to keep track of gender in their work and, hopefully, consider it in a meaningful way. It also serves as an accountability mechanism for donors and headquarters to keep track of which programming is complying with mandates to mainstream gender. In addition to system-wide measurements and tools, most humanitarian organizations have created their own gender tools for headquarter and field staff. We assessed publicly available tools to better understand what they seek to accomplish and for whom (see Appendix). We know that the impact of tools depends on their use and usefulness. This study asked humanitarians if and how these gender tools are important to IGTC in current practice.

The majority of tools reviewed provide all-encompassing mainstreaming guidance to ensure that gender is considered at every stage of the humanitarian program cycle, from design and implementation to the monitoring and assessment of projects. As such, they introduce or accompany the implementation of specific organizational policies, principles, standards, or strategic plans. Some humanitarian actors, such as Save the Children and Mercy Corps, mention having developed their toolkits at the request of field program teams for more guidance. Gender tools are often focused on raising awareness and improving the understanding and knowledge of staff. Actors such as UNHCR, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent (IFRC), Oxfam, UN Women, UN Population Fund (UNFPA), UN Development Program (UNDP), ActionAid, and CARE (the full list of actors who are striving to move this forward are too numerous to list here) are aware that organizational capacity is critical in programming for gender equality and as such offer more specific tools for organizational assessment, training, and capacity-building.

Yet humanitarian gender experts noted that most guidance is generic. The target group is unclear or undifferentiated, often lumping together "staff, partners, and communities" at "branch and field offices." This approach neglects the different local contexts and sectoral fields of work that staff members navigate. It also ignores the different resources and capacities available at the

headquarter, country, or field level. More specific tools are being developed to address this, dividing mainstreaming guidance into humanitarian clusters or elaborating on pertinent topics for certain target groups in a defined region or country. These distinctions emanate from the organizational logics—and arguably funding streams—of humanitarian actors at the international level, making it difficult, and perhaps impossible, to allow the intersectional realities of affected communities to shape guidance and interventions.

Despite this, INGOs are working to address building their own organizational capacity and that of other INGOs to address the context-specific and differentiated needs of communities. UN Women, for example, is providing guidelines and an e-learning course for evaluators and managers on how to professionalize the agency's gender-responsive evaluation function and the UNICEF Regional Office for South East Asia has developed a first toolkit that is specific to envisioned regional results (see Appendix). Similarly, CARE has developed its Rapid Gender Analysis tool,[23] a widely available online toolkit for enhancing both organizational development and program quality based on the principles of brevity and clarity to guide gender-transformative program planning and implementation. In contrast to the tool developed by CARE, the majority of gender tools are focused on making programming gender aware or gender responsive. Little explicit guidance was found on what transformative change is or how to contribute to it in humanitarian response. One notable exception is Plan International UK's internally developed and implemented Gender-Transformative Marker. Building on the IASC and ECHO gender markers, it guides program planning and measurement of the transformative potential of projects over a year in duration.

Question 2: What are the key factors to consider in creating gender-transformative change in humanitarian response?

2.1 What are gender and intersectionality?

> *"Y'all use [i]ntersectionality as research parsley. Don't even know what it means, just throwing it on."* (Tweet by @DrBritWilliams, quoted by KII [24])

The promotion of gender equality in humanitarian response is partially impeded by a lack of a common understanding of the term "gender" across the sector and what is meant by and leads to IGTC.[25] "Gender" is persistently conflated with "women," which limits our understanding of women as diverse and impacted by an intersectional range of factors; gender-based violence against men and non-binary people as *gendered*; and gender as *relational*, requiring engagement with people of all genders to achieve meaningful understanding and change.[26] Finally, in humanitarianism the separation of gender-based violence and gender equality by perspective,

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Intersectionality

Intersectionality is a framework for conceptualizing a person, group of people, or social problem as affected by a number of discriminations and disadvantages. It takes into account people's overlapping identities and experiences in order to understand the complexity of prejudices they face.

