

# Patriarchy, Power and Keeping Women and Girls Centered in Addressing VAWG in Humanitarian and Development Settings

A Critical Conversation Between Feminist Academics,  
Activists, and Practitioners

COFEM

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## COFEM

The Coalition of Feminists for Social Change (COFEM) is an informal collective of activists, academics, and practitioners working globally to end violence against women and girls.

Report written by Heidi Lehmann with input by COFEM members who attended the convening in New York City, March 2016.



*preventing violence against women & children*

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## Introduction

The last three decades have seen progress in addressing violence against women and girls (VAWG) around the world. Feminist analysis and activism, along with strong local, national and international women's movements have elevated VAWG-including in armed conflict and natural disasters - into the public domain.

The late 1990s and early 2000s witnessed positive developments in national and international normative and legal frameworks regarding VAWG, leading to an increased investment of resources and growth in technical expertise, guidance, and standards within the humanitarian and development sectors. Yet, over the last several years the space to focus on women and girls in humanitarian and development settings has shrunk. Women's rights and movement building as primary approaches to ending violence is being pushed aside in favour of a more narrow technical response, embedded in apolitical frameworks, to solve what is a social problem.

In humanitarian and development work a focus on VAWG without a socio-political analysis of gender inequality or a fully articulated theory of violence has led to interventions that do not address the lived experiences of women and girls, and do not recognize the constraints which prevent them from being able to realize their rights. This contributes to a failure to link acts of sexual or physical violence to the broader context of intersecting oppressions of race, class, patriarchy and post-colonial power<sup>1</sup>. Thus limiting the ways that women and girls can be centred in conversations about their own lives, as they face

marginalization and exclusion across different spheres of their lives.

Western agendas and interventions that heavily focus on research, cost, and market growth can undermine or even close space for initiatives that are women-centred, women-led, and rights-driven. As donors seek a "silver bullet" to ending VAWG, there has been a proliferation of male focused programming, exemplified by these agendas and interventions. This often results in the leadership and voices of women and girls being muted or, yet again, silenced altogether.

Against this backdrop of concerns, a group of academics, activists and practitioners held a two-day convening to further articulate and assess the problem at hand and agree on concrete next steps to place women and girls at the centre of efforts to end violence against them.

## Convening Preparation & Purpose

The first step in the convening preparation was defining and analysing what was driving the contracting space for women and girl-centred work in humanitarian and development settings. This was particularly important in light of a surge in high-level commitments to women and girls from leaders, often spearheaded by the United States, the United Kingdom, other European governments, and the United Nations. Some examples include, the Call to Action Against Women and Girls in Emergencies (2013), the G8 Declaration on Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict (2013), Safe from the Start (2013) and the Global Summit to End Sexual Violence in Conflict (2014). The 2011 report *Ending Violence Against Women and Girls by Engaging Men: A Critical Conversation Between Practitioners* was also reviewed as background for this convening. To ensure a broad perspective

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<sup>1</sup> Intersectionality, the concept coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw is a theoretical base used to describe the ways in which oppressions (sexisms, patriarchy, racism, classism, ableism etc.) are interconnected and therefore cannot be examined separately.

of this problem analysis, a series of interviews with close to 40 academics, activists, and practitioners were conducted over a three-month period between October 2015 and January 2016.

A 'summary paper' based on those interviews was developed, outlining themes and respondent feedback on those themes. Drawing in the interview summaries and other sources, a shorter 'background and discussion' paper was also produced which further distilled key points and posed critical questions for consideration at the convening, as outlined below.

