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**Research Report**

## Refugee-led organisations and intersectionality: Feminist development policy in the lives of refugees

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# Refugee-led Organisations and Intersectionality: Feminist Development Policy in the Lives of Refugees

Nasim Motalebi & Charles Martin-Shields

## Summary

This policy brief outlines how feminist development policy can be locally enacted by taking an intersectional approach to the provision of assistance to refugees and displaced persons. Refugee-led organisations (RLOs) play a key role in providing collective services, particularly in contexts where the host government is unlikely or unwilling to provide access to local social services. This is especially true in non-camp settings, and as global refugee policy moves away from encampment as a response to refugees the role of RLOs in refugees' daily lives will only increase.

While RLOs are an important part of life in a refugee community, they can be especially useful in supporting the needs of women, children, LGBTIQ refugees, ethnic minorities and diverse-ability refugees across multiple refugee communities city- or region-wide. Taking an intersectional approach to understanding the role of RLOs, in particular RLOs led by women, can help policy-makers identify networks of local actors who can effectively meet the social needs of all members of a local refugee community, including those who face particular marginalisation due to gender, sexual, religious or ethnic identity.

The intersectional approach to working with RLOs focuses on meeting the needs of marginalised identity groups across the entire refugee population in a city or region. For example, refugees representing multiple ethnic groups or nationalities might have their own ethnic or national RLO, but that RLO may not be able to meet the unique needs of women, children, LGBTIQ and religious minorities within the community. An intersectional approach means engaging all the RLOs in a city or region to meet the social, health and protection needs of marginalised community members, with the understanding that in doing so the wider needs of all community members will be met.

RLOs are part of a wider ecosystem of services and organisations that support refugees, and while they play a unique role in enacting feminist development policy for refugees, they have limitations. Policy-makers should engage them alongside official authorities from the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), and the host country government when possible. Given the challenges and opportunities that come with taking an intersectional approach to meeting refugees' needs through engagement with women-led RLOs, we offer the following recommendations to policy-makers:

- **Funding RLOs in situations where refugees have no legal status is challenging.** In many cases, RLOs can provide intersectional social services, but often need funding to do so. Donors can localise their programming by funding NGOs that collaborate with RLOs, and allowing NGOs to redistribute funding to their RLO partners.
- **Trusting RLOs as a mediator for connecting refugees to official protection and legal services.** Refugees living in situations where they may not have legal status often trust RLOs more than they do official agencies such as UNHCR. Donors can therefore support RLOs in providing protection against hostile legal environments for asylum seekers.
- **Mitigating risks associated with RLOs' ethnic, national, and religious biases.** RLOs come with their own limitations and problems. They are often informal institutions, and in many cases lack UNHCR's legal status. Since they are community-based, they can also at times replicate existing biases within an ethnic or national community. Donors should be aware of this risk when working with RLOs.

## **Feminist development policy, refugee response and intersectionality**

The German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) through its new approach to feminist development policy has made equal participation of all people in political and social life, regardless of gender, sexual orientation, race or religion, central to German development cooperation policy (BMZ, 2023). This represents a unique opportunity for BMZ, its partners in the global humanitarian and development communities, as well as refugee-led organisations in refugee communities to work together in achieving the goals of refugee self-reliance and inclusive refugee policies in host countries.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) envisions the self-reliance of refugees in being economically independent, having access to local social, health and educational services, and participating in the social life of their host city or community. However, in many refugee host contexts, humanitarian and social services are either not readily available, or the host state makes them legally unavailable to refugees. Without a legal framework for including refugees in national and municipal social and economic life, policies of self-reliance end up putting the onus of providing informal social, medical and educational services directly onto refugee communities.

Refugee-led organisations (RLOs) provide a social apparatus for organising these services at the community level, often within the neighbourhood or enclave within a city where refugees settle. In some cases, RLOs receive direct support from local UNHCR offices and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), but this support is often piecemeal, and targeted at support for one sector, such as community schooling or primary healthcare. Feminist development policy implemented through a lens of intersectionality can bridge the piecemeal nature of sector-based refugee support, working with RLOs to identify

avenues for supporting greater inclusion of women and girls, LGBTIQ community members and ethnic minorities in the local refugee community within existing development programmes.

Intersectionality was originally coined by American legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw to refer to the different forms of legal and social discrimination experienced by black women in comparison to white women or black men (Crenshaw, 2013). Through this concept, social and political categories of race, gender, sexuality, class, nationality, ability, ethnicity and so on are posed as interrelated such that their interaction influences the individual's or groups' political and social position in society. In the context of forced migration, refugees' intersecting legal status, nationality, ethnicity, religion, language, gender, age and disability creates unique psychological and social experiences (Fiske & Giotis, 2021; Ekoh & Okoye, 2022; UNHCR, 2022) that requires a nuanced approach to refugee intersectional programming from the ground up (Carastathis et al., 2018; UNHCR, 2022). RLOs are examples of these ground-up efforts; they create avenues of social and economic support and break cycles of social and institutional discrimination.

