GENDER AND AID AGENCY SECURITY MANAGEMENT
ABOUT THIS BRIEF

This Professional Development Brief is part of a series produced by the Security Management Initiative (SMI), which focuses on topics of central interest to the security and risk management community. The briefs follow a standardized outline offering practitioners an overview of key definitions and conceptual issues, the evolution of the topic, main debates and forward looking perspectives. They do not offer original research, but by providing a ‘lay of the land’, these documents aim to clarify and inform the security and risk management field.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Though security plans and procedures are generally perceived to be “gender neutral,” aid agencies would benefit from incorporating gender as one of a number of contextual factors informing security management. At the same time, insufficient understanding of how to mainstream gender can inadvertently lead to unsafe practices.

This brief maps the relationship between gender and security management. It begins by providing an overview of key definitions – namely “gender,” “security,” “gender mainstreaming,” and “gender neutrality” – and discussing the lack of a “field” of literature or practice on gender and security management. Drawing on the growing raw evidence base on how gender affects aid agency security, as well as on a slim body of literature, it shows that there are three key issues for gender and aid agency security management:

- the nature of gender-specific risks;
- how to appropriately mitigate these risks; and
- how this fits into the wider discussion of what constitutes security for aid agencies.

Perspectives from research and practitioners on how to address these issues to strengthen the gender-security management link are presented, including:

- further quantitative and qualitative research; with
- attention to appropriate methodologies.

Aid agencies can apply this research to policy and practice through:

- mainstreaming gender into security management;
- making staff aware of the wide range of ways in which gender is relevant;
- instituting context-specific assessments of gender-specific risks;
- integrating gender-specific risks into the security assessments that are conducted in emergency contexts; and
- involving gender experts in a reciprocal process.
INTRODUCTION

This brief maps the relationship between gender and security management. Security policies and procedures are generally perceived to be “gender neutral,” but gender is one of a number of contextual factors to be taken into consideration in developing security plans and procedures. At the same time, insufficient understanding of how to mainstream gender into security management can inadvertently lead to unsafe practices. While there is ample anecdotal evidence on the role of gender in effective security management, this information has yet to be systematically documented.

The literature on this topic is notably sparse, but pockets of practice do exist and are drawn on extensively in this brief. The brief discusses the key issues in gender and security management, and presents perspectives on how to address these debates moving forward. It is primarily intended for security practitioners and researchers, and both local and international aid agencies, but it is hoped it will also have relevance across the gender and security spectrum.

KEY DEFINITIONS

Gender

As distinct from sex, gender describes the cultural and social, rather than the biological determinants of the state of being male or female. Thus “gender refers to the particular roles and relationships, personality traits, attitudes, behaviors and values that society ascribes to men and women.” As such, “gender roles can vary among societies, within societies, and over time, [and] they are not bound to either men or women.” Because of this, “a clear understanding of local context is crucial to understanding gender relations in that society.”

Debates about gender and security management, like those that tackle the range of gender and security issues, often quickly revert to focusing solely on women, making gender a “women’s issue.” For example, researchers on gender and armed conflict found that “the discourse of ‘gender and development’ tends to stress women as a priority,” rather than focusing on gender considerations that affect both men and women. This emphasis is also reflected in the prevalence of specific sections on “women’s security” in NGO safety and security manuals, and the concurrent lack of any gendered component that might explain what role gender has in effective security management.

Security

Security refers to “the state of being free from danger or threat.” The way in which these dangers or threats are defined may vary greatly, depending on the perspective of the person who is defining them. Researchers have observed that people identify risks based on psychological and personal experiences. Aid workers are no exception.

Security is situational, relative and to a certain extent subjective. As a result, it is affected by a number of factors including, but not limited to, gender. For example, a male international staff member may face different risks than a male national staff member. Similarly, perceptions of and differences in gender may influence security risks. While a person’s gender may not increase the number of risks they face, it may affect the nature and/or their understanding of risk. There is a direct link between how these risks are perceived and the approaches taken to
mitigate these risks, which is explored further in latter sections of this brief.