*How do we include men and boys in work to eradicated VAWG in a way that is accountable to women and girls, and that contributes to deconstructing rather than reinforcing the oppressive power relations that lie at the core of the problem?*

*How should we better make explicit the connections and distinctions between VAWG work and other social justice and anti-violence movements working in humanitarian settings?*

*How do we continue to demand attention to women's and girls' needs and rights whilst identifying and partnering with other social justice movements?*

*Have key gender analysis and mainstreaming concepts and tools lost their utility? Should we abandon them or work to reclaim and reassert them from a feminist informed standpoint?*

*How do we re-politicize and reinvigorate feminist perspectives on and approaches to VAWG and to gender equality, in both humanitarian and development spaces?*

The purpose of the convening was to generate preliminary strategies, based on an intersectional feminist analysis, to ensure women and girls are consistently centred in humanitarian and development efforts to prevent and respond to the violence they face. An additional focus was to consider ways to scale up real time response actions when systems and/or individuals overlook how patriarchy,

power, and privilege prevent women from realizing their rights and/or put them at risk for violence.

The meeting was organized to ensure that participants left with:

- A shared understanding of the shrinking space in humanitarian and development settings and how this impacts work to end violence against women and girls;
- A sense of community with each other as feminist activists and practitioners working to end violence against women and girls; and
- A set of strategies, informed by an intersectional analysis, that would be further honed and put in motion post convening.



Figure 1 Agenda from March 2016 Convening

## The Convening Discussion

The two-day convening was held in New York City, with participants traveling from as far away as the Kingdom of Tonga, Afghanistan, Kenya, and Australia. Due to budget constraints it was not possible to accommodate all of those expressing interest in participating. This report is one step in sharing with interested individuals, networks and organizations the flavour and content of the meeting. This document intends to stimulate expanded discussions, partnerships, and actions with allies in the struggle to address violence against women

and girls through the lens of feminist theory and practice.

It was clear at the outset of the convening that the failure to consistently centre women and girls in humanitarian and development settings is not only a conceptual issue people are grappling with in their work, it is having an immediate and detrimental impact on the lives of women and girls. For example, new policies adopted by the Ministry of Health in Uganda that focus on getting men engaged in antenatal care has resulted in detrimental impacts on women. Often, women who don't come with husbands are sent to the back of the queue or are chastised by providers for not bringing a man with them. While engaging men in policies and programmes such as antenatal care may be well intentioned, the lack of consultation with women about how this might affect them is problematic and harmful. That men "should" be engaged has become understood by many to mean men "must" be engaged—a perspective that reinforces male decision-making power over wives and other women. Participants at the convening felt this was emblematic of the broader state of things – a world where women are consistently not consulted about issues that have a direct impact on their lives.

*"The irony is that 15 years after UN Security Council Resolution 1325 stated unequivocally 'that conflict has a disproportionate impact on women and girls'. Yet still, at just about every table I have been working at, my time is spent trying to convince people of this fact."*

*-Convening Participant*

Other participants from East Africa noted how the rise of donor investment in male engagement initiatives has created a plethora of organizations in the region

working with men and boys, with no conceptual or political understanding of gender, feminism, or women's rights more broadly and with no accountability structures to the existing women's movements in East Africa.

A participant from the Pacific region gave the example of the White Ribbon Campaign, something she noted that donors are keen to support as a positive example of engaging men in ending violence against women.<sup>2</sup> However, each year when it comes time for the White Ribbon Campaign, she watches women in her community staying up most of the night making the white ribbons for the men to wear. They also stay up to prepare the food the men eat after the march, and they watch as the men are congratulated for their support of women. "Where is the transformation in that?" this activist questions.

Participants working in humanitarian emergencies highlighted the Ebola Crisis in Liberia and Sierra Leone as key examples of how issues of VAWG were intensified by the crisis but were ignored in the response. Women's incomes collapsed, services were decimated and both movement and gathering was restricted, further increasing women's isolation. And yet, the experiences of women and girls were systematically ignored in the Ebola response. Among Ebola response organisations, the increase in VAWG was reportedly framed as "collateral damage" and not considered central to addressing the rights and needs of communities affected by Ebola.

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<sup>2</sup> The White Ribbon Campaign (WRC) is a global movement of men and boys working to end male violence against women and girls. Active in over 60 countries, the movement seeks to promote healthy relationships, gender equity, and a compassionate vision of masculinity.

