GBV EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS AND RESPONSE

OPPORTUNITIES FOR TRANSFORMATIVE LANGUAGE WITHIN FEMINIST APPROACHES TO PARTNERSHIP

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In many ways, the words we use create the reality we see. Words can communicate our biases and histories, and influence how we perceive our surroundings and the people with whom we interact. For several years, the Building Local Thinking Global (BLTG) coalition – a group of women's rights networks and their member organizations from Asia, East Africa, and the Middle East – has discussed how power hierarchies are shaped and reinforced by language used within the humanitarian sector. This paper, developed through consultations with BLTG members, seeks to explore language and power hierarchies within humanitarian aid, and the impact of language on relationships between different groups, with the goal of identifying new language that is inclusive and empowering, and promotes equality.

> **"** *Language is powerful. The words we use become part of our consciousness. When we use them over and over again, there's a normalization with using these words."*
>
> Respondent, Middle East

In a survey used to inform the paper, respondents identified their comfort level with commonly used words in the humanitarian sector. The top five most uncomfortable words to describe individuals, groups, or organizations were: victim, third world, marginalized, minorities, and vulnerable. During interviews and focus group discussions, participants discussed these and other words in more detail, outlining the multiple power hierarchies that inform understandings of certain words and that are reinforced by the use of certain words. Participants reflected on how language has the ability to make individuals feel included or othered, seen, or ignored. They raised how terminology is often imposed onto local organizations that may feel pressure to use certain language in order to access funding.

Discussions also, not surprisingly, went beyond language and addressed power dynamics between local and international organizations, as well as between local organizations and donors. Participants highlighted how unequal power dynamics and access to resources result in inequalities in salary and contracts. They also raised how top-down design processes imposed onto them are not always based on what local organizations know or what communities want.

> In this paper, we occasionally use the term "local organization" to reflect how participants discussed this term as well as the way this language appears in literature, especially literature on localization. A full discussion of the use of "local" can be found on pages 21-22.

Based on the findings, a number of key recommendations emerged to facilitate more inclusive and empowering language. We feel this will also promote more equitable, feminist partnerships across different types of actors in humanitarian settings. Below are actions humanitarian actors should take.

LANGUAGE CHOICES

→ Ask communities what words they would like to be used to describe them.

→ Identify opportunities for local actors to take the lead on developing terminology based on their knowledge of the context, recognizing that this means international actors and donors may need to reflect on how they use their power to influence terminology and seek to share their power.

→ Recognize that words have different meaning depending on the context and it is unlikely that words will be appropriate across all contexts and languages.

→ Identify appropriate, contextualized words that make sense in local languages to be used as alternatives where necessary.

→ Ensure that changing words to make them more inclusive and sensitive is done with analysis and recognition of power, and is not tokenistic.

LANGUAGE AND POWER

→ Create opportunities to influence other humanitarian actors to promote more inclusive and empowering terminology based on recommendations from communities and people with knowledge of the context.

→ Clearly define the meaning behind key words that are used in the humanitarian sector, being mindful of the power dynamics underlying certain words, the inaccessibility of certain technical language, and the impacts of such words upon different groups.

→ Critically reflect on and identify areas where power imbalances shape relationships between '"local" and "international" organizations, and between "local" organizations and donors.

LANGUAGE IN PARTNERSHIPS

→ Be intentional in framing equal partnerships so that partnerships go beyond merely using "local" organizations as implementing partners, but instead meaningfully address power hierarchies between different actors at every stage of the partnership.

→ Be guided by kindness and compassion in forming and sustaining partnerships with different humanitarian actors, taking care and time to ensure relationships are respectful, inclusive, empowering, and guided by the principle of sharing power.

In addition, participants suggested important considerations when thinking about what terminology to use. These suggested alternative language considerations appear on pages 26 – 27. Together, the findings, recommendations, and alternatives offer a way forward in acknowledging the power of language and how we can use language to shift power.

BACKGROUND

In many ways, the words we use create the reality we see. Words can communicate our biases and histories, and influence how we perceive our surroundings and the people with whom we interact. For several years, the Building Local Thinking Global (BLTG) coalition – a group of women's rights networks and their member organizations from Asia, East Africa, and the Middle East – has discussed how power hierarchies are shaped and reinforced by language used within the humanitarian sector. Words such as "marginalized," "beneficiary," and "vulnerable" depict the lives of communities in particularly rigid and unhelpful ways, and can exacerbate unequal power hierarchies between humanitarian organizations and communities. Labels such as "local organization" and "international organization" also reinforce power hierarchies between different types of humanitarian actors.[3]

The BLTG coalition identified a need for a paper that discusses the choices of language used by international organizations, particularly the ways in which language may reinforce privilege and power hierarchies. Through this paper, we seek to explore how feminist thinking may provide opportunities for inclusive and empowering language and equitable feminist partnerships.

This paper is based on a literature review, online survey with 35 respondents, focus group discussions with 19 women and individual interviews with 10 women active in BLTG. An external researcher led this process and then held a validation session with 24 women. The outcome of this work is an analysis of the ways in which commonly used humanitarian words are perceived across contexts, the power they hold, and recommendations for how we move forward with deeper understanding and thoughtfulness.

It is important to note that this paper, not unique in its recognition of language and power dynamics, stems in part from early conversations within the BLTG coalition that critiqued our own name as a group. Building Local Thinking Global, a project name selected during design phase, implies many of the unequal power dynamics that we critique as a group. We wanted to specifically examine further how language choices may impact equality and rights, and disempower some individuals, actors, and communities. This paper provides recommendations on how humanitarian actors can examine the language they use, how it reinforces privilege and power inequalities, and particularly how feminist thinking could enable a shift to language of equal power and respect.

> The BLTG coalition[4] brings together feminist women's rights organizations, activists, academics, community-based organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and regional civil society networks with the aim of harnessing collective power within the humanitarian community to ensure women and girls are protected from GBV in emergencies. The initiative convenes a coalition of women's rights networks and their member organizations from Asia, East Africa, and the Middle East.

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[3] In this paper, we occasionally use the term "local organization" to reflect how participants discussed this term as well as the way this language appears in literature, especially literature on localization. A full discussion of the use of "local" can be found on pages 21-22.

[4] Together, BLTG coalition members engage in a global, multi-agency initiative that aims to promote women's transformative leadership in GBV emergency preparedness and response. The coalition is composed of feminists, women's rights advocates, grassroots organizations, activists, and national, regional, and network organizations working in emergencies and fragile contexts with a commitment to the protection and empowerment of women and girls. More information on the BLTG initiative can be found at https://gbvresponders.org/building-local-thinking-global/.

KEY QUESTIONS

This paper seeks to explore language and power hierarchies within humanitarian aid, and the impact of language on relationships between different groups, with the goal of identifying new language that is inclusive and empowering, and promotes equality. This paper is grounded in the recognition that power and language are interdependent and mutually reinforcing. To understand how power operates, we must understand the impact of language choices, framed specifically within the diverse power hierarchies that may be at work in humanitarian settings. Power is not one-dimensional; it operates not just between international and local actors, but across relationships towards women and girls and between local actors as well.

This paper also recognizes that even once-feminist language may become diluted over time. Our work requires ongoing critical reflection on the usefulness of certain words and terms. In the context of GBV prevention and response, it is thus vital to think carefully about how we describe communities within humanitarian emergencies, as well as the activities we design and implement.

The key questions this paper explores are:

➜ What words or phrases commonly used in humanitarian work might have implications for power dynamics?

➜ Which power dynamics (including intersecting power hierarchies, identities, and discrimination) are associated with language commonly used in humanitarian aid?

➜ What is the impact of such language on relationships between different actors working on GBV prevention and response, between these actors and the public/donors, and between these actors and the communities and women and girls they serve in humanitarian settings?

➜ What opportunities might exist for feminist thinking to provide new language that is inclusive and empowering, and promotes equality within feminist partnerships and GBV prevention and response activities?

METHODOLOGY

The methodology for developing this position paper included: a literature review, online survey, semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and a validation session. This work was led by a consultant.

The literature review included academic literature and NGO reports discussing language, terminology, and power hierarchies in the humanitarian sector. The literature review helped to inform the design of an online survey and guides for interviews and FGDs.