**Gender Mainstreaming**

Gender mainstreaming is “the process of assessing the implications for women and men of any planned action, including legislation, policies or programs, in all areas and at all levels.” It entails making decisions and policy based on “the experience, knowledge, and interests of women and men.” Most importantly, it intends to instill the recognition that issues cannot be deemed gender neutral without proper examination, and promotes an assessment of gender stereotypes.

**Gender Neutrality**

Gender neutral means being devoid of gender markers. For example, gender neutral language avoids the generic “he” in favor of “s/he” or “they” in the singular. In the context of security management, there are two pertinent definitions. Gender neutral can convey the assumption that gender has no relevance to an issue. Alternatively, it can articulate that an issue that has been analyzed and shown to have no gender bias.

**EVOLUTION OF THE FIELD**

A “field” of gender and aid agency security management does not exist, such that its evolution might be traced. In 2000, Van Brabant noted that “this is a generally underexplored issue in aid agencies;” there has been little development in the ensuing years. The body of literature on gender and security has so far encompassed security sector reform, peacebuilding, conflict resolution and mediation, and gender in conflict, including gender-based violence. However, this work has not included the specific operational and policy dimensions of gender and security management within its remit.

Nor has aid agency security management ventured far, or formally, into the gender and security debate. Security management emerged over the last decade as a means of strengthening organizations’ safety and security. But it has tended to remain – or attempted to remain – gender neutral. Most organizational security policies are written in gender-neutral language, and there is very little institutionalized gender-specific awareness or training. The result of this gender neutrality has been the absence of considerations of gender-specific risks, rendering proper understanding, management and mitigation a challenge.

While some gender experts and security professionals have been keen to promote gender mainstreaming in security management, they have not succeeded in placing this issue firmly on the agenda. This lack of discussion may in part due to the prevalence of male aid agency security managers, who may have a limited view of gender issues. Those responsible for security management who are keen to explore the issue further have so far lacked the appropriate conceptual tools to do so.

Two key documents that do consider aid agency security from a gendered perspective are *Does Gender Matter?*, a research paper commissioned by Save the Children US, and Jane Barry and Vahida Nainar’s *Insiste, Persiste, Resiste, Existe*. The former deals directly with “how gender impacts security for non-governmental organizations’ field staff,” with a focus on aid workers from the organizations that belong to the Mindanao Emergency Response Network (MERN), in the Philippines. The latter restricts its focus to
women human rights defenders. It provides an overview of security risks faced by women leading and working in national NGOs, and is therefore a useful counterpart to the more international NGO-oriented trend in literature on security management. The findings of these documents are discussed in the following section, alongside a growing anecdotal evidence base of the ways in which gender affects aid agency security management.

**Key Issues**

There are three key issues for gender and aid agency security management. The first is the nature of gender-specific risks; the second is how to appropriately mitigate these risks; and the third relates the wider discussion of what constitutes security for aid agencies.

**Gender-Specific Risks**

Examples of gendered violence against aid workers abound. However, when these examples are gathered in databases that report security incidents, they are rarely accompanied by the contextual information necessary to analyze their gendered nature. For example, data is often not disaggregated by sex, making it difficult to establish the different risks faced by male and female aid workers. This absence of analysis has limited the gendered perspective of humanitarian security.

Despite the lack of data, it is acknowledged that gender-specific risks are implicit in all four types of risks faced by aid workers: 1) risks in general, shared by the local population and aid workers alike; 2) risks that are specific to working for an aid organization; 3) risks that are specific to a program; and 4) risks that are the result of individual behavior.

Specific to international aid workers, different cultural interpretations of gender may contribute to distrust of aid, humanitarian and human rights actors, subsequently translating into concrete threats and violence. National aid workers may face additional risks; Barry notes that national female staff leading and working for aid agencies may have their families threatened or attacked. The families of male aid workers may also be targeted, but in cultures where taboos exist against women working, families may be more likely to place subsequent pressure on women to stop their work.

