



What does ‘back to basics’ mean for gender and the fundamental principles?

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**Ariana Lopes
Morey**

Policy Adviser, ICRC



The recently-launched ICRC blog series ‘Back to basics: humanitarian principles in contemporary armed conflict’ aims to inspire discussion and debate about the relevance of, and challenges to, the humanitarian principles in current times. For some, that phrasing might imply a worrying move back to a time when humanitarian action was conceptualized in its most simplistic form, and the complex interplay between such action and social dynamics like gender, diversity, race and structural discrimination was seen as beyond the responsibility of humanitarian actors.

In this post, ICRC Policy Adviser Ariana Lopes Morey reflects on what ‘back to basics’ means when it comes to gender and humanitarian action, arguing that in order to live up to the basic principles themselves we must strengthen our capacity to bring a gender lens to all aspects of the humanitarian endeavor.

ICRC Humanitarian Law & Policy Blog · What does ‘back to basics’ mean for gender and the fundamental principles?

The ICRC has recently launched a series called ‘Back to basics’, to address the challenges we see arising in contemporary and highly polarized conflicts and to encourage discussion and debate on the relevance of the humanitarian principles in current times.

In the context of this important discussion, some may argue (or worry) that going 'back to basics' means a return to a time when gender policies were seen as *inappropriate for the ICRC, or when highlighting social inequalities in terms of rights and resources was seen as incompatible with the principle of neutrality*. A time when the fundamental principles were leveraged almost as a shield to prevent engagement with the complex debates on inclusion and exclusion globally, rather than a lens through which we see the importance of doing just that.

In recent years, the ICRC has deepened its engagement with and understanding of the relationship between *gender and the needs created by armed conflict*, and has made important progress in the incorporation of gender into its operational analysis and approach, its legal analysis (including the *update of the Commentaries to the Geneva Conventions*), and in its own internal staffing policies. However, it is also true that the shift in individual attitudes and beliefs needed to put policies into practice and change behaviour will take more time.

In the context of reviewing current operational and policy landscapes in the ICRC from a gender perspective, I at times noted tensions that appear to reflect two streams of thought: first, that as a protection actor that respects the principle of non-discrimination, the ICRC already and naturally 'does gender'. And second, in contrast, that respect for neutrality means that attention to the implications of gender inequality remain outside of ICRC's mandate because it is not a development actor and redistribution of resources is an ideological or political concern. These attitudes seem oppositional, yet they represent the same bottom line: that nothing more needs to be done. This view is far from universal in the organization, and I am sure that it is not unique to staff in the ICRC.

This blog series presents an opportunity to challenge and reframe that thinking, to ensure that our collective understanding of the fundamental principles is informed by the evidence that has been established in past decades about the differentiated reach and impact of the humanitarian endeavor, so that we can better live up to those principles.

Invisibility and impartiality

Long recognized as the architect of the fundamental principles of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, Jean Pictet himself was not immune to unconscious bias. In his commentary addressing the principle of humanity, he refers to meeting 'the needs of all *men*' even while addressing the mission of the Movement to 'ensure respect for the *human being*'. Few would argue that Pictet intended to exclude women or others from relief efforts through his choice of words. Still, those words do indicate that the situation of the general population was considered almost exclusively from the perspective of men – reflected not only in the language but in the prevailing attitudes and norms of his time. While many years have passed since, the same kind of unconscious bias remains prevalent in the humanitarian sector and, regardless of intent, it is not without consequences.

We now know that humanitarian action designed to reach 'all people' in fact does not naturally do so; it will be distorted by the power and social dynamics present in a place before the crisis hit and those *brought in by humanitarian actors themselves*. Overwhelming evidence collected in past decades has shown that women and girls, along with other groups marginalized based on their gender or sexual orientation, are often unintentionally excluded from blanket humanitarian assistance when it is designed and delivered without a deliberate gender analysis. Simply put, to reach 'all people' effectively and impartially demands an understanding of the social power dynamics and resulting marginalization of groups in a given community because only in that way can we ensure we are not overlooking the barriers faced by and the needs (and contributions) of specific groups. As the saying goes, 'if your needs aren't counted, your needs don't count'. And while not the main subject of this post, it is important to remember that a gender analysis will make more visible the specific gendered harms faced by any individual, including men and boys; it is a tool that improves the response for all.

The misconception of neutrality...

Another important challenge to the better incorporation of gender into humanitarian action is the belief that to remain principled, and notably to remain neutral, humanitarians should refrain from engagement with gender norms or gender equality as a principle. Given that gender is about the study of power relations, it is seen by some as inherently political and therefore outside the humanitarian's mandate. There are two issues with this.

First, we now know that even *principled 'neutral' humanitarian actors have an impact on gender norms and dynamics* in the places where they work. Despite the intention to operate independently of such dynamics, international humanitarian organizations bring in and distribute enormous resources, financial and otherwise. These are currencies of power and influence. They act as employers, service providers, advisers and more. And they often remain present in countries where they work for years, if not decades (for example, the ICRC has been present in the countries of its ten largest operations for an average of more than 40 years). It is simply not possible or realistic to presume that a humanitarian actor can remain 'neutral' regarding gender if that is understood to mean having no impact on local gender norms and dynamics.

