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Theme 5: Gendered Experiences of Local Volunteering in Conflicts and Emergencies

“As you might know, my parents do not want me to go because I am a girl. In their opinion, it poses more risks for the girls than for the boys. My parents themselves do not want their daughter to go. And my seniors send the boys to such risky places. There are a lot of cases in [region]. Some of them never came back and disappeared. Some of them, what shall I say, have to kneel down for hours. Girls will not be okay in this situation. So, our seniors are hesitant to send the girls on these missions.”

(Female Volunteer)

Introduction

Gender has emerged as a key consideration within humanitarian response and development practice. Many donors and agencies have made commitments to improving the inclusion of gender considerations in their programming, such as including requisite ‘gender’ sections on funding applications, promoting gender as a ‘cross-cutting theme’, and employing dedicated gender technical staff and gender focal points. The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent (IFRC) has developed the *IFRC Strategic Framework on Gender and Diversity Issues (2013-2020)* that outlines its commitments and strategic direction to Red Cross and Red Crescent national societies on how to meaningfully include gender and other factors of diversity – such as race, ethnicity, age, (dis)ability – in the Movement’s work providing assistance to the most vulnerable. The Movement has recognized that while gender is arguably the most prominent of

influencing factors of identity that shape a person's experiences throughout the life cycle, this is inextricably linked with other factors.

Although the above points to a trend whereby gender is now being understood as central to humanitarian response, little has been documented around how gender and other factors of diversity influence volunteering in conflicts and emergencies.

This theme paper explores how applying an intersectional lens that includes amongst other factors, gender, race, ethnicity and class, can reveal aspects of volunteering in conflicts and emergencies that otherwise remain invisible.

This paper will draw upon the data collected as part of the Volunteers in Conflicts and Emergencies Initiative during listening sessions with over 200 volunteers in six conflict and emergency settings to ask the following questions: firstly, how does gender, race, class and ethnicity affect volunteers' division of labour? Secondly, how does volunteering in conflict and emergency contexts affect gender relations, not only amongst volunteers but also between volunteers and their families and communities? Lastly, the paper will examine how the various risks associated with volunteering in conflicts and emergencies differ depending on one's gender, race, ethnicity and/or class. Each of these questions is extremely complex and merits further elaboration, however, the purpose of this theme paper is to offer a first exploration of these themes with the ViCE data to guide subsequent analysis and discussion, and identify further research needs.

ViCE (Volunteering in Conflicts and Emergencies) Initiative

The ViCE project is a three-year research, development and innovation initiative led by the Swedish Red Cross in partnership with Red Cross National Societies in Afghanistan, Honduras, Myanmar, South Sudan, Sudan and Ukraine, and Northumbria University. The data, collected

through a listening study methodology¹, sheds new light on the experiences and challenges faced by local volunteers, and the strategies and mechanisms they adopt to cope with increased risks and vulnerabilities, amid weakened institutional support systems. The findings offer a greater understanding of local volunteering in conflicts and emergencies, the changing nature of humanitarianism in contemporary conflicts and emergency settings, and the multiple and overlapping roles of local volunteers as humanitarian and development actors in their own fragile communities. The research provides a body of knowledge to support and facilitate a volunteer-led approach towards protecting, promoting and recognizing local volunteers working in conflicts and emergencies.

An Intersectional Approach to the Data: What Can Gender, Race, Class and Ethnicity Tell Us?

Applying a gender lens can illuminate dynamics of power and privilege, inclusion and exclusion that would otherwise remain hidden. Gender is a relational concept that requires both males and females to be examined in relation to one another, where ‘gender’ cannot be taken as synonymous with ‘women’. Further, neither women nor men can be treated as a homogenous group – even women or men in a certain geographical setting or class – since there are multiple factors that influence the relationships between people (Carbado, Crenshaw, Mays, & Tomlinson, 2013; Hankivsky, 2014; McCall, 2005). This speaks to the concept of intersectionality.

While this paper will place a particular spotlight on gender and volunteering in conflicts and emergencies, it cannot be overstated that other factors of identity such as race, class and ethnicity/tribe are mutually reinforcing – that is, inseparable – and taking these identities together can contribute to explain volunteers’ experiences. Different aspects of identity (e.g. class or tribe) will be more prominent in some contexts than others. Put another way, while one’s ethnicity may be the main influencer into how a volunteer is perceived – and received – by one local community in one context, it may be one’s class and educational background in another.

