

GENDERING NEUTRALITY

A feminist investigation of international humanitarian assistance and its Gender framework.

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, discussions of gender equality have become integral to humanitarian discourse. Heavily influenced by established thought in 'gender and development' studies, gender is now included as a priority cross-cutting issue in the policy and practice of most major (western) international humanitarian assistance (IHA) providers. The concentration of women and children in displaced populations and a growing belief amongst donors and the international humanitarian community that women are among the most vulnerable groups during times of emergency has effected an 'international consensus on the need to consider gender issues in emergencies and humanitarian assistance.' (Byrne and Baden 1995: i)

This paper will investigate this 'international consensus' and problematise the suggestion that gender issues have recently and helpfully been introduced to IHA. It will do so by illustrating that IHA has always been a gendered practice and argue that the current push for gender awareness builds upon pre-existing gendered hierarchies and constructions within its policy and practice – a policy and practice which, historically, has been discursively represented as being both impartial and neutral, including gender-neutral, despite evidence to the contrary. Further, it will suggest that moves to prioritise gender do not fundamentally challenge IHA's extant gendered construction. Thus, these moves will remain insufficient to remake the existing humanitarian frameworks that have allowed gendered injustices to take place. The paper will make these arguments by investigating, first, how gendered constructions worked in IHA before gender was an explicit priority area in IHA, and second, how gender has worked similarly during the contemporary era of gender mainstreaming. Finally, the paper will look to a possible post-gender era for IHA, suggesting that a move away from the gender concept may hold the most potential for security for all gendered identities.

INTRODUCTION

A funny thing has happened on the way to international political consciousness: 'gender' has become a safe idea ...one can utter the word 'gender' – as in 'gender and development' or 'gender and democratization' or 'gender and foreign debt' – in the corridors or the World Bank, the UN secretariat or the European Commission without hearing someone guffaw ... (Enloe 2001: 111)

'Gender' is no longer a subsidiary concept in international aid discourse. First instituted in the development sphere, gender policy considerations are now significantly incorporated across the various facets of the international aid architecture. This includes, somewhat controversially, in the once 'apolitical' field of emergency relief aid or international humanitarian assistance (IHA). The 'new wars' (see Kaldor 2007) context of the post-Cold war world has seemingly necessitated a 'new humanitarianism' – as Fiona Fox (2001: 275) states, one that is "principled", "human-rights based" and politically sensitive.' Moreover, it has necessitated a humanitarianism that moves past the 'neutrality' (including gender-neutrality) that has been claimed for earlier forms of humanitarianism. The humanitarian architecture has responded to this need by mainstreaming

gender in its policies and programs. Or so it is presented in mainstream discourses of humanitarianism. As usual, the discordance between discourse and reality is apparent if one looks closely enough. As Enloe suggests, mainstreaming gender has left the humanitarian system relatively unchanged, and has instead depoliticised gender, stripping it of its transformative potential.

The aim of this paper is to unpack narratives and practices of gender policy and practice humanitarian assistance. Through a critical feminist lens, it will assess the value and effectiveness of gender mainstreaming in IHA and will be organised as follows. First, it will establish that the practice of IHA has always been gendered – far before the advent of ‘new wars’ and ‘new humanitarianism’ – and question the idea that gender has been introduced to a neutral IHA. Second, it will investigate contemporary moves in IHA to address gender injustices through gender mainstreaming. It will suggest that the discursive prioritisation of gender mainstreaming has effected little positive gendered change on the ground. Finally, it will explore future options for addressing gendered insecurities in emergency settings through IHA. Ultimately, the paper will argue that gender mainstreaming has robbed the gender concept of its performative potential for change. The lack of conceptual coherence and clarity in gender mainstreaming policy and practice has problematically denied the importance of power, discourse, context and identity. The discursive primacy of this hollow version of gender has made it unsalvageable as a tool for understanding and effectively addressing gendered insecurities in humanitarian emergencies. As such, this paper will suggest a change in focus from ‘gender’ to ‘identity’ in humanitarian programming.

