



**‘WHO HOLDS THE MICROPHONE?’  
CRISIS-AFFECTED WOMEN’S VOICES  
ON GENDER-TRANSFORMATIVE  
CHANGES IN HUMANITARIAN SETTINGS:  
EXPERIENCES FROM BANGLADESH,  
COLOMBIA, JORDAN AND UGANDA**

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Cover Photo: A South Sudanese refugee woman holding a microphone.

Photo Credit: UN Women/Fernanda Baumhardt-Grojean.

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# RESEARCH PAPER

## ‘WHO HOLDS THE MICROPHONE?’ CRISIS-AFFECTED WOMEN’S VOICES ON GENDER- TRANSFORMATIVE CHANGES IN HUMANITARIAN SETTINGS:

Experiences from Bangladesh, Colombia,  
Jordan and Uganda



**PEACE, SECURITY AND  
HUMANITARIAN ACTION SECTION  
UN WOMEN**  
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# FOREWORD

“Who holds the microphone?” is an apt metaphor – and title – for this study. Crisis-affected women taking hold of the microphone in refugee and displacement settings represents a necessary disruption in the multiple power inequalities embedded in the humanitarian sector. In the context of exploring localization, participation and gender-transformative change processes, the same question of who holds the microphone can be extended and posed to humanitarian actors beyond these specific contexts to identify who speaks, in what formats, on what topics and with whose priorities.

The question “Who holds the microphone?” challenges humanitarian actions that only view women as victims and beneficiaries rather than as decision makers, with voice and agency to identify those with the greatest needs and lead humanitarian planning, action and accountability mechanisms. This research explores women’s leadership from eight diverse groups of crisis-affected women in large-scale refugee and displacement crises in Bangladesh, Colombia, Jordan and Uganda, and used participatory video processes, among other data-collection methods. By collaboratively creating this space and

video content over a period of several days, women took over the microphone to speak about different aspects of their lived experiences. Their responses to this question included reflections on and ideas about peer-to-peer engagement, and what it means to truly listen, engage and respond. They also captured an understanding of the microphone as a symbol of power.

This research aims to capture the voices, lived experiences and testimonies of communities affected by refugee and displacement crises regarding gender-transformative change processes, meaningful participation and effective localization. The central contention of this report is simple and a fundamental in UN Women humanitarian support, that the voices of crisis-affected women, often not heard as a result of gender and social norms, should resonate loudly and clearly in spaces where decisions about their lives are made.

Paivi Kannisto  
Chief,  
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*Rohingya refugee women handling video equipment. Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh.*  
Photo Credit: UN Women/Dr. Angélica Cabezas Pino

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# ABOUT THIS STUDY

One of the most concerted efforts to transform humanitarian assistance is the Grand Bargain, an agreement between the world's largest donors and aid providers to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of humanitarian action. Unfortunately, despite the fact that many Grand Bargain signatories have pledged separately to advance gender equality, the Grand Bargain itself is gender-blind.

This report contributes to the broader set of efforts by women's rights stakeholders to identify and share ways that the transformative potential of the Grand Bargain might also be realized for women and girls. This report's primary audience are the Grand Bargain signatories, in particular donor Governments, funding agencies and the diverse group of humanitarian actors who seek to operationalize the ambitious "localization" and "participation revolution" workstreams. In addition to exploring how gender-transformative change manifests itself in four humanitarian settings in Bangladesh, Colombia, Jordan and Uganda, this report suggests practical entry points to apply gender-transformative humanitarian action that contributes to the humanitarian-development-peace nexus, as well as funding opportunities for promising interventions that advance gender equality.

The research presented in this report is based on a mixed-methods approach that zoomed in on affected populations and includes participatory



*Colombian women filming their participatory video. Quibdó, Colombia.*

Photo credit: *UN Women/Fernanda Baumhardt-Grojean*

videos and video clips alongside key informant interviews (KIIs) and focus group discussions (FGDs). In order to bring women's experiences to the forefront of this report, we provide Quick Response (QR) codes throughout the report that are linked to the audiovisual material. With a QR code reader application operating through the camera function of a smartphone or tablet, these codes can be scanned and will lead the reader directly to the videos. Alternatively, embedded hyperlinks can be used for the same purpose.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Humanitarian emergencies are growing in scale, duration and complexity. Consequently, the humanitarian sector faces many challenges to respond to the rising and complex needs of affected people. Humanitarian response increasingly collides with development priorities and peacebuilding agendas, and the need to intervene at the nexus of these three is growing. Humanitarian crises are also deeply gendered. The shifting dynamics of contemporary crises have tangible impacts on the lives of women and girls and their enjoyment of their rights, exacerbating existing inequalities and exposing them to new risks and vulnerabilities.

At the same time, humanitarian crises can disrupt biased norms and discriminatory practices and provoke shifts in power relations. The need to adapt to new circumstances and adopt new coping mechanisms and survival strategies can often entail shifts in, for example, who earns an income or interfaces with public officials. In many humanitarian crises, women's agency and leadership, demonstrated through mobilization to meet daily needs and struggle for peace, are crucial for the survival of their households and communities. Exposure to new surroundings, community dynamics and humanitarian programming offers men an opportunity to "show up" as allies for women's rights and empowerment and serve as gender equality champions and role models among their male peers.

These dynamics of changing and protracted crises and shifting gender roles and relations offer opportunities for a transformation in the design and implementation of humanitarian response. One of the most concerted efforts to transform humanitarian assistance is the Grand Bargain, an agreement between the world's largest donors and aid providers to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of humanitarian action. Unfortunately, despite the fact that many Grand

Bargain signatories have pledged separately to advance gender equality, the Grand Bargain itself is gender-blind.<sup>1</sup>

This report contributes to the broader set of efforts by women's rights stakeholders to identify and share ways that the transformative potential of the Grand Bargain might also be realized for women and girls. We asked the question, what does gender-transformative humanitarian action entail? And we found that women's meaningful participation in humanitarian response, and the localization of humanitarian action to women's rights organizations and self-led groups, were key drivers of gender-transformative change. Moreover, we found that strategies to promote gender-transformative change also increased the quantity and quality of women's participation and the effective localization of humanitarian resources and programming.

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, the World Humanitarian Summit Core Commitments, Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) policy and accountability frameworks on gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls in humanitarian action, the IASC Gender Handbook and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Development Assistance Committee (DAC) Gender Equality Policy Marker.

## Participatory research in four crisis-affected communities

All too often, the voices of crisis-affected people are not heard in the planning, implementation and monitoring of humanitarian response. Using a unique

participatory methodology, the research presented in this report "passed the microphone" to crisis-affected women in four contexts: Bangladesh, Colombia,

Jordan and Uganda. In taking a turn to speak, these women and some men shared their lived experiences of crisis, participation, localization and gender-transformative change. Our research methods included participatory video, in which crisis-affected people created their own short films; video clips, in which researchers filmed crisis-affected people speaking about their experiences; KIIs; and FGDs.

The study focused on large-scale, protracted refugee and displacement crises and included camp, non-camp and urban settings. This enabled us to

capture a wide range of host, displaced, refugee and returnee dynamics and diverse aspects of the humanitarian-peacebuilding-development nexus. Throughout the research and analysis presented in this report, we account for intersecting identities and highlight examples of how women's and men's experiences of crises and humanitarian action are also shaped by additional facets of their identity including age, ethnicity, dis/ability, caste, class, religion, marital status and sexual orientation.

## Gender-transformative humanitarian action at the heart of meaningful participation and effective localization

Crisis-affected women's experiences of humanitarian action indicate that while they benefit from empowerment programming, more can be done to ensure that they have a say in determining the course of their own lives and the future of their communities. Moreover, strategies for meaningful participation and effective localization that intentionally seek to empower women and girls and the organizations that represent them, have enormous potential for transforming humanitarian action and for strengthening the nexus with development and peacebuilding efforts.

Sustainable changes to deeply rooted patterns of discrimination and inequality do not happen overnight, however. Gender-transformative change is a work in progress, one that will require patient work over sustained funding cycles. It also requires the participation of a variety of actors, including humanitarian responders, women's rights organizations and crisis-affected women, men, girls and boys, among others. The voices of crisis-affected people should guide the direction of gender-transformative humanitarian action, to ensure that it is context-appropriate and addresses intersecting inequalities. Indeed, the experiences of ethnic and religious minorities and of young women in contexts of displacement made clear that accounting for the specific dynamics that shape their lives goes a long way towards ensuring an inclusive and effective response.

### Meaningful participation

Across the four research contexts, crisis-affected women expressed a desire to participate not only in meeting their immediate individual and household needs, but also in the design and implementation of humanitarian action and longer-term development and peacebuilding opportunities. Relatedly, and on a more immediate scale, women's active participation in public dialogue emerged as a key indicator of gender-transformative change. Women spoke about gaining the skills and the confidence to engage in



*Colombian women filming each other. Quibdó, Colombia.*  
Photo credit: UN Women/Fernanda Baumhardt-Grojean

community discussions through leadership training and language classes. However, they also identified the need for humanitarian agencies both to adapt their ways of working, including meeting formats that facilitate their participation, and to support women's coalitions (networks, alliances, campaigns) that tend to foster the participation of diverse groups of women while holding humanitarian actors accountable to their gender equality commitments.

Resistance and backlash from men in households and communities were identified as unintended consequences of women's increased participation in public spaces and activities. Humanitarian agencies have a role to play in preventing and mitigating resistance and backlash in the design and implementation of their strategies and programming. Strategies to promote meaningful participation in the context of humanitarian action should consider women's shifting roles and responsibilities in the context of men's shifting roles and responsibilities, too.

## Effective localization

Community-based women's rights organizations are often among the first to respond during a crisis and remain long after the larger humanitarian agencies have left. Yet they are often overlooked as serious partners in formalized humanitarian action. In some cases, this is because smaller women's organizations and self-led groups lack official registration in the countries where they operate. In other cases, the

bureaucratic hurdles required by donors and larger humanitarian agencies are too large for organizations and groups with otherwise limited resources and staff capacity to overcome. Yet these obstacles are not intractable, and the benefits of localization efforts that include local partners as well as national partners are clear.

Crisis-affected women demonstrate leadership in their communities and in local government in a variety of women's rights organizations, self-led groups, community-based organizations, volunteer associations and social movements. While humanitarian agencies frequently rely on their unpaid labour to implement pre-formed strategies and programmes, this approach forecloses opportunities for local women to shape more effective and efficient interventions. Indeed, women's rights groups and other community-based organizations desire partnerships with humanitarian agencies that are based on equality and recognition of their contributions. Localization efforts that seek to accommodate and strengthen local women's organizations contribute to gender-transformative change by offering women opportunities to assume leadership roles in the decisions that affect their communities. Moreover, they contribute to more effective humanitarian action by leveraging community-based organizations as "connectors"<sup>2</sup> that funnel key local insights upward.

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<sup>2</sup> Connectors are defined as individuals or groups who build bridges or "connections" between affected populations and influential humanitarian actors.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

**Drawing on the lived experiences of refugee and displaced women and men, the report offers specific recommendations for Grand Bargain signatories as they take action on ensuring an effective, efficient and gender-transformative humanitarian response:**

1. Engage in two-way dialogue with women and men, in equal measure, in the deployment of conventional mechanisms for participation such as data collection, consultations and feedback mechanisms on a diverse array of issues including those perceived to fall “outside” the humanitarian realm.
2. Deploy an approach to participation that moves beyond “inviting” and “encouraging” affected communities to engage. Instead, adapt and generate the spaces for them to truly influence meeting formats, topics discussed, agendas and workflows.
3. Acknowledge and adequately support existing and emerging women’s leadership, ensuring not only that meetings are the right size and format to be conducive to their participation but also that they have the resources to organize themselves around their priorities.
4. Identify and financially support the priorities and solutions of self-led groups of affected women and enable them to influence meeting agendas and priority-setting.
5. Amplify affected women’s voices by bringing women’s networks, alliances and campaigns into spaces of influence to shape the decisions that affect their lives, and connecting them to national gender equality campaigns, equality policies or the women, peace and security agenda.
6. Formally recognize women’s rights organizations, self-led groups and young female volunteers as key humanitarian responders and acknowledge their contributions to broader emergency response efforts.
7. Broaden partnership guidelines to include a more diversified catchment of implementing partners and reduce barriers to funding by ensuring that calls for proposals are published in local languages, and that support for proposal development is also offered.
8. Increase direct and flexible funding to women’s rights organizations and self-led groups of crisis-affected women and eliminate unnecessarily burdensome operational and reporting requirements to enable them to pursue their own agendas and work on their own terms.
9. Seize the gender-transformative potential of connectors, engaging them consistently and supporting their work through funding and recognition of their work.
10. Proactively make space and generate a conducive environment to enable local-level women’s rights organizations and self-led groups to participate in coordination bodies that oversee cluster/sector areas that may not have an explicit gender-related mandate.



Colombian women during the production of their participatory videos. Quibdó, Colombia.  
Photo credit: UN Women/Fernanda Baumhardt-Grojean



Colombian women during the production of their participatory videos. Quibdó, Colombia.  
Photo credit: UN Women/Fernanda Baumhardt-Grojean

MOVING TOWARDS  
GENDER-  
TRANSFORMATIVE  
HUMANITARIAN  
ACTION

## KEY MESSAGES

- Emergencies are growing in scale, complexity and duration and as a result, require humanitarian response, development and peacebuilding interventions to work in a coordinated way.
- Humanitarian crises are deeply gendered, and response efforts must account for shifting gender roles, responsibilities and relations by actively seizing opportunities to contribute to gender equality.
- Humanitarian action that promotes effective localization and women's meaningful participation can advance gender-transformative change.
- Gender-transformative change is a work in progress that requires the participation of a variety of actors, including humanitarian responders, women's rights organizations and crisis-affected women, men, girls and boys, among others.
- The voices of crisis-affected people should guide the direction of gender-transformative action, to ensure that it is context-appropriate and sustainable and addresses intersecting inequalities.



*Ugandan host community women exploring the camera equipment together. Bidibidi Settlement, Uganda.*

Photo credit: UN Women/Fernanda Baumhardt-Grojean

# INTRODUCTION

Humanitarian emergencies are growing in scale, duration and complexity. In 2019, one person was forcibly displaced every two seconds, creating a staggering 37,000 new displacements daily (UNHCR 2019a). Indeed, by the end of 2019, there were 70.8 million forcibly displaced persons across the globe (OCHA 2019b, UNHCR 2019a). It is estimated that roughly half, some 35 million, are women and girls of reproductive age (UNFPA 2019). These individuals form part of the 167.6 million people in need of aid across 53 affected countries (OCHA 2019a). Humanitarian emergencies are also lasting longer. Today, the average duration of a crisis is more than nine years (OCHA 2018), and the estimated average duration of an individual's displacement is 26 years (UNHCR 2016a).

Today's humanitarian crises, moreover, are not the product of any sole factor or event, but rather result from interactions between a variety of human-made and natural disasters, armed conflicts, epidemics and human vulnerabilities (OCHA 2019b). Consequently, the humanitarian sector faces many challenges to respond to the rising and complex needs of affected people. Humanitarian response increasingly collides with development priorities and peacebuilding agendas, and the need to intervene at the nexus of these three is growing.

Humanitarian crises are also deeply gendered, and the shifting dynamics of contemporary crises have tangible impacts on the lives of women and girls and their enjoyment of their rights. Emergencies, for example, often exacerbate pre-existing gender inequalities. Patterns of marginalization, practices of discrimination and harmful gender norms manifest themselves in differential gendered impacts, risks and vulnerabilities. For instance, limited access to basic services such as education, nutrition and health, including sexual and reproductive health services, negatively impact women's agency and well-being. In many emergency settings, incidences of sexual and gender-based violence increase, including intimate partner violence, early and forced marriage, sexual exploitation and abuse and trafficking.

At the same time, humanitarian crises can disrupt biased norms and discriminatory practices and provoke shifts in power relations. The need to adapt to new

circumstances and adopt new coping mechanisms and survival strategies can often entail shifts, for example, in who earns an income or interfaces with public officials. In many humanitarian crises, women's agency and leadership, demonstrated through mobilization to meet daily needs and struggle for peace, are crucial for the survival of their households and communities. At the same time, exposure to new surroundings, community dynamics and humanitarian programming offers men an opportunity to "show up" as allies for women's rights and empowerment and serve as gender equality champions and role models among their male peers. These dynamics of changing and protracted crises and shifting gender roles and relations offer opportunities to transform the design and implementation of humanitarian action.

This report seeks to illuminate pathways forward for humanitarian response agencies to deliver the kind of assistance that transforms the lives of women and girls for the better. It is based on participatory research in four crisis-affected contexts: Bangladesh, Colombia, Jordan and Uganda. The report explores the question, what does gender-transformative humanitarian action entail? Drawing on the lived experiences of refugee and displaced women and men, the report offers specific recommendations for Grand Bargain signatories as they take action on ensuring a more effective and efficient humanitarian response.

# GENDER EQUALITY AND THE GRAND BARGAIN

One of the most concerted efforts to transform humanitarian assistance is the Grand Bargain, an agreement between the world's largest donors and aid providers to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of humanitarian action.

Unfortunately, despite the fact that many Grand Bargain signatories have pledged separately to advance gender equality, the Grand Bargain itself is gender-blind.<sup>3</sup> And as a result, the implementation of the commitments under the Grand Bargain agreement “are still failing to reach grass-roots women’s rights organizations or be felt by women affected by crises” (ActionAid and CARE 2018). This report seeks to contribute to efforts, such as those spearheaded by the informal Friends of Gender group, to identify and share ways that the transformative potential of the Grand Bargain might also be realized for women and girls.

