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Gender, inclusion and humanitarian principles in conflict contexts

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Summary

- The promotion of gender equality and the curtailment of marginalization are fundamentally aligned with the principle of humanity, as reflected in the humanitarian sector's goals to alleviate suffering and preserve dignity in conflict contexts. However, as recent events such as those in Afghanistan demonstrate, humanitarian agencies face challenges and dilemmas in their efforts to provide impartial, gender-responsive assistance, particularly where there is systemic gender-based marginalization.
- Humanitarian principles – humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence – are compatible with an approach that considers gender in project design and analysis. In particular, the principle of impartiality supports the response of agencies to gender inequalities in their allocation of humanitarian services and resources.
- However, the needs-based approach that underpins impartiality has two key limitations for the promotion of gender equality: it is restricted to addressing the outcomes of inequality rather than the underlying causes; and its focus on vulnerability risks undermining the agency of conflict-affected people and can, in turn, reproduce power imbalances between communities and international humanitarian agencies.
- Where marginalization is systemic, there is also the possibility of tension emerging between the humanitarian principles of neutrality and impartiality. In such contexts, aid organizations may be required to advocate for the removal of social, political and economic barriers to provide impartial humanitarian assistance to marginalized groups, which host governments or communities may not view as a 'neutral' approach.
- This paper emphasizes the importance of applying humanitarian principles in wider efforts to contribute to more equitable and peaceful societies, including by addressing the gendered drivers and outcomes of conflict via integrated practice across the humanitarian, development and peace spheres.
- The current Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) operational guidance for coordinated assessments is due for revision, which provides an opportunity to integrate a stronger gender and inclusion focus in needs assessments. The IASC humanitarian programme cycle is also being evaluated and this process could provide an opportunity to enhance the role of conflict-affected communities, as well as women-led and women's rights organizations in humanitarian work.

Introduction

The humanitarian principles widely recognized in standards and codes of conduct are humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence (see Table 1). They were agreed in 1965 by the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. In 1991, the principles of humanity, impartiality and neutrality were incorporated into the United Nations (UN) General Assembly (GA) Resolution 46/182 on the coordination of humanitarian assistance, and later the UN included the principle of independence in 2003.¹ Humanitarian principles provide guidance to those who wish to carry out humanitarian activities (protection or assistance) in times of armed conflict. They promote ways of operating that assure parties to armed conflict that humanitarian activities will not interfere in the conflict or give an advantage to their opponent. In theory, compliance with humanitarian principles should make it more likely that operations will be accepted by belligerents, and that they are implemented in a manner that is unimpeded and safe for humanitarian actors and beneficiaries.²

Table 1. Humanitarian principles

Humanity	Human suffering must be addressed wherever it is found. The purpose of humanitarian action is to protect life and health and ensure respect for human beings.
Impartiality	Humanitarian action must be carried out on the basis of need alone, giving priority to the most urgent cases of distress and making no distinctions on the basis of nationality, race, gender, religious belief, class or political opinions.
Neutrality	Humanitarian actors must not take sides in hostilities or engage in controversies of a political, racial, religious or ideological nature.
Independence	Humanitarian action must be autonomous from the political, economic, military or other objectives that any actor may hold with regard to areas where humanitarian action is being implemented.

Source: UN OCHA (2022), 'What are the Humanitarian Principles?', https://www.unocha.org/sites/unocha/files/OOM_Humanitarian%20Principles_Eng.pdf.

The precise meaning of the principles is subject to both interpretation and debate.³ This paper uses definitions of the humanitarian principles (see Table 1) from the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), and identifies humanity as the objective of all humanitarian action and impartiality, neutrality

¹ Pictet, J. (1979), 'The Fundamental Principles of the Red Cross: Commentary', International Committee of the Red Cross, <https://www.icrc.org/en/doc/resources/documents/misc/fundamental-principles-commentary-010179.htm>; for further information on the principle of independence, please refer to: UN General Assembly (2004), *Strengthening of the coordination of emergency humanitarian assistance of the United Nations: resolution/adopted by the General Assembly*, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/508943?ln=en>.

² Gillard, E.-C. (2021), *Framing the conversation: Humanitarian principles and the law*, unpublished Sanguine Mirage background paper, Chatham House.

³ See Norwegian Refugee Council and Handicap International (2016), *Challenges to Principled Humanitarian Action: Perspectives from Four Countries*, report, Geneva: Norwegian Refugee Council and Handicap International, <https://www.nrc.no/resources/reports/challenges-to-principled-humanitarian-action-perspectives-from-four-countries>; Schenkenberg van Mierop, E. (2014), 'Coming clean on neutrality and independence: The need to assess the application of humanitarian principles', *International Review of the Red Cross*, 97(897–898), pp. 295–318, https://international-review.icrc.org/sites/default/files/irc_97_1-2-12.pdf; Slim, H. (2020), 'You don't have to be neutral to be a good humanitarian', The New Humanitarian blog, 27 August 2020, <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/opinion/2020/08/27/humanitarian-principles-neutrality>.

and independence as tools used by humanitarian agencies to achieve that goal. In its examination of impartiality, this paper focuses on the operational aspects of a needs-based approach in humanitarian assessments and analyses.

Applying the principle of neutrality, particularly in highly politicized conflict contexts, has been integral for ensuring that humanitarian agencies gain access to affected populations. But the application of humanitarian principles in practice is an ongoing challenge. The interpretation of what it means to operate in accordance with the humanitarian principles in situations of armed conflict has continually evolved ever since they were adopted by UN organizations, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and NGOs. As a result, organizations face significant challenges in their efforts to apply the humanitarian principles.⁴

The focus in this paper is the compatibility of humanitarian principles, particularly impartiality and neutrality, with growing efforts to pursue gender equality within humanitarian action in conflict contexts. The paper draws on the insights and information shared by participants at a series of workshops that examined policy and practical approaches to the application of the principles, as well as the internal and external challenges facing humanitarian agencies attempting to work in accordance with the principles.⁵ The objective of this paper is to apply a gender lens to some of the key issues that have arisen through these workshops. The paper focuses on three specific issues in this regard: (i) the role and limits of impartiality in the pursuit of gender equality; (ii) efforts to promote the role of conflict-affected women, girls and gender-diverse people in humanitarian action; and (iii) the potential of integrated approaches that coordinate across humanitarian, development and peace goals to support longer-term objectives. The paper draws on the cases that were shared in these workshops, including examples from Afghanistan, Myanmar and South Sudan. In developing recommendations, the paper takes both a short-term operational perspective and a longer-term strategic one.

The promotion of gender equality and inclusivity are aligned with the fundamental humanitarian goals of alleviating human suffering and respecting human dignity. However, as this paper demonstrates, there are many challenges to implementation in practice and various approaches to the integration of gender into humanitarian programming. As shown in Table 2, these can be considered in terms of a spectrum of approaches to gender, from ‘gender blind’ to ‘gender transformative’. A particular distinction applied in this paper is the difference between ‘gender responsive’ and ‘gender transformative’ objectives (Table 2). The principle of impartiality provides an entry point for supporting gender equality, through the promotion of tailored humanitarian assistance based on analysis of gender-related discrepancies in gaining access to basic services and resources. From this perspective, impartiality can support

⁴ See Barber, M. and Bowden, M. (2023), *Better outcomes for civilians in armed conflict: What role for humanitarian principles?*, Research Paper, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs; Barber, M. and Bowden, M. (2023), *Rethinking the role of humanitarian principles in armed conflict: A challenge for Humanitarian action*, Research Paper, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs.

⁵ Three workshops and three roundtables were held as part of the Sanguine Mirage project, between November 2022 to January 2023, including Chatham House (2023), *Roundtable on gender and inclusion in humanitarian action during armed conflict*, Meeting Summary, 15 March 2022, <https://chathamhouse.soutron.net/Portal/Public/en-GB/RecordView/Index/202832>. The event was attended by 14 participants, of which 71 per cent were women and 14 per cent represented national NGOs. For further information, see: Chatham House (undated), ‘Sanguine Mirage: The False Comfort of the “Humanitarian Imperative”’, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/about-us/our-departments/international-security-programme/sanguine-mirage-false-comfort>.

agencies to be gender responsive. However, in pursuing gender-transformative objectives that require shifts of a deeper nature, impartiality is limited because it is predominantly concerned with responding to the outcomes of inequality rather than addressing its drivers. The needs-based approach underpinning impartiality also risks undermining the agency of conflict-affected people by focusing on their vulnerability, which could, in turn, reproduce existing power imbalances between affected communities and humanitarian agencies.