¹ Anderson, M. B., Brown, D. and Jean, I. 2012, *Time to Listen Hearing People on the Receiving End of International Aid*, Cambridge, MA: CDA Collaborative Learning Projects.

Thus, it is important to recognize that gender, class, race and other categories may have different meanings and outcomes depending on the context where volunteers are operating.

The Gendered Division of Labour amongst Volunteers

"I'd say, woman's role, not only in society, but in volunteering as well, on the working side, is quite marginalized. And I compared it, and that helped me back then to reflect on the role that we female volunteers have, because sometimes, many times, we are told: "Go ahead, give them your best smile and you'll manage to get that for us," because we have been told that occasionally. Then I say, no, I am more than that, going and laughing with somebody in order to try to get something for my colleagues; as a woman, I need to see what I can be for society. So I think in that sense I haven't noticed the Red Cross doing very much about this, I haven't noticed them getting involved so much in that gender issue on the volunteers' side." (Female Volunteer)

"We do not have any problems regarding the gender. Just look at [high position] of [region]. Most of them are females. We do not neglect someone just because she is a female. We all are on the same level. But we use each volunteer based on his or her expertise. We use female and male volunteers at the areas they are good at. We do not have any discrimination. That's my opinion." (Female Volunteer)

The above conflicting statements from volunteers point to the challenges of making any universal statements about how socially ascribed gender roles may translate into volunteer roles. The first statement illustrates that although male and female volunteers may work on the same teams, women are not immune from attitudes from their colleagues or supervisors that objectify them or do not see them as equal members of the team. The second quote calls attention to the reported mobility of women within volunteering ranks and opportunities that are available to

both men and women. In some contexts, the work that male and female volunteers undertake corresponds to wider attitudes in society about what is deemed appropriate for each, with female volunteers only interacting with other women and girls. However, as we will demonstrate, these boundaries can be challenged and crossed through volunteering, especially in conflict and emergency contexts.

Some volunteers are keenly aware of how the intersectionality of volunteer identity can impact the operations of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement (RCRC). The RCRC principle of Impartiality states that assistance is given regardless of race, religious beliefs, class or political opinions. However, some volunteers expressed frustration with the division within volunteer groups based on gender or age. The RCRC, therefore, needs to have a diverse volunteer corps that can reflect the communities in which they serve, including, as one volunteer suggested,

“[w]e workers as volunteers, we need peasants as volunteers, we need intellectuals as volunteers, need volunteers from the ethnic groups, blacks, [ethnic group], with local languages which allow having a spectrum of the country, of the development as such” (Male Volunteer)

The IFRC *Gender and Diversity Strategic Framework* addresses how to promote gender equality within the RCRC as an organisation, and not simply how to promote equality in communities in which it works. However, we cannot make any general statements on how male and female volunteers respectively view the equality of opportunity and their overall treatment as volunteers. Some volunteers cite the presence of women in high-ranking managerial positions as a sign of equality, as shown earlier in this paper. However, this conclusion does not seem representative of all volunteers given that others (some even from the same National Society) expressed perceptions that male volunteers are prioritized for training and advancement opportunities:

“There are no women in the aquatic rescue. There are certain areas where doors have not been opened to women. Do not come with tales, because it is true. They do not do it, therefore men are given a higher priority.” (Female Volunteer)

Teams and branches of volunteers are made up of local community members² and can, therefore, be seen as microcosms of the social dynamics that are at play in these communities. While the Red Cross Red Crescent Movement is based on fundamental principles of neutrality, impartiality and universality, which are highly internalized by volunteers themselves, volunteers are still members and products of their communities. These dynamics are sometimes seen at play in the volunteer ranks in terms of attitudes towards other members of the team, as the below quotation demonstrates.

“From the beginning, and I was rejected, and I was discriminated against, because I didn’t come from one of those neighbourhoods, because I didn’t know what it was like to be working with a gang member. Because I was not part of the group, or I couldn’t be part of the group. Because I was different. I wasn’t... I don’t know, I didn’t listen to certain kinds of music. I read, or I like to read, and I think that’s an exception.” (Female Volunteer)

Here, one female volunteer’s class was used as a signifier that she was perhaps not prepared to work in certain neighbourhoods, and was ostracized or “rejected” by the other volunteers.

