



## A lockable toilet door does not seem to be an extravagant request, except in a humanitarian context. Why?<sup>i</sup>

***SDG target 6.2: By 2030, achieve access to adequate and equitable sanitation and hygiene for all and end open defecation, paying special attention to the needs of women and girls and those in vulnerable situations.***

While a goal in itself, improving access to water, sanitation, and hygiene also helps reach other developmental goals, such as health, education, nutrition, and gender equality.<sup>1</sup> If we are serious about the Sustainable Development Goals, we need to go the extra mile by ensuring such services are adequate, equitable and above all safe. This can only be achieved if the rights of women, children and marginalized people are fulfilled.

Despite increased awareness this remains a difficult task for humanitarian agencies, facing systematic difficulties to meet women and girls' basic needs and to prioritize their safety.<sup>2</sup> They fail to realize, understand, and/or integrate women and girls' specific needs in their service provision, which further increases their vulnerability to harassment and violence, including sexual violence. As such, women and girls remain among the most vulnerable in times of conflict and crisis. Similar to previous years, roughly 14 million refugees and displaced women and girls suffered from sexual violence in 2019.<sup>3</sup>

Although improving services alone does not address the root cause of violence, the differences in power between people, it can make a positive contribution in reducing the exposure of those most vulnerable.<sup>4</sup> Following a seemingly simple object like a door lock helps illustrate the benefits of improving such services and sheds light on the barriers of doing so.

*Less distance to travel, separating latrines and/or bathing facilities for men and women, lighting and secure facilities (e.g. locks and sturdy doors) would all help increase the feelings of safety in both the day and night-time.<sup>5</sup>*

**Since 1999, recommendations that sanitation facilities should be locked appear in guidelines.<sup>6</sup>**

Despite these standards and the positive impact locks have,<sup>7</sup> a lockable toilet seems to remain an extravagant request in humanitarian settings. 82% of latrines were unlockable in a camp for internally displaced Pakistanis,<sup>8</sup> latrines in a refugee camp the size of a large city in Dadaab (Kenya) had no locking mechanism,<sup>9</sup> the lack of lighting, locks or even doors made 99% of women feel unsafe in a camp in Cameroon<sup>10</sup>; those are only a few examples of incidences where locks were reported missing.

---

<sup>i</sup> This case is part of a series of humanitarian operations vignettes by the INSEAD Humanitarian Research Group called *Behind the Scenes of Humanitarian Operations*. It was written in December 2019 by Sarah Dewilde, Valentine Hure and Luk Van Wassenhove. For more information go to <https://www.insead.edu/centres/humanitarian-research-group>.



*Refugee camps often fail to offer the most basic precautions, such as putting locks on toilet doors, keeping male and female facilities apart and ensuring adequate lighting. This puts women and girls at risk of violence in places that should be havens of safety and sanctuary and prevents them from meeting their most basic daily needs, such as washing.<sup>11</sup>*

The increased sense of insecurity contributes to low utilization rates of available latrines. Women modify their behavior to protect themselves: they engage in open-air defecation often in isolated places, they choose to use latrines at night to have more privacy,<sup>12</sup> or they restrict their intake of water and food.<sup>13</sup> This increases their vulnerability and negatively impacts their health and wellbeing and poses a public health risk for their society as a whole.

*By not addressing the women and girls' protection risks of WASH infrastructure, you are not only opening people up to violence, but you are also creating a public health problem.<sup>14</sup>*

### **Absence of locks is often explained by practical concerns, such as theft.**

The lack of adherence to these recommendations and insufficient consideration of beneficiaries' demands are often explained by practical concerns: recurring theft, fear of children being locked in, the very thin materials of emergency facilities, prioritization of quantity over quality, and lack of time in emergency context. Although these concerns are valid, they sound more like excuses than insurmountable problems. If the positive impact is clear, and the investment low, why are basic safety features like door locks not commonly available?

