



## Improving Participation and Protection of Displaced Women and Girls

Part 2: “When they speak, you listen”: The  
Role of Older Women in Displacement

SEPTEMBER 2019 | ANNA HIRSCH-HOLLAND

## Contents

1	Abbreviations	3
2	Acknowledgements	3
3	Executive Summary	4
4	Introduction	6
5	Analytical Framework and Methodology	7
5.1	Definitions and Analytical Framework	7
5.2	Summary of the Methodology	7
6	Problem Analysis	8
7	Older women's participation in agency-led activities	10
8	Older women's role outside of agency-led structures	11
8.1	Community's perception and treatment of older people	11
8.2	Older women in the 'private' (family) sphere	11
8.2.1	Status in the family	11
8.2.2	Contributing to family income and food basket	12
8.2.3	Solving family disputes	12
8.2.4	Knowledge and expertise	13
8.3	Older women in the 'public' sphere	13
8.3.1	External duties and relationships	13
8.3.2	Provision of advice and emotional support	14
8.3.3	Community problem solving and conflict resolution	14
9	Older women's protective role, or not	15
9.1	Intimate Partner Violence and Domestic Violence	15
9.2	Mediation in marital relationships	15
9.3	Advice about marriages and relationships	16
9.4	Advising on where women and girls go and what they wear	16
10	Methods for understanding and supporting the role of older women	17
10.1	Methods for understanding the role of older women	17
10.2	Methods for supporting the role of older women	18
10.2.1	Older women's inclusion in governance structures	18
10.2.2	Older Women's Safe Spaces	19
10.2.3	Older women as Protection Focal Points	20
10.2.4	Livelihoods and Income generating activities for older women	22
11	Conclusions	22
12	Bibliography	24
	Annex 1: Detailed Methodology	26
	Sources	26
	Field work locations	27
	Challenges and Limitations	28
	Annex 2: Older Women Analysis Tools	29

---

## 1 Abbreviations

CCCM – Camp Coordination and Camp Management

CM – Camp Management

DRC – Danish Refugee Council

FGD – Focus Group Discussion

GBV – Gender Based Violence

IDP – Internally Displaced Person

IOM – International Organisation For Migration

LWF – Lutheran World Foundation

NGO – Non-Governmental Organisation

NRC – Norwegian Refugee Council

ODI – Overseas Development Institute

OPA – Older Persons' Association

UN – United Nations

UNHCR – UN Refugee Agency

US – United States of America

WRC – Women's Refugee Commission

---

## 2 Acknowledgements

This report was written by Anna Hirsch-Holland, a consultant working with NRC. It is based on research that she conducted as part of a global project exploring how women's participation in community governance mechanisms, both inside and outside camps, contributes to enhancing women's safety. The wider project is managed by the International Organization for Migration, as the global co-lead of the Camp Coordination and Camp Management (CCCM) Cluster, and funded by the US Bureau for Population, Migration, and Refugees.

The author would like to acknowledge the women and men from displacement-affected communities who shared their perspectives during the field research, as well as the staff from service providers and Camp Management teams who also provided valuable insights. Thanks go to Nada Abdulrahman who supported the field work in Iraq; Jean Ndede and Susan Nakaitan Achuka in Kenya; and Eric Mativo in Tanzania – as well as all their colleagues in the NRC Country Offices who welcomed and took care of me. Particular thanks are also due to Noorina Anis (NRC) who led the data collection single-handedly in Afghanistan; Marjolein Roelandt and Amina Saoudi (IOM) who provided support and suggestions on the methodology and reports; and Giovanna Federici (NRC) who has provided invaluable advice, feedback, and friendship throughout the research.

Anna Hirsch-Holland is a freelance humanitarian worker specialising in community governance and capacity building, particularly in informal camps and urban out of camp settings. She has spent the last five years designing and implementing projects for the Norwegian Refugee Council, including in Lebanon, Afghanistan, and Iraq. She holds a Master's in International Relations from the University of Oxford.

---

## 3 Executive Summary

Through this study, NRC has developed and piloted a methodology for Camp Management and other agencies to understand the role that older women play in supporting their families and communities during displacement, including in formal camps, informal sites, and urban out of camp neighbourhoods. In better understanding older women's role in the community, including in the protection of women and girls, Camp Management agencies can then develop methods for harnessing the role of older women to improve humanitarian outcomes, including women's protection; some such methods are suggested in this report.

While it is undisputed that crisis-affected women can and should participate in humanitarian response, and that special efforts must be made to include and empower them, these efforts have not normally extended to older women. Older women *and* men are both frequently excluded from analysis and activities, rarely specifically consulted, and almost always considered only in terms of their vulnerability rather than their potential to be active participants in humanitarian response to displacement. This exclusion is exacerbated for older women in many displacement contexts, since they are much less likely than older men to have a pre-existing leadership role and hence less likely to be consulted or included by humanitarian agencies. Most older women informants in this study said that they were not consulted by humanitarian agencies and did not feel included in their activities; many lamented that since displacement their role was diminished – particularly in formal camps, where aid agencies were more plentiful and active than in out of camp settings.

However, excluding older women from humanitarian analysis and participation initiatives undermines their dignity and deprives them of their rights; may cause or exacerbate mental health and psychological issues; and misses an opportunity to harness their experience and position for the benefit of the wider community and humanitarian operations – particularly for women's protection and safety. Since Camp Management agencies have a fundamental role to play in facilitating the meaningful participation of men and women in the management of displacement, they also have the potential to enhance and support the role of older women. Although many participation initiatives encourage the establishment of new mechanisms and structures (e.g. 'committees'), this research sought to understand how Camp Management agencies could understand the *existing* roles that older women play and build on these, rather than only imposing new participatory mechanisms.

In order to understand the role of older women, the study has drawn on anthropological approaches, which means assessing relationships and knowledge in the community – in particular concerning the roles and influence of grandmothers, mothers, and other family members; decision-making patterns in the household; and knowledge and practices related to the well-being of women and children. Conducting this assessment and analysis can allow humanitarian practitioners to understand and then capitalise on the "cultural capital" of the community, rather than simply imposing on them a foreign cultural doctrine and practice. The study thereby developed a four-step process for understanding the role of older women, which is supported by practical tools (included in Annex 2) and can be replicated by Camp Management or other agencies in the field. The process involves in-depth consultation with different demographic groups in the community, as well as with local staff and particularly active or influential older women.

The study involved field work in four locations: Afghanistan (urban informal settlements and a peri-urban formal site); Iraq (informal settlements and urban out of camp neighbourhoods); Kenya (formal camp); and Tanzania (formal camp). The different locations provided contexts that varied not only by culture, but also by displacement type, including recent and protracted displacement, as well as refugees, IDPs, and returnees. Despite the variety in contexts, some striking similarities were observed across all of them, as well as subtle differences, in terms of how older women are supporting their communities, including with regards to the safety and protection of women and girls.

### **Older women's position and role within their communities:**

- Command respect and authority from all other community members – albeit in some cases diminished due to displacement-induced vulnerability and loss of traditional roles.

- Play a key role in handing down traditions and customs to younger generations, and advising others in their community as well as providing emotional support.
- Play a conflict resolution role within and between families, including between husband and wife, parents and children, children with other children, or adults with other adults.
- Contribute to the domestic and childcare responsibilities of the household, and in some cases also the financial income or in-kind resources.
- Have extensive social networks and understanding of the community, including historical knowledge.

#### **Older women's impact on women and girls' safety and protection:**

- Given their significant role in protecting and handing down traditions, older women can have a key influence on the continuation or transformation of customs and practices that may harm or help women and girls – such as early marriage and domestic violence.
- Older women in most contexts seem to be able to influence the behaviour of adult men (particularly their grown-up sons or grandsons) – including behaviour towards wives and children, to the extent that some older women claim they can actually stop men from behaving violently.
- Older women are more likely than older men to support non-traditional GBV response methods, as well as divorce if this is what a victim wants. However, at the same time, many older women do still favour a mediation approach which emphasises the unity of the family, and may lead to persuading women to stay with abusive husbands – contrary to GBV response best practice.
- On decisions about marriage and divorce, older women can be pivotal, sometimes having an equally or even more influential role than the older man, and being able to stop a marriage that they disapprove of. They also advise adolescents who may be entering into illicit relationships, providing 'warnings' to both parties about the risks involved.
- Older women can have an influence on the extent to which women and girls participate in the community – e.g. attendance at school, work, or humanitarian services.

Though the precise nature of older women's roles will vary not only by context, but also by family and individual (hence the need for an in-depth analysis, as suggested above), the broad trends highlighted above lead to several general recommendations that can be contextualised for a range of settings. These suggestions provide methods for Camp Management and other agencies to engage with older women to enhance their supportive role in the community:

1. Include older women – particularly those who are already influential and active in their communities – in community engagement initiatives, including in inter-generational governance structures where they can support their younger counter-parts – *for Camp Management agencies.*
2. Establish safe spaces that can be used by older women to (a) develop a livelihoods activity and (b) to provide their 'protective' role – e.g. provision of emotional support and advice, and conflict resolution – *for Camp Management agencies with support of Protection and Livelihoods.*
3. Formalise and shape older women's protective role to support referrals; response to protection cases; and provision of behaviour-change awareness. For older women to take on these roles they should be trained using "dialogical communication methods" – a process by which harmful practices are discussed and respectfully challenged in a way that builds new consensus, rather than simply imposing new ideas – *for Protection agencies with support from Camp Management.*
4. Livelihoods and income-generating activities for older women – *for livelihoods agencies with support of Camp Management.*

Older women can and do play a key supportive role in their families and wider communities during displacement. However, it is also evident that many of them feel like their role as advice-givers and transmitters of culture is being displaced by the work of humanitarian and development agencies. Engaging older women and restoring their influential role in society is therefore imperative, not only for the value this can have for the well-being of other community members, but also for the protection of their own rights and dignity in displacement.

---

## 4 Introduction

The humanitarian sector is increasingly cognisant of the role that crisis-affected women can and should play in humanitarian response, and the need, therefore, to make special efforts to include and empower them.<sup>1</sup> However, in reality such efforts have normally not extended to *older women*. Older people are frequently excluded from analysis and activities entirely,<sup>2</sup> and almost always considered only in terms of their vulnerability rather than their potential to be active participants in displacement management or humanitarian response. This exclusion is exacerbated for older women in many displacement contexts, where older men are much more likely to have – by default – a pre-existing leadership role and hence to be consulted or included by humanitarian agencies.<sup>3</sup>

Ensuring meaningful participation of displaced women and men in the management of their displacement situation is a foundational objective and core activity of the Camp Management Sector. Traditionally, the participation element of the Camp Manager’s role would be achieved through establishment of and/or support to governance or ‘leadership’ mechanisms (e.g. camp committees or block leaders), and more generally in efforts to engage the community – including women and girls – in activities designed by the Camp Management agency. However, as recommended in the IOM/WRC Women’s Participation Baseline Learning Report, we must “shift mindsets and reflect on how humanitarian actors could support how women and girls *already* participate at household and community level in collective action.” This research responds to this recommendation with specific reference to older women – seeking to understand the role that they are *already* playing in their community, to see how Camp Management agencies (or others) could capitalise on this role to support the community more broadly, and particularly to support other women.

