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A Feminist Approach to Safe Spaces for
Women and Girls in Humanitarian Response

Front cover: Rohingya girl-friendly space, Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh

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The creation and development of safe spaces for women and girls in emergencies and protracted crises has now become a key mechanism in humanitarian response. However, how a safe space is defined, what it represents, how it is managed and whether it promotes gender-transformative change could make all the difference to the lives of women and girls at risk of violence and abuse.

With more than a third of women worldwide experiencing violence and abuse in their lifetime, violence against women is considered the most pervasive and widespread form of human rights abuse. It is estimated that 35% of women have experienced physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence or sexual violence by a non-partner (not including sexual harassment) at some point in their lives. However, some national studies show that up to 70% of women have experienced physical and/or sexual violence from an intimate partner in their lifetime.

In humanitarian crises, women and girls face even a higher risk of violence and abuse with the weakening of family and community support networks.¹ This includes exploitation and failure to access services for social security. ActionAid sees the creation of safe spaces for women in crisis settings as a foundation for building the individual and collective power of women affected by disaster and conflict, supporting their leadership and agency in crisis response. Safe spaces also play an important role in the protection of women's rights in times of crisis, when there is an increased risk of violence, exploitation and abuse. They are a core element of ActionAid's pioneering efforts to drive Women-Led Community-Based Protection in humanitarian emergencies worldwide, supporting women from affected communities to identify and drive their own responses to threats to protection threats in times of crisis.

Safe spaces for women

A safe space is defined as a formal or informal space where women feel physically and emotionally safe. The term 'safe' refers to the absence of trauma, excessive stress, violence (or the fear of violence) or abuse,² where women have the freedom to express themselves without fear of judgment or harm. Safe, inclusive, women-only spaces where women can come together to develop their leadership, agency and collective capacity is a vital element in supporting women to define and drive their own protection needs. By doing so, the power to plan and implement community-based protection activities is shifted to the women affected by the crisis.

Safe spaces should be open to all women at risk of harassment and abuse. The concept should embrace the diversity of women affected by crisis, ranging from ethnicity to class/caste, religion, age, disability and sexual orientation, gender identity and expression. Should a group of women feel the need to have their own separate space, then they should be able to do so. This includes adolescent girls too.

Responsibilities of adulthood, such as routine housework and caring for younger children, are often imposed on girls at an early age, impeding their personal growth and development. Furthermore, early and forced marriage and teenage pregnancy disempower and deprive girls of their fundamental rights to safety, education and health and wellbeing. Woefully, each year 12 million girls in the world are married before the age of 18, with the risk increasing at times of humanitarian crisis.³ ActionAid recognises the importance of ensuring that our protection programming includes interventions that directly address the issues and needs of adolescent girls whilst giving appropriate attention to child protection. This is to ensure that there is adequate space for adolescent girls to define and lead on addressing their own issues.

¹ Le Masson, V. Lim, S. Budimir, M. Podboj, J. (2016) Overseas Development Institute (ODI), Care International and Unite to End Violence against Women (United Nation's Secretary General Campaign)

² UNFPA (2015) Women and Girls' Safe Spaces: A Guidance Note based on Lessons Learned from the Syrian Crisis

³ Girls Not Brides (2016) Child Marriage in Humanitarian Crisis



Nandège Pierre, OFASO
(women's rights
organisation) Haiti

Why are safe spaces important?

“It’s very important for women to play a leadership role during emergencies. This can prevent serious violations like violence against women, including sexual violence and psychological violence. The presence of women itself is a deterrence which safeguards women’s rights. Aid also reaches local people more when local women’s organisations are involved. Sometimes men use aid for exploitation, for example demanding sexual favours.”

Nadège Pierre, OFASO, Haiti. Hurricane Matthew Response

Haiti, Hurricane Matthew - After Hurricane Matthew devastated southwest Haiti in October 2016, ActionAid Haiti and our partner, Konbit Peyizan Grandans (KPGA), launched a women-led humanitarian response. Protection volunteer groups were formed in the temporary shelters to share messages and support women immediately after the hurricane. Women's safe spaces were created for and by women as hubs for

women's rights and protection. In these safe spaces, women-led community committees determined beneficiary criteria and then planned and undertook response activities. This operational approach devolved power and funding to the most vulnerable women affected by the disaster. It puts into practice ActionAid's call for a more localised international humanitarian system and locally-led responses to specific crises.