From the perspective of a humanitarian response, RLOs are often seen as the first responders to crises, as community gatekeepers or as mediators between institutional mechanisms and communities. For their communities, RLOs are the agents of conflict resolution, ethnic reconciliation, and support in protracted asylum situations (Miranda & Jacobsen, 2018; Pincock et al., 2020; UNHCR, 2022). RLOs cross social and institutional categorisations of refugees, not only responding to the unique needs of women but enhancing social equality and access to livelihoods for all refugee populations. Thus, instead of focusing on the domain of public health within discrete refugee enclaves in a city, a feminist development policy should guide development cooperation actors to focus on the collective needs of women as well as other marginalised refugee groups within the whole of the refugee community. This means

thinking about the health, education and social resources that women need to thrive, and then identifying how investing in those collective needs will help men, children, LGBTIQ and other members of the community.

The case of urban refugees in Malaysia is an example of the wide presence of RLOs that support refugees' self-reliance in a context where refugees lack legal status and limited material help from the local UNHCR office. The density of Kuala Lumpur and Penang helps support social connections between different national refugee communities, magnifying the collective efforts of RLOs. The case of RLOs in Malaysia also shows how RLOs become part of the urban infrastructure and social fabric of the cities to support migrants' needs across different dimensions, such as ethnicity, gender, age, ability and religion. Despite conditions of refugees' "illegality" in Malaysia, RLOs utilise their social capital to find workarounds or formalise their "informal" protection provisions.

## **Refugees in Kuala Lumpur – a practical example of RLOs and intersectionality at work**

In Malaysia, the co-existence of complex RLO identity groups has transformed their role from providing basic refugee advocacy and service delivery to enhancing opportunities for diverse participation of minority and marginalised individuals or groups in the refugee community. With over 70 RLO community organisations active in Malaysia, there is a fragmented pattern of mobilisation that stems from complex inter- and intra-community dynamics across different refugee nationalities (Purti & Gabiella, 2022). For example, despite their mutual fear of institutional threats, refugees from Myanmar mobilise based on their ethnic or religious identity groups – Rohingya, Chin, Karen and Buddhists. They are subject to inter-community conflict as well as intra-community violence from other refugee communities.

However, an intersectional approach can transform RLOs into intermediaries between refugees' ethnic, religious or gendered groups.

This is especially notable among women-led refugee organisations that provide intra-community support to refugees whose identities are neglected in institutional or local refugee response strategies. RLO leaders and refugee community members in Kuala Lumpur provide us with empirical insight into the roles that RLOs play in the daily lives of refugees (Martin-Shields & Munir-Asen, 2022). In this policy brief, we put forward information gained from women-led refugee organisations that are catalysing inclusive aid programming.

RLOs in Malaysia are organised around their national groups, such as Yemenis, Somali, Syrian, Palestinian, Afghan and Iranian refugees, or their ethnic background, such as Myanmar Muslims, Rohingya, Chin, and so on, to name a few. National or ethnic familiarity and social networks is the first contributing element to RLOs' mobilisation, which creates in-group support for refugees in the unfamiliar context of the host country. However, in the absence of female leadership within the RLO community, refugee women have experienced a male-dominant control in refugee affairs (Interviews, Myanmar and Yemenis leaders, August 2022) that reinforces the culturally embedded discrimination against women and minority groups.

The mobilisation of refugee women within each ethnic community has changed these power structures. It has also shifted the common strategies for temporary assistance to women, such as food vouchers and clothing hand outs, to one that responds to the unique aspirations of women through education, health and career development. "Women are broken wings" says a female Myanmar refugee leader and so, to enable women's livelihoods, she is creating inclusive safe spaces that prioritise the needs of women and other marginalised refugees. This is reflected in her support for diverse refugee populations who have been subject to discrimination by extremist groups. "Sometimes the Malaysian police ask me, are you Buddhist? Are you Muslim? Are you Muslim or not? I just explain [to the police], our community is a Muslim organisation but we are

just helping the diversity. So I told UNHCR, all the nations that don't get a democracy [in Malaysia], I give them democracy then.”

Through this prioritisation, women-led refugee organisations have crossed ethnic, national and religious silos to raise the voices of women and reclaim their livelihoods by extending support for women's literacy, reproductive health, psycho-social support for victims of sexual- and gender-based violence (SGBV), and career development. Other than targeted programming for women, women-led refugee organisations cultivate structural change for social justice. By educating men, these organisations fight to end child marriage, gender-based violence, and stigma against women who take up work, which reduces existing gender-based oppression against refugees in Malaysia (Torok & Ball, 2021).