The report presents the findings of a qualitative study into the role that older women are playing in their communities in a range of displacement settings,<sup>4</sup> and thereby suggests possible steps that could be taken by Camp Management and/or other agencies to (a) replicate this kind of study in their own project in order to (b) develop mechanisms to enhance and capitalise on these roles – particularly with regards to women’s safety and protection. Some suggested methods for (b) will be presented, but the emphasis is on the process of understanding and reflecting on older women’s roles, before responding with specific activities and initiatives at the field level. Specifically, the research will seek to answer the following questions, looking for similarities and differences between different displacement contexts:

1. To what extent and in what ways are older displaced women participating in NGO/UN/Authority-led (“agency-led”) participation mechanisms (e.g. committees, groups), and how can Camp Management actors encourage or enhance the role of older women in these mechanisms?
2. Separate from agency-led initiatives, in what ways might older displaced women participate in and support their communities (both within and outside the immediate family) – particularly with regards to women’s protection?
3. How can Camp Management actors learn about the particular role of older women in their contexts of implementation?

---

<sup>1</sup> E.g. in 2016, high level leaders at the World Humanitarian Summit agreed that “the capacity, knowledge, and impact that women and local women’s groups consistently display in a crisis is [...] rarely supported due to [...] structural inequalities”, and called for changes to ensure women’s empowerment in humanitarian action. World Humanitarian Summit, *Women and Girls: Catalysing Action To Achieve Gender Equality (High-Level Leaders’ Roundtable)*, 2016. See also: Alison Barclay, Michelle Higelin, and Melissa Bungcaras, *On The Frontline: Catalysing Women’s Leadership In Humanitarian Action*, Action Aid 2016.

<sup>2</sup> E.g. “Many surveys – such as demographic and health surveys – only collect gender-based violence data on women aged between 15 and 49” – Poppy Walton, ‘I Went to the EU Development Days and Older Women Were Invisible’, Help Age International Blog 2018

<sup>3</sup> As per the findings of this study and secondary literature, where ‘elder’ males often form part of traditional leadership structures.

<sup>4</sup> Namely: formal camps where the Camp Management agency has a formal mandate; informal (i.e. spontaneous, self-settled) displacement sites where the Camp Management agency may or may not have a formal mandate; and out of camp contexts (where the displaced are scattered among host community in a defined area – e.g. a neighbourhood) where the Camp Management agency is unlikely to have any formal mandate.

4. How can Camp Management actors capitalise on the findings of (3) to enhance the protective role that women may play in their communities?<sup>5</sup>

---

## 5 Analytical Framework and Methodology

### 5.1 Definitions and Analytical Framework

The research concentrates on contexts where Camp Management projects are being implemented in the various displacement settings that may be served by a 'Camp Management approach', including formal camps, informal sites/settlements,<sup>6</sup> and out of camp urban neighbourhoods.<sup>7</sup> The research focusses on the displaced communities residing in these settings – including internally displaced persons, refugees, and returning refugees/IDPs.

The UN definition of an 'older person' is 60+ years; however, in many societies a younger or older age is used since old age is linked to death rates, retirement ages, and social conventions. As such "older women" has been defined according to each context analysed in the research<sup>8</sup> in consultation with Camp Management local staff during the field work planning, and verified again during primary data collection with community members. A common theme that emerged during all field work is that the community's understanding of who is older is dependent on a range of factors, particularly: age, physical appearance and ability, and position in the family ("grandparent"). Due to the latter two factors, many communities consider that people in their fifties are 'older'.

The research investigates the participation and role of older women in different spheres, falling into three main categories: first, in agency-led structures, initiatives, projects etc.; second, in the 'public' sphere generally (i.e. outside of immediate and extended family) but separate from any agency-led initiatives, whether at a group or individual level; and finally in the 'private' sphere (i.e. within immediate and extended family) and separate from agency-led initiatives. The Camp Management Toolkit "degrees of participation"<sup>9</sup> provides a framework for understanding and analysing the extent of older women's participation in agency-led initiatives. However, to understand older women's role outside of agency-led initiatives, in both the public and private sphere, the research employed an anthropological approach, drawing on a methodology developed by Dr Judi Aubel in "The Grandmother Project", which involves assessing how older women relate to others within their community and families, and how they are involved in transmitting cultural norms and practices in the community.<sup>10</sup>

### 5.2 Summary of the Methodology

The research employed a qualitative analysis of both primary and secondary sources. Secondary sources included studies, reports, and project reviews pertaining to the role and participation of older people in a range of contexts. Primary data collection then allowed further investigation into the actual and potential role of *displaced* older women in settings with Camp Management interventions, including through piloting of tools that use an anthropological approach to understand the role and relationships of older women and others in the community.

---

<sup>5</sup> Camp Management Toolkit recommends that "strategies to effectively involve women can make use of their specific social position and existing cultural roles rather than trying to involve them in ways that go against tradition", IOM, NRC, and UNHCR, *Camp Management Toolkit*, 2015, p.54

<sup>6</sup> Terminology used in the study corresponds to local naming conventions

<sup>7</sup> Where displaced persons are living in accommodation with and among the host community

<sup>8</sup> This approach is also recommended by Jo Wells in *The Neglected Generation: The Impact of Displacement on Older People*, HelpAge International 2012

<sup>9</sup> *Camp Management Toolkit*, p.48

<sup>10</sup> Judi Aubel, *Involving Grandmothers to Promote Child Nutrition, Health and Development*, World Vision 2014, pp.36-47

Primary data collection took place in four countries, of which three currently have NRC Camp Management projects (Afghanistan, Iraq, and Tanzania) and one (Kenya) has other NRC interventions<sup>11</sup> but not a Camp Management project. These contexts covered a range of displacement settings and different types of Camp Management interventions – further details are included in Annex 1 (Detailed Methodology).

Table 1: Summary of research locations

Location	Displacement setting	Type of displacement	Nationalities
Afghanistan: Kabul	Urban Informal settlements (protracted)	IDPs, refugee returnees	Afghan
Afghanistan: Herat	Peri-urban formal and informal sites	IDPs	Afghan
Iraq: Ramadi	Out of camp urban neighbourhoods	IDPs, IDP returnees	Iraqi
Iraq: Ramadi	Urban informal settlement	IDPs, IDP returnees	Iraqi
Kenya: Kakuma	Formal camp; formal integrated settlement	Refugees	Multiple, including South Sudanese, Somali, Burundi
Tanzania: Nyragusu	Formal camp	Refugees	Congolese and Burundian

Data collection comprised of 36 key informant interviews and 21 focus group discussions with men and women of different ages from the displaced community and staff implementing camp management projects. In addition, staff from other service providers working in the project locations provided some insights on their work with older women and their perspectives about the role of such women. A total of 194 people (140 women and 54 men) were consulted.

## 6 Problem Analysis

Nearly a quarter of the world’s women are over the age of 50,<sup>12</sup> and it is estimated that older people make up 10–30% of displaced people, with a majority being older women.<sup>13</sup> International law and policy clearly asserts the right of older people to be included and actively participate in community life, including in humanitarian contexts.<sup>14</sup> Yet older people are frequently excluded or are considered only in terms of their vulnerability. While it is true that older people have specific needs and can be very vulnerable, they are also “adults who have had tremendously rich lives and a lot of experience, and a lot of potential to give back to society in some way.”<sup>15</sup> UNHCR, in its ‘Guidance on Working With older Persons in Forced Displacement’, aptly describes the need to recognise and involve older persons, highlighting the important roles that they play,<sup>16</sup> and this sentiment is supported by the findings of NRC’s 2018 Women’s Participation Study in eastern Afghanistan – which inspired the current research. During that study,

<sup>11</sup> Information, Counselling, and Legal Assistance; WASH; Livelihoods; and Education.

<sup>12</sup> Ann Stewart and Jennifer Lander, *Transforming Gender Relations in an Ageing World: A Policy Discussion Paper*, HelpAge International 2018, p.2, footnote 1

<sup>13</sup> Veronique Barbelet, *Older People in Displacement: Falling through the Cracks of Emergency Response*, HelpAge International/ODI 2018, p.1

<sup>14</sup> Principle 7 of the UN Principles for Older Persons (adopted by the General Assembly in 1991) states that older persons should remain integrated in community life and participate actively in the formulation of policies affecting their wellbeing. The Madrid International Plan of Action on Aging in 2002 linked this to humanitarian contexts, calling for “enhanced contributions of older persons to the re-establishment and reconstruction of communities and the rebuilding of the social fabric following emergencies.” (See: Madrid International Plan of Action on Aging 2002, Second World Assembly on Ageing, Objective 2 under Issue 8 (“Emergencies”), paragraphs 55-56). In addition, the IASC has provided a briefing on humanitarian action and older persons, which advocates for “[facilitation of] older persons’ involvement in decision-making, and in humanitarian prevention and response activities.” – see Inter-Agency Standing Committee, *Humanitarian Action and Older Persons: An Essential Brief for Humanitarian Actors*, 2008

<sup>15</sup> Cynthia Powell of HelpAge International as quoted in IRIN News article: <http://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/report/88403/haiti-dont-forget-elderly>

<sup>16</sup> UNHCR, *Working with Older Persons in Forced Displacement*, 2013



women from Neighbourhood Committees<sup>17</sup> particularly emphasised that “women’s problems” are solved by older women and that older women are the only women who can speak to ‘maliks’ (male community leaders).