It does this through close examination of two of the Grand Bargain workstreams, both of which have been recognized as high priority for achieving gender equality. The first is the Participation Revolution Workstream, which aims to include recipients of aid in the decision-making processes that affect their lives. The second is the Localization Workstream, which seeks to funnel greater levels of financial and other forms of support to local and national responders. These two areas of work, participation and localization, provide entry points for a gender-transformative approach to humanitarian action and the advancement of gender equality within and beyond emergency contexts. Moreover, the research presented in this report illustrates that gender-transformative humanitarian action can also enhance participation and localization efforts, through, for example, the strengthening



*A young Colombian woman holds the microphone while being filmed by a colleague. Quibdó, Colombia*

Photo credit: UN Women/Fernanda Baumhardt-Grojean

of grass-roots women’s networks. This report recommends that Grand Bargain signatories consider an approach to humanitarian action that sees these components – participation, localization and gender-transformative change – as mutually reinforcing.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, the World Humanitarian Summit Core Commitments, IASC policy and accountability frameworks on gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls in humanitarian action, the IASC Gender Handbook and the OECD-DAC Gender Equality Policy Marker.

### 1.3

# PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH IN FOUR CRISIS-AFFECTED CONTEXTS

This report is based on participatory mixed-methods research conducted in Bangladesh, Colombia, Jordan and Uganda. Our research methodology, which incorporated innovative uses of video (see Box 1), was designed to disrupt power dynamics embedded in the humanitarian field and offer an opportunity for affected people, their organizations and their communities to “hold the microphone”. Our methods included the use of:

- Participatory video, in which crisis-affected women created their own short films (eight videos featuring 85 women and two men, see Box 2)
- Video clips, in which researchers filmed crisis-affected people speaking about their experiences (nine clips featuring 11 women and two men)
- Key informant interviews (46 interviews with 49 women and 16 men)
- Focus group discussions (34 discussions with 218 women and 87 men)



*A Rohingya lawyer and activist during the production of a video clip. Cox's Bazaar, Bangladesh.*

Photo credit: UN Women/Dr. Angélica Cabezas Pino

## BOX 1

### Sharing the microphone through participatory video methods

This study used two audiovisual research methods: participatory videos (PVs) and video clips (VCs). With the PVs, refugee, internally displaced and host community women were invited to film their own videos and thus craft their own narratives. The intention of the VCs was to document stories and reflections on diverse identity dimensions and the ways in which community members promote gender-transformative changes.

**Participatory video:** We adapted more conventional forms of PV, which are focused on community engagement and the creation of audiovisual outputs, for the purpose of data collection. Two separate PVs were filmed in each humanitarian setting, for a total of eight videos. These videos are the creative product of 8 to 15 crisis-affected women (and in the case of Colombia, also men) working together over the course of around six days.<sup>4</sup>

In each context, women were invited to an audiovisual training called “Making My Voice Heard”. The training included the development of basic skills to enable the creation of a script, filming themselves and one another, and participatory editing. This process was complemented by facilitated discussion

sessions, including introduction to the research process, validation of research questions and ways and means of organizing ideas through scriptwriting, storyboarding and other pre-production techniques.

Following three days of participatory editing, we held a joint screening of the participants’ films followed by an extended discussion session in which all participants received certificates for successfully completing the training along with copies of their films.

**Video clips:** The VCs are five- to seven-minute clips in which a researcher conducted a traditional interview with specific participant(s) whose testimonies reflected an intersectional lens or a key transformative role not previously covered in the PVs. The clips feature a wide range of protagonists, such as a transgender woman activist working on lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) rights in Colombia, two Rohingya imams engaged in preventing child marriage in Bangladesh, a South Sudanese female refugee leader and student activists from the Syrian Arab Republic working inside Za’atari Camp in Jordan. (See Annex I for a full list of video materials.)



*Rohingya woman operating a video camera for the first time. Kutupalong camp, Bangladesh.*

Photo credit: UN Women/Dr. Angélica Cabezas Pino



*Zaad and Rema, youth/student activists during the production of a video clip. Za’atari Camp, Jordan.*

Photo credit: UN Women/Dr. Angélica Cabezas Pino

4 The only exception being one women’s rights organization in Colombia deciding to involve two male members of their network.

## BOX 2

### Lights, camera, action: Women's films about gender-transformative change



Colombian participants filming "Women from rivers, weavers of peace" in Quibdó, Colombia.

Photo credit: UN Women/Fernanda Baumhardt-Grojean

#### Colombia, Quibdó

Title of PV1: **Stories of gender-transformative change**

Participants: Chocó Department Women's Network

Location: *Old convent Quibdó, Antiguo Convento*

Title of PV2: **Women from rivers, weavers of peace**

Participants: Affected women with different affiliations to women's rights organizations, gender interest organizations, in particular gender sections within ethnic-traditional authorities.

Location: *Meeting space, Casa de Encuentro*



South Sudanese participants filming "South Sudanese women have a voice" in Bidibidi Settlement.

Photo credit: UN Women/Fernanda Baumhardt-Grojean

#### Uganda, Bidibidi camp

Title of PV1: **South Sudanese women have a voice**

Participants: South Sudanese refugee women

Location: *Tuajiji Hope Primary School*

Title of PV2: **Is the world listening to the voices of women from Yumbe District?**

Participants: Ugandan host community women

Location: *Alaba Primary School*



Rohingya participants filming "Shanti Mohila (Peace Women): This is our story" in Cox's Bazar

Photo credit: UN Women/Dr. Angélica Cabezas Pino

#### Bangladesh, Cox's Bazar

Title of PV1: **Shanti Mohila (Peace Women): This is our story**

Participants: Members of Shanti Mohila

Location: *UN Women Multipurpose Centre*

Title of PV2: **Shanti Khana (Peace Centre)**

Participants: Members of Shanti Khana

Location: *Community Women's Healing Centre*

### Jordan, Za'atari camp

Title of PV1: **Woman is the spirit of life**

Participants: Syrian women refugees participating in cash-for-work programming

Location: *UN Women Oasis Centre*

Title of PV2: **What we dream of**

Participants: Syrian refugee women

Location: *UN Women Oasis Centre*



*Syrian participants filming “Woman is the spirit of life” in Za’atari camp.*

Photo credit: *UN Women/Dr. Angélica Cabezas Pino*

In total, our study included 473 participants (365 women and 108 men). We intentionally sought to include the voices of crisis-affected people, in particular women, as all too often their voices are excluded from the design and evaluation of humanitarian programming. Through a total of 100 data-collection activities, our study included:

- **Crisis-affected people** (65 per cent of the sample, 78 per cent women/22 per cent men), the majority of whom were refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs), but also included host community members;
- **“Connectors”** (24 per cent of the sample, 77 per cent women/23 per cent men), who we defined as influential individuals or groups who build bridges or “connections” between affected populations and humanitarian actors;

- **Humanitarian actors** (11 per cent of the sample, 73 per cent women/27 per cent men), including formal humanitarian responders such as United Nations agencies, government counterparts, international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) and their implementing partners.

Throughout the research and analysis presented in this report, we also accounted for intersecting identities. In the following chapters we highlight examples of how women’s and men’s experiences of crises and humanitarian action are shaped by gender as well as additional facets of their identity including age, ethnicity, dis/ability, caste, class, religion, marital status and sexual orientation.

## 1.4

# RESEARCH CONTEXTS

This study focused on large-scale, protracted refugee and displacement crises and included camp, non-camp and urban settings. This enabled us to capture a wide range of host, displaced, refugee and returnee dynamics and diverse aspects of the humanitarian-peace-building-development nexus.

### 1.4.1

## Bangladesh: Cox's Bazar, Rohingya refugee response

The Cox's Bazar district in south-eastern Bangladesh hosts a large community of Rohingya who have fled persistent violence in Myanmar for some 30 years. In August 2017, escalating violence associated with “genocidal intent,”<sup>5</sup> as well as the use of sexual and gender-based violence as a tactic to terrorize and punish the Rohingya<sup>6</sup> by authorities in Myanmar's Rakhine State, deepened the humanitarian crisis and drove more than 742,000

in need of humanitarian assistance (OCHA 2019d). This large-scale humanitarian crisis exists within a protracted emergency, and indeed is one of the longest crises of this sort. The crisis has been compounded by unsuccessful efforts to ensure voluntary, safe and dignified repatriation of refugees to Myanmar (UNHCR 2019c). From a peace-building perspective, the recent adoption by the United Nations Security Council of resolution 2467 (2019), on preventing conflict-related sexual violence by creating judicial and accountability precedents, may generate new momentum for the increasing mobilization of Rohingya women as survivors of sexual violence.



*A young Colombian woman takes photographs in front of the river. Quibdó, Colombia*

Photo credit: UN Women/Fernanda Baumhardt-Grojean

people to cross the border and seek refuge in Cox's Bazar (UNHCR 2019e). With the impact on local host communities, an estimated 664,000 women and girls are

- 5 In its 2019 report to the United Nation Human Rights Council, the independent international fact-finding mission on Myanmar found that the “circumstances and context of the ‘clearance operations’ against the Rohingya that began on 25 August 2017 gave rise to an inference of genocidal intent” (HRC 2019). In his statement to the Human Rights Council, the head of the fact-finding mission, Marzuki Darusman, said that “there is a serious risk of genocide recurring” (HRC 2019a). Concurrently, other judicial efforts are underway to hold perpetrators accountable. In November 2019, the Gambia filed a case at the International Court of Justice accusing Myanmar of genocide against Rohingya Muslims on behalf of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (ICJ 2019).
- 6 In a separate report on sexual and gender-based violence in Myanmar (HRC 2019b), the mission found that soldiers routinely and systematically employed rape, gang rape and other violent and forced sexual acts against women, girls, boys, men and transgender people in blatant violation of international human rights law. “For the first time in such a UN report, we are clearly highlighting violence against transgender people,” said Mission Expert Christopher Sidoti. “We spoke to transgender Rohingya women, and found they are victimized twice, because they are Rohingya and because they are transgender” (OHCHR 2019).

### 1.4.2

## Colombia: Chocó Department, protracted crisis and internal displacement

Located on Colombia's Pacific Coast, the Chocó Department has experienced the brunt of more than 60 years of internal armed conflict. The persistent, constantly changing dynamics of the conflict have generated the forced displacement of urban and rural communities, including the majority ethnic communities largely composed of indigenous and Afro-Colombian people (OCHA 2018). Recurrent mobility restrictions, forced confinement and forced displacement events represent additional barriers for communities and their access to health, food and education (OCHA 2020). According to the Unified Victims' Registry,<sup>7</sup> between 1985 and 2016, there were 479,413 victims of forced displacement registered in Chocó, of whom 51.3 per cent were women (Unified Victims', Registry 2020).

Despite the signing of the 2016 Peace Agreement between the Government of Colombia and the largest guerrilla group (FARC-EP), armed activities by non-State actors, the recruitment of female and male youth into armed groups and threats and assassinations of social leaders and human rights defenders persist (Corporación Humanas 2019). The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights reported that amid a total of 454 cases reported, 163 killings of social leaders and human rights defenders, many of them women, had been verified by the end of 2018 (United Nations 2019).

High levels of femicide and gender-based violence (including sexual violence) against women, and women social leaders and human rights defenders, remain prevalent. According to the National Administrative Department for Statistics, levels of sexual violence in Chocó reach 66 per cent while the national average is 30 per cent (DANE 2017). The rate of sexual violence cases is 204.28 per 100,000 population against the national average of 88.4, and intimate partner violence reaches a level of 399.8 per 100,000, while Colombia's average rate is 203.5 (Instituto 2018)

Women social leaders and human rights defenders face different risks and disproportionate effects,

which are exacerbated depending on the rights they defend, their sexual orientation and gender identity, their ethnicity/race and their geographical location. During the last years, torture, murder, sexual violence and threats against women social leaders and human rights defenders have increased substantially. The United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, at the conclusion of his visit to Colombia from 20 November to 3 December 2018, said the Ombudsperson's Office had highlighted the seriousness of the attacks committed against women defenders of human rights. Of 143 women social leaders and human rights defenders supported by the Ombudsperson's Office from January 2016 to October 2017, 16.78 per cent were victims of sexual violence (OHCHR 2020).

Protection, food and health needs in the Chocó Department remain critical due to significant access constraints, ongoing violence and recurring climate-related disasters, including flooding (ACAPS and Start Network 2019) with 42.5 per cent of the population in Chocó exposed to hydrometeorological threats (DNP 2018). Internally displaced people reside outside of camp settings too and are dispersed all over the country. Indeed, more than 80 per cent of the inhabitants of Quibdó identify as having experienced internal displacement, including gradual and trickling rural-to-urban displacement and increased confinement and restriction of freedom of movement of entire communities (ACAPS and Start Network 2019).<sup>8</sup>

7 For updated information refer to <https://www.unidadvictimas.gov.co/es/registro-unico-de-victimias-ruv/37394>

8 Chocó was the department with the highest population confinement rates (57 per cent of the total) as of end 2018, and the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) confirmed that confinement rates in Chocó increased in 2019 compared to 2018 (ACAPS 2019). In 2018, those affected by confinement in the department were 74 per cent indigenous and 26 per cent Afro-Colombians, while of those displaced 82 per cent were indigenous and 17 per cent Afro-Colombians (ELC Chocó 2018).

### 1.4.3

## Jordan: Amman and Za'atari Camp, Syrian refugee response

Jordan is one of the Middle Eastern countries most actively responding to the Syrian crisis. As of March 2019, Jordan was hosting 762,420 refugees, of whom approximately 88 per cent are from the Syrian Arab Republic (UNHCR 2019). Of the latter, 83 per cent live in urban areas and 17 live in one of three refugee camps: Za'atari, Azraq and the Emirati Jordanian camp. Gender discrimination and pre-existing inequalities are exacerbating the risks of displacement for women and girls, who account for almost half of the Syrian refugee population (Ipsos Group 2018). The Syrian crisis has a multifaceted impact on the Jordanian people and institutions, compounding the ongoing and mutually aggravating security, economic, political and social issues in the country. Therefore, the Jordan Response Plan for the Syria Crisis (2020-2022) aims to foster recovery through creating opportunities and promoting resilience. A major element of the policies

implemented by the Government of Jordan has been to seek to address the crisis through opening trade and establishing a stronger relationship with the European Union market with the aim of creating employment opportunities for Jordanians and Syrian refugees (Barbelet et al. 2018). In recognition of the potential of these policies, the Government has agreed to reform labour markets to remove barriers to Syrians obtaining employment and to provide basic services for Syrian refugees. However, few employment opportunities for women exist or have been created due to the prevailing cultural norms that perceive vocational work as the sole responsibility of men (Consortium: Leaders for Sustainable Livelihoods 2018). Finally, the adoption by the United Nations Security Council of resolution 2242 (2015) on countering violent extremism may also open new windows of opportunity for localized engagement of affected women.

### 1.4.4

## Uganda: Bidibidi Refugee Settlement, South Sudan refugee response

Bidibidi Refugee Settlement covers 250 square kilometres of the eastern half of the district of Yumbe, stretching southward from the South Sudanese border into Moyo District along the western bank of the Kochi River. The settlement contains 232,000 South Sudanese refugees, making it the world's second largest refugee settlement. Women make up 53 per cent of this population (UNHCR 2019d). In opening its borders to a major influx of South Sudanese refugees, Uganda has become one of the host countries with the highest number of refugees in the world: as of 2019, 1.42 million refugees, of whom 62 per cent are South Sudanese, were residing within its borders. More than 80 per cent of these South Sudanese individuals are hosted in settlements located within nine districts.

Since Uganda became independent in 1962, its inclusive refugee policies have resulted in high levels of

institutionalization and understanding of the need for government, humanitarian and development actors to share responsibilities in Uganda. The Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework, formally launched in March 2017, is a progressive multi-stakeholder coordination model that focuses on the humanitarian and development needs of refugees and host communities. It includes an open border policy, access to land, health care and education, freedom of movement and the right to seek employment and establish businesses. The Office of the Prime Minister and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) jointly launched the revision of the 2019-2020 Uganda Refugee Response Plan in February 2019. This plan foresees that 100,000 refugees may spontaneously return to their home country in 2019 and 2020, provided that the possibility of sustainable peace becomes more tangible.

## BOX 3

### Researching gender in humanitarian settings is all about studying power

This study seeks to provide a perspective on deeply ingrained power inequalities that explains different lived experiences and attitudes towards gender-transformative change in humanitarian settings.

Gender inequality, as a form of power inequality, rests on the interaction with other dimensions of people's identity such as age, ethnicity, dis/ability, caste, class, religion, marital status and sexual orientation.

In different contexts, refugees, IDPs, people on the move and/or host communities negotiate and re-configure ideas around identity and gender roles, domains in which religion and ethnicity can play an important part. All of these factors determine an individual's vulnerabilities, capacities and access to and control over resources, but also shape their (potential) contributions to gender-transformative change processes.

In these settings, gender relations reflect a global pattern of gender inequality that is rooted in the devaluation of femininity and subordination of women as a group, as well as people with diverse sexual orientations and/or gender identities. Toxic masculinities are also exalted and perpetuate men (as a group) in dominating positions and instances of privilege for being male, a system that reproduces itself by producing a sense of entitlement/expectations of being accorded this privilege which may be undermined in situations of displacement.

