Gender Research in the Syrian Aid Response: Shortcomings and Solutions

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Contents

Executive Summary

Despite the sustained emphasis on gender-sensitivity among donor agencies and implementers, attempts to introduce gender perspectives into aid activities in Syria have yielded mixed results. While some of the challenges impeding gender-responsive aid action in Syria are widely understood, additional factors — seldom-recognised — are embedded within the approaches of donors and implementers themselves. This paper identifies four primary methodological shortcomings in the research that is designed to support gender-responsive aid action in Syria, including: the research's often limited scope, the failure to adopt meaningful intersectional approaches, the exclusion of LGBTQ+ persons, and the overemphasis on quantitative indicators.

Introduction

The research that undergirds gender-responsive aid programming in Syria deserves significantly more attention than it has received to date. Aid actors frequently misfire in their attempts to systematically introduce gender perspectives into their projects, typically reducing gender-specific issues to technical frameworks, checklists, and bureaucratic processes. This has negative implications for issues as broad as the underlying rationale of gender-sensitive programmes and the application of gender-related data.

In Syria, as elsewhere, aid organisations often carry out research to inform and shape gender-responsive aid programming.[1] The resulting reports are often broad in scope and frequently cover multiple, diverse programming locations in generalising strokes. Like other aspects of the conflict in Syria, however, gender dynamics are highly localised, and experiences vary significantly according to location, context, and personal status. Although the steady growth of what can be described as practice-oriented gender research should be met with optimism, a review of this research in Syria draws attention to blind spots that may limit its effectiveness in practice. Such research is shaped not only by contextual or programmatic factors, but also by the needs of donor reporting mechanisms and funding instruments, as well as conceptual and methodological shortcomings in the literature on gender itself. Based on an extensive review of literature carried out by implementing partners, this paper identifies four broad methodological shortcomings that are pervasive in gender-focused research in Syria. They include A) the limited scope used to assess gender-related issues (*e.g.,* rights, justice, violence, empowerment, participation and inequality); B) a lack of the intersectional analysis[2] needed to understand the root causes of conditions (*e.g.,* disadvantage, vulnerability, oppression and exclusion from power); C) insufficient inquiry into all groups encompassed under gender, including LGBTQ+ persons; and D) an overemphasis on quantitative indicators, to the exclusion of meaningful qualitative data.

Though at times critical of the way gender is articulated and researched in Syria, the paper that follows is not intended as an assessment of the approach to gender as practised by any specific implementer or in any specific project or donor portfolio. Nor does this paper set out to present a universal model for incorporating gender perspectives in aid activities. Rather, its purpose is to provide a common footing for mutual reflection on the state of gender research, policy, and programming, in hopes of offering recommendations to improve such research in the future and allow donors and partners to more confidently and honestly discuss the challenges of and opportunities for improving the gender-responsiveness of their work.

Key Findings

- Oversimplified representations of beneficiary groups have proliferated in gender research due to the scarcity of reliable gender-related data and continuous research, which has reduced aid impact.

- Although gender analysis is often expected during project inception, continuous gender monitoring is rare. The pressure to produce early-stage gender analysis limits the time for substantive assessments and risks blunting overall project impact by fixing poor assumptions within project design. In effect, the 'one and done' approach to gender analysis promotes a notion that gender dynamics are static and can be readily addressed through technical frameworks and templates.[3]

- By focusing predominantly on women, current gender research in the aid sector frequently perpetuates the mistaken view that gender issues primarily, or exclusively,

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concern women. This view carries over into programming and funding priorities and risks limiting the reach and efficacy of aid activities.

■ Similarly, a binary approach to gender is pervasive in aid-sector gender research, thereby excluding LGBTQ+ people from policy and programming.

■ Intersectionality is often highlighted but rarely applied in concrete terms in gender research, where intersectional approaches are often used only to account for diversity in beneficiary groups. This is a missed opportunity to improve aid impact by using an intersectional lens to assess the way social categories interact and create distinct disadvantages, vulnerabilities, and forms of oppression.