A general gendered risk for men is that they are more likely to be mistaken for combatants, or to be accused of being informers for parties to a conflict. With respect to men of western cultures, “Too often, [they] succumb to the ‘macho male’ syndrome” whereby they (aggressively) attempt to gain control of and dominate certain situations, creating additional risk based on individual behavior. Van Brabant writes that “Men have to appear ‘strong’ and are reluctant to admit fear. This has the potential to further inflame some situations – either because it provokes anger and escalates a situation, or because men may want to assume leadership and portray themselves as protectors of women, leading to tensions within a team.” Therefore “men must learn to ‘step back’” in certain situations.

Sexuality can also intersect with gender to create specific risks. Male aid workers may face charges of inappropriate relations with (local) women – including sexual contact, which affect the perceptions and trust of the local community. Interpretations and expressions of their gender on the part of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LBGT)
staff could put them at risk in culturally conservative contexts.

Programming decisions based on the gender of staff can also expose male and female staff to specific risks. For example, the Save US report found that many organizations assigned particular tasks to staff according to their gender. Women were often responsible for carrying out negotiation or interaction with community members, whereas men were tasked with carrying supplies and heavy loads. This presents health and safety risks of physical stress or over-exertion for male staff, while it potentially exposes women to hostile actions on the part of the groups with whom they are negotiating – including kidnapping, sexual assault or physical attack. Van Brabant writes that women are more easily prey to aggressors wanting to show off their power, and warns of female negotiators being lead away to “talk to the leader,” a factor not often taken into consideration when women are tasked with negotiation.

**Risk mitigation**

Most organizational security policies and procedures are written in gender-neutral language. However, many have sections dealing with female staff, indicating the common slippage from “gender” to “women’s issues”, and virtually all manuals have a section on sexual harassment and/or sexual assault in relation to women, but no equivalent for men. The Church World Service manual is an exception. It considers the issue of gender in greater detail, including discussing specific cultural gender differences, and the gender-based challenges faced by men and women in security situations. This specific analysis and understanding can promote effective risk mitigation.

The Save the Children US report found that acceptance was the main strategy used by both genders for mitigating risk. However, when this strategy is unsuccessful, different coping strategies emerge between men and women to deal with traumatic security incidents. Jane Barry observed of male human rights defenders that “because [they] are typically expected to be ‘macho’, and ultimately remain silent in the face of security threats, they often feel stigmatised and under pressure to cope alone in the aftermath of violent attacks, including sexual violence and torture.” Women cognizant of their particular vulnerabilities may be under constant additional stress.

In some cases, organizations can expose their staff to gendered risks through the actions they take to mitigate insecurity. Treating gender as a blanket determinant of security can in fact increase the vulnerability of staff and make for poor security decision-making. In some instances, to reflect the local cultural norm, organizations will segregate staff by sex for housing, thereby potentially inadvertently increasing the vulnerability of both male and female staff. Similarly, decisions and policies on staff movement and evacuation planning in insecure environments are often made based on the gender of staff, rather than their position within the team. Women may be evacuated first, leaving less senior men who may not have the training and experience to deal with intensely insecure situations.

Hiring private security providers for protection of field staff and property can further exacerbate gender-specific risks. Armed or unarmed security for NGO field offices and residences – which is usually provided by local men – may expose female staff to unwanted attention or sexual harassment. Men and women may not
feel equally secure when traveling around with armed escorts, who are usually male.

Management decisions regarding security can be undermined by gendered perceptions of authority. Male staff may be reluctant to accept the risk assessment and the resulting security procedures of a female manager, and equally female staff may consider the security measures of a male manager to be 'male chauvinism'.

