Gender issues in Sri Lanka

THE AUTHORS
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ABSTRACT
Using the context of Sri Lanka and its displaced population, the authors respond to Mary Diaz’s article ‘Gender and forced migration’. In discussing issues of education, reproductive health, sexual violence, and the role of women, they stress the importance of acknowledging the needs of war-affected women in intervention, in theory and in practice.

OBJECTIVES
The objectives of this paper are to:

• respond to Mary Diaz’s article ‘Gender and forced migration.’
• acknowledge the importance of gender issues when programming in conflict situations
• highlight the need to put theory into practice.

CONTENTS
1. Introduction
2. Education
3. Reproductive health
4. Sexual violence
5. The role of women

1. INTRODUCTION
In this short response we are attempting to contextualize the perspectives presented in Mary Diaz’s article. In doing so we have attempted to amplify on practices and experiences in Sri Lanka.

At a theoretical and an ideal level, the issues identified in the ‘Gender and forced migration’ article by Mary Diaz are relevant and important. The commentators of this paper wish to discuss the applicability of them to conflict situations. It is indeed important to have a gender perspective in intervention programmes for affected and displaced persons. However, one can question how often this is done - either because of lack of knowledge and awareness or lack of time and/or resources during an emergency situation.

In the Sri Lankan context, assistance to persons affected by conflict is provided both by the government and the humanitarian community. There are several issues here. First, the majority of women who are forced to migrate fall into the category of ‘internally displaced persons’ and may not face all the same concerns as ‘refugee’ women. Second, the perspectives found in the assistance programmes of the government of Sri Lanka need to be understood.

The role of the Sri Lankan government in relation to displaced persons finds expression in the delivery of essential services, including food and medicine. Further, assistance packages are available for purposes of resettlement and temporary relocation. In addition, compensation for specific categories of losses are also available in theory. The criterion for assistance is not distinguished by gender but rather by numbers, locations, and circumstances of displacement. However, gender sensitivity in assistance is found primarily in programmes delivered by humanitarian agencies. All the concerns which have been touched upon by Mary Diaz have commonality in respect of issues (not necessarily practice) in Sri Lanka.

2. EDUCATION
A conflict situation and sudden displacement leads to breakdown in infrastructure and services, and as a result conflict areas do not provide the same levels of education as the rest of the country. To that extent, and due to the longevity of the conflict, the impact on education and access to it is substantial. Where possible, international assistance has been forthcoming towards areas of infrastructure, financing for services and teaching materials.
Gender is theoretically not a discriminatory factor at an institutional and policy level, in terms of education. However, it is not often that issues (especially of concern to the girl child) associated with access to education (distance, transportation, environment, values, etc.) are taken into consideration when relocating and resettling families. At family, community, and societal level discrimination against the girl child’s access to education does take place. Economics do define priorities of dropping out and the capacity to access. In comparative terms, male children would fare better in this respect, often regardless of ability. Access to education is tempered by the reality in Sri Lanka of children of both sexes becoming party to the conflict in some parts of the theatres of conflict.

3. REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH

Reproductive and sexual health may not be considered a priority amongst either displaced communities (i.e. those living in welfare centres, camps, etc.) or humanitarian organizations. In the district of Vavuniya there is one non-governmental organization that concentrates exclusively on the issue of reproductive and sexual health. It is telling that of the significant number of organizations working in this district only one (at present) concentrates on reproductive health.

The government has Maternal Health Care Clinics and Children’s Clinics both in areas contiguous to the conflict zones and in war-affected areas. However, the efficacy and the availability of services have a ratio of diminishing returns the further you travel into conflict zones.

Public health workers who visit homes and discuss (pass on knowledge) on reproductive health, maternal health, and child development and maternity clinics are still common in areas contiguous to the conflict zones. However, the situation in camps does not indicate this same awareness or controlled birth rates. Whilst these clinics concentrate on maternal health, infant and child health, nutrition, etc., the extent to which reproductive health and sexuality are discussed (if they are discussed at all) is inadequate. Discussion on sexuality is a sensitive and to a great extent unaddressed subject. Openly discussing it with an outsider (especially a male outsider) would be not only an embarrassment but also a difficult task for women.

