

IS SEXUAL VIOLENCE BEING EFFICIENTLY ADDRESSED IN GLOBAL CONFLICT ZONES?

The UK will invest millions of pounds to reduce the rampant rates of sexual violence in war-affected countries. **Samer Abdelnour** examines why part of the solution will be to give women fuel-efficient stoves.

UK FOREIGN SECRETARY William Hague will use the 2013 Presidency of the G8 to draw attention to the pervasive problem of sexual violence in global conflict zones. On 25 March, he announced a plan to provide £180m in new funding to support health services in the Democratic Republic of Congo as well as increased efforts to bring perpetrators to justice. At least some portion of the UK's money will be funnelled into NGOs such as the International Rescue Committee which distributes 'dignity packages' containing fuel-efficient stoves and extra clothing to women. The idea is that the risk of sexual violence will decrease if women spend less time searching for firewood and water.

Specialised stoves are an entrenched measure of rape prevention and many prominent people doing humanitarian work advocate their distribution. Lynne Featherstone (2013), the UK's Under-Secretary for International Development, has stated that improved cooking technology will reduce a woman's risk "of being assaulted, raped, and murdered". Actor-advocate Angelina Jolie has expressed similar reasoning, noting it's "a sad fact that when you ask how to reduce sexual violence the answer is to help them not have to go out" (Borger, 2013). The assumption among public figures is clear: women are safe inside camps. Sexual violence happens "out there".

Given the UK's commitment to reducing the abuse of conflict-affected women it is worth re-examining the history of this logical connection. How did a domestic technology designed to keep women confined to camps become a routine part of rape-prevention strategy? Like mosquito nets to prevent malaria or blankets for children fleeing Syria, stoves-for-rape is a one-shot humanitarian intervention. It has seduced NGOs and international donors by reducing a complex political issue to a seemingly manageable, technical problem.

FUEL-EFFICIENT COOKING is a long-standing preoccupation in global development. Since the 1970s, agencies like the World Bank have been encouraging women to adopt fuel-efficient methods to reduce deforestation and the effects of smoke inhalation. But over the last decade or so, the idea that traditional fires must be replaced by specially engineered technologies has become a kind of dogma in the humanitarian community, attracting an outpouring of investment from a variety sources.

The battle against sexual violence in crisis situations is a key reason why many agencies and donors – UN agencies, NGOs, as well as USAID and DFID – justify projects for better cooking technology. In September 2010, for example, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton launched the Global Alliance for Clean Cookstoves, an initiative to promote a global industry for producing fuel-efficient stoves. In addition to the traditional environmental and health concerns, the Global Alliance also claimed the right kind of stove could reduce the "personal security risk" faced by displaced women and girls (US Department of State, 2011).

Personal security risk is sanitised language for "sexual and gender-based violence" (SGBV), which is itself a rather vague term that humanitarian workers use to refer to the daily abuses they witness in places like refugee camps and global conflict zones. Though there is no official definition of SGBV, offences include harassment, forced marriage, physical assault, domestic violence, sexual assault and murder. The term is increasingly being applied in conflict situations to demarcate gender-specific violence from other, simultaneous forms of violence taking place in conflict-affected areas. Today's "new wars" are extremely messy. Categories like SGBV frame programming initiatives; they organize chaos into manageable units.

Here's why this category is ambiguous: the wider western public imagines that when a humanitarian organisation arrives to deliver goods and services to a warzone, it also brings some measure of stability and safety. This is simply not true. Establishing security among displaced populations is extraordinarily challenging. The line separating civilians from perpetrators can be blurry, and partisans from all sides of a conflict often live and operate side by side within the same refugee camps. For instance, "combatants", themselves displaced by violence, may become recipients of aid. Similarly, the displaced may take up arms as "refugee warriors" or resort to banditry. What is more, the presence of competing security apparatuses inside camps makes their internal atmosphere volatile to say the least.

