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Empowerment of Women during Conflict and Post-Conflict Phases and the Role of Humanitarian Aid Organizations in Supporting Women’s Newfound Empowerment Gained during Conflict

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Abstract

In patriarchal societies, women are particularly vulnerable and targeted in several forms during an armed conflict. This is mainly due to a continuance of gender inequality. However, a conflict can also be a time of opportunity for women’s empowerment due to changes in their traditional roles and new responsibilities that they must assume in the absence of men who are away fighting in the conflict. Nevertheless, in many post-conflict scenarios achievements in the area of women’s empowerment are often reversed and, no matter how well women may have taken on new public and social roles or developed new skills and competencies, they tend to go back to their previous roles as mothers, wives and home keepers. Once men return from conflict, they want to go back to the previous status quo. Often during conflicts, there are temporary changes in gender roles but not in gender identities. Consequently, women are not well prepared to hold on to their new positions. This dissertation explores if there is a role humanitarian organizations can play in maintaining women’s empowerment in post-conflict scenarios through the observation of the main elements which contribute to women’s empowerment during a conflict period. It will also examine the principal obstacles to maintaining this empowerment in a post-conflict phase.

Keywords
Women, empowerment, conflict, humanitarian organization, post-conflict, gender, development, humanitarian aid, humanitarian action, women’s organization, gender equality.
To the women of my life:
My mom, the strongest woman that I have ever met
  Christina Schultz, the best boss and friend ever
Margrith, who made me feel at home in this country
  Isabel, my little daughter and my inspiration.
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Acronyms and Abbreviations

ACSUR: Association for Cooperation with the South
AECID Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation
ALNAP: Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance
AUC: United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia
DRC: Democratic Republic of Congo
FARC: Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia
GIZ: Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit
IASC: Inter-Agency Standing Commission
ICRC International Committee of the Red Cross
IFRC International Federation of the Red Cross/Red Crescent
LTTE: Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam
MSF: Medecins Sans Frontières
NGO: Non-governmental organization
NUDP: United Nations Development Programme
OCHA: Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
SDC: Swiss Development Cooperation
SUIPPCOL: Swiss Programme for Peace Promotion in Colombia
UN Women: United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women
UN: United Nation
UNFPA: United Nation Population Fund
UNHCR: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF United Nations Children’s Fund
USAID: United States Agency for International Development
WHO: World Health Organization
WID: Women in Development
# Table of content

Abstract .................................................................................................................................................. 2  
Acknowledgement .................................................................................................................................. 4  
Acronyms and Abbreviations ............................................................................................................... 5  
Table of content ...................................................................................................................................... 6  
Introduction ............................................................................................................................................ 7  
  Problem Statement ................................................................................................................................. 7  
  Research Questions ................................................................................................................................. 8  
  Methodology .......................................................................................................................................... 8  
  Limitations ........................................................................................................................................... 10  
Section 1: Fundamental concepts ........................................................................................................ 10  
  1.1 Women and Gender ......................................................................................................................... 11  
  1.2 Woman, gender and empowerment ............................................................................................... 15  
Section 2: Women in conflict and post-conflict scenarios ..................................................................... 19  
  2.1 Women are not only victims ............................................................................................................ 20  
  2.2 Women’s empowerment during conflict and post-conflict phases .................................................. 24  
Section 3. The role of humanitarian aid organizations in the empowerment of women in conflict  
  and maintenance of this empowerment in post conflict phases .......................................................... 26  
  3.1 Evolution of the perception of women and women’s empowerment in humanitarian  
      action ................................................................................................................................................. 27  
  3.2 Example of the sustainability of women’s empowerment after a conflict - Ruta Pacífica de  
      Mujeres .......................................................................................................................................... 32  
Conclusion ............................................................................................................................................... 36  
Bibliography .......................................................................................................................................... 39  
  Books ....................................................................................................................................................... 39  
  Articles .................................................................................................................................................... 41  
  Institutional Documents, manuals and reports ....................................................................................... 44  
  Institutional web pages ............................................................................................................................. 46  
  Other web pages ..................................................................................................................................... 48
Introduction

An article entitled, “How the Crisis is Altering Women’s Roles in Syria”, published in Forced Migration Review, chronicles the life of a 40-year old Syrian female teacher and English translator who during the Syrian conflict inadvertently rose to the crisis at hand and began distributing humanitarian aid due to the absence of men who had gone to fight in the conflict. She stated, “Our lives were predictable [before]. We all knew the beginning, middle and end of our stories. Then this conflict occurred, and it has turned everything on its head. I can never go back to doing what I did before; I can never be so meek and ordinary, now I know Aleppo and Aleppans like never before. This forced interaction with people I would otherwise never have met has changed my whole outlook”. Based on these moving words, certain poignant questions emerged regarding the status of women who underwent internal changes due to drastic external changes around them. For better or worse, many women such as these Syrian women were propelled, often willingly, to assume new roles, responsibilities and begin to shape new societal identities. The underlying question of how these women would then be expected to return, or regress, to their previous statuses became the driving force behind this dissertation.

Problem Statement

During conflict, women become particularly vulnerable and the targets of several forms of violence including: being used as a weapon of war; sexual exploitation; torture; forced prostitution; forced marriages; and rape by several armed actors such as soldiers, rebels, guerrilla fighters, among others. The nature of conflict also compels significant changes in society with regard to women’s traditional roles and responsibilities. The break down or disintegration of family and community networks force women to assume new roles in society. While conflict brings about violent and abrupt shifts in societies, it can also afford women opportunities to develop and strengthen their participation and decision-making abilities. Women may, for the first time, have the opportunity to work outside of the home, become income earners, organize themselves with other women, and become active in the public sphere. These opportunities which lead to transformations impacting women and women’s roles can be determinant in a reconstruction and post-conflict stage.

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Equally, however, change can often be reversed in many post-conflict scenarios. Men returning from armed conflict may expect the status quo which they once knew to resume where they left off. They also naturally expect to return to their jobs and retake the decision-making roles within their families and community. Similarly, society also tends to want to reorganize itself in the manner it was before the conflict. As returning men from conflict seek to retake their traditional roles, women’s newly acquired skills, capacities, and leadership roles are often overlooked and/or dismissed. Instead, a new, unfamiliar reality has unfolded whereby women have undergone irreversible, internal changes with regards to their attitudes, roles, status, and skills exercised in society. However, these significant transformations often fail to effectively and/or permanently transfer into a post-conflict stage in which women retain their newly found independence and status. Inequality and discrimination often persist in the face of drastic changes and advances.

Research Questions

Therefore, this dissertation will seek to explore if, and how, humanitarian aid organizations could contribute in strengthening and promoting women’s initiatives to maintain their newly acquired skills, status, and empowerment in a post-conflict stage. To answer this question, it is necessary to examine three preliminary questions: 1) Is there a clear and basic understanding by humanitarian aid organizations, governments, and other armed conflict actors regarding the roles women play during a conflict and in a post-conflict scenario? 2) Which key factors contribute to successfully maintaining and promoting empowerment and new skills of women’s associations, organizations, and/or women’s’ groups acquired during a conflict and in a post-conflict situation and which are obstacles? 3) Are there women’s associations, organizations, and/or groups in which their newly acquired skills, status, and empowerment have successfully been accepted and adopted during a post-conflict stage and can these experiences be replicated? To go through this process, lessons learned from previous humanitarian aid responses in this context will be observed.

