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The gendered experiences of local volunteers in conflicts and emergencies

Jessica Cadesky, Matt Baillie Smith and Nisha Thomas

ABSTRACT

This article explores the gendered experiences of local volunteers operating in conflicts and emergencies. Despite decades of progress to integrate gender issues into development and humanitarian research, policy, and practice, the gendered dynamics of volunteering are still little understood. To redress this, this article draws on data collected as part of the Volunteers in Conflicts and Emergencies (VICE) Initiative, a collaboration between the Red Cross Red Crescent Movement led by the Swedish Red Cross, and the Centre for International Development at Northumbria University. Contributing original empirical findings on the intersection of gender, volunteering, and emergencies, this article offers new ways of thinking about how gender equality and women's empowerment can be advanced in humanitarian crises, as seen through the experiences of local volunteers.

Cet article se penche sur les expériences sexospécifiques des volontaires locaux qui travaillent dans les situations de conflit et d'urgence. En dépit de dizaines d'années de progrès afin d'intégrer les questions de genre dans les recherches, les politiques et les pratiques des domaines du développement et des interventions humanitaires, la dynamique sexospécifique du volontariat est encore mal comprise. Pour remédier à cela, cet article se base sur des données recueillies dans le cadre de l'initiative Volunteers in Conflicts and Emergencies (VICE), une collaboration entre le Mouvement du Croissant-Rouge et de la Croix-Rouge menée par la Croix-Rouge suédoise et le Centre for International Development de l'université de Northumbria. Cet article propose des constats empiriques originaux sur l'intersection du genre, du volontariat et des situations d'urgence, ainsi que de nouvelles manières d'appréhender la manière dont l'égalité entre les sexes et l'autonomisation des femmes peuvent être favorisées dans les situations de crise humanitaire, sous l'angle des expériences des volontaires locaux.

El presente artículo analiza las experiencias de género de voluntarios locales que prestan sus servicios en conflictos y emergencias. A pesar de las décadas de progreso en el sentido de integrar las cuestiones de género en la investigación humanitaria y de desarrollo, aún son poco comprendidas las políticas, la práctica y las dinámicas de género en los entornos del voluntariado. Para subsanar esta laguna, el artículo examina datos recopilados como parte de la Iniciativa Voluntarios en Conflictos y Emergencias (VICE), una colaboración entre el Movimiento

KEYWORDS

Local volunteering; gender; humanitarian assistance; conflicts and emergencies

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de la Cruz Roja y la Media Luna Roja liderada por la Cruz Roja Sueca y el Centro para el Desarrollo Internacional de la Universidad de Northumbria. Partiendo de los hallazgos empíricos originales sobre la intersección de género, voluntariado y emergencias aportados por ViCE, así como de las vivencias de voluntarios locales, el artículo da cuenta de nuevas formas de pensar cómo pueden avanzar la igualdad de género y el empoderamiento de las mujeres durante las crisis humanitarias.

Introduction

Volunteering in conflict and emergency settings has received growing attention from researchers, policymakers, and wider society, including the media, in recent decades (Laurie and Baillie Smith 2017). By volunteering, we mean ‘an organized period of substantial engagement and contribution to the local, national, or world community, recognized and valued by society, with minimal monetary compensation to the participant’ (Sherraden 2001, 2).

Volunteering may offer local people opportunities to share existing expertise, skills, and knowledge, and for some, to learn new ones. While the impact of volunteering will vary widely depending on the intersecting elements which make each person unique, there are some – including gender – that merit particular attention. The gendered dynamics of local volunteering in conflict and emergencies have been under-researched and under-theorised. Humanitarian policymakers and practitioners also rarely seem to focus on gender and volunteering as a topic that is critical for consideration as part of their wider efforts to understand how gendered roles and power relations affect the situations they respond to, and the individuals and communities they seek to support. This is despite ongoing political and technical advances around gender equality, women’s empowerment, and humanitarian assistance. This said, one encouraging development is the growing recognition of women as constituting a significant proportion of the global volunteer labour force contributing to community resilience, peace, and development (United Nations Volunteers 2018).

The purpose of this article is to continue the progress to recognise the importance of local volunteers, and the significance of gender identities, roles, and relations in their experiences. We draw on data collected and analysed as part of the Volunteering in Conflicts and Emergencies (ViCE) Initiative, led by the Swedish Red Cross, in partnership with the Centre for International Development at Northumbria University, UK. Adopting a listening study (Anderson *et al.* 2012) approach, the ViCE Initiative focused on exploring what it is like to be a volunteer in different conflict and emergency settings.¹

We start our exploration by offering a short section on the Red Cross and Red Crescent (RCRC) and its engagement with gender issues. Following this, we provide a brief account of key bodies of research that shed light on the issues of volunteering, humanitarianism, and development, from a gender perspective. These issues have not been a focus for much research: there has seemed to be a silence around them, in fact. Yet looking across disciplines and fields of research yields interesting insights nevertheless. We then go on to give

details of the ViCE Initiative, including the methods used and the intersectional perspective adopted for the study.