In recognition of its leading role in humanitarian aid policy and provision, this paper focuses on gender mainstreaming as conceptualised and implemented within the UN system. However, the analysis presented could also be applied in varying degrees to other actors within the international humanitarian architecture, including international non-government organisations and national government aid donor agencies. Most actors have to some extent adopted the ideas of gender mainstreaming in aid policy though its conceptualisation and operationalization varies (Squires 2005: 368). Identity plays an important role in determining the philosophy of aid agencies and, consequently, the direction and form of assistance provided.

A CONCEPTUAL NOTE – WOMEN, GENDER, FEMINISM.

In the way that ‘gender’ has become a safe and accepted idea in international aid discourse, feminism has not. Nor is feminism part of the vocabulary of aid practitioners and policy makers. Yet, this paper contends that it is a feminist conception of ‘gender’ and ‘identity’ which holds the most promise for addressing gendered insecurities. A brief comment on the terms women, gender and feminism(s) and some explanation of the theoretical (feminist) approach to be used in this paper is thus needed.

Feminist IR scholars regularly allude to the fact that in international aid discourse and practice gender is often used as a ‘bureaucratically comfortable synonym for women’ (Enloe 2001: 111). This is troublesome, given the origins of the policy turn from ‘women’ to ‘gender.’ First occurring in the development sphere, this turn derived from a dissatisfaction with the singular focus on women that was practiced in WID (‘women in development’) projects of the 1970s and 1980s (Rathgeber 1990: 494). The resulting turn to gender and GAD (‘gender and development’) was hoped to enable development practice to move past a focus on women *per se* to embrace a relational and holistic understanding of gender power relations and identity as they relate to development (Hyndman 2003: 214). Simply, attention to the operation of gendered social power relations was hoped to uncover potential for structural change that could more deeply benefit the development of both women and their communities. GAD sought to move forward from the strategies of WID which often naively added women into masculine-biased social institutions and roles, without

considering the potential dangers of doing so or the underlying power dynamics at play. Ironically, the move from women to gender has made little practical difference with the two terms often used interchangeably. When women and gender are categorically incorporated into aid policy and project design, without consideration of the gendered power/discourse/structures at play, much of gender's potential is lost (Hyndman 2003: 214). In reality, despite the prominence of gender in discourse, WID, rebranded as GAD is continues to be implemented throughout the aid architecture (development and humanitarianism). The GAD agenda remains largely unfulfilled.

The contrast between the WID and GAD agendas is mirrored in and inspired by feminist IR theory, in its liberal (WID) and critical (GAD) paradigms. As the concepts of gender and women (when implemented as WID) are now 'safe' in international political consciousness, so too are liberal feminist ideals to the extent that they are embodied in these practices. As the name suggests, liberal feminism, like liberalism more generally, focuses on the principle of equality – in this case, gender equality. With a strong history of political activism, liberal feminism is probably the feminist paradigm most well-known in the public sphere. Its positivist methodology, including its claim to a universal (woman) subject also makes it compatibility with the extant international system excellent (Tickner 2001: 12-13). No substantive structural change is required within the international aid architecture itself for liberal (WID) demands to be met: just add women (Youngs 2004: 80). Critical feminism, by contrast, finds fault with liberal feminism's positivist methodology, adherence to the idea of a universal subject and acceptance of the international system as unchangeable and, implicitly, as acceptable (Lee-Koo 2007: 83). Instead, critical feminism embraces the idea of multiple-subjectivity within the category of women, acknowledging and celebrating difference and problematising the notion of an essential 'womanity'. It considers identity and interests to be personal, intersubjectively constituted, and contextually determined. As such, they are also fluid and may, for example, be as, or more, reliant on ethnicity, caste, class, religion or nationality as they are on gender (although gender will always comprise an aspect of identity/interests). In the aid context, a WID approach thus becomes inappropriate given that the category woman – as a unified interest/identity group, does not exist.