(Oxford Dictionary)

sector, funding streams, and staffing arguably works against a gender-transformative agenda (this in itself is a much larger topic and is beyond the scope of this paper). At the same time, we found that "gender" is often conflated with particular types of programming, such as protection/gender-based violence or sexual and reproductive health and rights, and can be used as a codeword for other aspects, such as "vulnerability."[27]

The lack of a shared understanding of gender is compounded by the lack of a shared concept of what IGTC is and how to achieve it:

> *"People do not know what gender responsive or transformative is and where they are on the spectrum and therefore they do not engage in it…. There is a lack of clarity and understanding of how this can actually be achieved."* (KII-Donor government)

Where programs were found (or aimed to be) gender transformative, interviewees agreed that the organizing framework for humanitarians to achieve structural change should be intersectional (KII-INGO; KII-INGO; KII-Donor government).[28]

While gender equality policies are relatively widespread, specific policies on intersectionality are mostly absent (see Appendix, p. 22). When intersectionality is mentioned, it is used to strengthen existing gender work by inclusion in age, gender, and diversity (mainstreaming) policies.[29] As an intersectional approach is at the core of advancing IGTC, more awareness needs to be raised through research, policy, and programs.[30] Moreover, this requires bridging the divide between theory and practice. Some practitioners stated the need for explicit and user-friendly directives for holistic and inclusive programming (KII-NGO; KII-INGO).[31] The Government of Canada, for instance, has launched a Gender-Based Analysis Plus (GBA+) online training for federal officials to systematically improve their intersectional work (KII-Donor government). This is a first step in getting people to think multidimensionally, since intersectionality is *"a mind shift, a change of lens"* (KII-INGO):

> *"It is time and resource consuming. The goal is to plant seeds about how people think about their approach. We need to get them thinking more about individual identity and intersectional identities."* (KII-INGO)

If applied correctly, an intersectional framework can help address the humanitarian principles of impartiality and "do no harm" by ensuring the inclusion of *all* people.[32] It overcomes the shortcomings of other models and provides a more radical, transformational, and power-sensitive framing by accounting for reflexivity, relationality, processes of differentiation, resistance and resilience to change, and by placing a lens on power and structural oppression.[33]

Despite its recognized value, challenges to intersectional practice exist. Like gender, the theory behind intersectionality is not well understood in the humanitarian sector (KII-Donor government; KII-INGO; KII-NGO).[34] It has been argued that the dilution and misappropriation of the term have reduced it to a buzzword instead of resulting in real intersectional efforts, hindering its contribution to social justice.[35]In addition to misusing theory, the practical applicability of intersectionality has been questioned. Intersectional thinking challenges the prevailing one-size-fits-all approach by requiring an understanding of the multiple marginalizations and inequalities that shape the operationalization and impact of humanitarian response.

2.2 Sectoral capacity: What is gender work?

> *"The issue to begin with is that "[i]t is hard to put your finger on what [gender] is, or what it means to be a gender expert.'"* (KII-INGO)

In part due to the challenges defining gender, gender equality, and intersectionality, the expertise and effort required to effectively combat gender inequality is challenging to understand and appropriately resource within humanitarian organizations. Without a system-wide definition and understanding of gender work, experts noted that it is often left to the sensitivity and intuition of the human resource department or person in charge of hiring. This is not an effective way to create change. Another observation was that *"[t]here is no kind of qualification for being a gender advisor. It just came up in the job"* (KII-INGO). Jobs may combine "gender and protection," but the hired person may only have protection expertise (KII-INGO). Underlying this is the problematic assumption that one implies the other. One interviewee was also dissatisfied with the selection of the leader of a gender unit: the appointee was either someone internal who had worked at the office for a couple of years, working on the assumption that this person was "qualified enough" for the job, or it was someone brand new who would start without the internal knowledge, network, or personal relations and influence to do the job (KII-Donor government). Interviewees identified this as a significant barrier to effectiveness, since the main task of a gender expert within an organization is often to influence colleagues:

> *"It is not so much about the direct work a lot of the times, but it is about letting others who are driving things also take what you are saying on board. A lot of times the only chance you have is to look for red flags and ensure nothing is doing harm from a gender perspective, but it does not necessarily mean that the program you are implementing is the most effective from a gender perspective."* (KII-INGO)

Gender expertise is often considered an add-on and is not well placed and resourced within an organization. In addition, it is construed and managed as a separate area of work, as opposed to an integral crosscutting lens for all work (KII-INGO; KII-INGO; KII-INGO). As an "add-on," it is also less well-resourced:

> *"Often, there is just one gender advisor for the entire humanitarian response. Having one person mainstreaming gender is a bit unfair."* (KII-Donor government)

> *"They need to start costing gender advisors on projects and not seeing them as something that does not bring income."* (KII-INGO)

With stretched dedicated human resources, humanitarian organizations need to decide whether to centralize or decentralize their gender capacity. This creates gaps between headquarter, regional, country, and local offices within an organization. Gender expertise tends to be staffed at the headquarter and regional level, with country and local offices being less well equipped (KII-UN; KII-INGO; KII-INGO; KII-UN; KII-INGO). However, this can lead to false assumptions: *"We assume that at headquarter level everyone is on board when they are not"* (KII-INGO). Moreover, there can be a disconnect: *"Headquarters gives good guidance but often in the field you have a better idea of your own context and what is feasible"* (KII-UN). While some effort has been made to decentralize capacity with gender focal point systems, the strong coordination and infrastructure needed to effectively implement such an alternative model presents a challenge, especially in volatile humanitarian contexts (KII-INGO).

The success of promoting gender equality depends on getting people who will never be specialists to think about gender and intersectionality in their work (KII-NGO KII-UN; KII-INGO; KII-Donor government). Theoretical guidance is not transformative on its own: tools can be difficult to use and apply in practice and therefore need to be accompanied by available support and in-person training for *all* staff. Interviewees highlighted that technical assistance and training are key to strengthening organizational capacity (KII-INGO; KII-INGO; KII-UN; KII-NGO; KII-UN; KII-Donor government; KII-INGO; KII-INGO; KII-INGO).

> *"At least internally at [INGO], it is not the lack of willingness to do this. When it comes to gender equality and mainstreaming, it comes down to guiding colleagues on how this can actually be done. We need to accompany policies with very concrete operational actions."* (KII-INGO)

In humanitarian emergency contexts, the time and resources required to effectively build field staff capacity for gender work (KII-UN; KII-INGO; KII-INGO), especially in settings where the technical lead is in another country and manages a response remotely, are not available (KII-INGO).

It was noted that everyone needs to be involved to break down organizational siloes and make sure that substantive area experts know how to create and implement an effective gender lens in their work:

> *"More training is important for other technical staff … to know how to do gender mainstreaming themselves. Otherwise, we just have this weird, siloed way of working where one creates a WASH program and it gets sent to a gender advisor, and the gender advisor has to try and make it better. But a gender advisor cannot be a jack of all trades, who is an expert on WASH, on protection, on education, on gender-based violence, on food security, and knows exactly how to make all of those things gender-sensitive, because sometimes it is really about knowing the subject and you will not catch everything."* (KII-INGO)

While mandatory onboarding exists for staff, the transfer of knowledge and expertise is a complex and lengthy process: *"Most of it is learning by doing … You learn a lot by internal knowledge transfer and from colleagues, which takes time"* (KII-UN). Becoming familiar with concepts depends on personal drive and people "who know." There is little emphasis on how guidance is transmitted: *"A lot of us do not have adult education backgrounds"* (KII-INGO). In addition, as one interviewee noted:

> *"We need to look into the fact that the educational system in some countries has not given people the skills to help facilitate processes of transformative change. In countries that have had a dictatorship and police regime, people were suspicious and afraid of each other for years, and didn't develop the skills to communicate."* (KII-INGO)

2.3 Systemic factors

"We are not doing enough—by far—on gender equality in humanitarian action." (KII-INGO)

Gender experts in humanitarian organizations consistently described the humanitarian sector's failure to deliver on effective work to combat gender inequality, let alone to advance gender-transformative change. From our interviews, six key themes emerged that explain why we are not doing well on gender work in humanitarianism.