The article then explores some of the gendered dynamics of volunteering in conflict and emergency settings. We demonstrate the importance of locating understandings of volunteering within both local gender dynamics and the ways these interact with the gender norms that underpin humanitarian and development discourses and practices. We go on to explore the relationships between volunteering, identity, and agency to reveal how volunteering in humanitarian settings can disrupt established social relations, and in doing so can shape both gendered identities as well as forms of humanitarian agency and capacity. In our conclusion, we reflect on the challenges our research poses for further scholarship and policy development in relation to gender, volunteering, and humanitarian assistance.

The RCRC, gender, and volunteering

The international RCRC Movement is the world's largest humanitarian network whose mandate is to prevent and alleviate human suffering without discrimination and to protect human dignity. In 1863, the Movement was founded by five men who set up the organisation that would later become the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). Among the founders was Henri Dunant, a Swiss businessman who originally conceived of the need for national relief societies to assist the wounded during war. Today, the RCRC Movement is made up of three parts: ICRC; the International Federation of Red Cross Red Crescent Societies (IFRC); and over 190 National Societies. The work of the RCRC Movement is based on seven fundamental principles: humanity, impartiality, neutrality, independence, voluntary service, unity, and universality.²

There are currently around 12 million people volunteering for the RCRC. Volunteers are often referred to as the 'backbone' of the Movement's work, responding to the needs of vulnerable people in times of crisis, including in conflict and emergencies (IFRC 2019). Within the RCRC, volunteering

is organised by recognised representatives of National Societies and is aimed at furthering its services and activities, always working in accordance with the Fundamental Principles of the Red Cross and Red Crescent. It is carried out by people motivated by free will, and not by a desire for material or financial gain, or by external social, economic or political pressure. (IFRC 2011a, 1)

Local volunteers play critical roles in delivering assistance to affected individuals and communities on the ground, yet their activities – and the worth of this contribution – have often been eclipsed. Paid professional work tends to be much more prominent than that undertaken by volunteers, and international volunteers are more visible than local volunteers.

The RCRC Movement is currently committed to making advances in its approach to incorporating a gender and diversity lens across its work, and to promoting gender equality (IFRC 2013), as well as reducing interpersonal violence including gender-based violence (IFRC 2011b). It has focused on gender and women's rights issues in its

programming since at least 1999 when its *IFRC Gender Policy* was launched. Gender and diversity issues are understood as being firmly embedded in – and indeed inseparable from – the Fundamental Principles. In 2015, the IFRC developed its *Minimum Standard Commitments to Gender and Diversity in Emergency Programming* (IFRC 2015a), which laid out its DAPS (Dignity, Access, Participation, Safety) approach, which the Movement is currently applying in several conflict and emergency contexts.

Insights into gender and volunteering: what do we know?

Voluntary work in humanitarian and development settings

Volunteering in humanitarian and development settings is a topic of significant and emerging research interest across the sector itself, as well as academia. This is reflected in recent landmark research by the IFRC for its Global Review on Volunteering (Hazeldine and Baillie Smith 2015) and the INGO Voluntary Service Overseas' research on 'Valuing Volunteering' (Burns 2015), as well as the growing volumes of academic research. The role of local volunteers is also relevant in the current debates about localisation among international and national actors including the United Nations and governments. The localisation agenda calls for greater recognition of the need to work in partnership with local people and their organisations, when responding to humanitarian crisis and emergency responses (IFRC 2015b).

Academic and policy attention has, to date, focused disproportionately on international volunteers from high-income 'developed' countries, offering their services and support in the global South, rather than 'local' people undertaking voluntary work in the global South, even though these are far more numerous (Laurie and Baillie Smith 2017). What kinds of volunteer and volunteering are celebrated and made visible in these accounts is shaped by historical ideas of who are the 'givers' and 'receivers', and long-standing interests and investments in particular configurations of agency and authority in humanitarianism and development. In Europe and North America, volunteers in crises and emergencies have started to be celebrated as popular icons of care and self-sacrifice, exemplified in the media attention to the White Helmets in Syria (CNN 2017) and the volunteers supporting migrants crossing the Mediterranean (Tremlett 2015).