At the same time, gender norms that maintain this inequality also impose strict expectations on men and boys, centring on their assumed responsibilities for household provision or protection and showing strengths or hiding feelings, which can get in the way of building healthy relationships and often lead men and boys to high-risk behaviours (Plan International 2019).



*A Colombian leader being filmed by a colleague. Quibdó, Colombia*

Photo credit: UN Women/Fernanda Baumhardt-Grojean

# EXPERIENCES OF GENDER-TRANSFORMATIVE CHANGE IN EMERGENCY CONTEXTS: CONCEPTUAL BASIS

Humanitarian emergencies cause significant disruptions in people's lives and destabilize prevailing norms and social relations. In emergency settings, gender arrangements cannot continue to operate in ways that they did in pre-crisis contexts. This reconfiguration of power relations will be shaped by the change of environment after displacement, disruptions of decision-making mechanisms, new spaces of community organizing and gendered coping mechanisms in response to new circumstances.

Affected women and men of different ages encounter challenges to live up to socially expected gender roles, and often assume new roles and responsibilities. Herein lie the opportunities to revisit, adapt or change established attitudes, behaviours and practices at individual, household and community levels and beyond. While acknowledging the gender-differentiated impact of humanitarian emergencies, crises can also provide opportunities for addressing inequalities and promoting transformative change (IASC 2017a). This can make localization and participation efforts more effective and meaningful.

Gender-transformative change, understood as a substantive contribution to gender equality with demonstrable and relevant impacts on the lives of crisis-affected people, is an abstract concept that requires unpacking. To accurately map opportunities for gender-transformative change during emergencies and trace how these processes contribute to gender equality in a particular response setting, the following

context-specific factors need to be taken into consideration: pre-existing gendered inequalities and differential gendered impacts of crisis; group-specific features of the particular population segment; and the gender-responsiveness of humanitarian responses.

As uncovered by this study, gender-transformative change in humanitarian settings involves the following five elements:

1. **Emergency-specific and group-specific dynamics.** Gender-transformative changes develop specific features and patterns in each crisis that contribute to gender equality in different ways across different population segments. Gender inequality, as a form of power inequality, rests on the interaction with other dimensions of people's identity such as age, ethnicity, dis/ability, caste, class, religion, marital status and sexual orientation. All of these factors determine an individual's vulnerabilities and capacities and their access to and control over resources, but also shape their (potential) contributions to gender-transformative change processes.
2. **Multilayered and interconnected interactions.** Gender-transformative change is a multilayered and interconnected phenomenon, comprising the internal, interpersonal, institutional and ideological levels (UN Women Training Centre 2016). It is in the linkages and the interconnectedness that gender-transformative change manifests itself and advances. Progress at the structural level

– such as legal frameworks advancing women’s rights, enforcement of gender equality policies or installing gender parity in institutions – advance at a slower pace and depend on the interplay of factors, stakeholders and interests. In comparison to the individual level, gender-transformative changes at the institutional or ideological level are more difficult to achieve. At the same time, once in place, these changes in norms have broad and far-reaching consequences for changes at other levels.

The work of humanitarian actors is extremely relevant as the opportunities of abrupt changes in the structural conditions of crisis-affected people take place during crisis response. To promote transformative change, humanitarian responders need to create conducive environments where advances on the individual and/or the community level can translate to (positive) shifts at the interrelational level within the household.

- 3. Interrelational gender dynamics.** In humanitarian settings, the interrelational level, particularly the household, constitutes a key unit of intervention for gender-transformative change. Households are the places where new roles and responsibilities are negotiated and instances of change at the individual and/or community level are boosted or undermined. Thus, households are the key site of reconfiguration of gendered and age-specific power relations. Within households, an opportunity to redistribute unpaid care work or a re-entrenchment of the sexual division of labour emerge. Women across the different study contexts stressed experiencing overburden of tasks, and given the global pattern of unpaid care work and household chores as the responsibility of women and girls, there lies an important potential for transformation and proactive work to redistribute unpaid care work.
- 4. Shifts in (gendered) power relations impact on perspectives about transformative change.** Gender-transformative change is about shifting power relations; it requires a reconfiguration of power relations to overcome inequality, exclusion and discrimination. As coping mechanisms often imply



*A Colombian woman poses for a portrait. Quibdó, Colombia*  
Photo credit: UN Women/Fernanda Baumhardt-Grojean

assuming new roles and responsibilities, gender norms, as well as notions of idealized femininities and masculinities, are destabilized. Consequently, in humanitarian settings, attitudes towards gender-transformative change depend on power positions at household and community levels and on lived experiences of gendered discrimination and (presumed) privileges of study participants. Different perspectives on gender-transformative change coexist. Positive, mixed and negative attitudes were uncovered in this study.

Embedded in a context of gendered inequalities, women participants in general tend to associate gender-transformative change with experiences of self-esteem, gendered consciousness, agency and participation, as well as backlash and resistance. In turn, men’s gendered narratives on transformative change often relate to an experience of loss in terms of their incapacity to live up to expectations linking masculinity to household provision and protection, framed as a sequence of loss comprising livelihoods, income, status and control over household members, alongside reference of gains that stem from new awareness around women’s rights and gender equality.

- 5. Attention to needs, social relationships and root causes are all key for the sustainability of gender-transformative change.**

The sustainability of gender-transformative change requires a holistic perspective that transcends project-specific approaches and comprises both humanitarian needs to physically survive and also psychosocial and mental health and well-being. Gender-responsive humanitarian interventions need to go beyond the individual to unleash their gender-transformative potential.

Recurrently, narratives and recommendations among study participants transcended individual aspects to highlight the need to involve other household or peer-group members on efforts to work towards ending gender inequality. Adult participants (regardless of their gender) often emphasized the well-being of children and youth and the importance of differential intergenerational approaches that generate opportunities and better conditions for them.

Importantly, for transformative changes to become more sustainable, research participants stress the need to proactively address the underlying root causes of the refugee and displacement crisis,

and the gender- and age-specific impacts thereof, be they the end of the armed conflict, access to citizenship and guarantees of safe and dignified return or contributing to reconstruct their war-torn countries. Linkages between the humanitarian, development and peacebuilding nexus are therefore key for the sustainability of gender-transformative changes.

For context-specific examples that illustrate how gender-transformative change emerges in each of the crises explored, please see the stories at the end of the following two chapters:

**Story 1. Uganda: Capacity-building initiatives enable women to exercise voice**

**Story 2. Bangladesh: Peer-support networks can be a gateway to public visibility**

**Story 3. Colombia: Women find power in collective action**

**Story 4. Jordan: Community attitudes shift as women earn an income**



*South Sudanese refugee women engage with filming equipment. Bibibidi Settlement, Uganda.*

Photo credit: UN Women/Fernanda Baumhardt-Grojean

# WHAT DOES A GENDER-TRANSFORMATIVE APPROACH TO HUMANITARIAN ACTION ENTAIL?

Gender-transformative action refers to interventions that target both the immediate symptoms and the structural causes of gender inequality, with an eye to creating lasting, positive change in gender relations and the choices that women and men have over their own lives (IASC 2017a). This approach is distinct from the more common approach to gender programming that typically involves the mainstreaming of gender considerations into response interventions, for example, through a focus on equitable access to humanitarian assistance. By contrast, gender-transformative action seeks longer-lasting changes in the everyday lives of those affected by humanitarian crises. This may include, for example, programming that aims to equitably redistribute power and resources or that seeks the emergence of a broader array of socially acceptable gender roles and relatedly, new opportunities for women and men's social, economic and political participation.

As humanitarian responders are not gender-neutral actors and investment is being dedicated to gender mainstreaming and gender-responsive interventions, a focus on gender-transformative action shifts the attention from project or programme outcomes to demonstrable impact on the lives of affected people regarding the attainment of higher levels of gender equality. Operationalizing gender-transformative action, however, remains a challenge. A growing body of applied research conducted by various humanitarian

actors, this report included, provides key insights and evidence of pathways forward.<sup>9</sup>

A key finding is that gender-transformative change manifests differently across contexts. Gender roles, responsibilities and relations, for example, differ across displaced and host communities, and are influenced by diverse and shifting social, economic and political conditions. This is also a key reason why attention to intersecting inequalities can guide more effective humanitarian action. When humanitarian responders collect data and design, implement, monitor and evaluate programmes and services, attention to gender and intersecting factors such as age, ethnicity, religion, migration status, sexuality and ability can help to identify specific drivers of inequality and also inform more equitable and effective responses.

9 Women Deliver, 2019. Feminist Humanitarian System Building Block I: Advancing Gender - Transformative Localization; Action Aid UK, 2019. Leading the way: Women-led localisation in Central Sulawesi: Towards gender transformative action; Careb, 2018. Women responders, Placing local action at the centre of humanitarian protection programming; (Lindley-Jones, H.); Oxfam Canada, 2018. A Feminist Approach to Localization: How Canada can support the leadership of women's rights actors in humanitarian action; Action Aid 2016. On the front-line: Catalysing Women's leadership in Humanitarian Action, Prepared for the World Humanitarian Summit, 2016, Turkey; Christian Aid 2017. Gender Justice: Achieving just and equitable power relations for all.

In Bangladesh, for example, the Rohingya community is an ethnic Muslim minority whose members were persecuted in Rakhine State, Myanmar on account of their ethnic and religious identity, and for this reason sought refuge elsewhere. Now, this Muslim community that was once rather isolated in a Buddhist majority context finds itself in predominantly Muslim Bangladesh. In practical terms, many study participants spoke about new opportunities to practice their faith openly, including being able to wear a hijab or niqab in public which enabled them to

assume greater “visibility” in social spaces outside their households. Such changing dynamics offer opportunities for humanitarian responders to encourage women’s participation in educational, income-generation and leadership programming. In other cases, attention to ethnicity and gender together reveal deeply ingrained barriers that humanitarian responders must overcome if they are to deliver on the participation and localization commitments of the Grand Bargain, as illustrated by the experiences of crisis-affected indigenous women in Colombia (see Box 4).

## BOX 4

### Understanding crisis through the lens of gender and ethnicity

The Departmental Table of Indigenous Peoples in Chocó, Colombia includes women and men from the Embera Chami Katio and Embera Dobida communities and some other communities located further away, such as the Wayuu people from La Guajira. Their experiences of confinement and displacement illustrate how gender and ethnicity together shape the impact of conflict on individuals and communities. For indigenous women, access

to justice, including in cases of gender-based violence, has been particularly challenging and there is widespread mistrust of State institutions. This is a barrier to humanitarian responders who seek the participation of local people, but also highlights the need for more localized responses. At the same time, many women emphasized the need for a holistic approach that considers the changing roles and responsibilities of both women and men in their culture.



*A group of Colombian indigenous women being interviewed in a video clip. Quibdó, Colombia*

Photo credit: UN Women/Fernanda Baumhardt-Grojean

“We are life, we belong to a territory that means everything to us. The armed conflict has affected everything in our way of living. Ancestrally, we used to live in harmony with nature, in equilibrium with nature and with our spirits. Then a series of displacements came about with a series of human rights violations that led to a total disequilibrium. Obviously, the impact is both for men as well as for women and total chaos came about in our territory.”

(Colombia, Video Clip, Indigenous Table)

Please scan this QR code



or visit the link:

<https://qr.go.page.link/P6gxc>

“When the social fabric is broken, the direct responsibilities that men and women have within our cultures are also broken (..) and our culture begins to decline. We begin to speak less in our language, we share less of our wisdom, including our grandparents’ heritage, stories and anecdotes, everything that they have told us about our spirituality, our cultural richness.”

(Colombia, Video Clip, Indigenous Table).

Another theme that emerged clearly across the four contexts was that rather than desiring a “reversal” of gender roles, women sought a broadening of gender roles and flexibility of responsibilities, so that women and men work together more collaboratively. Importantly, they stressed a desire to assume new roles and responsibilities without fear of stigmatization or reprisals, whether for women who engage in income-generating activities or men who assume domestic tasks. Our research made clear, moreover, that transformations in gender roles, responsibilities and relations in one area of life (say, legal systems) often sparked shifts in another (communities, households or individual beliefs). Households emerged as key sites of gender-transformative change in our research. During and following an emergency, family members often adopt new roles and responsibilities as they deploy new survival strategies and coping mechanisms, develop shared experiences of hardship and are exposed to humanitarian programming. And within households, new attitudes, beliefs and practices adopted at individual or community levels can be supported or undermined. At the same time, advancements in one area may provoke resistance or backlash in another.

The accounts of these indigenous women highlight the ways in which a gender-transformative approach to humanitarian action must account for shifting dynamics not only in the lives of individuals but also in whole communities.

This research documents, furthermore, that some women’s increased access to income through humanitarian programming is also associated with anger and resentment on the part of their husbands at home.

A key finding of this body of research is that gender-transformative change must be understood as a “work in progress” and an effort that requires the participation of multiple actors. Changing deeply ingrained norms and practices takes time, and as a result, gender-transformative change is more likely in protracted settings where continued advocacy and sustained programming are possible (UN Women 2015). The direction and priorities of humanitarian programming can play a role in promoting gender-transformative change. Humanitarian agencies must, however, commit to being agile and responsive in their programming and to working in close partnership with the communities in which changes are advancing. Indeed, this research makes clear that gender-transformative action, meaningful participation and effective localization are intertwined and mutually reinforcing approaches to delivering quality humanitarian response.

# PASSING THE MICROPHONE AND MOVING FORWARD

The research findings laid out over the following chapters make clear that gender-transformative action is not only about what humanitarian responders do, but how they do it. Chapter 2, Gender-transformative change at the heart of meaningful participation, illustrates that seeking out the equal participation of women and men in the design and implementation of response interventions under their own terms is a critical component of this approach. Chapter 3, Gender-transformative change at the heart of effective localization, underscores the importance of supporting local efforts so that crisis-affected people can be agents of their own destinies. Chapter 4 concludes with recommendations for moving forward.

Thus, this research and the related recommendations seek to inform the ways in which humanitarian action delivers for women and girls. A focus on gender-transformative change offers Grand Bargain signatories a key opportunity to act on their commitments to participatory

and localized humanitarian action. Moreover, it bolsters the potential for humanitarian initiatives to feed into and reinforce development and peacebuilding efforts, offering crisis-affected communities and national duty bearers a more promising future.



*Syrian refugee women filming their participatory videos. Za'atari, Jordan.*

Photo credit: UN Women/Dr. Angélica Cabezas Pino



*Syrian refugee women filming their participatory videos. Za'atari, Jordan.*

Photo credit: UN Women/Dr. Angélica Cabezas Pino



GENDER-  
TRANSFORMATIVE  
CHANGE AT  
THE HEART OF  
MEANINGFUL  
PARTICIPATION

## KEY MESSAGES

- Crisis-affected women want to participate not only in meeting their immediate individual and household needs, but also in the design and implementation of humanitarian action and longer-term development and peacebuilding opportunities.
- Active and meaningful engagement in community mechanisms and in public dialogue around humanitarian ways of working beyond discussions of “needs” is a key component of gender-transformative participation.
- Women’s coalitions (networks, alliances, campaigns) can foster the participation of diverse groups of women and should be supported by humanitarian agencies.
- Humanitarian agencies have a role to play in identifying the transformative potential of “connectors” and fostering women’s participation, as well as in preventing and mitigating resistance and backlash.
- Supporting existing and emerging women leaders, including young women leaders, is a key way in which humanitarian responders can foster gender-transformative change at the nexus of humanitarian, development and peacebuilding efforts.



Colombian participants pose for the camera after finishing their participatory video. Quibdó, Colombia

Photo credit: UN Women/Fernanda Baumhardt-Grojean

# INTRODUCTION

Achieving the transformative goal laid out in the Grand Bargain requires the meaningful participation of crisis-affected people (see Box 5, Commitments to participation in the Grand Bargain). This means putting “the needs and interests of those people at the core of humanitarian decision-making, by actively engaging them throughout decision-making

processes” (IASC 2017b). In practice, this entails staging an “ongoing dialogue about the design, implementation and evaluation of humanitarian responses with people, local actors and communities who are vulnerable or at risk, including those who often tend to be disproportionately disadvantaged, such as women, girls and older persons” (IASC 2017b).

## BOX 5

### Commitments to participation in the Grand Bargain

Under the Grand Bargain “Participation Revolution” workstream, humanitarian service providers, coordinators and donors commit to the following actions, all of which can contribute to gender-transformative change:

1. Improve leadership and governance mechanisms at the level of the humanitarian country team and cluster/sector mechanisms to ensure engagement with and accountability to people and communities affected by crises.
2. Develop common standards and a coordinated approach for community engagement and participation, with the emphasis on inclusion of the most vulnerable, supported by a common platform for sharing and analysing data to strengthen decision-making, transparency, accountability and limit duplication.
3. Strengthen local dialogue and harness technologies to support more agile, transparent but appropriately secure feedback.
4. Build systematic links between feedback and corrective action to adjust programming.

This study asked people affected by crises to share their experiences of “participation” in emergency contexts, with a specific focus on how these experiences may be different or similar for diverse population segments of women and men. Our research revealed that lack of participation in decision-making processes in humanitarian response efforts was an issue generally for both women and men, although men seemed to have significantly more access to spaces of relative power than women. However, age, ethnicity, dis/ability, caste, class, religion, marital status and sexual orientation all impact on experiences around participation in humanitarian settings, which also vary across crises.