Women's Committee planning aid distribution in the aftermath of Hurricane Matthew, Haiti 2016

Creating safe spaces where women and girls can organise and mobilise around their emergency response and protection needs plays a central role in ActionAid's rights-based programming. It is designed to support those most affected to define and lead their own agenda, rather than being passive beneficiaries of humanitarian assistance. This approach takes into account pre-existing gender inequalities and injustices the women and girls have experienced in these contexts.

Safe spaces should protect women's privacy and enable them to speak freely as they develop confidence and form connections with others. In many societies affected by crisis, women have limited space to meet and men inhabit public spaces, while women face restrictions on their mobility or their right to safety in public space is undermined. While the primary aim of safe spaces in ActionAid's humanitarian response programming is to strengthen women's leadership and agency, these women-only spaces can also be sites for providing direct



Women's Safe Spaces Haiti, 2016

access to information, humanitarian assistance including cash, psychosocial support and other essential services, as well as referral to specialised gender-based violence (GBV), reproductive and mental health services.

Safe spaces can provide a platform for women to analyse the protection issues and challenges they face and establish community-based protection mechanisms to prevent and respond to violence, exploitation and abuse. They can provide an opportunity for women to establish their own mechanisms for monitoring and reporting violence and abuse. Moreover, through safe spaces, women can facilitate safe and women-led relief distributions, which are inclusive of all women, ensuring that women's safety and dignity is respected. Physical spaces can also enable women from affected communities to link with women's rights groups and networks to strengthen their collective power to influence humanitarian actors.

Transformational change

Supporting and strengthening existing women's organisations, groups or organised collectives, or facilitating the formation of new groups initiated by crisis-affected populations, gives women the opportunity to come together, support each other and build their knowledge and awareness of rights. It also provides a space for women to initiate and lead community-based responses to protect their rights in times of crisis. These processes have the potential to catalyse women's collective action in driving social change, tackling the root causes of the gendered protection problems they face and transforming their situation through leadership and action. Collectively, women's leadership can also influence decision-making in emergencies to transform humanitarian systems and structures, influencing resource allocations and priorities, and ensuring increased respect, protection and fulfilment of women's rights. Developing a risk management matrix is highly recommended, identifying risk factors and ways of managing them. One of the risks can be backlash from the community. It's crucial that steps are taken to address those risks. See below how ActionAid Bangladesh has dealt with such issues.

ActionAid Arab Region (AAAR) has been supporting Syrian refugee women, addressing the violence and abuse they face in Jordan and Lebanon. Women's safe spaces, named Women's Circles, have been operating in collaboration with local partners in major urban centres, such as Mafraq and Zarqa, where there are large populations of Syrian refugees. In Zarqa alone, 120 women regularly participate in the Women's Circle, forming support networks, sharing experiences and talking about the challenges they face as women and as refugees, seeking solutions from each other as well as from support staff. The majority of the current members are from Dara, a Syrian town close to the border with Jordan. On average, 15 women per month are referred to specialised legal, social and health services, following initial assessments. In addition, women discuss and plan joint activities for the month ahead. Activities vary from

physical exercise, art and cooking to facilitated sessions on stress management, health and nutrition. To advocate for change on issues of unequal gender relations and discriminatory social norms, Women's Circle participants have set up Women's Protection Action Groups (WPAG) where they discuss and plan awareness-raising and advocacy activities targeting key audiences. Membership of WPAGS is open to all Women's Circle participants, though the majority of the current members are those who have been participating in Women's Circles for over a year, having gained confidence in engaging with local duty bearers. Recently, Zarqa WPAG held awareness-raising events at local schools, engaging students, parents and teachers in discussions on how parents and teachers can best support and empower adolescent girls who are frequently at risk of street harassment and abuse.