The online survey was administered over a three-week period from early November 2020 with BLTG coalition members and other partners. It was shared using Survey Monkey in four languages: English, Arabic, Burmese, and French. In total, 35 individuals participated in the survey (77% were women, 14% men, and the remainder preferred not to say or self-describe). In total, 43% of respondents were from East Africa, 29% from the Middle East, and 29% from Asia. Overall, 83% were BLTG members and 17% were not. Most identified as women's rights organizations (54%), followed by NGOs (23%), community-based organizations (11%), national civil society networks (6%), activists (3%), and government support entities (3%).

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in English using video call with 7 BLTG members and 3 BLTG Steering Committee Members[5] (all women) across the three geographical areas where BLTG focuses: Asia, East Africa, and the Middle East. These interviews focused on unpacking some of the key words covered in the survey, as well as the power hierarchies in the humanitarian sector. FGDs were conducted in English using video call with three groups organized largely by geographical region. In total, 16 women and 3 men participated in the FGDs. Participants discussed the initial survey findings, exploring the advantages and disadvantages of using certain terminology, as

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[5] BLTG Steering Committee Members are Akina Mama wa Afrika, GBV Prevention Network, Gender Equality Network – Myanmar, El-Karama, Strategic Initiative for Women in the Horn of Africa, and Women's International Peace Centre.

well as the power hierarchies in the humanitarian sector. Interviews and FGD data were coded based on key themes and compared with the survey data.

A validation session was held with 19 women and 5 men using video call. The consultant presented the findings of the survey, interviews, and FGDs, and invited participants to share their perspectives and respond to the findings. Interview and FGD participants were also invited to provide written feedback on the draft report. All BLTG members, including the IRC, were invited to provide written feedback on the PowerPoint slides used in the validation session, and later to provide written feedback on the draft report.

The findings of this process are not necessarily representative across the BLTG network, given the limited number of participants, largely due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It is important to note that the survey was not designed to be representative, given the small pool of potential respondents. However, the survey does help to provide a snapshot of the key issues that were discussed in more depth during interviews and FGDs. Additionally, the concepts and themes discussed in the findings do not represent an exhaustive analysis of the issues, given the limited time for interviews and FGDs. Not all of the concepts in the survey could be discussed in the interviews and FGDs; therefore, for some words that are commonly used in the humanitarian sector, only the survey findings are presented. Participants also reflected more broadly on power hierarchies within the humanitarian sector, including in their relationships with donors and communities, which was slightly outside the scope of this paper therefore was not included. The final paper represents an important starting point for an ongoing learning and reflection journey, which can be built upon for future studies, discussions, and use. The goal of the paper is to encourage critical reflection on language and power in the humanitarian sector.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE AND KEY CONCEPTS

THE IMPACT OF LANGUAGE

Within existing literature critiquing language used in the humanitarian and development sectors, language is identified as a powerful means of mobilizing people, funding, and agendas. In this paper, we suggest that language and power in humanitarian aid are interdependent and mutually reinforcing: language is shaped by power hierarchies, and power hierarchies are shaped by language.

Since the mid-2000s, feminists and development practitioners have critically reflected on language used within the humanitarian and development sectors, particularly related to gender equality issues.[6] This analysis suggests that certain words and terms that, on the surface, might appear to offer particular groups more voice and choice, may actually be instrumentalist, affirming dominant power hierarchies or agendas, such as neoliberalism.[7] Scholars argue that buzzwords like "gender,"[8] "empowerment," or "participation," can become diluted over time and end up being "fuzzwords" that refer to both everything and nothing.[9] In this way, language may be used to give legitimacy to a particular agenda or approach.[10] For example, the term "empowerment" is often equated with providing women and girls with knowledge and skills (as if they lack these by default), while neglecting the racialized, colonial, gendered, and other

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[6] Cornwall, A. & Brock, K. "What do buzzwords do for development policy? A critical look at 'participation', 'empowerment' and 'poverty reduction'," *Third World Quarterly,* 26:7, 1043-1060 (2005) hereafter, Cornwall & Brock; Cornwall, A. "Buzzwords and fuzzwords: deconstructing development discourse," *Development in Practice,* 17:4-5, 471-484 (2007); Eyben, R. & Napier-Moore, R. "Choosing words with care? Shifting meanings of women's empowerment in international development," *Third World Quarterly,* 30:2, 285–300 (2009), hereafter, Eyben & Napier-Moore.

[7] Cornwall & Brock, 1046; Eyben & Napier-Moore, 294-295.

[8] Schnable, A., et al. "International Development buzzwords: understanding their use among donors, NGOs, and academics," *The Journal of Development Studies* (2020), hereafter, Schnable, et al.

[9] Cornwall & Brock, 1056.

[10] Schnable et al., 3.

intersecting power hierarchies that affect their lives.[11] In so doing, language may also be used to frame solutions to complex problems like patriarchy in simplistic ways, while depoliticizing people's experiences.[12] Even the term "gender-based violence" (GBV) has at times been depoliticized, shifting from being seen as driven by unequal power hierarchies between men and women to narratives focused on violence occurring as a result of different gender identities and gender roles.[13]

Analysis into the origins of common buzzwords in the humanitarian sector also observe the role of donors in shaping narratives. Using their positions of financial power, donors may influence programming agendas by emphasizing certain language.[14] However, language may also be shaped by international events or crises, as well as by academics.[15]

Language can function as a means of excluding people, creating an "inner circle" of experts who use special language.[16] Toolkits, manuals, and even technical guidelines can contain language that privileges the technical over experiential, resulting in certain kinds of knowledge being valued over others.[17] It is important to recognize that the assumption that knowledge and power are driven by the "West" requires correction; there is also increasing acknowledgement that "local"

knowledge might also reinforce these dominant mainstream views.[18]

Language may also be selective. For example, the voices of women and girls might be simplified and summarized, flattening their experiences into generalizations in order to establish a link to a funding ask or program activity.[19] When this happens, researchers and organizations who develop policy reports wield power in deciding whose perspectives are represented and whose are not. Their positionality may cause them to preference certain perspectives and agendas over others.

The use of language has direct consequences for program implementation in humanitarian settings. For example, the language around being "evidence-driven" or "data-driven" can result in implementing agencies feeling they need to justify GBV prevention and response activities. They may feel pressured to collect prevalence data, which is time-consuming and costly, and actually contradicts existing guidelines on GBV responses in humanitarian settings, which state that GBV never needs to be "proven" for a response to occur.[20] Another example is the term "vulnerable." In humanitarian emergencies, decisions around which group of beneficiaries or communities is "vulnerable" are made based on set criteria determined by humanitarian actors. Meeting this vulnerability benchmark has a direct connection to benefits such as cash assistance, but this prescriptive concept of vulnerability masks the complexity of people's experiences.[21] The term may also act as a label that hides the structures and systems that make and keep people "vulnerable," while being used to justify particular funding priorities. Within humanitarian settings,

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11   Cronin-Furman, A., et al. "Emissaries of empowerment," Colin Powell School for Civic and Global Leadership, City College of New York, 2-6 (2017); Cornwall & Brock, 1045-1047; Batliwala, S. "Taking the power out of empowerment: an experiential account," *Development in Practice,* 17: 4/5, 557-565 (2007).

12   Cornwall & Brock, 1043.

13   COFEM (2017) 'Reframing language of 'gender-based violence' away from feminist underpinnings', *Feminist Perspectives on Addressing Violence Against Women and Girls Series,* Paper No. 2, Coalition of Feminists for Social Change.

14   Schnable, et al., 4.

15   *Ibid,* 14-16.

16   Cornwall & Brock, 1052.

17   COFEM "Finding the balance between scientific and social change goals, approaches and methods," *Feminist Perspectives on Addressing Violence Against Women and Girls Series,* Paper No. 3, (2017) hereafter, COFEM, Finding the Balance.

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18   Narayanaswamy, L. "Whose feminism counts? Gender(ed) knowledge and professionalisation in development," *Third World Quarterly,* 37:12, 2158 (2016), hereafter Narayanaswamy; Briggs, J. "The use of indigenous knowledge in Development: problems and challenges," *Progress in Development Studies,* 5:2, 99–114, 107 (2005).

19   Lokot, M. "The space between us: feminist values and humanitarian power dynamics in research with refugees," *Gender & Development,* 27:3, 467-484, 480 (2019), hereafter, Lokot.