Positive effects of women’s participation in the planning and delivery of humanitarian response

and in broader development and peacebuilding initiatives included increased self-awareness, self-esteem and acknowledgement and respect from their peers. Women saw these developments as helping slowly to shift gender norms towards the acceptance of women’s proactive and meaningful participation in the public realm. This dynamic illustrates that transformative change can be initiated through humanitarian planning and implementation processes and is not limited to outcomes of complex or specialized programming.

There are many pathways through which humanitarian agencies can foster women’s participation. Data collection, community consultations and dialogues, and feedback and complaint mechanisms are routes through which the participation



*Colombian participants film each other proposing recommendations for humanitarian actors. Quibdó, Colombia*  
Photo credit: UN Women/Fernanda Baumhardt-Grojean

of affected communities is typically sought in formal emergency response programming. Yet we also documented a broader vision of participation held by many of the women in our study, one that involved taking part in meaningful ways in the design and implementation of humanitarian action and of longer-term development and peacebuilding opportunities. This vision reflects the hopes of these women for a durable solution to crisis, one that delivers on a fulfilling future that they have helped to shape.

In the Chocó Department of Colombia, for example, women spoke about the importance of participating in ending the long-standing armed conflict and defending the ancestral lands of indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities. In the refugee camps in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, Rohingya women voiced a desire to participate in the negotiations required to achieve a safe return to, and

full citizenship rights in, Myanmar. Similarly, young women activists from the Syrian Arab Republic engage in skills-building opportunities so that they can participate in the rebuilding of their home country once it is safe to return. Women from South Sudan stress the existence of community decision-making mechanisms in Northern Uganda, raising their voices and being listened to, which they would like to bring with them once they return to their communities.

The first section of this chapter lays out the primary pathways for participation that emerged in this study. Next, it discusses the key role that humanitarian agencies can play in financing and otherwise supporting groups that serve as gateways for women's participation. Finally, it reflects on resistance to and backlash against women's participation and what humanitarian actors can do to prevent and overcome this.

## 2.2

# PATHWAYS FOR PARTICIPATION

There are many pathways through which women's participation in humanitarian response and development and peacebuilding activities can be facilitated. Some of these are more conventional, involving programmed activities by humanitarian actors, such as

data collection, community consultations and feedback mechanisms. Others, such as social mobilization, are less often supported by humanitarian agencies but merit a second look given their potential for catalysing gender-transformative change.

### 2.2.1

#### Data collection and information gathering

Affected communities are often involved in humanitarian response as data collectors and experts in their own lives, offering vital information to service providers. Yet the transformational effects of imparting information in one-directional ways and collecting narrowly defined data for programming purposes may be limited. Moreover, "gender-blind" approaches to data collection and information gathering foreclose possibilities for responses that address gender inequalities and promote the empowerment of women and girls.

Members of affected populations in the study lamented that outsiders to the community, including

international actors, enter the community to extract data and implement interventions without having sought appropriate permissions or consultation with community members. Some community members in Chocó referred to this dynamic as "an invasion of vests."

"[Many international visitors] have come to the community with letters of authorization and implement activities without consultation and the leaders don't know."

(Male, Uganda, FGD, South Sudanese Refugee Leaders).

"They [international cooperation] should come and complement that, not plunder. That's what I would say, don't come and extract information, taking it all elsewhere to do with it as they please."

(Female, Colombia, Video Clip, Connector)

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Concerns were also raised about the lack of information provided by the data collectors about how the data are used. It is thus important that affected communities be made aware of the impacts of their participation on programming and service delivery. Engagement between humanitarian responders and affected communities for dissemination purposes requires an adaptation of ways of working to ensure

two-directional information dissemination and collection, and responding effectively to the needs raised by affected people, particularly women and girls, instead of recurrently repeating needs assessments. Furthermore, it is important for responders to show accountability by acting upon the commitments made in the course of engagement with affected communities.

### 2.2.2

## Consultations and community dialogues

Over the last few decades, and in response to efforts to implement more effective humanitarian responses, dialogue and consultation mechanisms have been scaled up, constituting an improvement in terms of participatory practices. Yet room for improvement remains, including in ways that facilitate gender-transformative change.

A key theme that emerged was the need to seek women's and men's participation, in equal measure, in consultative processes that span beyond the humanitarian programming cycle, beginning with the identification of problems and setting of priority agendas. Indeed, community leaders spoke about being consulted only when something has gone wrong and needs correction.

*“Most of our involvement in the system is when bad issues appear, when wrong things have happened in the community. That is when we are called to attend. If all is going well there is no meeting.”*

(Males, Uganda, FGD, South Sudanese Refugee Leaders).

Moreover, study participants pointed out that all too often, only the participation of established community leaders is sought, which places women at a disadvantage because they are less likely to be in leadership positions. When women are invited to participate, their inclusion is tokenistic, for example to be featured in photographs used in the media and for donors. Indeed, greater efforts are needed to seek women's meaningful participation in consultation processes. The heterogeneity of crisis-affected women and their differential experiences of meaningful participation as impacted by age, ethnicity, dis/ability, caste, class, religion, marital status and sexual orientation, among other factors, must be always be accounted for. Unchecked, gender biases can influence dynamics in which humanitarian responders

defer to seeking men's participation, which in turn serves as a significant barrier to engaging female leadership.

*“We have actually not informed the humanitarian aid organizations about what we need, but we receive what these people [humanitarian actors] are giving through the 30 per cent [quota of assistance meant to reach host community]. We do not tell them because they are not asking us. They do not ask us about our needs, at times maybe they talk to our local leaders, but when those things are brought, we are not refusing them, we receive them.”*

(Male, Uganda, FGD, Host community)

*“Women leaders are inactive because they are made inactive.”*

(Male, Uganda, FGD, Refugee Leaders)

*“Women from the territories are not taken into consideration, they call the women for the pictures and the signing, but less to discuss content.”*

(Female, Colombia, PV2, KII)

Of course, efforts to consult with as many people as possible must be balanced with keeping the number of participants small enough that those who are there are able to contribute in a substantive way. Female refugee leaders report that in large, institutionally-moderated meetings of more than 100 attendees, women can struggle to have their voices heard.

*“You raise your hand but they can't allow all the women to go [speak], so they only send this one [representative]. We are thinking about breastfeeding, cooking, etc. and this woman will only raise two points, she will go home and get there to remember she has forgotten other points.”*

(Female, Uganda, FGD, South Sudanese Refugee Leaders)

Smaller, women-only and topic-specific meetings that involve two-way dialogue can facilitate women's participation. Two-way dialogue implies discussing issues that are important for the women themselves even if the issues transcend what is perceived as part of the traditional humanitarian field. In Uganda, for example, elected officials

from the women's caucus and a number of INGOs engage directly with women-led organizations and women's support groups to discuss and strategize to identify the best way to influence the issues that matter to them. The Yumbe District Council, for example, hosted a dialogue on high levels of teenage pregnancy:

*"The objective is to explore with the community members why our girls are getting pregnant too early, what could be the reason, what do we do to curtail it, with the community members."*

(Female, Uganda, KII, Connector, District Speaker)

*"We go to schools, we talk to the girls, we talk to the senior women teachers, we talk to the parents themselves to understand that the education of the girl child is very important."*

(Female, Uganda, Video Clip, District Speaker)

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Because of these targeted alliances between diverse women's leadership bodies, women-led organizations now sit in various intersectoral inter-agency planning meetings and share their views. Some barriers still remain, however, as affected

populations, particularly women and girls, struggle to access information circulated via email, lack adequate access to safe and affordable transportation to reach the meeting venues and can have limited influence on meeting agendas.

### 2.2.3

## Feedback and complaint mechanisms

The Grand Bargain urges humanitarian actors to proactively and regularly seek communities' perspectives and feedback on the humanitarian response, including on the relevance and quality of services, the adequacy of engagement, trust in aid workers and their sense of "agency" or empowerment (IASC 2017b). This is a key component of how the participation of affected communities is envisioned in efficient and effective humanitarian response.

Yet in practice, the capacity to provide feedback is mediated by power inequalities between humanitarian response actors and a diverse group of affected people, and often depends on educational and literacy levels or whether there

is a conducive set-up or invitation for a meeting to give feedback. This also feeds back to trust with regard to specific actors, as well as the previous experience of affected population, particularly women and girls, with regard to whether they can raise their issues and also whether their feedback is captured, registered and responded to. Indeed, the 2018 IASC Gender Accountability Framework Report notes that only 3 out of 25 official strategic response plans included specific language on how feedback mechanisms are safely and easily accessible to women and girls (IASC and UN Women 2020).

Barriers in access to feedback and complaint mechanisms were common experiences among our study participants.

For example, in Bidibidi settlement, South Sudanese refugee women explain that while complaints desks are the predominant means for affected people to engage with humanitarian actors, they are often not sufficiently staffed and opening hours are not observed.

“There is only one [non-governmental organization (NGO)] complaint desk around here. They take a long time to respond and they don’t turn up at the office.”

#### 2.2.4

### Social mobilization

Humanitarian emergencies have the potential to propel women into social mobilization, political activism and leadership positions during and beyond the crisis. The distance between mobilizing to meet immediate needs in an emergency crisis and becoming involved in dialogue and action around the community’s longer-term strategic interests, is often short.

Women’s mobilization can contribute to advancing broader gender equality goals, including diverse representation in decision-making bodies and addressing women’s rights issues. In this sense, community-driven mobilizing can be an expression of agency, in line with the “revolutionary” aspirations of the Grand Bargain participation workstream, as well as the culmination of what is intended with decades of women’s empowerment and agency programming.

“At the end of the day, when the implementing actors leave, we want to see that this woman is empowered, and that it [her empowerment] is sustained. They [the donors] want to see the numbers. I want to see that this woman, who is supposed to get support from me, is empowered. She will soon be on her own when they [the humanitarian actors] leave. She knows her rights, she knows how to get things that she needs like health, education, knowledge. They must have that in them. Even in the refugee camps when they go back. Even though we are refugees, we have

#### 2.2.5

### Self-led organizations

While some self-led peer-support groups of refugee and displaced women emerge independently, others are established as part of humanitarian programming, through

(Female, Uganda, FGD, Refugee Women)

“[The NGO] has not been turning up at the help desk.”  
(Female, Uganda, FGD, Refugee Women)

While camp authorities in Uganda readily referred to the hotline as being easy to access, most female and male community members and leaders did not identify the hotlines as a means of engaging with humanitarian actors.

a right to access justice, health, education, everything that we need. That is what we look at.”

(Female, Uganda, Connector)

Yet humanitarian actors frequently shy away from openly supporting women’s social mobilization, let alone incentivizing it, as it could be misconstrued to counter principles of neutrality or result in strained relations with host Governments. A study participant working for a humanitarian actor explains in the context of Jordan:

“Humanitarian actors don’t want to touch it they are afraid of a political action. You cannot ask refugees to participate. (...) In the region the percentage of youth with high unemployment. The war is keeping people quiet. In Syria it is keeping Jordanians here quiet. They don’t want to be the next refugees.”

(Female, Jordan, KII, United Nations agency)

While challenging, these points of contention need to be explored and discussed in order to address the unequal power relations embedded within the humanitarian system, so that the needs and interests of affected populations, especially women and girls in all of their diversity, are at the centre.

“savings groups”, “widows’ groups” and similar project-related organizing efforts. These are important sites of women’s participation because they are constituted by

affected women themselves and are often acknowledged as safe spaces. The informal structure allows for more direct participation of women and girls, including those in conditions of heightened vulnerability. It also fosters collective mobilization around self-defined needs and concerns, while building the relations of trust and solidarity required for long-term engagement in resilience. All of these elements are of key importance for gender-transformative change.

“I just got out from my home and said: ‘today let me join the group’ because at home sometimes I am traumatized and over stressed. At least let me go and join the women group so we can spend time [among women].”

(Female, Uganda, FGD, Refugee – Village Savings and Loan Association)

Self-led groups lay the groundwork and prepare affected women for participation in other arenas by strengthening self-confidence and self-esteem. They can also be powerful incubators for new ideas, where women can develop proposals and contribute to sharpening demands around

overlooked concerns, particularly their experiences of gender inequality and discrimination. The women in these self-led groups have their own priorities, aspirations and solutions for larger challenges that often go beyond immediate humanitarian needs.

A common indicator of the effectiveness of these groups is the number of groups created. Yet a potentially more relevant indicator is the extent to which humanitarian responders support self-led groups to grow into sustainable local organizations and do so in ways that are accountable to women’s rights and to affected women themselves, as well as their own priorities (COFEM 2017). While self-led organizations of affected women are unlikely to become implementing partners of humanitarian responders due to their high levels of informality, humanitarian response agencies could, however, support their priorities and agendas. This would require a shift in humanitarian ways of working to include ongoing dialogue and joint planning.

“We believe that after many years, we will go back to Syria and Syria has a bad situation now. So, we need to build ourselves now, because after that we need to build Syria again.”

(Female, Jordan, Video Clip, Youth Activist/Volunteer)

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“It is about changing social norms and not changing what women want. Women already know what they want. They are groups of angry women who survived genocide, rape, displacement. They don’t need to be convinced in their own stories. They just need to know if they speak up, they will be listened to and that they will be safe. Their passion for justice is extraordinary.”

(Female, Bangladesh, KII, Connector)

Unfortunately, this study did not identify a single instance in which humanitarian responders engaged with self-led groups for the purpose of sourcing proposals for solutions to gender inequalities. Going forward, humanitarian agencies should consider such consultations and then provide women’s self-led groups with adequate support, accompaniment and access to funds to implement their own gender-transformative pilots, while documenting and disseminating their lessons learned.

## 2.3

# MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION REQUIRES RESOURCING OF LOCAL WOMEN'S GROUPS

Examples of women-led humanitarian, development and peacebuilding initiatives existed across the four contexts of this study. In Colombia, for example, women leaders are the first responders in cases of floods, displacement and confinements within communities, and they tend to be the ones who search for their family members and for food and shelter. Their broad range of interventions to address the needs of their peers is captured in the following quote:

“We are present in the whole territory conducting day-to-day activism. We can have five meetings in one day. We leave at 8 a.m. and return at 7 p.m., move from one place to the next, from one group or collective to the next. This is the work of the lidere-sas [female leaders]. It is our words, the complaints we file, the videos we produce, the accompaniment

we provide [for women] to access the referral pathways.”

(Female, Colombia, KII, Connector, Women's rights organization)

Similarly, a woman refugee leader from South Sudan shared how she disseminates information from the implementing partners, mobilizes women for meetings, collects and passes on information, attends women's conferences, counsels young women and men on early marriage and family planning, accompanies women to court, serves as a counsellor and encourages other women to become a leader like herself (Female, Uganda, Video clip). And in Bangladesh, Rohingya women leaders are active in the neighbourhood watch, mediate in cases of intimate partner violence, support survivors of sexual and gender-based violence to access the referral pathways and have relevant information for humanitarian actors.

“But now, at least in the refugee settlement, I'm trained to be a leader. I could talk to women. I could counsel them. When they have problems, I could remember how my problem was, but I talk to them. They understand [...] I tell them my life stories: when I was young, during the war and now [who] I am and how I have become a leader. They elected me as the community so they will turn, they would be fine.”

(Female, Uganda, Video Clip, Refugee Leader)

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Yet none of these women received remuneration for their important work. Indeed, despite their added value as strategic resource persons with first-hand knowledge of the needs of affected communities, their work is assumed to be an extension of their (unpaid) care responsibilities. Often these women leaders do not fit the expected format of a resource person, as they often lack formal education and the experience to speak in front of large audiences or in the language of humanitarian responders. In other instances, women leaders are considered either as programme beneficiaries for leadership programming, or as volunteers to assist humanitarians to disseminate particular information or convene community members for meetings. While these opportunities are often welcomed and valued, women leaders are not able to unleash their full potential.

*“They have us tired running from one meeting to the next, from event to event. But when we turn around, it is us [women] who pick up and collect the cups, sweep the floors – they do not consider us [for project opportunities] and we feel that they are using us and we do not want them to use us anymore.”*

(Females, Colombia, PV2 KII, Affected Women)

Community-based leaders, particularly women leaders emerging in crisis contexts, often lack the financial means to do their jobs adequately and to fulfil the expectations placed upon them as community leaders. Gaps commonly cited included funding for transport fees and for means of communications and airtime credit to make calls and report issues to government authorities and/or implementing partners. Male leaders engaged in gender champion projects face economic constraints too:

*“We, the role model men, live far away in different camps. So, when we are called for a meeting like this some of us are lacking funds [for transport].”*

(Males, Uganda, FGD, Connectors, South Sudanese Refugees).

It is not reasonable to expect substantial progress towards gender equality within affected communities if the message sent by humanitarian agencies is that it is appropriate to rely on the unpaid labour of crisis-affected women. Advancing gender equality requires adequate and earmarked resources for grass-roots women’s organizations and local leaders to fulfil the expectations placed upon them.



*Syrian participants pose for a photo after filming their participatory video. Za'atari Camp, Jordan.*

Photo credit: UN Women/Dr. Angélica Cabezas Pino

## 2.4

# RESISTANCE AND BACKLASH TO WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION

The women in our study identified a number of barriers to their meaningful participation in humanitarian response and longer-term development and peacebuilding activities. Some of these are more prominent to specific segments of affected women and some are context-specific, applicable for example in places where women do not have secure immigration status and fear deportation, or where ongoing conflict poses threats to women's safety and security. These conditions understandably dampen women's willingness and ability to assume and remain in leadership roles. Other barriers stem from well-meaning but ultimately short-sighted approaches to

humanitarian response that limit women's participation to "gender issues".