Destabilizing Gender Relations through Volunteering

“While I entered in the section of volunteering, and while I came here, the women rights have been not considered outside. And when I came here to the section of volunteering, I have seen that they consider the women rights very much. I mean, for

² The term ‘local’ is highly loaded and contested; please see Theme Paper 2 for further discussion.

example; the women could work like a man or for example; they could study.”

(Female Volunteer)

Research has shown that conflicts and emergencies can destabilize gender relations. These shifts open up opportunities for new roles and relationships, but also place further restrictions on men and women, such as around mobility (Cockburn, 2005; Hyndman & De Alwis, 2004; Sjoberg & Via, 2010). In emergencies, volunteers often find themselves negotiating these shifting gender roles in order to adhere to the mandate of the RCRC and deliver neutral, impartial humanitarian assistance. At times, this means stepping over drawn gender boundaries and challenging cultural conventions. In some instances, volunteers reported that the culturally-appropriate dress code for them (skirts for women) were often not suitable for the work that they were tasked to do, and so sought creative ways to overcome this, such as dressing in the male RCRC uniform. As one volunteer simply said, “[t]he females in my squad dressed in male clothes for easy movement.” When done in societies with stricter social prescriptions around dress, this act can be seen as positively subversive, although it was born out of necessity and not a desire to challenge the prevailing gender norms. The volunteers consulted in this study have demonstrated incredible creativity and innovation in navigating the gendered contexts of conflicts and emergencies in their communities.

Another example is the volunteer work that was undertaken by female volunteers in one country context where women were not permitted to engage in public health outreach activities. Here, female volunteers found innovative ways to work around these social prescriptions. As one male manager explained, “the women were working every day. They didn’t kind of, it might have been seen as a house to house visit. It might have been seen as a group of friends sitting together. But women who were promoting public health work and messages and community-based health and first aid kind of training, were just continuing with their roles, unhindered, just without telling anybody.”

As girls, we don't go to the dangerous areas where there are potential troubles for us. So, we do not have any of such experiences. The reason we don't go to those places is that there is not enough protection for us. (Female Volunteer)

It should be mentioned that rarely is the gender balance amongst volunteer ranks equal. Depending on the volunteer function, location and context, the majority of volunteers may be either female or male. The gender division of labour amongst volunteers is often skewed towards assigning roles along gender lines, such as mostly female volunteers engaging in more 'caring' roles like health promotion and household visits to the elderly, while male volunteers tend to take on more front-line roles in responding to emergencies. As the above quote illustrates, there is a gendered cyclical process that occurs in some volunteer teams and within National Societies, whereby female volunteers are not encouraged or allowed to engage in activities that are deemed too risky for women, such as being part of the first team to respond to an outbreak of violence or go into a territory under the control of a non-state armed group.

Volunteer managers and volunteers themselves – both female and male – interpret that female volunteers would need a certain level of protection in order to perform these tasks, and therefore are side-lined from these duties and responsibilities. Later, this lack of experience is cited, again by both managers and female and male volunteers, as a rationale for not sending in inexperienced female volunteers into these situations. This is but one example of how although female volunteers are integral to operations in conflicts and emergencies, they often still operate within a masculine-dominated context whereby the rules are often steeped in gender norms that dictate how and where females (and males) can volunteer.

While male and female volunteers are not immune from larger societal ideas and dictates around gender divisions of labour, our data show that volunteering in conflicts and emergencies can sometimes open up spaces for volunteers to challenge these gender norms that are reflected in both communities and in Red Cross Red Crescent National Societies. The work of the RCRC in these contexts also seems to provide opportunities for men and women to make small moves outside of their confined gender roles that are produced and reproduced in their communities.

Some volunteers drew the distinction between how men and women interact on the ‘outside’ of the RCRC, as opposed to how this unfolds on the ‘inside’ within the realm of volunteering.