2.3.1 Not critical: In part because gender work is seen as something that can be accomplished with

technical approaches, such as tools and checklists, the systemic aspect is neglected and, when crisis hits, humanitarians and humanitarian systems revert back to upholding existing patterns:

> *"People think gender is an add-on. Nice to have, but not a must-have. And they are doing it too late. It's resulting in missed opportunities and massive inefficiencies in aid and relief spending, and this is a systems' problem."* (KII-INGO)

Despite widespread policy and organizational mandates, addressing gendered inequalities is not seen as critical to humanitarian work:

> *"Technically we know what to do and what is important, but when a disaster hits, somehow [gender] gets deprioritized. It is this reaction that gender is secondary that needs to change."* (KII-UN)

This arguably reflects a lack of acknowledgment or understanding that patriarchy is a structuring element of all systems.

2.3.2 Difficulty: It is perceived as being extremely challenging to bring a gender-responsive and transformative agenda to volatile contexts that demand a quick response. Even with available gender expertise and tools, humanitarian actors have difficulty analyzing different vulnerabilities, collaborating with local partners, and imagining tackling structural issues in settings marked by active conflict or high levels of displacement (KII- INGO; KII-INGO; KII-INGO).

2.3.3 Fear of backlash: There is resistance due to fear of potential backlash, which could hinder the ability of the humanitarian system to deliver interventions.

> *"[P]eople don't want to be told to change their norms. If you try and jump in too quickly, you can jeopardize the rest of the work you are doing and lose your humanitarian access."* (KII-INGO)

2.3.4. Siloes: Siloes between development and humanitarian funding and work have led to commitments to better integrate efforts at the global level, including the New Way of Working and the Agenda for Humanity. However, little has changed for actors on the ground. These siloes provide a key barrier to advancing a transformative agenda:

> *"You can't be a shaker and a mover if the system prevents you from shaking and moving."* (KII-Donor government)

2.3.5 The need for foresight and will: One of the greatest challenges is the "tyranny of the urgent" that characterizes humanitarian response and policies. The principle of prioritizing lifesaving interventions and meeting immediate needs take precedence over systemic change, despite the fact that cycles of crisis and displacement are often predictable, and protracted (KII-INGO; KII-INGO; KII-UN; KII-UN; KII-INGO; KII-INGO; KII-INGO).[36]

> *"We are still programming as if we are in an emergency instead of for the long term."* (KII-UN)

This concern reflects the length of displacement in many contexts and suggests the definition of emergency and immediate need is a way of getting out of gender work.

2.3.6. Lack of civil society engagement: A lack of strategic engagement with civil society creates parallel systems of knowledge and action that limit the possibility for transformation:

"[T]here are two parallel systems, refugees and citizens… we must connect with civil society." (KII-UN)

"We need to be more mindful of who we engage with. The emphasis comes in here of investing more in an analysis and understanding of the role different civil society actors play and acknowledging that there is no homogeneous voice for civil society. … There is a lack of acknowledgment and understanding of the role that women-led and women's rights actors can play in the humanitarian response." (KII-INGO)

Humanitarian actors could achieve so much more if they worked with civil society.

2.4 Organizational barriers: We are who we hire

"It does not matter how good your tools are if you do not have the right people." (KII-INGO)

Gender experts in the humanitarian system identified humanitarian staff (especially leadership), organizational culture, and accountability for transformative outcomes as key determinants of the ability to achieve transformative policies, programming, and impact:

"It is important that there is a strategic vision articulated somewhere that the senior leadership of the organization can say, yes, this is where we stand. … We now have a global theory of change of how we envision working toward this ultimate goal." (KII-INGO)

The strength of an organization lies primarily not in its programmatic tools, but in its people: *"Tools are only as good as the people using them"* (KII-INGO). One way to strengthen internal capacity and bridge gaps is to hire and manage human resources toward transformative goals. For humanitarian actors to effectively engage in gender-transformative programming, their organization and staff must first be fit for purpose: *"It always comes back to walking the talk…That's why organizational diversity, equity, and inclusion is so important"* (KII-INGO). Another gender expert noted, *"[t]he system is designed by men, for men"* (KII-Independent).

A senior staff member of a major humanitarian organization reflected on the findings of their review of the keys to achieving success with their age, gender, and diversity policy: *"[T]he most common response was leadership and the trickle-down effect"* (KII-INGO). Senior gender experts repeatedly said that leadership and organizational accountability for transformative outcomes are necessary for true change to occur, both in the delivery and the impact of humanitarian interventions.