Critical feminism also understands knowledge, discourse, societal structures and institutions as gendered constructions that privilege masculine values and devalue feminine ways of being and knowing (Lee-Koo 2007: 83). This is significant in the context of the international aid architecture, hinting at the reasons for the current ineffectiveness of gender mainstreaming policy and practice. Investigation of the gendered construction of the international aid architecture provides insight into the cultures and priorities of humanitarian and development assistance internally and comparatively (Williams 2002: 90). In short, a critical feminist approach provides important insight into the workings of gender in IHA and a valuable analytical tool for forming future policy and program directions. Paradoxically, as noted, the GAD agenda is theoretically not at odds with the general commitments of the critical feminist approach. Its implementation, however, falls back to earlier (liberal) WID ideas and, as such, is problematic. This paper will thus take a critical feminist lens to explore gender mainstreaming in IHA and to search for alternatives.

NEUTRAL, INDEPENDENT, IMPARTIAL: HUMANITARIANISM BEFORE GENDER

The historical narrative of humanitarianism is nothing if not morally inspiring. Based on the early guiding principles of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) movement, allegiance to the ethical ideas of humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence was presented as fundamental for humanitarian action to be considered legitimate. As Barnett (2005:724) describes:

The principle of humanity commands attention to all humankind and inspires cosmopolitanism. The principle of impartiality demands that assistance be based on need and not discriminate on the bases of nationality, *race*, *religious belief*, *gender*, *political opinions*, or *other considerations*. The principles of neutrality and independence also inoculate humanitarianism from politics. (emphasis added).

The reality of humanitarianism however – even in its traditional form – is far more complex. Indeed, traditional humanitarian ethics, presented as apolitical and universal, are spatially, temporally, and culturally bound, making their conceptions of impartiality, neutrality and even humanity, political and, of particular interest here, *gendered*. Expressed primarily through the frame of cosmopolitan responsibility, the international discourse of humanitarianism finds its roots in the interaction of Judeo-Christian religious thought and the enlightenment philosophy of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (Barnett 2008: 246). Enlightenment thinking offered a normative push for the ideal that ‘every singular human being is worthy of equal moral concern and ought to have an allegiance to the community of humankind’ (Nowicka and Rovisco 2009: 2) with individual thinkers offering nuances to such ideas. Religious discourses, likewise, have been heavily involved in the promotion of ideas of charity for ‘fellow man’. Christian reform movements were instrumental in the promotion, institutionalisation and internationalisation of humanitarian agendas – from the rhetoric of ‘humanity’ and the ‘family of man’ to the discourse of individual liberty and human rights (Barnett 2008: 19-20). The evolution of humanitarian practice has developed with a similar cultural heritage and is guided by analogous ethical/moral perspectives, represented strongly in the ‘core principles’ of the ICRC. These principles emphasise the moral equivalence (sameness) of all aid recipients and, in theory, of humanitarian providers and beneficiaries.

Given the contextual and cultural specificity of this lineage, IHA cannot be understood as a universally derived or representative idea. Although arguably holding global appeal, its theoretical construction, problems, and perspective, are a product of certain communities – those of the Enlightenment’s rational man and his cosmopolitan descendants (including the founders of the ICRC). Prevailing discourses regarding the appropriate roles, obligations, and responsibilities of different actors within the international community to deliver or receive IHA are equally bound. They reflect the preoccupations of a distinct political community, one that has both a western and a masculine (western) bias.