As the quote above demonstrates, the RCRC space can be seen in some circumstances as an opportunity for women, in this case, to engage in different activities that would otherwise be unavailable to them in other settings of their community. Further, the perceived advancements towards gender equality that the RCRC has been making seems to be an attractive quality for some volunteers who value this as well. In this way, the RCRC seems to be a site of progression whereby societal gender norms may not be applied as rigorously, and where men and women are able to move beyond restrictions set on them by the larger society, as the quote at the start of this section indicates.

A common theme that emerged in several of this study’s contexts was how volunteers’ families perceived their role as volunteers. When applying intersectional lenses to the data, we see that intricate gender norms come to the fore when volunteers speak about their families. In some contexts where there are codified restrictions on women’s mobility and the spaces in which men and women operate, this came through often when volunteers spoke of their experiences. Volunteers seemed acutely aware of the differences between various communities as well, making distinctions between rural vs. urban or ‘educated’ vs. ‘non-educated’.

“Those who are in [city] are able to be educated, go out, study and so to school but in provinces there is are no opportunities for girls. They cannot even come out from homes without their brother or father; this is oppression on women.” (Female Volunteer)

However, what is interesting is that the desire to become a volunteer and the act of volunteering itself have in many instances provided a catalyst for some of these entrenched gender norms to be challenged and eventually transformed. Some volunteers reported that they first met with resistance from their families when they expressed their desire to volunteer, and that this resistance was often rooted in socially prescribed norms on how women or men should behave

in society. However, through combinations of persistence, negotiation, and even support from siblings or other family members, these volunteers eventually secured permission and support from their families, especially heads of households.

“There was a project for risk reduction in [place]. In [place]. Yes, at that time, we went to different rural areas and spent the night there. My parents didn’t like that. Because I am a girl, they wanted to forbid me from going to those places, working there, and then spending the night. Although my parents wanted to stop me, I was able to convince them. I had to convince them. For example, “Mother, travelling there is a good opportunity.” (Female Volunteer)

It seems, then, that the volunteering for the RCRC can actually provide opportunities for social gender norms relating to be challenged and revisited, sometimes with outcomes that expand the spaces in which women and men are able to operate. In this way, volunteering can destabilize gender roles and be transformative not only at the individual level but also to the community and societal levels. It is also possible that conflicts and emergencies paradoxically provide the space in which these opportunities become even more important for male and female volunteers, as opportunities to socialize and even seek training and employment become constricted in the wider community.

What these shifts suggest is that more attention must be paid to how conflicts and emergencies shape and change gender relations within volunteer ranks as well as within communities, since these will impact on how and to which extent local volunteers can effectively respond to the needs of conflict and emergency-affected populations. Further, our data show that the dynamics of conflicts and emergencies can encourage more women to become volunteers and assume new roles and responsibilities. However, more research is required to understand the durability of these opportunities.

Research on the long-term sustainability of gains for women and men during times of conflict has shown that there is a tendency in the post-conflict period for a pushback towards restoring the

‘status quo’. This, for many women, means giving up hard-won gains made in all spheres of society – economic, social, political – to often return to domestic work (Parpart, 2015). The full extent to which shifts during conflict translate into long-term gains amongst local female (and male) volunteers is currently unknown and, hence, further research is required.

Risks and Identity

While volunteers working in conflicts and emergencies are inherently exposed to a multitude of risks, not least to their own safety and well-being, volunteers’ ethnicity, gender, race and other categories converge to influence the degree of these risks³. As mentioned earlier, the context in which volunteers operate is a major factor in determining which aspect(s) of one’s identity will be relevant.

From the data, examining risks associated with volunteering in conflicts and emergencies highlights some very clear and present dangers that may be more prevalent for certain groups of volunteers than others in a particular context. Some volunteers reported that moving across communities posed significant risks in terms of acceptance and potential for rejection or even violence⁴. In some cases, these were related to physical attributes or other markers that identified volunteers as being from one ethnicity or tribe that was negatively seen by the community in which they operated. One male volunteer described stopping unexpectedly for the night in a different village after their car broke down. Their language and accent identified the volunteers as being from one ethnicity, and they were reportedly refused help on this basis.

