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HOW IS THE CONCEPT OF 'WOMEN AND CHILDREN'
REPRESENTED BY TWO HUMANITARIAN
ORGANISATIONS?

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to analyse how the concept of ‘women and children’ is represented by two humanitarian organisations; International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF). The analyses concludes that there is (still) an assumption that women have an inherent vulnerability and women are often described together with ‘children’ as if they are *one* vulnerable group instead of two. This study suggests a problematization of the concept since activities planned by humanitarian organisations may have a big impact on people’s lives when assuming one group to be more vulnerable than another.

Key words: gender, International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), innocence, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), vulnerability, womandchildren, women and children

Definitions

ICRC - International Committee of the Red Cross

IHL – International Humanitarian Law

MSF - Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors Without Borders)

UN – United Nations

UNHCR - United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

WPR – What is the Problem Represented to be?

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1. INTRODUCTION

International Humanitarian Law (IHL) is known as the law of war and is a set of rules aiming to limit the effects of armed conflicts, protecting combatants and those who are not involved in combat, such as civilians. It is especially stated that because of their ‘specific needs’, women and children are granted additional protection by IHL (ICRC, 2017). Rule one in the first chapter of IHL is called *“The Principle of Distinction between Civilians and Combatants”* and explains how, in international and non-international conflicts, the battling parties must distinguish between combatants and civilians and that civilians should not be attacked within the conflict. This rule is said to be a norm of customary international law in state practice. According to ICRC (2010) the protection of civilians is central in the International Humanitarian Law. The fourth Geneva Convention of 1949 recognises defines protection for civilians as being protection for any person not belonging to armed forces or armed groups. The IHL specifies what is considered to be vulnerable groups in the following quote: *“While IHL protects all civilians without discrimination, certain groups are singled out for special mention. Women and children, the aged and sick are highly vulnerable during armed conflict. So too are those who flee their homes and become internally displaced or refugees”* (ICRC, 2010).

In the newspaper article *“‘women and children first’: war, humanitarianism and the refugee crisis”*, the author, Rozpedowski (2017), claims that the concept of ‘women and children first’ was first coined by the captain of the sinking ship HMS Birkenhead in 1852 as some kind of moral guidance. The author argues that a return to these values of ‘women and children first’ would protect the *weakest* in the society and continues to argue that humanitarian organisations should prioritize ‘woman and children’ during evacuations in conflicts and catastrophes and that ‘women and children’ should be granted *“special protective status as defenceless victims of violence”*. On the contrary, (Carpenter, 2006, p. 2) claims that *“the category ‘women and children’ conflates infants, who are indeed both innocent and vulnerable, with adult women and adolescents who may be neither”* and argues that the construction of women’s innocence and vulnerability has affected how humanitarian organisations work according to the mandate of ‘protecting civilians’ (Carpenter, 2006). DiQuinzio and Meagher (2005) argue that the notion of ‘women and children first’ claims to be in protection of the two groups but is in fact patronising and harmful for women and works disempowering for them.

My background, as a nurse, working for one of the organisations that will be analysed, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), has led to the curiosity of this topic. Many are the courses, trainings and literature where first ‘the population’ is described, and then ‘women and children’, as not being part of ‘the population’ and as being particularly vulnerable. I have questioned this narrative, but never really gotten an answer to, why this division seems logical to many course leaders and authors, but not me. In times where all professional humanitarian organisations have a gender perspective on top of their agenda, it is thus necessary that the concept of ‘women and children’ is problematised, especially in the humanitarian context where misconceptions from the organisations working with humanitarian aid/relief can have great impact on peoples lives.

2. MAIN TOPIC AND DELIMITATIONS

2.1 Aim

The aim of this study is to scrutinise how the concept of ‘women and children’ is represented by two humanitarian organisations. A gender perspective will be applied, to analyse *the way* the term ‘women and children’ is represented and scrutinise the hidden assumptions behind the conceptualisation. Furthermore, the study will analyse if ‘women and children’ is used when the intention is to speak about civilians and if so, why the terms are used interchangeably and what implications that might have for people in need of assistance from humanitarian organisations.

2.2 Delimitations

It should be noted that this study has absolutely no interest, nor reason, to question that women, as a group, are subjected to a widespread discrimination and violence (often by men) and therefore are (being made) a vulnerable group. Furthermore, the historical gender blindness, in general and in the humanitarian field, has not acknowledged this enough, which has allowed the discrimination of women to continue. However, the focus of this study is rather to problematise the assumption that women are always vulnerable and why women and children are perceived to have similar characteristics and interests when their reasons for vulnerability are often fundamentally different. The study uses a language that is associated with a binary gender/sex system where the population is divided into men, women, boys and girls. This is of course problematic, however the nature of the study, where the material analysed is based on this division, makes it difficult to analyse it outside of this narrative.

2.3 Research questions

The primary research questions are:

1. How is the concept of ‘women and children’ represented by the two humanitarian organisations; ICRC (International Committee of the Red Cross) and MSF (Médecins Sans Frontières)
2. Is there a pattern over time on how ‘women and children’ is being described in their annual reports?
3. What consequences could the two previous questions have for the people in need of assistance from humanitarian organisations?

2.4 Previous research

Previous research shows that the subject is touched upon but because of the major impact it could have, it is also highly relevant to further scrutinise and problematise the conceptualising of ‘women and children’ in relation to humanitarian organisations. Most research that has been conducted concerns the use of ‘women and children’ versus ‘civilians’ in a war context, and gender mainstreaming policies within the UN.

Charli Carpenter is Professor of Political Science at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. Carpenter’s research includes politics of war law, protection of civilians, transnational advocacy networks; with a particular interest in the gap between intentions and outcomes among human security advocates (University of Massachusetts Amherst, 2019). Carpenter’s perspective on ‘women and vulnerability’ and ‘women and innocence’, in particular in relation to ‘civilians’ has contributed to important theoretical knowledge for this study.

Erin K. Baines is Associate Professor of Public Policy and Global Affairs at the University of British Columbia. Baines’ research includes transitional justice, the politics of humanitarianism and forced displacement and the study of gender, youth and armed conflict (The University of British Columbia, n.d.). Baines’ book *‘Vulnerable Bodies’* scrutinises the implementation of gender mainstreaming policies at UNHCR and has contributed to the understanding of the consequences of implementing gender strategies in humanitarian work.

Maud Eduards is Professor Emeritus of Political Science at Stockholm University. Eduards has, for a long time, conducted research on gender and nation, power and politics. Eduards is now focusing on security politics, war, violence and globalisation in relation to gender and (hetero)sexuality (Stockholm University, 2017). Eduards’ research on ‘gender and nation’ and

‘gender and security’ in particular has been very useful for the theoretical background of this study.