The cold hard truth is that people warehoused in camps often suffer pervasive insecurity. In unstable situations, sexual violence is not confined to any particular location and it is not only used as a weapon of war. Gender-based violence is facilitated by the social vulnerabilities created by displacement, and can be exacerbated by aid-induced economies. It is heightened when the civilian population is heavily armed, and when marginalised youth turn to banditry. And so, SGBV occurs inside the camps and outside, while women search for fuel and water, but also when they seek work or attempt to re-establish livelihoods. For those displaced by war, gender violence is a part of everyday life.

The reports from conflict-affected areas speak volumes to the slippery nature of the phenomenon. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, the International Rescue Committee (2013) recently found in one camp that "in 45 per cent of the cases the perpetrator was someone known to the woman, typically a family member, partner or someone from the local community". Numbers like these raise a crucial question for UK policy makers: if women are not truly safe in camps, why is the humanitarian industry spending millions on cooking stoves in a futile endeavour to keep them there?

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HISTORY IS INSTRUCTIVE. The first time stoves were promoted as a gender-specific protection tool was in Darfur, after humanitarian organisations expressed concern over violent attacks on women and girls. Fuel-efficiency was attached to a specific narrative advocacy groups put forward: that African women and girls were being targeted by Arab militias "out there" in the bush (Abdelnour and Saeed, 2013).

In Darfur, women are a significant part of the economy. They travel long distances to collect grass or wood for sale or personal use, and must visit nearby towns and markets to find work. Since one of the reasons Darfuri women consistently leave camps is to search for cooking fuel, a peculiar logical connection emerged to explain where and in what circumstances these women were most vulnerable; if wandering to collect fuel exposed women to heightened risk of sexual violence, then reducing need for fuel should reduce the risk of attack.

In late 2005, a Washington-based humanitarian advocacy organisation called Refugees International (RI, 2005) released a significant "call to stoves" which crystallised a framework of action specific to Darfur. The document stated that "By reducing the need for wood and emission of smoke, a switch to simple, more fuel-efficient stoves could reduce the time women spend collecting wood, a task that exposes them to the risk of rape and other forms of gender-based violence."

It's not difficult to see why the connection between fuelwood and sexual violence has appealed to humanitarian advocates. "Efficiency" transforms an overwhelming social and political issue into a resolvable technical problem. Rather than focus on the overall incidence of sexual assault, stoves isolate one dimension of the violence affecting Darfuri women and offer to control it. Once increased fuel-efficiency gained currency as a generalisable tool of rape reduction, NGOs and donors had a clear

programming objective. They began experimenting with different stove technologies, designs and plans for product dissemination.

Stoves benefitted from the influx of international aid for Darfuris to become a taken-for-granted part of the humanitarian toolkit and a lucrative industry. As I have documented elsewhere stove promoters showcased up to a dozen different models to compete for these dollars, compared in terms of efficiency, cultural appropriateness, and cost (Abdelnour, 2011). At one point, the jockeying was so intense that one international efficient stove expert described the situation as Darfur's "stoves war". Tens of thousands of efficient stoves have since been delivered in Darfur by various agencies. One Darfuri woman I met sometime after 2006 had received six stoves from six separate NGOs.

Over time, the stoves available to the world's low-income women have without a doubt become more energy efficient. Many smart people – political advocates in New York, engineers in Berkeley, and NGO directors in Khartoum – have worked tirelessly to design them this way. The result of pouring money into stove design has returned a thoroughly predictable result: more efficient stoves and a booming humanitarian stoves industry. But there is no real evidence that these technical increases in fuel efficiency can decrease the overall rates of sexual violence in conflict-affected areas.

THE LOGIC THAT STOVES can prevent sexual violence is a media friendly dead end. It raises public awareness of global sexual violence, but masks the root causes of the phenomenon. The kinds of violent crimes Hague and the G8 are targeting do not occur because people leave home to carry out routine chores. They occur because victims and their prospective attackers live side by side in war torn areas, in conditions of profound political instability.

The bottom line is that pervasive sexual abuse cannot be solved by humanitarians handing out domestic products. "Stoves reduce rape" is a distracting rhetoric because it unduly transfers the burden of security into the private lives of the most vulnerable.

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