



Perspective

Preventing violence against women and girls in refugee and displaced person camps: Is energy access the solution?

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ABSTRACT

In humanitarian crises, experiences of sexual and gender-based violence, primarily experienced by women and girls, are known to increase and intensify. There are current humanitarian crises across several regions of the world, and as many as 65 million displaced people. As such, there is an ongoing need to consider the role of energy interventions in addressing gendered violence in emergency contexts. Here I argue that although international humanitarian actors may advocate for them, technological energy interventions, including lighting, improved cookstoves and the provision of firewood, cannot prevent or solve the problem of violence against women or girls. By bringing the existing literature on energy interventions into conversation with the emerging literature on causes and prevention of sexual and gender-based violence, I highlight the limitations of a technical, universal intervention to gender-based violence in complex and traumatised social settings, each with their own local dynamics and gendered norms. Moreover, advocacy for such technical solutions makes both the particularity of gender in different sociocultural contexts, and other possible responses, invisible. Indeed, local contexts, and local responses must be considered the starting point for responding to gender-based violence, in which engaging with energy practices is at most one approach to prevent violence by engaging the broader context of trauma, poverty and gender in which it occurs.

1. Introduction

Humanitarian emergencies, developing from conflict and other disasters, are at present occurring in several regions of the world, including Europe, North Africa and the Middle East, Sub-Saharan Africa, and South Asia [1,2]. The UN Refugee Agency estimates there are currently more than 65 million displaced persons worldwide as a result of these emergencies [1]. It is well established that the intensity and prevalence of gendered violence increases in emergency settings, and present crises therefore indicate the ongoing need to consider the role of energy in preventing such violence. My purpose here is to re-examine this role of energy from a feminist framework, by bringing the literature on energy, refugee settings and gendered violence into conversation with the broader literature on women, sexual and gender-based violence and emergencies, and the emerging literature on the causes and prevention of men's violence against women and girls.

1.1. A note on terminology and focus

Humanitarian emergencies can be broadly understood as times of intense disruption and hardship, in which a group of people's

immediate human needs, including food, shelter, and water, become compromised or are unable to be met, and can require humanitarian relief or aid. Emergencies can occur in a number of forms and from different causes, including natural, technological, conflict causes, can be complex, rapid or slow, or 'permanent' in the case of on-going poverty in deprivation [3]. That's to say, emergencies may occur as conflict or genocide, political events and disruption, or as a result of a tsunami or famine, which are natural emergencies. The existing literature on energy as a solution to gender-based violence in emergencies has largely focused on fuels and stoves in refugee camp settings in Sub-Saharan Africa [4–9], in addition to several studies examining other contexts, including Bhutanese refugee camps in Nepal in comparison with Africa [10], and lighting interventions in camps for people displaced by the 2010 earthquake in Haiti [11]. As such, I focus my analysis of the potential role of energy for preventing gender-based violence specifically in the context of emergency responses in camps for refugees or displaced persons.

While the term gender is used in a variety of ways, including to denote sexual difference between male and female bodies, although this use is not without significant critique [12], I employ it as an analytical tool to unpack and understand social relations. Gender is therefore

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understood here as a set of meanings associated with bodies and identity, constituted through social practices, and which structure social relations, often unequally [13]. Moreover, I understand gender to be dynamic, and to operate differently in different cultural contexts and places.

Gender-based violence can be defined as “any form of violence used to establish, enforce or perpetuate gender inequalities and keep in place unequal gender-power relations” [14]. Violence against women and girls is one form of gendered violence, specifically directed against women and girls as a result of the performance of their gender, or expectations of their gendered role in society, and with the intention of subjugating women. However, the two terms are not interchangeable, as gender-based violence includes other kinds of violence which may be directed toward people as a result of their gender or sexual diversity, or masculinity.

Gender-based violence takes many forms, not only those that are physical, and can include psychological, reproductive, verbal and economic coercion, abuse and harassment [15]. It is also important to note that an individual’s experience of gendered violence, and more broadly, gender inequality, is relative, and shaped by other aspects of their identity, including their culture or race, age, or socio-economic position.

I wish to stress at the outset that there is ample evidence to demonstrate that sexual and gender-based violence is overwhelmingly committed by men, against women and girls [14]. It is to emphasise this particular and prevalent pattern of gender-based violence that I use this terminology. Moreover, it must be considered that the literature on energy, emergencies and gender-based violence is almost exclusively based on data on women and girls’ experiences of violence by men, and it is this literature which sets the scope of my critique and discussion. However, I do not use such terms without qualifications, which I will elaborate below.