■ A top-down emphasis on hard evidence and value for money has driven the overuse of quantitative data in gender research, such that aid agencies are sometimes pressured to prioritise certain types of gender-related data and narratives over others in order to meet reporting requirements and secure funding.

Recommendations

■ Designing gender-sensitive interventions requires greater active participation by those affected by crisis. Only with continuous consultation can gender issues be analysed in context and addressed through aid implementation.

■ To address gender equality through aid activities, analysts and practitioners should employ concrete intersectional analysis to identify the root causes of vulnerabilities and the many ways in which social categories intersect to aggravate vulnerabilities and privilege some while disadvantaging others.

■ Aid actors should invest in the hiring and training of personnel who can collect and analyse disaggregated data from an intersectional perspective. Despite rhetorical commitment, monetarily, the emphasis on gender research and analysis in aid remains low. The growing appreciation for gender perspectives in approaches to areas like conflict prevention and sustainable economic recovery should be reflected in the allocation of resources.

■ Gender research should be carried out not only during project development, but continuously throughout implementation. Donors should fund projects accordingly, as

the demand for gender research without explicit support for continuous field research has driven some aid agencies to resort to flawed or irresponsible research practices.

■ Donors should adopt inclusive definitions of gender that encourage research and programming designed to address the needs and perspectives of LGBTQ+ people.

■ Donors should encourage the mainstreaming of gender analysis as an integral part of conflict analysis in support of projects. Genuinely conflict-sensitive aid action is impossible without disaggregated data and comprehensive analysis, including gender-related data. To this end, quantitative data collection must not come at the expense of qualitative approaches, which serves a fundamental role in evidencing gender-responsive aid efforts.

■ Donors can promote the use of gender perspectives within their project portfolios by strengthening their internal capacity to assess gender analysis and research. This may require a comprehensive strategy to build internal knowledge on gender and conflict, train in-house personnel in such gender analysis, and strengthen internal approaches to analytical assessments.

■ Support a broader scoping study to identify research and measurement gaps for gender in the Syrian context. This has been done in other contexts by mapping indicators across gender research outputs. This has yet to be done for Syria.

Scope and Methodology

This paper assesses practice-oriented gender research[4] on Syria produced mostly by NGOs and INGOs. In contrast with academic literature on the subject of gender-responsive aid action, the research assessed in this report is intended to inform the design of aid projects, support bids for prospective projects, or meet donor reporting requirements. Such research is sometimes identified as "operational" or "interventional". Literature was sampled from databases and the websites of relevant aid agencies and research organisations. To be included, a publication must: treat Syria as its primary research context; explicitly deal with gender as an overarching theme; be written in English or have an English translation available online; and be published between 2016 and 2021. While broad in scope, COAR's review does not address internal or non-published reports, nor is it inclusive of all actors working within the gender policy space.

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4   The term 'practice-oriented research' is used to refer to grey literature published by aid agencies, think tanks, consultancies, and practitioners concerning the design of aid programmes in conflict environments. The term 'grey literature' refers to research published outside academic and commercial channels, to include reports, policy documents, white papers, working papers, evaluations, and theses and dissertations.

Gendering Aid Policy and Practice: The Case of Syria

Syria is among the many crisis-affected settings in which a deeper thematic interest in gender has emerged in recent years, such that virtually all major donors to the Syria crisis response emphasise that gender-sensitivity is a fundamental concern of their programmes. Although almost every aid agency involved in the Syria response is now "doing gender", the manner in which they are doing so is to a large extent shaped not only by contextual factors, but also by donor reporting requirements. This, paired with the general trend among aid agencies to commit to data-driven programming decisions, has driven a surge in gender-related data and research in Syria.[5]