In contexts of systemic marginalization, achieving impartial humanitarian assistance may not be possible without addressing social, political and economic barriers.

In contexts of systemic marginalization, achieving impartial humanitarian assistance may not be possible without addressing social, political and economic barriers. However, perceptions of neutrality can be inconsistent with efforts to address such systemic inequalities. There is a risk that humanitarian agencies may use the principle of neutrality to avoid engaging with important gender issues, including meeting the needs of marginalized LGBTQ+ communities. There is no international agency that determines ‘compliance’ with the humanitarian principles, and international humanitarian law (IHL) does not specify who determines whether a particular organization operates in accordance with humanitarian principles, nor does IHL provide criteria for making this assessment.⁶

In practice, the ability to work in accordance with the principles is dependent on the perceptions of actors in conflict contexts, including affected communities and warring parties. This unpredictability makes it difficult to formulate clear-cut arguments about the compatibility of principles like neutrality with the promotion of gender equality. While supporting women’s rights or those of gender-diverse people may not be considered as ‘taking sides’ in conflict, it could affect perceptions of neutrality if it is considered as engaging in controversies of an ‘ideological nature’ (Table 1), depending on the context. However, the normative anchor of humanitarian action is humanity and when the principle of neutrality is applied to avoid meeting the needs of marginalized people, agencies are less likely to be working in accordance with the principle of humanity.

⁶ Gillard (2021), *Framing the conversation: Humanitarian principles and the law*.

Table 2. Spectrum of approaches to gender

Gender blind	Assumes gender is not an issue and is thus not considered in a humanitarian programme.
Gender aware	Considers gender but does not use it as an operational concept.
Gender sensitive	Uses gender to inform the project’s design and methodology.
Gender responsive	Uses gender in both project design and analysis, but it does not address the underlying structures creating gender inequality, such as norms and power dynamics.
Gender transformative	Not only attempts to respond to different power dynamics and needs based on gender, but also to transform those dynamics to be more equitable.

Source: Daigle, M. (2022), *Gender, power and principles in humanitarian action*, report, London: ODI, <https://odi.org/en/publications/gender-power-and-principles-in-humanitarian-action/#:~:text=It%20has%20been%20firmly%20established,and%20unavoidably%20shaped%20by%20gender.>

The paper highlights the importance of applying humanitarian principles within wider efforts to promote peace and address conflict dynamics, including the gendered drivers and outcomes of conflict. Achieving longer-term, transformative objectives is dependent on the capacity of organizations to overcome power imbalances within the aid sector, by bolstering the roles of conflict-affected communities in humanitarian action and leadership. For example, boosting the roles of women-led organizations, women’s rights organizations and organizations that represent gender-diverse people.

While external actors are in a position to support social change in conflict-affected contexts, doing so without the leadership of affected people risks such activity becoming a top-down approach that does not align with local priorities. Increasing calls to ‘decolonize’ the aid sector highlight how the promotion of gender equality can occur in the context of inequitable partnerships. At the same time, local leadership in conflict contexts is not a problem-free route to achieving gender equality. Any efforts to support local peace and social change processes requires political and conflict sensitivity. The paper also argues that the achievement of longer-term shifts towards more peaceful and equitable societies is dependent on the success of more integrated approaches that can coordinate across peace, development and humanitarian spheres.

The promotion of gender equality in humanitarian action

In recent years, there has been a rise in efforts to integrate gender issues and promote gender equality in humanitarian action, based on growing recognition of the gendered impacts of conflict and the specific barriers that restrict access to humanitarian assistance for women, girls and marginalized groups. This has been demonstrated by a shift in emphasis to protection and the provision of gender-based violence services, as well as efforts to empower conflict-affected women and to support their livelihoods. Such commitments are reflected in the

Gender in Humanitarian Action Handbook published by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) – the highest level humanitarian coordination forum of the UN system – and the IASC gender policy, which aims ‘to make gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls a core principle in humanitarian action’.⁷ The IASC handbook integrates gender issues across multiple aspects of humanitarian action, including cash-based interventions, food security, shelter, education and health. The IASC Gender Accountability Framework (2017) further bolsters these key documents through the implementation of annual reporting against a broad framework of indicators.

But while growing consciousness of feminist issues and collective action have influenced global development theory and practice since the 1970s, concerns of gender equality and women’s empowerment have not always been considered fundamental to humanitarian action in conflict contexts.⁸ In fact, in the past, humanitarian actors have questioned whether the pursuit of such goals may negatively impact the ability and capacity of agencies to access crisis-affected populations. The humanitarian principles have featured centrally in such claims; humanitarian organizations, including the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the ICRC have argued that pursuing the objectives of gender equality could create tension with the humanitarian principles, particularly neutrality and impartiality.⁹ For example, up until 2011, the ICRC’s annual report included the disclaimer that ‘in accordance with its principles of neutrality and impartiality, the ICRC does not claim to reform gender relations’.¹⁰

In more recent years, however, increasing efforts have been made to be gender responsive, and even transformative, in the way humanitarian assistance is provided. UNHCR and the ICRC have since adopted policies that underscore the relevance of a gender perspective to accurately assess and design responses. In 2022, an ICRC report elaborated that:

Casting gender equality only as a matter of ideological or political controversy fails to recognize the guarantee of equal rights between men and women, and prohibitions of discrimination, in international law. It is also inconsistent with the ICRC’s role as an actor distributing resources, visiting detainees and influencing behaviour in humanitarian settings and, most critically, with the principles of humanity and impartiality.¹¹

⁷ Inter-Agency Standing Committee (2017), *Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women and Girls in Humanitarian Action*, policy document, <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/system/files/2020-11/IASC%20Policy%20on%20Gender%20Equality%20and%20the%20Empowerment%20of%20Women%20and%20Girls%20in%20Humanitarian%20Action.pdf>.

⁸ Cornwall, A. and Edwards, J. (eds) (2014), *Feminisms, Empowerment and Development: Changing Women’s Lives*, London: Zed Books.

⁹ Olivius, E. (2015), ‘Constructing Humanitarian Selves and Refugee Others: Gender Equality and the Global Governance of Refugees’, *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 18(2), pp. 270–290, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616742.2015.1094245>.

¹⁰ ICRC (2011), *Annual Report 2011*, report, Geneva: ICRC, <https://www.icrc.org/en/doc/assets/files/annual-report/icrc-annual-report-2011.pdf>; Fal-Dutra Santos, R. (2019), ‘Challenging patriarchy: gender equality and humanitarian principles’, *Humanitarian Law and Policy* blog, 18 July 2019, <https://blogs.icrc.org/law-and-policy/2019/07/18/gender-equality-humanitarian-principles>.

¹¹ ICRC (2022), *Gendered impacts of armed conflicts and implications for the application of IHL*, pp. 35–37, <https://www.icrc.org/publication/4634-gendered-impact-armed-conflict-and-ihl>; Lopes Morey, A. (2022), ‘What does ‘back to basics’ mean for gender and the fundamental principles?’, *Humanitarian Law and Policy* blog, 1 September 2022, <https://blogs.icrc.org/law-and-policy/2022/09/01/gender-fundamental-principles>.

