

## CanWaCH GEWG Complex Issues - Brief #6

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# Building the Case for a Gender Transformative Humanitarian Response

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### What is a complex issue?

A complex issue is one with multiple and interconnected parts, where a quick fix is not possible. Instead, complex problem-solving requires innovation and multiple, sometimes competing, perspectives. It involves considering the impact of the solution on the surrounding environment and individuals.

### Defining Gender-Transformative Humanitarian Action

Humanitarian crises exacerbate existing inequalities and often cause new inequalities to emerge. Despite the negative implications for gender equality, however, humanitarian crises also present opportunities for change. For example, women may take on new leadership roles, and men may shoulder greater care responsibilities when they're unable to work. Therefore, it is essential for humanitarian actors to not only include a gender equality lens but also consider prioritizing gender-transformative programming to respond to these shifts in gender roles and power dynamics. Gender-transformative programming in humanitarian crises has the explicit intention of transforming unequal power relations for positive change while addressing women, girls and gender-diverse people's unique needs and challenges. Further, transformative programming tackles the root causes of gender inequality and exclusion while reshaping unequal gender and power relations. This involves several interventions, such as partnering with local women's rights and women-led organizations and movements or engaging men and boys as allies. While the short initial phase of humanitarian action limits immediate gender transformation, it lays the groundwork for lasting change, resulting in a more effective and comprehensive humanitarian response.

### Why are 'gender-transformative approaches to humanitarian action' complex?

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Gender-transformative change in humanitarian settings is an inherently complex issue due to the many layers of complexity that surround it. In any setting, creating lasting systemic change is challenging as it seeks to disrupt entrenched inequalities and power imbalances, but this is even more true when applied to humanitarian settings where populations are displaced and affected by conflicts and disasters. Further, there is no enabling environment within the humanitarian system — the organizations best suited to lead this change, such as local girls' and women's rights organizations, are underfunded, experience the brunt of crises, and are left out in humanitarian decision-making spaces. In addition, gender transformation is often seen as development work, meaning that donor requirements for humanitarian programming rarely align with what is required to implement a gender-transformative agenda despite its potential for supporting women and girls in crisis situations.

## Discussion

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### How can we achieve gender-transformative change in humanitarian action?

**Combine targeted gender equality work with gender mainstreaming in all sectors:** In order to achieve gender-transformative change in humanitarian settings, humanitarian actors need to ensure that they combine standalone programming that focuses on gender in emergencies with the integration of gender throughout other interventions such as WASH or nutrition.

**Integrate change in projects:** Gender-transformative change in humanitarian contexts necessitates the integration of gender-transformative initiatives from the project's design phase. For short-term projects, while it is important to use a gender-lens or gender-informed programming, the possibilities for gender-transformative work are limited in the early stages of emergencies. However, humanitarian organizations can lay the groundwork for gender transformation in the future. For recurring funded projects, it is imperative for humanitarian actors to carefully assess trends, patterns and lessons learned between funding cycles to ensure long-term gender-transformative change. Organizations need strong monitoring and reporting systems to make that happen. Additionally a holistic analysis, including a foundational understanding of gender considerations, such as rapid gender analysis, is useful for identifying and implementing suitable interventions.

**Promote coordination and leverage local expertise:** All key actors, from humanitarian groups to long-term development groups, need to recognize and prioritize the gendered component within decision-making spaces. Fostering coordination between all these actors, and across different levels, is crucial for better learning and collaboration within these spaces. Equally important is partnering with local organizations, groups and leaders, in particular local women-led and women's rights groups as well as women leaders. This involves efforts to meaningfully include these groups in the decision-making processes and program design, and create space for collaborative knowledge exchange and resource sharing. To do so, it's essential to build the capacity of different local groups before an emergency happens — a process that is gender-transformative in itself.



**Drive sector change:** Promoting gender-transformative change in humanitarian settings requires changes in the humanitarian sector itself; from deciding what the best practices are, to who's sitting at decision-making tables, to who's responsible for designing programs, to who's receiving funds. Sector change also involves engaging with donors and funders to advocate for dedicated budgets for gender-transformative initiatives, all while ensuring a cohesive distribution of resources that aligns with local needs and priorities. Sharing pragmatic examples of gender transformative initiatives in humanitarian settings and how they yield transformative outcomes can assist organizations and donors in recognizing the importance of this work. This deeper understanding can not only lead to budget allocation but also bring about adjustments in reporting requirements.