The advent of such research is, in theory, a welcome development. Clearly, an understanding of changes in gender dynamics is fundamental to identifying sustainable resolutions to conflict and displacement concerns. Nonetheless, although partners have taken strides to meet donor expectations concerning gender, results have been mixed. While there are many contextual reasons for these results, it is critical to recognise that the pressures resulting from the architecture of the donor-funded international aid system can inadvertently incentivise gender research practices that are out of sync with on-the-ground realities or capital-level priorities. Among them, donor reporting requirements have been described as contributing to partners' reliance (or over-reliance) on "often-performative administrative processes",[6] quantitative indicators, and targeting metrics that can come at the expense of more rigorous analytical methods.[7]

Not surprisingly, funding lies at the heart of many partner concerns. Aid actors in Syria have at times refrained from adapting projects in response to emerging findings, hesitating to acknowledge that previously held assumptions were inaccurate, out of fear that funding will be threatened if they recognise such mistakes.[8] In documented cases, aid actors have manipulated or even falsified data to achieve gender-related numerical targets, often a perceived necessity for securing funding.[9] Likewise, the assessment tools (often self-assessment) that are designed to improve accountability for integrating gender perspectives in aid programming have also been criticised for pressuring aid agencies to sometimes "over-mark themselves with no

consequences or accountability."[10] As a result, in some cases aid activities in Syria that are "completely gender blind with no gender component [have been] funded based on scores the organisations gave themselves."[11] To a large extent, research and program design issues such as these echo other empirical research indicating that aid practitioners in Syria largely regard the integration of gender perspectives in programming as a mere proforma activity, or "box-ticking exercise" (see: The Business of Empowering Women: Insights for Development Programming in Syria).

Methods Matter

Donor reporting and partnership pressures have shaped the way gender analysis is currently practised in Syria. With donors increasingly requesting gender analysis from prospective partners as a component of project design, the pressure to demonstrate gender sensitivity as early as the proposal phase is often high. Yet operational analysis — particularly of historical, political and social context — is difficult to deliver under such time constraints. Gender-specific indicators in humanitarian settings cannot easily be evaluated, a condition aggravated by the reality that relevant secondary data remains limited and primary data collection is costly and time-consuming to execute. The need for partners to rapidly produce gender research in support of programme design may, consequently, limit the quality of the programmes these perspectives are meant to improve. While rapid assessments are necessary under certain conditions, like conflict analysis as a whole, gender analysis should be layered and context-specific, and it can benefit from an iterative, ongoing process model.

❝ The need for partners to rapidly produce gender research in support of programme design may, consequently, limit the quality of the programmes these perspectives are meant to improve.

5   Lokot (2021) – Skewed Allegiances: Recalibrating Humanitarian Accountability towards Gender.
6   Lokot (2021) – Skewed Allegiances: Recalibrating Humanitarian Accountability towards Gender – Refugee Survey Quarterly, p. 392.
7   Lokot (2021) – Skewed Allegiances: Recalibrating Humanitarian Accountability towards Gender.
8   Lokot (2021) – Skewed Allegiances: Recalibrating Humanitarian Accountability towards Gender – Refugee Survey Quarterly, p. 403.
9   Lokot (2021) – Skewed Allegiances: Recalibrating Humanitarian Accountability towards Gender – Refugee Survey Quarterly, p. 403.
10 Lokot (2021) – Skewed Allegiances: Recalibrating Humanitarian Accountability towards Gender – Refugee Survey Quarterly, p. 400.
11 Lokot (2021) – Skewed Allegiances: Recalibrating Humanitarian Accountability towards Gender – Refugee Survey Quarterly, p. 400.

In application, factors such as these create conditions in which practice-orientated gender research is more likely to be "based on anecdotal reports and rapid assessments rather than thorough analysis."[12] Ultimately, this can give staying power to theories of change and programmatic approaches that are poorly substantiated, if at all. For instance, donors and partners continue to fund projects seeking to leverage the notional impact of economic initiatives (*e.g.,* women's skills training, etc.) as a means of transforming gender norms and practices, despite evidence that this potential is overstated (see: The Business of Empowering Women: Insights for Development Programming in Syria).[13] As a result, aid programmes are frequently designed according to false assumptions regarding gender in Syria.

