

PROTECTING COMMUNITIES IN THE DRC

Understanding gender dynamics and
empowering women and men



Pauline (name has been changed to protect her identity), 16, with her 14-month old son at their home, pictured in Dungu, Orientale Province, DRC. Many of IDPs now settled in Dungu, like Pauline, are traumatised from attacks on their villages and families. Pauline was kidnapped by the LRA and spent two years as a 'wife' to an LRA soldier, himself kidnapped aged 10. © Simon Rawles/Oxfam

Armed conflict has devastated large swathes of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) since 1997. Civilians in many parts of the eastern provinces – men, women, boys and girls – still face constant threats of forced displacement, sexual violence, abduction, and extortion, not only from militia groups, but in many cases from those who are mandated to protect them. Deep-seated attitudes and beliefs continue to perpetuate discrimination and violence against women. Oxfam's protection programme in the DRC aims to strengthen the ability of communities to advocate for their rights, including the right to protection from violence and exploitation. Evaluation of the programme's impact shows that in a situation where so many people's rights are abused and violated, empowering women often means including and empowering men in the humanitarian response too. It is also vital to take a sophisticated, context-specific approach to gender and women's rights, considering short-term, immediate needs, and longer-term strategic needs together.

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INTRODUCTION

Since 1987, armed conflict has devastated large swathes of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). The situation is fluid and, while exact numbers are disputed, it is clear that hundreds of thousands of people have lost their lives, and many survivors have fled their homes to other provinces or to neighbouring countries. Civilians in many parts of the eastern provinces in particular face constant threats of forced displacement, sexual violence, abduction, and extortion. They are regularly terrorised, not only by militia groups, but often by the police and armed forces mandated to protect them.

The conflict continues to stifle the country's development, particularly standards of education and health, the development of strong civil society groups, and gender equality. The average life expectancy is 48 years for women and only 46 for men, and has barely changed since 1990.¹

Weak state authority, the illegal exploitation of mineral wealth, and the ease with which weapons enter the country has helped fuel cycles of violence, with women, men and children caught in the crossfire. Civilians in eastern DRC in particular have been targeted by armed militia. The long-term instability and insecurity has left virtually no industry and limited opportunities for education and jobs. This provides an economic incentive for many young men and boys to take up arms, although they are also often forcibly recruited.

Despite the government approving a progressive sexual violence law in 2006 that includes a broad definition of sexual and gender-based violence, women and men are frequently subject to sexual violence.

Women face many inequalities in the DRC. They play a very limited role in public life and constantly confront deep-seated attitudes and beliefs that perpetuate discrimination and gender-based violence. Following the 2006 elections, women accounted for only 9.4 per cent of seats in the national Parliament.² The adult literacy rate (age 15 and over) is 65 per cent for the whole population, but 56 per cent for women compared with 78 per cent for men.³ Women are also under-represented in paid employment and are often denied rights of inheritance. In 2011, the maternal mortality rate was 670 per 100,000 live births.⁴

Men and boys account for the majority of deaths that occur during fighting,⁵ while women and girls may be more affected by the broader impact of conflict, including in the aftermath of war, when repercussions are still being felt. In many societies, they will be made more vulnerable to the negative effects of conflict due to their unequal status and limited access to services and opportunities.



Oxfam in the DRC

Oxfam has been working in the DRC since 1961 and has programmes focusing on water and sanitation, food security and livelihoods, public health, advocacy, education, gender equality, and protection. In 2006–7, Oxfam made a strategic commitment to address protection issues more explicitly and systematically. The programme in the DRC aims to strengthen the capacity of communities at risk to advocate for their rights and for protection from violence and exploitation, and to improve survivors' access to follow-up care and support (referral). The field programme is combined with international advocacy and campaigning to ensure that civilians' voices are heard, and to hold those in power – government leaders and officials, police, and the army – to account. As it will be some time before the state can properly fulfil its responsibility to protect civilians, Oxfam also supports communities to prevent and respond to abuse and to access referral services in a safe and timely manner.

Understanding gender dynamics within communities

Deep-rooted gender inequality is present in communities due to patriarchy and disparate power relations. Oxfam carries out annual protection surveys of people living in the conflict-affected areas of eastern DRC, including North and South Kivu and Province Orientale. These surveys paint a picture of violence and abuse that is highly gendered in terms of its targeting and impact, both in the short term and longer term.