Nira Yuval-Davis is Professor Emeritus, Honorary Director of the Research Centre on Migration, Refugees and Belonging (CMRB) at the University of East London. Yuval-Davis’ research includes intersected gendered nationalisms, racisms, fundamentalisms, identities and other interrelated topics (University of East London, 2019). Yuval-Davis’ theoretical research on ‘gender and nation’ has contributed to the understanding of gender assumptions of men and women in nation building, which has been essential for this study.

3. BACKGROUND

3.1 International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) was established in 1863 with the aim to protect lives and dignity of victims of armed conflict and other contexts of violence. ICRC is impartial, neutral and independent and they are working to promote humanitarian law and principles. All states are bound by the four Geneva Conventions¹ of 1949, which was adopted on ICRC’s initiative, the conventions also state the broad rights for ICRC to act in situations of armed conflicts and other contexts of violence (ICRC, n.d.-b). The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) is a part of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, the ICRC has 18,000 employees in over 90 countries worldwide (ICRC), n.d.-a).

3.2 Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF)

Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), called Doctors Without Borders in English, is a medical, humanitarian organisation, founded 1971 in Paris, by a group of doctors and journalists. The aim of MSF is to “*provide medical assistance to people affected by conflict, epidemics, disasters, or exclusion from healthcare*”. The work of MSF rests on the principles of medical ethics, impartiality, independence and neutrality (MSF, n.d.-c) as well as the mandate of *témoignage*, bearing witness, which is the intention to raise awareness with the aim to improve the given situation for the population (MSF, 1995). MSF is a global movement with 45,000 employees from 150 different countries in 2017 (MSF, n.d.-c).

¹ “*The Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols form the core of international humanitarian law, which regulates the conduct of armed conflict and seeks to limit its effects. They protect people not taking part in hostilities and those who are no longer doing so.*” (ICRC, n.d.-b).

MSF was established as a response to the perceived commitment by the French Red Cross and ICRC to remain silent during the war in Biafra (1967-1970). The French doctors interpreted the silence of neutrality as a passive agreement with the atrocities conducted. Hence, when establishing MSF, the mandate of bearing witness was crucial and the fundamental reason for starting a new organisation. With MSF being a medical, humanitarian organisation, MSF's work is focused on providing medical care whilst the mandate of ICRC is much larger. The work of ICRC is almost exclusively conducted in war zones whilst the same context accounts for no more than a third of all MSF operations. However, despite the differences, the two organisations often work closely together, their representatives meet regularly and they have a lot in common (Brauman, 2012) which is why it is suitable for this study to analyse them together.

4. THEORY

4.1 Innocence, vulnerability and security

The ancient conception of why 'women and children' should be spared and not killed during war, did not rely on moral standards or the concept of innocence, but rather that 'women and children' were men's property and not their own. Hence if you killed 'women and children' you stole a man's property and you had to answer to him (Carpenter, 2006). Eduards (2007) argues that women, like no other group, are both worshiped and despised at the same time, but the choice between worship and violence is out of their own reach. Whilst the body of a man does not need protection, and especially not by a woman, women's bodies are seen as either vulnerable and worthy to be protected, or accessible and possible to assault. The role of the one being defended is closely associated with being objectified, and possibly sexualised. The author claims that: "*the idealisation does not protect women from violence, but on the contrary makes them more vulnerable*" (Eduards, 2007, p. 52). Furthermore, Eduards (2007) claims that a woman is always at risk of becoming her body, with no reason or sense, but driven by emotions. Men on the other hand are seen as a whole, with control over their own body. This has been claimed throughout history; the dualistic distinction between men and women, between sense and emotion. When discussing *gender and nation*, Eduards (2007) argues that the forced national consensus consolidates normative gender roles where 'male' and 'female' is the fundament for this heterosexist narrative. Women are reduced to body and reproduction while men are seen as warriors and nation builders. In this narrative it is the duty of men to kill and the duty of women to give birth. Men's protection of women, in conflict or in peace, is often seen as something positive, and the author admits that 'women and children'

often are in need of protection, from men's violence in particular, however this protection needs to be on women's (and children's) own terms.

Yuval-Davis (1997) argues in her book *Gender&Nation*, that women have always been seen as eager promoters of peace, and that this has been portrayed as an inherited attribute of women, while men has the natural link to warfare. The author also argues that the myth of men going to war to protect 'women and children' creates the assumption that women is a part of a the collective identity of womanhood where children and family are central. "*Wars are seen to be fought for the sake of the 'womenandchildren', and the fighting men are comforted and reassured by the knowledge that 'their women' are keeping the hearth fires going and are waiting for them to come home*" (Yuval-Davis, 1997, p. 111). Sylvester (2015) claims that western history telling simply has left out stories about female combatants because the society does not have the ability to contemplate women's violence as memorable and heroic and that there is a narrative in western history of men as the fighters in war and women as the ones being protected. Similarly, Carpenter (2006) argues that men being the combatants and women being the 'innocent' is more the *narrative* of a conflict situation than the reality. In a conflict situation, the intention of the IHL should be to distinguish between combatants and civilians, hence the category of sex would only be a suitable variable if the binary system of men/women would be absolute in relation to combatant/civilian, which it is clearly not and therefor not adequate to use. Evidently, even though most combatants are men, it does not mean that all men are combatants. The idea of children being physically unfit or incapable to combat, which automatically makes them 'innocent', is also applied on women; both women and children are seen as physically vulnerable and innocent and therefor in need of protection and special treatment.

In their study of *the politics of gender in the UN Security Council resolutions on women, peace and security*, Jansson and Eduards (2016) claim that women's groups for decades have tried to place gender and vulnerability on the transnational security agenda. The recognition of women's conditions in security contexts as well as the promotion of women's representation have received support as well as criticism, support for challenging the gender blind policies and critique for being essentialist. The authors describe a tendency in these UN resolutions on *women, peace and security*, of an essentialist narrative of women as being more peaceful than men. There is a notion of woman as 'the other' due to 'vulnerability' (this will be discussed later on) but women are also seen to inherit 'specific' characteristics in

relation to 'innocence'. This notion is used to legitimise the promotion of women's representation and gender equality efforts. The primary reason for gender equality is thus not built on a women's rights- or democratic argument, to ensure women good living conditions for their intrinsic value, but rather seen as tool in the strive for peace. Jansson and Eduards (2016) claim that the narrative of protecting 'women and children' is a part of the discourse that legitimises war and conflict in the first place and that the protection and representation of women is used to ensure peace and security. Regardless, the authors claim that the gender mainstreaming and the inclusion of women in the security discourse have changed out-dated definitions of both *security* and *women*. However, the UN resolutions have been criticised to not acknowledge the roots of conflicts, and that they do not include patriarchy, masculinity and militarised power as a part of the conflict analysis. Peace is often explained in very traditional terms, not taking into account security, justice, freedom from poverty and oppression and exclusion. The traditional concept of security as being protection of values or state borders has been problematized by feminist security research, which argues that, instead, traditional gender norms have to be challenged (Jansson & Eduards, 2016).