Recent statements have similarly noted that there is ‘no such thing as gender-neutral humanitarian action’.¹² At the same time, governments – including in Canada (2017), France (2019) and Mexico (2020) – have also begun to pursue more overtly ‘feminist’ approaches in their foreign policy.¹³

In conflict settings, such efforts are seen in the growing emphasis on more integrated approaches that connect humanitarian, development and peace action, such as ‘triple nexus’ and women, peace and security (WPS) frameworks. Gender advocates describe the WPS framework as ‘an agenda for profound and sweeping action on gender justice within the humanitarian sector itself, and thus it is imperative for reaching crisis-affected people of all genders effectively and appropriately’.¹⁴ With a focus on integrated practice, the WPS framework promotes the role of humanitarian action in not simply responding to gender discrepancies in access to services and resources, but in supporting women’s roles in peacebuilding and conflict prevention. Meanwhile, advocates recognize the potential of the triple-nexus approach to support gender equality via its aims to promote resilience through connecting humanitarian action to longer-term peace and development processes.¹⁵

At the same time, the ‘localization’ agenda has gained pace, pushing donors and their implementation partners to address persistent power imbalances in the relationship between international and local humanitarian actors. There are many different ways to define localization, as well as the complexities around identifying who or what is ‘local’.¹⁶ In this paper, the term localization refers to efforts to promote and strengthen the role of crisis-affected communities and organizations in humanitarian action. Its goals are reflected in key policy frameworks like the Grand Bargain – an agreement between donors and humanitarian organizations to improve the effectiveness of assistance – which includes targets for increasing the amount of funding going directly to local organizations. The focus on funding in the localization obligations of the Grand Bargain (workstream 2) is complemented by commitments driven towards a ‘participation revolution’ under workstream 6, which aims to support ‘systematic accountability and inclusion’ to promote the role of people receiving humanitarian resources and services in decision-making processes.¹⁷

The localization agenda is central to the pursuit of gender equality in humanitarian action, particularly through its potential to support longer-term, transformative shifts in gender relations.¹⁸ The empowerment of marginalized conflict-affected

¹² ICRC (2023), ‘Gender Equality and War’, president’s statement, New York: ICRC, <https://www.icrc.org/en/document/women-conflict-and-international-humanitarian-law>.

¹³ UN Women (2022), ‘Feminist Foreign Policies – An Introduction’, https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2022-09/Brief-Feminist-foreign-policies-en_0.pdf.

¹⁴ Gender and Development Network (2021), *Humanitarians and the Women, Peace and Security agenda during Covid 19*, Briefing, London: Gender and Development Network, <https://gadnetwork.org/gadn-resources/humanitarian-wps-briefing>.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Baguios, A., King, M., Martins, A. and Pinnington, R. (2021), *Are we there yet? Localisation as the journey towards locally led practice*, report, London: ODI, <https://odi.org/en/publications/are-we-there-yet-localisation-as-the-journey-towards-locally-led-practice>.

¹⁷ See IASC (undated), ‘Grand Bargain 2.0 workstreams’, <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/grand-bargain/workstreams>.

¹⁸ UN Women (2020), ‘Who holds the microphone?’ *Crisis-affected women’s voices on gender-transformative changes in humanitarian settings: Experiences from Bangladesh, Colombia, Jordan and Uganda*, research paper, New York: UN Women, <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Headquarters/Attachments/Sections/Library/Publications/2020/Research-paper-Crisis-affected-womens-voices-on-gender-transformative-changes-en.pdf>; Gathumbi, A., Githuku, G., Hart, J. and Njunge, D. M. (2023), *Creating a Gender Equitable and Inclusive Response to Gender-Based Violence in Kenya*, report, Nairobi: Women’s Refugee Commission, <https://reliefweb.int/report/kenya/creating-gender-equitable-and-inclusive-response-gender-based-violence-kenya>.

communities, including the promotion of women and girls as leaders, is a pivotal goal of gender-transformative humanitarian action. Locally led gender programming aims to be tailored and to avoid top-down approaches that do not align with the priorities of conflict-affected women, girls and gender diverse people. Humanitarian organizations have made efforts to integrate gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls across the updated Grand Bargain 2.0 framework, endorsed by signatories in 2021. In reference to the Grand Bargain commitments, in this paper ‘inclusive’ refers to the inclusion of crisis-affected communities, especially women-led organizations, women’s rights organizations and those that represent gender-diverse people in humanitarian action.

Taken together, the gender equality and localization agendas call for an intersectional approach that recognizes and responds not only to forms of marginalization and inequity within conflict environments, but also within the humanitarian system itself.

Taken together, the gender equality and localization agendas call for an intersectional approach that recognizes and responds not only to forms of marginalization and inequity within conflict environments, but also within the humanitarian system itself. The achievement of these interlinking agendas is dependent, fundamentally, on the ability to understand and shift existing power dynamics, both in conflict settings and in humanitarian practices and systems. This research paper explores the extent to which humanitarian action can shift power in this way, while operating in accordance with humanitarian principles, particularly impartiality and neutrality.

Impartiality, neutrality and the promotion of gender equality

With its emphasis on non-discrimination and the equitable distribution of humanitarian resources, the principle of impartiality presents a clear opportunity to promote gender equality in humanitarian action. The pursuit of gender equality begins with the recognition that people do not experience equality by default, particularly in conflict contexts. In such circumstances, there often exist high levels of social exclusion and marginalization, where gender interacts with other social characteristics, including ethnicity, religion and political affiliation, to deepen inequality. The implementation of impartiality in humanitarian work is defined by a focus on ‘gender discrepancies’ in people’s access to essential resources and services.¹⁹ Impartiality is underpinned by the ‘difference principle’,²⁰ which

¹⁹ Olivius, E. (2016), *Beyond the Buzzwords: Approaches to Gender in Humanitarian Aid*, brief, Stockholm: Expert Group for Aid Studies, <https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:940987/FULLTEXT01.pdf>.

²⁰ Slim (2015), *Humanitarian Ethics: A Guide to the Morality of Aid in War and Disaster*, p. 62.

recognizes that people are not affected by conflict equally, often due to pre-existing inequities, and that conflict-affected communities will have different needs and degrees of vulnerability.

The principle of impartiality is aligned with an approach that considers the various needs of women, girls, men, boys and gender-diverse people. The application of impartiality can include the use of sex, age and disability disaggregated data (SADD) in programme design and analysis, and the principle is also reflected in tools like the IASC Gender and Age Marker (GAM), which includes coding options for people with diverse sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics (SOGIESC).²¹ Needs assessments tend to result in high numbers of women and children in humanitarian programmes. This is partly due to the vulnerability of these groups to violence, as well as a recognition of women's specific roles in communities.²² Impartiality corresponds with a gender-responsive approach that considers gender 'in both project design and analysis' (Table 2).

The experience of humanitarian agencies in Afghanistan demonstrates how the principle of impartiality can be applied to advocate for equal access for women, men, girls and boys in conflict-affected environments. This example also points towards some of the tensions and limitations connected to the needs-based approach. Afghanistan under Taliban rule presents a context of highly patriarchal governance with direct impacts on the capacity of humanitarian agencies, including the banning of women from humanitarian work. The country has received considerable attention for the gender-related challenges and dilemmas it poses for humanitarian agencies. The debate has been characterized by two primary positions. On the one hand, humanitarian actors have argued that an advocacy-based approach should be taken, which insists not only on equal access for women and men, but also on advocating for change in Taliban policy. Within this discussion, there are even stronger calls for the complete withdrawal of humanitarian aid to avoid being complicit in the persecution of women and girls.²³ On the other hand, agencies have argued that this approach inhibits access for populations in need of vital humanitarian assistance.²⁴ In the case of the latter, a trade-off could be deemed acceptable, where access for some populations is achieved, but where women and girls may not be equally represented.

The experience of humanitarian organizations that promote a rights-based approach like Oxfam is illuminating in this context, particularly following the Taliban takeover in 1996 when Oxfam's female staff were prevented from working. At this time, Oxfam felt that it could not provide humanitarian assistance 'with impartiality

²¹ UN Women (undated), 'Gender Data', [https://wrds.unwomen.org/practice/topics/data#:~:text=Sex%2C%20age%2C%20and%20disability%20disaggregated,the%20differentiated%20impacts%20of%20disasters](https://wrds.unwomen.org/practice/topics/data#:~:text=Sex%2C%20age%2C%20and%20disability%20disaggregated,the%20differentiated%20impacts%20of%20disasters;); UN Women (2021), 'Diverse SOGIESC Rapid Assessment Tool Guidance Note', <https://wrds.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2021-11/AP-DIV~1.PDF>; SIDA (2015), 'Gender Equality in Humanitarian Assistance: SIDA Gender Toolbox', <https://cdn.sida.se/publications/files/sida61850-gender-equality-in-humanitarian-assistance.pdf>.