There are many similarities in how men and women assess their overall insecurity, but the causes of insecurity and the type of threats they face – abduction, murder, arbitrary arrest, sexual violence, illegal checkpoints, forced labour – are often different. Through these means, state and non-state parties continue to manipulate and abuse civilians in order to assert their control. The conflict is very fluid, and although some areas may become more stable, men and women experience this change differently. Even in areas in close proximity, the short and long-term impacts of violence and abuse on gender dynamics can vary widely.

The shock of conflict, social turmoil, and reorganisation, coupled with the interventions of external actors such as humanitarian agencies, presents both an opportunity and a threat to the goal of greater gender equality. Humanitarian agencies need to have a sophisticated understanding of gender, based on a sound analysis of local gender inequalities and social relations, to ensure that, as a minimum, their work does not have a negative impact on gender equality or undermine people's rights. The armed conflict in the DRC, with its relentless and brutal targeting of civilians, is exceptionally damaging, and external interventions must be highly sensitised to the context to avoid inadvertent negative consequences. Conflict and social breakdown opens up opportunities to challenge traditional gender roles as people develop, adapt and even adopt new identities.

A strong gender analysis can enable humanitarian responses to go further, and build on the changes inherent in conflict and social transformation to bring about greater gains for women's rights and gender equality.

Political and social transformation rarely happens without some form of conflict, and conflict in itself is not necessarily negative until it turns to violence. Understanding how gender roles interact with the context is key to contributing to positive change that is sustainable. Not understanding this, or adopting a simplistic approach, risks doing significant harm. Humanitarian organisations may be able to contribute significantly to positive outcomes that promote gender equality by respectfully treating men and women as rights-holders as well as acknowledging the threats of sexual and other violence that they face, and providing significant 'safe' spaces for women where they can be free from social constraints that prevent them from speaking in front of men.

This paper outlines the approach to gender taken by Oxfam's protection programme in the DRC. It explains how the community-led nature of the programme has enabled women and men to address short-term protection needs as a priority, but also to tackle long-term barriers to women's rights without this being seen as a threat to men. It describes how the programme was implemented, through protection committees with equal numbers of male and female members and women's forums where women could talk freely among women, and promoting access to referral services. It then presents the programme's achievements, including a reduction in sexual violence, domestic violence, and early marriage in some communities. Men and women worked together to change attitudes and beliefs and the programme's approach emphasised sexual violence as everyone's concern, not just a problem for women.

Finally, it makes recommendations for other programmes considering similar work. It argues that Oxfam's aim of 'putting poor women's rights at the heart of all we do' is, in some situations, only possible when we address men's rights in parallel.

Effects of the conflict on women and men

The war in eastern DRC is notorious for the high levels of sexual violence and brutality inflicted by those involved in the fighting. A wide range of abuses are being carried out against men, women, boys, and girls, by armed actors, bandits and criminals, and in some cases by community members against each other. Men are more at risk of being killed, tortured or abducted, used for forced labour, or imprisoned. We are frequently told that women are often less likely than men to be abducted or killed when they go to the fields, but they are at high risk of rape – which often leads to rejection by their husbands. The survival strategies used to avoid these risks include: choosing not to go to the fields or market, which has serious effects on well-being and livelihoods; sending women to do such work (which may have other costs, as women tend to face higher taxes or other unofficial barriers at market); or submitting to an assault, which, while it may reduce the degree of violence used, can destroy a person's sense of self-worth. Further coping strategies described by communities were working and moving in groups, and limiting movement, as well as wearing more layers of clothing in certain areas.

There is also increasing evidence of violent rape and sexual assault against men and boys in the DRC. According to one community, some victims may have died due to the brutality of the assault, and survivors are very unlikely to tell anyone or seek help. In order to continue earning a living, families often have to make the unpalatable choice between women being raped or men abducted or murdered. Boys are more likely to be forcibly recruited to fight or work as porters and carriers for armed groups. Girls are frequently subject to sexual exploitation and forced into early marriage – sometimes with the support of their family, because it is seen as a coping mechanism.⁶ While some abuses, such as looting and theft, are indiscriminate of gender, they have a differential impact on men and women, as traditional gender roles determine their range of coping strategies and resilience.

Impact of conflict on identity for women and men

The different forms of gender-based violence are linked to traditional roles of men and women, which often shift during conflict. In the largely patriarchal society that dominated many areas of eastern DRC before the war, to varying degrees,⁷ men were expected to be strong leaders, provide for and protect their family, as well as being decision-makers at home and in their community. Women were expected to care for children, prepare food, run the household, and dig the fields. They were expected to be submissive, and not to take part in public life – leaving them vulnerable to many forms of gender-based violence, as well as denying their economic, social and political rights.