Indeed, the reluctance to acknowledge or engage with the principle of gender equality in effect *reinforces the status quo*, for example, by prioritizing consultation with established groups of 'community leaders' which may exclude or not equally represent women and other groups. It is not neutral but therefore reinforces existing gender-based discrimination; it is to do harm. The alternative requires us to analyze and understand gender dynamics and then respond to the findings to ensure that all people, without adverse distinction, have equitable opportunities to participate in shaping, accessing and evaluating the humanitarian response. This attention to all people is the heart of the principle of humanity, which recognizes each of us as inherently worthy of respect and dignity. As has been pointed out before, gender inequalities inherent in prevailing systems are a constant obstacle to ensuring the respect, and recognizing the full humanity, of those whom the system seeks to marginalize. Therefore, *'the full application of the principle of humanity not only allows for but requires the promotion of gender equality'*.

... implies conflict where there is consensus

Second, it is worth responding to the notion that gender, and gender equality, is 'too political'. Gender equality as a general principle can no longer be considered politically controversial. All fundamental human rights treaties, and other more specific human rights treaties, recognize explicitly the equality of men and women. Among many other instances, all 193 UN Member States restated their commitments to gender equality at the 23rd Special

Session of the UN General Assembly, and then again in 2015 as part of the 2030 *Agenda for Sustainable Development*. Regional organizations and groups have launched their own gender policies predicated on gender equality and women's empowerment, including the AU, the OAS, ASEAN, and OIC.

What may remain politically divisive – depending on the context and to different degrees – is what is required in practice for the realization of gender equality as a country pursues economic and social development. For example, what access to sexual and reproductive health entails, what constitutes the appropriate response to sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), and legal or other recognition of diverse sexual orientation and gender identity, can be politically and socially contentious.^[1] Still, these ideological differences do not imply that the ICRC or others should remain silent on the principle of gender equality in the name of neutrality because *'although neutrality defines the attitude of the Red Cross towards belligerents and ideologies, it never determines its behaviour towards the human beings who suffer'*. Fundamentally, the recognition of gender equality and integration of gender in humanitarian response is about recognizing how gender dynamics shape suffering in the context of conflict and disaster and responding adequately to that suffering.

This is not to argue that all humanitarian actors should take the approach of development actors to advance gender equality. Indeed, no matter how laudable the goal, humanitarians must maintain humanitarian objectives, or they risk abandoning impartiality. What is important, however, is for humanitarians to integrate the principle of gender equality into our work, recognizing that this principle is integral to humanitarian objectives as it is inherent to the principles of humanity and non-discrimination, and, more practically, it *makes visible and allows us to respond to all peoples' needs*. Only then can we better live up to our ambition to impartially alleviate the suffering of all human beings.

Is gender equality a Western construct?

One more argument is often raised to preclude humanitarians' engagement with gender equality, related to the notion that gender is too political, is that gender equality is a 'Western' value. Yet to claim this is misguided, and stems from a lack of knowledge or perhaps even an intentional devaluing of the critical contributions made by non-Western women to the foundations of and movement for gender equality. And while I highlight here the contributions of select non-Western women, it's important to acknowledge that many others, including men and gender non-conforming people have also made important contributions in this area.

Some of the *non-Western women who have fundamentally shaped the current international normative framework for gender equality* (often facing resistance from Western women and men) include: Brazilian delegate Bertha Lutz, who was responsible for the recognition of equality of 'men and women' rather than only 'men' in the preamble to the UN Charter in 1945, for ensuring 'sex' was noted as a basis on which discrimination is prohibited, and for ensuring that women had the opportunity to hold office in UN bodies; Indian delegate Hansa Mehta, who is widely credited with changing the phrase 'All men are born free and equal' to 'All human beings are born free and equal' in Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR); Begum Shaista Ikramullah of Pakistan, who pushed for language in the UDHR that emphasized freedom, equality and choice, including by championing the inclusion of Article 16 on equal rights in marriage, which she saw as a way to combat child marriage and forced marriage; and Minerva Bernadino of the Dominican Republic, a leader of the feminist movement in Latin America and the Caribbean whose sustained efforts are largely responsible for the creation of the UN Commission on the Status of Women, and who was one of those that signed the UDHR.

Much of the way gender and gender equality have been addressed in the UN system has indeed been influenced by both Western and non-Western alliances and political posturing, as is the case with any other topic. However, it was non-Western women who laid much of the foundation of the accepted international legal principle of gender equality that guides us today. And women, girls, and gender diverse people remain active across all regions to promote gender equality and gender justice in their societies. Humanitarian organizations should exercise caution in prioritizing supposed 'respect for local customs' where this is in contradiction to local women's, LGBTIQ+, and other activist efforts – after all, these are also local groups and initiatives deserving of respect. And if the purpose of neutrality is to *'enjoy the confidence of all'*, then we must consider whose confidence we lose in choosing to ignore these movements in favour of the status quo.

For a long time, humanitarians were perhaps considered (by themselves and others) exempt from the hard work of analyzing societal dynamics and their own unconscious biases because they busied themselves with the 'noble' and presumably short-term work of 'saving lives'. This is no longer accurate or sufficient. We know that lives, safety and dignity are at risk when we fail to see how social power norms and dynamics, including those humanitarians bring with us, shape the realities, needs and capacities of individuals living in situations of conflict and disaster. And the humanitarian response has become a decades-long, highly complex and multidisciplinary endeavor that can influence whole generations. It is incumbent upon us to ensure that we live up to the fundamental principles in a way that sees and serves all. This is what going 'back to basics' is about.

[1] J. Birchall, "Rollback on gender equality and women and girls' rights in international fora since 2016," K4D Helpdesk Report 933. Brighton, UK: Institute of Development Studies 2020

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