Of particular interest for this paper are two issues related to this bias. The first is the framing of the universal cosmopolitan (humanitarian) subject as both masculine and western in international humanitarian discourse. Humanitarian ethics rely on an image of a universal subject of moral equivalence. However, if this concept is dissected, it becomes apparent that the universal nature of humanity is rather a *universalised* nature. That is, characteristics associated with a certain understanding of the human condition are applied universally, in a way that is not representative of all (or most) identity groups. Understandings of the ‘humanity’ inspiring cosmopolitan action may therefore not resonate with many members of the international community, for example, women, children, various non-western cultural identities and economically disadvantaged persons. Enlightenment thinkers Kant and Bentham for example, adhere to an understanding of universal humanity that takes masculine characteristics, such as rationality, autonomy and strength as norm (Hutchings 2010: 63). In doing so, they devalue, marking as unhuman, characteristics traditionally associated (in a western context) with femininity – emotionality, dependence and fragility (Hutchings 2010: 63). Further, universal humanity is understood with relation to a set of universal needs and entitlements, codified in such mechanisms as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Any such universal ethical claim or framework will necessarily be exclusionary, given its inability to address the contextually specific issues facing individuals. Significantly, such mechanisms also tend to focus on life in the public sphere, from which many women (and minority groups) are excluded (Marshall 2005: 140). The humanitarian principles of humanity, impartiality and neutrality then, assume that all persons are equally entitled to assistance insofar as they meet the requirements of universal subjecthood under this frame. This becomes problematic in situations where such expectations are not met.

The second issue related to this bias is the subsequent tendency to attempt to reconcile discordant 'others' with this universal humanity. Historically, this has been managed through the frames of neutrality and impartiality in the context of IHA. By adhering to these principles and the assumptions of universal humanity, it becomes possible to avoid political discussions that may reveal the inappropriateness of such methodology. It also remains possible to frame IHA as a truly unbiased, apolitical act. Without critical investigation and engagement of political context in recipient communities, the western masculine bias of traditional humanitarianism can remain hidden (Hyndman 1998: 242). However, as humanitarianism has increasingly politicised with the end of the Cold War, humanitarian actors have proliferated in type and number and state involvement has increased (Terry 2002: 15), it has become more difficult to ignore these realities. The result has been an acknowledgement of a need to introduce ideas of gender into IHA, and its subsequent introduction as gender mainstreaming. The following section of this paper will assess contemporary gender mainstreaming policy and practice and investigate the effects of pre-existing narratives and biases on its implementation. First, it will give an outline of the context and evolution of ideas of gender within IHA. Second, it will critically assess gender mainstreaming and argue that it suffers from several shortcomings which prevent it from making any real improvement to gendered security in emergency contexts. Finally, it will argue that the concept of gender has been assimilated by mainstream IHA practice in a way that significantly reduces its usefulness. The paper subsequently argues that reframing feminist imperatives in IHA would be timely.

VARIATION WITHOUT CHANGE: NEW HUMANITARIANISM AND GENDER MAINSTREAMING

Women, so often on the margins of the international arena are more likely to drown in, than wave from, the mainstream, unless they swim with the current. (Charlesworth 2005: 18)

'New humanitarianism' unambiguously operates in the political realm (Warner 1999). While an apolitical IHA may have never been a reality, the increasing influence of states, and their funding contributions, combined with the primacy of rights-based international norms, has now, '...compel[led] aid agencies to incorporate practices once defined as political and thus outside the bounds of acceptable company' (Barnett 2009: 653). The manner and extent to which such practices are incorporated into policy and practice depends primarily on the identity and mandate of the particular humanitarian provider and, to a lesser extent, on their donor funding dependency (Barnett 2009: 653). Most providers, however, now include, at some level, incorporate consideration of human rights, gender, environment, disability, HIV/AIDs and a range of other obstacles to equality. Of these, gender is perhaps one of the most frequently accepted policy considerations and certainly holds the attention of the international community. (see Kouvo 2004, 171 – 175).