Methodology

To respond to these questions, the first part of this document will provide a literary review on the various definitions related to women, gender and empowerment. In addition, these definitions will be analyzed taking into consideration their relevance in conflict and post-conflict situations with regard to humanitarian aid. The second part reflects on the different roles that women take on during conflict and post-conflict phases, how these roles contribute to the women’s empowerment
processes during conflict and the obstacles they encounter to maintain their new found empowerment in a post-conflict phase. In the third section, the document will examine the evolution of the humanitarian aid sector with respect to the expected roles of women and empowerment processes during conflict and post-conflict phases. It will specifically look at one exemplary case of a women’s organization established and strengthened during the Colombian internal armed conflict and which has since maintained their empowerment in a post-conflict phase. This organization, *Ruta Pácifica de Mujeres*, provides an interesting perspective of women’s empowerment processes and sustainability in a post-conflict phase due to their organizational profile and grassroots activism. Aside from being one of the largest and more representative women’s networks, its members’ rich diversity embodies a broad spectrum of Colombian women impacted by the conflict including rural women, urban women, victims of the conflict, professionals, and academics among others. While the internal armed conflict persists today in Colombia, a demobilization process was held with one of its principal illegal armed groups, the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC) from 2003-2006. Throughout this process and in its post-conflict phase, *Ruta Pácifica* was among the strongest peacebuilding and women’s rights advocacy groups to galvanize thousands of citizens throughout Colombia’s hardest hit regions to demand change and peace. It should be noted that while it has been supported by several international organizations, *Ruta Pácifica* has primarily worked with development programs rather than humanitarian aid organizations.

Finally, the conclusion section of this dissertation will reflect on the challenges faced by humanitarian aid actors in support of women’s empowerment in contemporary conflicts and looking forward at post-conflict phases. This dissertation will not provide a comprehensive description and analysis of scenarios of conflict and post-conflict. It also will not focus on case studies of women in conflict or analyze gender relationships in conflicts. Instead, this dissertation is more theory-based using different conflict and post-conflict examples which respond to the initially established questions and provide lessons learned of previous humanitarian aid or development interventions also contributing to the reflection on women’s empowerment in current conflicts. The dissertation will focus on civilian women including their participation in women’s associations, organizations, and/or groups and the different roles they take on during a conflict. This dissertation will also mention, but not include a full analysis, of women combatants. Finally,
it will also not include a detailed analysis of the role of men in a conflict and/or post-conflict situations.

**Limitations**

This dissertation includes women and girls, irrespective of age, socio-economic or cultural status, and education levels. It will not distinguish between urban and rural women and instead take a general approach. Empowerment processes and its sustainability can have differences. This study examines these core issues using a broad and general approach.

Another significant limitation is that this study will not generalize empowerment issues related to conflict and post-conflict phases because conflicts around the world are different. While they may have similarities, they each have their particularities.

Scarce information on humanitarian aid actors working in post-conflict phases directly related to women’s empowerment issues also presents limitations in carrying out a comprehensive analysis. It is also important to note that throughout this dissertation the mention of peace processes does not necessarily indicate that these are cases of post-conflict scenarios. Some post-conflict scenarios may derive from other types of political and social conflicts.

Another major limitation is that this dissertation is based on secondary sources and not on group interviews of women and/or humanitarian aid actors. An in-depth study on this issue should include interviews and firsthand information collection of humanitarian aid actors and women’s groups who were active during conflicts. Interviews with women who were able to maintain their leadership during post-conflict phases would have also greatly enriched this study.

**Section 1: Fundamental concepts**

As a first step to develop this dissertation, it is important to establish a common understanding on the definition of women; the relations between women, gender, and empowerment; and to explore the role of women in conflict and post-conflict scenarios. There are different approaches with regard to the definitions of concepts surrounding women, gender, and empowerment. For the purpose of this dissertation, we will focus on these concepts mainly through a humanitarian scope.
1.1 Women and Gender

The most common way to define a woman is based on her biological and physical anatomy, or her biological sex\(^2\). A woman is defined as an adult, female human being\(^3\). A female is defined as a person bearing two X chromosomes in the cell nuclei and normally having a vagina, uterus, ovaries, a relatively rounded body and enlarged breasts developing at puberty, and retaining a beardless face\(^4\). This definition is strongly criticized by the feminist movement\(^5\) which considers it to be too simplistic. Even though feminists do not agree on one sole definition of a woman\(^6\), most of them do agree that biological characteristics are not enough to define a woman. In this sense, philosopher Linda Alcoff poses questions illustrating the limitation of this definition. She asks, “What is the significance, if any, of these anatomies? What is the connection between the female anatomy and the concept of a woman? She also maintains that not everyone with a female anatomy is considered a woman”\(^7\). Anthropologist Marta Lamas further supports this idea raising similar questions such as: What makes one female feminine or one male masculine? His/her anatomy? His/her sex? Are there feminine males and masculine females? What is feminine and masculine? Why is something which is considered feminine in one culture perceived as masculine in another culture? In answering these questions, it becomes evident that one’s biological sex is not equivalent to one’s acquired or chosen identity. Biology, per se, is not sufficient to define a woman’s identity.\(^8\)

The feminist movement believes that the definition of a woman is not solely based on biological factors, but also on social and cultural factors. Additionally, it is society which determines the definition of who a woman is. According to feminists, it is a patriarchal society, in fact, that projects women as inferior to men, in which men possess power and women are subordinate to them\(^9\). Simone de Beauvoir was one of the first authors to present this idea in her book *The Second Sex*.

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\(^1\)Either of the two main categories (male and female) into which humans and most other living things are divided on the basis of their reproductive functions. [http://www.oxforddictionaries.com](http://www.oxforddictionaries.com), Web February 2016.


\(^3\)Ibid


stating, "One is not born, but rather, one becomes a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature... which is classified as feminine...Humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him... He is the subject; he is the absolute – she is the other"  

Professor of psychology and gender issues Rosa Cobo also supports this idea stating that, “all societies had been constructed from anatomical differences between sexes and has turned them into social and political inequalities.” For centuries, biological characteristics of women have been used to consider them weaker than men. They are depicted as being much more sensitive, possessing weak rationality, dependent, incapable of playing a role in public spaces, and relegated to domestic spaces. In fact, until the 17th century the role of women in public spaces was limited. Most women were relegated to the private spaces of their homes as housewives and mothers. Until the 19th and 20th centuries, most women’s rights were not recognized including the right to education, property, vote, political participation, working outside of the home, decision-making for her children or herself, and so on. In many countries, women are still fighting for their full rights. There is not one specific definition for women found in glossaries, strategic plans, and/or guidelines of humanitarian aid organizations such as the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), or Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), the UN (such as UN Women, WHO, UNICEF, UNHCR, OCHA, UNDP), governmental cooperation agencies (such as USAID, SDC, GIZ) nor in humanitarian action platforms such as the IASC or Sphere Project (Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Disaster Response). However, all of them use biological sex to make the distinction between women and men in their program designs and interventions. All of them also agree that sex refers to the biological and physiological characteristics which define humans as women (female) or men (male). A person’s sex is natural, determined by birth and, therefore,
generally unchanging and universal. It is considered universal because it generally remains constant across cultures and over time.

Although, some of these entities do make a distinction and add some elements to the concept of a woman. For example, according to the WHO and UN Women, regarding mentioned physical traits, their definition of sex includes that, “these sets of biological characteristics are not mutually exclusive as there are individuals who possess both (Intersex)”. Meanwhile, the University of California Berkeley Gender Equity Resource Center outlines sex terms as male, female, transsexual, and intersex, taking into consideration that it is possible to change one’s original sex at birth. All of them agree on the fundamental idea that sex tends to differentiate humans as males and females.

However, while a specific definition may not exist among these entities, this does not mean that these organizations deny the influence of social and cultural factors in the definition of women or that they only take into account biological factors to define women. Most of them share the same opinion as the University of California Berkeley Gender Equity Resource Center which defines sex as biological, although social views and experiences of sex are cultural. Describing this cultural approach regarding biological differences is necessary to introduce another key concept-the concept of gender.