2. The relationship between violence against women, emergencies and energy

2.1. Gender, violence and emergencies

It has been well-established in academic literature that sexual and gender-based violence overwhelmingly impacts women and girls [14], and intensifies in emergencies [15–17]. Conceptualisations of gender may become amplified, or be challenged, and the policing of gender and subjugation of women with violence is reinforced in a context of other forms of violence and violent practices [3,16]. Indeed, in conflict and post-conflict contexts, women and girls face particular forms of sexual and gender-based violence, and have often been treated as rewards or objects of war [3,15]. Raping and intentionally impregnating women has also been used as practice of ethnic cleansing and genocide, intended to disrupt the cultural lineage of a particular group, or render their women ‘impure’ or spoiled [15]. In natural emergencies, the lack of privacy and security in displaced person camps puts women at increased risk of partner and non-partner violence, as well as trafficking [15].

Gender roles have also been shown to shift in emergencies. In political or conflict contexts, gender roles for women may be challenged by women who become guerrillas [18], or in both natural and complex emergencies, by it becoming more acceptable or necessary for women to take on additional roles or behaviours for survival in conflict or camp settings [19]. On the other hand, men and women have been found to respond differently to the stress, trauma and loss experienced by communities in emergencies, and men may be more likely to act through violence and aggression [17].

Indeed, the reality of gender in conflict is complex and contextual, with some women engaged as combatants in conflicts, while men are particularly vulnerable to death in armed conflict as a result of their gender [18]. Moreover, men may be impacted in other ways, for

example, Ritchie [19] found amongst Somali refugees in Kenya, and Syrian refugees hosted in Jordan, that men were unable to secure work, and subject to greater policing of illegal work respectively, and therefore marginalised from work opportunities. Similarly, Hilhorst et al. [18] note how men and boys, and non-hetero-conforming groups, can be considered of lesser priority by aid and resettlement agencies. It is worth noting that the construction of and focus on women’s victimhood in development and emergency discourse can contribute to this marginalisation and vulnerability, and has implications for gender-based violence. The disruption of masculinities and femininities, or ‘ways of being’ for men and women [14], via threats to gender norms such as men’s roles and identities as breadwinners, or women’s handling of household tasks, not only marginalise men, but also increase the likelihood and prevalence violence against women and girls in emergencies as attempts may be made to re-establish gender roles and norms [17,19].

There is greater risk of violence against women and girls in contexts in which violence is normalised, communities are experiencing stress, trauma and sudden poverty, and gender roles are being challenged. However, while gender is in a state of flux, there is also the possibility to transform gendered norms which support inequalities and enable violence against women and girls. Indeed, the Somali and Syrian women studied by Ritchie [19] expressed a greater sense of confidence, involvement in household decision-making and desire for independence as a result of the necessity of taking on traditionally masculine income-earning and entrepreneurial roles, albeit without the support from and with potential sanctioning by the men in their communities. Thus, the positioning of women as victims of emergencies, should not be assumed, or rather, may be an incomplete picture of the complexity of how gender plays out in crisis settings.

I maintain a focus on violence against women and girls here, but rather than reproduce a narrative of women, as put by Hilhorst et al. [18] “as the primary victims and primarily as victims”, I aim to contextualise and complicate this violence.

2.2. The causes and nature of men’s violence against women and girls

In order to understand the role that energy sources, including fuels and technologies such as cookstoves and lighting, can play in prevention, it is useful to engage with emerging feminist literature on the causes, drivers and prevention of violence against women and girls.

At the heart of the violence against women and girls are gendered social norms and structures which condone and enable violence to be perpetrated against women and girls, that’s to say gender inequality [14,15]. As put by Hughes et al. [15], violence against women and girls:

is both an expression and a reinforcement of unequal relations of power between women and men.

Indeed violence against women and girls, in the majority of lived contexts across the world, is reinforced by social structures and institutions, including that of marriage, and associated practices of dowry and household roles, legal frameworks which do not adequately protect women in cases of violence, and health systems, which may deny or curtail women’s rights to bodily autonomy and sexual and reproductive health services [15].

While the link between gender inequality and patterns of violence is well-established, the reality is complex and locally-specific. Rather, whether and why men, as the primary perpetrators of gender-based violence (including against women, other men and LGBTQ-identifying people), engage in violence has been shown to be varied and context-dependent [14]. Moreover, the structures and institutions enabling such violence are not homogenous, as are the kinds of gendered violence they enable and support, for example sexual violence of partners versus non-partners, or emotional violence [14]. While research in the field has overwhelmingly focused on women’s experiences of violence, there is an emerging body of literature examining the causes behind gendered

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