Older women’s role in their families and communities during displacement can have a significant influence on the safety of women and girls. Camp Management agencies should engage with older women in order to harness and capitalise on their role.

About the research

Through this study, NRC has developed and piloted a methodology to understand the role that older women play in supporting their families and communities during displacement, in order to develop methods for harnessing the role of older women to improve humanitarian outcomes. The research was conducted as part of a broader project managed by the International Organization for Migration as the global co-lead of the Camp Coordination and Camp Management Cluster. This wider project explores how women’s participation, both inside and outside camps, contributes to enhancing the safety of women and girls.

While it is undisputed that crisis-affected women can and should participate in humanitarian response, and that special efforts must be made to include and empower them, these efforts have not normally extended to older women. Older women and men are both frequently excluded from analysis and activities, rarely specifically consulted, and almost always considered only in terms of their vulnerability rather than their potential to be active participants in humanitarian response to displacement. However, this exclusion is exacerbated for older women in many displacement contexts, since older men are much more likely to have – by default – a pre-existing leadership role and hence to be consulted or included by humanitarian agencies.

Excluding older women from humanitarian analysis and participation initiatives undermines their dignity and deprives them of their rights; may cause or exacerbate mental health and psychological issues; and misses an opportunity to harness their experience and position for the benefit of the wider community and humanitarian operations – particularly for women’s protection and safety.

Since Camp Management agencies have a fundamental role to play in facilitating the meaningful participation of men and women in the management of displacement, they also have the potential to support the role of older women. While many participation initiatives encourage the establishment of new mechanisms and structures (e.g. ‘committees’), this research sought to understand how Camp Management agencies could understand and support the existing roles that older women play, rather than only imposing new participatory structures.
Anthropological methods for understanding older women

Taking an anthropological approach means assessing relationships and knowledge in the community – in particular concerning the roles and influence of grandmothers, mothers, and other family members; decision-making patterns in the household; and knowledge and practices related to the well-being of women and children. Such an assessment can allow Camp Management agencies (or other humanitarian practitioners) to understand and then capitalise on the “cultural capital” of the community, rather than simply imposing on them a foreign cultural doctrine and practice. In this regard, the study developed a four-step process with practical tools (summarised in Box 1) for understanding the role of older women. The process involves in-depth consultation with different demographic groups in the community, as well as with local staff and particularly active or influential older women.

What we learnt about the position and role of older women

The research involved field work in four locations: Afghanistan (urban informal settlements and a peri-urban formal site); Iraq (informal settlements and urban out of camp neighbourhoods); Kenya (formal camp); and Tanzania (formal camp). The different locations provided contexts that varied not only by culture, but also by displacement type, including recent and protracted displacement, as well as refugees, IDPs, and returnees. Despite the variety in contexts, some striking similarities were observed across all of them, as well as subtle differences.

In terms of their participation in humanitarian response, most older women informants in the study said that they were not consulted and did not feel included. Moreover, many lamented that since displacement their role was diminished – particularly where aid agencies were plentiful and active (i.e. in the formal camps more than out of camp).

Regarding older women’s position and role within their communities, several themes emerged. First, it was evident that older women command respect and authority from all other community members – albeit in some cases diminished due to displacement-induced vulnerability and loss of traditional roles. Second, they play a key role in handing down traditions and customs to younger generations, and advising others in their community as well as providing emotional support. Some of the adolescent girls participating in the study lamented that they were separated from their grandmothers, and were grateful for the support of other older women in the community. Third, they often play a conflict resolution role within and between families, including between husband and wife, parents and children, children with other children, or adults with other adults. Fourth, they contribute to the domestic and childcare responsibilities of the household, and in some cases also the financial income or in-kind resources. And finally, they have extensive social networks and understanding of the community, including historical knowledge.

Box 1: How we can learn about the role of older women

1. Consult with local staff on the attitudes towards older people, and the role that they play in the displaced community.
2. Consult with different population groups to understand the different internal and external roles of various community members/demographic groups, and what are their different areas of expertise and authority.
3. Through Step 1 and Step 2, identify influential older women and interview them about how they came to play this role and how it might be further supported.
4. Based on the above and other contextual knowledge (e.g. after using Women’s Participation Toolkit) consider a range of activities that could support older women and present these back to the community for feedback.
How older women can help or hinder women’s protection

In the contexts studied, it was evident that older women can have a significant impact on women’s safety. First, given their significant role in protecting and handing down traditions, older women can have a key influence on the continuation or transformation of customs and practices that may harm or help women and girls – such as early marriage and domestic violence. Indeed, older women in most contexts seem to be able to influence the behaviour of adult men (particularly their grown-up sons or grandsons) – including behaviour towards wives and children, to the extent that some older women claim they can actually stop men from behaving violently. Moreover, older women are more likely than older men to support non-traditional GBV response methods, as well as divorce if this is what a victim wants. However, at the same time, many older women do still favour a mediation approach which emphasises the unity of the family, and may lead to persuading women to stay with abusive husbands – contrary to GBV response best practice.

Second, older women give advice and make decisions about marriage and divorce – sometimes having an equally or even more influential role that the older man, and being able to stop a marriage that they disapprove of. They also advise adolescents who may be entering into illicit relationships, providing ‘warnings’ to both parties about the risks involved.

And finally, older women can have an influence on the extent to which women and girls participate in the community – e.g. attendance at school or work. Based on these findings, the study has proposed some possible methods for engaging with older women to enhance their supporting role.

Engaging older women and restoring their influential role in society is imperative, not only for the value this can have for the well-being of other community members, but also for the protection of their own rights and dignity in displacement.

Box 2: Suggestions for how we could capitalise on the role of older women

1. Include older women – particularly those who are already influential and active in their communities – in community engagement initiatives, including in inter-generational governance structures where they can support their younger counter-parts – for CM agencies.

2. Establish safe spaces that can be used by older women to (a) develop a livelihoods activity and (b) to provide their ‘protective’ role – e.g. provision of emotional support and advice, and conflict resolution – for CM agencies with support of Protection and Livelihoods.

3. Formalise and shape older women’s protective role to support referrals; response to protection cases; and provision of behaviour-change awareness. Training older women should involve “dialogical communication methods”, i.e. ideas are not imposed, but harmful practices are respectfully challenged in a way that builds new consensus – for Protection agencies with support from CM.

4. Livelihoods and income-generating activities for older women – for livelihoods agencies with support of CM.

Link to the full report: [pending]

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