The fact that gender-related data collection and analysis may be at odds with the experiences or needs of beneficiaries naturally has consequences for the quality of research that drives gender-responsive aid activities in Syria. The sections that follows outline four broad areas in which significant shortcomings are apparent — and can be addressed.

1. Conflicting Concepts within Gender Research

Although women's empowerment is an implicit objective of many gender-responsive aid activities, a reliance on contradictory definitions and sometimes irrelevant indicators of empowerment can limit the relevance of research and the effectiveness of gender policies and programming.[14] In this respect, the shortcomings of measurement tools, methods, and the indicators used to assess gender equality and women's empowerment in humanitarian settings have been highlighted as particularly deficient.[15] This is especially true for areas that defy easy quantification, such as women's control over their earnings, the independence of economic decision-making, the allocation of spending, and various metrics of informal economic support.[16]

Regrettably, conceptual shortcomings are observable throughout the research approaches to prominent themes in current gender-responsive interventions in humanitarian settings. Sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) is just one example of how conceptual discrepancies have far-reaching downstream implications that can hinder the efficacy of aid interventions. While SGBV indicators are the most frequently used metrics for analysis in gender equality and women's empowerment research, limitations to the conceptualisation of SGBV have frequently been demonstrated. Among other limitations, current practice-orientated research on SGBV frequently overlooks contexts of displacement and focuses almost exclusively on the victimisation of women, to the exclusion of other at-risk groups, including LGBTQ+ individuals.[17] This is particularly important given the fact that SGBV activities account for a large portion of gender-responsive funding. Given such limitations, even well-intentioned attempts to address the consequences of SGBV-induced harm, especially in forced migration contents, hamper the design and implementation of comprehensive policies.[18]

2. Intersectionality > Diversity

Despite the notional interest some in the aid world have expressed in intersectionality, the application of intersectional lenses in humanitarian contexts has been largely superficial. This is true even among implementing partners explicitly committed to feminism and with ties to countries with an overtly feminist foreign policy.[19] As an analytic approach, intersectionality is seldom explicitly applied,[20] and in many cases, it is used merely as a means of demonstrating a diverse beneficiary pool — a worthy objective, but one that falls short of the approach's potential value for assessing interlocking systems that perpetuate needs.[21]

12 Lokot (2021) – Skewed Allegiances: Recalibrating Humanitarian Accountability towards Gender – Refugee Survey Quarterly, p. 406.

13 Lokot (2021) – Skewed Allegiances: Recalibrating Humanitarian Accountability towards Gender – Refugee Survey Quarterly, p. 407.

14 Olivius (2014) – Three Approaches to Gender in Humanitarian Aid: Findings from a Study of Humanitarian Aid to Refugees in Thailand and Bangladesh.

15 Goulart et al. (2021) – Tools for Measuring Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment (GEWE) Indicators in Humanitarian Settings.

16 Goulart et al. (2021) – Tools for Measuring Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment (GEWE) Indicators in Humanitarian Settings.

17 Ozcurumez, Akyuz and Bradby (2020) – The Conceptualization Problem in Research and Responses to Sexual and Gender-based Violence in Forced Migration.

18 Ozcurumez, Akyuz and Bradby (2020) – The Conceptualization Problem in Research and Responses to Sexual and Gender-based Violence in Forced Migration.

19 Ozcurumez, Akyuz and Bradby (2020) – The Conceptualization Problem in Research and Responses to Sexual and Gender-based Violence in Forced Migration.