Zarqa Women's Circle, May 2019



Zarqa Women's Circle,
Jordan, May 2019

ActionAid's approach to safe spaces

ActionAid's approach to establishing safe spaces in emergencies promotes the following core principles:

- Leadership and empowerment of women from affected areas in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of safe spaces
- Safe and secure with appropriate lighting, privacy and security
- Centrally located to support easy access and close proximity to hygiene facilities
- Accessible to all women without physical or other barriers to access
- Inclusive of all women, including the most marginalised and excluded groups
- Women-only spaces that are child-friendly or offer a separate child-friendly space with supervised care
- Contextually appropriate and tailored to the emergency context
- Provide non-judgmental and factual information and support
- Facilitate access to information, services and support
- Coordinated with other actors and host communities to ensure streamlined support

For safe spaces to be truly transformative, they should facilitate access to permanent spaces for women so they can continue organising after the emergency is over. By bringing together women from affected communities with established women's organisations, they can also strengthen women's collective power to act.

Establishing safe spaces for women

Preparedness-The establishment of 'reflect circles' for women as part of preparedness activities, where women can reflect on current issues, challenges and power relations. Here the women consider threats to their safety and security in times of crisis and identify strategies that can enable them to address these threats and reduce vulnerability. These groups can then be activated in times of crisis in their own communities or to support neighbouring villages and communities.

Initial Assessment-This should be done with the active participation of women from affected communities in assessing safety and security issues, choice of location, timing and scope of activities. This process can also help identify potential women from affected communities who can take on leadership and facilitation roles in the safe space, alongside any specialised staff. This phase should also look at forming partnerships with other stakeholders, including women's rights organisations and service providers.

Promotion of Safe Spaces-The strategy for promoting safe spaces within the community needs to be established to ensure women are aware of the space and its purpose, and that any barriers to participation are addressed in timely manner. This may include creating an acceptance of the space with local leaders and men in the community, as well as outreach to marginalised groups to facilitate their access. This may also require careful attention to signage to avoid any negative perceptions of the space.



Rohingya women's safe space (WFS), Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh

Focus on the safe spaces-for ActionAid, the key goal of safe spaces for women is to support women to build rights awareness and facilitate processes where women can define and respond to their own protection needs as part of ActionAid's Women-Led Community-Based Protection Approach. These spaces can support women-led processes in times of a crisis, including generating community-based evidence, planning safe distributions and other community-based protection mechanisms. Spaces can also be used for capacity-strengthening and the training of emerging women leaders, local women's Community Based Organisations (CBOs) and networks in women's rights, protection and leadership. As part of building women's collective power, safe spaces are also important in enabling women to socialise and rebuild their social networks and support structures.

Integration with other activities and services-safe spaces can be integrated with other humanitarian response activities and services, including:

- Providing psychosocial support and recreational activities as a means of supporting women to reduce distress, support recovery, mental health and wellbeing
- Providing access to information and awareness-raising
- Designing and promoting appropriate complaints mechanisms
- Providing respite from the high demands of women's unpaid work
- Enabling privacy for lactating mothers
- Facilitating distribution of relief items such as hygiene kits and safe distributions of food and cash
- Facilitating referrals to GBV and other specialised services without judgment
- Supporting women's economic empowerment (WEE) and access to resources through the provision of cash transfers, vocational training and livelihood recovery programs

Safe space checklist

- Ensure women and girls are involved in all decision-making in relation to the space, including leading the establishment and running of the space and determining the timing of activities
- Coordinate with the government and women's organisations as well as the Protection Cluster and GBV coordination mechanism
- Establish effective referral pathways that will ensure women can access support across sectors
- Support women to engage communities, parents, husbands and community leaders in key decisions
- Make the space accessible and inclusive for women and girls
- Ensure that complaints mechanisms are developed with women and actively promoted, and that all staff and volunteers understand and adhere to ActionAid's code of conduct
- Ensure that all activities are women-led and that the space is protected as women-only
- Plan for sustainability and/or appropriate exit strategies
- Develop a trusting and transparent relationship with the affected community, ensuring regular communication to discuss and address concerns

Managing risks

This work requires staff to be mindful of women's responsibilities as in crisis-affected communities unpaid care work tends to increase and there are additional time burden-such as attending distributions and caring for injured relatives. It is imperative at all times to safeguard the privacy of women who choose

to attend, particularly if the space is being used for any data gathering or communications. Confidential feedback and complaints mechanisms should also be developed with women and publicised so that women accessing safe spaces can provide direct feedback on improvements needed to the space or concerns about the broader humanitarian response.