According to (Baines, 2004) framing women as 'vulnerable' made a lot of policy changes possible within the UNHCR and similar connected UN bodies. The *1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees* was seen to be gender-neutral and the common understanding was that the convention recognised men and women equally. However, from the late 1970's, more gender specific language and policies were used and implemented. Despite the fact that the notion of 'women as vulnerable' put women on the agenda and changed previous gender-blind policies to become more gender-sensitive, Baines (2004) argues that this notion also reinforces traditional stereotypes about women in conflict as being passive and voice-less and contributes to the idea of a western superiority when helping vulnerable women; western helpers in contrast to the 'cultural other'.

The feminist idea of women's vulnerability is related to external factors such as unjust distribution of resources and agency, not as an inherent characteristic. Carpenter (2006) claims that when using the concept of 'women and children', it is implied that women are vulnerable, weak and delicate even though most empirical evidence shows that the difference in physical strength between adult men and women is minor. The author argues how the assumed vulnerability in 'women and children' must not be seen as something inherent but the concept of vulnerability should be problematised and seen as something situation bound.

Pregnant women, breastfeeding women and women with infants are for instance indeed (a) vulnerable group(s). Jansson and Eduards (2016) claim that the narrative of women's vulnerability makes women the problem, and creates a victim without agency. The immediate threats towards women are violence from men and long-term consequences of inequality such as political and economic injustices. From a gender perspective, women's vulnerability is a consequence of unjust power relations between men and women (Jansson & Eduards, 2016). This means that, unlike the vulnerability of children for instance, women are *made* vulnerable, by unequal structure, discrimination and not to forget, (male) perpetrators.

Jansson and Eduards (2016) highlight the importance of analysing the underlying assumptions of gender and security in UN resolutions, since it will have a great, long-going impact. In the same way as UN resolutions have a great impact on their activities and their understanding of a situation in security contexts, it can also be applied on humanitarian organisations. The theory of how gender is understood and implemented in security contexts by the UN is similar to how it can affect the activities of humanitarian organisations and will thus be applied in this study. *“Even in the discourse on women, peace and security, the male soldier appears to be the ultimate referent”* (Jansson & Eduards, 2016, p. 601).

4.2 Woman as ‘the other’

Women are unarguably an exposed group, especially in a situation of conflict. However, this narrative of vulnerability has been used as the justification to include gender on the security agenda, according to Jansson and Eduards (2016). This reveals how men are the norm and women are ‘the others’; activities planned by humanitarian actors risk reproducing this notion, even when there is a belief that a gender perspective is implemented in the strategy. Jansson and Eduards (2016) describe how UN resolutions on mine clearing and refugee camp design claim to have a gender perspective in acknowledging women's ‘specific needs’ but as a consequence, reproduce the notion of women as ‘the other’. Women are assigned to have ‘specific needs’ because their needs or chores differ from those of men. The mine clearance is often conducted according to the movement pattern of men and the pattern of women is ‘added’ to this understanding. When planning refugee camp design, the risk for women of getting raped and/or sexually assaulted is acknowledged, but it is not discussed in relation to men and their responsibility. Women and their bodies become problematic in this discourse; women are sexed whilst men's bodies are not even discussed in these resolutions. Women and men's difference in physical appearance is also a way to justify measures that are seen as

extraordinary in comparison to the standard security procedures, women are gendered but men are the standard. Jansson and Eduards (2016) argue that the narrative of women's vulnerability in UN resolutions on *women, peace and security*, is based on the 'otherness' together with the conflict situation, hence if women would not be described in relation to men, there would be no notion of 'otherness' and the concept of women's vulnerability would be challenged. In a traditional understanding of vulnerability it is the context that leads to the security issue, the power imbalance that comes with patriarchal structures are invisible in that security narrative. However, a feminist perspective on women and security challenges the narrative of women's vulnerability linked to a conflict situation, on the contrary, women's vulnerability is consistent in situations of conflict as well as in peace and these situations are closely interrelated. The widespread violence against women can be described as a 'war on women', regardless if the general context is defined as a conflict- or peace situation. Jansson and Eduards (2016) claim that the UN resolutions define women and their bodies as being the problem and consequently reaffirm the adult male body as the 'normal' and the standard for security politics. The chosen methodology for this study, described above, is especially suited for analysing this sort of 'hidden assumptions' when scrutinising how a problem is represented and what the underlying factors for this, seemingly neutral, description is.

The Program Officer at the Office of the Senior Coordinator for Refugee Women and Gender Equality, UNHCR, Katarina Samara-Wickrama discusses the concept of defining vulnerable groups, in an interview, cited in Erika Baines book *Vulnerable Bodies*. The concept of vulnerability is applied to groups who are considered to be 'most in need'. 'Women and children' are often referred to as vulnerable, but also elderly, minority groups and people with disabilities, which only leaves young men to not be included in the concept of being 'most in need'. However, young men are often the most vulnerable in terms of being targets of military campaigns and recruitment. The conclusion is that everyone is vulnerable, depending of context and situation, which makes the label of vulnerability useless (Baines, 2004, p. 77).

A quote from Jansson and Eduards (2016, p. 594) highlights the importance of scrutinising the concept of vulnerability and the use of 'women and children' in relation to it: "*it can be argued that conflict situations place all human beings in a specifically exposed situation*".

5. METHOD

5.1 Selection of material

A search have been conducted on ‘women and children’ in the Annual Reports of ICRC and the International Activity reports of MSF, that are to be found online. When ‘women and children’ has been used by the organisations, the context of the reports has been analysed.

The two organisations presented in this study have been selected due to the central role of ICRC in upholding the International Humanitarian Law (IHL), from which the definition of ‘civilians’ and ‘vulnerable groups’ is used (ICRC, 2017). Furthermore, ICRC and MSF are two of the biggest humanitarian organisations within the field and with ICRC’s mandate to protect and assist victims of war and armed violence (ICRC, n.d.) and MSF’s mandate of *témoignage*/bearing witness, they both play a central role in defining humanitarian work and their activities reach millions of people across the world. It is therefore interesting to see how definitions and possible gender assumptions in the discourse can effect the humanitarian work they conduct.

The Annual Reports (ICRC) and the International Activity Reports (MSF) from five years, between 2012 and 2017 have been studied. None of the organisations had the reports for 2018 yet published which is why the reports from 2017 were set as the latest reports to study. The time span of five years was chosen to get enough material to analyse, as well as to analyse the pattern over time in the reports, although that was not the main focus.

The reason why the Annual Reports/International Activity Reports were chosen as the material to analyse is because they are meant to give an overview of the activities and priorities of the organisations. The reports can also be used both internally for employees and volunteers to get an insight in what ‘their’ organisation has conducted during the previous year, as well as to show the public and donors how the money has been spent. Hence, the documents give legitimacy and show accountability. What is written in these reports and the choice of language should give an insight in how the organisations wish to be represented, hence it should provide a good material to analyse.