Transformation requires capacity, skills, and the political will to shift power. Internal senior buy-in and leadership are therefore critical to implementing gender-transformative approaches. Humanitarian organizations must hire, on-board, and create accountability mechanisms to ensure that policies are robust and translate into global team efforts. Globally and locally, humanitarian response can only achieve gender equality and women's rights if women's and girls' perspectives are heard and meaningfully included in consultation and decision-making processes. Decision-making bodies, however, have traditionally been male dominated, with women's and other marginalized voices often entirely absent or excluded from meaningful participation.[37] Ensuring gender-equal and inclusive leadership leads to more comprehensive and collaborative decision-making that is more aware of the different impacts of decisions.[38]

Successfully advancing an inclusive gender-transformative agenda operationally in programming

starts with how gender concepts are internalized within an organization (KII-INGO). It is about *"changing internal mindsets on the role and value"* of IGTC (KII-INGO).

> *"[T]here is the approach of the organization, but then it's the people who do the work. The way we do things in regions is different, because with people comes a bias. Our history gives the color of how we do the work."* (KII-INGO)

Even in organizations where gender is a key consideration for programming, staff felt that the internal office environment in their country was hostile to any open discussion. Here, cultural considerations function as a "free pass" to avoid critically engaging with challenging attitudes or patterns.[39] As a senior staff member at the headquarters of a major humanitarian organization who is responsible for global programming for age, gender, and diversity noted: *"[t]he profile, position, and interest of program staff largely shape how [we] deliver on age, gender, and diversity"* (KII-INGO).

2.5 A technical fix for a political problem

One way in which organizations sidestep the centrality of leadership and organizational culture is by using gender tools: *"We often focus on programs but if leadership doesn't show commitment… [we will not achieve anything]"* (KII-Independent). These tools have been focused downstream at the point of program delivery with staff who are often not equipped to effectively address gendered inequalities. Programmatic staff are often overwhelmed with guidance, tools, and programmatic interventions for gender work. Assessments on the usefulness of guidance and tools diverge. On the one hand, especially in less well-resourced offices, they are considered valuable for helping staff familiarize themselves with gender concepts and are particularly important for those who are assigned responsibility for gender work without expertise or previous experience (KII-NGO; KII-UN; KII-INGO). They can also assist the standardization of some internal processes to mainstream gender, for instance by having basic checklists for all staff to be used in certain phases of projects (KII-INGO). This approach to strengthening gender work at the programmatic intervention level with technical solutions such as guidance and checklists largely serves to heighten awareness of the inclusion of marginalized people, such as women and girls, people with disabilities, LGBTQI+ people, youth, and older people. For example, tools such as the IASC Gender with Age Marker or the ECHO Gender and Age Marker are particularly useful for gender mainstreaming for program planning but are not transformative in their own right (KII-INGO).

The realistic use of these tools is questioned by gender experts within humanitarian organizations: *"There are so many tools, people do not know where to look "*(KII-Donor government; KII-INGO). For example, the 400-page IASC Gender Handbook, which is supplemented by specific organizational guidelines, is too long to read and is not sufficiently self-explanatory, simple, or concrete (KII-Donor government; KII-NGO; KII-INGO; KII-INGO; KII-INGO). The usefulness of tools also depends on whether they are adapted to local contexts and the specific field in which staff work: *"We have enough generic orientation"* (KII-UN). There is also a danger in the widespread use of tools:

> *"It does not matter how good your tools are if you do not have the right people. You create people that think they know what they are doing even though they might not, and…that is even more dangerous."* (KII-INGO)

The responses to the plethora of guidance on gender work reported by experts included *"[n]ot another tool"* and *"[y]ou've got to be kidding me"* (KII-INGO). Often these tools are written for donors: *"In some cases, [tools] should be for field-level implementation, but they are written for the donors"* (KII-Donor government), meaning it is unsurprising that they are of little use to the staff who implement them.

The current approach to gender work, which focuses on the production and use of tools, conceives of IGTC as a technical problem as opposed to a problem of people, systems, and power.