20   COFEM, Finding the Balance, 2-4.

21   Johnson, H. "Click to Donate: visual images, constructing victims and imagining the female refugee," *Third World Quarterly,* 32:6, 1015-1037 (2011), hereafter, Johnson.

the use of terms like "transactional sex" might dilute the power hierarchies underlying sexual exploitation. Similarly, referring to communities as "beneficiaries" negates individual power and decision-making and characterizes people as passive recipients of aid.

FEMINIST THINKING AND HUMANITARIAN AID

Feminist thinking offers opportunities for understanding and tackling the interdependent relationship between power and language in humanitarian aid. While there are several forms of feminism, feminists share the overarching goal of ending the oppression of women and girls.[22] Feminist thinking is guided by the premise that power hierarchies and oppressions shape the lived experiences of women, girls, men, boys, and people with diverse sexual orientations and gender identities and expressions (SOGIE). Feminism is explicitly political because of its focus on tackling unequal power dynamics. However, development and humanitarian narratives have been criticized for depoliticizing feminism from its original meaning and intent, to make it more acceptable.[23]

Feminism is sometimes critiqued as being a "Western" concept that is imposed in other settings. These critiques have given rise to the idea of "grassroots" or "Southern" feminisms, which is often seen as offering local and indigenous ways of conceptualizing feminism. These initiatives, such as The African Feminist Charter, have contributed important feminist insights, helping to draw attention to the expertise of "local" feminists.[24] However, others observe that "Southern" feminisms are also shaped by power

hierarchies and may be a product of "elite" local voices.[25] Local actors may themselves experience the benefits of being in positions of power by virtue of their education, socio-economic status, or other power hierarchies.

Important to the dynamic between international and local capacities is the idea of "localization," which has gained traction since the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit, in recognition of the power exercised by international humanitarian actors (including donors and international NGOs (INGOs) over local actors[26]. Despite the promises of localization, in practical terms localization may face significant challenges related to complex power dynamics, including in displacement and refugee settings.[27]

Feminist approaches to localization suggest that relationships of flexibility and trust are vital, and that local leadership must move beyond selecting elites to including a broader base of women. They urge that ceding power to local organizations must be meaningful and not tokenistic and must involve equal collaboration on what "impact" looks like.[28] These debates emphasize the importance of recognizing power at multiple levels, beyond merely the international-local binary, but also among different local actors, and between local actors and communities.

Feminist thinking draws attention to these complexities within power hierarchies, recognizing that power hierarchies and oppressions may intersect to deepen imbalances in power.[29] For example, an adolescent girl with a disability who is currently a refugee experiences the power

22   Letherby, G. *Feminist research in theory and practice.* Buckingham: Open University Press, 4 (2003).

23   Cornwall, A. et al. "Gender myths and feminist fables: The struggle for interpretive power in gender and development," Development and Change, 38:1, 1-20 (2008); Smyth, I. "Talking of gender: words and meanings in development organisations," *Development in Practice,* 17:4-5, 582-588 (2007).

24   The African Feminist Forum, "The African Feminist Charter," (2007). Available online: https://awdf.org/the-african-feminist-charter/.

25   Narayanaswamy, 2157.

26   Roepstorff, K. "A call for critical reflection on the localisation agenda in humanitarian action," *Third World Quarterly,* 41:2, 284-301 (2020), hereafter, Roepstorff.

27   Pincock, K., Betts, A., & Easton-Calabria, E. "The rhetoric and reality of localisation: refugee-led organisations in humanitarian governance," *The Journal of Development Studies,* 13 (2020).

28   Al-Abdeh, M. & Patel, C. "'Localising' humanitarian action: reflections on delivering women's rights-based and feminist services in an ongoing crisis," Gender & Development, 27:2, 237-252, 247-250 (2019).

29   Crenshaw, K. "Mapping the margins: intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color," *Stanford Law Review,* 43:6, 1241–1299 (1991); Crenshaw, K. "Intersectionality Matters Podcast." Available online: https://soundcloud.com/intersectionality-matters.

hierarchies associated with being a female, being young, having a disability, and being a refugee–all at the same time.[30] The term "intersectionality" is a feminist approach for understanding these intersections. Intersectionality goes beyond merely identifying differences between certain groups, as has sometimes occurred in humanitarian settings. Instead, it is explicitly grounded in understanding and transforming power imbalances.[31]

Feminist thinking recognizes that power hierarchies shape what is known about communities. Feminists argue that knowledge has historically been framed as "men's knowledge," affecting how the world is understood.[32] In humanitarian aid, this has meant that processes to understand community needs have sometimes privileged the voices of men, who are often community leaders, religious leaders, or gatekeepers, instead of women and girls. This has sometimes occurred under the guise of respecting local culture. Feminists urge that the needs and perspectives of women and girls are centered and valued, rather than being imposed by those in positions of power. This means that conducting intersectional gender analysis, instead of making assumptions about individuals or communities, is a vital feminist practice. While learning from other contexts is helpful, it is vital that programming is informed by the lived experience of women and girls and communities themselves.

It is not only the outputs or end products that concern feminists, but also the processes involved in achieving outputs.[33] Feminists therefore challenge the accepted means of collecting monitoring and evaluation data or conducting research in humanitarian contexts. Critiquing the over-emphasis on generating "evidence" by engaging with communities in sometimes-extractive ways, feminists focus on relational approaches that prioritize connection over imperatives like "value for money."[34] Feminist thinking may disrupt typical ways of understanding issues—for example, the use of rapid assessments in humanitarian contexts. Instead, feminists suggest that it is important to take time to allow the issues facing communities to emerge, if and when communities feel comfortable sharing such information.[35] This requires using flexible methods that enable meaningful participation.[36] Feminists emphasize that engagement with communities should be grounded in reciprocity–a give and take–as a way of equalizing the power dynamic between those collecting data and those providing data.[37]

Feminist thinking is informed by the practice of reflexivity. Reflexivity involves turning the focus inwards by critically reflecting on how our respective positions, backgrounds, and experiences could shape our perspectives, attitudes, and biases. Within humanitarian aid, it means also recognizing how positioning within institutions may shape power (or lack of power). Being reflexive means recognizing the complex power hierarchies that shape humanitarian aid, including how donor priorities influence programming. Some scholars suggest feminist thinking has been co-opted by neoliberal agendas in development and humanitarian contexts, resulting in over-emphasis on women and girls as producers of economic wealth.[38] Reflecting on the role of donors and others with influence over aid resources means acknowledging these power hierarchies and working to challenge them, where possible.

30 Building Local Thinking Global (BLTG), "GBV Emergency Response and Preparedness. Inclusion of diverse women and girls guidance note," (2019). Available online: https://bit.ly/2XbY6QK.

31 COFEM, "COFEM Feminist Pocketbook Tip Sheet #1. Why does a feminist perspective matter in work to prevent and respond to violence against women and girls?," (2018) Available online: https://bit.ly/2Mr9eXV; Michelis, I. "'Picked up, misused, abused, changed': intersectionality in the humanitarian discourse on gender-based violence," (2020).

32 Brooks, A. "Building knowledge and empowerment through women's lived experience," in Leavy, P. L. and Hesse-Biber, S. (eds) Feminist research practice: a primer. London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 53–82, 68 (2006).

33 Interpares, Action Canada, & Oxfam Canada "A feminist approach to Canada's international assistance," (2016). Available online: https://bit.ly/3bbEDYX.

34 Lokot, 477-480.

35 Trinh, Minh-ha, Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1 (1989).

36 Liamputtong, P. Researching the vulnerable. A guide to sensitive research methods. London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 13 (2007).

37 Huisman, K. "'Does this mean you're not going to come visit me anymore?': an inquiry into an ethics of reciprocity and positionality in feminist ethnographic research," Sociological Inquiry, 78:3, 372–396 (2008).

38 Calkin, S. "Feminism, interrupted? Gender and development in the era of 'smart economics,'" Progress in Development Studies, 15:4, 295-307, 297 (2015).