*There are very often huge missed opportunities. At the beginning of a response, the WASH workers could have picked up a toolkit and told their workers: "before you build anything, just go to some people and ask them where they want it and how they want these things to be designed."<sup>15</sup>*

This article, in line with countless feminist scholars, practitioners and organizations, argues that the lack of locks is symptomatic of structural challenges in the humanitarian sector. When year after year women and girls displaced by violence emphasize the need for locks on latrine doors, the absence of those locks reflects structures of power within the sector and a refusal to listen to the needs of these women and girls.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, community engagement practices often remain overlooked in a traditionally top-down and male-dominated WASH sector.<sup>17</sup>

### **A more feminist approach to humanitarian contexts is fundamental to address the inequalities of power.**

Throughout the humanitarian sector, decision-making is dominated by male voices. Men hold 70% of the top leadership positions, compared to only 30% of the global social impact workforce.<sup>18</sup> Even more so in the WASH sector, where there are very few female decision-makers at sector level, which is where policy, resourcing and planning are usually discussed and decided upon.<sup>19</sup>

*Women's leadership in water management is essential to challenging unconscious male bias and changing how decisions are made. Gender perspective influences how issues are prioritized, how budgets are allocated, and even the determination of what constitutes a solution. Diversity from leadership to the participatory level is essential if water, sanitation and hygiene services are to be responsive to a wide range of needs.<sup>20</sup>*



We are left to wonder how well equipped these male-dominated boards are to judge on the needs of women and girls in humanitarian setting, and how well they understand the additional inequalities and insecurities they face.<sup>21</sup>

*If we're not careful, humanitarian responses can reinforce barriers and discrimination. [...] So, for example, this can happen when humanitarians are doing needs assessments and they are working through male-dominated structures, without going the extra mile to include and consult women and understanding what the barriers to their exclusion are.<sup>22</sup>*

There are calls for a more feminist approach to humanitarian contexts. This is fundamental to address the inequalities of power within humanitarian organizations and to successfully deliver to female beneficiaries. At the core lies the belief that if the global social impact sector really wants to achieve gender justice and equality goals, it needs to start moving things internally. The safety of women and girls should be prioritized by senior management, and more technical expertise at higher levels is needed.<sup>23</sup> Yet can this be achieved when pushing for gender sensitivity is perceived as a “career blocker” in several humanitarian organizations?<sup>ii</sup>

*There is a lot of fluff and hardly any support at top levels. Every meeting seems to be about gender, yet nobody reaches the assistance on the ground let alone lockable toilets. Nobody cares. [...] It is much easier to make a career in the humanitarian world if you disregard the gender policies than when you try to implement them. Because when you try to implement them you are seen as a troublemaker.<sup>24</sup>*

### **Commitments are not enough; they need to result in action.**

While the world has never seen stronger expressions of commitment from policymakers and humanitarian actors to end violence against women and girls, action is needed to create an inclusive and gender sensitive humanitarian sector. Leaders have to incentivize or inspire their aid workers to take up responsibility to act and donors need to match the rhetoric with funding and action.<sup>25</sup>

*IRIN: Most big aid agencies have made commitments to do a better job of including local women's groups in humanitarian response. What needs to happen for these promises to become a reality? Madigan: The talk is there, but to really put talk into action there needs to be concrete actions put behind it. So, for example, building in budgeting. These things cost money, and to do needs assessments that actively include women when women are hard to reach might require extra funding.<sup>26</sup>*

The commitments often result in guidelines aimed to assist humanitarian actors and communities. These guidelines however are often described as “not very action oriented”, “vague” and “overwhelming”.<sup>27</sup> They do not provide any help in prioritization.

*Agency guidelines on community engagement and WASH tend not to offer advice about what to prioritize early in an emergency and how to develop and adapt community engagement over time.<sup>28</sup>*

---

<sup>ii</sup> Although some organizations (e.g. UNICEF) are implementing initiatives internal to the organization focus on women professionals in the sector, big gender imbalances in the WASH sector remain. - WASH Specialist. UN humanitarian organization. 6 September 2019. Personal interview.