The conflict has, however, significantly changed these traditional gender roles. Women report that taking part in the various committees set up by NGOs has given them the opportunity to participate in decision-making in their households and communities. Displacement towards urban and peri-urban centres and nearer main roads, introduced new ideas to men and women in previously relatively isolated communities. Perhaps more significantly, as men and women adopt new survival strategies, some women have started to play a more leading role in the family and community. In many cases, as employment opportunities and paid work have become scarcer, men moving around have been more at risk of being accused of being in militias. Women have started to play a more important role in providing for the household, often through cultivation or small-scale trade. Although increased mobility can put women at risk, if they are able to work and trade in a way that gives them economic power, this can increase their decision-making power in the household. Women's associations and solidarity groups have enabled women to develop more self-confidence. While the transformational impact of the conflict and humanitarian response on gender relations has varied in each area, it has frequently offered opportunities for women to participate further in the political, cultural and economic life of their community.

However, this new role for women has, in many cases, been paralleled by a diminished sense of self-worth among civilian men. Humanitarian interventions have primarily focused on opportunities – economic, social and political – for women, without creating positive opportunities for men, at a time when alternatives to participation in armed violence are needed more than ever, particularly for young, unemployed men.⁸ Violent conflict clearly affords certain privileges, and values ideas of manhood that are associated with aggression, physical power and violence – ideals that devalue and belittle other, more positive models of manhood.

Conflicts in Africa's Great Lakes Region have been the focus of some excellent and ground-breaking research on gender roles, and sexual and other gender-based violence.⁹ However, this has not always translated into policy and practice. In narratives of sexual violence in the DRC, women have been simplistically presented as 'victims' and men as 'criminals' or perpetrators of abuse. This has overlooked the fact that men are also subject to sexual and other violence, and denied other roles for women besides 'victimhood'. These portrayals have had a negative impact on community dynamics, creating conflict and hostile relations between some men and women, and reinforcing the idea of militarised masculinity and other gender stereotypes that perpetuate inequality. Men's sense of identity has also been altered and frequently undermined

by the war. As it has become impossible to fulfil pre-war ascribed gender roles, the conflict has triggered a crisis of masculinity that has, at times, been exacerbated by aid agencies' almost exclusive focus on women. NGOs working exclusively to valorise women's rights have done harm, and risk continuing to do so, if they do not address this crisis of masculinity and the rights of men who have also been abused during the conflict.

OXFAM'S APPROACH AND PROGRAMME

In 2006–7, Oxfam made a strategic commitment to address protection issues more explicitly and systematically in its humanitarian programming in the DRC. It began by building the capacity of field teams, developing practical tools for safe programming, and undertaking protection surveys in the communities where Oxfam GB was already working. From this base, protection work in the DRC gradually developed and has expanded to become Oxfam's largest protection programme, with an annual budget of \$1.8m, and 21 staff working with 10 partner organisations. Initially, Oxfam worked with larger partner organisations that did not have community links, but now works with partners operating at a smaller scale and at a more local level. The partnership is particularly productive when partner staff come from and live among target communities, and when the partner has a long history of acceptance in these communities – both by authorities and by women and men in the communities.

Oxfam started conducting protection surveys in the DRC in 2007. The surveys collect general information about how the conflict has affected people and what strategies they use to cope. But they have also highlighted the inability of many communities to mobilise for their own security, the difficulty of accessing authorities and officials, and the lack of information about where to go for help when there is a problem.

Oxfam and its partner staff help conflict-affected communities identify the main threats they face, and actions they can take to mitigate these threats. Staff facilitate links with local authorities, and provide training to civilians and authorities on legal standards and laws relating to protection issues. They map and assess local referral structures, particularly for medical and psychosocial services; publicise this information; and try to find ways to improve relationships between service providers and potential clients. It is planned that these activities will continue.

Protection committees

Protection committees are central to the programme, and as of mid-2012, 56 committees had been set up. They respond to emergency needs in their communities but also link humanitarian needs to longer-term development, supporting state actors and others with protection obligations – such as armed groups – to fulfil their obligations. Interventions must be carefully managed to ensure that emergency needs are met, without substituting for the state or community more than necessary. Although the committees are not intended to be permanent parallel structures, they may well evolve into some form of civil society group, maintaining the role of interlocutor between the state and population, while also holding officials to account. The training, information exchange with civil society groups and alliances, skills, experience, and confidence that those associated with the committees develop will be sustained beyond the end of the intervention.