FINDINGS

COMMON WORDS AND THEIR POWER HIERARCHIES

In the survey, respondents were asked to respond about how they feel when they hear certain words in the humanitarian sector that are used to describe individuals, groups, or organizations. They were asked to review a list of words and respond based on a scale of: very uncomfortable, uncomfortable, neutral, comfortable, or very comfortable. The top five words with which most respondents were uncomfortable were: "victim," "third world," "marginalized," "minorities," and "vulnerable."

The following sections unpack these terms in more detail, as well as other common terms discussed by participants in interviews, FGDs, and the survey. The full list of terms appears in alphabetical order.

In the survey, 23% of respondents said they were either uncomfortable or very uncomfortable with the word "beneficiary." About 29% felt neutral; 49% felt either comfortable or very comfortable.

Across the three FGDs, there were also mixed feelings about the term "beneficiary." Many felt it was a neutral term. A few FGD participants felt the term was positive: "Something good for a person to benefit from" (East Africa). One FGD participant said, "Beneficiaries means a person who gets benefit from the initiatives or actions" (Asia). Another FGD participant commented that the term was "better than 'donee'—person who receives a donation or person who receives help" (Asia).

On the other hand, other FGD participants talked about the negative connotations of the word: "It's like we're doing them a favor" (East Africa). Another FGD participant suggested the term may be political: "It's like we don't recognize that actually the beneficiaries or the communities are similar partners with us and they also have resources, and we can together collaborate to achieve the goal" (Asia). One FGD participant drew attention to the translation of the term from English: "When we translate it into our language it doesn't make sense because it applies to beneficiaries of insurance" (Asia). One interview participant also talked about the "charity orientation" of the term (East Africa). One survey respondent said, "Beneficiary also means having to be dependent on services by others" (Asia).

Another FGD participant who felt the term was more neutral suggested that the context where "beneficiary" is used determines whether it is appropriate, explaining that it is ok to use the term in the humanitarian sector, but not in advocacy work, where the preferences would be "participant in an activity" or "stakeholder" (East Africa). Another FGD participant suggested the word "partner" (Asia). A few FGD participants suggested "target" or "target group" as an alternative, but another participant observed, "It is maybe a bit

problematic to think of women or children as targets" (Middle East). One interview participant said that "targeting" women and girls sounds "as if they are the object of your shooting" (East Africa). One FGD participant suggested "rights-holders"' and "duty-bearers" as an alternative because it affirms the notion that people have rights while different actors in the humanitarian sector have duties towards them (Middle East).

One FGD participant said: "I think this word is used so much and has become so common in the humanitarian [sector] that it has almost neutral meaning. We do not ask ourselves, what does it mean?" (Middle East). Another FGD participant added, "Maybe because we believe in what we are doing so we don't really dig into the meaning of the word" (Middle East).

CAPACITY-BUILDING

In the survey, 11% of respondents said they were uncomfortable with the word "capacity-building." About 17% felt neutral; 71% felt either comfortable or very comfortable.

One interview participant said capacity-building meant "moving people from one point to another." She added, "It's almost akin to empowerment" (East Africa).

One interview participant discussed how they avoid the term "capacity-building" when inviting stakeholders such as the police. However, they use the term when talking to communities, which she felt was problematic: "When working with marginalized groups, it's easy to say capacity-building, we need to have a training. Inside our minds it's like they need this, it's ok to tell them. But when we contact the police, we need to make it soft" (Middle East).

One interview participant said there was no negativity associated with the term capacity-building (Asia). Another noted both the positive and negative associations: "If you want to be nit-picky or look at it in a power frame, then capacity-building becomes you're the one with the

capacity and you're going to build the capacity of others because you found them with nothing… which is not true, people have their own capacity" (East Africa). A survey respondent said that "capacity-building means no capacity exists" and suggested "capacity development" as an alternative (Asia). Another survey respondent recommended the term "capacity-strengthening" (Asia).

Another interview participant emphasised that for them, capacity-building was "mutual" and "not one-way" (East Africa). She said that capacity-building is "the one thing in development terminology that everybody relies on" but emphasized that "without ancillary services, capacity-building on its own is not able to shift or have a greater impact in development work." When discussing feminism, she referred to the concept of capacity-building: "In whatever conversation, process we are in, we need to make sure we break down the hierarchies, we deconstruct the hierarchies. If you are a trainer, you do a capacity-building workshop, it doesn't mean that your information is more credible than the information of the people you are training" (East Africa).

EMPOWERMENT

In the survey, 3% of respondents said they were uncomfortable with the word "empowerment." About 14% felt neutral; 83% felt either comfortable or very comfortable.

Many participants mentioned that "empowerment" is a positive term. One interview participant said, "It's mainly about the ability to take actions and decisions that affect your own life. It's a process. It also affects how you feel" (East Africa). Another interview participant clarified, "As long as it is not used as a way to bridge from weakness to strength," suggesting there is sometimes a "negative connation that someone is weak" and needs their capacity enhanced (Middle East). Others used capacity-building and empowerment interchangeably: "The outcome of empowering someone, or building capacity, I get a

positive vibe. We are building their capacity to raise voice about their own rights. We are giving them knowledge which they can use to get their own rights. There is a chance that those at the receiving end they can be at the giving end as well" (Asia).

A few participants observed that the term empowerment may be misused to cover training activities, but training may not be enough to ensure empowerment. One interview participant said that the term is "sometimes overrated or exaggerated": "Empowerment is the new trend from capacity-building or enhancing skills, but are the interventions provided… really empowering the people?" (Middle East). Another interview participant said: "We always use and hear this word. It doesn't mean to empower someone to give them an awareness workshop. It is not only this. If we are talking about empowerment, we have to talk about not project but program… It is not empowering if I do this workshop one year and then next year the funding is finished" (Middle East). Another interview participant said that when empowerment is implemented effectively, it can address the root causes of a problem (East Africa).

One interview participant reflected on the pressures from donors to use this term: "Sometimes we are forced to use it. When we have a call for proposals, we have to use it if the subject is empowerment or the goal is empowerment… We decided not to use empowerment two years ago. We believe each person has power, are strong in themselves, they have capacity, but we have to let them understand and discover this power they have. We enhance them to understand themselves, to use the resources they have." (Middle East). Another interview participant also mentioned that their organization had shifted from women's economic empowerment to economic justice to recognize the role of power in shaping women's lives (East Africa).

EVIDENCE-DRIVEN

In the survey, 6% of respondents said they were either uncomfortable or very uncomfortable with the term "evidence-driven." About 26% felt neutral; 69% felt either comfortable or very comfortable.

The term evidence-driven was also discussed during FGDs. One FGD participant observed the political ramifications of using this term: "It may be a little sensitive for the government if we use 'evidence-driven' or 'evidence-based' because we don't have these terms in our country. The government may feel someone wants to check on them or get evidence to intervene in policies or in politics" (Asia).

One interview participant said "evidence-driven" was a better term than "data-driven," explaining how the concept of data may result in women's views being excluded (East Africa). One FGD participant noted: "Data can be read in different ways. It can also be misread or over-read. So, relying a lot on these things can also result in completely ignoring some other segments that are also important and that are not reflected in the data" (Middle East). She also noted that it is important not to just present donors with statistics but to organize specific meetings to "go deep" and discuss the nuances.

LOCALIZATION

In the survey, 17% of respondents said they were either uncomfortable or very uncomfortable with the term "localization." About 29% felt neutral; 54% felt either comfortable or very comfortable.

Several interview and FGD participants discussed the concept of localization. One interview participant said, "Localization is failing here because nobody supports it. Donors don't trust local NGOs, and INGOs don't want to give us a stake of their funds" (Asia). One interview participant said that donors are willing to give

INGOs more money than local NGOs (East Africa). Another interview participant discussed the challenges faced by smaller local organizations: "Many of the bigger local NGOs who have access to capacity development always win these proposals because they know how to write and how to implement. Other smaller ones don't get the opportunities to access this funding" (Asia). Only one person had a positive view of donors: "Before, donors' approach was completely different, they were like a bureaucracy. Now they treat us like a partner. Now they say, 'We are partnering.' This closed the gap between donors and implementing organizations" (Asia).

MARGINALIZED

> In the survey, 66% of respondents said they were either uncomfortable or very uncomfortable with the word "marginalized." About 9% felt neutral; 26% felt either comfortable or very comfortable.