Gender mainstreaming in IHA finds its origins in its sister field of international development assistance. The leading contemporary operationalisation of the GAD agenda, gender mainstreaming has been formally endorsed by the majority of UN agencies and has become ubiquitous in the international aid arena (Charlesworth 2005: 5). Definitions abound, but most include some variation of the following:

Mainstreaming a gender perspective is the process of assessing implications for women and men of any planned action, including legislation, policies or programmes, in all areas and at all levels. It is a strategy for making women's as well as men's concerns and experiences an integral dimension of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes in all political, economic and societal spheres so that women and men benefit equally and inequality is not perpetuated. The ultimate goal is to achieve gender equality. (ECOSOC cited in Puechguirbal 2010: 166)

Despite hints of a GAD approach in this definition, these are rarely reflected in IHA policy and practice. Evidence of a WID approach is visible however, with some recognition of the nutritional

and health needs of women and their roles as carers (Byrne and Baden 1995: 3). Increasingly too, the vulnerability of women to violence, including sexual violence is considered in refugee camp design, for instance (See Ward and Marsh 2006: 8). Analyses of local gendered power dynamics, and processes of relationship change associated with the GAD approach are noticeably absent in most cases. Likewise, analyses of the gendered construction of recipient *and* provider communities and institutions are not undertaken. Considering the rate of social change and transformation of power dynamics in crisis environments, such analyses are essential for relief to be targeted appropriately. Given the apparent acceptability of gender mainstreaming for IHA, why is this not happening? Indeed, what are the effects of a WID-esque focus for IHA, and has this itself been implemented effectively? The following analyses of gender mainstreaming will make a number of interconnected arguments related to these questions. First, there is a lack of conceptual clarity around gender mainstreaming in IHA, leaving it poorly and sporadically implemented. Second, when gender mainstreaming is attempted, there is a tendency to homogenise gendered identities, with very little appreciation of the nuances of lived experience. This occasions a negative ‘othering’ of the gendered subject, often without intention. Third and specific to IHA, a simultaneous resistance and vulnerability to politics has encouraged an incorporation, but depoliticisation of the gender mainstreaming. Consistent with this, IHA often relies on the ‘emergency excuse’, seeing gender mainstreaming as a non-urgent requirement that may wait until after the ‘real work’ is done. Finally, and consequently, gender mainstreaming has been neutralised and assimilated into the existing gendered construction of IHA. This has ensured that its transformative potential is lost and instead serves to reify the system. It is time to look for an alternative to the gender concept.

Conceptual confusion

Gender mainstreaming, as above defined, is both too limitless and too restrictive to be practical or helpful (Charlesworth 2005: 13). It suffers from a plurality of definitions, ranging from ‘inclusion of women’ to ‘reversal of gendered injustice’ to ‘displacement of gender norms’ (Squires 2005: 366). As Squires (2005: 369) highlights, ‘[t]he central normative issue here is whether gender equality requires de-gendering or the equal valuation of different contributions by women and men.’ Most definitions seem to include a combination of these prerogatives, understanding them as complementary. In many ways, however they are contradictory, leaving the questions of ‘What is the aim of gender mainstreaming?’ and ‘How can this best be achieved?’ with a multiplicity of possible answers. This has led to fragmented practical implementation, with policy formulation often relying on the domestic contexts of donors and implementing agencies, rather than the circumstances of the emergency setting (Squires 2005: 367). Given dominant liberal (western) understandings of equality as sameness, this had led many policy makers and implementing agencies to fall back on early WID formulations, simply ‘assessing the implications for women and men of any planned action,’ leading to little more than a standard impact assessment and a guarantee that relief will be distributed equally to men and women (Charlesworth 2005: 13).