The International Activity reports of MSF are meant to provide a descriptive overview of the operational activities, in each country (94 countries in 2017) between January and December the chosen year. The MSF reports show, in numbers and pictures, the overview of activities by countries and categories, such as how many and where the biggest projects have been according to the number of employed staff, consultations, expenditure etcetera. They also

provide detailed numbers of how many people who have been vaccinated against measles, how many births that have been assisted, how many mental health group sessions that have been conducted etcetera. The reports also give an insight in what specific challenges the organisation faced during the year and describe more in depth that year's focus on specific diseases or activities (MSF, 2017). The International Activity reports of MSF are about 100 pages.

ICRC claim that one of the functions of their annual reports is to show accountability, by showing their operational activities, with the mandate to protect lives and dignity of victims of war, and their work in promoting international humanitarian law (IHL) (ICRC), n.d.-a). Because the nature of their work, with sensitive negotiations in armed conflicts and other violent contexts, the reports do not claim to describe *all* their activities and might also not describe *all* contexts with humanitarian suffering due to denied access for ICRC, hence, they do not operate there (ICRC, 2018). The Annual Reports from ICRC are about 600 pages.

5.2 'What's the problem represented to be?' -approach

The 'what's the problem represented to be?' (WPR) is an approach to analyse policy in a structured way, to explore the implicit representation of a problem. This approach claims to uncover the underlying assumptions of a problem and explore what meanings are attached to a policy. When policies are usually seen as a reaction to a problem, the WPR approach acknowledges that policies can in fact *create* the problems in the assumptions of it. To reveal this, the WPR approach does not start analysing the problem itself, but instead the explanation or representation of the problem, to uncover the meaning it is given. In this way, new ways of thinking of a problem is created and with that, new effects might be discovered. A WPR approach can help to better understand how a representation of a problem sustains or challenges traditional power structures (Bacchi & Eveline, 2010).

The WPR approach consists of the following six questions to analyse policy problems:

- 1. What's the 'problem' represented to be in a specific policy?*
- 2. What presuppositions or assumptions underlie this representation of the 'problem'?*
- 3. How has this representation of the 'problem' come about?*
- 4. What is left unproblematic in this problem representation? Where are the silences? Can the 'problem' be thought about differently?*
- 5. What effects are produced by this representation of the 'problem'?*

6. *How/where has this representation of the 'problem' been produced, disseminated and defended? How could it be questioned, disrupted and replaced?*" (Bacchi & Eveline, 2010, p. 117).

According to Bacchi (2009, p. vi), the WPR approach can be seen as a post structural approach to policy analysis and the author claims that one of the purposes of the approach is to scrutinise how *"women's inequality has been understood in western policy interventions, and the implications for feminist theorists"*. One of the focuses of this study is to scrutinise how unequal gender assumptions are being produced and reproduced in relation to the concept of 'women and children'. The concept of gender is in this paper understood in the same way as Bacchi's description: *"the use of the term 'gender' is invoked to challenge assumptions that women are destined by their biology to fill certain roles. Much of the literature draws a distinction between 'sex' as biology and 'gender' as socially constructed roles and characteristics. The turn to 'gender' is also intended to be a means of drawing attention to the need for men to change"* (Bacchi, 2010a, p. 22). The WPR approach aims to reveal power relations such as privilege and norms, and their influence in policy making. Thus the WPR approach is suitable for this study where a gender perspective will be applied to scrutinise the influence of normative gender assumptions in humanitarian work. The WPR approach is, according to the author and creator; Bacchi, a suitable methodology to apply for gendering awareness (Bacchi, 2010b), which is in line with the intention of this study.

Bacchi claims that policies do not address a problem but rather shape it (Bacchi, 2009). From a gender perspective, this can be explained as unequal structures in society are shaping everyone and everything and thus, the understanding of a problem is already coloured by a certain normative assumptions. Because the proposed solution, or change, for a problem, will depend on the understanding of the problem, a biased or wrong understanding of that problem will consequently not provide the appropriate solution, instead the answer will be based on the question. Therefore, if the question is changed, the answer will change as well. The WPR approach attempts to challenge what is taken for granted, which is similar to when feminist theory wants to challenge normative structures. Even though Bacchi's method of analyses is primarily constructed to analyse formal policies it is also suitable for other forms of discourse analyses, like in this study. Bacchi (2010b) states that policies are *gendering*, which is why they have to be scrutinised to understand and reveal the effects of the gendering practices. This means that a discourse and the linguistics of a humanitarian organisation can contribute

to reproducing unequal structures, even though the intention is to highlight them. Having preconceptions related to gender will affect how humanitarian organisations prioritise their activities, but also how they describe and explain the context they work in, which will affect their problem analysis. To define vulnerability in ‘women and children’ as the ‘problem’ (to use Bacchi’s words) already consists of assumptions in the problem description. If the problem would be thought about differently, or problematised, the consequences or the measures taken would be different as well. Because ‘women and children’ have been conceptualised by many, including humanitarian organisations, there is a need to problematise it according to the WPR approach.

6. ANALYSIS

6.1 Introduction to the analysis

The analysis is based on the ‘what’s the problem represented to be?’ (WPR) approach that is described in the methodology section, focusing on the following two questions;

2. *What presuppositions or assumptions underlie this representation of the ‘problem’?*

4. *What is left unproblematic in this problem representation? Where are the silences? Can the ‘problem’ be thought about differently?*

The two questions will not be analysed one by one, but in themes that have been identified during the reading of the reports.

In all the reports the term ‘women and children’ is sometimes (or often) used in relation to women’s pregnancy and/or maternal health, and the link between women and children is, in these cases, obvious. When the term ‘women and children’ is used, referring to pregnant or breastfeeding women, I have chosen to not include it in the analysis, since this is a group, I claim, that is unquestionably physically vulnerable and also has the obvious link to ‘children’. Carpenter (2006) claims that pregnant women, breastfeeding women and women with infants are indeed (a) vulnerable group(s), which thus is not contested in this study. My intention is rather to analyse the use of ‘women and children’ when the concept of vulnerability, as well as the link to ‘children’, is unclear.

An example of how ‘women and children’ is described in a context, explicitly related to pregnancy and/or maternal health, is shown in this example describing the situation and MSF’s activities in Mali: “MSF also provides basic care for pregnant women and children under five years of age at the community health centre in the town” (MSF, 2017, p. 63).

In the ICRC report, pregnancy is never mentioned explicitly as an explanation to women's particular vulnerability, when referring to 'women and children'. However, in some cases the link between women and children and women's vulnerability is clear when referring to antenatal services, like in this quote, describing the activities of primary health care centres in northern Mali: *"Thousands of patients benefited from the centres' services: 51,116 curative and antenatal consultations took place, most of them for women and children; and 155,506 people were vaccinated. The ICRC covered transportation expenses for patients referred for further care, including pregnant women"* (ICRC, 2018, p. 161).