Committee members are elected through community assemblies that select six men and six women. Alongside these, a separate women's forum is established, made up of women who are members of existing associations or groups – such as choirs, parent–teacher associations, or community health workers – again, to avoid creating parallel structures. Such groups are essential because, if women are to be able to affect activities and protection committee decisions, a separate forum at which they can discuss their needs and issues has to be

established. The women's forum meets regularly and feeds views into the protection committee, influencing its work and any decisions made.

In this vast rural country with very little road infrastructure and limited mobile networks in many areas, to ensure that the programme reaches a broad geographical area, community outreach workers (*agents du changement*) or Change Agents are also recruited, usually 10 men and 10 women in each area. The structure of the programme, centred on the protection committee, is designed to support women to prioritise their own issues (through the women's forums) without excluding men and their needs, and while ensuring that the programme can reach locations that are difficult to access.

The first step in any community is to collectively and inclusively identify the main protection threats. This is done by the women's forums and *agents du changement* separately, who then input into the protection committee. The protection problems identified by men and women, in both mixed and single-sex groups, are sometimes the same, but there are also some notable differences. Men often focus on immediate threats such as looting, the presence of armed groups, arbitrary arrest, forced labour, and sexual violence, whereas women often cite looting, sexual violence, and illegal taxes and checkpoints among the key immediate threats, but they are more likely to voice concerns about longer-term or strategic needs too.¹⁰ These include inheritance rights (a key concern for women, who often do not know how to ensure that their husbands' land is inherited by their children rather than reclaimed by his family), domestic violence, marriage registration (because prohibitively expensive registrations have resulted in unregistered marriages and a consequent lack of rights when relationships breakdown), child labour, and girls' rights to education. Where men and women raise similar issues, this can create a sense of shared ownership of the problem, and a base on which issues that are specific to women – or any other group that faces discrimination – (e.g. displaced people) can be jointly addressed.

All priorities put forward are discussed by members of the protection committee, who reach agreement on what the problems are and identify actions to prevent and respond to specific problems or abuses, such as the unlawful detention of children, or illegal checkpoints.

Having equal numbers of men and women on the protection committees and among *agents du changement* is a symbolic nod towards gender equity, but risks being tokenistic if women's participation is not meaningful. An internal review of the programme's implementation in May 2012 in more remote and insecure areas found that even formal parity was not achieved on committees in those areas where women's and girls' rights were most severely curtailed. Oxfam is now considering how to respond to this situation. The separate space within the women's forum allows them also to focus on their priorities and provides an opportunity for them to express themselves more freely on matters that are important to them, but on which they are rarely consulted.

Following an earlier external evaluation in April 2011, the programme increased its allocation of resources to issues that women prioritise and created more space to work with women, while ensuring that problems specific to or prioritised by men were included and that men remained fully engaged with programme activities. As protection committees have been established in different communities, it has initially been important to address issues that men and women feel are the most pressing – on which there is usually some consensus. As the programme has become more established, and a level of trust and mutual respect has developed between the committee members – men and women – and the partner organisation, there has generally been more scope for addressing women's issues directly, as well as more structural issues.

Occasionally, the women's forums have invited men to present at meetings. This has been particularly appreciated when, for example, men from the local authorities have been able to answer questions on issues such as inheritance. Elsewhere, men have played a more active role in women's groups, recognising that women's problems are not just for women but for the whole community – their priorities need to be addressed by both men and women.

Women's forums

In some areas, very few women were interested in taking part in the protection committees because, culturally, they are not permitted to stand up and speak in front of a man. In these areas, the women's forum plays an important role as a space that is more accessible and open to them: this is where women can talk freely among other women and with someone from the outside the community. The women's forums mean that women are not pressurised to talk in front of men before they are ready, but have time and space to build their confidence. Women who initially felt that they would not dare to talk in front of a man have ended up being active members of the protection committee. They say that one of the elements they appreciate most is the opportunity to approach local authorities about the difficulties in their lives.

Men and women involved in the protection programme jointly decide what they would like to focus on. This offers men the opportunity to get involved with protection problems often seen exclusively as 'women's issues', which was what one man in Beni territory described as the main benefit of the project for him. It also shows men and women that women can be active in areas more traditionally associated with men, such as negotiating with authorities and representatives of the state. As one woman put it, *'We cannot wait for others to defend us. Our security depends on us.'* At times, women have identified the protection of male family and community members – husbands, fathers, brothers and sons – as their main priority when their safety has been specifically threatened.