Is gender-transformative impact in humanitarian action lifesaving? Does gender-transformative programming help advance gender equality outcomes only or can it also help advance humanitarian outcomes?

**Reduce vulnerabilities and foster long-term development:** Gender-transformative programming in humanitarian settings **can be lifesaving**. While it may not directly involve immediate life-saving measures like medical care or food distribution, it effectively tackles the underlying causes of vulnerability, including harmful gender norms that contribute to issues such as limited access to sexual and reproductive health and rights, malnutrition, gender-based violence, early childhood marriage, maternal mortality and more. Because these issues are amplified in humanitarian settings, incorporating gender-transformative programming is particularly impactful. In addition, it's vital to recognize that women, girls and LGBTQI+ individuals bear a disproportionate burden during humanitarian crises. By actively addressing their specific needs and actively seeking to reduce their vulnerability, humanitarian programs can become more effective in protecting and assisting affected populations.

**Foster community resilience:** By challenging harmful gender norms and promoting gender equality, gender-transformative approaches can foster more resilient communities. By improving access to resources, opportunities, services, leadership and decision-making opportunities, gender-transformative programs ensure that communities are better prepared to cope with and recover from crises, ultimately contributing to saving lives in the longer term.

**Contribute to conflict prevention:** Gender-transformative programs, through their focus on addressing power imbalances and inequalities, have the potential to reduce the source of tension and conflicts, thereby fostering a more stable and secure environment. This positive impact extends to various levels, be it within communities or households, even amid crises.

What are the barriers & risks to advancing gender-transformative change in humanitarian action, and how can these be mitigated?

There are several barriers and risks to advancing gender-transformative change in humanitarian action, including:

- Lack of intentionality in doing gender-transformative work;
- Short project cycles with indicators that are not always designed or able to capture gender-transformative results;



- Those best placed to lead gender-transformative change are underfunded and absent from decision-making leading to maladaptation going forward;
- Gender-based analysis is often delayed in humanitarian interventions due to the absence of gender experts and/or the lack of necessary understanding to enable the correct application of tools within initial response teams dispatched to address the crisis.

However, these barriers can be addressed, and the risks can be mitigated with dedicated efforts. Such efforts can include:

- Better commitment and greater focus on gender, which will make it more straightforward to identify, mitigate, solve and measure the gendered dimensions of the crisis;
- Identifying stories that convey the qualitative impacts of our work and can serve as powerful examples of change;
- Working with local partners and supporting them long-term to do the work;
- Ensuring that the initial team that responds to emergencies has a gender specialist on it and is equipped to immediately conduct a rapid Gender-based Analysis that is used to make decisions.

Barriers and risks should not be an excuse to avoid addressing gender inequality in humanitarian settings because the benefits for women, girls and gender-diverse people outweigh the challenges.

## Resources

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[Oxfam Canada. \(2019\). Making gender-transformative humanitarian action a reality.](#)

[Women's Refugee Commission. \(2021\). Gender Transformative Change in Humanitarianism: View from Inside.](#)

[CARE \(2022\). Women Lead in Emergencies: Global Evaluation Report.](#)

[Martin J. Bunch, Sohrab Pathan, Antoinette G. Battaglia, Bryn Greer-Wooten, Alana Mascoll, Trevor Russell and Josh Folkema. \(2020\). Quantifying community resilience in South Sudan: The FEED project \(Fortifying Equality and Economic Diversification\).](#)

[Geeta Rao Gupta, Caren Grown, Sara Fewer, Reena Gupta & Sia Nowrojee. \(2023\). Beyond gender mainstreaming: transforming humanitarian action, organizations and culture.](#)

[Chikezirim C. Nwoke, Jennifer Becker, Sofiya Popovych, Mathew Gabriel, and Logan Cochrane. \(2022\). Gender Transformation in Humanitarian Response: Insight from Northeast Nigeria.](#)

Some system-wide references and tools:

- [CARE Rapid Gender Assessment](#)
- [IASC Gender Policy Handbook](#)
- [IASC Gender and Age Marker](#)



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