This also applies to the way in which the advice of security professionals, whether private contractors or those brought in-house, is received. In general, female security professionals may be received differently from their male counterparts. This hinges on the impression – substantiated or not – that male security specialists, who often have military or law enforcement backgrounds, are likely to be strongly influenced by their male-dominated professional background and hierarchical organizational culture, which often is at odds with an aid agency’s more participatory organizational culture. One international private security company reported a notable relaxation on the part of the program staff of a humanitarian organization working in Iraq when they sent a female consultant to carry out the contract. This pertains equally to in-house security specialists, who are predominantly male. Inversely, male target groups may be more hostile to the advice of a female security consultant.

Whether or not security specialists are likely to have a ‘masculine’ approach, the Save the Children US researchers found that even though most security trainings do not include a gender module, women trainers are more likely to incorporate such modules. This suggests that the gender of security experts does play a role in their approach to training and gender.

**Whose security?**

The above discussion has so far focused on gender as it relates to aid agency staff security. But aid agencies do not operate in a vacuum, and their actions will affect and may even inadvertently increase security risks for others. In fact, male and female aid workers face many of the same risks as local populations. Thus, for example, the use of rape as a tool to destroy and demobilize communities has also been used on humanitarian aid workers in contexts that remain hostile to the humanitarian presence. On the other hand, the mere presence of large numbers of international staff can contribute to an increase in insecurity of local women and other vulnerable beneficiaries through sexual abuse or exploitation, or simply through association. Aid agency use of armed escorts can further expose local men, women and children to armed violence.

This highlights the gap between how aid agencies approach beneficiaries’ safety and security – usually referred to as protection and delegated to protection specialists – and how they view the security of their own staff. Present across aid agency programming, this separation inhibits communication and coordination between protection, gender and security specialists. Lack of coordination between security management and gender-based violence activities results in the absence of appropriate consideration of security, inadvertently increasing risk.

For example, one of the underlying principles of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) programming is to “keep survivors safe.” Yet program staff often does not have the security expertise to know what will and what won’t escalate a situation. As a result, staff attempting to address SGBV issues can
put themselves and survivors in greater danger.

**Perspectives**

This brief has articulated a range of issues related to gender mainstreaming. It has demonstrated the need to consider security from a gender perspective, if only to ensure that security decisions based on gender do not put aid agency staff and local populations at greater risk. This section offers some perspectives in terms of research, policy and practice, for strengthening the gender-security management link. Those recommendations which remain unattributed are amalgams of suggestions provided by the advisors on this brief. These are intended and should be read as recommendations intended to initiate a wider conversation on how to proceed.

**Research and context analysis**

Better understanding and anticipation of gender-specific security risks requires further quantitative and qualitative data, gathered and analyzed at the research, policy and field levels.

Firstly, monitoring of aid agency security incidents is still often ad hoc and does not usually identify the gender of the staff involved, rendering quantifiable understanding of gender-specific risks faced by staff in the field difficult. Addressing this problem requires the following activities:

- systematic aid agency security incident reporting with sex as a variable to enable quantifiable understanding of gender-specific security risks,
- interviews with staff members to provide qualitative data on such risks and gender-specific perceptions of security.

In terms of methodology, creating safe spaces within which interviewees can explicitly state their concerns may facilitate information gathering. If researchers – and organizations – are confident and comfortable broaching gender-specific subject matter as they would other risks, such space may be opened. Given that talking about security entails identifying vulnerabilities and examining deep-rooted cultural perceptions, interviewees may not feel comfortable speaking out without proper guarantees of confidentiality.

Ensuring confidentiality will also promote quality research. For example, there is currently a serious risk of underreporting of gender-specific security incidents within aid agencies because of the perception that staff members who express concerns or doubts are unable to handle high-risk situations.

Secondly, in order to assess what gender-specific risks staff face in the field before they occur, researchers, policy-makers and practitioners should:

- ask whether the attitudes of local actors in the theatre of operations affect male and female aid workers differently, and how that affects security; and
- assess the gender-specific security risks faced by both aid workers and communities in which they work. For example, aid agencies would benefit from further in-depth analysis of the behavior of armed movements and warring parties that are using sexual violence against both civilian populations and aid workers as a tactic and a weapon of war.