20 There are, however, compelling examples of how academic research that has applied an intersectional framework has been able to uncover, for example, how Syrian refugee women's participation in civil society organisations (CSOs) greatly depend on the intersections between gender and other social categories, such as socioeconomic status and ethnic/national identity. For more on this discussion, please see: Al Munajed (2020) – An Intersectional Analysis of Syrian Women's Participation in Civil Society in the Post-2011 Context. Research has also shown how structural gender hierarchies are mirrored in many CSOs, which effectively results in the exclusion of women from high posts and decision-making. For more on this discussion, please see: Abu Assab and Nasser-Eddin (2019) – Gender Dynamics within Syrian Civil Society: A Research Based on Gender-Sensitivity Assessment of Syrian Civil Society Organisations. Other research has found that intersections between gender, ethnicity and geographical location has created unique hardships for Syrian refugee women in the Kurdistan region of Iraq due to the state-led systematic discrimination against Kurdish communities in Syria. For more on this discussion, please see: UN Women (2014) – 'We Just Keep Silent': Gender-Based Violence Amongst Syrian Refugees in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

21 Michelis (2020) – Picked up, Misused, Abused, Changed: Intersectionality in the Humanitarian Discourse on Gender-Based Violence.

Perhaps the most common application of intersectional approaches in practice-oriented gender research in Syria is as a means of linking distinct social categories (usually gender) to vulnerability. Without reference to the many other factors that contribute to vulnerability, however, this narrow framing represents a missed opportunity to increase impact and more carefully target assistance.

Similar shortcomings hamper the application of intersectional approaches to other dimensions of gender analysis. For instance, in programme design, women as a whole are often viewed through the lens of victimhood, or in contrast, as potential peacemakers, change agents, and "untapped resources" for conflict management and poverty alleviation. Such approaches assume, for example, that women, by virtue of their gender, are innately vulnerable and peaceful, and that women, if empowered, can further other peace, security, and development objectives.[22] Not only are such approaches at times unfounded, but they may risk treating women's rights and gender equality as instruments of other policy objectives, rather than goals in their own right.[23]

While aid activities that seek to address conflict management and poverty alleviation should account for gender, there is little reason to believe that gender alone is a sufficient targeting criteria in many programming areas. In fact, specious assumptions regarding traits that are supposedly inherently linked to women's gender identities have been identified as ineffective at shaping aid initiatives with objectives such as youth leadership, conflict mediation, and deradicalisation.[24] To understand and target beneficiaries based on vulnerability or notional capacity in areas such as conflict management and poverty reduction, operational research must investigate the gendered assumptions that so often are attached to aid theories of change.[25] If social categories like gender are to serve as useful analytical lenses, they must be understood as dynamic and context-specific, which is arguably a necessity for grasping how such conditions arise and evolve.[26] This can only be achieved through an intersectional lens.

3. Altering the Archetype: LGBTQ+ Lens

Practice-oriented gender research on the Syrian context operates in overwhelmingly binary terms that contrast the experiences of women and men, often with an explicit focus on women as the subjects of gender-sensitive approaches.[27] This narrow analytic frame generally fails to consider the perspective of beneficiaries who do not conform to dominant heterosexual norms and binary gender identities (see: LGBTQ+ Syria: Experiences, Challenges, and Priorities for the Aid Sector). As a result, some of these groups are largely absent from research, policy, and programming targeting (heterosexual cisgender) women.[28]

Indeed, the gender-specific conditions facing men and boys are rarely considered in research or programme design. For example, the conditions affecting male adolescents have largely been ignored in aid and human rights discussions concerning conditions in northeast Syria, while the gendered aspects of armed group mobilisation have been similarly ignored in Syria and analogous contexts (see: Repping Masculinity: Gendering Libyan War Propaganda). Male adolescents are regularly viewed as a "source of danger and instability — a portrayal directly linked to stereotypes surrounding their gender identities" — and gender is used as a sole criterion for punitive measures, such as family separation and detention without due process.[29] Gender is also important to understanding the experiences of Syrian men and boys who have endured systematic rape, sexual torture, and humiliation by Syrian Government forces and non-state armed groups throughout the conflict.[30] However, the specific vulnerabilities of men and boys to SGBV are seldom understood from a gender perspective.[31] Despite calls for gender research that is inclusive of men and boys, it has been suggested that a focus on women's victimhood drives resourcing at the funding agency level, where gender is often narrowly defined. Programming and research, therefore, continue to be designed and executed with an emphasis on women.[32]