Where local volunteers *are* researched, it is frequently in the context of assessing the efficacy of their roles as 'service deliverers' for donors and states, in contrast to research on international volunteers that has focused on volunteer experience over development impacts (Hazeldine and Baillie Smith 2015). For example, in South Kivu, Democratic Republic of the Congo, local humanitarian actors were seen as central in humanitarian efforts, but only in terms of their ability to manage physical and security challenges to access information and provide fast needs assessments to international humanitarian actors, rather than for their unique and complimentary roles to play and capacities to offer (Barbelet 2019).

International humanitarian agencies often celebrate the supportive roles local volunteers play in helping them access information and hard-to-reach communities. United

Nations Volunteers (UNV) reports on how they worked closely with community volunteers in West Africa, during the Ebola outbreak, to trace the contacts of Ebola-infected patients and distribute food to Ebola-affected families with the World Food Programme (UNV 2014). UNHCR's refugee outreach volunteer (ROV) programme describes the role of refugee volunteers in Addis Ababa in helping UNHCR reach the nearly 23,000 refugees scattered across the city (Diaz 2019). These examples show that there is a danger that the localisation agenda referred to earlier may result in an instrumentalisation of local people to serve agendas developed elsewhere, a point that is important to, among others, feminists involved in humanitarian work and research.

Understanding gender and volunteering

The limited attention to 'local' volunteering sits alongside very limited gendered analyses of volunteering, especially in the global South. One body of Northern-focused research that we found helpful in understanding the gender dimensions of voluntarism comes from a social-psychological perspective. This has analysed the relationship between gender and volunteering behaviour at an individual level (Einloff 2011).

Some research has argued that women are more likely to have an 'ethic of care' which is positively associated with volunteering (Karniol *et al.* 2003, 17). E. Gil Clary *et al.* (1996) found that due to the gendered differences in the way particular individuals are socialised, particularly in relation to helping other people, women have stronger motivations to participate in volunteer opportunities. Echoing feminist arguments in the gender and development literature, discussed further in the next section, Gul Aldikacti Marshall and Hiromi Taniguchi (2012, 216–7) point to the theory that 'gender-based expectations and behaviour in one life arena are carried over to another'. They focus on individuals' 'gender identifications' – characteristics that emerge from culturally patterned relations that define rights and duties for men and women – that permeate into their varied social roles, and the way they 'perform' their gendered identities as women or men in their particular context.

The gendered expectations and gendered social norms experienced by all human beings obviously extend into volunteering as well. We know from looking at humanitarian responses that the duties of female volunteers generally differ from those of male volunteers, with men performing more traditional male roles and women following traditional female roles, and this has been recognised in research also (Wemlinger and Berlan 2016). Some research has argued that men are more likely than women to express interest in risk-taking volunteer roles, while women express more interest in helping roles (Wymer 2011), but the reasons for this are rooted once again in gender relations, not due to any particular innate quality of women. Christopher Einolf (2011, 1094) has argued that some types of volunteering are affected by particularly strong gender norms, with men dominating volunteer fire and rescue squads and women making up the majority of hospice volunteers.

Following the last point, one key area of research and policy debate which *has* focused on gender and volunteering in the global South is that of community health care. Research in this area is often focused on assessing the efficacy of women's voluntary work in service delivery. However, an exception is Katy Jenkins' (2008, 155) powerful feminist analysis of

health promoters in Peru, and their experiences of 'neoliberal professionalisation', as their jobs are formalised. It is perhaps telling that where research does address gender and volunteering in the global South, it focuses on volunteering in the context of 'care', and adopts a feminist perspective.

Feminist economists and gender and development writers offer perspectives on the enormous contribution women make to development through unpaid work (Hoskyns and Rai 2007). This is obviously not voluntary work in the conventional sense: however, its worth to wider communities and society is noted. It extends beyond individual households, into the realms of collective action, using 'power with' (Rowlands 1997). Accounts of women's activities in resource-poor contexts show women operating at the level of the community, literally 'volunteering' time and skills for wider social benefits (Moser 1993). Further, it has been widely noted that the importance of this activism on behalf of the wider community increases at times of crisis (Chant 2008). An example of this comes from Mercedes Gonzalez de la Rocha (2008) on women's essential role keeping communities going in times of economic cutbacks, by running community kitchens.

