

Ninth Meeting

6th September 2017, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Iveagh House

Minutes: Thematic Meeting

Presentation by Bríd Kennedy, Concern Worldwide

Bríd Kennedy from Concern Worldwide presented to the group on her organisation's 'Engaging Men' programme which works with Syrian refugee and host community men in Lebanon to promote safety in their communities, through increasing their capacity to use pro-social coping and mitigate and resolve conflicts peacefully. The programme is implemented in an environment where gender norms privilege male power over that of females, but where Syrian men are also in a position of considerable powerlessness. This context is seen as contributing to issues such as domestic violence, sexual harassment and exploitation, early marriage, child labour, physical discipline and child abuse.

The programme has three main elements: life skills trainings; psycho-social support and community-based social projects. An independent evaluation found the programme facilitated a safe emotional space for men to meet collectively to talk about their problems and to become more attuned and reflective about their relationships with their wives and children. It provided an opportunity to leave the house, to socialize, feel some sense of belonging, expand their social network and offered some degree of relief from mounting psychological distress and pressure.

Qualitative evidence demonstrated an increase in instances of pro-social coping. Wives of male participants reported improved patterns of interaction and communication. They witnessed increased openness, flexibility, empathy and perspective, and improved engagement with children, for example, reduction in yelling and beating, increased dialogue and positive time, change from authoritarian father figure to guide and transmitter of knowledge. Increased knowledge of the adverse effects of early/child marriage, for example, cognitive development, adverse health outcomes, marital problems, divorce, and the inability of a 'child to raise a child' were also observed.

Discussion

A number of points of concern were raised during the discussion segment. The fact that Syrian refugees must resort to informal employment and the potential exploitation and abuse that this leaves them open to was highlighted. Concern Worldwide's 'Livelihoods' programme was developed to address this. It was noted how child marriage as a form of protection and a coping mechanism in circumstances of extreme poverty is a growing problem. Education had been identified as a means of prevention but the difficulty of pursuing accountability for marriages which had already taken place was acknowledged.

Relations between refugee and host communities must be carefully managed to ensure the success of such programmes. Facilitators are aware of potential political or religious tensions among recruits to the programmes and of the lack of trust among many in the refugee community. It was noted that the EU's shortcomings on its own commitments to refugees and asylum seekers are creating push back from host countries such as Lebanon and weakening the EU's ability to advocate for better conditions in refugee camps abroad. It was noted that the "Engaging Men" programme is set to continue and be expanded.

Presentation by Brandon Hamber, INCORE, Ulster University

Professor Hamber began his presentation by explaining that he would be discussing the gendered aspects of conflict rather than asking "where are the men?". He would be using the terminology of masculinities to represent the range of male identities performed relative to femininity and hegemonic masculinity. He noted that dominant norms of masculinity can and do change over time and in different national contexts and are often aspirational rather than actual. He then elaborated upon three main themes; masculinity and violence, men as victims of sexual violence, and male engagement and participation.

Often no differentiation is made between masculinity and violent masculinity despite the higher proportion of male civilians than combatants in conflict. It is often difficult to find stories in the literature about non-militarised men. It is necessary to challenge the common narrative of women as victims versus men as perpetrators and instead focus on championing women's agency. Professor Hamber discussed the need to explore how sexual violence is defined to fully understand its relative impact on men and women. For example, the Peruvian Truth Commission initially determined that only 2% of sexual violence victims were men but this rises to as much 30% when violence is considered to extend beyond rape to include sexual humiliation; forced nudity etc. As such, complex gendered dynamics may exist which go beyond those commonly portrayed in the literature.

In terms of male engagement, Professor Hamber drew attention to global movements such as the HeforShe campaign. He noted that many such initiatives are based on Western liberal discourse and designed around a concept of individual transformation which does not always translate well into non-Western country contexts. It is also unclear what men are expected to "transform" into. This notion of transformation can tend to portray men as a homogenous group and reinforce old stereotypes. Instead more attention should be given to broader structural issues and relations of power which are harmful to women.

Discussion

It was suggested that it should not be presumed that men will react in negative ways to changes in their day-to-day reality brought about by conflict and instead greater attention should be given to the potential of those who respond in more positive ways. Alongside this, a better understanding is needed of the many and complex reasons why combatants initially take up arms, for example, as a matter of survival. The humanitarian aid sector values simple categorisations which attract donors and make the allocation of resources more straightforward. As such there is a tendency to focus on the perceived vulnerability of women and girls rather than undertaking a gender analysis of societal structures which in general do more harm to women than men. It was further noted that the word "vulnerable" can be problematic in itself, in that it creates categories of "deserving" and "non-deserving" victims.

As such it is becoming increasingly acknowledged that adopting a human rights approach in conflict settings may be more appropriate and beneficial than the traditional humanitarian response. Ethical questions arise over choosing short term solutions over investments which will deliver structural change in the long term. The difficulty of finding adequate language to challenge those structures which reproduce harmful gender norms and stereotypes was noted. We cannot rely on the assumption that educating individuals will change society-wide behaviours and alongside this there is a need to ensure that programmes are appropriate for the context in which they are implemented.

In terms of how the Oversight Group itself can build on the learning from the day, it was suggested that the next National Action Plan could give greater consideration to the full range of men's experiences of conflict in order to challenge the dominant woman-victim/male-perpetrator dichotomy which currently limits women's agency. The next National Action Plan could also consider drawing attention to the distinctions between harm due to inherent vulnerability and harm caused by structural inequality; to include interactions with cultural and gender norms, poverty and youth.

Minister Coveney's Visit to the Group

During his visit to the Group, the Minister shared his support for gender-mainstreaming across Government Departments and noted Ireland's strong reputation in peacekeeping and overseas development aid as a source of authority on the Women, Peace and Security Agenda. He discussed in detail the provision of social housing for individuals transitioning out of Direct Provision, through the Housing Assistance Payment system; but also acknowledged the continued shortcomings here.

Action Points

- Secretariat to prepare concept note and begin planning for Q4 Oversight Group meeting.
- Chair to write to the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs by way of follow up on progress under the Direct Provision system and Irish Refugee Protection Programme.
- Secretariat to follow up with Department of Justice and Equality and civil society organisations involved in immigration support on identifying gaps in support for refugees on leaving the Direct Provision system.
- Proposed Civil Society Engagement Strategy to be brought forward for discussion at Q4 meeting.

Secretariat to the Oversight Group to Ireland's 2nd National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security

12th September 2017