22 CFFP (2020) – A Feminist Foreign Policy for the European Union.
23 Winterbotham (2018) – Do Mothers Know Best? How Assumptions Harm CVE.
24 Winterbotham (2018) – Do Mothers Know Best? How Assumptions Harm CVE.
25 Barbelet and Wake (2020) – Inclusion and Exclusion in Humanitarian Action: The State of Play.
26 Michelis (2020) – Picked up, Misused, Abused, Changed: Intersectionality in the Humanitarian Discourse on Gender-Based Violence.
27 Fletcher (2018) – More than Women and Men: A Framework for Gender and Intersectionality Research on Environmental Crisis and Conflict.
28 Larkin (2019) – Pride and Prejudice: LGBTIQ Community Responses to Disaster Events Worldwide.
29 Aoláin (2021) – Gendering the Boy Child in the Context of Counterterrorism: The Situation of Boys in Northeast Syria and Davis (2016) – Gendered Vulnerability and Forced Conscription in the War in Syria.
30 All Survivors Projects and the Syrian Network for Human Rights – Conflict-related Sexual Violence Against Men, Boys and Persons of Diverse SOGIESC in the Syrian Arab Republic.
31 Ozcurumez, Akyuz and Bradby (2020) – The Conceptualization Problem in Research and Responses to Sexual and Gender-based Violence in Forced Migration.
32 Ozcurumez, Akyuz and Bradby (2020) – The Conceptualization Problem in Research and Responses to Sexual and Gender-based Violence in Forced Migration.

It is therefore little surprise that indicators relating to LGBTQ+ people are rarely included or measured in gender toolkits and gender research designed for humanitarian settings. LGBTQ+ people in Syria have faced a heightened risk of SGBV, sometimes on a systematic basis, which has merely exacerbated pre-existing discriminatory practices and gendered persecution (see: LGBTQ+ Syria: Experiences, Challenges, and Priorities for the Aid Sector). Gender research of this nature is necessary for reflecting the realities of marginalised groups on the ground and finding programmatic means of addressing such issues, regardless of the difficulties that may arise in researching what is often considered a societal taboo in the Syrian context.

Despite growing rhetorical commitments to address the needs and vulnerabilities of LGBTQ+ Syrians, studies of sexual and gender minorities are almost completely absent from practice-oriented gender research on the Syrian conflict. Not only does this mean that LGBTQ+ people are largely excluded from relevant gender-responsive literature, it means that the experiences of LGBTQ+ Syrians, alongside those who fall outside the male-female binary, remain poorly understood. The exclusion of LGBTQ+ Syrians from this particular type of research has contributed to the misconception that LGBTQ+ issues are somehow of marginal importance in Syria. Future gender-responsive initiatives require culturally sensitive approaches to capture LGBTQ+ experiences in conflict settings — like Syria — as they naturally sit within the framework of gender research more broadly.

4. Hard Data, Hard Choices

By putting a premium on quantitative metrics, aid actors implicitly deprioritise qualitative data, which is nonetheless vital to capturing the intricacies of context-specific gender-related issues in conflict settings.[33] In practice, meeting the minimum standards for disaggregated data collection does not in itself reliably indicate more gender-responsive approaches or programming.[34] Meanwhile, numerous factors impede the collection of age- and gender-disaggregated data, analysis of the data in context, and attempts to adjust assistance accordingly.[35] A preoccupation with quantifying data on women's empowerment in Syria has encouraged programming that neglects other critical dimensions of women's empowerment that are less easily quantified, such as non-economic factors (see: The Business of Empowering Women: Insights for Development Programming in Syria). Similar shortcomings occur across sectors including agriculture and food security, education, emergency shelter, health, and WASH.[36]