One interview participant explained why this term is used: "We use it for people who are underprivileged and deprived" (Asia). Others discussed the negative connotations of the term. One interview participant suggested that describing people as marginalized passes a kind of judgment of communities and suggested referring to them as lacking access to resources or unreached or unlucky: "It's not their problem they are far away and don't have access to services. It's our problem because we didn't reach them before, or the government didn't reach them. When we say marginalized, it's like it's their fault" (Middle East). Another interview participant said: "It implies the unimportant position within a community. It is kind of discriminatory…. At the World Humanitarian Summit, we started using 'affected populations'" (Asia).

One FGD participant said that youth and women are sometimes described as marginalized, but "actually they are not marginalized." She explained why this term is incorrectly used: "We mean to say that they don't have equal opportunities, but we use the term marginalized… It gives the sense of

weakness but actually, they are not weak. They have less opportunities but they have equal potential, equal abilities, and sometimes more. So, this word does not have the real meaning of what we want to say" (Asia).

Multiple participants emphasized that the term "marginalized" needs context: "I wish there was another word than marginalized. Depending on the context in which it is used… When you say marginalized you could be explaining that certain groups are left out. Marginalized depends a lot on the context. It could mean that some activities are not being inclusive" (East Africa); and "It is good to look at why they are marginalized, what kind of challenge they are facing" (Middle East).

One FGD participant reflected on her work with refugee communities, particularly the fact that even those in remote areas would not call themselves marginalized. She questioned the idea that living in urban areas means "living in the center": "All of the words we use to describe them are in relation to us. We sit in [city name] and we think it is the centre. Our donors who sit in [another city name] think it is the centre. Our international donors in [European city name] think they are the centre. It is very interesting to see that power shifts and the centre shifts as well" (Middle East). Another interview participant said, "The person who is using the word seems to be more powerful than that person who is receiving the word" (East Africa).

MINORITIES

> In the survey, 51% of respondents said they were either uncomfortable or very uncomfortable with the word "minorities." About 31% felt neutral; 17% felt either comfortable or very comfortable.

A few participants mentioned the challenges with using the word "minority." One FGD participant said the word was commonly used but posed problems for interactions with communities: "They say, 'Don't call us minority, we are not minorities, we are equal citizens. By calling us minorities you

make us small…' After this, I started to use 'person belonging to other religions' because I felt they don't feel good from this word" (Asia). In this example, hearing directly from the community resulted in a change in the language she used.

An interview participant said: "Turning an empowered group into one category of minorities strips people of their rights. Sometimes it is done with good intentions but still puts people in certain boxes that limits their potential" (Middle East).

PARTICIPATION

In the survey, 3% of respondents said they were uncomfortable with the word "participation." About 3% felt neutral; 94% felt either comfortable or very comfortable.

During the validation session, participants discussed the concept of participation. One participant said, "Participation for me means I am a part of something, I am owning this" (East Africa). Another talked about "active engagement" as a way of defining participation (East Africa). This was similar to an interview participant who felt the word "engagement" is "more proactive" than participation (Asia).

Participants in the validation session also discussed how the term "participation" may be misused. One participant reflected: "It can be misused when it just comes to involvement. Involvement could mean I was there, I participated… But then participation can have less meaning when it is only representation and not active engagement, no participation in decision-making... It can have less meaning to just participate and be represented, but not with actual voice" (East Africa). Another participant said participation can be misused "when they ask you to take part but ignore your expertise and ideas." She explained: "It happens quite often… Women's rights organizations are asked to participate… Then the organization participates, shares expertise, ideas, gives an in-depth analysis of the situation of the ground… But then when this knowledge is transferred it somehow dissipates, it vanishes and it does not

reach the decision-making levels." In reflecting on feminist values, she recommended focusing on finding ways to collaborate through bottom-up approaches so that everybody feels included and "they have a say in this, they have a stake in this." She said, "It is more about creating the relationships than actually just looking at the good outcome of the project" (Middle East). One participant suggested that the word "partnership" should be used by feminists more often than "participation."

REFUGEE

In the survey, 46% of respondents said they were either uncomfortable or very uncomfortable with the word "refugee." About 29% neutral; 26% felt either comfortable or very comfortable.

During the validation session, participants discussed the term "refugee." One participant mentioned that the term is linked to displacement (Asia). Another participant mentioned that the term originates from the United Nations (East Africa). A few participants from the Middle East region felt that the term "refugee" needs to be kept to capture the political meaning of the term, which is particularly important for Palestinians who have been forced to leave their homes.

A few participants also mentioned the stigma associated with the term. One participant said: "The name refugee, to us it means that we don't belong. We are not citizens of countries and you are taken as 'the other,' like you are not a human being… You feel like you don't belong there, and you have no rights to entitlements like a citizen of that particular country" (East Africa). Another participant reflected that the term impacts communities in specific ways: "After the rehabilitation, they continue to think they are refugees… They are still waiting for organizations to help them because they are refugees or they are migrants. It always lets them think they are less and there is someone else has the resource to give it to them" (East Africa).

One FGD participant said an alternative they use is "persons of concern" (East Africa).

RESILIENCE

In the survey, 3% of respondents said they were very uncomfortable with the word "resilience." About 20% felt neutral; 77% felt either comfortable or very comfortable.

The term resilience was discussed less in interviews and FGDs. One interview participant said: "It's a good word because it gives power. It doesn't talk about weakness" (Middle East). Another interview participant highlighted the challenges related to this term: "It's like you're saying, buckle up and find a way of coping. Psychologically it makes sense, but otherwise in our empowerment work it may need some more unpacking" (East Africa). Another interview participant reflected: "Why should communities continuously have to be able to withstand adversity? Why aren't we working to ensure that we are lift people out of poverty instead of growing their resilience to withstand adversity and bounce back?" (East Africa).

THIRD WORLD

In the survey, 69% of respondents said they were either uncomfortable or very uncomfortable with the term "third world." About 20% felt neutral; 11% felt either comfortable or very comfortable.

One survey respondent explained, "Regarding who is a third world, and why and who suppose that Europe or America is the example of civilization, the ideal life that everyone aspires to" (Middle East). Another survey respondent said the term "reflects power relations and superiority" (Asia). Another survey respondent suggested, "It is preferred to mention each country by its name… North Africa, the Arab world, the Islamic world, Latin America… without specifying a first or third world" (Middle East). One survey respondent suggested North-South as an alternative (Middle East), though others raised concerns with this term. Another survey respondent suggested "developing economies" (Middle East).

TRADITIONAL

In the survey, 23% of respondents said they were either uncomfortable or very uncomfortable with the term "traditional." About 40% felt neutral; 37% were either comfortable or very comfortable.

FGD participants discussed how the word "traditional" can be positive or negative. One FGD participant spoke about how it can refer to positive things, like history, clothing, or food (Middle East). One FGD participant suggested that the term was associated with "something backward, something that is not updated, something that is not towards modernity at all" (East Africa). Another FGD participant suggested the term "makes people appear as if they are conservative" (East Africa). One FGD participant suggested that the term may not be viewed positively by communities: "If we mention negative traditional practices it might be harmful for some communities… If you translate into local language the people may think they are not up to date" (Asia). One FGD participant said that using the word "traditional" to describe a group may be "marginalizing" when there are different ethnic communities within that group, suggesting using local resources, local community, or local stakeholders instead (East Africa).

One FGD participant said, "Much of the time especially in the humanitarian sector I've not seen the word traditional used in a positive light" (East Africa). She explained that the term is often used to refer to "something people should abandon," suggesting the term is a "shaky word" that people use without thinking about the context.

One FGD participant emphasized the need to explain the term to ensure the right meaning is communicated (East Africa), while another suggested that context was important and there should be "clarity so that it doesn't do harm or give misperceptions" (East Africa).

VICTIM

In the survey, 71% of respondents said they were either uncomfortable or very uncomfortable with the word "victim." About 17% felt neutral; 11% were either comfortable or very comfortable.

One interview participant said: "Survivor is better. It means they have hope, they have energy to change their situation" (Middle East). One FGD participant explained that victims are "defined by the harm that has come to them," whereas survivors are "defined by their life afterwards" (Middle East). She suggested the word survivor captures the power in living after an incident of violence. One FGD participant mentioned the word "client" as an alternative for "victim" (Asia).