²² Slim (2015), *Humanitarian Ethics: A Guide to the Morality of Aid in War and Disaster*.

²³ Slim, H. (2023), 'Humanitarians Must Reject the Taliban's Misogyny', Oxfam blog, 10 January 2023, <https://frompoverty.oxfam.org.uk/humanitarians-must-reject-the-talibans-misogyny>.

²⁴ Chatham House (2022), *Roundtable on gender and inclusion in humanitarian action during armed conflict*, Workshop Summary, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, <https://chathamhouse.soutron.net/Portal/Public/en-GB/RecordView/Index/202832>.

and proportionality, and without further undermining the position of women'.²⁵ As a result, Oxfam had to balance the continued delivery of humanitarian aid with a stance on the abuse of women's rights under the Taliban regime.²⁶ An interesting feature of Oxfam's perspective in this context is the argument that humanitarian action cannot be impartial in contexts of extreme inequality due to the systemic barriers in place. This indicates that impartiality can be used as a basis on which to advocate for the removal of those barriers.

However, in addressing systemic inequality, it is important to examine the limits of impartiality and its intrinsic needs-based approach. Two primary limitations stand out. Firstly, as scholars have observed, the approach to tracking and responding to gender discrepancies 'is a necessary first step towards addressing gender inequalities'.²⁷ Impartiality is, however, limited in its capacity to support gender equality because it does not seek to analyse and address the political, social and economic drivers of inequality. The needs-based approach focuses on the symptoms or outcomes of inequality, rather than trying to shift its underlying causes. Taking a stronger position in relation to such underlying dynamics could conflict with an organization's attempts to remain neutral, particularly when doing so would require, as in the case of Afghanistan, agencies to advocate for change in government policy. In ethical terms, this situation can be described as a 'conflict of incomparable values', with the principle of neutrality apparently clashing with the pursuit of gender equality.²⁸ And it is worth noting from this perspective that Oxfam as an organization does not subscribe to the principle of neutrality:

Oxfam cannot claim to be neutral as our action is a rights based approach, which implies that people have the right to defend the basic human rights they are entitled to, and that Oxfam is an actor in defending and proactively promoting the implementation of these rights.²⁹

Indeed, there is evidence that in displaced communities, the principle of neutrality has been used to deprioritize and delegitimize certain gender issues.³⁰ For example, research among displaced communities in Uganda has identified reluctance on the part of international humanitarian agencies to engage in LGBTQ+ issues, due to the potential impacts on their perceived neutrality. A similar concern was raised in the research workshops for this paper, where participants noted that in some conflict-affected contexts, 'support for gender equality, the rights of women and the LGBTQI+ community are considered political positions and thus pose a challenge to perceived neutrality'.³¹ In Uganda, such positions have impacted the ability of conflict-affected displaced people with diverse sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics (SOGIESC) from accessing

²⁵ Clifton, D. and Gell, F. (2001), 'Saving and protecting lives by empowering women', *Gender & Development*, 9(3), pp. 8–18, p.13, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4030624>.

²⁶ Williams, S. (2001), 'Contested terrain: Oxfam, gender, and the aftermath of war', *Gender & Development*, 9(3), pp. 19–28, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4030625>.

²⁷ Olivius (2016), *Beyond the Buzzwords: Approaches to Gender in Humanitarian Aid*.

²⁸ Slim (2015), *Humanitarian Ethics: A Guide to the Morality of Aid in War and Disaster*, pp. 161–162.

²⁹ Oxfam (2012), 'The Oxfam Humanitarian Dossier: Version 4.A', <https://www.oxfamwash.org/running-programmes/coordination/OI%20Humanitarian%20Dossier%20version4a%20march2012.pdf>.

³⁰ Daigle, M. (2022), *Gender, power and principles in humanitarian action*, report, London: ODI, <https://odi.org/en/publications/gender-power-and-principles-in-humanitarian-action/#:~:text=It%20has%20been%20firmly%20established,and%20unavoidably%20shaped%20by%20gender>.

³¹ Chatham House (2022), *Roundtable on the humanitarian principle of neutrality*, <https://chathamhouse.soutron.net/Portal/Public/en-GB/RecordView/Index/191240>.

‘badly needed services’.³² In contexts of systemic marginalization and exclusion, achieving impartiality may require efforts to address drivers of inequality and defend people’s rights, which can only partially be accomplished by the needs-based approach underpinning impartiality.

In the research workshops for this paper, participants noted that in some conflict-affected contexts, ‘support for gender equality, the rights of women and the LGBTQI+ community are considered political positions and thus pose a challenge to perceived neutrality’.

The second limitation of the needs-based approach is that, as an avenue for addressing gender inequality, it focuses on vulnerability and ‘beneficiary’ status, which risks undermining the agency of conflict-affected communities and their role in humanitarian action. The approach to establishing beneficiary status risks reproducing power imbalances between conflict-affected communities and external actors.³³ For instance, research among refugee populations indicates that the process of identifying and defining need involves the construction of ‘subject positions’ that ‘cast refugees as either passive or problematic subjects who need to be rescued, protected, assisted, activated, controlled and reformed through humanitarian interventions, while humanitarian workers are positioned as rational administrators and progressive agents of social transformation’.³⁴ As the following section examines, the ability to support gender equality, and particularly more ambitious transformative objectives, is dependent on the capacity to promote the agency of marginalized communities in humanitarian action.

There is evidence that humanitarian responses have not always met the needs of conflict-affected women and girls, people living with disabilities, gender-diverse people and the elderly due to a lack of adequate understanding of their needs, as a result of a humanitarian system in which these groups rarely take part in decision-making.³⁵ For instance, evaluations have found that needs assessments deprioritize gender equality in the early stages of a crisis in order to focus on more immediate ‘life-saving’ concerns. As a result, gender responsive practice is often limited to dealing with sexual exploitation and abuse or gender-based violence under the protection mandate.³⁶ Although the collection of disaggregated data improves as interventions progress, consultation with affected women and other marginalized groups rarely translates into them having a decision-making role

³² Daigle (2022), *Gender, power and principles in humanitarian action*.

³³ Peace Direct (2021), *Time to Decolonise Aid*, Report, London: Peace Direct, https://www.peacedirect.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/PD-Decolonising-Aid_Second-Edition.pdf.

³⁴ Olivius (2016), *Beyond the Buzzwords: Approaches to Gender in Humanitarian Aid*.

³⁵ See Hersi, A. and Hastie, R. (2022), ‘Applying feminist principles and gender justice to humanitarian action’, published in Annex to Chatham House (2022), *Roundtable on gender and inclusion in humanitarian action during armed conflict*.

³⁶ United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (2020), ‘Inter-Agency Humanitarian Evaluation on Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women and Girls (GEEWG)’, evaluation report, <https://www.alnap.org/help-library/inter-agency-humanitarian-evaluation-on-gender-equality-and-the-empowerment-of-women-0>.

in the design or implementation of a response. Interventions are also rarely adapted and revised in response to new analysis.³⁷ Such findings indicate that although impartiality is fundamentally aligned with gender-responsive humanitarian action, problems with its implementation in humanitarian work mean that it is not fulfilling its potential in this regard.

Involving women's groups in humanitarian coordination and management structures is one way to promote the role of women in decision-making.³⁸ But the absence of conflict-affected communities in humanitarian leadership raises a particular problem in relation to how needs are defined and identified. Indeed, it has been shown that understanding the needs of a diverse group of people is best achieved by organizations that are themselves diverse.³⁹ The ALNAP *State of the Humanitarian System* (SOHS) report highlights that, despite more women reaching leadership positions within the sector, the proportion of actors from aid-receiving contexts in such positions remains very low.⁴⁰ While 93 per cent of the humanitarian workforce are citizens of the countries in which they work, the SOHS report states that less than one-fifth of country directors are. According to the SOHS report, people from countries receiving aid comprised less than 20 per cent of international NGO boards and only 2 per cent had any experience living as a refugee or in a humanitarian crisis environment.⁴¹ Such dynamics indicate the application of the principles by humanitarian agencies is conditioned by their position as external entities to conflict contexts.

