



Protecting “The Invisible”: Understanding organisational response to violence against sexual and gender minorities in humanitarian contexts

Laidlaw research scholarship

Anna Metzger, University of Cambridge

Supervisor: Ilaria Michelis

A Study of the Women's Refugee Commission

Introduction

Since the 1990s, there has been a growing focus from Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and International Organisations (IOs) on addressing the unique needs of women and girls in humanitarian programming (Lokot, 2021, p. 1). The 1993 United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325, on women, peace, and security recognised the devastating effect that conflict has on refugee populations of women and girls around the world. Major organisations have integrated analysis of gender-based violence (GBV) into their research, toolkits, and resolutions. Simultaneously, in recent decades, feminist and queer scholarship has challenged the notion of “woman” as a universal, transhistorical and stable analytic category (Ferrari, 2008, p. 571). In part as a result of these shifts and the work of LGBT advocacy groups such as Outright International, the sub-sector of humanitarian intervention focused on GBV programming has increasingly had to address how a diversity of gender and sexual identities, beyond heterosexual women, may be affected by conflict related violence.

Academic scholarship on this area of humanitarian protection has primarily used either a positivist approach, essentially setting out to examine where and in what forms GBV exists in refugee settings or have taken a discursive approach, examining the way in which GBV has been conceptualised in scholarly and policy communities¹. Institutional analysis of gender-based refugee protection has largely been lacking, despite the plethora of NGOs and IOs operating in the sphere and the widespread “institutional turn” in social sciences (Kenny, 2014, p. 679). Institutional analysis acknowledges that formal and informal “rules of the game” within organisational bodies deeply affect how policy and discourse are constructed (Kenny, 2014, p. 679).

In this article, through analysis of two semi-structured interviews and four policy research papers, I use the framework of institutional analysis to examine the way in which the

¹ For an example of the first approach see Ward, J. & Vann B. (2002). “Gender-based violence in refugee settings”, *The Lancet*, Vol. 360. An example of the discursive approach can be found in Simon-Butler, A. & McSherry, B. 2019. “Defining Sexual and Gender-Based Violence in the Refugee Context”. *IRiS, Institute for research into superdiversity, University of Birmingham, IRiS Working Paper Series, No.: 2/2019*.

Women's Refugee Commission has approached the inclusion of sexual and gender minorities in GBV programming.

Note on terminology

The terminology in this sphere of research is subject to continuous scrutiny and evolution. Some reports have used the commonly understood acronym of LGBT to describe people with diverse gender identities or sexual orientations. However, this term was developed in the global north, therefore running the risk of leading to a west-centric approach. Across the world, the terminology of LGBTQIA may not be the language that people use to describe themselves. In this study, I have used the term SOGIESC, referring to sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and sex characteristics. This acronym is suitable because of its breadth and inclusivity, however, there may equally be limitations as it lacks specificity. We all possess the characteristics of sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and sex characteristics, leading to ambiguity in terms of what it means for these features to be 'diverse'.

Methodology and Theoretical Framework

Across the social sciences, recent decades have been marked by an "institutional turn" (Kenny, 2014, p. 679). This framework is built upon the unifying belief that the formal and informal "rules" of organisations deeply shape political outcomes (Kenny, 2014, p. 679). The so-called "New Institutionalism" (Hamlin, 2022, p. 3) that emerged from the 1980s, aims to focus on the interaction of social structures with individual agency in an institutional context. Across disciplines, institutional theory encompasses a large variety of theoretical and empirical approaches that are connected by a common emphasis on constraining and enabling effects of formal and informal rules on the behaviour of individuals and groups.

In the case of the subject of GBV, an institutional analysis offers a focus on how rules, norms, and discourses are shaped and enforced by organisations. Questions about institutions have become increasingly pertinent to the study of forced migration and gendered violence over past decades. Since the end of the Cold War, scholars have pointed to the development of a

thickly saturated “refugee regime complex” comprised of a variety of “nesting” and “overlapping” non-governmental organisations involved in refugee protection (Hamlin, 2022, p.1). All these different organisations have their own internal characteristics and histories that contribute to the way in which they approach GBV programming.

GBV was developed as an analytic category that described the range of sexual, physical, and economic violence that women and girls are at a heightened risk of experiencing within a patriarchal social system (Banwell, 2014, p. 47). An institutional analysis of GBV can therefore be conducted by asking how organisations have conceptualised gendered vulnerability to violence in their informal and formal discourses or norms of practice. The framework of “feminist institutionalism” (Thomson, 2018) was developed as part of the broader “institutional turn” in order to investigate how gender is inscribed into male dominated institutions and institutional analysis. It aims to account for gendered stigmas and outcomes of institutions, thereby highlighting aspects of inclusion and exclusion.