6.2 The use of 'women and children' in the reports

The five ICRC reports studied are very similar in phrasings and descriptions of projects and activities. Often projects are described in general wordings as an introduction to explain more in detail the activities conducted by the organisation, thus several paragraphs from different years are exactly the same. 'Women and children' is mentioned 54 times in the 2013 report, 46 times in the 2014 report, 29 times in the 2015 report, 24 times in the 2016 report and 18 times in the 2017 report. While the reports are about the same length, around 600 pages, the phrase 'women and children' is used 3 times less frequent in the 2017 report compared to the 2013 report and every year the frequency decreases (ICRC, 2014; 2015; 2016; 2017a; 2018). When 'woman and children is not mentioned in relation to pregnancy and-/or maternal health, the term is often used in a context of the domestic sphere or as being particularly vulnerable detainees. Several times when describing operational activities the activities are mentioned with the addition 'including women and children'.

In the ICRC reports from 2013, 2014 and 2015 there is a section describing ICRC's approach to women and girls and the term 'gender' is also explained as being socially constructed roles, different for men and women, that varies in different contexts and situations (ICRC, 2014, p. 34; 2015, p. 34; 2016, p. 33). The organisation claims to use a gender perspective for a better understanding of the roles and responsibilities of different groups, to be able to provide the accurate support to men, boys, women and girls. In the reports from 2013, 2014 and 2015, the use of the term 'women an children' is discussed, similarly in all the three reports; *"Often, women and children are placed in the same category of vulnerability. Such hasty categorization overlooks the fact that women's needs, experiences and roles in armed conflict and other situations of violence differ from those of children"* (ICRC, 2014, p. 34; 2015, p. 34; 2016, p. 33). The reports argue that different groups are exposed to different kinds of

vulnerability and that it is context- or situation bound. The reports acknowledge that it is too simplified to portray women as passive victims and men as active combatants and that “*while women are not inherently vulnerable, they often face heightened risks in conflict situations*” (ICRC, 2014, p. 34; 2015, p. 34; 2016, p. 33). The organisation conducted a ‘women and war’ study between 1999 and 2003 which resulted in practical guidelines in addressing the needs of women, which they claim have been overlooked.

In the five analysed International Activity Report of MSF, ‘women and children’ is mentioned seven to nineteen times in the about 100 pages reports (MSF, n.d.-b, n.d.-c, n.d.-d, n.d.-a, n.d.-e). The majority of times, ‘women and children’ is referring to women as ‘mothers’ or to a context of pregnancy and-/or maternal health. Occasionally ‘men, women and children’ is also used when describing the numbers of people affected by a situation.

The reports of MSF do not explain or discuss the concept of ‘women and children’, nor a presumed vulnerability. On their website, where the topics of the activities are presented women’s health is described as: “*be it in conflict, in a natural disaster, a disease outbreak, or in an HIV programme - women are in need of specific care. Reproductive healthcare is an integral part of the medical care we provide, including in emergencies*” (MSF, n.d.-e).

6.3 ‘Women and children’ portrayed as *one* group in the reports

When the IHL defines who is particularly vulnerable in conflicts, it states “*Women and children, the aged and sick*” (ICRC, 2010). Women and children become *one* interrelated category, dependent on each other. The use of ‘and’ instead of a comma might seem as trivial semantics but the difference between ‘women *and* children’ and ‘women, children...’ has a completely different connotation to it; women and children are seen as one category instead of two, which, without a doubt, has effects on how women (in conflicts) are perceived and how assistance for women (and children) is organised by the international community and by ICRC and MSF. When describing the development of UNHCR’s attitude towards gender and their work with the refugee population, the author Erin K. Baines states that: “*Women and children were often conceptually and operationally lumped together as vulnerable groups*” (Baines, 2004, p. 53), which is also exemplified by this description of the situation for displaced people in South Sudan 2017, by MSF: “*The majority of the displaced are the most vulnerable: 85 per cent of refugees are women and children*” (MSF, n.d.-d, p.18). Baines (2004) argues that two third of the refugee population consists of women and children, yet women and children are often described as *one* particular group and claims that: “*the*

frequently used phrase 'refugee women and children' collapses these two troupes into a single undifferentiated whole" (Baines, 2004, p. 52). Despite being the vast majority, the category 'women and children' is seen as *one* particular group with particular interests in relation to what is clearly the norm; men. It is of course rational and necessary to describe the demographics of a population, but I argue that this description actually hides the composition of the people, which is not beneficial for either women or children (or men). Bacchi (2010) highlights how there is a risk that when implementing 'gender' in mainstreaming policies it simply replaces 'women', whilst 'men' remain being the neutral 'sex'. The previous quote can be interpreted as an example of this, a poor understanding of gender analysis. Women are pointed out to not be forgotten about, however when 'women' are lumped together with 'children' it is still not possible to meet the 'specific needs' of women (nor children) and they become, once again, invisible.

The term '*children and their mothers*' is used occasionally in the ICRC reports but nowhere in the MSF report. The use of '*women, children (...)*', referring to woman and children as two separate groups that are not necessarily linked together, is used several times in the ICRC reports but never in the MSF reports. However both the organisations use the wording of '*men, women and children*' as in the following quote from the 2016 International Activity Report of MSF: "*The number of people crossing by sea to Italy increased from 153,000 in 2015 to over 180,000 in 2016. At least 5,000 men, women and children died while attempting the journey*" (MSF, n.d.-c, p. 6)

Bates (2017) describes the importance of linguistics and the power of language: "*(...) the linguistic sleight of hand performed by those who use the phrase 'women and children', instead of the quite different 'women with their dependent children'. Through this elision, she points out: 'the children don't become women. The women become children'*" Enloe (2017, p. 59) is also problematizing the concept of 'women and children' and states that the phrase is a part of a gendered power structure: "*Delivering food and medical supplies to displaced people within Syria— people (a majority of whom today are women with their dependent children, which is quite different from the patriarchal elision of 'women and children')*"

Bacchi (2010b) claims that the WPR approach is suitable for revealing underlying gender assumptions and for questioning what is taken for granted. The term 'women and children' has now become a concept, but when applying Bacchi's understanding of assumptions and

silences, a deeper meaning can be discovered. There are implications within the term ‘women and children’ that are coloured by gender assumptions and this has effects. Using the term ‘women and children’ is not only a description of a problem/situation but is also a part of (re-) producing the problem, according to the WPR approach. Burman (2008) argues that even though the relationship between women and children is uncontested, women’s rights and children’s rights are neither adversarial nor equivalent. Furthermore the author argues that within the concept of ‘women and children’ the child’s perspective is at risk to get lost.

To describe women and children as one category, with the same inherent characteristics, one of them being vulnerability, is not only wrong and misleading but it is also infantilising for women, especially since the reasons for this presupposed vulnerability could be very different for the two groups. When children are, indisputably, inherently vulnerable, women are often vulnerable due to external factors such as (sexual-) violence conducted by a perpetrator.