Another interview participant drew attention to the translation of the term: "In English, we use the term, 'survivors,' about women who suffer from violence. When they translate this term to Arabic, it means women who went out from violence, but actually they are still under the cycle of violence. They didn't go out from this cycle. To say victim, it's like the woman is very weak. But when we use survivor in Arabic, it doesn't give the same meaning in English" (Middle East).

VULNERABLE

In the survey, 71% of respondents said they were either uncomfortable or very uncomfortable with the word "vulnerable." About 17% felt neutral; 11% felt either comfortable or very comfortable.

One interview participant explained why this term is used: "When we talk about refugees, since they migrated from one area to another, they are vulnerable in their situation because they are not citizens. They don't have status in a region." She explained that words like vulnerable can convey that certain groups are "more deserving" (Asia).

A few interview participants discussed being vulnerable as being linked to weakness (Asia). A survey respondent also explained this is a "flat" term that does not say anything further about the reasons for vulnerability (Middle East). One interview participant discussed how using this term may be an act of power towards another group: "Being outside of these groups, when you are not vulnerable… it's easier to group everyone else under this category. This is where the power hierarchy stands… Even if done with good intentions, you are still excluding yourself from these groups" (Middle East). She discussed this term in more detail: "Sometimes this status is due to external factors and sometimes due to internal factors. Is it financial, physical, economic? It cannot be stand-alone" (Middle East). She emphasized the importance of considering multiple levels of vulnerability and considering intersectionality when speaking about vulnerability rather than seeing vulnerability as "one size fits all."

A survey respondent also said it was more helpful to use intersectionality to explain the factors resulting in vulnerability (Middle East). A few interview participants reflected on the fact that vulnerability is contextual: "The word vulnerable shows that someone is so powerless and yet sometimes, vulnerable depends on the situation" (East Africa). One FGD participant suggested an alternative translated in their local language, which equates to "groups who are not yet prosperous" as an alternative for vulnerable.

LANGUAGE AND IDENTITIES

The BLTG guidance note on the inclusion of diverse women and girls in GBV emergency preparedness and response (July 2019) addresses language and identity. In that document we emphasized the importance of asking women and girls about the language and terms they prefer; avoiding acronyms that can easily label people as 'other' and undermine dignity; and avoiding one-dimensional descriptions of a person's identity.

Language related to specific identities came up again in our conversations with BLTG members for this paper. One interview participant for this paper observed how grouping people in certain categories "makes life easier for donors and communication" but suggested this means we may "fall into the trap of seeing it as one-dimensional" (Middle East).

Overall, the findings in this section are limited because respondents did not include specialized organizations working with women and girls living with disabilities, women who are older, or women and girls with diverse sexual orientations, gender identities and expressions. Nonetheless, feedback from respondents re-emphasizes for us the importance of consultation with specific community groups, activists, and specialized actors to ensure that language is reflective of what individuals who hold those identities prefer. This may be due to contextual considerations – what is experienced as respectful and powerful language – or due to safety considerations. One interview participant reflected on how a term such as "women and girls" can be political, regarding how or if it is inclusive of gender non-confirming and trans individuals (East Africa). Participants also highlighted how attitudes, beliefs and norms are interlinked with language, and the importance of working on the deeper issues rather than assuming that abrupt language shifts will address prejudice or bias.

LANGUAGE AND TOKENISM

Language may also be used in instrumentalizing or tokenistic ways—for example, to give the impression that work is inclusive or being responsive to the needs of certain groups. In the survey, 69% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, "In the humanitarian sector, I sometimes feel that our efforts to include women and girls are tokenistic." (About 14% felt neutral, 14% disagreed, and 3% said they did not know.) During interviews and FGDs, participants discussed how common terms such as "women and girls" may be used in the humanitarian sector. Many participants emphasized the importance of ensuring "women and girls" are specifically mentioned because their challenges and needs are different from those of men and boys. One FGD participant commented on the importance of explicitly referencing women and girls to ensure their participation.

A few participants discussed that simply naming "women and girls" does not capture the intersections between being a woman or girl and other power hierarchies or oppressions. One interview participant said: "The term(s) 'women and girls' is used by many but to me I think it's a very general term… Yet women and girls are diverse with different needs… for example, women living with HIV/AIDS, women who are older…" (East Africa). An FGD participant commented on the need to further define who the girls are: "There are girls that are in school, there are girls that are out of school, there are adolescent girls. It's also important to go further into very specific categorization because then it makes our interventions, our investment in these categories of people, very specific, targeted, and meaningful to them" (East Africa).

Another interview participant said: "It falls into the concept of you add gender and stir… It feels like it's just added to make the donor satisfied with the targets you are reaching. On the ground women and girls are the main recipients, but at the same time just adding it as a tail to a sentence is very… it doesn't take development as a holistic issue" (Middle East).

CONNECTIONS BETWEEN LANGUAGE, POWER, AND WAYS OF WORKING

In the survey, participants were asked to respond to statements about power hierarchies in the humanitarian sector:

- 63% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, *"Many humanitarian organizations operate and make decisions in ways that are hierarchical and top-down."* About 29% were neutral; 9% disagreed.

- 57% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, *"Many humanitarian organizations are patriarchal."* About 20% were neutral, 11% disagreed, and 11% said they did not know.

Throughout FGDs and interviews, participants highlighted how power hierarchies in humanitarian organizations affect the language that is used. Multiple participants discussed how different actors use different terms, requiring local organizations to adapt. One FGD participant said: "Having been in the humanitarian sector, most of us can agree that if you're handling multiple projects, we get to change the dynamics of the language depending on which partner you're working with… They keep graduating and changing, 'Oh no we've stopped using this, now we are using this,' and then next time 'We have stopped using this, we are using the next… Sometimes it can be a bit much" (East Africa). In a similar vein, one interview participant commented: "All these international standardized terminology, international ways of working, are thrown onto to us…" (Asia).

Participants also discussed how international organizations influence the terminology used by local organizations. One interview participant said, "Often they come with high-flown words that cannot be understood by local communities. Sometimes they cannot even be translated by the local communities" (Asia). She gave the example of the term "nexus," which is difficult to translate, as

well as "gender," which in her context sometimes translates as male and female, which excludes other groups. Her recommendation was: "It is important for international actors to think about implications of terminology when they bring terminology into the country, and think about what it means for locals."

In the survey, 29% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, *"In my organization there is pressure to use certain words to describe communities because this helps to show need and generate funding."* (About 26% were neutral, 40% disagreed or strongly disagreed, and 6% said they did not know.) One FGD participant spoke about the power hierarchies that require them to use terminology used by donors: "We are totally dependent on the use of language that the donors use. We try to come up with alternative terminology and they will either not accept it, or they will correct it. In this sense we are really subordinate." She gave the example of how their status as an organization shifts depending on the donor: "Sometimes we are called just an NGO, sometimes we are called a women's rights organization, sometimes we are called a civil society organization, depending on what is the most obvious term for the donor to have towards us. In this sense we are pretty much co-opted and this is the word that really summarises this relationship. We are co-opted into adopting this terminology and the ideology behind it in being part of this humanitarian system" (Middle East).

Participants mentioned UN agencies and donors as having specific jargon, which is very specific and technical. One participant sent written feedback, explaining: "UN agencies and INGOs use many acronyms and abbreviations, which is excluding in itself. If you do not understand these acronyms, you do not understand the meeting you are sitting in, or and you also have a hard time filling in some of the templates where these acronyms are used" (Middle East). A few participants also noted that different language is sometimes required given the political stance of donors and that this can create challenges in highlighting the lived experiences of those in certain humanitarian contexts.

A few participants emphasized the importance of having a clear understanding of terms and what they mean: "We need to engage with those words with international organizations so we agree on the right terms to use when we are working together, so that it is more inclusive. If one group is feeling left out or they feel the language is not appropriate, they will keep quiet… For me I think we need to agree on the language we use, on the technical or appropriate words that we use when we are working together" (East Africa).

THE LANGUAGE AND DYNAMICS OF "LOCAL" AND "INTERNATIONAL"

In the survey, respondents were asked to reflect on the term "local organization" as well as power hierarchies between local organizations and international organizations:

• 23% of respondents said they were either uncomfortable or very uncomfortable with the term "local organization." About 29% felt neutral; 49% felt either comfortable or very comfortable.