Most feminist institutionalist analyses focus on the comparative social, economic, and political power that men and women wield. However, feminist institutionalism has often omitted how organisations can be gendered beyond the binary of male privilege and the suppression of women. Feminist institutional analysis has usually not considered organisations that were founded with a distinctly feminist ethos. In this study, I focused on a non-profit organisation committed to providing services to displaced women: The Women’s Refugee Commission. Given that the organisation was founded by women in order to offer marginalised women protection, institutional norms surrounding gender inevitably differ from the typical idea that men dominate organisational life. Rather than examining the way in which women are subjugated within the organisation, in this instance the principles of feminist institutionalism can be used to uncover internal gendered power dynamics within the women’s movement. Specifically, in this study, I focus on how sexual and gender minorities are treated within the feminist organisational context. Through this, emphasis can be given to the way in which the gendered nature of institutions may intersect with other vectors of power and discrimination.

For this study, I examined institutional conceptualisation of sexuality and gender in GBV programming within the Women’s Refugee Commission. I carried out this research by conducting two semi-structured 30-minute interviews with employees from the Women’s Refugee Commission whom I reached out to by email. Interviews were held on Zoom during which I asked open-ended questions about organisational norms and practices in regard to the inclusion of sexual and gender minorities in GBV programming as well as how the Women’s Refugee Commission was responding to developments in the sector more broadly. On top of this, I analysed four written, publicly available research outputs and reports produced by the Women’s Refugee Commission.

Sector-wide context about the inclusion of sexual and gender minorities in GBV programming

The term GBV has in many cases been used synonymously with violence against women (VAW), for example in the case of the 1993 UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women which defines VAW as “any act of gender-based violence” (UN General Assembly, 1993). Similarly, in its discussion of terminology, the GBV Area of Responsibility highlights that the term GBV is used to “underscore how systemic inequality acts as a foundational characteristic of most forms of violence perpetrated against women and girls” (GBV AoR strategy, 2019, n.p.).

Experts within humanitarian response have expressed that women and girls are not alone in being vulnerable to violence in humanitarian settings. A report by the International Red Cross concluded that along with women and girls, men and boys were also not being adequately protected from GBV in emergency settings (International Red Cross, 2022, n.p.). As advocacy increased for a more “gender inclusive” (Dolan, 2014, p. 486) approach to GBV, there were calls to include people with diverse SOGIESC in GBV programming. However, exactly how this could be done or how this category should be thought of remained unclear. Although the unique situation of refugees with SOGIESC have been acknowledged, for example, in the International Rescue Committee (IRC) report “Cycles of Displacement”, discussion of their vulnerability to GBV has often been simplistically tacked on to discussion directed towards

men and boys. This approach may inadvertently imply that all people with SOGIESC also identify as men and boys or could alternatively reinforce damaging stereotypes that sexual violence against men and boys is a cause, or sometimes a consequence of homosexuality (Sivakumaran, 2007, p.272). All too frequently, the label of SOGIESC have been oversimplified in GBV literature, treating sexual and gender minorities as a “third category” (Loken & Hagen, 2022, p. 7) and resulting in a lack of consideration of the multiplicity of experiences.

Background on SOGIESC inclusion in the Women’s Refugee Commission

The Women’s Refugee Commission was founded in 1989, at a moment when NGOs, IOs, academic scholarship and media coverage were for the first time devoting significant attention to GBV in conflict settings. Around the end of the 1980s, the needs of women affected by conflict were singled out in humanitarian programming as exemplified by the founding of the first working group on refugee women convened in 1985 (UN Women, 2013, n.p.). The WRC was founded by the Norwegian actress and film director Liv Ullman and was focused on protecting refugee women from GBV from its origins. In 1992, the WRC was the first organisation to report on the devastating uses of GBV as a weapon of war in the Balkans. In the following years, the WRC co-sponsored key reports and resolutions including the landmark report *Refugee Women and Reproductive Health Care: Reassessing Priorities (1994)* and *If Not Now, When? Addressing Gender-Based Violence in Refugee, Internally Displaced and Post-conflict Settings (2002)*, the first major report on GBV in the listed circumstances.

