

GENDER SECURITY FOR AID WORKERS

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A person's gender plays an important part in his or her own security. Men and women aid workers may experience different security risks. For example, Wille and Fast found that women were more vulnerable in urban areas, residences and work locations, whereas men were more likely to be injured or killed, particularly in rural areas or when traveling on the road. Others (Gaul et al) have documented that men and women aid workers experience differences in types of security risk: men are more often involved in violent confrontation, whereas women are more likely to experience sexual assault or harassment.

Beyond the data, however, are the varying perceptions men and women aid workers have about their safety and security. Their sense of safety and security will vary as a result. As one example, I have heard both a man and a woman who experienced the same kidnapping event tell their version of what happened. During the man's narrative, rape was not raised nor considered as an issue. But when the woman told her version, she talked at length about her fear of being raped from the beginning to the end of the ordeal.

For the past four years, I have been facilitating a seminar about gender security as part of Hostile Environment Awareness Training (HEAT) for aid workers. At this point I estimate that I have engaged approximately 25 groups (about 600 individuals) and heard their views on what they consider to be their personal gender security issues and what they would like others to understand about what it is like to be a man/woman aid worker in hostile and fragile contexts.

Diversity is a critical influence on issues of gender security. Because gender is culturally defined, there are widely divergent perspectives. These fascinating conversations have taken place among aid workers diverse in not only in gender, but in every other demographic you can imagine: ethnicity, age, religion, marital status, education, etc. As a facilitator of discussions around gender, I am constantly aware of the differences, not only between men and women, but also among men and among women.

Keeping in mind that there is variation, here are some of the more common threads that arise in the discussion. Remember that the discussion is based on people's perceptions of their own security. Perceptions may not be based on data that would pass muster as scientific findings. They more likely result from their own personal experiences, the stories they have heard from others, and what they have read or heard. It also does not mean that their perceptions are wrong. They could very well turn out to be in alignment with the facts as we grow our currently limited and incomplete databases.



What women want men to know about women's safety and security needs in a high conflict context:

- Women feel the threat of sexual violence far more commonly than they believe men realize. For some it is a daily or weekly fear, even in their most familiar environments.
- Women want to remind men that it is very possible that the person to assault them will be a male colleague, not a stranger. When this is shared, the tension and silence often rise in the group.
- While men may feel that sexual harassment is not a security issue, many women feel unsafe in a context where harassment is present - especially if the context is a guest house where they both live and work. (This is one of the topics where I have found women do not always agree with each other.)
- Many women don't want men to feel it is their job to protect them. Often, the perception that they need protection makes them feel concerned that they are seen as inadequate to do their work.
- Women are curious about whether men feel burdened by having women colleagues because of increased security risks.

What men want women to know about men's safety and security needs in a high conflict context:

- Men are often surprised that gender security issues also include them. They feel it is typically presented as women centered.
- Men want women to be aware that in many cultures where they work, when a woman colleague violates local norms, it is often their male colleague who will bear the consequences. In these cultures, men are considered to be responsible for the behavior of the women they accompany.
- In a context where violence could erupt, such as an illegal checkpoint or a local bar, men anticipate that they will be the one likely to experience physical violence. They realize that they are often more prone to initiate or engage in violence than women.
- Men are often put into the front lines in contexts that are considered to be dangerous. They are usually the drivers of vehicles and thus more often to be victims of road traffic accidents.
- Men are curious about whether women want to be protected by them. They also want to know what they can do to better understand women's experience.

Perhaps the most important learning I have taken from this experience is the rarity of these conversations. Most participants say that this is the first time they have ever had this discussion in a work-related context. The absence of discussions about gender security among aid workers is a security problem in itself. Unless men and women can become comfortable talking openly about the varying security risks they face, there is less that can be done to mitigate the likelihood of the events or the impact that they will have.



In closing, I would like to challenge you to do two things.

First, ask yourself, what are the security issues that concern you the most in your work context? And, what are you personally doing to mitigate the chance that you might be involved in a critical incident?

Second, in your sphere of influence, find time to talk to your colleagues about gender security. You can begin simply by asking the question that you have asked yourself, "What are the security issues that concern you the most in your work context?" Together you are more able to find ways to reduce your risk.

If you would like to know more about HEAT trainings please read the following resources:
[Gender Security in Hostile Environment Awareness Training \(HEAT\)](#)
[Our Partnership With HEAT Trainings.](#)

References

Julia Brooks. "Humanitarians Under Attack: Tensions, Disparities, and Legal Gaps in Protection. Harvard Humanitarian Initiative." ATHA (Advanced Training Program on Humanitarian Action).

Christina Wille and Larissa Fast, ["Aid, Gender and Security: The Gendered Nature of Security Events Affecting Aid Workers and Aid Delivery"](#) (Insecurity Insight, 2011).

Alexis Gaul et al., "NGO Security: Does Gender Matter?," Capstone Seminar in International Development (Save the Children; The George Washington University, May 8, 2006),. For another study that notes the relevance of gender considerations, see Emily Speers Mears, "Gender and Aid Agency Security Management," SMI Professional Development Brief (Security Management Initiative (SMI), July 2009).