What comes through clearly from this feminist literature focusing on the global South is that women do unpaid work to keep societies and economies functioning, and this work goes largely unrecognised and undervalued. Poverty and crisis make this unpaid work even more critical for survival. This clearly resonates with considerations about volunteering. For example, explaining women's participation as volunteers in the context of their responsibility for 'care' risks essentialism, assuming that certain kinds of volunteer work are best suited to (all) women. Moreover, the gendered social norm that care work is performed unpaid at home and at the community level in some contexts could increase the risk that some key features of the politics surrounding volunteering can be obscured. One obvious point is that the norm that women are not paid for such work opens up the possibility of using women's labour as a form of cheap service provision, as identified in Katy Jenkins' (2008) and others' work, particularly around health care.

Insights from Critical Feminist Security Theories on gender, crisis, and change

Critical Feminist Security Theories (CFST) also offer additional important insights when examining how the particular dynamics of power and gender play out in volunteering in emergencies. As Eric Blanchard (2003, 1305) explains, feminist security theory 'entails revealing gendered hierarchies, eradicating patriarchal structural violence, and working towards the eventual achievement of common security'.

CFST approaches invite policymakers, practitioners, and researchers to challenge assumptions that gender categories are stable, pointing out that to think this would be to ignore the reality of shifts in gender roles which occur throughout periods of war and peace (Harders 2011). These shifts may open up opportunities for new roles and relationships, but may also place further restrictions on men and women, such as around geographical mobility (Cockburn 2001). Conflicts and emergencies often destabilise gender relations (Hudson 2005). These disruptions may be harmful, but can also render more positive outcomes that suggest potential progress towards gender equality.

It is important to note that while these feminist analyses of emergencies shed light on the fact that they are experienced in highly gendered ways, the focus has been on parties to armed conflict, and on ‘civilians’ or non-combatants. Local humanitarian volunteers are not a focus of these discussions. However, we used insights from CFST in our data analysis, to good effect.

In the next sections, we discuss the research and offer key findings, as a contribution to understanding gender relations within the particularities of local humanitarian volunteering.

The ViCE Initiative: method and approach

The ViCE listening study is a three-year research, development, and innovation initiative that had as its central goal to shed new light on the experiences and challenges faced by local volunteers, and the strategies and mechanisms they adopt to cope with increased risks and vulnerabilities amid weakened institutional support systems (Thomas *et al.* 2018). The research was conducted from September 2015 to March 2016, and involved conversations among 198 RCRC volunteers and 84 wider stakeholders. The participants came from six countries: Afghanistan, Honduras, Myanmar, Sudan, South Sudan, and Ukraine. Each of the six participating National Societies were part of the global ViCE team that shaped and helped implement the ViCE Initiative, including identifying these important issues that volunteers discussed. All the authors of this article were involved directly in the research, and we give details of this in our biographical notes below.

Of the volunteers participating in the research, 78 were female and 120 were male. We saw it as imperative to take an intersectional approach that moved beyond simple binaries. Although we did not ask volunteers explicitly to identify themselves as such, we strived to listen to volunteers who identify with multiple factors of identity including gender, race, class, and caste, each working in tandem to create lived experiences of oppression and privilege, vulnerability, and resilience. The age range of our sample was 16–60 and 16–66 years for female and male participants, respectively. We listened to volunteers and volunteer managers in a total number of 18 towns, villages, or other locations within the six countries where the listening study took place.

The listening approach avoided pre-determined questions or ideas, allowing participants to decide what is important to them and letting them talk about those issues in whatever way they chose. In each country, participants were selected by the local RCRC National Society. Listening sessions were conducted with individuals, pairs, and small groups of four to six volunteers. The group listening sessions included both mixed-gender groups as well as separate groups for men and women. Listening sessions were facilitated by a team of two international ‘listeners’ who reflected, as best as possible, diversity of age, gender, geography, and other factors. With informed consent, these conversations were recorded and later translated, transcribed, and analysed using practitioners’ views of the most important things being raised. The quotations in the sections that follow are taken from listening sessions with volunteers and conversations with volunteer managers.

Participants' experience of volunteering for the RCRC

The average number of years that male and female volunteers across the six countries were active as volunteers were almost the same, averaging eight years (96 and 98 months for females and males, respectively). The contexts in which the volunteers worked varied, from recent and protracted armed conflicts, to civil unrest, to urban violence. According to the context, work included basic health promotion, first aid provision, delivering first aid training for communities, blood donation, and dead body management. For example, some volunteers in one context worked in communities of internally displaced persons to provide warm meals or distribute non-food items such as blankets and cash or vouchers, while in another volunteers worked in schools, community centres, and delivered life-saving messages and information house-to-house. In another context, volunteers provided ambulance services, often travelling into areas marred by urban violence in order to reach a person in need of assistance.