> *"Only people can improve their own communities. When you come in with some tools, some technical contribution, you somehow come with your own vision. Then people think you do the work for them. So, you have to really review the method of work with [your partners]."* (KII-INGO)

2.6 Donor influence

> *"[I would] love to see a world in which donors align their requirements around age, gender, and diversity."* (KII-INGO)

There was a consensus among interviewees that a fundamental shift in donor priorities and practice is essential for a more gender-equitable humanitarian response and impact. Some gender experts reported experiencing the internalization of gender in their context as a simple buzzword to be reported for donors due to external pressure (KII-NGO; KII-INGO; KII-INGO).

> *"It is professionally frustrating.... I would go in and prepare a beautiful analysis and action plan. And then they are like, awesome, tick the box and put it on the shelf because we don't actually have the will to do this."* (KII-INGO)

The commitment of donors to gender equality, policies, and requirements is the main driver of the type and delivery of programs that organizations implement.[40] If donors have a limited understanding of gender, this will likely manifest in the work they fund—and, in the words of one interviewee, *"[i]n humanitarian response you often do not have the luxury to choose your donor"* (KII-INGO).

Donor countries have different reputations for their approaches to gender programming. The Government of Canada, for example, is perceived as *"a strong ally"* (KII-UN; KII-INGO; KII-Donor government). Several humanitarian actors expressed that donors will often expect certain types of programming and discourage others:

> *"[They] just want basic needs and cash programming, but are not willing to talk about related protection risks or to adapt vulnerability criteria."* (KII-INGO)

A recent study by UN Women and UNFPA highlights the global lack of funding for programming for women and girls, and specifically for gender-transformative programming. There is a lack of funding for local women's organizations and gendered social norms and behavior change programming. Furthermore, there is little active involvement of women's organizations in program design, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation.[41]

One common frustration among humanitarian actors is the experience of a lack of true dialog and flexibility among donors to adjust their practices in line with the needs of organizations at the field level. The type of funding and the process to receive it hampers the possibilities of feminist localization.

> *"If we are engaging with partners on these short-term three-, six-month contracts... It is not meaningful engagement in any way, it really ends up being more like a supplier... It is not going to really make any type of impact and movement toward the whole localization agenda."* (KII-INGO)

For transformative programming, funding needs to be less project-focused and driven by quantifiable short-term outcomes; instead, it must be more flexible and focused on the long term

(KII-INGO; KII-Donor government; KII-UN; KII-INGO): *"Changing people's mind takes time, and we do not change behaviors in three months"* (KII-INGO). Moreover, *"donors are rigid about their measurement and log frames"* (KII-INGO), which requires funding and capacity-building that does not serve transformative outcomes.

Humanitarian gender experts acknowledged that both their own systems and those of donors compound the problems caused by the current approaches to controlling the perceived risk of funding smaller civil society actors:

> *"Our own internal systems hinder our ability to partner more easily than we would like to. Everything from the assessment to identifying local partners and the contractual process is cumbersome, both for our staff and partners…. If we really want to partner with more informal grassroots organizations, the processes are not fit for purpose…. It is a sector wide issue…. It would be great if the sector could get to the point where there is some type of centralized audit process and some type of certificate, so you do not have to repeat this on organizations over and over again. We are a long way away from that. We all have our internal compliance requirements and then donor compliance requirements on top of that. I think that really kind of prevents us from making that more systematic change in the sector around that."* (KII-INGO)

Question 3: What should humanitarian organizations do to advance gender-transformative change?

> *"We should turn upside down our ways of working … the humanitarians from the north leave, and the local actors lead and act."* (KII-UN)

Building on previous analyses and recommendations about what needs to be done to make progress on IGTC in humanitarian response,[42] we make the following recommendations based on the findings of this study:

1. A gender-transformative agenda must happen **within** humanitarian organizations and be centered on hiring staff, especially leaders, with the capacity for and commitment to IGTC, and accountability mechanisms for transformative processes and outcomes.

2. Donor and international NGO requirements largely exist to manage risk. The calculus of risk that drives who gets funded and how is shaped by colonial frames of who can be trusted. A feminist frame for estimating "risk" should be created, and adopted by the field to enable donors and other global humanitarian actors to support transformative change.

3. Create and Implement an inclusive gender-transformative audit of the organizational practices of international NGOs that receive funds and deliver humanitarian aid.