---

*“I am elderly and I help solve the problems. If I leave it to the youth, they will be in conflict with each other and they will fight.” (Older woman member of NRC’s Neighbourhood Committee, eastern Afghanistan, 2018)<sup>18</sup>*

---

And yet, at least in the humanitarian context, the role and position of older women in the community is often not recognised and even less often is it considered as an opportunity. For example, in a gender analysis of the Rohingya Refugee response the nutrition section notes that lactating mothers sought advice from older women in the community, but presents this as a negative point (since mothers do not access specialist support) rather than a dynamic to capitalise on.<sup>19</sup> This seems to be a problem also present among development projects such as health and nutrition programmes which, according to The Grandmother Project, tend to “focus exclusively on children and women of reproductive age, and either ignore grandmothers or view them as an obstacle rather than a resource.”<sup>20</sup>

Part of the problem is the pervasive perception that older people’s role is largely passive; “it is assumed that after 60, older people ‘can’t work’ and ‘just sit’ - especially in a disaster, where most processes exclude older people’s participation in community and camp life.”<sup>21</sup> For example, an ODI study of older displaced people in Ethiopia and South Sudan found a disconnect between older people’s perceptions of their changing roles and understanding of these issues among aid actors: “older people told us that Western values and education and the role given to younger people in the camps created tensions between generations, and that young people had taken over their role as community leaders.”<sup>22</sup> By contrast, NGO staff working in the camps assumed that nothing had changed in older persons’ roles<sup>23</sup> – suggesting that these staff have failed to develop a sufficiently nuanced understanding of older people’s actual and potential roles. It is therefore not surprising that NGOs have not developed adequate systems for ensuring older people’s participation. Even where older people are consulted or involved, this is likely to target primarily a smaller subset of respected “elders”, who, as well as being male, normally have a higher socio-economic standing in the community and are therefore unlikely to represent the wider population of crisis-affected older people.<sup>24</sup>

According to some practitioners we are now at a “critical juncture” where this attitude is starting to change and there is “an increased recognition of older people as contributing actors, not just vulnerable recipients of assistance.”<sup>25</sup> Nevertheless, examples are primarily found among age-focussed humanitarian agencies (principally HelpAge International), or in the development sector where there seems to have been more innovation and good practice in this regard.

Excluding older women from humanitarian analysis and participation initiatives can cause or exacerbate mental health and psychological issues of older people<sup>26</sup> while depriving them of their rights;<sup>27</sup> prevents

---

<sup>17</sup> Established by NRC as part of its Urban Displacement Out of Camp (UDOC) project

<sup>18</sup> As quoted in Anna Hirsch-Holland, *Women’s Participation Study Report (Afghanistan)*, NRC 2018 [Not publicly available]

<sup>19</sup> Iulia Toma, Mita Chowdhury, Mushfika Lajju, Nina Gora, and Nicola Padamada, *Rohingya Refugee Response Gender Analysis: Recognizing and Responding to Gender Inequalities*, ACF/Save the Children/OXFAM 2018, p.29

<sup>20</sup> Aibel, 2014, p.vi.

<sup>21</sup> Will Day, Antoinette Pirie, and Chris Roys, *Strong and Fragile: Learning from Older People in Emergencies*, HelpAge International, 2007, p.6

<sup>22</sup> Barbelet. p.9

<sup>23</sup> Barbelet. p.22

<sup>24</sup> Barbelet. p.v

<sup>25</sup> Barbelet. p.27

<sup>26</sup> Older people in an ODI study “linked mental health and psychological issues with their loss of power, authority and role in the community as a result of displacement.” Barbelet, p.v

<sup>27</sup> UN Principles for Older Persons state that “Older persons should remain integrated in society, participate actively in the formulation and implementation of policies that directly affect their well-being, and share their knowledge and skills with younger generations” (Article 7); “Older persons should be able to seek and develop opportunities for service to the community and to serve as volunteers in positions appropriate to their interests and capabilities”. Adopted by General Assembly resolution 46/91 of 16 December 1991 (<https://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/OlderPersons.aspx>).

establishment of services and protective mechanisms tailored to their specific needs; and misses an opportunity to harness their experience and position for the benefit of the wider community and humanitarian operations – particularly for women’s protection and safety.

## 7 Older women’s participation in agency-led activities

The lack of older people’s participation, including and especially older women, was highlighted in much of the secondary literature, and corroborated by primary sources. In Iraq, neither the older women nor the service providers consulted in the research could mention any examples of older women’s participation at any levels. They had not been approached for provision of information, and all of the older women participating in the research said that this was the first time they had ever been consulted. In Kenya, the older women informants said that they were only consulted after specific emergencies (e.g. a recent flooding) and otherwise they felt forgotten, especially as their assistance was dwindling. They said that agencies do not consult with them as they assume that leaders will take information from the older people – however, they did not feel that they had access to camp leaders, who they said did not proactively consult with them. While a small number of older people, including women, have a leadership role in traditional ‘Committees of Elders’, these are not recognised, let alone consulted and included, by service providers; moreover, informants were lacklustre about the influence of these committees due to cultural changes in the camp.

In Afghanistan and Tanzania, older women did apparently attend some information sessions for ‘passive information transfer’ or to FGDs and community meetings for ‘consultation’. Moreover, in Tanzania there are some activities implemented by agencies that facilitate older people’s ‘functional’ participation – e.g. a mobile phone charging station, which is staffed by older people who can earn a small income by providing this service for camp residents. Moreover, moving closer to the ‘interactive’ end of the participation spectrum, there are older women participating in camp leadership. For example, in Herat (Afghanistan), 17% of NRC’s female committee members are 50 or above, while 8% are 60 or above; in Kabul, 31% are 50 or above while 15% are 60 or above, and some are also volunteering as Community Health Workers with another agency. Similarly, in Iraq, 18% of NRC’s neighbourhood committee members are aged 50 or more, while 9% are 60 or above.<sup>28</sup> These numbers are quite encouraging and suggest that there is at least a foundation for ‘interactive’ participation and ultimately ‘ownership’. While Camp Management staff did not indicate that particular efforts or initiatives had taken place to support the older women’s role in the committee, some informants suggested that in Afghanistan the Maliks (male community leaders) invite older women to meetings with service providers, and the older women felt able to speak with these stakeholders. This highlights the potential that older women have in playing a coordination role, since (in the Afghanistan context, at least) they have more freedom to meet with men and are more accepted in playing a ‘public’ role than their younger counterparts.

Table 2: Degrees of Participation of Older Women in the research field locations

Degree of Participation	Examples
Ownership	None – though potential for this in places where older women are members of Site/Neighbourhood Committees
Interactive	Some older women involved in site/neighbourhood management committees or have camp leadership positions – which in some cases enables them to participate in decision making with service providers
Functional	Some older people involved in agency-designed initiatives (Tanzania and Afghanistan). Others involved in Camp Management leadership structures or traditional structures (e.g. ‘Councils of Elders’) but decision-making in humanitarian response is limited
Consultation	Some older women consulted by agencies during FGDs or assessments – normally ad hoc rather than systematic/regular

<sup>28</sup> Numbers for Kenya could not be obtained, but on observation there were some older women leaders.

Information transfer	As per above (consultation)
Passive	Some older women attending information and awareness sessions, or community meetings during which they do not participate but only listen

## 8 Older women’s role outside of agency-led structures

### 8.1 Community’s perception and treatment of older people

While there were of course differences across the studied contexts, there were also some clear common themes. In particular, in all contexts older people are respected and revered within their communities, and generally cared for by their families and neighbours. In Iraq they were described as “at the top of everything” and that “when they speak, everyone listens”; similar sentiments were expressed by adult men and women as well as adolescent girls in Kenya. Older women are respected alongside older men, but most participants agreed that the older man has the highest status in a family until he dies, at which point the older woman takes his place.

At the same time, a few respondents – particularly in Kenya’s Kakuma/Kalobeyei camps and in Afghanistan’s Herat informal camps – also highlighted the fact that older people can also be a burden, “another mouth to feed”, and that older women who are separated from their family are particularly vulnerable and need extra care from neighbours and service providers. Moreover, even if older women are universally respected, the extent of their influence varies. In particular, it seems that access to humanitarian assistance and livelihoods seems to affect the extent of older women’s influence, and that this in turn can be linked to displacement context. For example, if displaced families have access to emergency household assistance (such as food, NFIs, and cash) and are also isolated from livelihoods opportunities that would typically be open to older women (e.g. cultivation or small-scale trading), this lessens the role of the older woman in her family and therefore – possibly – her authority within that family. This was observed in the formal camp context of Kakuma, in contrast to the urban out of camp and informal site settings of Iraq and Afghanistan where older women were more involved in providing for their families – especially if husbands (adult or older) had been lost due to conflict. At the same time, if the conditions of a camp or informal camp environment exacerbate the vulnerability of older people (e.g. in Afghanistan’s Herat; or in Kakuma where there is declining assistance without durable solutions), this also seems to diminish their role in the community. Moreover, in a long-established camp with a ‘heavy’ presence of NGOs undertaking behavioural change activities or providing services that previously would have been fulfilled by older women, older women’s role is diminished. These conditions are all present in Kenya’s Kakuma camp, where there was a sense among many informants that older women’s traditional roles are being eroded since displacement, and as a consequence their status in the community is weakened.

### 8.2 Older women in the ‘private’ (family) sphere

#### 8.2.1 Status in the family

Participants across all contexts agreed that the elder man in the family is generally the ‘boss’, but they also agreed that the elder woman has a major role to play. One of the male participants in Iraq noted: “If she asks you to do something, you must do it”, and other Iraqi men agreed that the older woman is “the police” of the family, and they especially emphasised that once the older man dies the elder woman becomes the first authority in the household: “she supports her family in everything and does everything”. As such, the role of many older women in Iraq has increased since displacement and losing husbands through the

conflict. The older women must then do everything for the family such as paying rent, buying food, and following up on documentation and legal issues.<sup>29</sup>

In all contexts, informants suggested that – regardless of the presence or not of an older man – older women also provide childcare and other domestic responsibilities, and in case of orphaned children they are often the ones to take the children in.<sup>30</sup> Adult men in Kenya also emphasised that older women had particularly good knowledge about the household’s needs, since they stay at home and care for the children. At the same time, some informants – particularly in Kakuma camp – said that older women’s role is diminishing as many have become too weak since displacement.

---

*“My grandmother is around 70 and she likes cooking, and in the evening she gathers her grandchildren together and teaches them how to sing and tells them stories”*  
(Young South Sudanese woman, Kakuma Camp, Kenya)

---

### **8.2.2 Contributing to family income and food basket**

In most contexts, participants emphasised that older women (and in some cases older men as well) were involved in paid or unpaid livelihoods activities – such as cultivating vegetables for the family, running small retail business such as market stalls or small neighbourhood shops, or perhaps undertaking a simple craft such as wool spinning in Afghanistan. Moreover, older women in Iraq and Afghanistan would go to the markets to do the family shopping, and would sometimes take their daughters or grandchildren with them.<sup>31</sup> South Sudanese informants in Kakuma noted that older women know a lot about cultivation and agriculture, which they were doing back home, but seem unable to do in the camp. The older women expressed sadness that they cannot pass these techniques to the younger people in Kakuma, where there is apparently inadequate land or irrigation for cultivation.