The term gender, used as a concept to distinguish biological differences from social/psychological ones, originates in psychology. Even though, in 1955, anthropologist John Money proposed the term "gender role" to describe the behaviors socially assigned to men and women, it was the psychologist Robert Stoller who thoroughly established the differences between sex and gender. Stoller, in his book *Sex and Gender*, discussed transsexuality as a means to explain why some people felt that they were ‘trapped in the wrong bodies, and used the terms ‘sex’ to pick out

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biological traits and ‘gender’ to pick out the amount of femininity and masculinity a person exhibited.”

Later in the 1970s-80s, the term gender was used by various social science disciplines because it proved to be a useful category to illustrate more precisely how biological differences contribute to inequality (economic, social and political) between women and men. Sociologists and feminist historians have conceptualized gender as a structuring element of a set of social relations—the relations of gender that determine the interactions of human beings as sexual persons. Gender relations are socially constructed and, therefore, are transformable; not from biology and not necessarily harmonious. On the contrary, gender relations may generate opposition and conflict. Since these conflicts are socially determined, they can take very different forms in different circumstances; often they take the form of male domination and female subordination.”

The humanitarian assistance field has adopted some elements of the feminist movement to develop their definition of gender. International organizations (such as the ICRC, Save the Children, MSF, Oxfam, World Vision, etc.), governmental agencies (SDC, GTZ, USAID) and UN agencies (UN Women, WHO, UNICEF, OCHA etc.) agree on the Sphere Project definition of gender which refers to “…the roles, responsibilities and identities of women and men and how these are valued in society. These vary in different cultures and change over time. Gender identities define how society expects women and men to think and act. Gender roles, responsibilities and identities can be changed because they are socially learned.”

In addition, UN agencies point out that the concept of gender includes five important elements: relational, hierarchical, historical, contextual and institutional. Additionally, gender systems are institutionalized through education systems, political and economic systems, legislation, and culture and traditions. GIZ also mentions that gender determines relative power and influence that society ascribes to the two sexes on a differential basis. It also adds that gender roles are determined by the social, cultural and economic organization of a society as well as by dominant religious, moral and legal conceptions. According to them, gender roles are not neutral, but connected with different choices, rights and decision-making possibilities. In most cases, these

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23 Ibid 15
tend to be in favor of men. For ICRC, gender is a central organizing factor in societies and can significantly affect the processes of production, distribution and consumption. In agreement, UNDP adds that in most societies there are differences and inequalities between women and men regarding responsibilities assigned, activities undertaken, access to and control over resources, as well as decision-making opportunities. Gender is an important criterion for socio-cultural analysis like class, race, poverty level, ethnic group and age.

It is necessary to mention that, on a conceptual level, humanitarian aid organizations have a clear understanding that gender refers to both women and men and the relationship between them. However, in practical terms, it is common to see the concept of gender being interchangeable with the term woman/women. This observation can be extended to other social and human disciplines, resulting in what is somewhat contemptuously called academic "womanism." It is also a common mistake, although all humanitarian aid organizations make distinctions between sex and gender, to replace the word “sex” for “gender” and vice versa in publications and actions carried out in the field. For the purpose of this dissertation, the terms “sex” and “gender” coincide with those used by UN agencies and humanitarian aid organizations. A “woman” will be understood as a female human being with full rights, capacities and possibilities just like men.

1.2 Woman, gender and empowerment

Women are very active socially in western countries and are no longer exclusively restricted to the private sphere. Instead, women are playing active roles in social and political sectors. Nevertheless, they often do not have economic and political equality. According to feminist literature, one of the most important reasons for this imbalance between men and women is the oppression of women by men, who throughout the ages, have achieved domination through power. This power has not only been obtained due to men’s individual qualities (for example, physical strength) but also through a long-established patriarchal society (for example, through the legal system). Because

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29Mikkola, Mari. Feminist Perspectives on Sex and Gender. Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, First published Mon May 12, 2008; substantive revision Fri Jan 29, 2016. Page 54
of this imbalance in power – or disempowerment of women - real disadvantages for women have been created. Furthermore, given the difficulty in changing social and political structures which support this imbalance, the empowerment of women has become an important objective for women’s organizations, NGOs, governments, as well as bilateral and multilateral agencies.

“Empowerment has different meanings in each context and for each individual or group. Definitions vary according to the disciplines that use the term: psychology, political science, education, law or economics, among others.” With regard to women’s empowerment, there is also a similar problem. Consensus does not exist regarding the concept of women’s empowerment and sometimes can be confused with other concepts related to women such as gender equality, and women’s self-determination, among others. Also, women’s empowerment does not have a general definition and measure because it depends on the culture and the context.

Economist and gender researcher Naila Kabeer defines empowerment as ‘the expansion in people's ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them.” Jo Rowlands, a contemporary author in empowerment, defines empowerment as a process by which people become aware of their own interests and how those relate to the interests of others, in order for both to participate from a position of greater strength in decision-making and to actually influence such decisions. She considers three dimensions of empowerment: personal (involving a sense of self and individual confidence and capacity as well as undoing the effects of internalized oppression); relational (developing the ability to negotiate and influence the nature of a relationship and decisions); and collective (individuals working together to achieve a more extensive impact than each could have had alone). For feminist Nelly Stromquist, empowerment is "a process to change the distribution of power both in interpersonal relations and in institutions throughout society" which includes five components: cognitive (women's understanding of their conditions of

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33 Some examples of this disadvantages: In 2015 the global labor force participation rate was 50 percent for women but 77 percent for men. Worldwide in 2015, 72 percent of working-age men were employed, compared with only 47 percent of women. In the period 2005 – 2015 the rate of population older than 25 year with at least some secondary education was 54.5 for women and 65.4% for men. For 2015 the rate of women share of seats in parliament worldwide was only of 21.8%. Dates of Gender Inequality Index 2015 http://hdr.undp.org/es/composite/GII. Web March 2016.


36 Gender Equality means that the rights, responsibilities and opportunities of individuals will not depend on whether they are born male or female. Promotion of gender equality means that women and men, girls and boys have equal conditions, treatment and opportunities for realizing their full potential, human rights and dignity, and for contributing to (and benefitting from) economic, social, cultural and political development. Fourth World Conference on Women, Beijing 1995 http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/. Web March 2016


subordination causing the development of the knowledge to change them), psychological (women have self-confidence and understanding of their capacities to act on personal and societal levels to improve their conditions), economic (ability to engage in a productive activity that will allow them some degree of financial autonomy), and political (ability to analyze social and political environments as well as organize and mobilize for social change)\textsuperscript{40}. Along the same lines, Lucy Lazo describes empowerment as "a process of acquiring, providing, bestowing the resources and the means or enabling the access to a control over such means and resources and it could be a self-propelled and self-propelling process."

William Scott and Stephen Gough add another component regarding the definition of empowerment. With regard to empowerment and education, they argue that when groups increase in power it may imply another’s loss of power. This displaced group, then, may be inclined to resist its removal and thus generating conflict. From this perspective, women’s empowerment would imply less power for men.\textsuperscript{42} Feminist activists stress that women’s empowerment is not about replacing one form of empowerment with another. Women’s empowerment should lead to the liberation from false value systems and ideologies of oppression. It should lead to a situation in which each person can become a whole being regardless of gender, and use their fullest potential to construct a more humane society for all\textsuperscript{43}. This review of definitions represents a small part of an extensive collection of literature on empowerment, and specifically on women’s empowerment. Even though there are differences in definitions, most contemporary authors like Datta and Kornberg, Rowlands, Kabeer, Oxaal and Baden agree that empowerment is a process which involves power, choice, and change. Moreover, it illustrates that empowerment is a process that not only implies the self-change of people, but also a deeper change in society and structures of domination.