The gender mainstreaming concept has thus far remained largely theoretical, with pragmatic gender work often varying substantially (Squires 2005: 375). Obtaining a measure of its effectiveness is thus difficult, due to the lack of coherence in the practice to be assessed. Its piecemeal implementation does however imply that regardless of the success of individual strategies, its overarching impact can, at best, only be limited. Despite this lack of conceptual coherence and clarity however, some consistent themes emerge throughout analyses of gender mainstreaming practices. These will be the focus of the following section. It is important to remember here, that the applicability of this commentary will necessarily be variable according to the particular implementing organisation of IHA. IHA providers, like aid recipients, have varying identities and their particular practices and philosophies are subject to these.

Identity De-individualised

The WID tendencies of gender mainstreaming practices in IHA often result in an image of ‘third world women’ as a universally oppressed group. In Hudson’s (2005: 168) language, they are ‘...by definition religious, family-oriented, conservative, illiterate and domestic...’ Added to this are western (universalised) conceptions of ‘woman’ as inherently peaceful, cooperative, gentle, nurturing and empathic. These motifs are consistent throughout much IHA practice, policy and discourse, and have a great impact on both the effectiveness of gender-sensitive IHA and its reception in recipient communities. Such representations assume straightforward power asymmetries between men (group) and women (group) that may be rectified by establishing equal social and political power within existing societal systems. The narrative is reminiscent of Spivak’s (1985: 120-130) famous allegory of ‘white men saving brown women from brown men’ and ignores the way in which gender interacts with other identity markers to sustain social relations in powerful ways (Charlesworth 2005: 13). Moreover, it neglects to acknowledge that taking political and social equality with men within the confines of IHA recipient areas as an ultimate aim, biases social relations and maintains the masculine (western) norm as hegemonic, given the extant masculine bias of IHA constructs. Significantly, reliance on pre-established notions of gender and gender relations highlights an inability to understand the particular characteristics and dynamics of gender relations in any given crisis situation and how these may impact on gendered insecurities.

An acknowledgement of the (at least partially) mythical nature of these motifs is required for gender policy to move away from stereotypical responses. Assessment of gender as a relational identity marker and its interaction with other markers (ethnicity, race, class etc) is requisite to progress past a view of aid recipients as a disenfranchised ‘other’ and engage productively. It is rarely considered for example, that some women may have significant interests in maintaining gendered social inequities as they stand, while some men may profit from their removal (Cornwall 2008: 160). When such structural and identity-specific factors are not considered, there is a problematic tendency for humanitarian emergency and suffering to be ‘presented as a technical issue, that is, one that is most directly remedied by technical solutions’ by humanitarian organisations and their donors (Raven-Roberts 2005:45). Consequently, contextual issues, such as human rights dimensions, conflict histories or colonial legacies are omitted from analysis, along with issues related to individual and group identity. IHA is then left to work without appropriate contextual history, increasing the danger of acting without appropriate sensitivity in the given situation, placing both aid recipient and provider at risk (Raven-Roberts 2005: 45).

Vulnerability VS Resistance ... Emergency!

Resulting from and contributing to this problematic gender discourse, IHA struggles both with accepting its contemporary political existence and reconciling this with its historical resistance to politics. This paradox adds extra complexity to an analysis of gender mainstreaming into IHA, which might otherwise tell a similar story to that of gender mainstreaming in the context of development assistance work. The negotiation of this dissonant existence has led IHA providers to react to the obligations of gender mainstreaming in two separate ways that work compatibly with the gender myths and imagery discussed above.

First, gender mainstreaming is *depoliticised* as much as possible, to enable the humanitarian narrative of ‘impartiality’, ‘neutrality’, and ‘independence’ to remain convincing. The theoretically transformative potential of the GAD agenda is often intentionally diluted, reducing gender mainstreaming to a process of adding female beneficiaries and homogenised women’s perspectives to existing so-called neutral, impartial intervention frameworks (Hyndman & de Alwis 2003: 215). A pure needs-based analytical framework may be used in determining the appropriate response to a given emergency. Such frameworks tend to over-rely on pre-existing notions of women as victims

or mothers, and thus disregard other gender-specific variables, needs, and vulnerabilities, rooted in unequal gender relations and societal structures. (Byrne and Baden 1995: 10)