Today, the WRC remains one of the only international organisations that is primarily occupied with protecting displaced women and girls. However, in recent years, the organisation has launched some projects focused on refugee populations beyond women and girls. Today, the commission frequently uses more broadly inclusive language. Their website declares that their intention is to “create a better world for refugees” without further specificity and that the organisation responds to crises by “advocating for the rights of women, children, and other marginalised populations” (WRC, n.d.). Press releases, social media outputs and research projects have all begun to mention sexual and gender minorities. There has evidently been an institutional and sector wide shift in the direction of recognising people with diverse

SOGIESC as a vulnerable population. In this study, I examined how broader inclusivity of people with diverse SOGIESC shapes the direction of a feminist organisation.

Case Study 1 – Men and Boys project

The WRC considered the needs of people with diverse SOGIESC in their extensive 2018 project on violence against men and boys in humanitarian settings. By this point, voices in the humanitarian sector had begun to suggest that men and boys had been disadvantaged by woman-specific GBV programming.² The WRC set out to contribute to this area of research by outlining “*what the characteristics of sexual violence are for those who were designated male at birth or who identify as men and boys*” (interview 2) while remaining committed to an “*intersectional feminist*” (interview 2) mode of analysis which prioritised “*accountability to women and girls*” (WRC, 2019). Exploratory qualitative research was undertaken in three refugee hubs: Cox’s Bazaar, Bangladesh, the Central Mediterranean route from Libya to Italy, and among urban refugees in Nairobi and Mombasa, Kenya. Both interview participants frequently mentioned this project when asked about the inclusion of sexual and gender minorities within the WRC, giving the impression that this project marked an attempt to expand the topical reach of the commission’s work.

The work of the WRC seeks to primarily focus on “*gender transformation*” (interview 1), a goal which centres involving people of all genders and sexual orientation to create an equitable and non-discriminatory social reality. Interview participants reflected that all projects, especially the men and boys research undertaking began from the starting point of “*how can we be more inclusive?*” (interview 1). The project organisers of the men and boys project dedicated time and consideration to how violence affected people with SOGIESC in every region studied. Continuously, the point was made that there is a unique risk of violence posed to displaced people with diverse SOGIESC. For example, in the reports along the Central Mediterranean route and on urban refugees in Kenya, the WRC fact-finding missions

² For discussion of this see Chris Dolan and Jeanne Ward’s debate in Dolan, Chris. 2014. “Letting Go of the Gender Binary: Charting New Pathways for Humanitarian Interventions on Gender-based Violence.” *International Review of the Red Cross* 96.894 pp. 485-501 and Ward, Jeanne. 2016. ‘It’s Not about the Gender Binary, It’s about the Gender Hierarchy: A Reply to “Letting Go of the Gender Binary”’. *International Review of the Red Cross* 98(901) pp. 275–98.

concluded that “thousands of people with diverse SOGIESC flee every year, escaping persecution, violence and discrimination” (WRC, 2019). Testimonies and quotes from informants emphasise that people with diverse SOGIESC “are extremely vulnerable to sexual violence” (WRC, 2019). Even in regions in which no informants with diverse SOGIESC were identified, the report explicitly stated that this did not mean that violence did not exist but simply that it was not easily identifiable.

However, the attempts to include people with diverse SOGIESC in this project demonstrated the difficulties that can arise when institutional principles and aspirations meet the realities of humanitarian practice. Interview participants reflected on the contradiction between the desire to understand the experience of a specific group and the fact that often the organisation “*doesn’t have the expertise or the knowledge base*” (interview 1). Difficulty arose identifying certain subsections of the SOGIESC label, which encompasses a variety of identities all of which may experience unique hardships in displacement. The report articulated this diversity, but this did not resolve the fact that certain groups like lesbians, trans men and intersex people remained almost entirely absent from the project. In order to engage these “*hidden*” groups, a “*lot of time and money needs to be dedicated to reaching these groups*” (interview 1). These are not resources that are usually available, especially since financial contribution to one group may mean another is left out.

The men and boys research project encapsulated how institutional values of “*inclusivity*” and attempts to “*meaningfully engage*” (interview 2) can come head-to-head with both the practical and theoretical complexities of providing support to people with SOGIESC. The project does not attempt to answer how we should theorise about SOGIESC inclusion in the GBV sector, with participants expressing that these topics had the potential to become “*really complicated*” (interview 2). In a discussion published after the first phase of the men and boys project, the WRC reflected on the tensions of ethical accountability that arose during the project. The review raised concerns about whether more could have been done to ensure accountability to women, girls, and people with diverse SOGIESC, including more representation on committees that were consulted. Within the WRC, there was therefore an acknowledgement that what research sets out to do is not always what can ultimately be

produced when working in complex and unstable regions and trying to target individuals who may be difficult to identify.