Referral: access to services – for women and men

An important aim of the programme is to help people affected by violence and abuse to access information and services that can help them. Staff provide information on abuses such as forced labour and unlawful detention, and promote informed self-referral to medical, psychosocial and, occasionally, legal services. The model of referral does not solely focus on sexual violence, unlike many other projects in the DRC, but provides support to men, women, boys and girls affected by violence and abuse, whether rape, torture, beatings, or other human rights violations. Oxfam is further developing its approach to 'informed self-referral',¹¹ given it does not provide specialist services (e.g. medical or psychosocial) and does not have the expertise to carry out case management, but does want to improve safe, timely access to such services. Two pilot projects under way in 2012 (one in the DRC, and one in Yemen¹²) further developed this approach, which needs to be appropriate to the context, complement the other services available in the area, and link with existing referral networks.

Referral pathways in the DRC tend to focus on sexual violence – indeed, the term 'referral' has become synonymous with the medical, psychosocial and judicial support package promoted by the government programme, and almost exclusively targeted at women and girl survivors of sexual violence. Undoubtedly, there is a great need for these services. However, communities cite many different types of abuse, often gendered, but not necessarily sexual. One committee member pointed out that if a married couple were attacked, during which the wife were raped and the husband tortured, it would make no sense to only help the wife get the care she needed.

During discussions about whether protection committees should help survivors with transport to life-saving medical services, committee members were adamant that the resources should be used for men and women. Moreover, they felt frustrated that several NGO projects support transport for women survivors, but very few for men. Statistics gathered as part of an internal evaluation show that approximately 80 per cent of people benefiting from this support are women, but a significant 20 per cent are men. Therefore, the inclusion of men has brought about greater joint action on gender issues and more buy-in from men without losing sight of the greater need for women and girls to access such services. The prevalence of sexual violence against men and boys, which often forms part of what is reported as 'torture', means it is

important not to make assumptions about who needs access to emergency services. Another woman told us, '*Our men are victims of this war too*'.¹³

There is a clear dissonance between the way people describe and experience acts of violence and abuse and the way services are provided by humanitarian actors or prioritised by donors. Rarely do the communities needing these services fit neatly into the pigeon holes created by institutionalised checkboxes and categorisations such as 'rape victim'. A woman who has been raped may also be the mother of a child that has been abducted, and a wife whose husband had been tortured – each one dealing with the pain of seeing a loved one suffer as well as their own pain. Thus, the open access of the 'referral' system is a deliberate and conscious choice by Oxfam's programme in response to the way people have described their experience and support needs.¹⁴

Programme impacts

The impacts of protection programmes are often hard to gauge due to the multiple factors affecting the situation and the difficulty in identifying any form of causal chain. An external evaluation of Oxfam's DRC programme found that successes cited by committee members were not always recognised or agreed with by other community members;¹⁵ likewise, measuring a concept as complex as 'empowerment' – which includes subjective feelings of self-worth and confidence – is never easy. However, feedback from communities, including statistical data, has identified some tangible positive changes. It also suggests that the broader approach to gender – recognising the impact of conflict on men, and not just in an instrumental way to improve the situation for women – has brought about positive results, strengthening women's feelings of security and empowerment that can contribute to achieving broader transformational change.

It is particularly difficult to assess the impact of this kind of programme on taboo and under-reported issues – for example, sexual violence (although fewer cases of reported rape might be considered a positive indicator). However, evidence suggests that, as taboos are gradually broken down, this may lead to more reporting of rape and other sexual violence. It is important to emphasise that the situation in eastern DRC is very localised and there can be surprising differences in communities that are relatively close to each other – for example, because of the presence of different armed groups in some areas – and the different behaviours and strategies people use to mitigate risks. In many locations, committee and some community members tell us that the number of rapes has gone down.¹⁶

Despite the difficulty in assessing impact, an internal evaluation in 2012 found a reduction in sexual violence in 6 of the 11 communities surveyed. In many locations, committee members and other members of the community reported that the number of rapes had gone down. Domestic violence had reduced in six communities and early marriage in two, while in eight communities, gender relationships were felt to be more equal. Four communities reported an increase in girls' and women's enrolment in education. In one area, committee members carried out an awareness-raising campaign that resulted in a reduction in instances of men rejecting their wives because they had been raped, and greater understanding of the need for urgent medical care. In one community, men reported providing shelter for displaced women who had been raped and subsequently abandoned by their husbands. This change was attributed to men and women working together to change attitudes and beliefs, and an approach that emphasises sexual violence not as a problem for women, but for the whole community – and therefore everyone's concern.