RCRC volunteers are most often managed by a paid volunteer manager or similar staff position within the National Society, who is responsible for the day-to-day operations and sometimes strategic planning for volunteers and volunteer activities. These dynamics of paid versus unpaid, staff versus volunteer, and 'local' versus 'non-local' are explored further elsewhere (Hazeldine and Baillie Smith 2015). Local volunteers and international actors have different levels of psychosocial support available to them during and after the volunteering period (Griffiths *et al.* 2018). This is particularly crucial for volunteers who work in highly stressful and even dangerous settings of conflicts and emergencies, and who, unlike international volunteers or paid staff, may not have access to benefits such as 'R & R' (rest and recuperation) leave.

All volunteers go through some form of induction process to orient them to the Movement's mission and principles, among other aspects of the work. The level of training and support differs in each context and in relation to the kind of work. Each country's National RCRC Society applies global policies – including those on gender and diversity – in different ways, leading to variations on matters such as budgeting for male family members to accompany female volunteers during their travels where safety and culture require it.

In the next section, we explore some of the findings from the ViCE Initiative. These relate to the ways local volunteers in conflicts and emergencies understand and discuss the gendered relations that shape their lives and their volunteering.

Volunteers' experiences in conflict and emergencies: gendered insights

As stated earlier, the RCRC Movement is based on fundamental principles including neutrality, impartiality, independence, and universality, and which are highly internalised by volunteers themselves. However, the structure and culture of RCRC volunteering is also informed by local gendered norms. Hence, volunteering with RCRC Societies creates unique spaces where these norms are both reproduced and challenged.

The gender division of labour amongst volunteers in several of our research locations confirmed insights from feminist research and wider volunteering research discussed

above. Roles were assigned along gendered lines, an example being that it is predominantly female volunteers who engage in ‘caring’ roles like health promotion and household visits to the elderly, while male volunteers tend to take on more front-line roles in emergency response, e.g. driving an ambulance into insecure areas or providing first aid to injured protesters and bystanders during demonstrations. Importantly, this gendered pattern of role allocation was often influenced by not only gender but also age.

In one context, the majority of first aid volunteers were women whose average age was 55. One volunteer reflected on her work as a volunteer in her new community of displaced persons who have fled armed conflict:

We are retired people. Imagine, if we stayed at home, we would get mad. Yes, and like this we are all in work, we are moving, we are ... communicating. We came here to visit ... we meet people. And with people ... we communicate. That's good. It is life for us, if there was not this, I don't know.

In this context, the work of volunteering falls in the main to older women. Young people are not available to fulfil the volunteer roles, since they must find paid work:

For sure, if there were more young people, [the work] would be extended, the organisation would be bigger, [there] would be more help. We have young people too. They did not come, because they work.

It is not clear from our data why so few men were involved as volunteers, but it is possible that the pressure on men to find paid work is greater than that on women due to gendered social norms. Another potential reason is that some tasks such as health promotion or first aid, particularly training and during peacetime, is associated with women's social role in providing care for families and communities, as discussed earlier.

In contrast, in a different setting, the gendered and aged pattern of volunteering was interpreted by a female volunteer manager:

Youth volunteers are mainly dedicated to working with children and young people in education, prevention of certain diseases and certain situations. And they have a mostly sensitising role within the society. And the ladies have worked in, some sort of social issues. Honestly within the NS [National Societies] the problem with the ladies is they have up to a certain point, become a social club. So sometimes, what happens is that, they get together, they drink tea or coffee and talk about each other's lives ... Many of them are married to very wealthy men, and they mostly work in fund-raising.

This volunteer manager understands the role of youth volunteers – both male and female – present in regular operations as largely engaged in the less risky and often considered ‘soft’ side of humanitarian work, such as sensitisation and education. Critically, she seems to perceive the work of women volunteers – in this case, understood by middle-class, adult, married women volunteers – to be of diminished value and perhaps unimportant. These female volunteers are seen as serving their own personal social needs rather than the operational needs of the RCRC.

Like all of us, local volunteers are acutely aware of the gendered expectations and norms that are expressed and reinforced within their relationships with their families

and communities, as well as with fellow volunteers and managers. Local volunteers who are often members of the communities in which they work may come into contact with different and contrasting gender norms due to contact with international staff and volunteers. The dialogue and cross-cultural exchange that can be created offers a catalyst for all involved to become aware of the cultural specificity of some beliefs they may have taken for granted. Our research showed that some volunteers understood the structure and culture of volunteering as providing a favourable environment for otherwise strict gender norms to be somewhat relaxed, or even challenged. The act of volunteering itself has in many instances provided a catalyst for some of these entrenched gender norms to be challenged and eventually transformed.