Promoting the role of conflict-affected communities in humanitarian action

Organizations led by women, girls and gender-diverse people play a crucial role in humanitarian action, and they are often involved in the most transformational gender work that takes place.⁴² Among displaced communities, for instance, research shows that when conflict-affected women and girls are given opportunities to have their voices heard and participate in humanitarian action, it not only results in a more accurate understanding of their needs, but it can have transformative effects on gender relations.⁴³ Similarly, one of the most prevalent messages to emerge from research on gendered dynamics of conflict is the central role played by women's collective action and social movements in pathways towards inclusive peace.⁴⁴ This shows the need for external interventions not to overlook the priorities and activism of women themselves. In many fragile contexts, locally rooted efforts to promote

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Hersi and Hastie (2022), 'Applying feminist principles and gender justice to humanitarian action'.

⁴⁰ Obrecht, A. and Swithern, S. with Doherty, J. (2022), *The State of the Humanitarian System 2022 Report*, London: ALNAP/ODI, <https://sohs.alnap.org/sohs-2022-report/a-reader%E2%80%99s-guide-to-this-report>.

⁴¹ Loy, I. (2022), 'Key takeaways from the latest snapshot of the humanitarian system', 13 September 2022, New Humanitarian blog, <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news/2022/09/13/State-of-the-humanitarian-system-Key-takeaways>.

⁴² Gender and Development Network (2021), *Humanitarians and the Women, Peace and Security agenda during Covid 19*.

⁴³ UN Women (2020), 'Who holds the microphone?' *Crisis-affected women's voices on gender-transformative changes in humanitarian settings: Experiences from Bangladesh, Colombia, Jordan and Uganda*.

⁴⁴ Domingo, P. et al. (2013), *Assessment of the evidence of links between gender equality, peacebuilding and statebuilding*, Literature review, London: ODI, <https://cdn.odi.org/media/documents/8767.pdf>.

and secure women's empowerment exist independently of international interest and agendas. For instance, in Afghanistan, the commitment to women's rights among some of the most influential Afghan civil society organizations pre-date the influx of international interventions that occurred in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks.⁴⁵

In more recent years, efforts have been made to align the pursuit of gender equality with the localization agenda to promote the role of crisis-affected communities in humanitarian action.⁴⁶ The Women's Refugee Commission, for instance, noted that:

Localization is central to the discourse on gender-transformative and feminist humanitarian action as it draws attention to the roles of women and local women's organizations in humanitarian response. It also calls for increased support and space for local women's leadership as a key element of gender-transformative work in crisis-affected countries.⁴⁷

However, key localization policy architecture for the humanitarian system, like the Grand Bargain, has faced challenges in incorporating and implementing a gender focus. In fact, the initial Grand Bargain commitments made in 2016 omitted gender priorities altogether. Under the influence of the Friends of Gender Group (FoGG) – a collective of Grand Bargain signatories steering its gender work – the Grand Bargain 2.0 framework sought to rectify this and was successful at integrating gender equality and women's empowerment issues across the 2021 framework document.⁴⁸ To support this process, FoGG members also produced a series of guidance notes applying a gender lens to four priority workstreams in the Grand Bargain, including cash assistance, participation, localization and needs assessments.⁴⁹

A significant challenge, however, to the implementation of gender-responsive localization under the Grand Bargain is the lack of an effective accountability mechanism for tracking signatory progress. This is reflected in low levels of reporting against key gender commitments like the proportion of funding going to women-led organizations (WLO) and women's rights organizations (WRO), which is an optional indicator and was completed by only five signatories in 2021 and 2022.⁵⁰ It has been very challenging to track progress on the Grand Bargain due to a lack of data, affected by the absence of commonly applied indicators and categorization approaches, including definitions for WROs and WLOs.

⁴⁵ Grau, B. (2016), 'Supporting women's movements in Afghanistan: challenges of activism in a fragile context', *Gender & Development*, 24(3), pp. 409–426, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13552074.2016.1233736>.

⁴⁶ Oxfam Canada (2018), *A feminist approach to localization: How Canada can support the leadership of women's rights actors in humanitarian action*, Report, Ottawa: Oxfam Canada, <https://www.oxfam.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/a-feminist-approach-to-localization.pdf>; Arab Renaissance for Democracy & Development (2021), *Localizing the Gender Agendas*, Paper, Amman: Arab Renaissance for Democracy & Development, <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/58256bc615d5db852592fe40/t/60505f62e60dd13c3c625d1d/1615880040834/Localising+Gender+Agendas+English.pdf>.

⁴⁷ Gathumbi, Githuku, Hart and Njunge (2023), *Creating a Gender Equitable and Inclusive Response to Gender-Based Violence in Kenya*.

⁴⁸ Metcalfe-Hough, V., Fenton, W., Saez, P. and Spencer, A. (2022), *The Grand Bargain in 2021: An independent review*, report, London: Overseas Development Institute, https://cdn.odi.org/media/documents/Grand_Bargain_2022_ogGQS0m.pdf.

⁴⁹ Inter-Agency Standing Committee (2020), *Friends of Gender: Guidance notes on how to promote gender equality through the Grand Bargain commitments*, Geneva: Inter-Agency Standing Committee, <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/grand-bargain-official-website/friends-gender-guidance-notes-how-promote-gender-equality-through>.

⁵⁰ Metcalfe-Hough, V., Fenton, W. and Manji, F. (2023), *The Grand Bargain in 2022: an independent review*, https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/system/files/2023-08/HPG_report-Grand_Bargain_2023_master_rev.pdf.

To address this, the Gender Reference Group in the IASC has developed a common definition of WROs and WLOs that will, once formally endorsed in 2023, be integrated into the tracking systems for partnerships with and funding to WROs and WLOs. In the most recent independent review of the Grand Bargain, progress on the participation of WRO and WLO actors in global and country-level decision-making forums is reported, including in the advisory boards of country-based pooled funds (CBPF), which are a central funding mechanism for local organizations.⁵¹ Internally, the FoGG has been working to promote the role of WROs and WLOs within the Grand Bargain structure, including advocating for the representation of these organizations in the facilitation group, and active participation and leadership within national reference groups. The FoGG itself is also in the process of shifting its leadership towards WRO and WLO actors.

The localization agenda and its gender focus are still evolving, and localization is by no means a silver bullet for promoting the leadership of conflict-affected women, girls and gender-diverse people in humanitarian settings. Localization faces various barriers and challenges, including the risk of reinforcing existing inequalities in local contexts.⁵² For instance, interviews conducted with local humanitarian partners and women in Syria indicated that the majority of ‘localized’ funding went to larger, male-dominated NGOs, ‘which have been able to negotiate larger scale programmes precisely because of their more conservative social and political affiliations’.⁵³ Of particular relevance to this paper are challenges relating to the humanitarian principles.⁵⁴

There is a perception that acting in line with the principles is a challenge for local and national organizations involved in humanitarian action, due to the proximity of these actors to local contexts and communities.⁵⁵ This is particularly relevant in highly politicized conflict environments. For instance, Médecins Sans Frontières has argued that:

National and local humanitarian actors face several critical challenges in adhering to the core humanitarian principles when armed conflict is taking place in their country. These may be unintentional, because of the actors’ various ties or affiliations with institutions, groups and communities, or because of their deliberate choice to favour a particular geographic area or population group. Striving to assess needs and provide assistance in an impartial manner may simply not be feasible for someone who is part of the local dynamics. Further complications may exist with regards to the principles of neutrality and independence.⁵⁶

⁵¹ Metcalfe-Hough, Fenton and Manji (2023), *The Grand Bargain in 2022: an independent review*.

⁵² Baguios, King, Martins, Pinnington (2021), *Are we there yet? Localisation as the journey towards locally led practice*.

⁵³ ActionAid (2018), *Not what she bargained for? Gender and the Grand Bargain*, report, Geneva: ActionAid, https://www.actionaid.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/actionaid_report_gender_and_the_grand_bargain_june_2018.pdf.

⁵⁴ Barbelet, V., Davies, G., Flint, J. and Davey, E. (2021), *Interrogating the evidence base on humanitarian localisation: A literature study*, Literature review, London: ODI, <https://odi.org/en/publications/interrogating-the-evidence-base-on-humanitarian-localisation-a-literature-study>.