### **8.2.3 Solving family disputes**

Participants across all contexts agreed that older women played an important role in keeping the ‘unity’ of the family – both in terms of protecting the ‘institution’ of the family itself and defending its interests, as well as solving disputes through mediation – often together with the older man of the family (but without him if he has died). Most informants emphasised that older women (and men) are involved in trying to prevent (sometimes “at all costs”) the separation of husband and wife, and in Iraq the men in particular highlighted older women’s role in resolving marital problems – see section 9.2. However, among the South Sudanese older women in Kakuma it seems that Councils of Elders or elder men are more involved in solving marital disputes, while older women emphasised their conflict resolution role primarily in relation to disputes between parents and children (also mentioned by staff in Tanzania). At the same time, they said “if the son is religious he will listen to his mother, but in most cases men will not listen to elder women” – this contrasts significantly from the findings of Iraq and Afghanistan where older women held more sway over their adult sons – as explained in section 9.1.

---

<sup>29</sup> This is similarly the case for Syrian refugees – see Evelyn King Mumaw, *Woman Alone - the fight for survival by Syria's refugee women*, UNHCR 2014

<sup>30</sup> This has also been recognised in other contexts such as South Sudan (Barbelet. p.v) and among Syrian Refugees (Mumaw/UNHCR, 2014)

<sup>31</sup> Similarly, in Pakistan women who cannot be accompanied by a male head of household could only access services in the company of older female family members – on whom *purdah* [social rules] restrictions are not so strict. IDMC, *Briefing Paper on Flood-Displaced Women in Sindh Province, Pakistan*, 2011, p.9

## 8.2.4 Knowledge and expertise

---

*“NGOs are taking the role of older women: the older women are told not to give their advice, and then they feel like they are being denied a role in the community.” (Adult woman in Kakuma Refugee Camp, Kenya)*

---

South Sudanese older women in Kakuma camp as well as Iraqi older women see themselves as playing a key role in sharing religious and cultural knowledge and practices. For example, they accompany children to mosques or churches, and teach them how to pray – particularly when the mother is too occupied with domestic work to do so. In addition, across all contexts, older women were recognised as playing an important role in supporting parents in matters of health and nutrition, including maternal and child health – based on the older women’s extensive experience in these matters, and especially when public health services are lacking. However, adult and older women consulted in Kakuma also said that older women’s expertise in this regard was being displaced by NGO staff, and that this left many older women excluded and denied a role in the community.

In general, while all respondents appreciated the role of older women in the family, a few respondents in Iraq and Afghanistan also mentioned that older women can have high expectations of their family and even interfere “too much” in the lives of their offspring and in-laws.

## 8.3 Older women in the ‘public’ sphere

### 8.3.1 External duties and relationships

---

*“As women become older, they become bolder” (NRC staff, Tanzania)*

---

In Iraq and Afghanistan, participants generally agreed that older women are more able to participate in the public sphere compared to younger women due to their freedom of movement (if healthy enough) and ability to meet with non-family member men. In Kenya’s Kakuma camp, this was emphasised less, though a small number of older South Sudanese women do have positions on Councils of Elders along with older men – which solve problems among the South Sudanese community in the camp (see below). In Iraq and Afghanistan, older women do not seem to have a role in traditional community leadership structures like those in Kakuma, however some have become known in the community as leadership figures (described by men in Iraq as having a “masculine” personality), and may be asked by others in the community to represent their interests – for example, an influential woman interviewed in Iraq’s Kilo 7 settlement said that other women asked her to represent them during meetings with one of the main service providers in the site. Moreover, she claimed to advise the Mukhtar and a local authority representative living in the site to “make them stronger”. As mentioned above, this similarly applies in Afghanistan, where older women said that Maliks invite them to join meetings with service providers. In Kakuma camp, it seems that some older women do take on unofficial leadership roles in the community by raising issues on behalf of other older women, as well as visiting and advising women, and collecting food to redistribute among the neediest families in their block.

In the out of camp context of Iraq, women working at local authorities gave various examples of older women who have managed to bring services and assistance to thousands of people in their neighbourhoods through their local influence.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, some informants also emphasised that older women’s ‘external’ role becomes essential if she has lost her husband; this includes, for example, approaching local authorities, going to the market, and running errands in general. By contrast, this was

---

<sup>32</sup> Unfortunately time limitations meant it was not possible to contact and interview these women during field work.

not something mentioned by informants in the camp setting of Kakuma, where older women alone were seen as being dependent on neighbours and humanitarian aid.

In both displacement contexts of Iraq, participants mentioned that older women often walked children to school – especially the children of female-headed households, since younger women feel unsafe walking, but older women do not face such issues so long as they are physically able: “nobody will make violence against us”.

More generally, it seems that older women in all contexts are particularly adept in developing large and intricate social networks, while gaining the trust of a range of community members – including children. This enables them to understand the private dynamics of relationships within their community – such as between husbands and wives, and adolescent girls and boys. This knowledge then enables them to make ‘interventions’ in such private affairs – of which more below.

### **8.3.2 Provision of advice and emotional support**

Across all contexts, older women were seen as a source of advice and emotional support in their communities or tribes – including for people outside of their immediate families. In Kenya, the older women described themselves as a role-model for the extended family and neighbours, especially on matters of religion and culture. At the same time, they lamented the fragmentation of the community in camp life: “in the previous life we brought up the community together, as one unit”.

Staff and community members in Iraq and Afghanistan also mentioned that older women are often ‘leading’ the mourners at funerals and the celebrations at weddings, as well as visiting bereaved families to offer condolences. All participants agreed that older people – men and women – give advice to people both inside and outside their families and that they can do this because of their wisdom gleaned from years of experience and having faced “lots of ups and downs”. Older women were seen as particularly approachable persons from whom to seek support and advice – including by younger people. One young man in Iraq mentioned his preference to ask older women in the site for help, as he feels shy with younger women; and adolescent girls in Kenya said that older women “do good things for young people” and like to give them advice on many things, including “how to be responsible” in the household – particularly in terms of household chores such as cooking and cleaning.

### **8.3.3 Community problem solving and conflict resolution**

Informants from across the contexts agreed that, to a greater or lesser extent, some older women are involved in conflict and problem solving at the community level – i.e. among neighbours, or within the tribe or wider extended family. Indeed, in Iraq’s Kilo 7, some participants felt that certain strong older women were able to solve problems that even the major family Sheikhs or Imams failed to solve. In Kenya (Kakuma) and Tanzania (Nyarugusu) this role was formalised through traditional justice systems that are presided over by elders both male and female. In Tanzania, staff suggested that older women would especially be involved in resolving issues pertaining to child neglect, domestic violence, and disputes between women.

---

*“There is a Council of Elders where grandmothers and grandfathers come together to discuss issues at the tribal level. It’s helpful because they make people obey the laws.” (Adolescent girls from South Sudan in Kenya’s Kalobeyei Settlement)*

---

Besides these ‘formal’ structures, older women also solve disputes between spouses, children, and neighbours in a more ad hoc way by bringing together disputants and mediating to solve the problem; indeed, adolescent girls suggested that older women are even more involved than men in such issues because the men are busy. They also said that older women are called upon by families who do not have their “own” elder to mediate. This informal role was also emphasised in both Iraq and Afghanistan – though informants disagreed on whether they had a greater or lesser role than men in this regard. In Iraq, participants particularly cited examples of older women intervening to solve conflicts between families that stemmed from children’s arguments or from marital problems, as well as solving marital problems themselves – of which more below. On children’s arguments, though these may seem trivial, respondents

agreed that they can easily escalate to the parents (normally the mothers) and wider community, and that older women could intervene and solve the issue by talking “grandma to grandma”.

---

## 9 Older women’s protective role, or not

### 9.1 Intimate Partner Violence and Domestic Violence

Participants agreed that various family members may be involved in solving problems between a husband and wife, and in serious cases eminent community members such as imams (Iraq and Afghanistan), family sheikhs or maliks (Iraq, Afghanistan), or Councils of Elders (South Sudanese refugees) could also be involved. However, many also agreed that this is an area where older women in particular have a significant role to play - not just in their own families but also in other families in their neighbourhood or site.

Within their own families, older women will give advice to their married sons and daughters, particularly where the son has a “bad attitude” towards his wife – this was mentioned by participants from across demographic groups in both Iraq and Afghanistan. Moreover, older women in the informal settlement context of Iraq all agreed that *they can stop violence by a husband towards his wife* through their interventions. The men described how the parents of an abused wife may go to speak to the parents of her abusive husband to solve the problem, at which point the mother or even grandmother of said husband will speak to him to make him stop. Outside of their own families, older women may still intervene by talking to an abusive husband or father about his behaviour, or mediating between a husband and wife. For example, staff in Tanzania said that some older women have their own ‘offices’ where they undertake counselling and ‘mediation’ on their own initiative, and older women from Iraq’s Kilo 7 settlement said that they advise parents not to use violence against their children. Also in Iraq, male informants mentioned a case of an older woman who intervened when a husband was being violent towards his wife. The older woman appealed to the man to cease such behaviour, and when he did not, she reported it to the wife’s family and thereby helped the wife to obtain a divorce with her family’s support. The informants felt that this particular older woman’s personality and leadership skills enabled her to play such a role. In Kenya, South Sudanese older women said that in the past they would talk to men who were beating their wives, but nowadays this role is fulfilled “by UNHCR.”<sup>33</sup>

### 9.2 Mediation in marital relationships

Although there are examples – particularly from Iraq – of older women supporting women to obtain a divorce from abusive husbands, most informants emphasised that older women (and men) normally attempt to prevent divorce through mediation. South Sudanese older women are part of a Council of Elders that decides whether or not to grant a divorce (aiming for the latter) – and apparently tries to deal with problems before they reach UNHCR and GBV responders; adult women also said that older women often advise a wife to stay with her husband. Similarly, staff in Tanzania said that the main objective of older women intervening in marital disputes was to keep the husbands and wives together. *However*, ‘mediation’ in cases of GBV is contrary to recommended best practice in GBV response, since it generally aims at protecting family unity over and above the protection of victims of domestic abuse and can inadvertently condone the perpetrator’s behaviour.<sup>34</sup> As such, older women’s role and influence has the potential to exacerbate or perpetuate GBV. At the same time, in those cases where older women do support women survivors to separate from their abusive husbands, they may be criticised by the community – this was indicated by men in Iraq who gave an example of an older woman who “threw fuel on the fire” by supporting a couple to obtain a divorce.

---

<sup>33</sup> It can be assumed that in referring to UNHCR they were referring to the range of agencies providing GBV response under the auspices of UNHCR, e.g. UNHCR, IRC, and others.