4. Create mechanisms to hold humanitarian actors accountable to affected community organizations and communities.

5. Move beyond a binary conceptualization of gender to understand the full range of gendered marginalizations and their implications.

6. Foster collective learning with civil society and national governments on emerging issues and innovative responses.

7. Provide longer-term funding and programming that supports gender-transformative change.

8. Work across sectoral siloes that shape humanitarian response (e.g., the humanitarian–development–peace nexus).

Conclusion

Evidence from recent studies on gender work in humanitarian response shows the field is largely falling short when it comes to contributing to lasting shifts that will lead to equity at individual and systemic levels. Indeed, global frameworks such as the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the IASC Gender Policy and Accountability Framework, the Call to Action on Protection from Gender-Based Violence in Emergencies, the Agenda for Humanity, and the Whistler Declaration on Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women and Girls in Humanitarian Action have been adopted because they all recognize that the needs and rights of marginalized groups are still overlooked in humanitarian responses and that the participation and leadership of women and girls, and other marginalized communities, remain largely unrealized. This study has shown that without attention to the systemic and internal **organizational** barriers to gender—and indeed all transformative work—the humanitarian system will not be able to achieve the **operational** goals needed to achieve equitable and sustainable impact.

Frameworks such as the Grand Bargain arguably require a major sectoral overhaul that requires disrupting the hierarchies of the field. In particular, there is a call to **decolonize international aid** and to ensure that displaced and host civil society communities and organizations drive the solutions to the humanitarian crises of our times. Finally, there is an emerging understanding that humanitarian response must be developed and delivered in a broader context that includes longer-term development and peace processes, commonly referred to as the **nexus**. Together these calls for **gender equality**, attention to **intersectionality**, a mandate for **decolonization,** and **an understanding of longer and integrated processes of change** provide an important opportunity for the field of humanitarian response to better contribute to the transformative change needed to create more just and sustainable responses and impacts.

We know that to contribute to inclusive IGTC, the humanitarian sector must address both **what we do** and **how we do it**. This will require methodologies that shift power, such as participatory processes that center and privilege the knowledge and perspectives of displaced and host communities and organizations to allow them to lead and shape the response. Technical inputs, such as training, toolkits, and gender appraisals, must be understood in terms of whether they are useful to those who implement and participate in programs, as well as the enablers and barriers to their usefulness.

For the humanitarian sector to contribute to IGTC in humanitarian response, and avoid further entrenching the structural inequalities that shape the impact of crises and displacement, we need to address the ecosystem of power that is the humanitarian system itself.[43] Transformative outcomes require power and resources to be shifted to actors in affected contexts and communities, especially to women-led civil society and movements.[44] Given the current architecture, legacies, and context of development and humanitarian aid, a shift in power and resources and paying serious attention to IGTC will require a sea change in the leadership and culture of major humanitarian actors. There is no technical solution or one-size-fits-all programmatic approach to creating equitable and inclusive systems and societies. The path to IGTC is on the same road as the decolonization of aid and anti-racism movements. This requires the will to shift power.

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Appendix: Organizational Policies and Tools