Second, gender analysis and mainstreaming work is often delayed until such a time as ‘real’ emergency needs are dealt with. In crisis situations, gender is often deprioritised as a time-consuming optional extra or soft issue to consider perhaps when hard issues of conflict, peace and security are under control or when funding allows for such luxuries (Stammes 2010: 18). With IHA operations compelled by a sense of urgency, the crisis setting tends not to favour in-depth contextual analysis but instead frames responses as dependent for success on a culture of speed (Byrne and Baden 1995: 42). IHA providers often argue that survival (the ultimate goal) is not dependent on addressing gendered injustices or politics and is sometimes made more difficult by doing so (Hyndman and de Alwis 2003: 214). Such operations:

...favour top-down, donor dependent, expatriate-run operations, reliant on a narrow range of indicators, whilst integration of developmental and gender concerns, requires a fuller understanding of gender relations, and more bottom-up, participatory methods (Byrne and Baden 1995: 42).

Further, programs are often exempt from the same needs assessments, quality, and monitoring and evaluation requirements of other (development) aid activities due to their humanitarian status. Even when humanitarian assistance is delivered in non-acute ‘emergency’ settings (for example, famine relief), the culture of speed may continue to frame gender as an unessential superfluity, deeming it disposable.

From Transformative Potential to ‘Tick the Box’

The combination of gender mainstreaming’s conceptual confusion, tendency to rely on gender mythology, and positioning between the competing claims of politics and neutrality, has left the issues to be addressed by gender mainstreaming in need of a new home. Rather than searching to transform gender relations and correct gendered injustices, gender mainstreaming has been neutralised as just another element of the biased (masculine, western) practice of IHA, subject to both its problems and strengths. Gender has been so thoroughly bureaucratised and assimilated into discourse that it no longer has substantive meaning or transformative potential (Hyndman and de Alwis 2003: 223). Indeed, gender mainstreaming is, as Kouvo (2004: 333) points out, seen as not a ‘means to an end,’ but an ‘end in itself’ – a necessity to secure donor funding, but not something from which any real outcome can be expected or needs to be demonstrated.

The prominence of gender mainstreaming discourse in the international community hints at success. However, its ready adoption by mainstream IHA practice also indicates an ability for it to operate without ruffling too many institutional feathers. Its impact then has largely been restricted to the level of discursive change, with progress on the ground lagging significantly (Charlesworth 2005: 16). Gender mainstreaming in IHA is confined to the language and norms of its institutional and legal framework. This framework reifies gender identities into pre-existing binaries, assuming the naturalness and universality of such frames (Hyndman 1998: 255). However, for IHA to improve its relevance and effectiveness for gendered identities on the ground, substantive changes need to be made. Hyndman suggests, for example, with reference to the work of United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), that:

Differences in culture and gender cannot simply be added to an overarching framework of humanitarian assistance, nor can the development of a single set of gender policies be applicable to all humanitarian situations ... UNHCR can ‘unframe’ fixed notions of gender and cultural difference by taking such ‘variables much more seriously (1998: 255)

In the opinion of this author, however, notions of gender (and culture) are, at this point, so fully institutionalised, fixed and bureaucratised, that it may be time to look for alternatives to the gender concept. As Charlesworth (2005: 18) suggests, a more rewarding strategy might operate outside the mainstream, in a less comfortable place perhaps, but without such danger of co-option. In searching for this strategy, a critical feminist framework and focus on identity will be crucial.

CONCLUSION: A GENDERED IDENTITY CRISIS: WHERE TO FROM HERE?