4. SEXUAL VIOLENCE

Sexual violence in the Sri Lankan context takes the form of both violation and harassment. This is an issue of concern, not only to women who are displaced and living in camps, but also to those who are displaced and living in their own homes, and for women (and girls) who live in border areas. Sexual violations can be carried out by the armed forces, military groups, and civilians themselves – both in the public and private spheres. As is the case in any conflict setting, women are vulnerable, and more so when ethnicity is a factor. Distribution of food rations, issuance of travel permits and passes being predominantly done by males, only exacerbates tensions.

A significant feature in the Sri Lankan setting is that women are in combat and are perceived to be assisting the conflict, and to that extent they suffer arrest, detention, and torture. The abuse that takes place includes psychological, physical, and sexual abuse. The Human Rights Commission which was established by the government of Sri Lanka also addresses concerns rising from persons who are detained and/or tortured, as do several NGOs.

5. THE ROLE OF WOMEN

There is a recognition and acceptance of the changing role of women, in the family and at a community level. The transition of women as the breadwinner, head of household, and/or income earner is accepted and considered as the reality in conflict-affected settings as well as in families of combatants who have died.

Nearly all income-generating projects in Sri Lanka are geared towards women. Whilst it is important to provide women with such opportunities, one should also consider the possible resultant tensions and evaluate the extent to which the women themselves benefit from these projects. Further, one needs to question if this acceptance is applicable to non-traditional employment roles as
well, and if women themselves view these changes as positive. It may be that the circumstances faced by these women may leave them with no other feasible alternative.

The various tools and guidelines developed by humanitarian agencies address some of the most important issues faced by women in conflict situations. However, how many of these tools are actually put into practice or are used in the implementation of programmes is subject to discussion. In Sri Lanka, UNHCR guidelines on sexual health, guidelines on the protection of refugee women, the emergency manuals of UNHCR, UNICEF’s Women’s Equality and Empowerment Framework are the present manuals and guidelines – they are infrequently available or used.

Further, it is important to contextualize, adapt and determine the applicability of these tools prior to implementing them. The disruptions in institutional memory, various perceptions of the tools, prejudices of the implementers, reluctance to listen to local voices can all affect the outcome of these ‘well-intended’ tools. Therefore, it is essential to listen to women who are forced to migrate and/or are affected, to find out their needs, concerns, and issues, and plan/implement programmes accordingly.

In view of the concerns addressed above, it is important to understand that displaced women are often affected as those responsible for the welfare of their family. The situations faced by them, their vulnerabilities, their concerns, their strengths all need to be understood in the present context before implementing programmes for their ‘benefit’.

It is important to understand and question if the programmes implemented by the various humanitarian actors provide psychological well-being, physical security, and economic certitude to these women who are living in a situation of conflict. The importance of ensuring an element of gender sensitivity in such programmes and the importance of listening to the voices of women who are displaced and affected by the conflict cannot be stressed enough.

Vindicating masculinity: The paradoxical effects of empowering women in a refugee camp

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Abstract
This article explores how attempts by UNHCR and others to empower women in refugee camps – based on a politics of equal rights – are reinterpreted and given new meaning by the refugees themselves. It argues that ideals of gender equality are interpreted by men and women alike as a threat to men’s authority in the camp and, finally, explores how young men fight back and try to reassert their masculinity.

Objectives
The objectives of this paper are to:

• investigate the effects of gender based policies and programming on refugees
• highlight some of the unintended consequences, at local level, of UNHCR’s policy on gender.

Contents
1. Women as victims
2. Babies in UNHCR’s arms
3. Reasserting masculinity
4. Conclusion

1. Women as victims
Women’s issues have become increasingly central in UNHCR’s policies over the past fifteen years. Often