Among the most salient barriers to women's meaningful participation, however, are resistance and backlash within their households and communities. As women and girls are encouraged and supported to take on more prominent roles in public spaces, this often requires them to transcend socially accepted gender roles. While some people welcome women's leadership, the shifting of established roles and responsibilities can provoke resistance and backlash from men and also some women who fear losing out.

### 2.4.1

#### Resistance

As the level of women's empowerment advances, some men respond by defending their privilege and resisting women's participation.

"The men [in our organizations] push us out of these spaces. They do not let us participate in important decision-making processes. The public offices are also reserved for them and they do not let us get access to these."

(Female, Colombia, KII, Connector Female Youth)

Consequently, female study participants stressed the need to engage male leaders in gender-transformative work to disrupt the larger pattern of marginalizing active women. Hence, programming to promote gender-transformative change needs to go beyond increasing women's representation in public spaces, to achieve a dynamic in which women are sought out as experts and have influence over the outcomes of meetings, agendas and workplans.

"There is always the obstacle because they [men] want to continue with their patriarchy and believe they have the power of command and an already empowered woman

says: 'no, no, stop, here we are both in charge.' Because we were already very affected and we don't want any more of that."

(Female, Colombia, PV2 KII, Internally Displaced and Connector)

"When they need us, they acknowledge that we [women] are empowering ourselves. When it is about organizing marches, to mobilize women, do the logistics, organize everything and to cook, they consider us empowered; but when it is time to say: we need your knowledge, according to men, we do not have the capacity. But we do have the capacity and we can! It has been a struggle within the organizations themselves; we have had to struggle to be able to be in those spaces."

(Female, Colombia, KII, Connector)

In particular, men's reflections in the study revealed conflicted feelings about changes in gender relations within their households. While they appreciated many of the improvements that come with women's increased empowerment and participation in public life, they also reflected

on personal hardship. The primary driver of this dynamic was their newfound inability to live up to expectations to provide economically for their families (see Box 6, Men as providers?). However, men in this study did not discuss participating in decisions that affect their lives, households and communities as much. For men, participation was assumed

as a given, which can also lead to an aggrieved entitlement when it is not only them participating, prompting men to be particularly vocal when they are sidelined in decision-making by humanitarian actors or their leadership is not being respected.

## BOX 6

### Men as providers?



*A group of men, South Sudanese refugee leaders participating in a focus group discussion. Bidibidi settlement, Uganda.*

Photo credit: UN Women/María Fernanda Novelo Duarte

Men in the study expressed feeling excluded and emasculated by humanitarian programming that targeted women to receive financial assistance. In Uganda and Bangladesh, references to women being “wives of the UN” were common.

“On one hand, we are not happy because women now [belittle men] because the women get food from the Government now, instead of their husbands. On the other hand, we are happy because when women give birth, they get help from NGOs [humanitarian actors], so they are not in pain, and the children get vaccinated.”

(Male, Rohingya in Bangladesh, FGD, Connector)

Affected men in Bangladesh, Jordan and Uganda were visibly shaken by this turn and expressed a sense of having lost their purpose in life. Women also



*A group of South Sudanese refugee men gathered for a focus group discussion. Bidibidi settlement, Uganda.*

Photo credit: UN Women/María Fernanda Novelo Duarte

expressed conflicted feelings about this dramatic shift in gender roles. They suggested that the “preferential treatment of women” is not only unfair to men, but that it creates a burden for the women themselves, who struggle to cope with the newfound freedom resulting from empowerment programming. For example, a Syrian refugee in Jordan welcomed a return back to “normal”:

“If I get a chance to rest for sure I will not say no. Let the men take responsibility again.”

(Female, Jordan, Syrian refugee).

While humanitarian agencies are right to ensure that women have access to income, creative options should be pursued that seek women’s empowerment while avoiding a zero-sum dynamic or the overburdening of women.

Some men also lamented their loss of control over their wives, and indeed, in the face of persistent patriarchal attitudes and practices, women may choose to leave unhappy marriages.

“The rules today are with women more than men, so men cannot say anything...Women can complain about anything happening to them. This is positive, but also negative because the women become stronger and do not accept their husbands. The cases of divorces increased in the camp because women here become more powerful, so they choose divorce over living in a situation they do not like. This is different from the past when the women

were chosen to be patient and bear all the circumstances to keep and protect their marriage.”

(Female, Jordan, FGD, Syrian refugee)

In humanitarian contexts, while women enjoy increased participation in the public sphere, men may resist participating more equally in responsibilities in the private sphere. This has negative consequences for women’s work burden, as they assume double roles (see Box 7, Equal and meaningful participation in public and private spheres is needed). Humanitarian agencies should integrate such considerations when they are planning programming and consult with women and men about how best to do so.

## BOX 7

### Equal and meaningful participation in public and private spheres is needed

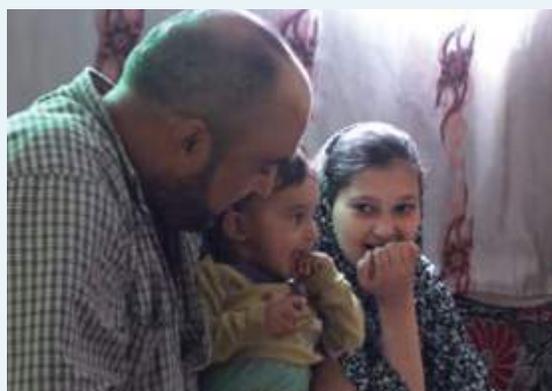
Shifts and stasis in the gender division of paid and unpaid labour was a common theme in interviews and FGDs about participation. On one hand, some women spoke about positive changes in the household involving a more collaborative approach to unpaid care and household chores and an increase in shared decision-making, as they also assumed new roles post-crisis as income earners. Yet on the other hand, they also reflected on the ways in which crisis can also lead to stasis in some gender roles at the household level or provoke negative changes. For instance, some women experienced a higher work burden in needing to assume both paid and unpaid work.

“Women need to manage their time between both [income-generating tasks and domestic chores] and to have a deal with their husbands about that. For me, my husband is used to doing nothing. I do everything by myself.”

(Female, Jordan, adult Syrian refugee)

“[Women and men] work together side by side in the mountains and then come home and the men expect that women do everything, to cook and keep the children clean. It is difficult to address patriarchy and machismo.”

(Female, FGD, Connector, Colombia)



*A Syrian refugee family gathers at home. Amman, Jordan.*

Photo credit: UN Women/Dr. Angélica Cabezas Pino

To be sure, even when men may wish to participate in childcare or domestic tasks, persistent gender norms in the broader community may deter them from doing so. For example, in Jordan, an NGO study participant shared that men have started “taking care of their children, although it shameful for them to be seen doing this” (Female, Jordan, KII, Connector INGO).

Humanitarian response programming has a key role to play in facilitating gender-transformative change at the household level, by encouraging the

participation of both women and men in the delivery of key services and in decision-making processes at the community level. In Uganda, initiatives such as “role model men” encourage young men to adopt responsibilities that decrease women’s unpaid care and domestic workloads and leverage a peer-support model to counter the stigma associated with assuming non-traditional gender roles.

“I think I feel happy because I have some changes in my life. What I could not do before, I can do now... For

example, cooking. I can help my mother do some activities... I think she is so happy with [the path] I have chosen for my life.”

(Male, Uganda, FGD, Connector)

Young men in the Youth Network in Chocó participate in programming related to “new masculinities” that provides men with a safe space to engage with issues like responsible paternity and egalitarian relationships.



A Colombian male youth leader being filmed for a participatory video. Quibdó, Colombia.

Photo credit: UN Women/Fernanda Baumhardt-Grojean

“[...] the Youth Network of Women from Chocó (Red Juvenil de Mujeres Chocoanas) accompanied me throughout all of this transformative process. Thanks to that, I was able to discover new things such as the so-called new masculinities. This has helped me to become a role model in society, particularly for my friends. They have noticed that the old Bladimir that did not enjoy doing house chores is now doing them, they see him cooking and that motivates them.[...] They have seen the kind of relationship that I have with my daughter which is very direct, based on trust and accompaniment. This has been an inspiration for many of my personal friends.”

(Male, Colombia, PV1, Youth leader)

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## 2.4.2

### Backlash

The forms that backlash takes are highly context-specific and depend on prevailing gender norms. All too often, it can manifest as acts of harassment and gender-based violence. Young and unmarried Rohingya women, for example, reported experiencing harassment by men in public places. Their experiences illustrate how gender and age intersect to produce specific inequalities, and why humanitarian programming should respond to these (see Box 8, Young women’s experiences of backlash in public spaces). In Bangladesh, the PVs were filmed among women affiliated with self-led groups, because individual women had expressed concern that their faces might be recognized, triggering gossip and reducing their prospects for marriage. In the videos, young women from the Shanti Khana group showed their appreciation by waving their hands, because the noise of women clapping might upset men outside the building.

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### BOX 8

#### Young women’s experiences of backlash in public spaces

Gender segregation of public spaces can break down during a crisis because of overcrowding and new coping mechanisms that require changes in women and men’s roles. An imam in Bangladesh spoke about the changes he had witnessed in his community: “There was no freedom of movement in Myanmar. Now in the camps [youth] are exposed to one another. They are free. Males and females can walk around and that creates problems.” (Male, Bangladesh, KII, Connector [imam]) Families may respond to this new “exposure” with measures that may be harmful for young women. “Young boys and girls start interacting, talking, chatting on mobile phones. Then often the families immediately suggest marrying them. That is done primarily to keep their [girls’] reputation, otherwise they would not be able to marry the girl. Also, they would be afraid of the girl being raped.” (Female, Bangladesh, KII, Connector [Justice Committee])



*Young Rohingya women interviewing each other for their participatory video. Cox’s Bazar, Banglaesh.*

Photo credit: UN Women/Dr. Angélica Cabezas Pino

Young women and female adolescents in Bangladesh and Jordan spoke about experiencing backlash to their heightened mobility linked to participation, in the form of harassment and physical and psychological violence:

“Boys would tease us and men would tell us we will be beaten, if we don’t get married. All men,

old, young, fat, skinny, the older ones are the worst. They pull our burka and tear them off and even if we refuse to marry those older men, [they threaten to] do magic and kill us, and generally harass us. One lady got crazy after men doing magic [casting a spell] on her.”

(Female, Bangladesh, FGD, Rohingya Refugee)

“The first big issue we have as young women is harassment. Whenever we walk on the street or in the camp, and because the camp is very small... many people in the street. We hear words from even the little children. And you will find that many families don’t support the girls. Because if they hear any boy saying a bad word to the girl, it will be the girl’s problem and not for the boy. So sometimes when the girl goes to school or walks alone in the street. As young girls we cannot hang out, go to the market, we can’t do anything here in the camp.”

(Female, Jordan, Video Clip, Youth)

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“I would like to denounce a problem that we suffer from at the camp. This is harassment. All kinds of harassment. [...] We need awareness for young people. [...] This is not for me, but for our girls in the camp. They are afraid to go outside, or to go to school.”

(Female, Jordan, PV2, Syrian Refugee)

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These dynamics hinder humanitarian action and development programming in education and community participation, as girls will be less likely to take

part. Responses must address male perpetrators while also supporting a collaborative vision of more egalitarian gender relations.

Backlash can also surface in increased levels of violence within households affected by crisis. Routinely speaking up in community spaces and participating in decision-making processes is a new dynamic for many South Sudanese refugee women, as well as for women in the Ugandan host community. Study participants reflected on the costs of empowerment for women who receive leadership training, as well as the benefits.

“After receiving the training these women will change. In the community they are looked at as people who are trying to change the culture in the community and they are being challenged. In the household the same thing, husbands felt that women are becoming ‘big headed’ and they ask the women: ‘Who brought you here?’ [as reference to put women ‘in their place’ (...)] The empowerment comes with a lot of implications on the house, mostly [gender-based violence].”

(Female, Uganda, Humanitarian Actor)

“[Despite an increase in women’s participation] even now women do not feel comfortable to speak when the men are there. Once we bring men on board, it is the men who are trying to [deter] these women from participating. (...) we used to have community awareness sessions for women’s human rights, the refugee men would say that Uganda law favours women. Men say, everything is about women, what about men?”

(Female, Uganda, Humanitarian Actor)

In Colombia, there is a decades-long history of armed conflict and retaliation, threats and assaults, and the disappearance and assassination of male and female community leaders was not uncommon. Women and people with diverse gender identity or sexual orientation often remain silent and walk away from leadership roles in order to avoid exposing themselves as targets for violence. According to a transgender woman and social activist in Chocó Department:

“We cannot talk about a post-conflict period when there really isn’t such a thing. If I choose or decide to be a transsexual or transgender woman or be part of the LGBTI population in the Chocó Department, I am fearful because I do not know which groups [non-State armed actors] could try to take my life and I may have to become displaced because I don’t know what kind of ideals or ideology they may have regarding this population.”

(Female, Colombia, Video clip, Connector)

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In these contexts, when women’s behaviour is perceived as transcending their established social roles, they may also be sanctioned by their own communities and families who reject their active leadership role for exposing others around them to risks. They may end up rejecting women leaders or distancing themselves from them, leaving them in even greater isolation and vulnerability. For instance, in Colombia, women leaders – especially those who

are travelling, particularly if involving an overnight stay, which is sometimes required due to long distances and high transport costs – are accused of promiscuity, which results in tensions with their partners. Furthermore, women’s rights activists are considered destructive for their households, with people assuming that they only engage in empowerment and capacity-building in order to leave their husbands. (Female, Colombia, IDP).

# CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR WOMEN'S MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION

Enhancing meaningful participation necessarily touches upon gendered power inequalities. Women's experiences show that gender-transformative work is an ongoing and continuous process; as the levels of women's empowerment and representation increase, new challenges to meaningful participation arise. In line with established principles of "Do No Harm" (UNHCR n.d), it is incumbent upon humanitarian responders to think through the unintended consequences of programming aiming to empower women and to work with local women's organizations, and male allies, to mitigate risks of gender-based violence.

In order to unleash the potential of meaningful participation to address gender inequalities, humanitarian responders need to move away from a "utilitarian logic" of asking how affected communities can "serve" the effectiveness of the response, towards supporting affected populations, especially women,

to become their own agents of change. Women's participation needs to be enabled by humanitarian actors through a shift in their ways of working to become more participatory. It is the responsibility of the humanitarian actors to open up the spaces and facilitate women's meaningful engagement, taking into account their diversity and their priorities and thus going beyond "inviting" them and ensuring that certain representation quotas are fulfilled in humanitarian activities.

There exists a need for humanitarian actors to work on the topic of gender-transformative participation not only with women but also with male leaders and community members. This ongoing work needs to be captured not only in project proposals, but also in the formulation of those proposals through information gathering and community consultation, and throughout project implementation and in feedback mechanisms.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

**Humanitarian organizations can implement a gender-transformative approach to participation in the following ways:**

1. Engage in two-way dialogue with women and men, in equal measure, in the deployment of conventional mechanisms for participation such as data collection, consultations and feedback mechanisms on a diverse array of issues, including those perceived to fall "outside" the humanitarian realm.
2. Deploy an approach to participation that moves beyond "inviting" and "encouraging" affected communities to engage. Instead, adapt and generate the spaces for them to truly influence meeting formats, topics discussed, agendas and workflows.
3. Acknowledge and adequately support existing and emerging women's leadership, ensuring not only that meetings are the right size and format to be conducive to their participation but also that they have the resources to organize themselves around their priorities.
4. Identify and financially support the priorities and solutions of self-led groups of affected women and enable them to influence meeting agendas and priority-setting.
5. Amplify affected women's voices by bringing women's networks, alliances and campaigns into spaces of influence to shape the decisions that affect their lives, and by connecting them to national gender equality campaigns, equality policies or the women, peace and security agenda.

# STORY OF GENDER- TRANSFORMATIVE CHANGE 1: CAPACITY- BUILDING INITIATIVES ENABLE WOMEN TO EXERCISE VOICE

South Sudanese women in Uganda draw on training to challenge submissive roles at home and in public.



*A group of South Sudanese women after filming their participatory video. Bidibidi settlement, Uganda.*

Photo credit: UN Women/Fernanda Baumhardt-Grojean

Many women in the study reflected on speaking up for the first time in community meetings in order to voice their opinions and concerns, and on taking a greater role in household

decision-making processes. For them, this was a matter of strength in their communities and households and of feeling respected by their husbands and neighbours.

“Now because of the changes, it is better for us. We women should be strong-hearted and participate in speaking in public so that we are better. Our hearts are now strong. If they ask who should raise the hands up, it is now me. Now we start talking in points, one by one. The difficulties we were facing before, now they are better. The changes are good.”

(Female, Uganda, PV2, Host Community Women)

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“In South Sudan when we went to meetings, women were not allowed to talk. But now in Uganda we can talk, we have the right to talk, we can ask anything in the meetings. Before, when you wanted to talk in the meeting, [the men] would say ‘no, you are a woman, you cannot talk.’”

(Female, Uganda, FGD, Refugee Women)

“I used to go to those meetings, they knew I had never been to school, they thought I could not say anything important and they would chase me away. Now I have that strength to raise my hand and express my views.”