### **Absence of compliance obligations leaves it to the humanitarian sector to take ownership.**

Like with many other commitments, holding donors and implementing agencies accountable is difficult due to limited capacity.<sup>29</sup> The absence of an obligation to comply to these commitments leaves it up to the humanitarian sector to take ownership. However, given that after two decades humanitarian organizations still fail to guarantee locks, it might be a sign that commitments and goodwill are not sufficient to tackle the inequalities faced by women and girls.

*The humanitarian sector needs an accountability mechanism, by goodwill things will not change. It has become the new trendy word in the sector, but it is true. [...] it is no longer about capacity; it is about what people are doing and holding them accountable.<sup>30</sup>*

### **Funding, is it part of the problem or could it be part of the solution?**

A final component to this story lies with the donors. Violence against women and girls remains an underfunded area of humanitarian response compared to other sectors, and funding requests do not match the scale of the problem.<sup>31</sup> The lack of funds is attributed to various causes, including the lack of human resources for needs assessment, programming and advocacy; donor disinterest and “lack of institutional commitment”; and the fact that some perceive violence against women and girls to be an issue of social norms that is too big and too slow to change in a crisis (a perception that seems to persist even when conflicts last for more than 10 years).<sup>32</sup>

*“Of the \$41.5 billion spent on humanitarian response between ‘16 and ‘18, just \$51.7 million, less than 0.2 %, was spent on gender-based violence prevention for women and girls.”<sup>33</sup>*

The lack of funding, too, might be an explanation for the absence of door locks. If funding is part of the problem, could it also be part of the solution? Could donors leverage their financial power to encourage required behaviors and/or penalize otherwise, through for example a Pay by Result (PbR) approach?<sup>iii</sup> Yet, how would donors pinpoint clear objectives, determine the right KPIs, balance the different needs of a holistic policy and monitor actual implementation?

*Following a seemingly simple object like a door lock, quickly brings us into some of the dark corners of the humanitarian sector contributing to gender-insensitive decision-making. Until donors and humanitarian actors prioritize the safety of women and girls and tackle the causes and consequences of violence, they will continue to undermine their broader efforts to achieve the SDGs and build a peaceful, prosperous and more equal world.<sup>34</sup> Ensuring that the rhetoric is translated in real change on the ground will require more than procuring a container of locks and developing another set of guidelines. Gender sensitive thinking should be part of a holistic package implemented from the initial stages of humanitarian response.*

---

<sup>iii</sup> DFID’s PbR policy is often highlighted as a good practice. Projects achieving their targets receive what they spent, over-achievement and under-achievement lead to bonuses or losing money respectively. Although this is intended to encourage adaptation and reward innovation, in many cases it may have actually limited it. Organisations were more concerned with not losing money than with innovating to potentially gain the bonus. Would PbR be able to contribute to a more gender sensitive WASH sector? How would they pin-point clear objectives and KPIs, balance the different needs of a holistic policy and monitor actual implementation?



*“As long as we don’t have an accountability mechanism that really targets all the practices of the humanitarian sector right down to the camp commander who says that lightings on the way to bathrooms aren’t as important as whatever else, as long as we don’t have a simple accountability framework that gives you a green light or red light depending on whether you are matching the right activities, including the donors, including the UN agencies, including the NGOs, baking in whether we are embedding GBV in all of our work. Until we have that we will not be able to leverage all the individual actions around us. We have to really invest in the way we measure our progress.”<sup>35</sup>*

---

<sup>1</sup> Assessing DFID’s Results in Water, Sanitation and Hygiene. ICAI. 24 May 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> *Safety First - Time to deliver on commitments to women and girls in crisis*. International Rescue Committee. November 2019.

<sup>4</sup> *Improving WASH, Reducing Vulnerabilities to Violence*. Alexandra Chitty. WASH Funders.

<sup>5</sup> *Lighting, WASH and Gender-Based Violence in Camp Settings*. Oxfam. August 2018.

<sup>6</sup> *Reproductive Health in Refugee Situations: An Inter-Agency Manual*. UNHCR. 1999.