The protection committees, women's forums, and *agents du changement* have carried out awareness-raising and training on a number of other issues relating to gender roles. Although it is very difficult to measure, reports from committees and community members in Haut-Uélé, Province Orientale, imply that the project is having a positive effect on reducing intimate partner violence. The same communities reported a reduction in drunkenness, which had been identified by the women's forum in Beni territory as a key contributing factor in 'domestic'

violence,¹⁷ as well as issues relating to women's uneven workload and a general lack of productivity among men. The committee persuaded the customary chief to ban drinking in the morning and, as a result, men are now helping women in the fields. In another area, when women gave birth, they used to be 'put aside' from their families for some time afterwards, and the husband took a second wife. Anecdotal reports suggest that this practice is now less common, and, in some areas, there has been a reduction in early marriage: *'Since the women's forum has been acting, early marriage is also going down'* (male committee member in Kitutu).

ACHIEVEMENTS

Oxfam's protection programme in the DRC is not a 'gender' or 'women's rights' programme in the traditional sense (i.e. it does not specifically aim to bring about changes in gender relationships or women's rights), and while its protection objectives have primary goals regarding women's participation and representation, it is not a programme that has primarily focused on women's rights. Positive changes in relationships between women and men have been an additional outcome. The programme has, however, taken a strong gender approach, particularly upholding Oxfam's aim to 'put poor women's rights at the heart of all we do'.

Changes in attitudes and beliefs about gender roles are hard to assess and can take considerable time. The programme has learned to celebrate small victories, while not over-estimating its potential impact. 'Small victories' can still be significant and life-changing at a grassroots and individual level, when people are able to realise their rights. One older woman in a community that had been isolated for a long time during the war told how the programme had allowed her to sit down next to a man: *'Before, I could not speak in front of men. Now, we eat together. Even when 10 men are seated together discussing, they are polite to me.'*

More generally, the approach seems to have had a positive impact on women's empowerment, feelings of confidence and self-worth, and particularly their participation in community affairs:

'The activities with the community protection committee taught us that women are equal to men. What men can do, women can do. We saw that women can also be leaders.' (Female committee member in Cifunzi)

'I got married very young. I didn't know that women could sit and talk to people the way that we are doing right now. We had shadows in our eyes. But now we talk even to local authorities, and even to the military.'

'Before, custom was considered to be "above" women, according to tradition. In some families, women were not allowed to speak. But with the training that women have received through this programme, they can go to the customary chief to lift some discriminatory practices against women.' (Female committee member in Kalega, displaced to Cifunzi)

Humanitarian actors often underestimate the social effects of their interventions, which can be negative as well as positive. During recent research, men and women in eastern DRC reported that one of the key benefits they have gained from taking part in training organised by the programme is that they met different people. The social capital that is created during the training will last beyond the programme's lifetime. Many of the respondents in the May 2012 evaluation also cited an improvement in relations with local authorities as one of the programme's most significant achievements. Citizens and duty-bearers alike reported this.

The type of analysis used in protection work is very effective – when used properly – in identifying gender differences and analysing gender relations. The programme tackles serious abuse and violence, but has not singled out violence against women and girls at the expense of addressing other forms of violence affecting men and boys. Nonetheless, two-thirds of its beneficiaries are women, and there have been tangible gains in women's representation, leadership, political engagement at a local level, and the broader promotion of gender equality.

Gains have varied across the DRC because context and opportunities to create change differ greatly. As the recent evaluation report (May 2012) puts it:

‘The programme’s approach, which is, in essence, a rights-based approach that places special emphasis on women’s rights, means that each group of committee members can join for reasons that are of personal interest and relevance to them. In this approach, women’s rights are not positioned as being in opposition to human rights but rather as an integral component of them. Put another way, the men in the communities do not feel threatened by the emphasis on women’s rights but rather see women’s rights as contributing to their overall goal of civilian protection. Moreover, women also feel engaged by issues that are specific to women but also note the importance of and contribute to efforts that enhance men’s protection and the protection of the entire community.’

The evaluation also highlighted the need to address the wider barriers to women’s participation and empowerment – for instance, through facilitating greater access to literacy training, which would link the intervention to longer-term programming. It also recommended an increase in specific resourcing and support for women’s forums, in particular through locally recruited female resource people and exchange activities between communities.

The programme’s achievements were rooted in the following factors.