“We told them that we are passengers we need a place to stay, because our car got out of order, just give us 2 or 3 breads. When we told them that we are passengers and when they realized that we are [ethnicity] people, they refused to help us and told us we don’t interact with you. They were [other ethnicity] speakers. They locked the door and told us that it is not necessary, because you are [ethnicity] people, and

³ Please see Theme Papers 3 and 6,

⁴ Please see Theme Paper 2.

we don't consider [ethnicity] as human beings. There was a man that was screaming a lot, and we spent that night without any food and water." (Male Volunteer)

Another female volunteer described how she felt scared to perform needs assessments in a community of different religion and ethnicity as her own:

"I wanted to act in accordance with the seven principles of the Red Cross. You cannot show partiality to a religion or race. We have to work like this. I had to persuade my family. Also, I didn't feel safe going to the villages. It is worse for women. When we do an assessment, we have to go into individual's homes. I was too afraid to go alone. Also, I don't speak their language. So, I felt scared." (Female Volunteer)

Here the volunteer locates her own difference in terms of gender and ethnicity, citing that it is "even worse for women". Although she does not expand it further, her statement makes clear that perceived risks are associated with multiple factors of the identity of volunteers.

Sometimes these risks are inherent in working with and from within communities during active conflict, with the risk of being caught in the cross-fire. However, sometimes power relations informed by gender and other identity factors, such as age, can manifest themselves in behaviour between volunteers that results in exposing some volunteers to more risk than others. The below quote from a female volunteer illustrates this aptly:

"He [my team leader] left me there to walk all the way out of that neighbourhood, on my own, and I was like, what? 23 years old. They could have killed me, they could have raped me, anything could have happened. And it was just because he wanted to feel superior, because he was a paramedic and I was just an apprentice." (Female Volunteer)

Risks also shape the how and to what extent volunteers are able to perform their duties, as illustrated by the quote below. The frustration of this male volunteer in not being able to interact with women and girls in affected communities is accompanied by an acknowledgement of the grave physical risk that this would entail. Although he recognizes that in order to provide the best assistance it would be important to consult all members of the family to fully assess needs, his safety would be put in jeopardy based on his gender.

“The way that I could change it is to go and have interviews in their homes. To have their experiences. I am sure that those girls have much experience, different experience, and they could share. Because they have the experiences that the boys can’t have in the provinces. Especially how the females, the girls in the districts and the provinces in the areas that are very dangerous. For sure if I could do that, I would be very happy. But unfortunately, we couldn’t do that. And we cannot do that. And even if we try our best we cannot go to that province. We don’t have this permission to have interview to the daughter of the family for being interviewer or record their voice. I told you, they have this idea, and that if you look at the daughter of someone, they are going to shoot you.” (Male Volunteer)

Conclusion

This theme paper provides an initial exploration into how gender and other factors of diversity such as age, class, ethnicity and tribe influence volunteers’ experiences working in conflicts and emergencies. While no general statements can be made regarding the gendered division of labour among volunteers, the data point on the one hand to certain tasks associated with femininity, e.g. ‘caring’ roles, to be assigned to female volunteers, while other tasks associated with masculinity, such as being first responders to crises, are often assigned to male volunteers. Further, female volunteers face particular challenges to advance in the ranks to more senior roles, as well as a perceived inequality of access to training opportunities for all volunteers, regardless of gender. On the other hand, while this may echo patterns of discrimination or preference that exist in the larger

community and society where National Societies operate, the RCRC can serve as a site where societal gender norms may be challenged by potential and current volunteers.

The comments particularly from women who have faced resistance from their families to become volunteers demonstrate that societal attitudes towards women and expectations about where they can move and what they are able to do can be successfully challenged through volunteering. This can have transformative potential not only for the individual volunteer and her or his family but also for their broader communities. Despite gains for female volunteers in moving into previously inaccessible spaces and roles, longitudinal information on these shifts is required to have an understanding of the durability of these gains once the acute phase of an emergency or the post-conflict phase has begun. There is also a need to understand the impacts on gender relations during protracted conflicts and emergencies.

Lastly, applying an intersectional approach to examining the various risks facing volunteers working in conflicts and emergencies reveals that ethnicity, age and gender may combine and entail different risks for different volunteers, depending on the context. This paper provides an introduction to the major themes that emerged from the ViCE Initiative regarding gender and diversity. It flags the need for multi-scaled gender analyses that address the different gender relations of volunteering in specific contexts, and the specific ways these are shaped by conflicts and emergencies.

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