(Female, Uganda, FGD, South Sudanese Refugee)

Capacity-building initiatives play an important role in shoring up women’s confidence to speak publicly. In Uganda, South Sudanese refugee women draw on leadership training that included public speaking and language classes to challenge subordination at home and in public. They receive training from a variety of humanitarian actors on Uganda’s legal framework, including laws criminalizing domestic and intimate partner violence, sexual violence and child marriage. Women report that this training, plus the knowledge that laws are more consistently enforced in Uganda, provides them with the confidence to denounce violence to the authorities.



*An empty classroom where refugee women gathered to participate in a focus group discussion. Bidibidi settlement, Uganda.*

Photo credit: UN Women/Maria Fernanda Novelo Duarte

“Before, we were not supposed to talk in front of the public like that. But currently, through

training, we are able to present our issues, to take and do whatever a man can do.”

(Female, Uganda, FGD, Refugee Leader)

“When I was in South Sudan, the women [did] not have rights. In Uganda, here, the women have rights [...] the women become leaders.”

(Female, Uganda, PV1, Refugee)

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“We have got a lot of change here and a lot of knowledge. If we go back [to South Sudan], we are going to lift those who are down and talk in public. Before women were not supported even if your man beats you, you stay and wait. Here we are equal with the men and what the men can do, we can do as well. We want to lift those women down to be like us.”

(Female, Uganda, FGD, Refugee Leader)

In Uganda, gender-transformative change takes place through community participation. Opportunities to overcome women’s marginalization emerge from humanitarians’ investments in women and opportunities tailored to women that create a conducive environment for women’s participation, a greater capacity to raise their voices and not only to speak in public but to actually influence decision-making in community spaces.

# STORY OF GENDER- TRANSFORMATIVE CHANGE 2: PEER-SUPPORT NETWORKS CAN BE A GATEWAY TO PUBLIC VISIBILITY

In Bangladesh, Rohingya women find support, solidarity and collective activism in women's groups.



*A group of young Rohingya refugee women introduce themselves on camera while filming their participatory video. Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh.  
Photo credit: UN Women/Dr. Angélica Cabezas Pino*

For Rohingya women in Bangladesh, displacement has diluted some social norms around gender-segregated spaces and created opportunities for women to become more active in public spaces. In part, this is because in the refugee camps, people must live in much closer proximity to one another than was the case in their home

communities. It is also because of the extraordinarily high rate of unmet need within women's families, and the heightened risks and vulnerabilities facing women themselves. These factors prompt women to seek peer support, solidarity and collective organizing.

“If we notice any conflict in a house like a husband is beating his wife, then we go and talk with both of them and we will conduct a women’s meeting...we will go to those houses and we talk with them about these things.”

(Female, Bangladesh, FGD, Connector).

“Before, people never listened to us. They thought, ‘why should I listen to those random women?’ Since we joined [the group], people really do listen to us and respect what we say. If they have any problems, they discuss them with us.”

(Female, Bangladesh, FGD, Connector)

“At the beginning, most of the people did not respect us. But now, even men are imitating us, and they say it’s possible for women to solve problems like a man. People support us to continue our activities, and they even say it’s a good initiative and helpful work...But we went to the CIC office to request for a space and they never gave us an answer...Because [of] the lack of space, we can’t come all together to raise our voice properly.”

(Shanti Mohila members, Bangladesh, PV)

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Three distinct organizations offer women the skills and support they need to take a more active role in public. Shanti Mohila advocates for justice for Rohingya people, the Rohingya Women’s Empowerment and Advocacy Network intervenes in cases of intimate partner violence, and Shanti Khana provides psychosocial care by volunteers. The distinct mandates of these groups indicate how transformative peer support can be found in a variety of service offerings.

Gender-transformative change occurs as the Rohingya women who are part of these organizations overcome gendered isolation, rooted in norms of segregation of unmarried women and men in public spaces, to come together in safe spaces that not only generate support and opportunities but also propel women as individuals and collectives as agents for change. The transformative element emerges in the unprecedented possibility of connecting with other women to enhance community-level participation, thus broadening women’s roles in largely male-dominated spaces.



*Members of Shanti Mohila interview each other while filming their participatory video. Cox’s Bazar, Bangladesh.*

Photo credit: UN Women/Dr. Angélica Cabezas Pino



*Rohingya refugee women engage with the video equipment to create their own participatory videos. Cox’s Bazar, Bangladesh.*

Photo credit: UN Women/Dr. Angélica Cabezas Pino

GENDER-  
TRANSFORMATIVE  
CHANGE AT THE  
HEART OF EFFECTIVE  
LOCALIZATION



## KEY MESSAGES

- Effective localization should go beyond national-level partnerships to include local actors who are often on the front lines of emergency response, particularly women’s rights organizations, self-led groups, community-based organizations, volunteer responders and social movement leaders, among others.
- Women’s rights organizations desire partnerships with humanitarian agencies that are based on equality and recognition of their contributions, and that span beyond the length of the programming cycle.
- Women’s rights organizations, self-led groups and volunteer structures must be recognized as key humanitarian responders with their contributions to broader emergency response efforts acknowledged.
- Local actors that serve as “connectors” between communities and humanitarian responders have a key role to play in the implementation of gender-transformative localization and must be appropriately funded and supported by humanitarian actors.



Two women in Uganda help each other with the video equipment. Bidibidi Settlement, Uganda.

Photo credit: UN Women/Fernanda Baumhardt-Grojean

# INTRODUCTION

A key component of the Grand Bargain seeks to shift decision-making power and resources locally, from international agencies to crisis-affected communities and their duty bearers. This is the mandate of the Localization Workstream, which sets out to provide “more support and funding tools for local and national responders” (IASC 2019). In so doing, Grand Bargain signatories commit to foster national and local ownership of emergency programming as often as possible, while still recognizing the important role played by international actors, especially in contexts of armed conflict. Ultimately, efforts at localization should increase accountability and transparency in humanitarian action, leading to a more effective emergency response.

While Grand Bargain signatories commit to achieving a clear set of aims through the Localization Workstream (see Box 9, Commitments to localization in the Grand Bargain), there is no explicit definition of what localization entails in practice (Wall and Hedlund 2016). While these aims could be interpreted as “gender-blind”, meaning that they lack a gender-sensitive lens, they do not preclude a gender-transformative approach. Indeed, as this chapter will show, efforts to localize humanitarian response are both strengthened by the participation of women’s rights organizations and offer a unique opportunity to shift power into the hands of women and girls.

## BOX 9

### Commitments to localization in the Grand Bargain

Under the Grand Bargain Localization Workstream, aid organizations and donors commit to the following actions, all of which can be leveraged to support gender-transformative change:

1. Improve leadership and governance mechanisms at the level of the humanitarian country team and cluster/sector mechanisms to ensure engagement with and accountability to people and communities affected by crises.
1. Increase and support multi-year investment in the institutional capacities of local and national responders, including preparedness, response and coordination capacities.
2. Understand better and work to remove or reduce barriers that prevent organizations and donors from partnering with local and national responders in order to lessen their administrative burden.
3. Support and complement national coordination mechanisms where they exist, and include them in international coordination mechanisms as appropriate and in keeping with humanitarian principles.
4. Achieve by 2020 a global, aggregated target of at least 25 per cent of humanitarian funding to local and national responders as directly as possible.
5. Develop with the Inter-Agency Standing Committee and apply a “localization” marker to measure direct and indirect funding to local and national responders.
6. Make greater use of funding tools which increase and improve assistance delivered by local and national responders, such as pooled funds.

Recognizing that State and non-State responders are those with whom Grand Bargain signatories seek to share decision-making power and resources, this study asked crisis-affected individuals to share their

lived experiences of localization efforts. We asked about their experiences engaging with humanitarian responders, what effective localization should look like and how it could be placed in service of advancing



*Participants in Uganda during the process of editing their participatory video. Bidibidi Settlement, Uganda.*

Photo credit: UN Women/Fernanda Baumhardt-Grojean

gender equality. A clear message was that in order for localization to effectively address the needs of women and girls, women's rights organizations need to be approached as capable local actors and funded accordingly.

The chapter begins by briefly considering what "local" means in the context of humanitarian response and provides evidence in support of more grass-roots

engagements. The second part of the chapter draws on study participants' perceptions and experiences of three key components of the Localization Workstream: partnerships, funding and coordination. The third part of the chapter outlines entry points for Grand Bargain signatories to leverage and strengthen the gender-transformative potential of localization efforts that include women's rights organizations and local groups.

## 3.2

# A GENDER PERSPECTIVE ON “LOCAL”

Participants in the study urged international agencies to take measured steps to ensure that localization plans included grass-roots women’s rights organizations in addition to national-level actors. Their experiences provide evidence of why the development of partnerships across “local” scales is so important for a more effective humanitarian response.



*A Syrian refugee woman smiling.*

Photo credit: UN Women/Dr. Angélica Cabezas Pino

A key reason why localization efforts should include local actors is because the further away from communities that decision-making and oversight lie, the greater the risk of inefficiencies and slowed progress.

Involving local organizations, in addition to national actors, in localization efforts also helps to ensure that the interests of crisis-affected women and men will be represented in national dialogue and programming. As internationally displaced people often lack citizenship in the host country, and as a result, representation, it is important that localization efforts carve out specific spaces for their inclusion.

Intentional steps need to be taken to ensure that local organizations benefit from the Localization Workstream. Indeed, it is not enough to assume that State-level actors will share decision-making power and resources with those at the local and grass-roots levels. Our study participants spoke at length about bureaucratic structures at the national level that often serve as barriers to participation of women’s rights organizations in governance processes.

“If the whole response is ‘nationalized’, then we will have fewer women.”

(Female, Bangladesh, FGD, Humanitarian Actor)

“The Government will not accept all the projects and grants from the grass roots. There are cases that grass roots lost the funds because the Government did not approve it or took a lot of time, nine months, to approve grants.”

(Female, Jordan, FGD, Connector, Women’s rights organization)

It is also critical that localization efforts include partnerships with local organizations that hold women’s rights at their core. A gender-blind approach to partnerships risks fostering a dynamic in which the gender-discriminatory practices at the national level are perpetuated at the local level. By specifically seeking out partnerships with local women’s rights organizations, localization efforts can more effectively include the needs and interests of people who may otherwise be marginalized from governance processes.

### 3.3

# LOCALIZATION FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF CRISIS-AFFECTED WOMEN

Partnerships, funding and coordination are three central components of the Grand Bargain Localization Workstream. While the workstream does not identify how

a gender lens might be useful to making work in these areas more effective, the participants in our research had plenty of ideas.

#### 3.3.1

### Partnerships

“If transformation is what we are after, it is important to strengthen local women’s organizations, who work tirelessly, without funds.”

(Male, Colombia, KII, United Nations agency).

“In Jordan, women’s rights organizations are very active on women’s issues and on top of that, they are the ones leading the concept of localization. We are working together on the localization component to ensure we are supporting them to have a voice and become an equal member in the humanitarian response, equally with INGOs. When we look at localization, it is not just partnerships, it is having equal rights in terms of designing the project, redefining the role of local actors in the country.”

(Female, Jordan, KII, Humanitarian Actor)

In the context of the Grand Bargain, partnerships refer to formalized agreements between international actors and organizations that have adequate institutional, administrative and operational capacities to contribute to core components of the humanitarian response. In practice, this means that partnerships tend to be formed with large organizations that have a national presence rather than smaller, local organizations with more niche expertise. There are, however, distinct benefits to partnering with smaller women’s rights organizations, not only as local implementing partners but as humanitarian actors capable of setting their own agendas. Unfortunately,

significant barriers prevent such partnerships from materializing.

Local women’s rights organizations provide spaces for marginalized women to mobilize, build solidarity and advance awareness of women’s rights (see chapter 2). The Chocó Departmental Network of Women is a notable example of a women’s rights organization that evolved from a small beneficiary group, first to a departmental network and implementing partner of various humanitarian and development projects, and then to co-financer of new project initiatives. A key component of the Network’s success has been its ability to set its own priorities and agendas, a component that is often missing in traditional humanitarian partnerships. The Network has become an important government partner, contributing to the development of subchapters in different departmental regions and other groups such as the Youth Network. As the Network has grown in reach, so has the influence of its gender-transformative advocacy and programming.

“I am a young woman leader that has been empowering herself through the Youth Network of Women from Chocó (Red Juvenil de Mujeres Chocoanas) in topics such as gender equality, non-violence against women and all other topics that are relevant for us as women from Chocó to claim our rights. Being part of these processes with the Youth Network has enabled me to be part of advocacy and accompaniment processes with international and national organizations that have enabled my voice to be heard in order to transform the lives of other young women who have been victims of violence or victims of the armed conflict. My voice has been heard to such an extent that it has enabled me to be part of the Departmental Network of Women from Chocó (Red Departamental de Mujeres Chocoanas) our mother organization. This way, I am able to bring my voice to older women at the same time as I can continue to empower myself based on their extensive experiences to keep on transforming the lives of our women.”

(Female, Colombia, PV1, Youth leader)

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*A young female Afro-Colombian leader speaks to the camera while filming a participatory video. Quibdó, Colombia.*

Photo credit: UN Women/Fernanda Baumhardt-Grojean

Local women’s rights organizations have the benefit of proximity to affected communities. This means that partnering with local women’s rights organizations from the outset of the programming cycle increases the likelihood that the solutions developed will be tailored to problems that crisis-affected women themselves identify as high priority. It also means that interventions may be more likely to reach those in conditions of heightened vulnerability or are overlooked. As partnerships are envisioned, it is important to acknowledge the diversity among local women’s rights organizations. While some are looking to strengthen their capacities and humanitarian expertise, others, particularly in protracted crises, have fully developed their capacities across decades of experience doing gender-transformative humanitarian work. Humanitarians must therefore move away from one-size-fits-all approaches to partnering with local women’s organizations and recognize their unique capacities, skills, objectives and needs.

“We as women from Chocó...would like to make an observation that we have here women’s organizations that have been here in the territory for over 22 years resisting all these displacement issues and have been able to organize ourselves and be part of many capacity-building programmes, and political advocacy programmes. We have built our capacity to be able to help other women and more than other women, the youth who are our seeds. And we have not been able to make progress in this objective because we do not even have a shelter or even an office where the women can arrive in confidence. Then, we have to move to reach them and it is very difficult to get to where they are because we do not have a productive project that generates income for us. We have been life-transforming. We have been agents of change. We have knocked from door to door, we have gone to the communities, we have gone to the urban areas and we feel how much these women need us. They ask us: ‘when are you coming back? we need you to replicate a programme for us, to give a workshop, a capacity-building activity, etc.’ But we do not go beyond that because we do not have effective tools of work because all the resources stay in the big organizations.”

(Female, Colombia, PV2, Affected Leader)

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“Sometimes things come with very strict and tough guidelines from all the way over there without really looking at what are the actual needs of the women here. A person who does rural work knows that the urban and rural spheres are not the same. The rural woman lives a double war. She is a person that is not reached by the institutions. She does not receive anything from the Government, the international cooperation, the institutions or elsewhere. Nothing reaches her, and when the international cooperation does reach, it is through a third party because most of the support stays in the urban areas.”

(Female, Colombia, PV2, Affected Leader)

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Razia Sultana is a Rohingya lawyer and activist who has lived in Bangladesh since childhood. She runs a space for refugee women to discuss traumatic experiences of violence and displacement in a safe space. She suggests that

humanitarian actors are overlooking opportunities to advance gender equality by implementing pre-packaged programmes and not supporting self-organized groups of affected women to pursue their own priorities.

“All the NGOs [meaning humanitarian actors] or most of the NGOs they just bring a project and implement it, but they are not thinking about that particular person, that human being... They have the intention to just finish the project... This is just giving points: ‘Don’t harm your woman, don’t beat your children, don’t fight, don’t do polygamy’. This is just like reciting a speech, what’s already in the book (...).”

(Female, Bangladesh, Video Clip, Connector)

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Yet established women’s rights organizations face significant barriers to becoming formal implementing partners in humanitarian responses. Many of these relate to bureaucratic operational and financial requirements imposed either by Governments or humanitarian agencies and donors. Lack of formal registration, for example, is a common obstacle. This situation can arise as a result of restrictive government regulations, or because of an over-saturated market. In Uganda, for example, guidelines intended to strengthen the capacity of national responders suggest that with the existence of 10,500 national NGOs in the country, “there is no need to create additional ones” (UNHCR 2018).

“We had intentions to work with humanitarian organizations, but we didn’t have support and funding. You need some funding support to begin with when you work with these actors. We had not registered at the national level; you need to register to work with those organizations.”

(Female, Uganda, KII, Yumbe Gender-Based Violence Network)

Donor-imposed restrictions on the required expertise of potential partners serve as additional barriers. Some donors and intermediaries in Colombia, for example, insist that potential grantees have two years of previous partnership experience with international organizations. At the same time, they do not accept decades of highly-regarded community presence as counting towards the fitness of a potential partner. Such subjective decisions serve to exclude women’s rights organizations and self-led groups. Moreover, they create a dynamic that favours partners who may be low-maintenance from a contractual perspective and may know how to work with international partners, but otherwise lack valuable capital in the ability to effectively and efficiently mobilize communities.

Barriers related to funding, which emerged as a significant theme in our study, are explored in the next section.

### 3.3.2 Funding

There is an emphasis within the Grand Bargain on closing the funding gap and providing more funding

directly to national and local responders. At the same time, workstream members also stress the need for

a broader approach to supporting local actors (IASC 2019). While local women’s rights organizations often have the benefits of proximity to crisis-affected populations and established trust and credibility within target communities, they often lack the financial resources to bring their pre-existing or planned initiatives to scale. Participants in our study emphasized the need for dedicated funding for gender-transformative programming, and for the funding to be made more accessible to local women’s rights organizations and self-led groups.