- Addressing women and men’s rights as equally important.
- Providing a space (the protection committee) for women and men’s concerns to be voiced, that promotes shared ownership, and where issues identified by men and women are understood holistically in terms of their wider impact on the community.
- Acknowledging the abuses and violence perpetrated against men as well as women, their specific needs for care and support, and the positive role they play in supporting and representing their communities.
- Establishing a strong women’s forum that provides a safe space for women to discuss problems, and where they can gain confidence in a supportive environment.
- Promoting discussion about how rape and other forms of sexual and gender-based violence affect whole communities.
- Developing a code of conduct for each committee and thereby creating a safe space for men and women to discuss gender issues together.
- Promoting opportunities for men and women to have better access to local authorities – separately and together.
- The community-led nature of the programme allows men and women to address immediate, short-term protection needs as a priority, but also longer-term barriers to women’s rights and without these being seen as a threat to men.
- Celebrating ‘small victories’ that are, after all, significant and life-changing for the individual (or individuals) involved.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In conflict settings, Oxfam’s aim of ‘putting poor women’s rights at the heart of all we do’ means taking a sophisticated, intelligent and context-specific approach to gender and women’s rights. When a humanitarian crisis occurs, agencies need to respond rapidly. But adopting a simplistic attitude to women’s participation without understanding complex local dynamics and the impact of the proposed intervention on women and men’s identity risks doing more harm than good, or creating programmes with inevitably unsustainable impacts. In a situation where so many

people's rights are being abused and violated, empowering women in ways that are safe and sustainable often requires including and empowering men in the response too. Short-term and long-term needs must be considered together, and different strategies adopted to achieve the strongest overall result. Social change such as improving gender relations takes time, and the experience of Oxfam's protection programme in the DRC shows that it is important to plan stages for relationship-building that leads to attitudinal change. As the protection committees became more established and male and female committee members developed mutual trust, it became more feasible to address women's issues directly and also to focus on long-established structural issues such as inheritance rights.

Some recommendations:

- All interventions should start with a gender analysis. This would ideally be part of the initial needs assessment, based on discussions with a broad range of community representatives. This should include a nuanced and sophisticated understanding of gender dynamics and go beyond simplistic generalisations. Avoid preconceived ideas about gender, and listen. Expect it to be complicated, gender relations often are. The gender analysis should consider the different circumstances, impacts of the crisis, coping strategies, and resilience of men, women, boys and girls. In most cases, gender inequality means that women and girls face very specific threats and are particularly vulnerable. However, they are not a homogenous group and certain people may be disproportionately affected or targeted if they are from an ethnic minority group or are internally displaced or refugees. In conflict settings, groups that would not normally be priorities for aid agencies – such as fit and healthy young men – may be at high risk of violence and life-threatening danger, and their needs should be considered as part of the response.
- Data collection, information and analysis should be broken down by gender but also by other significant factors such as ethnicity, age, tribal or political affiliation, and so on.
- The gender analysis should help to establish whether the agency should or should not directly target men or women. In some situations, targeting women directly may have inadvertent negative consequences. In others, achieving goals linked to women's empowerment and gender equality may be more likely if activities target men. Interventions may target young men and boys directly – for example, when they need assistance to avoid forced recruitment into militias, or are at risk of banditry.
- The issues that men face should be addressed at the same time as those affecting women. Due to women's subordinate role in the household, they are unlikely to achieve any sustainable gains if humanitarian interventions focus exclusively on issues affecting them at the expense of those affecting men. Men, and possibly some women, will not take the NGO, or the women involved in the project, seriously. In addition, this runs the risk of creating a backlash or negative consequences for the women involved.
- In many conflict situations, a very aggressive, militarised masculinity is promoted as an ideal, and men who do not conform to this ideal may be at risk. Aid agencies can support men and boys who are taking positive action to support their communities and who promote gender equality and more positive ideals of manhood as a long-term goal.
- Separate spaces should be established where women can come together and talk. It may be an off-shoot of an existing community group such as a water committee or producers' association. It should not be prioritised over men, but should work with them.
- We should think of the impact of our interventions in the long term as well as the short term. It may be culturally inappropriate to target women directly in the short term, or they may lack the confidence to take on leadership or representational roles at the outset. But over the course of the project we should ensure that there are forums where women's voices can be heard and they can take steps for their own empowerment. These should be negotiated with men, and ultimately bring men and women together in more equal forums, supporting women's access to local decision-makers. We may not achieve this over the lifetime of a

humanitarian project, but we can work in ways that introduce ideas of gender equality and establish building blocks for future interventions.