Both of these recommendations tie into to a growing trend towards improved context and situation analysis as a means of addressing aid workers’ and civilian populations’
security. Some researchers and practitioners are already developing and promoting community-based approaches as the most effective tool for identifying security concerns for civilian populations, as “cultural logics about security attend not only to the kind of security problems local communities identify and face – such as small arms or gender-based violence – but also to the means by which the community members may be receptive to addressing them with international actors, such as UN agencies.”

Thus aid agencies could benefit from undertaking deeper research on culture, tradition and language and their relation to gender, in order to understand who are the guardians of these three themes.

Engagement with gender experts can be a catalyst for this process. Gender experts can show organizations how to use gender as an informative tool, how to include it in security assessments in order to better understand the culture and situation of operational contexts, and how to protect staff and local communities.

This could be a reciprocal process, with security experts advising their gender counterparts on the security implications of protection activities, for example developing stronger preparedness elements in safe houses or safe spaces for survivors of gender-based violence. Promoting this exchange may not only allow for improved mitigation of staff security risks, but also to engage security staff to increase their understanding of gender roles and risks within a given context.

Review of organizational practice

As this brief has show, gender-specific risks are not simply something to which staff are exposed at field level. They are also affected by organizational and individual approaches.

Mainstreaming gender into all aspects of security policy and decision-making would ensure that staff at all levels of programming are aware of the range of ways in which gender is relevant. In this environment, the ultimate policy objective would be to integrate gender into decision-making and security management more broadly so that it becomes one of a number of factors that are considered in security assessments. One way of facilitating this might be monitoring and evaluation of the standard tools and methodologies used to conduct security assessments through “gender audits.” As part of this process, it is important to ensure that a gendered approach avoids identifying women as in need of special training or manuals. Instead, materials should be provided to both men and women, covering concerns affecting both genders so that gender tools avoid being “gendered” towards women alone.

Equally, context-specific assessments of gender-specific risks will help to ensure that gender awareness filters down – and feeds back up – into all levels of programming.

To what effect?

A closely related issue is that of the external management of gender and security. For their part, researchers, policy-makers and practitioners need to ask, how does aid agencies’ behavior affect the security of others? In order to understand the effects of security actions for actors other than staff, and to ensure they are properly assessed, local and international NGO partnerships for enhancing security could be developed, including encouraging and supporting local women’s organizations and networks. The lessons learned from women’s groups at the local level could also contribute to monitoring and assessment of aid agency security practices.
For the sake of simplicity, we use the term ‘aid agency’ in this text to refer to the variety of organisations that provide aid in complex environments. We recognise that agencies working in these environments may also be carrying out activities that would more accurately be described as humanitarian, developmental, peacebuilding, protection, advocacy, etc. or any combination of the above.


For these and other comments and suggestions, SMI is also indebted to the gender and security experts who advised on earlier versions of this brief: Jane Barry, Bineta Diop, Sonia Navani, Maria Daniela Sommardahl, and Daniel de Torres. While they provided valuable feedback, any errors that remain are SMI’s alone.

The UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNOHCHR) defines gender as referring to the socially constructed differences between women and men that are: 1) attributed throughout the life cycle; 2) learned, not innate; 3) changeable for any given society over time; and 4) manifested with wide variations both within and between cultures. It notes that “Gender influences the roles, power and resources for women and men in any culture.” UNOHCHR, Fact Sheet No. 33, Frequently Asked Questions on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, December 2008, No. 33, p. 19. Available at: http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/499176e62.html.


Peace Corps Manual, quoted in Gaul et. al., “Does Gender Matter?”


“Lack of full participation of women in economic, social and cultural decision-making, including rural development and post-crisis recovery, results not only in failure to reflect women’s views and experiences in efforts to realize economic, social and cultural rights, but may also result in the development of programmes and policies that are not fully relevant to them.” UNOHCR, Fact Sheet No. 33, p. 19.