⁵⁵ Duclos, D. et al. (2019), ‘Localisation and cross-border assistance to deliver humanitarian health services in North-West Syria: a qualitative inquiry for the Lancet-AUB Commission on Syria’, *Conflict and Health* 13(20), <https://conflictandhealth.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s13031-019-0207-z>.

⁵⁶ Schenkenberg, E. (2016), *The Challenges of Localised Humanitarian Aid in Armed Conflict*, report, Geneva: ALNAP, <https://www.alnap.org/help-library/the-challenges-of-localised-humanitarian-aid-in-armed-conflict>.

There are also assertions that ‘you don’t have to be neutral to be a good humanitarian’.⁵⁷ Indeed, humanitarian crises, including the wars in Ukraine and Syria, have brought into question the dominance of neutrality in Western humanitarian practice and enlivened debates about ‘alternative forms of humanitarian action’ that concentrate on different sets of principles, including solidarity, resistance and social justice.⁵⁸ Moreover, the concept of international actors as somehow immune from the politics of conflicts is potentially ‘overly naive’ because all humanitarian actors, national and international, face challenges in upholding the principles, and it could be argued that any humanitarian presence in conflict zones is ‘inherently political’.⁵⁹

Localization faces various barriers and challenges, including the risk of reinforcing existing inequalities in local contexts.

The case of Myanmar demonstrates these dynamics. Women’s organizations in Myanmar have argued that expectations for the blanket application of the humanitarian principles can hinder the role of local organizations.⁶⁰ For instance, the ability of these organizations to work in accordance with the principles of neutrality and impartiality is challenged by the nature of unequal power relations between the military, civil society and warring parties.⁶¹ However, local actors are often best situated to deliver aid given their knowledge of local conflict dynamics, access and trust. Myanmar presents a hostile landscape for humanitarian organizations, including intentional acts of violence against international aid workers and the military junta not allowing humanitarian actors to access conflict-affected communities. Trust is therefore particularly important in a context in which the role of international organizations has been rejected by communities due to their perceived relationship with the junta – because such humanitarian organizations are beholden to the authorities of the territories they are in for their operation and mobility. In this context, women’s organizations have chosen a human rights-based approach that demonstrates solidarity with persecuted and marginalized communities. This has supported the development of trust with communities, but it has tested the principle of neutrality. The Myanmar case exemplifies the reality of a highly politicized environment, where applying a rights-based approach, while not being neutral, can support access and positive relationships with communities.⁶²

While the example of Myanmar shows the challenges faced by women’s organizations in upholding the principle of neutrality, using the principles to delegitimize locally led humanitarian action may be more reflective of the position of international humanitarian organizations than the realities of conflicts on the ground. As the SOHS report findings indicate, the humanitarian system is not ‘neutral’ but is marked

⁵⁷ Slim (2020) ‘You don’t have to be neutral to be a good humanitarian’.

⁵⁸ ODI (2022), ‘Beyond neutrality: alternative forms of humanitarian action’, event, <https://odi.org/en/events/beyond-neutrality-alternative-forms-of-humanitarian-action>.

⁵⁹ Barakat, S. and Milton, S. (2020), ‘Localisation across the humanitarian-development-peace nexus’, *Journal of Peacebuilding & Development*, 15(2), pp. 147–163, p. 150.

⁶⁰ Chatham House (2022), *Roundtable on gender and inclusion in humanitarian action during armed conflict*.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

by its own embedded power dynamics, assumptions and political incentives. For instance, commentators note that international agencies suggest that all aid should be neutral in an effort to ‘guard their space’ in an environment of shrinking donor funding and increasing pressures to localize aid.⁶³ Similarly, it has been argued that the humanitarian principles can operate as a ‘convenient escape from much harder conversations about gaps in commitment, leadership and political will’.⁶⁴ In order to promote gender-equality in contexts of armed conflict, the role of conflict-affected communities, particularly marginalized groups, in humanitarian action should not be undermined by arguments about their capacity to uphold the principles. Such observations do not necessarily imply that neutrality as a principle should be abandoned entirely, simply that the expectation for its blanket application in conflicts requires critical examination and is both context- and actor-dependent.

Strengthening integrated approaches with conflict sensitivity

Critiques of the needs-based approach underpinning impartiality highlight that, whether it is intended or not, humanitarian action always has the potential to shape gender relations, both positively and negatively. However, the ‘practical and limited scope of the basic needs approach is not well suited to foster awareness of the subtle and often unintended gendered effects of policies and programmes’.⁶⁵ Similarly, analysts have brought attention to the way in which the limited technical focus of needs assessments can fuel conflict and insecurity.⁶⁶ For instance, in South Sudan, armed groups have exploited the technical focus of needs assessments to control local populations, exposing them to greater insecurity. They have done this by pushing populations into contested territories, then asking agencies to provide assistance on the basis of need; this has further fuelled resource allocation-related tensions between different communities. This has been possible because humanitarian needs assessments have failed to situate and assess physical needs within the broader political contexts in which operations takes place.⁶⁷

Observers argue that an approach that is sensitive to conflict dynamics in contexts like South Sudan would involve moving beyond purely needs-based interpretations of impartiality to a ‘more expansive agenda’, in which the humanitarian sector’s existing principles are complemented by a concern for social injustice and the aim of redressing structural inequalities.⁶⁸ In South Sudan, structural inequalities and injustice include gender disparities, which can be viewed as both an outcome

⁶³ ODI (2022), ‘Beyond neutrality: alternative forms of humanitarian action’.

⁶⁴ Daigle (2022), *Gender, power and principles in humanitarian action*, p. 20.

⁶⁵ Olivius (2016), *Beyond the Buzzwords: Approaches to Gender in Humanitarian Aid*, p. 8.

⁶⁶ Craze, J. and Luedke, A. (2022), ‘Why humanitarians should stop hiding behind impartiality’, *The New Humanitarian* blog, 22 August 2022, <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/opinion/2022/08/22/impartiality-humanitarian-aid-South-Sudan-conflict>.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

and a feature of conflict, seen particularly in the prevalence of gender-based violence, but also as a part of the underlying social norms and power dynamics that drive violence.⁶⁹

A recent UN Human Rights Council investigation in South Sudan highlights how rape and sexual violence are perpetrated by all armed groups across the country as a tactic of war. Such violence has been enabled by ‘near-universal impunity’ for perpetrators in the country’s justice system.⁷⁰ In South Sudan, the marginalization of gender-based violence in the public justice system is an example of the gendered nature of political settlements in fragile contexts, which can be characterized by relationships between violent forms of masculinity, conflict, gender-based violence and women’s marginalization in public life.⁷¹

Recognition of the interconnection between gendered power relations and conflict has driven calls for humanitarian action that integrates approaches under the triple nexus and WPS frameworks. These agendas recognize that humanitarian interventions alone may be limited in their ability to address the gendered drivers and outcomes of conflict. However, they can work in a way that coordinates across the humanitarian, development and peace spheres to contribute towards more long-term, transformative outcomes. Arguing along these lines, a Gender and Development Network briefing states that ‘[t]o be meaningful, gender-responsive humanitarian action must connect women and girl’s rights in crisis settings to WPS’s call for conflict prevention, women’s participation and resilience’.⁷² In the research for this series of papers, practitioners similarly argued that meaningful engagement with gender by humanitarian agencies would involve a rights-based approach that challenges power, gender norms and promotes gender justice.⁷³

At the same time, the varied interpretations of humanitarian principles are challenging the ability of organizations to break down the different sectoral approaches to conflict and gender. This is seen particularly in differences of opinion over whether humanitarian action should be kept as ‘apolitical’ as possible and whether actors should avoid peace and development issues to protect the neutrality and independence of organizations.⁷⁴ For instance, a recent ALNAP briefing points towards ‘widespread concerns’ about the tensions that arise between humanitarian principles and the nexus approach, which can involve closer collaboration with

⁶⁹ Cordaid (2010), *Gender-responsive Peace and State-building: Transforming the Culture of Power in Fragile States*, brief, The Hague: Cordaid, <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/gender-responsive-peace-and-state-building-transforming-culture-power-fragile-states>; ICRC (2020), *Male Perceptions of Sexual Violence in South Sudan and the Central African Republic*, report, <https://shop.icrc.org/male-perceptions-of-sexual-violence-in-south-sudan-and-the-central-african-republic-pdf-en.html>.