<sup>7</sup> *Keeping it simple: a gender-specific sanitation tool for emergencies*. de Lange et al. Waterlines. January 2014.

<sup>8</sup> *Frequency and Physical Factors Associated with Gender-Based Violence in the Internally Displaced People of Pakistan*. Qayum, M., Mohmand, S., & Arooj, H. Journal of the College of Physicians and Surgeons Pakistan. 22 January 2012.

<sup>9</sup> *Assessing refugee camp characteristics and the occurrence of sexual violence: A preliminary analysis of the Dadaab complex*. Aboune, A and J Hernandez. *Refugee Survey Quarterly*. 2013

<sup>10</sup> *Menstrual Hygiene Management in Humanitarian Situations: The Example of Cameroon; Water Supply & Sanitation Collaborative Council (WSSCC)*. UN Women and the Institute of Demographic Training and Research (IFORD). 2018.

<sup>11</sup> *Safety First - Time to deliver on commitments to women and girls in crisis*. International Rescue Committee. November 2019.

<sup>12</sup> *Infrastructure for all*. Reed, B.J., Coates, S. and Parry-Jones, S. et al. Loughborough University of Technology. 2007.

<sup>13</sup> *Briefing note 2: improving WASH programming and services*. Gender and Development Network. 2014.

<sup>14</sup> WASH Specialist. UN agency. Personal interview. 6 September 2019.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> *“Next steps in the drive for gender equality in crisis settings: How a feminist approach can help” - Speech by The Rt Hon David Miliband President and CEO*, International Rescue Committee. 10 June 2019.

<sup>17</sup> *What next for menstrual hygiene in emergencies — a call for further action*. ELRHA. 6 June 2018.

<sup>18</sup> FAIR SHARE of Women Leaders. <https://www.fairsharewl.org/>. Consulted on 9 December 2019.

<sup>19</sup> *Women in the WASH sector: is being invited to the party enough?* Mengistu B. WaterAid. 7 March 2019.

<sup>20</sup> *“The Empowering Role of Water, Sanitation and Hygiene”*. Savio Carvalho. 10 March 2019.

<sup>21</sup> *“Next steps in the drive for gender equality in crisis settings: How a feminist approach can help” - Speech by The Rt Hon David Miliband President and CEO*, International Rescue Committee. 10 June 2019.

<sup>22</sup> *Q&A: How to include more local women in emergency response*. Irwin Loy. 9 January 2019.

<sup>23</sup> *Where is the money? How the humanitarian system is failing its commitments to end violence against women and girls*. International Rescue Committee. 10 June 2019.

<sup>24</sup> Gender and Diversity Coordinator. Large NGO. Personal interview. 24 October 2019.

<sup>25</sup> *Safety First - Time to deliver on commitments to women and girls in crisis*. International Rescue Committee. November 2019.

<sup>26</sup> *Q&A: How to include more local women in emergency response*. Irwin Loy. 9 January 2019.

<sup>27</sup> Protection Officer SGBV. UN agency. Personal interview. 8 January 2019.

<sup>28</sup> *Community Engagement in Sanitation: A Landscape Review*. Oxfam. August 2018.



---

<sup>29</sup> *Safety First - Time to deliver on commitments to women and girls in crisis*. International Rescue Committee. November 2019.

<sup>30</sup> GBV specialist. UN agency. Personal interview. 21 January 2019.

<sup>31</sup> *Where is the money? How the humanitarian system is failing its commitments to end violence against women and girls*. International Rescue Committee. 20 June 2019.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> *Q&A: Why does so little aid money go to preventing violence against women and girls?* Megan Clement. 27 November 2019.

<sup>34</sup> *Safety First - Time to deliver on commitments to women and girls in crisis*. International Rescue Committee. November 2019.

<sup>35</sup> *Panel discussion at "UNICEF: Children and Women Under Attack: Ending gender-based violence in emergencies"* [01:17:10]. David Miliband, CEO IRC. 27 September 2018.

<https://www.unicef.org/stories/children-and-women-under-attack-ending-gender-based-violence-emergencies>.