• 80% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, *"At times, it feels like international humanitarian organizations interact with local organizations in ways that are hierarchical and top-down."* About 9% were neutral, 6% disagreed, and 6% said they did not know.

• 66% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, *"Local expertise and knowledge are often unrecognized in international and local organization partnerships within the humanitarian sector."* About 14% were neutral, 14% disagreed or strongly disagreed, and 6% said they did not know.

• 80% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, *"If local organizations were given more funding, voice, and decision-making power, power imbalances in the humanitarian sector would reduce."* About 11% were neutral, 6% disagreed or strongly disagreed, and 3% said they did not know.

In interviews and FGDs, the dynamic that participants most discussed was the relationship between local organizations and international organizations. In the survey, 29% of respondents said they were either uncomfortable or very uncomfortable with the word "local." About 31% felt neutral; 40% felt either comfortable or very comfortable.

Interview participants also discussed the meaning behind the term "local." One interview participant said: "This is the meaning—they have nothing, they are unskilled, they have lack of capacity, they are unprofessional… It's like they are the ones who know and we don't know" (Middle East). Another interview participant commented: "Especially international organizations like to use 'local' to differentiate they have more resources, knowledge, and coverage. For local, they mean someone is working in a smaller area" (East Africa). She suggested alternatives such as, "We partner with [NGO name]" and referring to "organizations working in this area" (East Africa). Another interview participant said: "I prefer to use national organization, not local organization. National is better because it is not an indicator of international being superior and have privilege" (Middle East). One interview participant said that in her context, the term local is linked to the country's colonial history and means something unworthy and not positive in local slang (East Africa).

One interview participant suggested that the term "local" kept certain organizations in a subservient position: "When we worked with [international NGOs], they would keep us local. That would justify why they were paying us little money… That's why they were calling us local, to justify why they were giving us little resources. Meanwhile for them,

they're international, with all the resources and power to decide over you. That's how we were feeling. And they would make us feel it. The tone and the words they used made you feel like you are useless. Because you are local, you don't know certain things" (East Africa).

One interview participant observed that international organizations view smaller organizations as lacking in capacity, yet rely on them for information and for access to unreachable areas. The fact that these smaller organizations are not then represented in decisions, reports or publications "can be a kind of racism" that occurs in their context (East Africa).

Another interview participant commented on the power INGOs have over money: "The INGOs are looked on as, like, donors. They are regarded as more powerful… They play the role of fund manager. They have the power of controlling the funds and can manipulate the local civil society organizations because they have money, they want you to do what they want you to do" (Asia).

COLONIAL LEGACIES AND RACISM, REINFORCED BY THE LANGUAGE OF AID

As evident above, these conversations related to language and power also sparked reflections about colonial legacies and racism in the aid sector. 31% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, *"Racism is a problem in the context where I work."* (About 11% were neutral, 51% disagreed or strongly disagreed, and 6% said they did not know.) 69% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, *"The humanitarian sector needs to address colonial power hierarchies in our relationships with communities."* (About 17% were neutral; 14% disagreed or strongly disagreed.) Some of these reflections, connected to but also reaching beyond just language, are highlighted here. We suggest these areas for continued learning and dialogue.

One FGD participant reflected on the role of colonization in reinforcing power hierarchies: "For us coming from countries that have historical experiences of colonizations, sometimes we feel we are still in the colonial idea. Sometimes we still feel we are lower than the other people coming from the West region… Sometimes we are not confident to have a conversation and to share our experiences or our knowledge so sometimes we just receive that knowledge coming from West, coming from other countries, is better than what we have" (Asia). An interview participant commented: "Now you see a lot of international organizations directly implementing. Why?... Why are you imposing a colonial agenda? It's a colonial way of dealing with the community. We have to disagree with this colonial system" (Middle East).

Participants reflected how power dynamics emphasized by the language of "international" and "local" play into salary and differences in contracts. One interview participant said: "They have different contracts for local people and for international people. It's different conditions, different salary, different privilege. The term international and local… makes some unequal"

(Middle East). One interview participant raised the issue of salary negotiations with international organizations: "They thought we are local and once we are local we don't have challenges like them… we don't need the resources like them… They kept saying, 'You know you are local, you live here." In this example, the local NGO had less negotiating power: "We had to accept what they were proposing. We knew we could not change much" (East Africa). Another interview participant said: "If local, you have to accept everything without negotiation. You look like you are not independent to have your decision freely" (Middle East).

Language, power and the communities where we work

In the survey, 77% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, *"Communities would be surprised if they heard some of the words we use to describe them."* About 17% were neutral; 6% disagreed or strongly disagreed.

In interviews and FGDs, participants raised the importance of ensuring terms are relevant to communities and translated correctly to capture their meaning. One interview participant said: "It is very good if we can get words from our own communities. If we come with our own words, it can make people feel like 'the other'" (East Africa).

MOVING FORWARD: BUILDING NEW LANGUAGE

During FGDs, interviews, and surveys, participants reflected more broadly on the role of language in the humanitarian sector. One interview participant said: "Language can be used as a tool, can be used as a weapon, can be used as a shield. It is very important if we are doing this politicized work, language really matters, and it's really important to pay attention to language." (East Africa). Another interview participant emphasized the importance of the learning journey: "It's always a learning in terms of terminologies that we use. Sometimes you're just not aware that certain language is not empowering" (East Africa). The fact that categorizing people is itself an exercise of power was also discussed in one interview (Middle East). A survey respondent said, "All the humans are equal and deserve equal respect, but we divide them by calling them from these words" (Asia). Another survey respondent commented about the "violent" language used by humanitarian workers as well as the fact that language in the humanitarian sector is technical and "business-like" (Middle East).

> " *Language is powerful. The words we use become part of our consciousness. When we use them over and over again, there's a normalization with using these words"*
>
> Respondent, Middle East

A few participants mentioned that they had not previously reflected on the use of these terms: "This is my first opportunity to talk about these issues… We don't talk about these issues. It's like they are normal terms" (Asia). They reflected on the fact that it was important to have these conversations and to take care in what words are used. Others used this opportunity to critically reflect on the words they use in their work: "When I read the questionnaire, I felt shame" (Middle East). One survey respondent reflected that the whole list of terms "make me feel bad" (Asia). Another interview participant said: "There are many words in the development and humanitarian sector that we use without unpacking. We don't unpack what they mean for us and if they actually convey what we want them to mean" (East Africa).

> In the survey, 66% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, *"I feel comfortable challenging colleagues and partner organizations if they use words that are inappropriate or disempowering when talking about communities."* About 20% were neutral; 14% disagreed or strongly disagreed.

One FGD participant discussed the importance of NGOs internally reflecting on their language to decide which terms they will use and not use: "The NGO should also have a say in what they are able to use and what they are allowed to use, without having to always bend down and to accept everything that is sort of written for them. Without having first these discussions within the organization on your stance you cannot internalize the terms and what they mean to you" (Middle East). An FGD participant also commented on the importance of deciding the meaning of terms: "From the very beginning, what do you mean by this and why do you use it" (East Africa). A couple of participants cautioned against just changing words: "It's tricky, if you want to make it a bit romantic, it loses its true meaning…" (Middle East).

In the survey, 100% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, *"Humanitarian actors should consult with women and girls to understand how they would like to be referred to."* About 63% strongly agreed; 37% agreed.

One interview participant commented on the importance of asking communities themselves what words should be used: "I think it's the most important thing. We need to have a big discussion now, like you are opening now, but it's not only with the NGOs, we have to go to these communities, the people we say 'target group,' the people we say 'marginalized,' the people we say 'refugee'… What do you like to be called, what do you prefer, how it is affecting you when you hear it? Then we take the decision from these people about how they would like to be called" (Middle East).

During the validation session, participants discussed what being "feminist" means to them, and what opportunity feminist analysis represents for building more transformative language. One interview participant discussed the importance of feminism in talking about power hierarchies: "Feminist approaches also press upon us a burden to use a power analysis, to know that nothing is neutral… Feminist approaches help you deconstruct power hierarchies, to be aware there are power hierarchies that we need to take care of, spaces are not neutral. All that helps us in shaping and informing and deconstructing" (East Africa). Participants also recognized that the terms "feminist" or "feminism" still often spark discomfort in humanitarian organizations. 43% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, *"Many people in my organization feel uncomfortable when they hear the term 'feminist.'"* (About 11% were neutral, 34% disagreed or strongly disagreed, and 11% said they did not know.)