Organization / Reference	Policy / Strategy	Guidance / Tool
Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation	Global Framework for Advancing Women's Economic Empowerment	Gender Equality Toolbox
CARE	Gender Equality Policy (2018) Commitment to Gender Equality	Gender Toolkit Online Resources
Coalition for Adolescent Girls		Toolkit for Meaningful Adolescent Girl Engagement (2015)
ECHO	Gender in Humanitarian Aid: Different Needs, Adapted Assistance (2013)	Gender-Age Marker Toolkit (2013)
Gender-Based Violence Area of Responsibility (Global Protection Cluster)	Strategy 2018–2020	Tools and Resources Collection
IASC	Policy and Accountability Framework on Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women and Girls in Humanitarian Action (2017) GenCap and ProCap Strategic Framework 2018–2021	Gender Handbook in Humanitarian Action (2018) Guidelines for Integrating Gender-Based Violence Interventions in Humanitarian Action (2015) Gender with Age Marker (2018)
IFRC	Gender Policy Strategic Framework on Gender and Diversity Issues 2013–2020 Strategy on Violence Prevention, Mitigation and Response 2011–2020	Protection, Gender and Inclusion in Emergencies Toolkit Gender and Diversity Organisational Assessment Toolkit: Pilot Version
IOM	Gender Equality Policy 2015–2019	Project Handbook (2011)
Mercy Corps	Gender Sector Approach	Gender Procedures: Policy in Action Gender, Inclusion and Resilience Toolkits (2018)
NRC	Gender Policy (2016)	
Oxfam	Minimum Standards for Gender in Emergencies (2013)	Gender Training Manual (1994) Quick Guide to Gender Analysis (2014) Quick Guide to Gender-Sensitive Indicators (2014) Quick Guide to Promoting Women's Empowerment (2014) See Both Sides: A Practical Guide to Gender Analysis for Quality Service Delivery (2004)
Population Council		The Girl Roster
Rutgers		Gender-Transformative Approach
Save the Children	Gender Equality Policy: Transforming Inequalities, Transforming Lives (2017) Transforming Inequalities, Transforming Lives: Gender Equality and Inclusion Strategy (2017–2021)	Engendering Transformational Change – Gender Equality Program Guidance and Toolkit (2014) Integrating a Gender Perspective into Vulnerability Analysis (2005) CFSVA Comprehensive Food Security & Vulnerability Analysis (2009) Comprehensive Online Gender Toolkit
UN OCHA	Policy Instruction Gender Equality (2016)	Gender Toolkit (2012)

Organization / Reference	Policy / Strategy	Guidance / Tool
UN Women	Strategic Plan 2018–2021	Gender Mainstreaming in Development Programming (2014) How to Manage Gender-Responsive Evaluation (2015) Guide for the Evaluation of Programmes and Projects with a Gender, Human Rights and Intercultural Perspective (2014) Gender Equality Capacity Assessment Tool (2014)
UNDP	Gender Equality Strategy 2018–2021	Gender and Recovery Toolkit (2020) Gender in Development Programme – Learning & Information Pack Gender Analysis (2001) Gender Mainsteaming Training Manual (2007)
UNHCR	Policy on Gender, Age and Diversity (2018)	Handbook for the Protection of Women and Girls (2008) Gender Training Kit on Refugee Protection and Resource Handbook (2002) Working with Men and Boy Survivors of SGBV in Forced Displacement (2012) Working with Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender & Intersex Persons in Forced Displacement (2011) UNHCR Tool for Participatory Assessment in Operations (2006) Sexual and Gender-based Violence Against Refugees, Returnees and Internally Displaced Persons: Guidance for Prevention and Response (2003) SGBV Prevention and Response Training Package (2016)
UNICEF	Gender Action Plan 2018–2021	Promoting Gender Equality through UNICEF-Supported Programming in Child Protection (2011) Promoting Gender Equality: An Equity-Focused Approach to Programming (2011) Gender Toolkit Integrating Gender in Programming for Every Child South Asia (2018)
WFP	Gender Policy (2015–2020)	Gender and Food Security Analysis (2016)
Women's Refugee Commiission		I'm Here Approach
World Vision		Gender Training Toolkit (2008)

Acronyms and Abbreviations

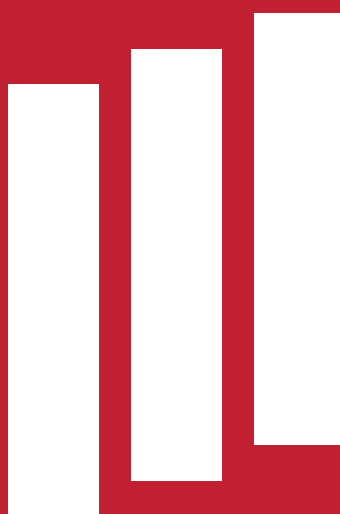|	
ACAPS	Assessment Capacities Project
AWID	Association for Women's Rights in Development
DRC	Danish Refugee Council
IASC	Inter-Agency Standing Committee
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
IFRC	International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies
IGTC	Inclusive Gender-Transformative Change
INGO	International nongovernmental organization
IRC	International Rescue Committee
NGO	Nongovernmental organization
ODI	Overseas Development Institute
SIPA	School of International and Public Affairs at Columbia University
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNPRPD	United Nations Partnership on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNOCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
UN Women	United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women
WRC	Women's Refugee Commission

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