Judy El-Bushra and Ibrahim Saul, Cycles of Violence: Gender Relations and Armed Conflict (London: ACORD, 2005), p.82.

Since there is no agreed aid agency definition of security, this brief uses the definition found in the Oxford Concise English Dictionary.


Definitions from the Peace Corps’ Gender and Development Manual, in Gaul et. al., “Does Gender Matter?”,


See Kristin Valasek, “Security Sector Reform and Gender,” in Gender and Security Sector Reform Toolkit (Geneva: Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces (DCAF), OSCE/ODIHR, UN-

xviii It could be that aid agency security remains distinct from the broader gender and security discourse because it is concerned with the security of a specific subset of actors within any security situation – namely, aid agency staff – rather than human security, or the general security of populations. Problems arising from this distinction are discussed below.


xxii Thanks to Sonia Navani for this observation.


xxv Gaul et. al, “Does Gender Matter?”


xxviii Ibid.


xxx Ibid, p. 46.


xxxii This review comes from Gaul et. al, “Does Gender Matter?”


xxxv Ibid.

xxxvi Van Brabant, *Operational Security*.

xxvii Thanks to Sonia Navani for this observation.

xxviii Thanks to Daniel de Torres for this observation.
xli For example, the male : female attendance ratio at European Interagency Security Forum (EISF), a network of security focal points at European humanitarian organizations that meets on a quarterly basis, was 16:6 at September 2008 meeting; 13:8 at March 2008 meeting; and 21:2 at November 2007 meeting. See also Gaul et. al, “Does Gender Matter?”
xlii Gaul et. al, “Does Gender Matter?” Any gender module is almost always an optional component of the session.
xliii This is rarely discussed in the sexual and gender-based violence literature, which usually restricts its focus to civilian populations. See for example, UNHCR, *Sexual and Gender-Based Violence against Refugees, Returnees and Internally Displaced Persons. Guidelines for Prevention and Response* (Geneva, May 2003).
xliv Corinna Csáky, *No One to Turn To: The under-reporting of child sexual exploitation and abuse by aid workers and peacekeepers* (London: Save the Children 2008).
xlv Thanks to Sonia Navani for this observation.
xlvi IASC, “Guidelines for Gender-based Violence Interventions in Humanitarian Settings.”
xlvii By staff inserting themselves into the situation as opposed to assisting the survivor outside of the situation and away from the perpetrator. For example, in situations of domestic violence where staff members go to home to “mediate” conflicts. Thanks to Sonia Navani for this example.
xlviii Gaul et. al, “Does Gender Matter?”
xlix Thanks to Bineta Diop for this recommendation.
li See [http://insecurityinsight.org/](http://insecurityinsight.org/)
l\ii Thanks to Bineta Diop for this observation.
l\iii Ibid.
l\iv Thanks to Sonia Navani for this recommendation.
l\v Gya, “The Importance of Gender in ESDP”, p. 3.
l\vi Gaul et. al, “Does Gender Matter?”
l\vii Thanks to Maria Daniela Sommardahl for this recommendation. See “Gender tips for SSR assessment and M&E” in SSR and Gender Toolkit on M&E, p. 2 of Practice Note 11 of Toolkit.
l\viii Ibid.
l\ix Ibid. See also Miller and Rudnick, *The Security Needs Assessment Protocol.*
l\x Gaul et. al., “Does Gender Matter?”
l\xi Ibid.
l\xii Thanks to Bineta Diop for this recommendation.
ABOUT THE SECURITY MANAGEMENT INITIATIVE

The Security Management Initiative (SMI) was created to address the challenges in security and risk management faced by non-profit and international organizations in hazardous environments by providing authoritative research, policy development, training and advisory services. Through these products and services, SMI aims to enhance the capacity of non-profit and international agencies to improve risk and security management in hostile environments, reduce the human and program costs for agencies and their staff operating under extreme workplace hazards, and promote a robust security management culture among mid- to senior level professionals of aid agencies.

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