Humanitarian aid and international organizations along with the UN system agree on a definition of woman’s empowerment as a process that enables women to gain control over their lives. According to their mandates, some of them add elements to their definition based on their own

views of empowerment. For UN Women, empowerment involves awareness-raising, building self-confidence, expansion of choices, increased access to and control over resources and actions to transform the structures and institutions which reinforce and perpetuate gender discrimination and inequality. For UNFPA, women's empowerment includes five components: women's sense of self-worth; their right to have and to determine choices; their right to have access to opportunities and resources; their right to have the power to control their own lives, both within and outside the home; and their ability to influence the direction of social change to create a more just social and economic order, nationally and internationally. For UNHCR, empowerment is a process/phenomenon that allows people to take greater control over the decisions, assets, policies, processes and institutions that affect their lives. The WHO adds the element of conflict in the definition of empowerment. For them, “empowerment is a multidimensional social process. Therefore, the strategies for empowerment often challenge existing power allocations and relationships to give disadvantaged groups more power.” UNICEF includes a spiritual element in their definition. For them, “empowerment refers to increasing the spiritual, political, social or economic strength of individuals and communities.” According to UNDP, “The concept of empowerment is related to gender equality, but distinct from it. To be empowered, women must not only have equal capabilities (such as education and health) and equal access to resources and opportunities (such as land and employment), they must also have the agency to use those rights, capabilities, resources and opportunities to make strategic choices and decisions (such as are provided through leadership opportunities.”

One important element, shared by international organizations and governmental agencies, is that women’s empowerment is a process whereby disadvantaged people proactively shape and improve their living conditions. It is not about someone else empowering them. In this sense, World Vision states that “women's empowerment implies providing a climate where women can develop critical thinking skills, reactivate their minds and reorganize their perceptions about themselves

Office of the Special Adviser on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women (OSAGI) United Nations, Definitions and Concepts
and the environment in which they live in. It also offers women the opportunity to question and analyze issues from a different perspective in order for them to overcome the subordination syndrome and emphasize self-actualization, self-identity and positive validation.” GIZ agrees with this point and purports that “empowerment requires the full participation of all affected people in the formulation, implementation and evaluation of decisions that determine the well-being of societies. Empowerment of women is a ‘bottom-up’ process of transforming gendered power relations as well as social, economic, legal and political institutions.” Additionally, UN Women points out that women’s empowerment cannot be achieved in a vacuum; men must be brought along in the process of change. Empowerment should not be seen as a zero-sum game where gains for women automatically imply losses for men. USAID includes a social component claiming that while empowerment often comes from within, individuals empower themselves, cultures, societies and institutions. This creates conditions that can facilitate or undermine the possibilities for empowerment. In summary, with few differences of the definition, all of them do agree that “empowerment comprises six mechanisms that foster empowerment (knowledge; agency; opportunity; capacity-building; resources; and sustainability), five domains of empowerment (health; economic; political; resource; and spiritual), and three levels (individual; community; and organizational)” For this dissertation, the UN Women’s definition is adopted and complemented by the idea which stresses that there are women who empower themselves. Additionally, it takes into consideration USAID’s opinion that cultures, societies and institution can and must create conditions that facilitate the possibilities for empowerment and that empowerment is one strategy for gender equality.

Section 2: Women in conflict and post-conflict scenarios

For the purpose of this dissertation, the Sphere Project’s definition of “conflict” is adopted. Based on the Geneva Convention Article 1 and 3 as well as Additional Protocol II, it states: “Conflict refers to violent fighting between two or more parties that threatens the safety and security of...
communities or of the general population. An armed conflict is said to exist when there is an armed confrontation between the armed forces of States (international armed conflict) or between governmental authorities and organized armed groups or between such groups within a State (non-international armed conflict).” According to international humanitarian law, the term "armed conflict" is used to refer to situations where hostilities reach a threshold synonymous with war. (Article 8.2(d), Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court)

OCHA defines post-conflict transition as the tenuous period immediately following the termination of a conflict during which humanitarian needs must still be met and programs such as disarmament, demobilization, reintegration, rehabilitation as well as rebuilding infrastructure remain at an early stage. This period may also involve the temporary transfer of government functions to a 20 UN transitional administration. Graham Brown, Arnim Langer & Frances Stewart add that post-conflict scenarios are often characterized by multiple transition processes. Normally, hostilities do not suddenly come to an end and followed by a complete period of peace. While there may be an agreed “peace” accord signed, low-level or sporadic fighting often continues and frequently resumes to its full level after a short period. These authors view the post-conflict scenario not as a period bound by a single specific event, but as a process that involves achieving a range of peace milestones including reconciliation, societal integration and economic recovery. For this dissertation, elements of these two definitions are adopted.

2.1 Women are not only victims

According to Medina Haeri and Nadine Puechguirbal, advisors on women and conflict issues for ICRC and the UN, “most humanitarian aid reports and documents depict women as helpless victims in need of protection, irrespective of the different roles that women can play in times of war”. Of course, there are strong reasons to consider women as victims of conflict. UN Women estimates “that close to 90% of current war casualties are civilians, the majority of whom are women and children.” It is also a fact that women suffer different types of violence during a conflict. According to UN Women, “the most common risks of violence forms for women in conflicts, in addition to internal displacement and general violence, are: rape as a tool of war; sexual

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assault/exploitation by combatants and community members; forced prostitution; increased domestic violence; human trafficking; female infanticide; early and/or forced marriage; murder; sexual slavery; forced pregnancy; and forced sterilization and so on. Just to mention some figures, “In conflicts such as that of the former Yugoslavia, Congo, Sierra Leone and Liberia, women were raped as part of the combatants’ war strategy.” According to UN agencies, more than approximately 60,000 women were raped during the civil war in Sierra Leone (1991-2002), more than 40,000 in Liberia (1989-2003), up to 60,000 in the former Yugoslavia (1992-1995), and at least 200,000 in the Democratic Republic of the Congo since 1998”. The Zenica Centre for the Registration of War and Genocide Crime in Bosnia-Herzegovina documented 40,000 cases of war-related rape. From a sample of Rwandan women surveyed in 1999, 39% reported being raped and 74% reported that they were aware that sexual violence had occurred during the 1994 genocide.” More recently, in July 2012, International Rescue Committee rapid assessments of Syrian refugees in Lebanon and Jordan revealed that early and coerced marriages had increased and the average age of girls marrying dropped since the start of the conflict. Families have reportedly been marrying girls as young as 12 years old as a means of protecting them from rape or dishonor. In other cases, girls were married to wealthy businessmen in exchange for money to pay rent, or in exchange for free living accommodations or reduced rent. In armed conflicts, women also frequently face inequality with regard to access to health services such as maternal and infant healthcare resources. In addition, they have less decision-making capacity and access to education as well as experience greater difficulty in accessing financial resources and so on. Nevertheless, it is important to point out two elements in this situation. First, understanding vulnerability “as the diminished capacity of an individual or group to anticipate, cope with, resist and recover from the impact of a natural or man-made hazard. (This concept is relative and dynamic and most often associated with poverty. However, it can also arise when people are

isolated, insecure and defenseless in the face of risk, shock or stress).” Women are not more vulnerable simply by virtue of being a woman during conflict. Vulnerability factors affect different groups in different ways, and it would be a gross oversimplification to consider either sex as inherently more vulnerable than the other. The vulnerability of women is directly associated with gender roles and gender-based discrimination. In the context of armed conflict, when existing inequalities in gender relations during peacetime are exacerbated, the stereotypical perception of women as wives, mothers, nurturers and guardians of the culture persists. As a consequence of the construction of the women’s identities in these gender roles, they are more easily perceived as victims in need of protection and become a target of armed groups in conflict. According to Charlotte Lindsey, author of the ICRC book entitled Women Facing War, “women are particularly susceptible to marginalization, poverty and the suffering engendered by armed conflict, especially when they are already victims of discrimination in peacetime. Also, women are particularly vulnerable to rape as a weapon of war if they are upheld as “symbolic” bearers of a cultural and ethnic identity and the producers of the future generation of the community.” In addition, “the very nature of women’s vulnerability often lies more in the fact that armed conflicts have evolved to the extent that the civilian population is totally caught in the fighting and women are frequently the ones trying to maintain and provide for the everyday survival of the family.”