Many volunteers reported that they were met with resistance from their families when they expressed their desire to volunteer, and that this resistance was often rooted in socially prescribed norms on how women or men should behave in society. Gender norms also constrain women – in particular young women – from travelling away from home, in many communities.

Female volunteers may find it hard to persuade their families to allow them to volunteer, in particular in contexts or communities where women do not normally work outside the home, and/or for pay. In contexts where men are seen as family breadwinners, and move around freely outside the home, male volunteers may find it easier to gain family approval for them to volunteer (unless they are expected to find work that is remunerated – an issue for women too in many contexts).

Through combinations of persistence, negotiation, and allied support from siblings or other family members, young women volunteers reported that they often do eventually secure permission and support from their families, especially (male) heads of households, as illustrated by two female volunteers:

There was a project for risk reduction in [place]. Yes, at that time, we went to different rural areas and spent the night there. My parents didn't like that. Because I am a girl, they wanted to forbid me from going to those places, working there, and then spending the night. Although my parents wanted to stop me, I was able to convince them. I had to convince them. For example, 'Mother, travelling there is a good opportunity.'

This volunteer's parents objected to her staying overnight in a community that would receive humanitarian aid, an objection based on gender ('because I am a girl'). But through mobilising her parents' desire for her to seize opportunities – understood here as learning or professional opportunities – the volunteer was able to convince her parents to allow her to go.

The second volunteer perceived the RCRC as a setting where norms around gender equality were promoted and openly discussed, providing an important motive for her to want to volunteer:

Personally, my family wasn't happy with my decision of working as volunteer, but it was my enthusiasm, and when I went to ... in order to see how it seems. My family was kept telling me that if it's not benefiting you financially then you don't need to go to there. But ... I was so interested [in] this job, and I argued with my family about it, even I cried in front of them,

and I insistently asked them several times to let me go there. Then they told me that you can go there for learning something, but there is no need for being a volunteer too. Once I heard that they consider women's rights, this made me [very] interested to work as a volunteer.

The motivation to volunteer was not material gain (indeed, her family – like many families of volunteers who we listened to – cited financial reasons for not supporting her desire to volunteer). Rather, this speaker was seeking opportunities to be exposed to ideas and conversations in which she perhaps could not otherwise engage.

The complexity of gender issues in volunteer experiences can be seen in women volunteers' accounts of expanding horizons, on the one hand, and the risk of gender-based violence, on the other. The following account from a female volunteer offers a stark picture of how her gendered vulnerability as a woman, and her role as a volunteer, exposed her to potential danger:

He [the team leader] left me there to walk all the way out of that neighbourhood, on my own, and I was like, what? 23 years old. They could have killed me, they could have raped me, anything could have happened. And it was just because he wanted to feel superior, because he was a paramedic and I was just an apprentice.

In stark contrast, some male respondents emphasised that volunteering gave them opportunities which did not require them to challenge gender norms. In fact, in some cases it enabled them to better realise gendered expectations of masculinity:

I have a three-year-old baby and when he sees me with my uniform, when he tells me, 'Daddy, you're a superhero', I feel happy and proud because he sees me like that. Because he likes the Red Cross. When he sees me, 'Daddy, do you ride in an ambulance?' I tell him yes and he starts laughing, and doing [noise of an ambulance siren] like this. He says, 'Daddy I'm from the Red Cross, saving lives' ... That's what encourages me, what inspires me, because I want to be a good example for him. And when I'm treating a patient I see my mother, my father, my son. And so I try to do my best to treat them, to make them feel comfortable, to make them feel well.

The use of the term 'superhero' is often invoked when speaking of volunteers, especially those working in conflicts and emergencies, or on the 'frontlines'. The perception that volunteer work is dangerous and requires bravery and strength tracks with concepts of masculinity that cast men as protectors of women and children (Alison 2007), and 'saving lives' in times of emergencies. But this volunteer seems also to be weaving a more complex masculinity through openly expressing a desire to care.

The same gendered social norms that shape wider society are at work in the operational environments of the RCRC. As one female volunteer comments:

I'd say, [a] woman's role, not only in society, but in volunteering as well, on the working side, is quite marginalised. And I compared it, and that helped me back then to reflect on the role that we female volunteers have, because sometimes, many times, we are told: 'Go ahead, give them your best smile and you'll manage to get that for us', because we have been told that occasionally. Then I say, no, I am more than that, going and laughing with somebody in order to try to get something for my colleagues; as a woman, I need to see what I can be for society.