It has been argued that in the face of intense competition, aid agencies face increased pressure to undertake projects that can be easily measured quantitatively for the sake of justifying funding, demonstrating impact, and illustrating to prospective donors the value for money they offer.[37] At times, however, empirical gender-related data has been misused and misrepresented in the Syria response to meet numeric targets and demonstrate the prevalence of gender-based harms, which are in actual fact notoriously difficult to quantify.[38] For instance, implementing partners have pointed to the way in which the focus on quantification has led to reporting and internal programmatic analysis that adopt "the language of quantification" and use percentages instead of numbers to disguise small sample sizes. These types of methodological adaptations naturally distort awareness of gender-specific needs, risks, and harms.

The pressure to demonstrate gender expertise and produce rapid gender research for programmatic purposes ultimately results in the prioritisation of certain kinds of gender-related data over others.[39] Violence and protection indicators are most commonly identified in gender research, while indicators such as leadership, human development, and empowerment are lacking. The lack of emphasis on the latter areas is surprising given the considerable focus there has been on women's economic empowerment within gender-responsive interventions, but also given the practical and ethical challenges attached to collecting reliable data on gender-based violence in conflict settings. These findings, however, correlate with the inference that most gender

33 Lokot (2021) – Skewed Allegiances: Recalibrating Humanitarian Accountability towards Gender and Michelis (2020) – Picked up, Misused, Abused, Changed: Intersectionality in the Humanitarian Discourse on Gender-Based Violence.

34 Chaplin, Twigg and Lovell (2019) – Intersectional Approaches to Vulnerability Reduction and Resilience-Building.

35 Nearly all of the guidance notes, both those targeting general audiences (such as The Sphere Project handbook) and sectoral or agency specific ones (such as agency handbooks, emergency-specific guidelines, or sectoral standards), require aid actors to collect gender and age disaggregated data. However, research has uncovered some of shortcomings in current practices on disaggregated data collection. For more on this discussion, please see: Mazurana (2013) – How Sex- and Age-disaggregated Data and Gender and Generational Analyses Can Improve Humanitarian Response.

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37 Eyben (2013) – Uncovering the Politics of 'Evidence' and 'Results'. A Framing Paper for Development Practitioners and Lokot (2021) – Skewed Allegiances: Recalibrating Humanitarian Accountability towards Gender and Marchais, Bazuzi and Lameke (2020) – 'The Data Is Gold, and We Are the Gold-Diggers': Whiteness, Race and Contemporary Academic Research in Eastern DRC.

38 Lokot (2021) – Skewed Allegiances: Recalibrating Humanitarian Accountability towards Gender – Refugee Survey Quarterly, p. 407.

39 Lokot (2021) – Skewed Allegiances: Recalibrating Humanitarian Accountability towards Gender.

research available on humanitarian settings, including Syria, is observational, indicating that the impacts of gender-responsive interventions are still poorly understood.

Conclusion

For a host of contextual, practical, and conceptual reasons, the research that undergirds gender-responsive programming in Syria is often less evidence-driven than is desired. This is regrettable, given the emphasis that has been laid on gender perspectives in aid action in Syria. If encouragement is to be found, it exists in the recognition that improving practice-oriented gender research does not require the development of entirely new handbooks, toolkits, or frameworks, which already exist in abundance. Rather, many of the most serious shortcomings of gender research as practised in Syria today are the result of flawed or incomplete application of existing tools. The recommendations above outline approaches to address these challenges.

In addition, it is important to note that in many instances, gender — though widely adopted as a programmatic lens — is treated most often as a vehicle for achieving other objectives, often in the development or security domain. To give them due weight, gender-related outcomes such as rights, justice and equality should be pursued as goals in their own right. Other donor priorities may follow. Ultimately, it must be recognised that approaches to policy and research have real life impact, and they must therefore be crafted to reflect the diverse experiences of those they concern. This requires that research and policies be responsive to the needs of diverse societies and, above all, do no harm. While these principles are recognised in rhetoric, they are not always found in practice.

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