Second, an important element which is central to this dissertation is that, “although women and men do often assume these traditional roles, there is a tendency in the mainstream literature to exaggerate the extent to which they play stereotypical gender roles in armed conflict”. In reality, “women are rarely mere passive victims of conflict and should not be treated as such. Women play different roles in a conflict. They can even play active roles in the events that lead to fighting and instability, and even in combat itself”. In fact, in different conflicts around the world, women have participated as combatants in several non-State armed conflicts. For instance, in Nepal it is calculated that one-third of the Maoist fighting forces were women. In Sri Lanka, it is estimated that 15% of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) forces were women and estimates

indicate that 10%-30% of women comprised the fighting forces in the Sierra Leone conflict. In Colombia, female combatants comprise 35%-40% of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). In addition, in some legal State forces such as the United States, Canada, India, Australia, New Zealand, Sweden, Israel, Sri Lanka, and Norway, women serve as combatants in their armies.

Also, civilian women can play different roles in a conflict situation. Beside their traditional roles as housewives and mothers responsible for children and injured war victims, “in most conflicts around the world, women take over the roles that society usually attributes to men such as providers, care givers, and social and political administrators of their communities is common. They also sometimes serve as peace mediators.” For example, in Yugoslavia, Somalia, Northern Ireland and Liberia among others, women played a significant role in the mobilization for peace. Meanwhile, in Colombia women have mobilized for years to defend human rights and advocate for peace. “Women in Bosnia and Herzegovina managed daycare facilities and voluntary health services in seized communities. In Rwanda, women participated in the distribution of food aid and in El Salvador they founded organizations to press for the release of political prisoners and to provide relief to families of the victims of political repression.” Recently, in the Syrian crisis which has extended for more than five years, the conflict has resulted in the cut-off of most public services. As a result, in Syria, women have become the leaders of the informal humanitarian aid community which emerged during the conflict. They have served as health care volunteers in improvised and clandestine health centers. They have also become activists in supporting informal education and teaching children at home. In addition, they have assumed the responsibility of generating income and providing for their families. In fact, a 2015 assessment carried out with the participation of CARE in Syria points out that 12%-17% of households in Syria are now female-
According to Medina Haeri and Nadine Puechguirbal, “…women are far more resilient and less vulnerable to the impacts of armed conflict than is suggested in much of the current humanitarian aid literature and given the active roles they often adopt, the perspective of women is invaluable not only in the midst of the conflict, but also with regard to conflict resolution and reconstruction in the wake of the hostilities.”

2.2 Women’s empowerment during conflict and post-conflict phases

Despite the significant impacts that armed conflicts have on women, especially in patriarchal societies, the new roles they begin to assume and the structural changes in societies brought on by conflict represent opportunities for their empowerment. In the absence of men during conflict, women are challenged to take on roles in public sphere which forces them to redefine the cultural and social perceptions of themselves. “Many women acquired new confidence, new skills, and a new vision for the future, increasing their participation in public affairs. In many cases, the expansion of women’s public roles enhanced their social and political positions in their countries. Consequently, by the end of the conflicts, many women are able to take the lead in forming organizations to pursue their interests and agendas.”

For instance, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, El Salvador, Guatemala, Rwanda, Cambodia and Georgia, most women organizations were established at the end of their conflicts. In countries such as El Salvador, Cambodia, Lebanon, and Mozambique among others, evidence shows that women increased their political participation during the post-conflict phases. With regard to economic empowerment, an increase in women’s participation in the labor force can be seen during and shortly after the end of conflicts in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Cambodia, El Salvador, Georgia, Guatemala, Rwanda, East Timor, Indonesia, Sudan, Angola, Mali, Uganda and Somalia. However, women’s empowerment is not only expressed in the public sphere. In the domestic sphere, they become income earners and main

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80 Livelihoods Assessment in Southern Syria: Dar’a and Quneitra governorates Joint report published by NRC, RFSAN, IMMAP, United Muslim Relief, FAO, Humanitarian Monitoring Group, and CARE. November 2015, p. 24
decision-makers demonstrating their capabilities and capacities. They redefine their roles and self-perception within the family unit.\(^86\)

Unfortunately, “Historically, and in most but not all cases, women have been unable to maintain and formalize gains made during conflict into post-conflict. Often, women remain at the ‘margins of political, economic and social power; their voices and experiences diminish when the peace processes start’.”\(^87\) For instance, despite the multiple roles that they played and the significant impacts experienced by women during armed conflicts, their participation in a peace process is marginal and, in some cases, non-existent. In a UN review of 31 major peace processes (1992-2011), women only made up 4% of signatories, 2.4% of chief mediators, 3.7% of witnesses, and 9% of negotiators.\(^88\) Similarly, social acceptance of women as income providers is often only temporary as these new roles respond to and fill immediate, short-term needs that emerge during conflict. In addition, high societal pressure to return to pre-conflict conditions contributes to women being unable to hold on to newly formed roles or achieved statuses once in a post-conflict phase. This situation can be seen in the post-conflict phases of Rwanda, South Sudan, Bosnia, and Sierra Leone among others. In these countries, married women’s statuses and roles went largely unaltered from pre- to post-conflict phases. The few changes in terms of empowerment made during conflict were ultimately unsustainable. In the post-conflict phases of these countries, women reverted back to (or continued on) with domestic tasks in the household and subsistence farming.\(^89\)

There are several reasons why women in post-conflict phases return to their traditional roles which are mainly associated with gender inequality. Due to the fact that gender roles may change during a conflict but gender identities may not, the traditional patriarchal values impede opportunities which a new post-conflict scenario could offer women and/or help them to maintain and strengthen their empowerment. No matter what roles women may have played during a conflict situation and despite all the strength, capability and leadership that they may have demonstrated during conflict periods, there is a resurgence of stereotypical attitudes about women’s weak leadership skills and

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women during post-conflict scenarios which push them out of public engagement. Furthermore, “Women’s groups tend to be under funded and are often poorly positioned to seize opportunities to influence governance arrangements during the peace process. Structural inequalities and barriers prevent women’s full engagement in institutions of governance in post-conflict period”\(^9\). In addition, “…women’s disproportionate share of the burden of ensuring the subsistence of the household in a post-conflict context, including care for the elderly, children, orphans, disabled or internally displaced relatives, means that women have little time to devote to politics or to participate in reform processes. According to UN Women, 30%-40% of households, after armed conflict, are female-headed.”\(^92\) Furthermore, the continuance and even increase of domestic violence and other forms of violence against women, sometimes exacerbated by the absence of law enforcement agencies and impunity for gender crimes during conflict and post-conflict, can be decisive factors in rolling back women’s gains and compelling their return to pre-conflict roles. Likewise, women face huge barriers regarding earning fair wages and obtaining good jobs once men return from conflict due to competition for jobs and power. Lack of power, lack of formal education, lack of resources to support their organizations and the lack of the full recognition of their rights represent only a few obstacles with respect to retaining women's economic empowerment in the long term.\(^93\)

Section 3. The role of humanitarian aid organizations in the empowerment of women in conflict and maintenance of this empowerment in post-conflict phases

For the purposes of this document, humanitarian aid organizations are defined as international, non-governmental, non-profit organizations and/or a coalition of organizations whose principal mandate is to provide humanitarian aid and/or protection to people in need. Humanitarian aid or humanitarian assistance is defined as aid that seeks to save lives or alleviate the suffering of a crisis-affected population while maintaining or protecting human dignity during and in the aftermath of humanitarian crisis caused by natural disasters, man-made disasters or complex emergencies\(^94\) in

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\(^91\)Ibid.
\(^92\)Ibid.
in accordance with the basic humanitarian principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence.\textsuperscript{95}

3.1 Evolution of the perception of women and women’s empowerment in humanitarian action

A significant evolution has taken place in the way that the humanitarian aid community perceives the role of women during a conflict as well as in post-conflict scenarios. Since the rise of humanitarian aid organizations in 1949 when the Geneva Convention was established, a broad stipulation obligated the protection of civilians in conflict, however, without making any special distinction or consideration for the sexes and gender roles. With the passage of time, there is now a general recognition of the significant effects of conflict on women and an accepted understanding of the determinant role women play during a conflict as well as during peacebuilding processes (UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000) on Women, Peace and Security). As evident, it has been a long process in reaching this point.