Participants discussed the fact that while evidence shows that women-led organizations working to end violence against women globally have made the most significant impact on changing policy, and providing necessary services, they remain chronically under-funded. The shift in focus away from women-led initiatives to end violence has seen many leading initiatives forced to close or face financial hardship<sup>3</sup>.

*“Movement towards equality for women and girls is tolerated as long as it presents no real challenge to the benefits of patriarchy for men. What we’re seeing now is the inevitable open resistance that comes when real change starts to be demanded.”*

– Convening Participant

As the conversations continued it was clear that a significant toll is being exerted on women’s groups and practitioners who are expending an extraordinary amount of energy to keep women and girl’s needs fully on the UN, donor, academic and government agendas, especially at the field level. In addition, key topics covered during the convening included the need to find ways to support each other in a system where openly identifying oneself as a feminist poses real threats to legitimacy, validity, the capacity to influence, and, in many instances, even their careers.

Some participants described these examples given as “backlash” to the idea of centring women and girls in programming. However, one participant suggested that the idea of ‘backlash’ is in itself problematic, “Making it sound like there was some real progress and the world was changing, but actually there has always

been resistance.” Systems of oppression keep functioning, while allowing for the illusion of change but show strong resistance when actual, transformational change is a possibility.

## The Problem Analysis

Participants at the convening agreed with the analysis set out in the background paper that the shrinking space and undermining of work with women and girls are manifesting in multiple ways but are all linked by the depoliticizing of VAWG.

This manifests in multiple and interconnected challenges, including:

- The rise of gender neutrality within humanitarian discourse and practice;
- The emergence of competition around victimhood;
- A shift from women and girl led movements and activism to a technocratic approach to ending violence;
- Different interpretations of what “gender-based violence” (GBV) entails;
- A lack of clarity about how VAWG intersects with other forms of interpersonal and collective violence; and
- A lack of analysis of how to include men and boys in work to eradicate VAWG in a way that is accountable to women and girls.

The challenge of language was noted in two distinct ways. First, different interpretations of gender-based violence (GBV) have led to contested perspectives on what constitutes gendered violence. This creates confusion around the similarities and differences between VAWG work and work to address violence perpetrated against children, men and LGBTQ. This has led, in turn, to competition instead of complementarity between strands of work to prevent and respond to different forms of violence.

<sup>3</sup> Mala Htun and S. Laurel Weldon (2012). The Civic Origins of Progressive Policy Change: Combating Violence Against Women in Global Perspective 1975-2005. American Political Science Review, 106, pp. 548-569.

Second, was the fact that gender-neutral language obscures violence against women, making it unclear who is perpetrating and benefitting from the violence, and/or who is suffering from that violence. An example given was the language use surrounding child brides, one participant called for, “Using language that names these acts for what they actually are, the rape of young girls. It is young girls, not boys, who are being sold and married off and as a result experiencing multiple forms of violence.” When language is neutralized, with a failure to name the perpetrator of violence or even the victim, the systematic nature of that violence, and the role of patriarchy in its use, is obscured.

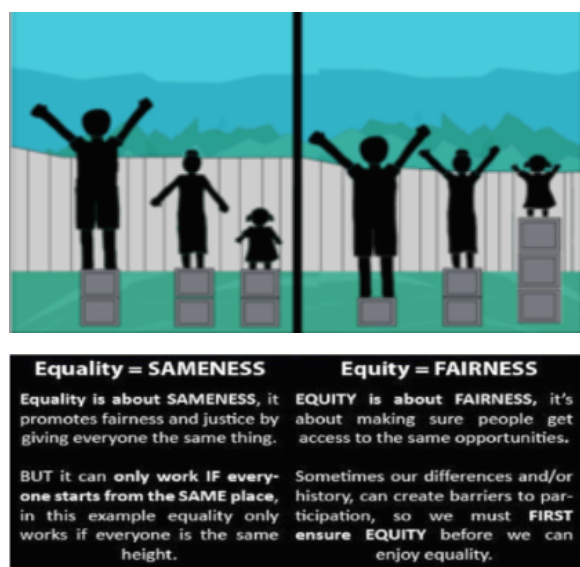


Figure 2 Modified version from Interaction Institute for Social Change

There was a discussion about the need to develop a deeper understanding of equality within some sections of the international community. The lack of a gender power analysis means people assume that programming for women either excludes men or that men should receive the same programming as women, making invisible the existing gender-related advantages for men, such as access to education, ownership of land, higher monetary value for their skills and so forth.