VALUES AND WAYS OF WORKING

In FGDs and interviews, participants discussed values and ways of working. One FGD participant reflected not just on the words themselves, but how they are said: "With the choice of words and with the choice of language, we necessarily create some type of power structures and so we can also break down these barriers by the same method, by using language, more tolerant and friendly language. This was an example when writing. But also when speaking, being kind to each other, and saying things in a more compassionate way. There is a lot we can improve" (Middle East).

In the survey, respondents also listed values humanitarian organizations should draw on to reduce power hierarchies between different groups. These are depicted visually below. The values in larger font represent those stated by multiple respondents.

In addition to the recommendations from the survey, interviews, FGDs, and validation session, the following table contains considerations when using certain words, and recommended alternatives. Many of the considerations below emerged from participants, as well as from the literature and during the review and report finalization process.

WORDS, CONSIDERATIONS AND ALTERNATIVES

Beneficiary

Recognize that persons who benefit from services/activities are not passive recipients of aid but should be actively engaged as key stakeholders on whom we focus the response. The dynamic is two-way.

Alternatives: Participant, stakeholder, community, partner

Capacity-building

Recognize that capacity-strengthening is mutual and not one-way. Recognize that everyone has capacity.

Alternatives: Capacity-strengthening, capacity-sharing

Disabled people

Recognize that the group is not homogenous, but that persons with disabilities experience other identities, such as gender, race, age, etc.

Alternatives: Persons with disabilities, women and girls with disabilities

Displaced

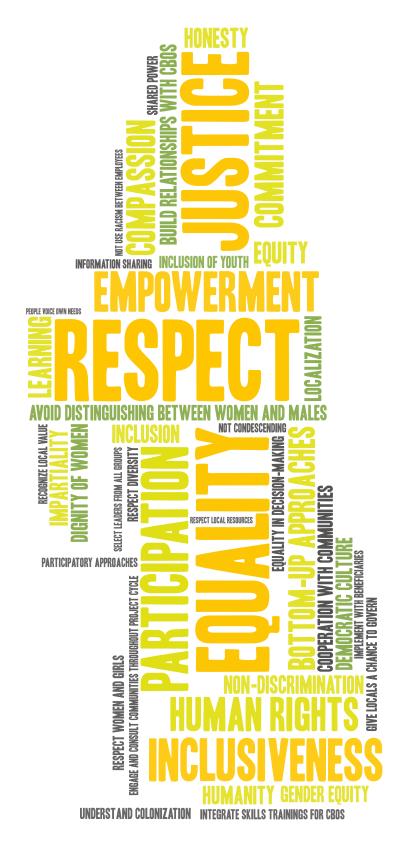Do not use as a stand-alone term, but together with context of the displacement.

Alternative: Affected person

Empowerment

Recognize that empowerment is a process and is not achieved merely by training. It requires holistic efforts at multiple levels to tackle the root causes of disempowerment.

Grassroots organization

Alternatives: Community organization, Indigenous organization

Word cloud: HONESTY, SHARED POWER, BUILD RELATIONSHIPS WITH CBOS, JUSTICE, COMMITMENT, COMPASSION, NOT USE RACISM BETWEEN EMPLOYEES, INFORMATION SHARING, INCLUSION OF YOUTH, EQUITY, EMPOWERMENT, PEOPLE VOICE OWN NEEDS, LEARNING, RESPECT, LOCALIZATION, AVOID DISTINGUISHING BETWEEN WOMEN AND MALES, RECOGNIZE LOCAL VALUE, IMPARTIALITY, DIGNITY OF WOMEN, INCLUSION, SELECT LEADERS FROM ALL GROUPS, RESPECT DIVERSITY, NOT CONDESCENDING, PARTICIPATION, RESPECT LOCAL RESOURCES, EQUALITY IN DECISION-MAKING, NOT CONDESCENDING, BOTTOM-UP APPROACHES, PARTICIPATORY APPROACHES, EQUALITY, COOPERATION WITH COMMUNITIES, DEMOCRATIC CULTURE, IMPLEMENT WITH BENEFICIARIES, GIVE LOCALS A CHANCE TO GOVERN, ENGAGE AND CONSULT COMMUNITIES THROUGHOUT PROJECT CYCLE, RESPECT WOMEN AND GIRLS, NON-DISCRIMINATION, HUMAN RIGHTS, INCLUSIVENESS, UNDERSTAND COLONIZATION, HUMANITY, GENDER EQUITY, INTEGRATE SKILLS TRAININGS FOR CBOS

LGBTQI, SOGIE, gays and lesbians

Translating the acronym is less helpful.

Alternatives: Women with sexual diversity, women and girls with diverse sexual orientation and gender identity and expression

Local organization

Alternatives: National organization, civil society organization, partner, organizations working in this area, women's rights organization, women-led organization

Marginalized

Do not use as a stand-alone term. Clarify what it is that makes this group marginalized (e.g., lack of opportunities, lack of access to resources, being yet unreached, etc.).

Minorities

Alternatives: Persons belonging to other religions, persons belonging to other ethnic groups

Older women

Recognize that people hold diverse identities (e.g., gender, race, etc.) and that classifying someone solely based on age can be dehumanizing.

Alternative: Women who are older/elder

Participation

Recognize that there are different levels of participation, starting with merely representation, which is different from having voice or decision-making.

Alternatives: Partnership, engagement

Refugee

Recognize that the word "refugee" is political, so changing it may have consequences for certain groups. Recognize the different dimensions of people's identities and respect them as human beings—not just as refugees. This includes other identities, such as gender, race, age, etc.

Alternatives: Person of concern, affected person

Third world

Mention each country by name or region

Alternatives: Developing economies, North/South

Traditional

Clarify what specifically is considered traditional. Recognize the complexities of cultural contexts and do not make assumptions about traditions.

Alternatives: Local resources, local community, local stakeholders, indigenous

Victim

Alternative: Survivor

Vulnerable

Do not use as a stand-alone term. Clarify what it is that makes this group vulnerable (e.g., their financial situation, lack of opportunities, gender, urban/rural location, etc.).

Women and girls

Clarify which women and girls, in line with an intersectional approach (e.g., girls living with disabilities, women living with HIV/AIDS, etc.). Be sensitive to the way the term is used in a particular cultural context (e.g., the distinctions between "woman" and "girl" may be tied to marital status in some contexts, so it might be more appropriate to use "young women" instead of "girls.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following summarizes key recommendations from the survey, interviews, FGDs, and validation session for feminist thinking to provide new language that is inclusive and empowering, and promotes equality within feminist partnerships and GBV prevention and response activities. Below are actions humanitarian actors should take.

LANGUAGE CHOICES:

➜ Ask communities what words they would like to be used to describe them.

➜ Identify opportunities for local actors to take the lead on developing terminology based on their knowledge of the context, recognizing that this means international actors and donors may need to reflect on how they use their power to influence terminology and seek to share their power.

➜ Recognize that words have different meaning depending on the context and it is unlikely that words will be appropriate across all contexts and languages.

➜ Identify appropriate, contextualized words that make sense in local languages to be used as alternatives where necessary.

➜ Ensure that changing words to be more inclusive and sensitive is done with analysis and recognition of power, and is not tokenistic.

LANGUAGE AND POWER:

➜ Create opportunities to influence other humanitarian actors to promote more inclusive and empowering terminology based on recommendations from communities and people with knowledge of the context.

➜ Clearly define the meaning behind key words that are used in the humanitarian sector, being mindful of the power dynamics underlying certain words, the inaccessibility of certain technical language, and the impacts of such words upon different groups.

➜ Critically reflect on and identify areas where power imbalances shape relationships between local and international organizations, and between local organizations and donors.

LANGUAGE IN PARTNERSHIPS:

➜ Be intentional in framing equal partnerships so that partnerships go beyond merely using local organizations as implementing partners, but instead meaningfully address power hierarchies between different actors at every stage of the partnership.

➜ Be guided by kindness and compassion in forming and sustaining partnerships with different humanitarian actors, taking care and time to ensure relationships are respectful, inclusive, empowering, and guided by the principle of sharing power.