<sup>34</sup> UNFPA, Minimum Standards for Prevention and Response to Gender-Based Violence in Emergencies, 2015, Box 7, p.44

### 9.3 Advice about marriages and relationships

Besides mediation in marital problems, participants in Iraq mentioned that certain older women play a significant role in advising adolescent boys and girls in illicit relationships. One influential older woman from the informal settlement described her role in this regard: she said she would advise the boy to “back-off” and warn the girl of the risks of being involved with the boy. Similarly, in case of girls falling for “inappropriate” men, she would advise these girls and help them to avoid a potentially harmful liaison.

In terms of decisions relating to the marriage of young women and men (or, unfortunately, girls and boys), participants recognised that the whole family would be involved in discussing this, and the precise role of the older woman, older man, and father varies by context and also by different families in the same contexts. For example, in Iraq and among South Sudanese refugees it seems to be the father who manages the whole process; while according to staff working in Tanzania’s Nyarugusu camp, it is the older women among Brundian and Congolese refugees who manage the marriage process – e.g. assessing potential matches and negotiating dowry payments. Nevertheless, in most contexts, informants felt that older women could have a decisive impact on the final decision regarding a marriage. Numerous examples were presented whereby older women had stopped marriages of which they disapproved. It seems that older women’s extensive networks and historical knowledge of families in their wider communities places them well to advise on possible matches, and they seem willing to provide their opinions, which will mostly be listened to. However, older women from Kakuma said that their role in this regard was much diminished in the camp, since arranged marriages were becoming less common as “now people fall in love and get married”.

Adult men and women in Afghanistan, along with adolescent girls from South Sudan in Kenya, all agreed that grandmothers were also key in ‘guiding the brides’ about married life – e.g. “how to treat your mother-in-law, how to manage your home, and how to stay happy in life without fighting with your husband”.

### 9.4 Advising on where women and girls go and what they wear

In terms of girls’ attendance at schools, most respondents from all contexts agreed that – even if older women are mostly uneducated – they value and support the education of their grandchildren. However, some respondents said that this support is focussed on boys more than girls, e.g. in Afghanistan and among some South Sudanese refugees in Kakuma/Kalobeyei. On the other hand, adolescent girls in Kalobeyei said that older women are more encouraging of their education than older men; the older women emphasise that girls need to learn something since they cannot rely on cultivation, and they regret that they were not educated themselves.

---

*“Some of the older women tell us ‘your generation is different from ours – you don’t know how to cultivate, so you need to go school’”*

*“They want you to have an education because they didn’t have this themselves and they can see the benefit it has.”*

*(South Sudanese adolescent girls, Kalobeyei Settlement, Kenya)*

---

In the refugee camps of Tanzania and Kenya, women and girls seem to have relative freedom of movement, while in Iraq, all respondents agreed that decisions about where women and girls can move around is primarily the husband/father’s decision. However, it seems that older women can also influence this decision in both directions. In the out of camp context, the older women mentioned that they might stop a daughter-in-law from attending activities/work outside of the home since it would detract from her domestic duties; while in the settlement context the older women said that a girl’s grandmother may argue with the father to convince him to allow the girl to move around (citing an example of a girl who was



forbidden to go on a school trip). While participants implied that the grandfather would (in theory) have more influence, it is only the *grandmother* who is willing to enter into a fight with her son.

On the issue of how women and girls dress, it was generally agreed that older people are influential on this matter, and tend to have more conservative views than younger family members. As such, in Iraq or Afghanistan girls living with grandparents may therefore be veiled earlier than those who do not. However, girls consulted in Iraq did not mind wearing the veil – on the contrary, they wanted to wear it as a sign of their maturity and sophistication. In Kenya, South Sudanese girls said that older women dress in traditional clothes that are more ‘respectful’ than the clothes that younger people wear, and that the older women try to influence what the younger ones wear – though apparently with little success.

---

## 10 Methods for understanding and supporting the role of older women

The findings presented above point to several broad patterns with regards to older women’s role in displacement-affected communities, and these are also supported by other research. For example, anthropologist Dr Judi Aubel has carried out an extensive review of the roles of grandmothers in more than 40 non-Western cultural contexts,<sup>35</sup> and identified certain core roles that grandmothers play in almost all these contexts,<sup>36</sup> and which also appear to be present in all of the displacement contexts studied here. Nevertheless, there are subtle differences as well – both between and within different contexts.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, there will always be some older women who are more active and influential in their communities, while others are more passive and dependent. As such, understanding the subtleties of the roles that older women play in a given context is an essential first step in designing interventions that support and capitalise on their role.

### 10.1 Methods for understanding the role of older women

This study took an anthropological approach to understanding the role of older women, and it is recommended that such an approach is taken by Camp Management actors hoping to design interventions that can harness the influence and role of older women. Taking an anthropological approach means assessing *relationships* and *knowledge* in the community – in particular concerning the roles and influence of grandmothers, mothers, and other family members; decision-making patterns in the household; and knowledge and practices related to the well-being of women and children.<sup>38</sup> Such an assessment can allow Camp Management agencies (or other humanitarian practitioners) to understand and then capitalise on the “cultural capital” of the community, namely: “the cultural norms, practices, roles and networks that constitute important resources for families and communities to promote their harmonious development in society.”<sup>39</sup>

A four-step process of assessment and design pertaining to the role of older women is recommended (with mentioned tools included in Annex 2):

**Step 1 (Tool 1):** Consult with local staff on the attitudes towards older people, and the role that they play in the displaced community. Depending on the context and the project, national staff may have more or less accurate understanding. For example, in a refugee context where there are large cultural and social divides between the host community and displaced, the national staff (if coming from the host community) may have a superficial understanding of the social dynamics among the refugee community. By contrast,

---

<sup>35</sup> Aubel, Judi, *Grandmothers: A Learning Institution*, (2005), Washington, D.C.: Creative Associates International/USAID, 2005.

<sup>36</sup> Advising and guiding younger generations on a variety of issues; supporting young mothers in child care and upbringing of children; Promoting family health and providing home treatment for illnesses; advising male family members on issues regarding the well-being of children and women.

<sup>37</sup> For example, the South Sudanese grandmothers in Kenya seemed to show less inclination to challenge men (son or husbands) and played less of a core role in family dispute resolution compared to in Iraq.

<sup>38</sup> Aubel. 2014, p.31

<sup>39</sup> Aubel. 2014, p.47

in an IDP context where national staff may even come from among the IDP community, it is likely that they will have a better understanding.

**Step 2 (Tool 2):** Consult with different population groups to understand the different internal and external roles of various community members/demographic groups, and what are their different areas of expertise and authority. If the local team already has a strong pre-existing knowledge and experience (see above), then this step may require less time/fewer focus groups.

**Step 3 (Tool 3):** During the course of Step 1 and Step 2, informants should be asked if they know of any influential or particularly ‘helpful’ older women, or women leaders, who should then be interviewed to provide further insights on how they came to play this role and to understand how their role might be further supported. A ‘snowball’ technique can help to identify more influential older women.

**Step 4:** Taking into account the particular needs of the community, including with regards to women’s safety (e.g. those that have been identified following safety mapping exercises and discussion with women – see IOM/WRC Women’s Participation Toolkit)<sup>40</sup> as well as the findings from Steps 1 – 3, the project team should consider a range of possible activities that could bolster or capitalise on older women’s roles. These should be presented back to a select number of people in the community – from various demographic groups – to obtain feedback and refine the ideas prior to implementation. Depending on the initiatives selected (see some suggestions below) it may also be strategic to partner with another specialist agency – e.g. health or GBV related.

## 10.2 Methods for supporting the role of older women

The research undertaken has focussed primarily on understanding the role of older women, rather than ‘testing’ any ideas for how to capitalise on this. However, based on reflection with team members and some of the participants in the field research, a few suggestions are presented here. Some of these suggestions are aimed specifically at Camp Management agencies, while others may be of more relevance to agencies working specifically on women’s protection and prevention or response to GBV.

The research has shown that many older women have significant influence and a key role to play in supporting both their immediate and extended families, and some also have an important role in the wider community. Their role often concerns some of the most sensitive topics that humanitarians and development workers may struggle to deal with – including domestic violence, early or forced marriage, and the treatment of women and girls generally. Moreover, older women’s comparative freedom of movement and expression, and their willingness, in many cases, to ‘pick a fight’ with their husbands or adult sons, uniquely positions them to challenge some of the most private and harmful behaviours with respect to women’s protection.

### 10.2.1 Older women’s inclusion in governance structures

Age-focussed organisations in various contexts have developed specific older person’s governance structures and volunteer networks, such as “Older People’s Associations”. While there are many benefits of OPAs,<sup>41</sup> these structures and other age-focussed volunteer initiatives have typically been employed to enable older people to support other older people, rather than the wider community. For example, HelpAge in Haiti established a network of older community outreach agents working at camp level to collect data and provide home-based support for highly vulnerable older people,<sup>42</sup> and after the 2007 Cyclone Sidr in Bangladesh, older persons’ committees disseminated early warning messages to vulnerable older persons and their families.<sup>43</sup>

---

<sup>40</sup>Available at: <https://womenindisplacement.org>

<sup>41</sup> T. Suthep and A. Muange, *Older People’s Associations: A Briefing on Their Impact, Sustainability and Replicability*, HelpAge International, 2016, p.4

<sup>42</sup> Jessica Hartog, *Disaster Resilience in an Ageing World: How to Make Policies and Programmes Inclusive of Older People*, HelpAge International, 2014

<sup>43</sup> Inter-Agency Standing Committee, *Humanitarian Action and Older Persons: An Essential Brief for Humanitarian Actors*. 2008.

However, older men and women may have a valuable role to play in broader community management and support – not just in issues pertaining to other older people. Indeed, evidence suggests that involving older women in intergenerational governance structures may serve to strengthen the influence of younger women. For example, NRC’s Women’s Participation Study in Afghanistan found that a girls’ shura (local community committee) had managed to solve some disputes in the community with the support of elderly women; and in Pakistan, Concern Worldwide staff encouraged older women to speak up on behalf of all women, as they command respect within the community.<sup>44</sup> Similarly, many older Iraqi and Afghan women consulted in this study said that they felt able to meet and liaise with male staff from authorities or NGOs, while younger women did not feel able to. Intergenerational leadership is also recommended in UNHCR’s *Leadership Training Manual for Young Refugee Women*, which advises that “older, established women leaders should also be part of the [young women’s leadership training] group, to provide role models to the younger women and to undertake a mentoring role in the future.”<sup>45</sup> This was also something recommended by adult men in Kakuma camp, who suggested that LWF<sup>46</sup> should support elders to work with the Youth Parliament to solve problems.