Resting our claim to legitimacy as a political actor on a construct of who we are and what we can do (for you) rather than on a claim of rights, means that we can easily be excluded (again) when we fail to embody and enact the construct. The construct of difference that we argue makes us fit to participate can be turned into an argument for why it would be dangerous to allow us to participate. (Cohn 2003-2004: 18)

An understanding of subjective (gendered) identity dynamics is crucial to a realistic comprehension of security needs in crisis situations. Identity is also political. Yet, IHA's gender mainstreaming is seemingly unable to incorporate these realities into its policies and practices effectively. A critical feminist approach can and, given its compromised position, a turn away from the gender concept is needed. This paper therefore advocates a shift in focus from gender to identity to address gendered insecurities in IHA, and a plea for this focus to be maintained outside of the mainstream. This shift in focus should be pursued with a strong (critical) feminist ethic and be unafraid to engage in the politics of recipient communities.

Supporting arguments for this suggested approach are fourfold. First, as already discussed, the gender concept has been compromised in purpose to such a degree as to be currently unsalvageable. A shift in discursive focus is therefore required. Second, gender is not always the only or primary identity variable contributing to an individual's insecurity in a crisis situation. A focus on identity not only allows movement away from universalised gendered mythologies and humanitarian narratives, but also provides opportunity to contextualise experience without ascribing to relativist accounts of culture (Hutchings 2010: 70). Instead, a focus on identity provides a place of ethical engagement with the humanitarian subject, engagement with empathy, but without judgement. In addition, a focus on identity allows for a more contextually relevant privileging of factors affecting identity politics. As noted, it may not always be appropriate to prioritise gender ahead of religion, ethnicity, caste, class, economic status, age or other factors (Kouvo 2005: 317). Indeed, the predetermined privileging of gender without consideration of context may, at times, be part and parcel of the overall western masculine bias of IHA. This reality can be corrected with a more appropriate focus on an adaptable, contextually relevant analytical framework focused around identity politics.

Third, gender relations and other relations of identity are inseparable from power relations (Rao and Kelleher 2005: 59). Therefore, they are political and should be recognised and addressed as such. An acknowledgement of the importance of politics and its impact on context places the humanitarian recipient (individual or community) firmly on an equal plane of humanness with the humanitarian provider. By recognising the humanitarian subject as a political being, a detrimental reliance on gender myths will be avoided. A denaturalisation and consequent politicisation of identity, will more readily allow for policy decisions to be made outside the discursive entrapment of prevailing gender and IHA mythology (Squires 2005: 383).

Fourth and finally, a critical feminism is considered the most appropriate and well positioned framework to guide this agenda. This is because '...a thoroughly feminist analysis incorporates *multiple* bases of identity and power relations, not exclusively gender ... they are mutually constitutive' (Hyndman and de Alwis 2003: 223). A focus on identity over gender *per se* is not anti-feminist and, indeed, is compatible with ideas of identity as grounded in 'relational-positionality' (Hyndman and de Alwis 2003: 213). As such, it enables the dichotomy between

universalised humanity and the reality of the contextualised subject to be overcome by linking localised individual experiences to wider global processes. In this way the divide between the aid provider and recipient can be lessened and a politics of empathic humanitarianism encouraged (Hudson 2005: 155).

Jacqui True states in her assessment of gender mainstreaming in international institutions that:

Gender mainstreaming has not brought the revolution in gender relations or global governance that feminists hoped for. Yet it is naïve to expect bureaucratic structures with all their pathologies and power relationships to deliver anything more than incremental change that precipitates an ongoing process of reform and contestation (True 2010: 200).

This is a valuable observation. International institutions, including providers of IHA, are not well-equipped to be drivers of social change, but rather, respond most readily to changes in wider public opinion and external lobbying. It is unlikely that it would be possible to institute the changes advocated in this paper within the context of such bureaucracies, without widespread popular support. It may also be undesirable for such changes to occur first within mainstream organisations, for fear of (again) compromising transformative potential. The greatest potential for effective and innovative change in this arena then, is located outside mainstream organisations, in alternative grassroots and indigenous movements, where greater experimentation and adaptive practices are possible and encouraged.

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