Case Study 2 – Transwomen pilot project in Lebanon

One of the main ways in which organisations can engage with hard to access communities is through community partners who have localised knowledge that an international NGO might lack. This is especially important for the pilot projects that the WRC delivers. While research is fundamentally exploratory, producing data that can be conveyed to academic and humanitarian communities, pilot projects test how these findings can be applied. Targeted, specific interventions are usually carried out with a local implementing partner to “build up the much-needed evidence base for best practice” (WRC, 2017:1) for how GBV policy should be developed.

In 2017, the WRC carried out a pilot project to provide “psychosocial support” and “peer networks” (WRC, 2017, p. 2) as a GBV response strategy for transgender women in Beirut, Lebanon. The pilot project was hosted by the “trusted” and “experienced” (WRC, 2017, p.2) LGBT organisation MOSAIC, the MENA Organisation for Services, Advocacy, Integration, and Capacity Building. The program for transgender women in Beirut aimed to create a “safe space” (WRC, 2017, p. 3) in which participants, both refugees and those from Lebanon, could partake in a series of arts and drama therapy sessions.

The design of the project utilised “*innovative methodologies*” (interview 2) in order to ensure that local organisations are “*directly involved in leading the design and implementation*” (interview 2) of GBV programs. Since its founding, discussion of WRC’s mission statement have articulated the goal to “ensure that the voices of refugees are heard” (UNHCR, n.d.) and partnerships can help organisations to “*understand the context*” (Interview 2) that they’re operating in. In the case of the transwomen in Lebanon, the project aimed to respond to the sense of distrust between local and refugee transgender women in Lebanon, while offering both groups therapeutic support. Despite WRC’s mandate to primarily protect refugees, partnership with a local MENA organisation allowed them to address the shared experience of “ostracization from family and friends, persecution, and severe physical and emotional

violence” (WRC, 2017, p. 3) between Lebanese and refugee women, thereby diminishing the importance of this usually culturally significant separation.

From an institutional perspective, a joint pilot project carried out with a local organisation may result in a negotiation of both organisation’s ways of operating, requiring a variety of perspectives to be incorporated from different vantage points. These organisations may have their own set of incentives, goals, and wield different forms of power that a pilot project may reflect. As the International Rescue Committee report, *“When We Know Nothing”* states, “Within LGBTQI communities there may also be gatekeepers” (IRC, 2021, p. 9). International NGOs and local partners don’t necessarily have the same perspective on what an ‘inclusive’ program should look like, leaving open the possibility of imbalances of power and who is visible in a community being perpetuated as they may amplify those already “most visible and vocal in the community” (IRC, 2021).

Pilot projects also require collaboration from local government and international organisations operating in the region while also working within the constraints of the partner organisation. In the case of Lebanon, local government could not attend gender training directed by the WRC for practitioners because a large multilateral international organisation was concerned about the *“reputational risk”* (interview 2). These concerns may emerge out of worry about organisations being seen as an imperialistic force imposing so-called Western values and facing possible backlash against LGBTQ+ rights. An organisation may not feel like it has a social license to operate if it is perceived as intrusive.

Although both pilot projects and research projects are part of a broader effort to expand the evidence base, the way in which institutional identity is negotiated in these settings is different. Implementing a project in partnership with a local organisation allows GBV programming to incorporate a variety of perspectives, from very different vantage points. However, given the scarcity of resources and possible dangers around carrying out pilot projects in the sphere of SOGIESC protection, the concerns that institutions have of how they are perceived by external actors may play a key role in establishing whether pilot projects are enacted.

Conclusion

The way in which people with SOGIESC have been included in the work of the Women's Refugee Commission marks a concerted effort by the organisation to expand beyond an isolated focus on women and the organisation seeks to play a key role in "*moving the needle (of inclusion) forward*" (interview 1). Part of this seems to be motivated by the principle that women's issues cannot be understood as being insular but that instead they intersect with problems facing people of all genders. This approach marks a shift from the earlier conceptualisations of what it meant to operate as a women's organisation. However, conducting research and pilot projects on how people with diverse SOGIESC are affected by GBV runs into fundamental problems. In many parts of the world the rights of sexual and gender minorities are policed or exist in a state of social and political taboo, meaning it may be unsafe for individuals to identify themselves to organisations and organisations may be told that they "*cannot ask here*" (interview 2). Therefore, organisations don't simply propagate their institutional values through their projects, but what they encounter in these projects feeds back into the organisation. In the case of the WRC, inclusivity and unknowability frequently hang in the balance. Overall, more studies are needed on humanitarian research methodologies that specifically engage people with diverse SOGIESC that humanitarian organisations can more confidently incorporate these groups into their work.