The quote demonstrates a volunteer's experience bristling against the attitudes of her supervisors and colleagues who expected her to use her femininity to facilitate the team's activities ('you'll manage to get that for us'), ostensibly through performing a version of femininity that is characterised by pleasantness and docility. While some volunteers have found that volunteering has opened up spaces to experience and learn new things that were otherwise not available to them, this volunteer provides a contrasting picture of an operational culture that reproduces oppressive gender norms that restrict her role within humanitarian aid, and, hence, larger opportunities for growth to 'see what [she] can be for society'.

A female volunteer manager (a paid member of staff) sees the act of volunteering as potentially producing positive transformation, in which both women and men volunteers come together and build on gendered stereotypes of their different roles in society to promote peace and stability:

Females, usually, when they respond to be a volunteer, they respond because they feel the responsibility and the ownership, and mainly this in the area where there is conflict. And in conflict, usually the most vulnerable groups are females. Usually. At least in [country], but it's usually like that. And they are the ones who come because they feel the responsibility. Then it became more [of a] burden on their shoulders as a female, to respond to their communities' need and their household. Most of them have households. And in the same time ... This is one other thing, they feel like male[s] are not supporting of them, and they are more busy with creating war. It's like that. Because they are those who are holding guns, and the ladies are those who are suffering because of this. By the time we start developing strong volunteers, then [having volunteers who are both women and men] is part of peacebuilding. Because you will make them feel like there are more focus in keeping their communities safe, in keeping them developed and organised than fighting with others.

This volunteer manager views the act of including both women and men in humanitarian volunteering activities as both a means to stem the conflict, as well as a way to capitalise on women's naturalised roles as carers and peacemakers. Obviously such ideas are stereotypes – this volunteer manager does not recognise here the contributions that men have made to peace efforts outside humanitarian aid volunteering, nor the myriad direct and indirect roles that women play within armed groups (see Moser and Clark 2001). However, the notion that the act of volunteering can be one of peacebuilding through the engagement of both men and women is compelling.

The findings in this section showed how volunteers navigate through social codes and norms around gender, and in turn reconstruct or reflect back these norms. Doing so helps shift our understanding away from volunteering as a neutral act of benevolence and care. It also moves us away from the question of how volunteers can help deliver the wider goals of a humanitarian response. It begins to reveal the productive potential that volunteering offers volunteers to challenge gender norms, as well as for consolidating and confirming them.

Volunteering, identity, and agency in humanitarian settings

Our data reveal how volunteers often find themselves negotiating these shifting gender roles in order to adhere to the mandate of the RCRC and deliver neutral, impartial,

independent humanitarian assistance. At times, this means challenging conventions around gender, as well as age, and other identities including class and race.

In one case, for example, volunteers reported that the culturally appropriate dress for women – a skirt – was often not suitable for the work that they were tasked to do. They dressed in the more practical male RCRC uniform of pants and a shirt. As one volunteer simply said, '[t]he females in my squad dressed in male clothes for easy movement'. The volunteer did not emphasise the potential for this to be seen as resistance to gender norms, but rather as a measure of necessity in order to deliver humanitarian assistance in a particular environment. This meant the female volunteer behaved in a way *as a volunteer* that was counter to the gender codes and taboos to which she would be expected to adhere to *as a woman*. She shirked taboo and refused to perform her gender identity as scripted by society, all due to the priority of delivering humanitarian aid.

The volunteers who participated in this study demonstrate astonishing creativity in navigating the gendered contexts of conflicts and emergencies where spaces in which women can operate are constricted. One example is the volunteer work that was undertaken by female volunteers in one country context where women were not permitted to engage in public health outreach activities. Here, female volunteers found innovative and even subversive ways to work around these social prescriptions. As one male volunteer manager explained:

The women were working every day. They didn't kind of, it might have been seen as a house to house visit. It might have been seen as a group of friends sitting together. But women who were promoting public health work and messages and community-based health and first aid kind of training, were just continuing with their roles, unhindered, just without telling anybody.

While male and female volunteers are not immune from larger societal ideas and dictates around gender divisions of labour, our data show that volunteering in conflicts and emergencies can sometimes open up spaces for volunteers to challenge gender norms that are reflected in both communities and in the RCRC itself. Volunteering for the RCRC in these contexts can provide opportunities for men and women to make small moves outside their confined gender roles that are produced and reproduced in their communities. Some volunteers drew the distinction between how men and women interact on the 'outside' of the RCRC, as opposed to how this unfolds on the 'inside' within the realm of volunteering.

The RCRC 'space' can be seen in some circumstances as an opportunity for women, in this case, to engage in different activities that would otherwise be unavailable to them in other settings of their community. Further, the perceived advancements towards gender equality that the RCRC has been seeking to make (IFRC 2013) seem to be an attractive quality for some volunteers who value this as well. This could be seen in the words of one of the volunteers quoted above, who thought volunteering would give her an opportunity to be exposed to ideas about women's rights. In this way, the RCRC seems to be a progressive 'space', whereby societal gender norms may not be applied as rigorously, and where men and women are able to move beyond restrictions set on them by the larger society.