Carpenter (2006, p. 2) claims that: *“the category ‘women and children’ conflates infants, who are indeed both innocent and vulnerable, with adult women and adolescents who may be neither”*. There is also a difference between using the phrase ‘women with their dependent children’, or something similar, to ‘women and children’, where the first example clearly refers to women as being mothers, hence the link between women and children is unquestionable, whereas in the phrase ‘women and children’ it is implied that women are to be seen as mothers, or at least caregivers, and that men are not. Baines (2004) argues that the picture of women within the concept of ‘women and children’ is used, sometimes as a strategic move, to show women linked to motherhood, and how the universalism in this is an effective narrative for creating policies that recognises women’s subordination but is also important for public awareness and fund raising. Since both the organisations ICRC and MSF are depending on fundraising this is an important aspect of how the written- and/or imagery language used by them can have implications on their fundamentals for existence, the donors and their willingness to donate money.

6.4 Innocence, vulnerability and security – represented in the reports

As shown above, ICRC is problematizing the concept of ‘women and children’ in relation to an assumed (inherent) vulnerability of women and the merge of ‘women and children’ into one group. However, this is only something that is discussed and problematized in the first three reports studied (2013, 2014 and 2015), the two most recent reports do not have sections like this. The acknowledgment of the problem in the earlier reports and the constant decrease

in using the concept could be interpreted as an understanding of the complexity of the phrase. However, as will be discussed further on, the use of the phrase can still be seen as problematic in some contexts and despite the paragraphs in the beginning, it can not be seen as a disclaimer for the rest of the 600 pages. The challenge for the organisations is of course to act according to the reality, to acknowledge structural discrimination, without reproducing the same structures that they are trying to respond to. Applying Bacchi's WPR approach and the second question² about what assumptions that underlies a problem (Bacchi & Eveline, 2010), it is clear that the alleged vulnerability of women is often not problematised or explained, it is assumed.

Once in the ICRC report it is explained why 'woman and children' are seen as particularly vulnerable: "*When distributing aid, the ICRC gives priority to the most vulnerable households, many of which have lost their main breadwinner (usually adult males). Women and children are, therefore, often the main beneficiaries of the relief provided to IDPs, returnees and residents*" (ICRC, 2018, p. 30). However, despite the disclaimer in some of the ICRC reports and some clarifications on women's vulnerability, there are still contexts where the specific vulnerability of women is not explained and it is difficult to see it as anything else than an assumption of an 'inherent vulnerability', which the organisation claims to not believe in. The following quote cannot be translated to anything less than the notion of 'women and children first': "*Women and children have priority in operations to evacuate the wounded and sick from areas affected by fighting*" (ICRC, 2014, p. 37). The generalisation in the quote seems contradictory to the claims of the organisation that vulnerability should be seen as situation- and context bound. Carpenter (2006) refers to an ICRC study on *women and war* that describes the absence of a man as a key factor for women's vulnerability during armed conflict. This shows how men are seen as the protectors of women and how it is the absence of a man that is seen as the problem not the fact that women do not have access to whatever it is that would keep them safe. The woman's agency is taken away and the assumption is that a woman needs a man to protect her.

² "*What presuppositions or assumptions underlie this representation of the 'problem'?*" (Bacchi & Eveline, 2010, p. 117).

The 2015 International Activity Report from MSF describes the activities for war-wounded in Syria as following: *"A report compiled by MSF and released in early 2016 showed that 154,647 warwounded patients were received in 2015 in MSF-supported hospitals and clinics in northwestern, western and central Syria (Aleppo, Homs, Hama, Idlib, Lattakia and Damascus governorates), and 7,009 war dead were documented. Women and children accounted for 30 to 40 per cent of the victims. In 10 documented mass-casualty influxes, such as after the bombings of schools or playgrounds, between 60 and 90 per cent of the victims were women and children"* (MSF, n.d.-b, p. 83) and in Afghanistan 2015: *"In the three weeks after the announcement of the start of the annual 'fighting season', medical staff treated 204 war-wounded patients, 51 of whom were women and children"* (MSF, n.d.-b, p. 26). A patient story from a refugee camp in Lebanon 2013, hosting people from Syria, also exemplifies the notion of women and innocence: *"The first couple of days we didn't move; we thought they were after young men for the army service. But then we understood that even women and children would be targeted. So we left"* (MSF, n.d.-a, p. 61). The term 'women and children' seems to be used when the actual meaning is 'civilians' or in a sense that women (and children) are particularly protection worthy. This is of course very problematic for several reasons, one being; if the intention is to protect civilians as the IHL states (ICRC, 2010), why only protect women and children and not male civilians? Also in the UN security council's resolutions' on *women, peace and security* the concept of gender has been criticised to equate 'women' and 'femininity' with 'peace', as if women are always innocent and peace striving (Jansson & Eduards, 2016).

6.5 Woman as 'the other' - represented in the reports

Women (and children) are seen as 'the other', despite the fact that they uphold two thirds of the population, women are also seen as family members, always in relation to children, in contrast to the way men are portrayed, as independent individuals with agency. Describing the situation in Uganda in the 2017 MSF report, 'women and children' are presented as following: *"By August, one million people – 85 per cent of whom were women and children – had fled across the border into northern Uganda, according to UNHCR, the United Nations refugee agency"* (MSF, n.d.-d, p. 91). ICRC describes water- and sanitation activities in the 2014 report: *"In general, people living in rural areas and/or areas difficult to reach owing to insecurity and/or lack of infrastructure – and people deprived of their freedom). Around 30% and 40% of the beneficiaries were women and children respectively"* (ICRC, 2015, p. 93). With these numbers it seems reasonable to think that 30% of the beneficiaries were men,

hence 30% were men, 30% were women and 40% were children. To provide sex disaggregated data can be a good way to highlight gender inequality but in this example it gives the reader the impression that the majority of the given population were women and children when in fact the men and the women constituted an equally big part. One of ICRC's explicit aims are to highlight the conditions for 'women and children' but the given example can give the impression that it is only on paper, since the reality here, was that the beneficiaries were constituted of as many women as men but the focus was clearly on the women (and children).

Bacchi (2010a) claims that using a gender analysis also has the function to make men accountable for their actions and question number four³ in the WPR analyses, which wants to scrutinise what is left unproblematic and reveal the silences (Bacchi & Eveline, 2010) can be used to highlight that men are often left unproblematic in the humanitarian narrative. ICRC describe their water- and sanitation activities and how they give women and children safe access to water since "*long journeys to water points, [during which] women and children may be at risk of attack*" (ICRC, 2014, p. 36). It is also described how the provision of stoves reduces the risk for 'women and children' to be attacked when leaving the house in search of firewood. There is no question that 'women and children', under these circumstances, are vulnerable due to the risk of being attacked. The problem here is not that 'women and children' are described as vulnerable, but that the *reason* of why they are vulnerable and under attack is not explained. Describing the problem as 'being at risk of attack' is not only vague, but also only implied that the risk is being attacked by a presumed male perpetrator. This does not only make the perpetrator invisible, it also gives a connotation that this threat is in fact inherent for the perpetrator, it sounds like the attack could be from an animal or a natural disaster, not a person responsible for their actions, that commits an abuse and a crime. The focus here is not the perpetrator, but the survivors and it is taken for granted, without problematising or even mentioning the real problem of the perpetrators, that 'women and children', do not only have to, but also *should*, adapt their lives out of fear of being attacked by a man.