Identifying and engaging with pre-existing older women leaders in the community, such as those who participate in ‘Councils of Elders’ or similar traditional community structures, is an essential first step for Camp Management agents to capitalise on older women’s influence and authority in the community. Section 10.1 above suggests methods for identifying these women, and coming to understand their role and how it might be supported further – while also being cognisant of the ‘negative’ role that they may play in regards to women’s safety (see section 9.2). Besides these traditional or unofficial leaders, there may be other influential older women who are keen to volunteer to become members of leadership structures even without being specifically approached or targeted. However, to be sure of ensuring inclusive and representative membership in governance structures, Camp Management agencies should apply specific quotas for older women within such structures, and proactively seek out older women volunteers if none are forthcoming.

Besides older women’s inclusion in governance structures, given their intimate knowledge of what is happening in the community, Camp Management agencies and others should (a) consult with them at strategic points in project planning and (b) link them to any outreach initiatives or governance structures, including camp/neighbourhood committees as well as outreach staff or volunteers. Indeed, older women (non-leaders) in Afghanistan specifically requested “to be given priority in community meetings and other activities so we can use our past experiences to inform the future interventions.”

### 10.2.2 Older Women’s Safe Spaces

In various camp and displacement settings, agencies have established “Age Friendly Spaces.”<sup>47</sup> For example, in eastern DRC HelpAge International established community centres under the management of local associations of older persons in camps and return areas – aiming to provide a space where older persons could meet and access support, as well as to facilitate advocacy within the community and with leaders.

Such spaces have been designed primarily in the mindset of older people as ‘beneficiaries’ or recipients of services, even if they play an active role within them, and have reportedly provided older people with many benefits.<sup>48</sup> However, an additional or alternative function of such spaces could be to provide a location inside the site where older women could enhance the safety of *other* members of the community, through provision of emotional support, counselling, and advice. For example, such a space could allow older women to meet privately with adolescents who may be engaging in harmful behaviours and need to be supported in private, away from their families. In other words, the “Older Women’s Safe Space” would be designed not so much as a safe space provided *for* older women, but a safe space provided *by* older

---

<sup>44</sup> Supriya Akerkar and Rhea Bhardwaj, *Good Practice Guide: Embedding Inclusion of Older People and People with Disabilities in Humanitarian Policy and Practice*, ADCAP 2018.

<sup>45</sup> Eileen Pittaway, *Leadership Training Manual for Young Refugee Women*, UNHCR 2006, p.18

<sup>46</sup> Providing Peacebuilding activities and support to Camp Leaders in Kakuma and Kalobeyei

<sup>47</sup> E.g. Cox’s Bazaar: GiHA Brief No. 4: Interconnectedness Gender Age and Disability Issues in the Rohingya Refugee Response

<sup>48</sup> According to Jo Wells, benefits included: reduction in isolation; shelter from rains; a mechanism to ensure that older people are represented in the community; a place to for older people to register for support and access income-generating activities; and a space for intergenerational activities, conflict resolution, and literacy classes. *The Neglected Generation: The Impact of Displacement on Older People*, HelpAge International 2012, p.24.

women. This is something that is apparently already provided by some older women refugees in Nyarugusu refugee camp – as reported by Camp Management staff – and was also a suggestion made by some of the older women consulted in the Informal Settlement in Iraq. They supported the idea of providing a space under the guise of another type of service – such as a small shop or laundrette – in order to serve as a discreet space that is ‘owned’ by the older women themselves rather than run by a service provider, as would be the case for a traditional ‘Women’s Friendly Space’ or ‘Age Friendly Space’. Of course, if older women are to be using these spaces to support survivors of GBV or to advise adolescent girls, then the selection and training of these women to ensure they are following GBV prevention and response best practice is also critical – as discussed below.

### 10.2.3 Older women as Protection Focal Points

Engaging older women as protection focal points – whether for referral, advice, emotional/psychosocial support, or behaviour change – could be a valuable community-based approach for protection-focussed agencies to enhance their response in displacement settings. If these community focal points were then linked to Camp Management-supported governance structures, the response could be enhanced even further.

While adult men in both Iraq and Kakuma (South Sudanese refugees) suggested displeasure at having organisations intervening in their private family problems, and in Kakuma the older women felt displaced by service providers’ handling of ‘family problems’ as well as other matters such as childbirth and breastfeeding, some informants suggested that organisations could engage older women to enhance and benefit from their influence and respect in society. For example, adult men in Iraq’s Kilo 7 settlement suggested that organisations should build trust and interact with the community by working closely with influential older women. These women could mobilise volunteers from among the neighbours to help them solve problems within families, refer women survivors, and even support organisations in delivering awareness sessions (e.g. on the dangers of early marriage) to support behaviour change. An adult woman in Kakuma camp also suggest that older women could be engaged as volunteers in the clinics, hospitals, and child protection offices – where they could provide advice and emotional support.

---

*“NGOs should give older women a role in the community and involve them in decision making” (Adult woman in Kakuma Refugee Camp)*

---

Given that many older women have wide networks and intimate knowledge of private domestic matters, they could be a key resource for linking survivors of violence to protection agencies or services. This is evidenced in Tanzania, for example, where Women’s Protection staff have found that – subsequent to adequate training or sensitisation – some older women are now referring cases to Women’s Protection Centres, whereas previously they would have only tried to convince wives to stay with their husbands in the face of domestic violence. However, it goes without saying that any engagement of older women in agency-supported protection initiatives would need to be accompanied by specific training and sensitisation of the women. This was also recommended by girls consulted in the Kenya camps, who agreed that older women should be trained by organisations<sup>49</sup> “since they are the ones advising us”.<sup>50</sup>

Besides their potential to refer cases, advise others, or provide emotional support, older women could also be engaged in awareness-raising activities for the protection and promotion of women’s rights. This is an approach that some protection-focussed agencies are already working on – for example in gender programming in South Sudan, where they have recognised the role that older women can play in

---

<sup>49</sup> They specifically mentioned Danish Refugee Council, which has a Women’s Protection and Empowerment project, as well as GBV prevention and response project. The participants in the FGD were all beneficiaries of the DRC project.

<sup>50</sup> Note: a recent study by IOM/WRC (presented during the 2019 Global CCCamp Management Retreat in Geneva) on participation of adolescent girls in South Sudan indicated that they prefer peer-to-peer support, rather than receiving advice from older generations. As such, the extent to which older women could be given a formal or informal role in advising adolescents would need to be assessed on a case-by-case basis.

supporting gender norm change among young women.<sup>51</sup> However, given older women’s significant influence on their families and in society more generally their involvement could also facilitate wider behaviour and social change, including among mature men who are typically the most influential in society and often obstructive of gender norm change.<sup>52</sup>

Harnessing the authority of older women to promote behaviour change is the main thrust of “The Grandmother Project”, which uses a “Change through Culture” approach to capitalise on the role of grandmothers as family decision-makers, advisors, and coaches for younger women and their families.<sup>53</sup> The approach was developed to respond to issues of child health and nutrition; however, this research has demonstrated that older women’s authority and influence permeates many more themes than this, including matters of women and girl’s protection. Moreover, though the approach was developed for and has been mainly applied in a development context, the longevity of most humanitarian operations would provide a similarly stable environment within which to pursue such an approach, and indeed could be essential to address increases in protection threats to women during displacement. This is also illustrated by the case of Kakuma in Kenya, where more than a decade of women’s empowerment and gender equality programming indeed seems to have created a cultural shift in the camp (see the companion report ‘The Role of Displaced Women in Coordination’).

The “Change through Culture” approach involves including grandmothers in group dialogues to explore and discuss existing cultural values, roles, and resources; as well as strengthening communication between generations and building community consensus using the influence of older women. This study has indicated that older women often have traditional notions of how to protect their relatives/community members that are not in line with GBV best practice and women’s empowerment – e.g. intervening in an issue without informed consent, putting pressure on daughters-in-law not to work, and encouraging women to stay in an abusive marriage. However, the “Change through Culture” approach involves engaging older women in “dialogical communication methods” in which their received wisdom on various issues is *respectfully* challenged and possibly therefore altered – to the benefit of other community members. Besides “The Grandmother Project”, which has successfully used this method to change attitudes towards girls’ education and marriage as well as child health and nutrition, other agencies have also successfully harnessed the influence of older women (and men) to address harmful behaviours. For example, HelpAge International and its local partners in Tanzania (albeit not relating to a displacement context) established ‘Village Older People’s Committees’ (VOPCs) to reduce witchcraft accusations against older women. The committees, which were trained to facilitate seminars and discussions on gender roles and responsibilities and issues facing vulnerable groups, was strikingly successful, with reported witchcraft related violence being reduced by over 90% in the 72 villages where the project was implemented.<sup>54</sup>

---

*“Before we were displaced, we were respected. But now the culture has changed, and we don’t have a role” (South Sudanese older woman refugee in Kakuma Refugee Camp, Kenya)*

---

Directly engaging older women as community-based volunteers for protection, particularly GBV prevention and response, is likely not something that a Camp Management agency (and its staff) will have the expertise and capacity to address, and would therefore need to be taken on by a specialist protection actor. However, the Camp Management agency would have a key role to play in coordinating and liaising with these older women focal points/volunteers, including through linking them with governance and leadership structures and thereby helping them to address women’s safety issues on a wider scale in the camp or other displacement setting – for more recommendations on this, see the companion report ‘Women in Coordination’.

.....  
<sup>51</sup> Barbelet, p.23

<sup>52</sup> E.g. see Kristine Anderson, *Tearing Down the Walls: Confronting the Barriers to Internally Displaced Women & Girls’ Participation in Humanitarian Settings*, UNHCR 2019, p.35

<sup>53</sup> Grandmother Project, ‘Grandmothers - An Invaluable Resource for Adolescent Girls’, *Grandmother Project Bulletin Issue #13*, 2015

<sup>54</sup> Julia Powles and Robert Deakin, ‘Seeking Meaning: An Anthropological and Community-Based Approach to Witchcraft Accusations and Their Prevention in Refugee Situations’, *New Issues In Refugee Research*, UNHCR 2012, p.15

#### 10.2.4 Livelihoods and Income generating activities for older women

In situations of displacement or post-conflict, and especially in informal sites or out of camp where humanitarian assistance is less available, older women often take on a huge burden of responsibility for their families, and many older women consulted in this study thereby wanted access to income-generating opportunities to enable them to support their families. Given that healthier older women generally seem to have more freedom of movement than younger women, they may also be more able to leave the house to undertake paid work. This could enable them to contribute additional income to the household and thereby relieve some domestic stress, and in turn reduce domestic violence which, as shown in various research,<sup>55</sup> is exacerbated by economic hardship.