⁷⁰ UN Human Rights Commission (2022), ‘South Sudan: UN report highlights widespread sexual violence against women and girls in conflict, fuelled by systemic impunity’, press release, 21 March 2022, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2022/03/south-sudan-un-report-highlights-widespread-sexual-violence-against-women>.

⁷¹ Ibid.; O’Rourke, C. (2017), ‘Gendering Political Settlements: Challenges and Opportunities’, *Journal of International Development*, 29(5), pp. 594–612, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1002/jid.3285>; Nasiwa, J. (2021), ‘No Justice for Women, No Peace in South Sudan’, African Arguments blog, 19 March 2021, <https://africanarguments.org/2021/03/no-justice-for-women-no-peace-in-south-sudan>; UN Human Rights Commission (2022), ‘South Sudan: UN report highlights widespread sexual violence against women and girls in conflict, fuelled by systemic impunity’.

⁷² Gender and Development Network (2021), *Humanitarians and the Women, Peace and Security agenda during Covid 19*.

⁷³ Chatham House (2022), *Roundtable on gender and inclusion in humanitarian action during armed conflict*.

⁷⁴ DuBois, M. (2020), *Triple Nexus – Threat or Opportunity for the Humanitarian Principles?*, discussion paper, London: Centre for Humanitarian Action, <https://www.chaberlin.org/en/publications/triple-nexus-threat-or-opportunity-for-the-humanitarian-principles-2>.

state-based parties in conflict.⁷⁵ But, as this paper has noted, when retaining an ‘apolitical’ stance leads humanitarian actors to overlook the political, economic and social dimensions of conflict they risk reinforcing existing gender inequalities and conflict dynamics.

One way in which agencies attempt to overcome the risks and limitations associated with politically blind programming is through conflict-sensitivity assessments. Conflict sensitivity is generally underpinned by recognition that if humanitarian organizations do not have a full grasp of the contexts in which they operate, then their interventions can become implicated within processes that further stoke violence. As the South Sudan example shows, this also applies to the operationalization of humanitarian principles. In recent years, there have been efforts to embed a stronger gender focus in conflict-sensitivity frameworks. For instance, Saferworld’s 2020 gender-sensitive conflict analysis guidelines recognize that ‘harmful gender norms fuel not just gender inequality but also conflict, broader discrimination, exclusion and violence’.⁷⁶ This approach aims to highlight how different types of violence, including economic violence, gender-based violence and political violence, are used to maintain power in public and private spaces, and how these spaces are connected. Saferworld’s approach also aims to gain a fuller picture of conflict-affected people’s needs in peacebuilding and humanitarian programming, arguing:

If you have a conflict analysis that doesn’t consider gender, or that does so in a superficial way, your policies and practice will not just be incomplete and inefficient – by not considering the specific needs of at least half of the population you’re working with and how gender norms fuel men’s violent behaviour at all levels, for example – they may even cause harm.⁷⁷

In the context of Afghanistan, Oxfam has also promoted the role of conflict sensitivity that incorporates gender concerns.⁷⁸ However, there are a number of operational challenges associated with implementing gender-responsive conflict sensitivity. These include the perception that conflict analysis can slow humanitarian assistance down and compromise the ability of agencies to achieve their fundamental, life-saving objectives. The analytical approaches used can also fail to fully address how interventions interact with conflict dynamics, instead focusing on more technical geospatial, nutritional or agricultural data. This can be connected to humanitarian actors overlooking how aid could be diverted or instrumentalized by armed groups, which, as shown in South Sudan, has the potential to fuel or fund conflict.⁷⁹ Based on its analysis in Afghanistan, Oxfam

⁷⁵ ALNAP (2023), ‘The nexus: current status and discourse’, <https://www.alnap.org/the-nexus-current-status-and-discourse>.

⁷⁶ Saferworld (undated), ‘Gender-sensitive conflict analysis: a facilitation guide’, <https://www.saferworld.org.uk/resources/publications/1284-gender-sensitive-conflict-analysis-a-facilitation-guide>.

⁷⁷ Saferworld (2020), ‘This is how gender-sensitive conflict analysis improves peacebuilding’, Saferworld blog, 6 November 2020, <https://www.saferworld.org.uk/resources/news-and-analysis/post/915-this-is-how-gender-sensitive-conflict-analysis-improves-peacebuilding#:~:text=What%20is%20a%20gender%2Dsensitive,broader%20discrimination%2C%20exclusion%20and%20violence>.

⁷⁸ Oxfam (2021), *The Imperative of Conflict Sensitivity in Humanitarian Operations*, report, Geneva: Oxfam, <https://reliefweb.int/report/afghanistan/imperative-conflict-sensitivity-humanitarian-operations#:~:text=The%20recognition%20that%20a%20humanitarian,exacerbate%20conflict%20constitutes%20conflict%20sensitivity>.

⁷⁹ Craze and Luedke (2022), ‘Why humanitarians should stop hiding behind impartiality’.

concludes that poor local-level context analysis can lead to conflict dynamics being overlooked and to programming that focuses more on ensuring continued funding, rather than on doing no harm.⁸⁰

The role of funding incentives points towards the need to integrate political-economy analyses into any approach that aims to be conflict sensitive. An example of good practice in this area is the Gender, Inclusion, Power and Politics (GIPP) toolkit, which merges political-economy and gender analysis and has been developed through piloting in conflict contexts like Myanmar.⁸¹ The GIPP approach involves outlining formal power structures as well as less tangible, invisible and hidden forms of power, including personal behaviours, norms, ideology and beliefs as pervasive systems of power. Using gender-sensitive analytical approaches in conflict contexts can help overcome the limitations associated with the implementation of impartiality. Applying gender-sensitive analytical approaches alongside needs assessments can help expand the framework of analysis conducted in humanitarian assessments to include the social, political and economic drivers of conflict and the effects of these dynamics on women, girls, marginalized or minority groups. Integrating gender, power and economic analysis can support the conflict sensitivity of integrated practices that coordinate across humanitarian, peace and development sectors.

⁸⁰ Oxfam (2021), *The Imperative of Conflict Sensitivity in Humanitarian Operations*.

⁸¹ Social Development Direct (2021), 'Gender Inclusion Power and Politics Toolkit', <https://www.sddirect.org.uk/node/123>.

Conclusion

In humanitarian action, the promotion of gender equality is aligned with the fundamental goals of humanity: to alleviate human suffering and respect human dignity. However, the promotion of gender equality in practice and its relationship with the humanitarian principles is complicated. The principle of impartiality and its central needs-based approach provide an essential entry point for efforts to support gender equality, through tailored humanitarian assistance based on analysis of gender-related differences in access to basic services and resources. Impartiality can support agencies to be gender responsive, if this approach is implemented in an inclusive way that responds to the full diversity of people's needs in conflict contexts. However, in pursuing more ambitious, longer-term objectives that require shifts of a structural nature, impartiality is limited. This is because the principle mainly responds to the outcomes of inequality rather than address its drivers, including social norms, economic systems or government policy. With its focus on needs and vulnerability, the approach underpinning impartiality also risks curtailing the agency of conflict-affected people and reproducing existing power imbalances between affected communities and humanitarian agencies.

In practice, the ability to work in accordance with the principles is dependent on the perceptions of actors in conflict contexts, including affected communities, host governments and warring parties. The absence of objective criteria for the fulfilment of the humanitarian principles means that their compatibility with the promotion of gender equality is highly context dependent. As a result, efforts to overcome systemic barriers to promote and secure the impartial access of marginalized groups to assistance may cause tension with other principles, including neutrality. This is particularly the case in contexts of systemic marginalization, where the achievement of impartiality may necessitate actions to address the social and political barriers facing marginalized communities. However, if the principles, like neutrality, are being applied in a way that prevents humanitarian agencies from meeting the full range of people's needs in these environments, this will weaken the ability of these organizations to achieve the fundamental goal of humanity. Going forward, there is a need for further critical examination and assessment of the application of the principles in different contexts to understand how, and the extent to which, they pose a barrier to the promotion of gender equality and inclusion.