Bibliography

Banwell, Stacy. 2014. "Rape and sexual violence in the Democratic Republic of Congo: a case study of gender-based violence", *Journal of Gender Studies*, 23:1, pp. 45-58.

Chynoweth, Sarah & Martin, Sarah. 2019. "Ethics and accountability in researching sexual violence against men and boys", *Forced migration review*, 2019, pp. 23 – 25.

Dolan, Chris. 2014. "Letting Go of the Gender Binary: Charting New Pathways for Humanitarian Interventions on Gender-based Violence", *International Review of the Red Cross* 96.894 pp. 485-501.

Ferrari, Chiara. 2008. "Contested Foundations: Postmodern Feminism and the Case of the Union of Italian Women", *Signs*, Vol. 33, no. 3, pp. 569–94.

Hamlin, Rebecca. 2022. "Institutional Analyses of Refugee Protection", *Journal of Refugee Studies*, pp. 1-13.

International Red Cross. 2022. "*That never happens here*": Sexual and gender-based violence against men, boys, LGBTIQ+ people. Accessed at:

<https://www.icrc.org/en/document/sexual-gender-violence-against-men-boys-lgbtiq>

on 26th September 2023.

International Rescue Committee. 2021. "*Cycles of Displacement*": Understanding Exclusion, Discrimination and Violence Against LGBTQ People in Humanitarian Contexts, accessed at

<https://www.rescue.org/sites/default/files/document/5961/irccyclesofdisplacementfinaljune2021.pdf> on 26th September 2023.

International Rescue Committee. 2021. "*When "We Know Nothing*": Recommendations for Ethical Research and Learning with and for LGBTQI People in Humanitarian Settings.

Accessed at:

<https://www.rescue.org/sites/default/files/document/5962/ircwhenweknownothingfinaljune2021.pdf> on 26th September 2023.

Kenny, Meryl. 2014. "A Feminist Institutionalist Approach", *Politics & Gender* 10.4, pp. 679-84.

Loken, Meredith & Hagen, Jamie. "Queering Gender-Based Violence Scholarship: An Integrated Research Agenda, *International Studies Review*, Vol.24, Issue 4, pp. 1 -21.

Lokot, Michelle. 2021. "From the Inside Out: Gender Mainstreaming and Organizational Culture Within the Aid Sector", *Frontiers in Sociology*, Vol. 6, pp. 664406 – 664410.

Sivakumaran, Sandesh. 2007. "Sexual Violence Against Men in Armed Conflict", *European Journal of International Law*, Volume 18, Issue 2, pp. 253 – 276.

Thomson, Jennifer. 2018. "The Women, Peace, and Security Agenda and Feminist Institutionalism: A Research Agenda", *International Studies Review*, Vol. 21, Issue 4, pp. 598 – 613.

UN General Assembly. 1993. "Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women" [General Assembly Resolution 48/104]. Accessed at: <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/eliminationvaw.pdf> on 26th September 2023.

UNHCR, n.d. "Women's Refugee Commission". Accessed at: <https://www.refworld.org/publisher,WCR,,,,,40.html> on 26th September 2023.

UN Women. 2013. "Historical Timeline" [Virtual Knowledge Centre to End Violence against Women and Girls]. Accessed at: <https://www.endvawnow.org/en/articles/1472-historical-timeline.html> on 26th September 2023.

WRC (Women's Refugee Commission). 2017. *Supporting Transwomen Refugees in Beirut*, New York: Women's Refugee Commission. Accessed at: <https://www.womensrefugeecommission.org/research-resources/beirut-ii-bringing-host-community-and-refugee-transwomen-together/> on 26th September 2023.

WRC (Women's Refugee Commission). 2018. *It's Happening to Our Men as Well: Sexual Violence against Rohingya Men and Boys*. New York: Women's Refugee Commission.

WRC (Women's Refugee Commission). 2018. "More Than One Million Pains:" *Sexual Violence against Men and Boys on the Central Mediterranean Route to Italy*, New York: Women's Refugee Commission.

WRC (Women's Refugee Commission). 2019. *"We Have a Broken Heart": Sexual Violence against Refugees in Nairobi and Mombasa, Kenya. The Experiences of Congolese, Somali, and South Sudanese Men, Boys, and Trans Women.* New York: Women's Refugee Commission.