Besides being able to support their own families, the ability of older women (as well as their younger or male counter-parts) to have an influence in the wider society is determined “not only by local rules and values, but also by their *ownership and management of natural and other resources*,”<sup>56</sup> hence why we see that some wealthier older people retain a strong influence in their communities even after displacement. This is something that older people in refugee camps have noted themselves – identifying a link between their “declining social status in refugee camps and loss of control over natural resources and assets.”<sup>57</sup> As such, bolstering the socio-economic standing of older women could in turn increase their influence, which they could use for the benefit of problem solving and conflict resolution in their community.

Finally, with some creativity, certain livelihoods initiatives could also be linked to suggestion 10.2.2 above – “Older Women’s Safe Spaces” – e.g. women’s-run shops, kitchen gardens, or small businesses like the ‘charging stations’ of Nyarugusu could also provide a space for older women to provide their protective role in the community. In Afghanistan, NRC established women’s shops (albeit not targeting older women) in a neighbourhood where women’s movement and freedom was particularly restricted, and customers reported that one of their main reasons for visiting the shop was to meet and socialise with other women. In Kenya’s Kakuma camp, older women from South Sudan were saddened that they could no longer practice and pass on their cultivation skills; if they could be supported to re-establish this activity – e.g. through grey-water filtration gardens – they could return to playing this role, and if it was implemented as an inter-generational activity it could also give them the space to interact with and advise younger people on matters broader than just gardening. These older women also suggested that if they could be supported to make a “group business” or to have access to relief items, they could ensure that items were distributed to the most needy in the community.

---

## 11 Conclusions

This study has confirmed that older women have a significant role to play in supporting their families and communities across displacement contexts, but that this is a role which often goes unnoticed by responding agencies. As such, humanitarians – including Camp Management agencies – are mostly missing an opportunity to capitalise on the wisdom, respect, and authority of older women to improve the management and response to displacement crises. In particular, older women’s unique role in matters pertaining to women’s safety and protection has the potential to be harnessed for provision of more impactful GBV prevention and response activities.

Looking at four different countries (Iraq, Afghanistan, Tanzania, and Kenya) with several different displacement settings (urban out of camp; urban informal settlement; peri-urban formal and informal settlement; rural formal camp) – including both IDP and refugee response – the study has nonetheless identified some striking common themes in terms of the position and role of older women.

---

<sup>55</sup> E.g. C. Hennon, ‘Displacement and violence against women in Afghanistan’, *Forced Migration Review* 46, 2014; and R. Horn, ‘Exploring the Impact of Displacement and Encampment on Domestic Violence in Kakuma Refugee Camp’, *Journal of Refugee Studies*, Volume 23, Issue 3, 2010

<sup>56</sup> Barbelet, p.v

<sup>57</sup> Barbelet, p.9

1. They command respect and (to varying degrees) authority from all other community members and are seen as having a key role in handing down traditions and customs to younger generations, and advising others in their families and wider communities.
2. They frequently play a role in providing emotional support, and in resolving disputes/conflicts in the community – including between husband and wife; parents and children; children with other children; or adults with other adults.
3. They contribute to the domestic and childcare responsibilities of the household, and in some cases also the financial income (through business or paid work) or in-kind resources (e.g. cultivating food).
4. They have extensive social networks and understanding of the community, including historical knowledge.

Cutting across the four main features of older women’s role in the community, as outlined above, it is also clear that they can play an important part in enhancing or, in some cases, worsening the safety and protection of women in a domestic setting, and women and girls’ rights generally. In particular, three common themes emerged:

1. Older women in most (*but not all*) contexts seem to be able to influence the behaviour of adult men – including behaviour towards their wives and children – to the extent that some women claim they can stop men (normally their own sons or grandsons) from behaving violently towards their families.
2. Older women frequently play a significant role in giving advice and making decisions about marriage of girls/women (including when and to whom they marry), and divorce (e.g. in cases of domestic violence).
3. Older women can have an influence on the extent to which adult women and girls participate in the community – in particular in terms of their attendance at school or work, and their participation in NGO-led or other activities.

However, the precise role of older women in a given context would require further study by intervening agencies. This report has suggested a method for learning about the role of older women, in order to inform interventions by Camp Management and Protection agencies. A four-step process encourages Camp Management agencies to employ an anthropological approach to understand the role of older women in relation to other community members. First, local staff themselves must be involved in sharing their understandings; second, community members from different demographic groups must be consulted; third, identified older women ‘influencers’ or ‘leaders’ should be interviewed more in-depth; and finally, activities should be designed based on the prior steps and further consultation with a range of community members. Tools for steps 1 to 3 are provided in Annex 2.

Notwithstanding the need to develop context-specific response, this report has proposed some possible methods for engaging with older women to enhance their supporting role, particularly (but not only) with regards to the safety of women and girls. Some of these suggestions are aimed at Camp Management agencies, while others would be better led by other specialised agencies. In summary, the suggestions are as follows:

Method	Issues this can address	Role of Camp Management agency	Role of other agency
Include older women in community engagement initiatives, including governance structures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Women’s empowerment</li> <li>- Marginalisation of women (older and younger)</li> <li>- Other issues as per priorities and knowledge of older women (including women’s safety)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Assigning quotas for older women’s representation in governance structures</li> <li>- Ensuring that governance structures consult with older women</li> <li>- Ensuring older women’s inclusion in community</li> </ul>	<p><i>Women’s Protection/GBV agency:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Awareness-raising/sensitisation and training</li> <li>- Receive and respond to referrals</li> </ul>

		meetings, FGD consultations, etc.	
Engage older women as Protection Focal Points and/or Behaviour Change Mobilisers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- GBV</li> <li>- Child Protection</li> <li>- Health and nutrition</li> <li>- Girl's education</li> <li>- Women's empowerment</li> <li>- Older women's marginalisation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Identifying and connecting influential older women (e.g. committee members) to relevant agencies</li> <li>- Connect protection volunteers to other community-based structures</li> <li>- Receive and respond to referrals</li> </ul>	<i>Women's Protection/GBV agency:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Awareness-raising/sensitisation and training using a "Change through Culture" approach</li> <li>- Ongoing support and coaching to older women focal points/mobilisers</li> <li>- Provide referral pathway information</li> <li>- Receive and respond to referrals</li> </ul>
Establish Older Women's Safe Spaces	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- As above, and:</li> <li>- Provision of another service needed in the community (e.g. shop, laundrette, garden, etc.)</li> <li>- Provision of safe social space</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Assess and identify best modality for the space</li> <li>- Provide required inputs</li> <li>- Identify (with specialised agency) older women to manage the spaces</li> </ul>	<i>Women's Protection/GBV agency:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Identify (with Camp Management agency) older women to manage the spaces</li> <li>- Provide relevant training/awareness-raising (as per above)</li> <li>- Provide referral pathway information</li> <li>- Receive and respond to referrals</li> </ul>
Provide livelihoods and Income generating activities for older women	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Economic hardship, and (by extension) domestic violence</li> <li>- Inter-generational relationships and knowledge/wisdom-transfer</li> <li>- Older women's marginalisation</li> <li>- Provision of safe social space</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Assess response options</li> <li>- Identify potential participants</li> <li>- Implement activities (unless undertaken by a Livelihoods provider)</li> <li>- If applicable, liaise with Livelihood(s) provider</li> </ul>	<i>Livelihoods agency:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Work with Camp Management agency to assess activity options and identify participants</li> <li>- Implement activities and provide follow-up and monitoring</li> <li>- Coordinate with GBV/Women's Protection providers</li> </ul>

This research study has indicated that older women can and do play a key supportive role in their families and wider communities. However, it is also evident that many displaced older women feel like their role as advice-givers and transmitters of culture is being displaced by the work of humanitarian and development agencies. Engaging older women and restoring their influential role in society is therefore imperative, not only for the value this can have for the well-being of other community members, but also for the protection of older women's own rights and dignity in displacement.

## 12 Bibliography

Akerkar, Supriya, and Rhea Bhardwaj, *Good Practice Guide: Embedding Inclusion of Older People and*



*People with Disabilities in Humanitarian Policy and Practice*, ADCAP 2018

- Anderson, Kristine, *Tearing Down the Walls: Confronting the Barriers to Internally Displaced Women and Girls' Participation in Humanitarian Settings*, UNHCR 2019
- Aubel, Judi, *Involving Grandmothers to Promote Child Nutrition, Health and Development*, World Vision 2014
- , *Grandmothers: A Learning Institution*, Washington, D.C.: Creative Associates International/USAID, 2005
- Barbelet, Veronique, *Older People in Displacement: Falling through the Cracks of Emergency Responses*, HelpAge International, 2018
- Barclay, Alison, Michelle Higelin, and Melissa Bungcaras, *On The Frontline: Catalysing Women's Leadership in Humanitarian Action*, Action Aid 2016
- Birnbaum, Phyllis, *On Her Own: How Women Forced to Flee from Syria Are Shouldering Increased Responsibility as They Struggle to Survive*, CARE/Columbia University Press 2015
- Day, Will, Antoinette Pirie, and Chris Roys, *Strong and Fragile: Learning from Older People in Emergencies*, HelpAge International, 2007
- Federici, Giovanna (CCCM Cluster), *Desk Review: Urban Displacement and Outside of Camp*, International Organization for Migration (IOM), Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) and UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) 2014
- Grandmother Project, 'Grandmothers - An Invaluable Resource for Adolescent Girls', *Grandmother Project Bulletin Issue #13*, 2015
- Hartog, Jessica, *Disaster Resilience in an Ageing World: How to Make Policies and Programmes Inclusive of Older People*, HelpAge International 2014
- HelpAge International, *Older People's Associations in Community Disaster Risk Reduction: A Resource Book on Good Practice*, 2007
- Hennion, C., 'Displacement and violence against women in Afghanistan', *Forced Migration Review* 46, 2014
- Hirsch-Holland, Anna, *Women's Participation Study Report (Afghanistan)*, NRC 2018 [Not publicly available]
- Horn, I., 'Exploring the Impact of Displacement and Encampment on Domestic Violence in Kakuma Refugee Camp', *Journal of Refugee Studies*, Volume 23, Issue 3, 2010
- IDMC, *Briefing Paper on Flood-Displaced Women in Sindh Province, Pakistan*, 2011
- Inter-Agency Standing Committee, *Humanitarian Action and Older Persons: An Essential Brief for Humanitarian Actors*, 2008
- , *Inter-Agency Standing Committee Policy on Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women and Girls in Humanitarian Action*, 2017
- International Organisation for Migration and Women's Refugee Commission, *Women's Participation Pilot Project Learning Report (Baseline)*, December 2017
- , *Women's Participation Pilot Project Learning Report (Endline)*, December 2017
- International Organization for Migration (IOM), Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) and UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), *Camp Management Toolkit*, 2015
- Inter Sector Working Group, *Gender Mainstreaming in Rohingya Refugee Response*, 2018
- , *GiHA Brief No. 4: Interconnectedness Gender Age and Disability Issues in the Rohingya Refugee Response*, 2018
- Madigan, Suzy, 'Is a humanitarian crisis the time and place for women's economic empowerment?', HPN Blog, 21 August 2019