Regardless of how much gender inequality is acknowledged at a theoretical level, in practice, practitioners and activists often battle against the assumption that women and men, girls and boys are socially situated in the same ways and as such should get the same programmatic access to resources and opportunities.

This then transitioned into a conversation about how work with men and boys has evolved and the impact this is having on women and girls. Convening participants agreed that donors have put an overwhelming amount of pressure on women-led and other organizations to adjust their programming to include men without clearly understanding the possible negative implications of doing so. This includes a lack of sensitivity to the needs of women survivors of violence perpetrated by men - who as a result have varying levels of comfort with men's presence in counselling, medical, legal and other service delivery interventions.

Programming with men and boys, initially meant to be in support of women and girls rights and equality has developed with little accountability to and consultation with women and girls. All of the participants voiced support for working with men and boys as one way to end violence against women and girls. However, participants noted that working with men and boys has drifted from being a strategy for gender equality or ending violence against women or girls as originally intended, to becoming a goal in and of itself – with little attention paid to the content of programming or most importantly its impact on women and girls.

Participants felt there were specific and sometimes overlapping discourses involved with this drift. For example, the belief that changing men's behaviour is simply a matter of awareness raising or training to help men and boys understand



that women and girls have rights. Another discourse at play is that men are violent towards women because they are poor, stressed, and/or displaced. Meaning that if men were not poor, stressed, or displaced they would not be violent towards women and girls. This discourse lacks depth of analysis regarding where the violence originally stems from.

All participants expressed concern that none of the discourses underpinning most of the current work with men and boys recognize the fact that violence is a core mechanism of oppression. More specifically, violence against women and girls, or the threat of it, is one of the most effective ways of maintaining women's subordination. All participants expressed concern that in some instances 'engaging men and boys' seems to be creating a foundation for men's rights activism, that is not simply disconnected from women and girls, but is in some instances actively working against women's rights by reasserting male power under the guise of a "crisis of masculinity."

## Conclusion

Participants left the convening agreeing that the progress made in addressing violence against women and girls over the last two decades, is under threat. High-level commitments made to women and girls are not being realized on the ground where it matters. Pushback, which has always existed, against gender equality and ending violence against women and girls, is increasing.

The lack of application of feminist theory that explains violence as both an outcome of, and means to maintain women's subordinate status, has created a dangerous vacuum. Into this vacuum has stepped those with limited understanding of the dynamics of violence against women

and girls or those who may oppose to the gender equality that ending violence against women brings creates.

In seeking a world where women and girls are not only able to live safely but can actively participate and control all parts of their lives. Yet, in the current climate it takes only the question, "what about men and boys" to stop action needed to address identified risks to women and girls. It only takes being labelled a "feminist" in mainstream organizations to have credibility undermined.

The dialogue at the convening was intense, invigorating, and diverse, grounded in a shared belief that there is a need to reassert a feminist understanding of violence against women and girls. Without this, essential conversations about how to achieve genuine equality for women and girls cannot take place.

There was a strong sense that this meeting was both a continuation of efforts, but also a beginning. It was a continuation of the struggle for equality that women all over the world have been engaged in for generations –which has set the path we now walk. This convening was also a beginning point for amplifying conversations women are having around the world to highlight their concerns about stalled progress in achieving equality. A beginning of forging new alliances to counter the challenges we are facing in keeping women and girls centred in humanitarian and development spheres. A beginning of saying, "No more business as usual, when that business is failing women and girls."