Rohingya women-friendly space, Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh

“Men were really concerned about where women were going... We had to explain door-to-door that this is a women-friendly space, they can come and it’s all safe. But it was very challenging explaining this. We talked also to the male family members to explain. We faced challenges every day. Male members like the Imam were often difficult to convince-they were threatened by the idea of women having more knowledge and power. Sometimes they come and say ‘What is this place?’, so we explain and offer them help and information.”

Afruz Sultan, ActionAid WFS Centre Manager

The journey of Rohingya women

In August 2017, hundreds of thousands of Rohingya people fled Rakhine state in Myanmar into neighbouring Bangladesh, seeking refuge from waves of violence and alleged ethnic cleansing carried out by the Myanmar military. They were broadly welcome by the people and government of Bangladesh, but nearly two years on they are still struggling to recover from the trauma and build new lives in the refugee camps that remain their temporary home.

Rohingya people follow a very strict and conservative version of Islam which has severely curtailed the rights of women and girls, even before the crisis hit. Culture and customs dictate that the Rohingya girls cannot leave the house once they reach puberty and child marriage is common and even desirable. Women are largely under-educated with no access to formal education. Domestic violence is also a deeply entrenched issue. Men beating their wives is accepted as normal by almost all community members. Polygamous marriages and men having the right to divorce easily and at any time with no obligation to compensate their wife has left Rohingya women open to both emotional manipulation and poverty, exacerbating the issues of both child marriage and domestic violence. The threat of violence perpetrated by the Myanmar army meant that women and girls were further victimised and confined to the home both day and night during their time in Myanmar.

The pre-existing lack of freedom meant that it was almost impossible for women to take control of any part of the humanitarian response. They remained confined to their tents. Women therefore did not have a say in how aid was distributed, leaving the decision-making to male leaders who communicated with the Bangladeshi authorities on their behalf. Imams (religious leaders) were known to warn women off receiving aid such as hygiene kits.

ActionAid has been able to respond and adapt to some of these challenges. For example, despite having no plans to engage with religious leaders, when staff discovered they were stopping women from collecting hygiene kits, they undertook sensitisation sessions so that the Imams would permit women to collect their kits. Furthermore, ActionAid set up women-safe spaces (WFS) through which they supported Rohingya women in addressing violence against women and girls, child and forced marriage and set up women-led committees on water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) and health.



First Aid training session, WFS, Cox’s Bazar, Bangladesh

For many Rohingya women, now is the first time in their lives that their voice is being heard and this has had a powerful effect on them. The WFS initiative has created a place where women can find themselves, raise their voice and begin to act as catalysts for change. Indeed, programmes have been introduced in response to the issues that women have brought back from the community, including sewing training to help them earn an income and homestead gardening to address the lack of vegetables in the food-aid diet.

ActionAid currently runs eight women-friendly spaces, all of which are recently constructed, offering areas for group meetings as well as a wide range of activities including GBV, domestic abuse and child marriage awareness-raising, economic empowerment and leadership training, legal, nutrition, sexual and reproductive health advice, psychosocial counselling and a creche. Separate spaces within each WFS have been created for adolescent girls, older women and women with disabilities, offering choices to women to bond and build relations with the group they closely identify with.

Female community mobilisers were employed to encourage women to attend the safe spaces. This proved to be a difficult task.

There has been remarkable determination to encourage both women and men to use the safe spaces. This has meant that, despite being new and unfamiliar, the WFS is undoubtedly making a big difference to the lives of those who attend; supporting them to value themselves and encourage others to do the same.

This think piece was co-authored by Michelle Higelin, Country Director of ActionAid Australia, and Mandana Hendessi, Head of Research and Programme Policy, Humanitarian Policy and Practice at ActionAid UK, with contributions from Claire Grant, Women's Protection Advisor at ActionAid International.

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