- Mollett, Howard, *She Is a Humanitarian: Women's Participation in Humanitarian Action Drawing on Global Trends and Evidence From Jordan and the Philippines*, CARE 2016
- Mumaw, Evelyn King, *Woman Alone - The Fight for Survival by Syria's Refugee Women*, UNHCR 2014
- Pittaway, Eileen, *Leadership Training Manual for Young Refugee Women*, UNHCR
- Powles, Julia, and Robert Deakin, 'Seeking Meaning : An Anthropological and Community-Based Approach to Witchcraft Accusations and Their Prevention in Refugee Situations', *New Issues In Refugee Research*, UNHCR 2012
- Stewart, Ann, and Jennifer Lander, *Transforming Gender Relations in an Ageing World: A Policy Discussion Paper*, HelpAge International 2018
- Suthep, T., and A. Muange, 'Older People's Associations: A Briefing on Their Impact, Sustainability and Replicability', Help Age International 2016
- Toma, Iulia, Mita Chowdhury, Mushfika Laiju, Nina Gora, and Nicola Padamada, *Rohingya Refugee Response Gender Analysis: Recognizing and Responding to Gender Inequalities*, ACF/Save the Children/OXFAM 2018
- UNFPA, *Minimum Standards for Prevention and Response to Gender-Based Violence in Emergencies*, 2015
- UNHCR, *Working with Older Persons in Forced Displacement*, 2013
- Walton, Poppy, 'I Went to the EU Development Days and Older Women Were Invisible', Help Age International Blog 2018
- Wells, Jo, *The Neglected Generation: The Impact of Displacement on Older People*, HelpAge International 2012
- Wells, Melinda, and Geeta Kuttiparambil, 'Humanitarian Action and the Transformation of Gender Relations', *Forced Migration Review* #52, May 2016
- World Health Organization, *Older Persons in Emergencies: An Active Ageing Perspective*, 2008
- World Humanitarian Summit, *Women and Girls : Catalysing Action To Achieve Gender Equality (High-Level Leaders' Roundtable)*, 2016

---

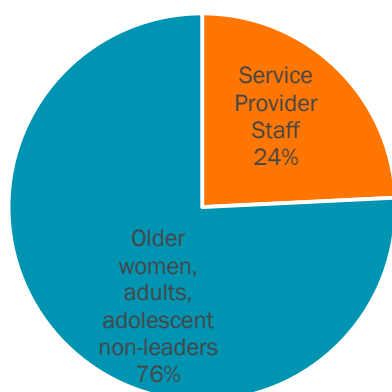
## Annex 1: Detailed Methodology

### Sources

The research employed a qualitative analysis of both primary and secondary sources. Secondary sources included studies, reports, and project reviews pertaining to the role and participation of older people in a range of contexts. Given the limited number of humanitarian projects that specifically focus on displaced older people, let alone displaced older women, these sources included projects implemented in development and non-displacement emergency contexts in the hope of gaining valuable insights that can also be applied to displacement settings. Primary data collection then allowed further investigation into the actual and potential role of *displaced* older women in settings with Camp Management interventions, including through piloting of tools that use an anthropological approach to understand the role and relationships of older women and others in the community.

Primary data collection took place in four countries, of which three currently have NRC Camp Management projects (Afghanistan, Iraq, and Tanzania) and one (Kenya) has other NRC interventions<sup>58</sup> but not a CM project. Data collection comprised of 36 key informant interviews and 21 focus group discussions with men and women of different ages from the displaced community and staff implementing camp management projects. In addition, staff from other service providers working in the project locations provided some insights on their work with older women and their perspectives about the role of such women. A total of 194 people (140 women and 54 men) were consulted.

Types of Informants



Gender of participants

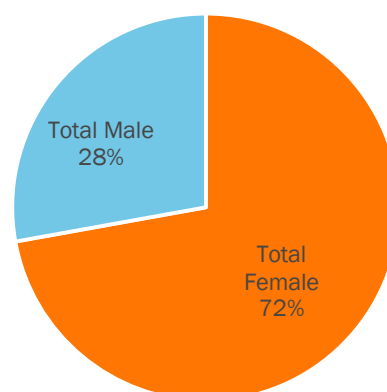


Table 3: Informants consulted in the study

Informants	Sex	Afghanistan	Iraq	Tanzania	Kenya	TOTAL
Service Provider Staff <sup>59</sup>	Female	4	12	5	8	47
	Male	2	5	3	8	
Older women, adults, adolescent non-leaders	Female	48	33	0	30	147
	Male	19	12	0	5	
	Total Female	52	45	5	38	140
	Total Male	21	17	3	13	54
	Total	73	62	8	51	194

## Field work locations

### Iraq

NRC’s Camp Management project is operating in two displacement contexts within Ramadi city: informal settlements, and neighbourhoods (out of camp). In both contexts there are a mix of returnees and IDPs. The informal settlement targeted for this study is known as ‘Kilo 7’ and hosts 2,050 IDPs and returnees. The out of camp component of the project consists of a Community Centre in Ramadi city, and the

<sup>58</sup> Information, Counselling, and Legal Assistance; WASH; Livelihoods; and Education.

<sup>59</sup> These are the same informants as for the companion study on Women’s Role in Coordination. Most of the questions aimed at these service providers were focussed on coordination, but matters of older women’s role were also touched upon. CM staff (11 persons) were asked about older women’s role in more detail.

establishment of committees in five surrounding neighbourhoods with a combined population of around 32,500 people. The Community Centre provides a central hub for coordination, referrals, and service delivery.

### **Afghanistan**

The research focussed on NRC's Camp Management project in two locations: protracted informal settlements in Kabul and newly established formal and informal settlements in Herat. In Kabul, the project targets 20 settlements with around 36,000 conflict-induced displaced persons. The project concentrates on establishing and building the capacity of site management structures, as well as provision of information, referrals, and support to coordination through physical Community Centres located within and between the sites. In Herat, one formal site and several scattered informal sites host around 60,000 people (numbers fluctuate) displaced by drought and conflict during the course of 2018. NRC's Camp Management response involves 'Community Tents' and mobile teams providing communication with communities, coordination, and protection through protection monitoring and Individual Protection Assistance.

### **Tanzania**

NRC is mandated to provide Camp Management in Nyarugusu Refugee Camp, which accommodates around 145,260 refugees of mainly Congolese and Burundian origin, since 1996 and 2015 respectively. The Camp Management project has various components including a Helpdesk Service for information provision, CFRM, and referrals; support to coordination and community leadership structures; site improvements; community mobilisation; and NFI distribution.

### **Kenya**

Kakuma Refugee Camp (established in 1992) and Kalobeyei Integrated Settlement (2015) host a population of around 190,000 refugees from 19 countries out of which 38,000 live in Kalobeyei Settlement. The majority (58%) of refugees come from South Sudan, while Somalis are also well represented, many having been relocated from Dadaab Refugee Camp. Camp Management is provided by the Kenyan Refugee Affairs Secretariat (RAS), supported by UNHCR and Lutheran World Foundation.

## **Challenges and Limitations**

Being a qualitative study without a representative sample of participants it was difficult to ensure that the 'data saturation' point was reached, particularly given a limited time-frame for data collection in the field. Nevertheless, the report concentrates on findings that were repeated multiple times by a majority of or all informants; findings that received less conclusive backing will be highlighted as such.

With primary data collection taking place in four contexts, there will be a limit as to how broadly the findings can be extrapolated to other contexts. However, the study has nonetheless observed broad patterns across the different contexts investigated here which may well be applicable across many other contexts, as well as suggesting avenues for further investigation at the local level, as well as tools that could be used to do so.

A challenge faced during field data collection stemmed from relying on non-professional interpretation through members of the local NRC teams. This is likely to have led to certain nuances becoming lost in translation. Nevertheless, this approach was chosen for the following reasons (a) to build the capacity of the staff themselves in consulting with the community in this level of detail; and (b) to enable a degree of control and spontaneity by the researcher during the data collection – being qualitative, it is important to enable flexibility in questioning to explore avenues that may not occur to a local enumerator who has less understanding of the broader research objectives. The challenge was mitigated by ensuring ongoing dialogue between the researcher and interpreter(s) – both during the FGDs, and immediately afterwards.

In Afghanistan, the field work was undertaken by a female Camp Management staff, rather than by the Consultant. This means that answers to some questions were lacking in detail, and some nuances lost during the transcription of notes.

Field work in Tanzania was significantly restricted since the Consultant was unable to obtain a camp entry permit from the authorities. Moreover, due to a sensitive camp population verification exercise that was still ongoing at the time of the Consultant's trip, it was not possible to collect data directly from the population – even through local enumerators. As such, the Consultant was restricted to collecting information and reflections from staff of NRC and other organisations. The trip to Kakuma camp in Kenya was organised as a result of the lack of access in Tanzania, to ensure that direct data from displaced community could be collected in a formal camp setting. However, due to the shortened time-frame, FGDs could not cover as much detail as for the Iraq context, and the data collection tools were thereby modified to focus on the most essential topics only. Moreover, participants were primarily selected from one nationality group (South Sudanese) in order to compare among different demographic groups with a similar cultural background. Only one FGD (adult women) contained mixed nationalities – this approach was then discontinued due to interpretation challenges and time-constraints.

Finally, a challenge – though also a finding in its own right – during field data collection in Iraq was that the 'older' women who agreed to participate were primarily on the younger end of the 'older' scale. Indeed, a majority were under the age of 60 (the UN definition of 'older'). This makes it more difficult to extrapolate from this population group (aged 50 to 65) to the rest of the older community. Nevertheless, questions to all participants (older and younger) were phrased in such a way as to glean information about *all* older women – not just the 'younger older' that happened to attend the discussions.

---

## Annex 2: Older Women Analysis Tools

Available for download.

[www.nrc.no](http://www.nrc.no)

Norwegian Refugee Council  
Postboks 148 Sentrum  
0102 Oslo, Norway