³ "*What is left unproblematic in this problem representation? Where are the silences? Can the 'problem' be thought about differently?*" (Bacchi & Eveline, 2010, p. 117).

Several quotes with ‘women and children’ associate women with the household in one way or another; as being the caregiver of the children, the breadwinner or the responsible for food- and water supply, as in this quote from the ICRC report; *“ICRC water, sanitation and habitat activities give displaced and resident women and children safe access to a source of water for multiple purposes (e.g. household consumption, agriculture or other essential needs), ensure better sanitation practices (...)”* (ICRC, 2018, p. 31). Even though this is problematised in the ICRC reports and despite the disclaimer, there are still obvious risks of reproducing such assumed gender roles. Even though the organisations need to act according to the reality they are working in and respond in an adequate way, Bacchi (2009; 2010b) claims that the presuppositions of a problem can re-produce that same problem and be a part of the *gendering* process. There is a difference between describing a fact as in the following quote: *“when distributing aid, the ICRC gives priority to the most vulnerable households, many of which have been deprived of their main breadwinner (usually adult males) and are headed by women. Therefore, women and children – including girls – are often the main beneficiaries of the relief provided to IDPs, returnees and residents”* (ICRC, 2015, p. 36) and *“women and children are the primary targets of health and hygiene promotion sessions that help ensure they have the knowledge and skills to help prevent the spread of disease”* (ICRC, 2015, p. 37). In the second example ICRC are adapting to the reality where, probably most women are responsible for the household. However the women are also *being made* responsible and it is implied that they have to assure that also men get information about health and hygiene, and that they comply with it. This can, depending on the context, be a heavy burden to put on women and children’s shoulders. It is also likely that women and children are the ones being approached by health promoters because they are more open-minded to receive the information and implement it, meaning that the men have already shown a resistance too big for humanitarian organisations to overcome, and the task is given to the women instead. Jansson and Eduards (2016) argue that women in conflict settings are given the narrow mandate to represent the group of women, thus women are, once again portrayed as one homogenous group. When gender awareness is conflicted with stereotypical narratives of women and men, women’s assumed innocence and peace striving is also giving them the responsibility to contribute to other women’s security and a gender equal peace. It is also problematic to assume women to be the primary or only caregivers of children; women are seen as mothers whilst men are not seen as fathers. When men are not seen as caregivers of children, by humanitarian organisations, stereotypical values are reproduced.

Baines (2004) claims that traditional gender roles, and other power relations, is a factor that drives processes of forced displacement. With this knowledge, if organisations and institutions with a humanitarian mandate are in fact contributing to settling traditional gender roles, they could also be contributing to the very situation they are trying to ‘rescue’ people from. When ‘women and peace’ is being discussed, what is actually of importance is ‘men and war’ (Jansson & Eduards, 2016). Within the silences of the discourse, what is *not* being said, the analysis becomes complete, which is what Bacchi and Eveline (2010) address when asking ‘what are the silences’ of the problem?. It is of great importance to have the courage to even problematise and scrutinise narratives that have been developed as a response to feminist critique and that is meant to highlight and describe unequal structures that are affecting women. If we satisfy with that ‘women and children’ are finally being acknowledged, we might miss that the very same policies that are meant to ‘empower’ women might do the opposite, or even miss the point, as when discussing ‘women and peace’ instead of ‘men and war’. *Very* generalised; the problem is not women and how to be more inclusive for women in peace building, the problem is men and the wars they are conducting. Jansson and Eduards (2016) claim that one of the main critiques towards the UN Security Council resolutions on *women, peace and security* is that the men and male norms are absent from the analysis. Women are also seen as ‘the others’ when being used as a token for representation, and the assumption is that women is a homogenous group with shared characteristics and interests, something that men is not assumed to have. When claiming that women (and children) have ‘specific needs’ as stated in the IHL (ICRC, 2017b), this is clearly compared to something/someone without these ‘specific needs’ - the norm. Thus, this is not a statement that addresses the diversity within a population or within groups, with all their specific needs, this statement implies that there is a population from which the International Humanitarian Laws is based on and will protect, and then there is a *specific* population with *specific* needs, namely women.

6.6 Summary of the analysis

The use of the ‘women and children’ in the reports is often justified, but not always. An assumption in the use of the term ‘women and children’ is clearly often that women are inherently vulnerable and sometimes even innocent. Women are also being seen as ‘the other’, in contrast to the male norm and described, explicitly or implicitly, to have ‘specific needs’. Women are their bodies, they are gender and they are ‘the others’ whilst men are sex and the norm, of which the policy-based response is based on. The initiatives to highlight that

the needs for women and men might differ are well intended, and often necessary, but they are also reproducing the narrative that men are the baseline. The silence of what is not being said is often the men - as perpetrators, as not being seen as 'vulnerable' or 'civilians', or as fathers. It is true that the silences of what is *not* being said reveals a lot about what is actually being said.

In the ICRC reports a pattern over time was clearly visible, the use of 'women and children' decreased drastically between 2013-2017, but at the same time the concept was not discussed in the later reports as it was in the earlier reports. The consequences of conceptualising 'women and children' will be discussed more in depth in the next section but generally speaking, humanitarian organisations have a great impact in how people are portrayed and this will also affect their own work, in planning, defining and conducting their activities to assist the people in *most* need.

7. DISCUSSION

7.1 Problematising women's alleged vulnerability and innocence

One of the obvious risks of assuming women's vulnerability is that it reproduces stereotypical notions of men and women. Men are seen as the norm and women as 'the other', even though women constitute half of the population. With the notion of being 'the other', women's rights risk being exempted from human's rights. Baines (2004) problematises the efforts to implement gender equality policies within the UNCHR and claims that the implementation of gender equality policies rests on an assumption of traditional gender roles such as women's innocence and vulnerability and men as the fighting force and political being. The result is that these policies lead to fixing' women and men into specific (and traditional) roles - roles that are often to a disadvantage for women. The problem lays within not problematising the concept of vulnerability in women and to see it as inherent. Women can be (and they often are) a vulnerable group, but this is context based and not in the biology of women. The assumption of women's innocence is even more problematic. In contrast to vulnerability, the label of innocence cannot be attached to a category of adult people, but must be an individual assessment based on the persons actions. As shown in the theory section and exemplified in the analysis, women-specific initiatives can, despite the opposite intentions, have the effects that women are seen as a 'specific' homogenous group with 'specific needs' due to their inherent 'vulnerability'. Women are seen as the problem and the humanitarian organisations take on the responsibility to 'save them'. Baines (2004, p. 21) claims that *"just as refugees are 'confined to their body' and commodified, refugee women are confined to a 'gendered*