Even though the United Nations Charter of 1945 and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 established, for the first time, an official worldwide recognition of women’s equality and non-discrimination on the basis on sex,\textsuperscript{96} the humanitarian aid sector did not see women and men as equals in conflict or post-conflict contexts. Between 1950 and 1970, women were seen as passive beneficiaries of aid and considered default beneficiaries if the men in the family received humanitarian aid. They were seen exclusively as wives and mothers and accordingly their main issues were related to access to food, contraceptives, nutrition and health care\textsuperscript{97}. Due to their significant advances made by the feminist movements of the 1970-80’s with regard to women’s equality, their public roles and their right to development was made more noticeable with important events such as the First World Conference for Women held in Mexico in 1975, the subsequent two world conferences for women (1980 and 1985), the establishment of the UN Decade for Women 1975-1985, and the promotion of the Women in Development (WID)\textsuperscript{98} approach to development programs. Nonetheless, it did not make a significant difference in the way that women were seen by humanitarian aid actors. It was not until later in the 1990's, stemming from a number of


declarations and platforms established, such as the 1990 World Conference on Education for All, the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, the 1993 Human Rights Conference, the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development, the 1995 World Summit for Social Development, and the Regional Preparatory Conferences and the 1995 Fourth World Conference, did a general recognition of the need for women’s empowerment really begin to take root. Development programs took notice and not only focused on women’s issues, but instead began framing it as gender and gender equality issues. This also developed into a call for humanitarian aid organizations to recognize the pivotal role women played with respect to humanitarian assistance and to realize that humanitarian aid responses were more effective when both women and men were taking into account and all of their differences, needs, vulnerabilities, interests, capacities and coping strategies were considered in a disaster or conflict\textsuperscript{99}. Similarly, the United Nations system, also aware of the important relevance of women in the development process, amended and adapted goals and priorities to incorporate these new concepts of gender equality and empowerment of women\textsuperscript{100}. Subsequently, a substantive normative framework has continued to build over the years recognizing that women play a critical role in conflict and post-conflict phases. Among them, the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000) on Women, Peace and Security recognizes the disproportionate and unique impact of armed conflict on women and girls and the key role women play in peace building efforts. It urges the development of strategies that address the needs of women and girls during post-conflict situations. The Security Council resolution 1820 (2008) recognized sexual violence as a threat to international peace and security and the subsequent follow-up resolutions, 1888 (2009), 1889 (2009), 1960(2010), 2016(2013) 2122 (2013) focus on the prevention and response to conflict-related sexual violence. It has established a number of mechanisms to this end\textsuperscript{101}. In the same way, “in October 2013, the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women adopted General Recommendation 30, which provides authoritative guidance to States Parties to the Convention on legislative, policy and other appropriate measures to protect, respect and fulfill women’s human rights in situations of conflict and instability”\textsuperscript{102}. Additionally, in 2010, the Sphere Project, was updated to better define the minimum standards of humanitarian action in order to provide better quality assistance to

\textsuperscript{100}Ibid.   \\
\textsuperscript{102}Ibid
individuals impacted by crisis, especially women and girls.\footnote{UN Women. Humanitarian Action. http://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/humanitarian-action. Web August 2016.} In more general terms, the creation of UN Women, the UN entity for gender equality and the empowerment of women, demonstrates the UN’s and States’ members’ commitments in its promotion and facilitation not just in conflict situations but also during peace times. It also reflects how the issues of women’s empowerment and gender equality can galvanize resources and mandates seeking a deeper impact.\footnote{UN Women. About us. http://www.unwomen.org/en/about-us/about-un-women. Web August 2016.}

The legal framework for humanitarian action today affirms that the humanitarian action scope, in general, embodies the different impacts and roles of both women and men in conflict and post-conflict scenarios, at least in terms of relief and protection. According to the Sphere Project “…women and men have the same entitlement to humanitarian assistance and protection, to respect for their human dignity, to acknowledgement of their equal human capacities including the capacity to make choices, to the same opportunities to act on those choices and to the same level of power to shape the outcome of their action and it is necessary to address these differences and inequalities among them through gender analysis”\footnote{The Sphere project, page 15, http://www.sphereproject.org/handbook. Web March 2016}. Furthermore, the majority of humanitarian aid organizations and UN system offices have established policies, guidelines and/or manuals on gender to ensure that a gender perspective is considered in their activities\footnote{Some examples: OXFAM: http://policypractice.oxfam.org.uk/ourwork/genderjustice, ICRC: https://www.icrc.org/eng/assets/files/other/icrc_002_0840_women_guidance.pdf, Save the Children: http://resourcecentre.savethechildren.se/library/save-children-gender-equality-policytransforming-inequalitytransforminglives, USAID: https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1865/GenderEqualityPolicy_0.pdf, SDC: https://www.shareweb.ch/site/Gender/Documents/SDC%20Gender%20Policy.pdf, CIDA: http://www.international.gc.ca/developmentdeveloppement/assets/pdfs/fundingfinancement/ge_humanitarian_assistance_eng.pdf, IFRC: http://www.ifrc.org/Global/Governance/Policies/genderpolicyen.pdf, IASC: https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/system/files/legacy_files/IASC%20Gender%20Policy%2020%20June%202008.pdf}. In the same way, UN Women is committed to ensuring equality between women and men as partners and beneficiaries of humanitarian action.\footnote{UN Women. Humanitarian Action. http://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/humanitarian-action. Web August 2016.}

Despite all of these developments in law and policies with respect to the humanitarian aid and development scope over the last two decades and all of the progress and achievements made for women in the public sphere, the legal framework is not fully implemented. Gender equality and women’s empowerment remain an objective not easily reached. One of the main reasons is that there are still a lot of misunderstandings, confusion, contradictions and tensions within humanitarian aid organizations and even within the UN system about what “working with a gender perspective in humanitarian aid”, “addressing gender issues”, “taking gender into account”, “being
gender-sensitive”, “mainstreaming gender” and “promoting gender equality” all mean.\textsuperscript{108} There is no consensus on these issues and no agreement on how to address these issues in the field. This makes integrating a gender perspective into humanitarian action and coordination among humanitarian aid organizations difficult. The lack of full integration of gender equality into humanitarian action contributes to the entrenchment and/or regression of negative gender stereotypes coupled with discriminatory attitudes and social norms.\textsuperscript{109} Women are still marginalized in conflict and post-conflict scenarios, not only by their societies, but sometimes by humanitarian aid actors. On the one hand, they are marginalized with regard to the decision-making process due to the misconception of women as passive beneficiaries and the lack of recognition of the different roles that women play during a conflict. In the end, this disempowers them and excludes them from humanitarian efforts.\textsuperscript{110} On the other hand, they are further marginalized due to humanitarian aid organizations’ sometimes lack of understanding of the local context. Humanitarian aid organizations also have their own agendas and visions of empowerment that sometimes it is not complementary or respectful of local women’s organizations, processes and/or priorities. According to UN Women, “…the limited institutional coordination regarding gender equality and women’s empowerment in humanitarian action and the task of ensuring that humanitarian action integrates a gender dimension has largely failed at both the policy level (responsibility of the IASC) and at the operational level. Consequently, it is necessary to take measures to ensure a dedicated and systematic institutional coordination and leadership on gender equality and women’s empowerment. Otherwise, humanitarian action will continue to fail women and girls…”\textsuperscript{111}