This paper emphasizes the importance of applying the humanitarian principles within wider efforts to promote peace and address conflict dynamics, including the gendered drivers and outcomes of conflict. The success of such efforts will be dependent on the capacity to overcome power imbalances within the aid sector by promoting the roles of conflict-affected communities in humanitarian action and leadership. This includes women-led organizations, as well as those representing the rights of women, girls and gender-diverse people. While external actors are in a position to support social change in conflict-affected contexts, doing so without the leadership of people in those situations is less likely to achieve contextually responsive and sustainable outcomes. Similarly, local leadership in conflict contexts is not necessarily a straightforward route to achieving gender equality and addressing marginalization. Any effort to support endogenous peace and social change processes in conflict contexts requires political and conflict sensitivity.

Over the longer-term, the ability to support change towards more peaceful and equitable societies is also dependent on the success of integrated approaches that can be coordinated across humanitarian, development and peace spheres.

Recommendations

Short-term/operational

1. Understanding the humanitarian principles and their role

- Promote training and learning to boost understanding within humanitarian agencies on how the principles can support gender equality in humanitarian action. For instance, current professional training on the humanitarian principles – such as that provided by the International Association of Professionals in Humanitarian Assistance and Protection (PHAP) – could include a focus on how the principle of impartiality can support gender-responsive practice, and also the limits of impartiality in pursuing gender equality.⁸²
Responsibility of: Professional bodies and accreditation associations (e.g. PHAP); UN training bodies and schools (e.g. UN System Staff College), learning and gender advisers in international NGOs.
- Conduct further research on how the principles are being applied by a variety of humanitarian organizations in practice, as well as in donor policy, focusing on how this affects their ability to support gender equality and address other intersecting inequalities (e.g. related to disability, age, religion, political affiliation or ethnicity) in conflict and conflict-affected contexts. Further research is required to understand the extent to which the implementation of the principles, particularly neutrality, is impeding or supporting efforts to achieve gender equality and inclusion in humanitarian action, particularly in relation to attempts to support crisis-affected LGBTQ+ and gender-diverse people. This research would identify what to do when operational field staff use the principles as a justification for refusing to engage with important gender issues.
Responsibility of: Donors and academic institutions or research organizations.

2. Understanding and identifying needs – implementing impartiality

- Humanitarian agencies should prioritize the deployment of gender expertise, particularly gender experts with contextual knowledge, at the onset of crises. It is recommended that humanitarian country teams (HCTs) ensure that regular opportunities are created to adapt and revise humanitarian response plans to consider intersectional gender analysis and disaggregated data. This process should draw on the work and existing recommendations of the FoGG to develop guidance on how to promote gender equality through impartial and joint needs

⁸² See the International Association of Professionals in Humanitarian Assistance and Protection (undated), 'Certification in Applying the Humanitarian Principles in Practice', <https://phap.org/cp-ahpp>.

assessments.⁸³ It should also draw on efforts within the sector to be accountable to conflict-affected people, in particular via the emphasis on participation of the most marginalized communities in decisions that affect them.⁸⁴

Responsibility of: All humanitarian agencies, so-called ‘multi-mandated’ organizations, UN resident coordinators (RCs) and HCs.

- Revise IASC standard operating procedures on needs assessments to include guidance on the involvement of conflict-affected women, girls, men, boys and gender-diverse people, so that needs are self-defined and identified. This involves moving beyond consultation of conflict-affected marginalized groups, to providing opportunities for them to take part in the design of interventions through shaping strategic planning. For instance, the current IASC operational guidance for *Coordinated Assessments in Humanitarian Crises, 2012* is due for revision in 2023, which provides an opportunity to integrate a stronger gender and inclusion focus on coordinated needs assessments. The IASC humanitarian programme cycle is also in the process of revision, which provides further opportunities to enhance the role of conflict-affected communities in implementing impartiality. This process should draw on the work and existing recommendations of the FoGG to develop guidance on how to promote gender equality through impartial and joint needs assessments.⁸⁵ The new standard operating procedures should also reflect complementary IASC guidance on strengthening participation, representation and leadership of local and national actors in IASC humanitarian coordination mechanisms.⁸⁶
Responsibility of: IASC humanitarian programme cycle steering group, UN humanitarian coordinators (HCs) and HCTs.

3. Integrated approaches and the role of local and national actors

- When working across humanitarian, peace and development spheres, humanitarian organizations should look to apply contextual analysis frameworks that focus on the social, political and economic drivers of conflict and the effects of these dynamics on women, girls, marginalized or minority groups. Integrating gender, power and economic analysis can support the conflict sensitivity of integrated practices that promote longer-term outcomes and resilience. Saferworld’s gender-sensitive conflict analysis framework is one such example presented in this paper. Using context analysis in this way can also support humanitarian agencies to avoid the risks related to simplified needs-based assessments of crisis-affected contexts, particularly the risk of further fuelling marginalization or conflict dynamics.
Responsibility of: All humanitarian agencies, so-called ‘multi-mandated’ organizations, UN resident coordinators (RCs) and HCs.

⁸³ UN Women (2020), *How to promote gender equality through impartial and joint needs assessments*, guidance note, Geneva: UN Women, <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/system/files/2020-05/UN%20Women%20-%20How%20to%20promote%20gender%20equality%20through%20impartial%20and%20joint%20needs%20assessments%20-%20Guidance%20Note.pdf>.

⁸⁴ UNICEF (2020), *Summary Guidelines to Integrating Accountability to Affected People (AAP) in Country Office Planning Cycles*, <https://www.unicef.org/esa/media/7101/file/UNICEF-ESA-Intergrating-AAP-2020.pdf>.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ IASC (2021), *Strengthening participation, representation and leadership of local and national actors in IASC humanitarian coordination mechanisms*, guidance note, Geneva, Inter-Agency Standing Committee, https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/system/files/2021-07/IASC%20Guidance%20on%20Strengthening%20Participation%20Representation%20and%20Leadership%20of%20Local%20and%20National%20Actors%20in%20IASC%20Humanitarian%20Coordination%20Mechanisms_2.pdf.

- To support localization efforts under the Grand Bargain, parties to the agreement should develop guidance on the application of humanitarian principles when funding local or national organizations, including WLOs and WROs. These standards should adopt a flexible approach to applying the principles that respects the organizational integrity of partners and their relationships with conflict-affected communities. This approach involves the conflict-sensitivity models outlined in this paper, so that decisions about how and the extent to which partners are expected to uphold the principles are determined by contextual analysis and understanding.
Responsibility of: Grand Bargain facilitation group principals and caucus members on funding for localization.
- To support reporting on gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls by the Grand Bargain signatories, the FoGG should continue its engagement with the caucus on funding for localization to support the establishment of a baseline for tracking funding to WROs and WLOs. For instance, in the Grand Bargain agreement, the FoGG has called for members to include recommendations for signatories on reporting funding to WROs and WLOs. It has also recommended that members lead by example by committing to track and report funding to WROs and WLOs.
Responsibility of: Grand Bargain FoGG, caucus members on funding for localization.

Longer-term, strategic issues

- In humanitarian practice, there is a need to continually reflect on and unpack the principles and how their interpretation and application should evolve to remain meaningful and useful, especially for field practitioners involved in the promotion of gender equality and social inclusion.
- Conduct further research on how WLOs and WROs representing marginalized groups perceive and use the principles. This will support localization efforts by looking at the evolution of policy and practice of humanitarian action in Global South contexts. The perspectives, narratives and histories of local and national actors are often omitted, despite being recognized as primary humanitarian actors.
- Research the barriers to increasing the role of local and national actors in humanitarian action in conflict contexts, to understand the extent to which the humanitarian principles pose a genuine challenge to the localization agenda and how.

About the author

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The project aims to offer recommendations designed to bring about substantial improvements in outcomes for civilians, both in the short and long term.

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Cover image: Volunteers prepare aid packages for refugees fleeing Sudan, at the Wadi Karkar bus station near the Egyptian city of Aswan, 2 May 2023.

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