But while the ViCE research revealed opportunities for volunteers to re-work and challenge gender relations, and ways to build on the positive aspects of existing norms (in the case of the father and his young son, cited above), volunteering is limited in its impact. Of the many examples we could select to make this point, one particularly powerful one is the existence of gendered social norms and institutions that prevent some potential volunteers from stepping forward. This particularly affects women because of the social expectation that they are primary carers for families. This leads to ‘missing women’ among volunteers. Even if young women begin as volunteers, at a particular age they may have to leave. One male volunteer observed how existing gendered social institutions continue to shape the lives of volunteers, with marriage being a particularly powerful constraint on the lives of women volunteers:

[c]urrently, female and male volunteers work equally. But some of the female volunteers will get married and have to leave the society to take care of work around the house.

Another female volunteer responds to this societal expectation of her with a renewed commitment to creatively support the larger mission of the RCRC in its humanitarian assistance work:

Even if I could not volunteer myself now, I [would] support my husband as much as I can in his volunteer work by making sure his uniforms and other things are ready.

Of course, marriage, the household, and the family all underpin the work of the RCRC, and unpaid care work makes the reproduction of the volunteer workforce possible. If we view volunteering as a *productive* activity, in that it provides the labour required to deliver humanitarian assistance as a good, then all of the activities that are necessary to equip and support a volunteer to be able to volunteer their labour can be seen as *reproductive* work (Moser 1993). This reproductive work includes activities such as child minding and rearing duties, preparation of meals, and, as illustrated by this volunteer, ‘making sure his uniforms and other things are ready’. In addition to the excluded voices of certain volunteers, the (likely gendered) contributions of those who support volunteers’ lives and work delivering humanitarian aid are thus far unexplored.

Conclusion

In this article, we have sought to address silences in existing research and debate around volunteering in humanitarian and development spaces. This initial exploration reveals how more attention must be paid to how conflicts and emergencies shape and change gender relations within volunteer ranks as well as within communities, since these will impact on how and to what extent local volunteers can safely and effectively respond to the needs of conflict- and emergency-affected populations. In addition, the RCRC and other organisations working with volunteers may find these findings helpful in their discussions of how best to work with and support local individuals and organisations, and in particular volunteers in humanitarian settings.

It is critical to minimise the risks associated with volunteering and maximise the potential of the experience to enable individuals and groups to challenge gender inequality and further the empowerment of women. Volunteering in humanitarian settings can entrench and reproduce gender norms, but also provides opportunities to re-work and context those norms. Women can become volunteers and assume new roles and responsibilities, challenging assumptions about skills and capacities, re-shaping identities, and mobilising new forms of agency.

It seems that in certain settings, volunteering for the RCRC can open up spaces for challenging and revisiting social gender norms, expanding the spaces in which women and men are able to operate. Volunteering can destabilise gender roles and be transformative, not only at the individual level but also at the community and societal levels. It is also possible that conflicts and emergencies paradoxically provide the space in which these opportunities become even more important for male and female volunteers, as opportunities to socialise and even seek training and employment become constricted in the wider community.

However, more research is required to understand the durability of these opportunities. Research on the long-term sustainability of gains for women and men during times of conflict has shown that there is a tendency in the post-conflict period for a pushback towards restoring the ‘status quo’. This, for many women, means giving up hard-won gains made in all spheres of society – economic, social, political – to often return to domestic work (Parpart 2015). The full extent to which shifts during conflict translate into long-term gains amongst local female (and male) volunteers is currently unknown. Hence, further research is required.

Notes

1. Literature about these experiences has largely focused on young international volunteers from the global North, with limited attention to international volunteers from the global South (Baillie Smith *et al.* 2017), or to older volunteers. The idea that young people can go to volunteer while taking a year out of formal education, and find this a valuable formative experience while contributing usefully to development, is now widely questioned (Baillie Smith and Laurie 2011). While remaining popular and widely celebrated, ‘gap year’ volunteers and international volunteering more generally have been subjected to growing criticism from activists in the global South, highlighting the implicit racism of these ideas. Further, there is a growing body of research from critical scholars and development practitioners who have been exploring best practices for more equitable approaches to North–South volunteering (see Tiessen and Grantham 2017).
2. For more information on the RCRC Movement, see www.ifrc.org and for ICRC, see www.icrc.org (last checked 3 April 2019).

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