- Monitoring processes should involve men and women, and boys and girls, in separate groups, in a confidential setting, with someone of the same sex. Throughout the project, it is important to ask them what is changing for them, what they think the risks are, and what could be done to mitigate these risks. Feed their views back into the project to strengthen future planning and implementation.
- Code of conduct training for all staff, and where possible community committees, is essential for promoting a safe space where sexual abuse and exploitation of women or girls, or men or boys, is not tolerated.
- Assume that sexual and gender-based violence is going on – and that women, men, girls and boys may be experiencing such violence. Consider establishing a system to help people get safe and timely access (referral) to relevant care and support services such as medical clinics.
- While it may be difficult to achieve in some cultures and societies, having female staff on the project team is a very effective way of promoting women's empowerment.

NOTES

- ¹ According to the World Development Report 2012, women in the DRC now have lower life expectancy than two decades ago, at 49 instead of 50. See: The World Bank (2011) 'World Development Report 2012: Gender Equality and Development', Washington DC: The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development/The World Bank, p.384
- ² Gender Action for Peace and Security (GAPS) UK (2009) 'Global Monitoring Checklist on Women, Peace, and Security: Afghanistan, Democratic Republic of Congo, Nepal, Northern Ireland, Sri Lanka', GAPS UK, London, available from: <http://www.gaps-uk.org/resources/index.php> (last accessed 6 September 2012)
- ³ 'Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2011', <http://www.unesco.org/new/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/HQ/ED/pdf/gmr2011-statistical-tables.pdf>
- ⁴ International Human Development Indicators (UNDP), <http://hdrstats.undp.org/en/countries/profiles/COD.html>
- ⁵ C. M. Ormhaug, P. Meier, and H. Hernes (2009) 'Armed conflict deaths disaggregated by gender', *PRIO Paper*, Oslo: Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO)
- ⁶ In times of economic hardship, family members may encourage girls into sexually exploitative relationships. Community members explain that inexperienced and naïve girls can quite easily be exploited by men offering promises and cheap trinkets. In areas where rape is a daily threat for adolescent girls, families may push for early marriage, as a girl who has been raped may not be considered 'marriageable', or in the belief that once married, she will be at less risk of exploitation or sexual violence.
- ⁷ In isolated communities, this dominant model frequently went unchallenged.
- ⁸ See D. Lwambo (2013) "'Before the war, I was a man": men and masculinities in Eastern DR Congo', *Gender and Development* 21(1), forthcoming.
- ⁹ C. Dolan (2010) "'War is not yet over": Community Perceptions of Sexual Violence and its Underpinnings in Eastern DRC', London: International Alert; M. E. Baaz and M. Stern, 'The Complexity of Violence: A Critical Analysis of Sexual Violence in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)', Sida Working Paper on Gender based Violence,, 2010,, <http://sida.se/publications>; The Refugee Law Project, Faculty of Law, Makerere University, 'Nobody is Immune: Gender Against Men', film documentary , <http://www.refugeelawproject.org>.
- ¹⁰ 'Women, girls, boys and men have immediate, "practical" survival needs particularly in humanitarian crises. They also have longer-term "strategic" needs linked to changing the circumstances of their lives and realizing their human rights... Practical needs focus on the immediate **condition** of women and men. Strategic needs concern their relative **position** in relation to each other...' IASC guidelines, 'The basics on gender in emergencies', p.3
- ¹¹ Oxfam is developing a model for 'referral' to ensure that the communities it works with can access services not provided by Oxfam itself, such as medical clinics. In order to avoid taking on roles and responsibilities for which Oxfam is not equipped or skilled, such as case management, the primarily model has been through the proactive dissemination of information to promote 'informed self-referral'. However, this model will undergo further development in 2012.
- ¹² The DRC project was concluding at the time of writing, and the project in Yemen was scheduled to begin in September 2012.
- ¹³ Focus group with women, Rambo, Kalonge
- ¹⁴ The programme is currently examining how to broach the subject of sexual violence against men – a subject that is very much taboo.
- ¹⁵ For example, an external evaluation found that whereas committee members felt they had had a positive impact on the number of illegal checkpoints, community members described these as having multiplied in the same timeframe.
- ¹⁶ This may be a result of the customary practice of condemning rape but resolving it through the, usually forced, marriage of a survivor to their rapist. People have not necessarily perceived this as something wrong or abusive.
- ¹⁷ The May 2012 evaluation received similar statements on drunkenness as a factor in domestic violence from women's forums and protection committees in parts of South Kivu and Province Orientale as well.

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