Study participants identified a number of funding-related barriers that need to be addressed in order for localization efforts to deliver on gender-transformative change. These include the bureaucratic and technical complexity of bidding processes, and inflexibility in relation to forward financing of contracts and allowing partners to adequately recover their costs. At the same time, participants explained how they have been prevented from pursuing their own gender equality priorities by funding restrictions that limit them to implementing what was conceived and decided by others.

“We are restricted due to donor policies that do not allow simple community-based organizations to operate in camps. Then, you also have the Office of the

Prime Minister who wants to see financial viability, the outreach you have and your logistical capacity.”

(Female, Uganda, FGD, Connectors, Women’s rights organization)

“Some organizations...there are many difficulties with them. They have detailed conditions, they interfere in the course of action...and especially local representatives, or some governmental institutions that are funded by international actors. There was obstruction, bureaucracy, control, all these reasons have led us to refuse some funds.”

(Female, Jordan, KII, Connector, Women’s rights organization)

Bidding processes are made further inaccessible by calls for proposals that are only issued in English. This communications choice fuels perceptions of favouritism towards established and larger women’s rights organizations and the undue influence of key individuals within them.

Humanitarian agencies and donors could facilitate a more inclusive bidding process by eliminating unnecessary paperwork and restrictions and issuing calls for proposals and proposal development support in local languages. They can also offer actionable feedback to local women’s rights organizations on unsuccessful proposals, increasing the opportunities for these groups to implement learning and have a higher chance of success the next time around.

“I want to make some recommendations and demands for the international cooperation agencies that support this work. The projects to be developed should have more clarity. The questions that are asked in the calls for proposals are very difficult. At the same time, it is very difficult for women to be able to apply for such calls. We also want them to notify us when the proposals are accepted or rejected and if they are rejected, we want to know why. We want to have another stage where the proposals can be improved. You do not need an expert. Sometimes experts have a title, but they do not have the knowledge. Take into account the empirical knowledge that the women leaders in the territory already possess.”

(Female, Colombia, PV1, Connector, Women’s rights organization)

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Longer-term funding to women's rights organizations that also permits the resourcing of interrelated projects is also necessary. The representative of a peer-support group for Rohingya people in Bangladesh spoke about the limitations of a humanitarian funding model that is all too often highly project-centred, resulting in interventions that fall short of adequately responding to the complex needs of their intended beneficiaries (Female, Bangladesh, video clip).

Longer-term funding is also needed because gender-transformative change takes time. Staff from an INGO in Uganda spoke about the need for longer-term funding because at its heart, transformative change is about changing deeply rooted cultural attitudes and practices:

*"We have some good ideas but there is no money to implement them. Without resources you cannot succeed. And not with these short-time resources. Gender equality is a process, it takes time; there are behavioural changes needed. Culture is like a leech sticking to the body, you cannot simply pull it off, you must cut out the piece of flesh to get it out. It is in this way you get transformative change of gender justice within the communities."*

(Female, Uganda, KII, Humanitarian Actor)

### 3.3.3 Coordination



*Colombian women practicing the use of video equipment before filming.*

Photo credit: UN Women/Fernanda Baumhardt-Grojean

Localization efforts that are truly inclusive and that leverage the mobilizing power and grounded knowledge of women's organizations require a more flexible and sustainable approach to programme financing. The needed approach must enable local women's rights organizations to pilot and implement their own gender-transformative solutions in humanitarian settings. Funding these initiatives needs to be in accordance with their expressed needs and priorities even if they are highly context-specific and may fall outside the conventional funding windows of humanitarian donors.

For instance, this research found that funding requests from local women's rights organizations may include the purchase of a motorboat for an Afro-Colombian ethnic-territorial entity to reach remote communities with live-saving and gender-responsive support, or the provision of adequate office and meeting space for a growing Rohingya women's self-led group or a women's shelter to provide dignified and safe space for displaced women. All of these requests, if properly funded, could substantially contribute to gender-transformative change as envisioned by the local women's rights organizations.

Sector or cluster meetings aim to bring national and local responders, including government departments, United Nations agencies and INGO and NGO actors, together in a single coordinated response addressing a specific prioritized area of intervention (e.g., water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH), shelter, health etc.). These meetings could be leveraged to increase the participation of local women's organizations and co-develop workplans with affected communities. Yet all too often, organizations of crisis-affected people are excluded from spaces of coordination and especially so for women's organizations. The 2019 IASC Accountability Framework Report (IASC 2020), for example, cites that only 56 per cent of the reporting countries held consultations with local women's organizations in their strategic response planning processes.

“People (the international cooperation) stay in the theory while the practice is different. They do not sit down to coordinate with the people who do know. They pick a third party, someone with a white tie, someone who speaks nicely, a professional. A person who does not have any clue what the life in the [affected] communities is like.”

(Female, Colombia, PV2, Affected Community)

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“It is very difficult for them [refugees] to come to the [sexual and gender-based violence] meetings and the meeting is in English (...) [It is also about] follow-up to make sure there are Syrians at the table. It’s mind blowing – because we are talking about them in the meeting and we see them outside the window passing by and they are not in the meeting.”

(Female, Jordan, KII, Syrian Refugee)

By excluding these groups from coordination mechanisms, the humanitarian response misses a key opportunity to learn from the first-hand experiences of affected communities. Concerted measures are required to facilitate their inclusion and leverage opportunities to develop a more effective response. For example, new seats could be made available for local representatives at coordination meetings and roundtables.

“There is a chain of communication. What is happening in the field, I know as a coordinator [in the camp]. Then I have to follow the chain that my supervisor, she knows from me so she is participating in the meeting [Sexual and Gender-Based Violence Working Group] so she can explain what is happening in the field. But if there is a field representation that could be more effective.”

(Female, Bangladesh, KII, Humanitarian Actor)

Initiatives to broaden the membership of coordination mechanisms will also likely require additional accommodations to be made to ensure that all people are able to participate in meaningful ways. In Cox’s Bazar, Bangladesh, for example, the imams who we interviewed reported that despite their active leadership in the prevention of early marriage, they did not participate in coordination meetings due to language barriers and for understanding the aim of the meeting to be “coordination among implementers”. In this case, barriers can be removed through ensuring the presence of translators and extending opportunities for all members of the coordination group to contribute to setting the meeting’s agenda. Additional measures may also be needed to ensure that travel time and costs do not prove to be a barrier to the participation of local women’s organizations.

It is not uncommon for gender-specific concerns to be outsourced to coordination bodies focused on protection and prevention and response to sexual and gender-based violence. To be sure, these focused spaces are critical for generating learning and momentum around gendered issues that are otherwise easily deprioritized. Yet it is also important for other coordination spaces to approach gender equality as a specific and related goal, and to engage with local actors whose work may cut across various topics typically siloed in formal humanitarian response programming. The contributions of local women’s

rights organizations and affected people themselves in these coordination spaces can be invaluable for effective localization, but humanitarian actors need to adapt their ways of working on coordination to make space and foster a conducive environment for them to engage meaningfully.

Ensuring the presence of local women's rights organizations in coordination bodies and their meaningful participation therein is also important for supporting the sustainability of women's leadership over time. In the Chocó Department of Colombia, local coordination teams are important mechanisms for facilitating localization. Members of women's rights organizations have fought to form part of these teams, recognizing that their involvement is key not only to ensure that their particular concerns and needs are represented, but that they have a lasting seat at the table.

"I can't contribute to the whole spectrum of issues, because there are more than 10 work areas, there are the topics of children, gender, violence and food security. You can't manage all issues, but in the meetings, you learn about the topic. On gender, we do feel that we have strength. We have been building our capacity within the network. (...) (Although) this space I won it by fighting. In that coordination space there were no local organizations from Chocó. In that space, I said, that there should be organizations from Chocó, because one day the international cooperation will leave. So they started to invite implementing partners of the agencies, and among them I [participated]. Not fighting, but yes energetically. At one moment the [international cooperation] will leave from here. We need to stay with learning of what this [humanitarian action] is all about."

(Female, Colombia, KII, Connector, Women's rights organization)

"We want to see the international cooperation articulating plans, programmes and processes to work with the local institutions. Why? Because there is a lot of turnover in the [international and national] positions that deal with attention to women victims of violence and that's where due to lack of knowledge, lack of training or simply a lack of sensibility from officers, women are sometimes re-victimized."

(Female, Colombia, PV1, Connector, Women's rights organization)

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## 3.4

# ENTRY POINTS FOR LOCALIZATION EFFORTS THAT INCLUDE WOMEN

Our research found that efforts to localize humanitarian response often do not extend adequately enough into crisis-affected communities. Yet we also identified key entry points to correct what is, in

our view, a costly oversight on the part of humanitarian agencies and donors. These include three local actors: connectors; self-led groups; and young female volunteers.

### 3.4.1

#### Connectors

Key among these are the strategic resource persons or “connectors” that exist in all emergency contexts – one of the main findings of this study. These connectors include community and religious leaders who are associated with a diverse array of bottom-up initiatives, peer-support groups and neighbourhood service provision. While they often assume the responsibilities and roles of local responders, their strategic contributions to response

efforts are often trivialized and overlooked, and as a result, their capacities to connect affected communities to broader response efforts remain underutilized. This study uncovered that the potential which these connectors hold for gender-transformative change is crucial yet rarely acknowledged and acted upon by humanitarians, and they often comprise an additional invisible layer of the implementation of the localization agenda.

Rohingya Hindu midwives, for example, reported that they have few interactions with humanitarian responders and do not receive any emergency-related funds. Yet their reach into crisis-affected households is significant. In addition to assisting with births, they provide referral services around sexual and reproductive health and disseminate information about intimate partner violence and healthy adolescent relationships. Connectors in the Yumbe district of Uganda include local female legislators and members of the women’s caucus. In their work advancing the implementation of the district gender policy, they also address key humanitarian priorities, including menstrual hygiene management and prevention of adolescent pregnancy. And in Cox’s Bazar, imams are leveraging local legislation that sets the minimum legal age for marriage at 18 years for girls and 21 for boys to prevent child marriage and advance gender equality, which they consider in line with the teaching of the Qur’an and eventually benefiting the whole community. None of these key community actors, however, have been consulted or involved in formalized humanitarian response efforts.

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Humanitarian agencies and donors who are interested in partnering with local connectors to advance the localization agenda from a gender-transformative perspective can conceptualize their work as generating three types of key connections or linkages:

- Horizontal linkages: Connectors have strong relationships with their peers and affected community members. They have the capacity to mobilize crisis-affected women, including those in situations of heightened vulnerability. These horizontal linkages can be leveraged to promote peer learning, solidarity, awareness-raising and the exchange of information.
- Vertical linkages: Connectors can serve as bridges between national and international humanitarian actors, or their implementing partners, and crisis-affected people. This pathway is important for funneling the voices of affected communities upward, into key decision-making spaces.
- Nexus linkages: Connectors often have existing relationships with local government and other actors concerned not only with emergency response, but also with development and peacebuilding. They thus provide an entry point for humanitarian response that is embedded in efforts to ensure sustainable solutions that endure once emergency responders have left.

### 3.4.2

## Community-based women's organizations

Community-based women's organizations, including women's self-led groups, often also assume roles as responders in humanitarian emergencies, even while activities to this end are not typically included in their mission statements. In Colombia, for example, women's rights organizations and ethnic-territorial entities provide critical support to isolated and conflict-affected communities. When we asked them whether they

consider themselves to be humanitarian actors, they responded affirmatively.

“Yes. We are a humanitarian actor because generally women are the ones who first go out to offer our services in tragedies, in disasters, in displacements, during attacks. We are always the first ones to leave. Sometimes to move elderly or children from one place to another. Or provide them with food. We also take from our own resources to bring relief to women, which arrive well before institutional support. Because institutional relief is very bureaucratic and takes too long to arrive. Either we take from our own resources or send the SOS to our supporters. When there is flooding, or in 1997, we from the ‘Red [RDMC]’, or network, were the first ones to arrive on site at the Acandí massacre. We chartered a plane, took blankets and food there. We had five women's organizations there, who were the ones that were under attack. Then when things take longer [are protracted] and the humanitarian situation persists, we seek support in the National (Women's) Network, we seek help in the Red Cross. Also, we have international friends, we write to them and they send things. When there is flooding, we ask them to send so many boxes of sanitary napkins or we buy them.”

(Female, Colombia, KII, Connector, Women's rights organization)



Colombian women, members of diverse local women's rights organizations, gather to plan the storyboard of their participatory video. Quibdó, Colombia.

Photo credit: UN Women/María Fernanda Novelo Duarte

“We respond by putting on our vests, we prepare and go. When we can go, we go. When the violence is very strong, we do not go. We wait for them (displaced women and men) here, but we are in contact [with them]. We are calling, we know what is going on. Then, when they arrive here [in the town of Quibdó], we receive them in the river and we search for accommodation and a place to stay. When we have to go to the communities to bring them here to the city, that is when we run into problems. In one of the ‘rápidas’ [motorboats] it takes an hour, but for us it takes a whole day to get there. And when we return, the sun sets down, but we are doing what we like to do. We are sharing, we are helping those in need, all the women whom we need alive.”  
(Female, Colombia, Video Clip)

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Formal acknowledgement of these groups as humanitarian actors is a key step in deepening the reach of a localized and effective humanitarian response. So, too, is the development of new pathways for responsively financing their activities, especially given how quickly they are able to mobilize to respond to emergencies.

Self-led groups are usually composed of and directed by women facing a particular vulnerability or set of vulnerabilities and working collectively to overcome them. In crisis settings, these groups provide spaces for affected women to voice their concerns and build the solidarity, skills and social networks required to take action within their communities. While the priorities set and activities carried out by self-led groups may not fit within conventional “life-saving” or humanitarian categories, they often contribute to elevating the social, political and economic position of women and girls within their communities, thus advancing gender equality.

“We created a group called ‘Eve.’ We are all women. Eve, it means women. It is an informal group of people in the camp [...] I used to work with men who would do everything and say to us women: ‘just sit down and relax because you are a girl.’ They [the men] think they are being nice and they would do all the work. I thought, I will make another team [group] and we will do the work as women.”

(Female, Jordan, KII, Youth Activist/Volunteer)

“For us as a group, we have never stepped down from what we are doing, we have a responsibility to help others. I am helping and advising others like with the song about early marriage so our young girls should not marry. We move as a group to support other families and other women.”

(Female, Uganda, FGD, Refugee, Widows’ Group)

“[Our group] started to prevent [gender-based violence] in the community. We also involved ourselves in raising awareness about violence in families.”

(Female, Uganda, FGD, Refugee, Village Savings and Loan Association)

Unfortunately, self-led groups tend to be overlooked by larger humanitarian agencies and donors when it comes to partnerships and resourcing. While these groups may lack the organizational capacity and/or interest to become formalized humanitarian actors, self-led groups have much to offer in the advancement of a gender-transformative agenda and should be acknowledged and supported (financially and otherwise).

“That group that was made by themselves, from their own voices, own rights, own voice... they need help, they need support from the NGOs [and humanitarians].”

(Female, Bangladesh, Video Clip, Connector)

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“We work when we get some money. We raise the money here with iftar for kids here in the camp, we do that with schools [...] We don’t ask the organizations [humanitarian actors] for anything. [...] We have videos

of what we do and we post them in Facebook – one of them has 30,000 views.”

(Female, Jordan, KII, Youth Activist/Volunteer)

“For our team [self-led group], we have many projects, many new ideas, many things we want to do in the camp, to change this camp and make it more pink but we couldn’t have enough money for that, because we are students, most of us in the university, we couldn’t work to get our own money to help with it. And it just stayed as plan on papers, so we want someone to support us to make Eve team something universal, that everyone knows. And to have its touch not just in Za’atari camp, but on the whole world.”

(Female, Jordan, Video Clip, Youth Activist/Volunteer)

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Humanitarian agencies and donors should support self-led groups as key stakeholders in the localization agenda. Given their unusual organizational characteristics and lack of resources, self-led groups can struggle to implement their plans on a broader scale. Yet humanitarian agencies and donors could support these

groups through capacity-building support and access to reasonably-sized pots of funds that would allow them to implement their own gender-transformative pilot programmes. The learning generated through these programmes could then be leveraged for larger, partnership-based initiatives that reach more people.

### 3.4.3

## Young female volunteers

This research finds that strategic attention and investment in volunteering structures holds significant potential for gender-transformative localization. Young female volunteers, in particular, emerged as local actors who are already contributing to humanitarian response efforts and initiatives to promote gender equality in their communities.

“After supporting my family, I love supporting the people here, helping them with their problems, I really started to feel like I’m really a good human because I’m making a change and I also started to prove myself. I’m the youngest person in the organization where I work [volunteer].”

(Female, Jordan, KII, Youth Activist/Volunteer)

“They [affected young women and men who are HIV-positive] sensitize the community about the dangers to prevent and for those who are positive to go for care. They contribute to the HIV response. They become mobilizers and then they work in coordination. They were not leaders before.”

(Female, Uganda, FGD, Connector, Yumbe Gender-Based Violence Network)

When young female volunteers take proactive and visible roles in their communities, they also contribute to shifting restrictive gender norms in their households

and communities. These kinds of engagements, at such a young age, lay the groundwork for women’s leadership later in life. Through volunteer engagements, young women develop the skills and relationships needed to assume decision-making roles and run for elective office.