Another element to point out as an obstacle for humanitarian aid organizations with regard to women’s empowerment in conflict situations and their capacity to promote women’s initiatives in maintaining their skills, status, and empowerment acquired during post-conflict phases is the weak commitment of humanitarian aid organizations to transform gender inequalities and promote women’s empowerment due to the lack of gender mainstreaming within each organization. “The language of empowerment is not consistently adopted in humanitarian aid scenarios and gender

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equality is often put aside from the humanitarian aid organization scope.”\textsuperscript{112} ICRC’s approach is an example of this reality. ICRC considers a gender analysis relevant in an intervention in order to obtain more information to design a more appropriate response to the needs of the affected population during an armed conflict. However, it is also clear that it is not mandated to engineer social change with respect to the status of either sex in the cultures with which it works. In this sense, gender equality and women’s empowerment are not part of its work even if during its intervention there are spontaneous processes of women’s empowerment\textsuperscript{113}. Similarly, with MSF, its mandate and principles do not consider special activities in favor of women’s empowerment or gender equality.\textsuperscript{114} It is the same situation for other international organizations working in humanitarian action, even if they operate development programs. Finally, as UN Women points out, another major obstacle to maintaining women’s empowerment in post-conflict scenarios is the gap between the humanitarian aid and development fields, which also underpins the short-term nature of humanitarian action. Humanitarian action must be linked with development early on in emergency settings and early recovery should be integrated as a way to increase the relevance and sustainability of humanitarian efforts.”\textsuperscript{115} UN Women has as an overall goal in its 2014-2017 humanitarian strategy which promotes the integration of gender equality and women’s empowerment considerations into the development and implementation of norms, policies and procedures of humanitarian action. In this sense, UN Women underscores the necessity to promote the voice, agency, capacity and support conditions necessary for women to develop and maintain their empowerment during conflict and post-conflict situations. Humanitarian aid organizations can play a significant role in this action. However, accomplishing such a goal must be made mandatory. An integration of gender equality and women’s empowerment in humanitarian aid efforts must also include joint collaborations and coordination between humanitarian aid and development organizations.\textsuperscript{116}


3.2 Example of the sustainability of women’s empowerment after a conflict - *Ruta Pacifica de Mujeres*

In the midst of a conflict, the provision of humanitarian relief is a priority delivered by local, national and international governments; international organizations; and humanitarian aid organizations. When there is a peace process underway or an agreement is reached ending a conflict, new priorities are established regarding social and economic reconstruction. Funding for these initiatives tends to flood in from different sources. Usually, humanitarian aid organizations reduce their involvement to give way for development organizations with longer-term interventions. This transition of war to peace is not always easy.\(^{117}\) As we saw in the previous section, even if women held a significant public role during periods of conflict, they are frequently not prepared for new challenges brought on in a post-conflict phase with new actors and men returning from conflict. Often, women are not well-informed enough; they are not well represented in decision-making process; and they lack access, support and assistance sources related to the reconstruction process. They continue to carry on many responsibilities in their private lives and continue to live under patriarchal structures that limit their freedom and capacity of social and political participation.\(^{118}\) For this reason, it is important during the conflict to prepare women for the post-conflict phase to help them to capitalize all their gains related to empowerment made during a conflict in order to contribute to changing the imbalance of power. The post-conflict phase could be an opportunity for women if they are well prepared to take advantage of the social, political and economic changes that usually result from a peace process\(^{119}\).

Despite all of the obstacles that women face to maintain and increase their empowerment in post-conflict scenarios, there are some women or groups of women that do so successfully. In some cases, they play a significant role in the reconstruction of the society after the conflict. So, what do these women or groups of women have that others don’t? What are the elements or special conditions that help these women or groups of women maintain their empowerment in public or private arenas during post-conflict phases? How could humanitarian aid organizations contribute during conflict periods to prepare women in facing the challenges encountered in a post-conflict phase?


It is not prudent to make generalizations on this topic. As it was mentioned in the first section of this document, empowerment is an individual process. No one can empower another and women’s empowerment does not have a general definition and/or measure because it depends on the culture and the context. Nevertheless, it is possible to analyze some particular experiences in order to identify some elements that contribute to at least sustaining, or ideally, increasing women’s empowerment in post-conflict scenarios. Toward that end, the following example from Colombia’s conflict is presented.

*La Ruta Pacifica de Mujeres* was established in 1996 in response to the horrors of the Colombian conflict. It made a strong call on all actors of the conflict to respect human rights and human dignity. It is one example of a women’s organization in Colombia which developed empowerment during conflict. Even when one of Colombia’s principal illegal armed actors of the conflict, the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC), demobilized in 2006, *Ruta Pacifica* maintained its organizational coherence and strength well beyond this transitional phase. Today, *La Ruta Pacifica de Mujeres* is one of Colombia’s leading women’s civil society network organizations. It is organizationally strong and well-recognized with regard to the ongoing peace process between Colombian government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). It is comprised by more than 315 civil society organizations and women’s groups across 11 regions in Colombia representing various social sectors including: indigenous communities, Afro-Colombians; female youth; farmers; urban women; women who have been forcibly displaced; intellectuals; professionals; students and so on. They identify themselves as a feminist movement working towards a negotiated settlement of the armed conflict in Colombia. As an advocacy group, it also seeks to increase visibility of the effects of the conflict on their lives and for the demand of their rights to truth, justice, reparations and the reconstruction of individual and collective historical memory for the non-repetition of violations. In 1996, *Ruta Pacifica* led a national march mobilizing more than 2,000 women from different regions throughout Colombia to convene in the Urabá region. Urabá had historically been heavily impacted by excessive paramilitary violence. This was an act of unprecedented solidarity to accompany and support women victims of paramilitary-led massacres who were raped and who witnessed the brutal killings of their spouses,

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120 *Mujeres y guerra. Víctimas y resistentes en el Caribe colombiano. Informe del grupo de memoria histórica de la comisión nacional de reparación y reconciliación. Editora Aguilar, Altea, Taurus, Alfaguara, S. A. Bogotá, Colombia. 2011 Page 319*

121 *Video Ruta Pacifica de Mujeres aplauda logros de La Habana y pide al gobierno enfrentar el paramilitarismo* [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CqEp6llP0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CqEp6llP0). Web August 2016.

children, neighbors and other community members. Through actions like these, *Ruta Pacífica* began breaking down paradigms and stereotypes. It was the first time in Colombia’s history that women were seen demonstrating in such large numbers and taking a political stance without the leadership or involvement of men.123 Women who formed part of this network have achieved significant advancements such as: an increase in their self-confidence; recognition and participation in citizen-driven peace initiatives; overcoming fear, helplessness and indifference related to the conflict; gained respect by armed actors; and extensive organizational experience in the preparation and coordination of mass marches for peace.124