body' in order to sell gender equality to humanitarians". Many humanitarian organisations have 'women and children' as their beneficiaries or target population. Reproducing the narrative of 'women and children' as 'innocent' and 'vulnerable' can most likely increase the donors willingness to donate money, regardless if that is the intention of the organisation or not. Humanitarian organisations have a big responsibility in working with vulnerable populations that might have difficulties making their voices heard. It is therefore extremely important that organisations working with people affected by conflict and crises acknowledge this mandate and do not speak 'on behalf' of a population if this cannot be legitimised or if it is not the voice of that population. Furthermore, the responsibility of the organisations, in how they address problems of which people they choose to assist, based on who they choose to 'be most vulnerable', will have an impact on how these people are viewed. If only 'innocent, vulnerable women and girls' have earned the right to assistance, what will happen with the equally innocent boys? Or the women who are not innocent? Burman (2008, p. 4) discusses this in the following quote: *"this position of 'deserving victim' relies on a notion of innocence that not only strips away agency but also pathologises those who do not appear so innocent (as where women and children have sex or fight in wars...)"*.

If the concept of 'vulnerability' is not problematised and seen in light of the context, there is a risk that the people in most need of assistance will not get it. Carpenter (2006) highlights this, with an example of the evacuation processes during the war in former Yugoslavia. The author describes how, in 1993 in Srebrenica, men and boys were largely excluded from being evacuated even though they at the time were the most vulnerable. So even though women, girls and younger boys were most vulnerable to specific forms of violence such as sexual violence, exploitation and deprivation, women and younger children were the *least* vulnerable to lethal attacks. Humanitarian organisations evacuated people from the narrative of 'women and children first' – which was conflated with 'vulnerable civilians', which resulted in that adult men, who were the most likely to be killed or detained, almost never was evacuated. This shows how vulnerability in adult civilians is, as mentioned, situation bound and how it cannot be taken for granted that women are always vulnerable, or the most vulnerable.

Women are often or mostly described in a context of being mothers in the analysed reports. In the same way that it is problematic to assume women to be the primary, or only, caregivers of children, it is also problematic to not recognise that men can also be parents. Carpenter (2006) exemplifies this by referring to the Geneva Convention that states that a woman should be

spared from death penalty in a situation of armed conflict if she is pregnant or has a child under five years old, the same does not apply for fathers. The consequences for the child of losing its parent are only considered when the parent is a woman. This demonstrates how the reproduction of stereotypes can have a large negative impact on people's lives, even if the intentions are good or the intervention is based on what the reality most often looks like. As stated in the beginning of this paper, the challenge for the organisations is of course to act according to the reality, to acknowledge discrimination and vulnerability, without reproducing the same structures that they are trying to respond to.

7.2 The humanitarian principles

Both ICRC and MSF rely on their core principles to guide and define their work, *impartiality* being one of them for both organisations (ICRC, 2016; MSF, 1995). In ICRC's definition of impartiality, sex/gender is not mentioned as a factor for discrimination whereas MSF defines impartiality as "*non-discrimination in regard to politics, race, religion, sex or any other similar criteria*" (MSF, 1995). One of the effects of misusing the term and the concept of 'women and children' could clearly not only be to jeopardise people's lives, when miscalculation what groups are the most vulnerable in a given situation, but also to jeopardise the principle of impartiality, which is fundamental for both ICRC and MSF and many other humanitarian organisations. According to the concept of impartiality, the humanitarian assistance should be based on needs, and not discriminate certain groups. The risk of always pointing out specific groups as *always* being in extra need of help and support, could lead to neglecting individuals from other groups that might be in more need or being vulnerable at the time.

8. CONCLUSION

The aim of this study was to analyse how the concept of 'women and children' is represented in the humanitarian field, by ICRC and MSF, and what implications that could have for the people they are aiming to assist. Clearly 'women' and 'children' are often vulnerable groups, especially in conflict situations. There is also an undisputable connection between women as mothers and children. However, women are much more than (possible) mothers and women are also not a homogenous group that can have generalised characteristics attributed to them, even though the intentions are good. As discussed previously, there is always an unequal power relationship between the one being protected and the one protecting. Regardless the

intention, the one being protected is not the one with the agency, which is why it is sensitive and might be problematic to ‘speak on the behalf’ of a group and dedicate them certain characteristics. The concept of ‘women and children’ and ‘women’ in relation to ‘vulnerability’ and ‘innocence’ must be problematised, no one benefits from large generalisations based on stereotypical notions on gender; not women, nor the humanitarian organisations that have as their mandates to assist the people *most in need*. The narrative of women’s inherent vulnerability and innocence is based on ancient perceptions on normative gender roles but also on nation building. Men have been seen as the warriors that are protecting what is theirs; the borders and the women. Women, being reduced to body and reproduction, have been seen to have no agency and in need of protection, also in the name of the nation. In this narrative, the obvious critique is that men claim to ‘protect’ women although women often need protection from men’s violence. This is also what has been noticed as a silence in the material studied; men and men’s role in women’s lack of safety. According to Bacchi (2010a), applying a gender perspective on policies also means highlighting men’s need to change, which is not something that has been visible in the material analysed. As discussed, the narrative of women’s ‘vulnerability’ and ‘innocence’ has been shown to facilitate the legitimisation of including women in policies regarding peace and security. It has to be considered that the same narrative is valid for humanitarian organisations, such as ICRC and MSF. Picturing women as ‘vulnerable’ and ‘innocent’ could have an impact in how and what activities are planned, especially if women are seen as the key to creating peace. The donors of these organisations are most likely also affected by these gender stereotypes, where innocence and vulnerability might be attributes that attract donation of money. There are no easy answers on how to approach this problem representation for the humanitarian organisations, they have to generalise to a certain extent to identify structures but at the same time not reproduce the same unequal structures. However, to problematise and challenge assumptions of a group or a population is necessary, even though the outcome in the end might be the same. Finally, the acknowledgment that everyone is vulnerable, depending of context and situation, has to result in questioning the reason and use of the label ‘vulnerability’ in relation to ‘women and children’.

There seem to be a tendency that ICRC use the term ‘women and children’ less and less frequently but at the same time have removed the section where they discuss the concept in their latest reports. This could be interpreted as a conscious action, where they see the need of problematising the concept. In this study five years of annual reports have been analysed but with this tendency from ICRC and the importance of the subject, a recommendation for future research would be to further study this pattern over time. Furthermore, as discussed in the section of ‘delimitations’, the concept of ‘women and children’ and how ‘women’ are always seen in comparison to ‘men’ would be important to analyse, from a non-binary, non-cis normative perspective.

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