*Syrian refugee women gather to plan the storyboard for their participatory video. Za’atari Camp, Jordan.*

Photo credit: UN Women/Dr. Angélica Cabezas Pino

“They didn’t respect me when I used to go to people’s houses before. But now, whenever I go to their house, they say: ‘She works in an NGO. She is not here to do bad things. She is here to do good things.’ They respect me by saying that.”

(Female, Bangladesh, PV2, Shanti Khana)

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“It makes my parents proud of me and now I really want to work more and more, that’s why I want to

study International Relations to work with these [humanitarian] organizations.”

(Female, Jordan, KII, Youth Activist/Volunteer)

“People didn’t know me before, but now because of my work (as volunteer), they recognize me. Before, when I used to go out, people said ‘Who knows where she might be going?’, but now they say: “She is going to work, no need to tell her anything.”

(Female, Bangladesh, PV2, Shanti Khana)

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At the same time, however, transgressing social expectations can expose young female volunteers to resistance and backlash from those who oppose their heightened visibility and power. Young and unmarried Rohingya women, for example, spoke about being the subject of malicious gossip and public harassment that have significant social consequences, among them the diminished prospect of marriage. They were the targets of street harassment that included insults,

tearing of the veil and physical violence including sexual violence.

Humanitarian agencies can play a role in supporting young female volunteers by formally acknowledging their contributions within crisis-affected communities. They can also provide them with the necessary resources to ensure their safety, such as funding for safe transportation, and connections to established agencies where they can build supportive relationships.

# CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR GENDER- TRANSFORMATIVE LOCALIZATION

There are many different roles that women's rights organizations and self-led groups can assume in humanitarian localization efforts. These include but also go beyond serving as implementing partners to participating in the monitoring of effective and efficient use of funds and building coalitions and networks of local actors to catalyse community mobilization efforts. Yet all too often, efforts to localize humanitarian responses often do not adequately extend into crisis-affected communities. This is a missed opportunity not only to

advance a more comprehensive and effective humanitarian response, but also to promote gender equality in crisis-affected communities.

Effective and gender-transformative localization depends on the capacity of national and local responders to engage with affected communities in inclusive and participatory ways. This is an area where localization and participation consistently overlap and can contribute to gender-transformative change in humanitarian settings.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

**Humanitarian organizations can implement a gender-transformative approach to participation in the following ways:**

1. Formally recognize women's rights organizations, self-led groups and young female volunteers as key humanitarian responders, and acknowledge their contributions to broader emergency response efforts.
2. Broaden partnership guidelines to include a more diversified catchment of implementation partners and reduce barriers to funding by ensuring that calls for proposals are published in local languages, and that support for proposal development is also offered.
3. Increase direct and flexible funding to women's rights organizations and self-led groups of crisis-affected women and eliminate unnecessarily burdensome operational and reporting requirements to enable them to pursue their own agendas and work on their own terms.
4. Seize the gender-transformative potential of connectors, consistently engaging them and supporting their work through funding and recognition of their work.
5. Proactively make space and generate a conducive environment to enable local-level women's rights organizations and self-led groups to participate in coordination bodies that oversee cluster/sector areas that may not have an explicit gender-related mandate.

# STORY OF GENDER- TRANSFORMATIVE CHANGE 3: WOMEN FIND POWER IN COLLECTIVE ACTION

In Colombia, gender relations shift as diverse groups of women and men collaborate for better futures in their communities



*Colombian women after finishing filming the footage for their participatory video. Quibdó, Colombia.*

Photo credit: UN Women/Fernanda Baumhardt-Grojean

In the isolated Chocó Department, a long history of armed conflict has meant that many women and their families have had to grapple with the devastating effects of ongoing violence in their communities and households. In the face of this, women report that community-led peacebuilding efforts have created

opportunities for them to exercise leadership. Diverse groups of women are finding pathways to leadership, too, because of campaigns for gender quotas and multicultural leadership bodies. These efforts to ensure that the leadership of multi-ethnic territories reflects their constituents is a positive development in this region.

“The biggest satisfaction that I have in my social and political life is the creation of the Secretary for Women in Quibdó and today’s advancements to have a Departmental Secretary for Women in Chocó. All of my leadership and articulation with women’s organizations has granted me national and international recognition. This is why I am committed to continue working for women’s rights in Chocó and to participate in different decision-making spaces to communicate our thoughts, our feelings and our realities in order to contribute to the transformation that our territory needs.”  
(Female, Colombia, PV1, Affected Woman)

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The commonly held goal of restoring peace in their communities has also brought women and men together. Frank discussions about the need

to share in decision-making and about the harm caused by machismo are shifting gender relations in positive ways.



Colombian women discuss the content of their participatory video. Quibdó, Colombia.

Photo credit: UN Women/Fernanda Baumhardt-Grojean

“The work that we do has changed the ‘machismo’ that was found in the areas where Cocomacia” works. [...] The men have learned to share, they have learned to respect and the best part is that they have learned to communicate with the women. [...] Before, the men would keep the money in their pockets even though we (men and women) would both work. [...] The man would keep the money and we would have to ask: ‘Please give me 2,000 pesos’ and he would ask: ‘Why? What are you going to buy with it?’ Nowadays, this doesn’t happen anymore. The women keep the money themselves. We now sit down together at the table and say: ‘this is how much we’ve got, we will do this and that with this amount, this is yours and this is mine.’ Right?”  
(Female, Colombia, Video Clip, Connector)

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Gender-transformative change is taking particular hold in Colombia with boys and male adolescents as Colombian ‘lideresas’ or female leaders are directing some of their transformative work towards their sons and young male relatives. Boys and male adolescents, who are growing up in the midst of protracted conflict in predominantly female-headed households, actively engage in household chores as a key characteristic of their understanding of new masculinities.



*Male Afro-Colombian adolescents participate in a focus group discussion. Quibdó, Colombia.*

Photo credit: UN Women/María Fernanda Novelo Duarte

“I am a mother of a 7-year-old boy. This is also a challenge. How can I, from my experience and empowerment, transform him into a man who will clearly know how to be in favour of gender equality in the future? I want him to know how he can contribute to the kind of more equal society that we so badly need. I want him to understand that being a man does not limit him from doing certain things that our society has dictated are only meant for women.”

(Female, Colombia, PV1, Connector)

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11 In its 2019 report to the United Nation Human Rights Council, the independent international fact-finding mission on Myanmar found that the “circumstances and context of the ‘clearance operations’ against the Rohingya that began on 25 August 2017 gave rise to an inference of genocidal intent” (HRC 2019). In his statement to the Human Rights

# STORY OF GENDER- TRANSFORMATIVE CHANGE 4: COMMUNITY ATTITUDES SHIFT AS WOMEN EARN AN INCOME

In Za'atari refugee camp in Jordan, women from the Syrian Arab Republic assume new roles as economic providers.



*A Syrian refugee woman being filmed for a video clip discussing her experiences of gender-transformative change. Amman, Jordan.*

Photo credit: UN Women/Dr. Angélica Cabezas Pino

Before being displaced, the gender division of labour for many of the Syrian families who today live in Za'atari refugee camp was strict. Men were idealized as the sole economic providers, while women were assigned complementary roles within households where they assumed responsibility for

unpaid care and domestic work. Displacement has destabilized these roles. The collectively recognized need for economic resources in many camp households, for example, has weakened the “culture of shame” associated with women’s paid work outside the home.

“During the war, women used to go out to visit our relatives but we didn’t work outside the house. After the war, we came to Jordan as refugees. We started to depend on ourselves, because the men cannot find jobs easily here. [...] I told my husband: we have to work together, it’s necessary to work together.”

(Female, Jordan, Video Clip, Syrian Refugee)

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Humanitarian programming also plays a role. Many economic empowerment programmes proactively target women for participation in rotational income-generation projects, which offer women new opportunities to support their families. Today, some women report that they enjoy “being appreciated” by other women in the camp, and that they encounter less surveillance by their neighbours than they did at home in the Syrian Arab Republic.



*A Syrian refugee woman displaying her sewing skills using a sewing machine. Amman, Jordan.*

Photo credit: UN Women/Dr. Angélica Cabezas Pino

“Syrian women did not use to go out of the house, they considered it shameful. But it became normal now, because families started to grow. Life requires women to go out. Because under these circumstances, a man cannot handle all the needs of a family by himself. It is necessary to collaborate to secure all the needs of the household and children.”

(Female, Jordan, Video Clip, Refugee)

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Such transitions are not always easy for men, however, who may feel as though their own purpose and standing in the households and communities has been upended (see Box, 6 Men as providers?) and may experience depression or lash

out at their female family and community members. Humanitarian agencies should work to minimize these harmful unintended consequences by seeking the equal participation of women and men in the design and delivery of their programming.

*“When I started working, my whole life changed. I started a different kind of routine. I started waking up early and going to work in a good mood. [...] I have gained a lot of intellectual skills. Now, I can balance work and my family.”*

(Female, Jordan, PV1, Syrian Refugee)

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In the meantime, women’s involvement in income-generation activities is already fueling gender-transformative change through the

broadening of acceptable gender roles among refugees inside Za’atari as well as those living outside the camp with the host community.

*“I proved myself. I proved that I exist in life. I could improve my life and my daughter’s life. I worked. I worked hard. Now, I am the master of my own life. I can get what I want for my house. I have improved my circumstances a lot.”*

(Female, Jordan, PV1, Syrian Refugee)

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# CONCLUSION.

## TOWARDS A GENDER-TRANSFORMATIVE HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE

This study has explored experiences of gender-transformative change in diverse refugee and IDP settings in Bangladesh, Colombia, Jordan and Uganda. The rich narratives of affected people of different genders and across different stages of the life cycle confirm that humanitarian crises can both exacerbate pre-existing gender inequalities, discrimination and gender-based violence and at the same time disrupt harmful gender norms, weaken gender stereotypes and shift practices of domination. Crises can therefore generate opportunities for humanitarians to capitalize on changes in power relations and disruptions to gender inequalities taking place on the ground, but also within the humanitarian system to advance gender-transformative change that is sustainable, thus moving towards gender-transformative humanitarian action.

Gender-transformative humanitarian action cannot be conceived of in isolation. This research made clear that in the context of the Grand Bargain, participation, localization and gender-transformative change are deeply intertwined, and that all three are required for a more effective, efficient and sustainable humanitarian response, a response that contributes to gender equality and has a demonstrable impact on the lives of affected people, leading to durable solutions and resilience.

Gender-transformative humanitarian action is about continuous and accountable support uplifting those at the receiving end of power inequalities. It requires that humanitarian actors operate under new ways of working to proactively take measures, including joint planning, that transcend project-centred approaches to advance gender equality. This approach to humanitarian action also requires that actors make use of participatory and inclusive ways of engaging with affected populations, particularly women and girls, and that they develop a habit of accurately identifying opportunities for

gender-transformative change that are rooted in the specific contexts and reflect group particularities.

Despite the Grand Bargain being largely gender-blind, its focus on participation and localization offers key entry points for signatories to integrate a gender-transformative agenda into their emergency response efforts. Indeed, women are already on the front lines of crisis response in places across the globe, ensuring that the most isolated and those in conditions of heightened vulnerability in their communities have access to life-saving resources and support. Moreover, they are making the most of dire situations by catapulting themselves into positions of leadership from which they can advance longer-term development and peacebuilding agendas.

The question of “Who holds the microphone?” and later on “Passing on the microphone” served as useful metaphors to generate space to uncover key aspects that will have to be tackled by gender-transformative humanitarian action that aims to enhance meaningful participation and effective

localization. These aspects include identifying who speaks, in what formats, on what topics and with whose priorities, and can lead to efforts to shift decision-making power and resources towards national and local actors in ways that proactively enables women's rights organizations, self-led women's groups and "connectors" to voice their concerns and priorities as well as meaningfully engage and contribute to humanitarian response efforts on their own terms.



*A Colombian participant smiling.*

Photo credit: UN Women/Fernanda Baumhardt-Grojean

## RECOMMENDATIONS

**The voices and experiences of crisis-affected women in Bangladesh, Colombia, Jordan and Uganda drove the findings of this report and informed the following recommendations for Grand Bargain signatories to adopt a gender-transformative agenda:**

1. Engage in two-way dialogue with women and men, in equal measure, in the deployment of conventional mechanisms for participation such as data collection, consultations and feedback mechanisms on a diverse array of issues including those perceived to fall "outside" the humanitarian realm.
2. Deploy an approach to participation that moves beyond "inviting" and "encouraging" affected communities to engage. Instead, adapt and generate the spaces for them to truly influence meeting formats, topics discussed, agendas and workflows.
3. Acknowledge and adequately support existing and emerging women's leadership, ensuring not only that meetings are the right size and format to be conducive to their participation but also that they have the resources to organize themselves around their priorities.
4. Identify and financially support the priorities and solutions of self-led groups of affected women and enable them to influence meeting agendas and priority-setting.
5. Amplify affected women's voices by bringing women's networks, alliances and campaigns into spaces of influence to shape the decisions that affect their lives, and by connecting them to national gender equality campaigns, equality policies or the women, peace and security agenda.
6. Formally recognize women's rights organizations, self-led groups and young female volunteers as key humanitarian responders and acknowledge their contributions to broader emergency response efforts.
7. Broaden partnership guidelines to include a more diversified catchment of implementing partners and reduce barriers to funding by ensuring that calls for proposals are published in local languages, and that support for proposal development is also offered.
8. Increase direct and flexible funding to women's rights organizations and self-led groups of crisis-affected women and eliminate unnecessarily burdensome operational and reporting requirements to enable them to pursue their own agendas and work on their own terms.
9. Seize the gender-transformative potential of connectors, engaging them consistently and supporting their work through funding and recognition of their work.
10. Proactively make space and generate a conducive environment to enable local-level women's rights organizations and self-led groups to participate in coordination bodies that oversee cluster/sector areas that may not have an explicit gender-related mandate.

# ANNEX I. EXTENDED LIST OF VIDEO MATERIALS

## PARTICIPATORY VIDEOS



### Colombia, Quibdó

Title of PV1: **Stories of gender-transformative change**

Participants: Chocó Department Women's Network

Location: *Old convent Quibó, Antiguo Convento*



Title of PV2: **Women from rivers, weavers of peace**

Participants: Affected women with different affiliations to women's rights organizations, gender interest organizations, in particular gender sections within ethnic-traditional authorities.

Location: *Meeting space, Casa de Encuentro*



### Uganda, Bidibidi camp

Title of PV1: **South Sudanese women have a voice**

Participants: South Sudanese refugee women

Location: *Tuajiji Hope Primary School*



Title of PV2: **Is the world listening to the voices of women from Yumbe District?**

Participants: Ugandan host community women

Location: *Alaba Primary School*

## Bangladesh, Cox's Bazar

Title of PV1: **Shanti Mohila (Peace Women): This is our story**

Participants: Members of Shanti Mohila

Location: *UN Women Multipurpose Centre*



Title of PV2: **Shanti Khana (Peace Centre)**

Participants: Members of Shanti Khana

Location: *Community Women's Healing Centre*



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## Jordan, Za'atari camp

Title of PV1: **Woman is the spirit of life**

Participants: Syrian women refugees participating in cash-for-work programming

Location: *UN Women Oasis Centre*



Title of PV2: **What we dream of**

Participants: Syrian refugee women

Location: *UN Women Oasis Centre*



## VIDEO CLIPS



### Colombia, Quibdó

1. Female member of the Gender Commission of Consejo Comunitario Mayor de la Asociación Campesina Integral del Atrato, COCOMACIA (Afro-Colombian ethnic-territorial authority)



2. Three indigenous women, Indigenous Table of Chocó



3. Transgender woman activist from Fundación Johana Maturana working on LGBTI rights



### Uganda, Bidibidi camp

1. Chairperson of the Women's Caucus and District Speaker, Yumbe District Local Government



2. South Sudanese refugee woman, Welfare Refugee Committee community leader, Bidibidi settlement



### Bangladesh, Cox's Bazar

1. Two imams (male) from Camp 3 Kutupalong, Cox's Bazar working on preventing child marriage



2. Executive Director of Rohingya Women Welfare Society (RWWS) and creator of Peace Centre (Shanti Khana). Rohingya woman promoting mental health well-being for fellow Rohingya women living in the camp



#### **Jordan, Za'atari camp**

1. Two young women, members of Eve, a self-organized group of activists. Young women Syrian refugees, Za'atari Camp



2. Bothina Mefleh Al-Darweesh, Syrian refugee woman living with her family in the host community of Mwagar, East Amman

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**UN WOMEN IS THE UN ORGANIZATION  
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GLOBAL CHAMPION FOR WOMEN AND  
GIRLS, UN WOMEN WAS ESTABLISHED  
TO ACCELERATE PROGRESS ON  
MEETING THEIR NEEDS WORLDWIDE.**

UN Women supports UN Member States as they set global standards for achieving gender equality, and works with governments and civil society to design laws, policies, programmes and services needed to ensure that the standards are effectively implemented and truly benefit women and girls worldwide. It works globally to make the vision of the Sustainable Development Goals a reality for women and girls and stands behind women's equal participation in all aspects of life, focusing on four strategic priorities: Women lead, participate in and benefit equally from governance systems; Women have income security, decent work and economic autonomy; All women and girls live a life free from all forms of violence; Women and girls contribute to and have greater influence in building sustainable peace and resilience, and benefit equally from the prevention of natural disasters and conflicts and humanitarian action. UN Women also coordinates and promotes the UN system's work in advancing gender equality.



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