Today, this group of women collectively and individually have been empowered and play very public roles. It is important to point out that the women from *Ruta Pacífica de Mujeres* developed their empowerment during an ongoing conflict. By the time Colombia’s paramilitary forces went through a demobilization process in 2006, they were organizationally strong enough to participate and effectively participate in public debates regarding this process. A *Ruta Pacífica* member expressing her dissent to the process claimed "…this is not a demobilization which is headed towards peace, which is moving towards ending human rights violations, or which is moving towards the ending of forced displacement. This demobilization is something of a farce, as an urgent move by the Colombian government to demonstrate to the world a reality that does not exist in Colombia. We view this demobilization more as a legalization of paramilitarism.”125 Today, they have been equally vocal regarding the current peace process between the Colombian government and FARC.126 However, it hasn’t been an easy process. The majority of these women were victims themselves of the conflict prior to joining this movement. As an organization, these women continue to face various barriers with regards to achieving their mission. They have had to face threats, sexual violence, and the murder of members of their group at the hands of armed actors of the conflict. Additionally, they have come up against structural barriers common in a patriarchal society, especially in the more conflict-affected. Their amazing courage stands out as one of the various qualities which catalyzed their empowerment. These women do not fear speaking their minds in front of armed actors and have mobilized masses in times of intense violence. Another

fundamental element to this organization’s success is the diversity of its members. Rural women affected by displacement and poor economic conditions with limited education and access to information were given an opportunity to participate in awareness raising workshops and to receive training to improve their self-confidence, their leadership and participation skills on political and social issues. Similarly, women from rural areas with limited communications and information access formed symbiotic partnerships with urban-based women who were able to provide them with key contacts and sources to assist them in obtaining financial resources to carry out activities advancing their agendas. These support partnerships also contributed to increasing the visibility of their situations and obtaining institutional support which promotes women’s equality and women’s empowerment. Other favorable factors for their success was the parallel development of public policies in Colombia fostering women’s civic participation as well as the increased attention by academia related to the reflection, studies and support of women’s social movements.127

While Ruta Pacífica may have started out as a grassroots initiative, key supporting actors such as development organizations, international agencies and governments also played an important role in their development and strengthening of capacities. Ruta Pacífica de Mujeres has received support from international and local NGOs such as SUIPPCOL, Caritas Switzerland, Swissaid, Internóm Oxfam, Diakonia, Hegoa and Amnesty International Switzerland; cooperation agencies such as USAID, CDC, AECID; UN agencies such as UN Women and UNDP; and governments such as Germany, the Netherlands, Spain, Canada and the UK. Training, technical assistance, and financial support provided by these entities have assisted them in overcoming common obstacles regarding women’s empowerment during conflict and its sustainability in a post-conflict phase. While humanitarian aid organizations such as MSF and ICRC have not directly supported Ruta Pacífica, they have certainly worked alongside them on shared projects or initiatives. On occasion, some women from Ruta Pacífica have received direct assistance on an individual basis as victims of conflict.

In Colombia’s case, the conflict has been the target of development agencies which have access and have developed credibility among the population. In this way, they are able support to these types of initiatives. From a different perspective, and especially in cases of protracted crises, given that humanitarian aid organizations work directly with affected populations, there is a valuable

window of opportunity for these humanitarian aid organizations to facilitate empowerment processes. As part of humanitarian assistance, they can facilitate spaces of sharing and reflection among women from different backgrounds and experiences. Similarly, humanitarian aid organizations are sometimes invited to participate in peace processes, at the very least as observers. They could use these opportunities as a platform to advocate on behalf of women’s inclusion and participation in these processes. They also can help women to increase their self-confidence and develop capacities by providing them with responsibilities in humanitarian aid planning and distribution. It is during conflict periods when it is necessary and possible to prepare women to play a more significant role in a post-conflict phase. Humanitarian aid organizations can assuredly contribute to this process. Whether intentional or not, humanitarian intervention often contributes to social change among the population where they intervene. It does not matter if humanitarian aid organizations are impartial and are not looking to create social changes. Experiences related to violence and conflict change people and women are not an exception. If women have the opportunity to learn or to develop a new skill, they will do it. Today, humanitarian aid actors in some conflicts, oftentimes are the only actors who have exclusive access and opportunity to work closely with women victim populations. If they cannot promote women’s empowerment, they at least should be aware in order to facilitate empowerment that may spontaneously happen.

**Conclusion**

UN Women identified the lack of coordination among humanitarian aid and development actors as one of the key shortcomings to supporting women’s empowerment efforts. The importance and need to improve coordination where these actors overlap in their work should not be understated. These factors could have serious impacts with regard to engaging women who face barriers and who are invisible during post-conflict phases. Improved coordination can also lead to women receiving much needed assistance and support by development organizations.

Humanitarian aid organizations often have the recognition, credibility and influence to promote structural changes in societies and governments in favor of gender equality and women’s empowerment. However, these aid organizations must decide to first prioritize women’s empowerment in their own program agendas. In this way, these organizations can begin to work towards gaining a true understanding of the local contexts in which they work as well as develop an internal commitment and a shared concept of gender equality.
The nature of conflicts is ever changing and more and more protracted crises have become the norm throughout the world. The model of short-term humanitarian interventions, which in yesteryear’s conventional wars were standard, is no longer sufficient to meet modern day warfare conditions and needs which largely impact civilian populations as well as combatants. Today, the traditional model is more the exception than the rule. Instead, today the same humanitarian aid organizations are working with affected populations for a longer period of time, in some cases for years. For example, this is evident in crises like Syria, DRC, Sierra Leona, Eritrea etc. These types of situations commit aid organizations to provide more than just humanitarian emergency relief and protection. These situations are often compelling humanitarian aid organizations to hold internal debates to devise better responses to appropriately address the differentiated needs which emerge in these conflict scenarios.

Due to the severe hardships and impacts that armed conflicts generate upon women’s lives, women are often put in situations forcing self-empowerment in order to survive and adapt to their new conditions and environments. Sometimes the presence of humanitarian aid organizations in post-conflict scenarios can positively contribute to maintaining this newfound empowerment. Therefore, it is necessary for humanitarian aid actors to reflect on their roles in these types of situations. Aid organizations do not necessarily need to drastically modify their mandates to solely work on women empowerment issues. However, if their actions indirectly strengthen women and give them some tools, elements, and a space which facilitates their empowerment, then it behooves humanitarian aid organizations to develop a greater awareness so as to better support these processes or at least to take them into account for their exit strategies.

Despite the numerous international conventions and resolutions established in favor of women during a conflict phase, women remain at a disadvantage because they continue to live in patriarchal societies. Especially in post-conflict periods, women are almost invisible and they need to have a voice and the opportunities and platforms to exercise their voices. Post-conflict periods are transitional windows of time where women should have institutional support and protection to fight for their rights in order to use all their newly acquired skills obtained during the conflict period to take advantage of the possible opportunities provided by structural changes in society.

Oftentimes, humanitarian aid organizations are working in societies where women have almost no rights. These environments demand that humanitarian aid organizations define a clear position to best respond without further jeopardizing them and/or reversing advances made by women. This is also of significant relevance because there are laws, instruments, and mechanisms which address women’s protection and/or promote equality which could be further implemented.

Humanitarian aid organizations face another big dilemma. Today, humanitarian aid organizations are more than ever faced with the challenge of balancing their principles of impartiality while responding to these specific needs. Humanitarian aid organizations can have a positive impact with regard to women’s empowerment achieved during conflict periods and can play an integral role in the preparation of women facing the post-conflict challenges, even if their mission is completed after the conflict. It behooves humanitarian aid organizations to assume this task, even more so given that they are sometimes the only organization with access to specific populations. In not doing so, they are losing a valuable opportunity to generate real change in women’s lives. However, aid organizations need to make a commitment to integrate gender equality into their interventions. These types of organizational cultural changes may prove challenging as they may compromise their principle of impartiality and therefore may come at a larger cost for them.

More in-depth studies are needed to determine the real implications of acceptance, access, security etc. on humanitarian aid organizations in order to make a commitment to support women’s empowerment in conflict and post-conflict periods under patriarchal societies. Likewise, more in-depth analysis of the social costs should be performed to better understand the implications of humanitarian aid organizations not getting involved and implicitly accepting, and even involuntarily, strengthening limiting gender stereotypes. With these elements better understood, a serious debate should take place among humanitarian aid organizations to define actions to take on this issue.
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