Moreover, women leaders often engage in social activism by challenging socially sanctioned power structures within their communities, which helps other marginalised refugee groups that are seeking community protection. For example, women RLOs are certifying cross-religious or cross-ethnic marriage ceremonies for different ethnic minorities who are rejected by their religious or ethnic leaders. Based on their principle of humanity, women refugee leaders are providing inclusive support for all refugees to access health, shelter, and protection regardless of their gender or religious identity.

With extensive knowledge of women's needs and available resources, women RLOs also fill in the institutional gaps by becoming an alternative to UNHCR Malaysia. The Malaysian government does not distinguish between refugees and undocumented migrants, regardless of their asylum status with UNHCR. As a result, refugees and asylum seekers are vulnerable to arrest. Yet, UNHCR's tiered system and its limited resources slows down asylum processes, which keeps the majority of asylum seekers awaiting determination of their refugee status, with no access to the piecemeal support offered by UNHCR or other NGOs. These conditions have pushed refugees

away from UNHCR and turned them towards refugee-led organisations. RLOs commonly express how UNHCR has insufficient capacity to respond to refugee situations and, in fact, a Myanmar Muslim leader and a Chin refugee leader claim that “UNHCR comes to us [RLOs] for help.”

An example of this is the inadequacy of the UNHCR Malaysia platform in communicating available resources to refugees. The UNHCR Malaysia website is inaccessible to refugees with different literacy and language skills, which drove a female Yemenis leader to develop a new information website that supported the information needs of refugee women, and responded to their unique levels of literacy and language skills (Interview, Yemenis leader, October 2022). Refugees in Malaysia, especially women within the Yemenis, Myanmar and Rohingya communities, have low literacy levels and may require in-person services for their cases, which makes inclusive programming a critical topic for RLOs. Using online education platforms, messaging apps such as WhatsApp or Zoom, or face-to-face interactions are some of the strategies used by RLOs to enhance refugees' literacy as well as to create inclusive access to information for refugees in different geographies especially refugee women (see for example Martin-Shields & Munir-Asen 2022).

Indeed, the presence of women leaders has a diffusion effect on other RLOs activities. This is reflected in the work of a Somali RLO that has deliberately set up the organisational mechanisms to involve Somali women to lead programmatic efforts around reproductive health, family planning, child protection, entrepreneurship and sports, among others (Interview, Somali leader, July 2022). By recognising the power of women in leadership roles, these RLOs bring in more diverse perspectives and generate an environment of knowledge exchange and social inclusion which they find beneficial to the diverse population of refugee groups. Nevertheless, inter- and intra-community conflict among refugee communities, and exclusionary approaches among some RLOs,

persist. By prioritising women and minority groups, women-led refugee organisations promote social inclusion by negotiating their intersectional experiences across religious, ethnic or national identities.

Through these negotiations, women refugee leaders create spaces for social inclusion. This is reflected in UNHCR's Age, Gender, and Diversity programme and the Global Compact for Refugees that showcase refugee-led support based on the shared experiences of LGBTIQ asylum seekers and refugee women with detention, sexual and gender-based violence and forced marriage (UNHCR, 2022). Therefore, investing in a local agenda for intersectional policies is an opportunity to enhance support for women's leadership as well as for the whole of the RLO community to address discrimination against marginalised refugee communities – especially the LGBTIQ refugee community, who face additional legal risks from the Malaysian Muslim court (Goshal, 2019).

### **Intersectionality and feminist development policy in refugee contexts: policy recommendations**

Although we cannot fully capture all the dimensions of intersectionality, the Malaysian example highlights how intersectionality among women-led refugee organisations activates inter-sectoral and inter-group support across different refugee communities. With this knowledge, the international community can strengthen pathways for supporting RLOs and women leaders as a backbone of localised programme interventions in cases where there is little or no institutional support from host country governments. To this end, we offer a set of policy recommendations around intersectionality and feminist development policies in the refugee context.

Often policy-makers and researchers approach refugee communities through gatekeepers or community focal points such as refugee leaders

and RLOs. However, RLOs are not merely community gatekeepers, they are also agents of inter-group conflict resolution, social inclusion and social justice. In this way RLOs, especially those led by women, serve not only as a contact point for outsiders, but as a binding social infrastructure between different groups of refugees in a host city or region. Aid donors can take an intersectional approach to feminist development policy by providing financial support and expertise to RLOs that enact a multi-sectoral approach to addressing complex refugee challenges faced by different marginalised groups. This can extend the impact of humanitarian and development programmes focused on health, education and other social services for the entire refugee community.

Programmes that take an intersectional approach must account for how the host country's legal and political context shapes the role of RLOs in linking refugee communities to official refugee agencies. This often means having a critical eye for how RLOs operate at a local level, and the biases that exist within different refugee communities. For example, in Malaysia UNHCR's tiered system prioritises Rohingya, Palestinian and Syrian refugees entering Malaysia, and has created a feeling of bias against other refugee nationalities waiting for determination of their refugee status. RLOs are not immune from becoming biased, or pursuing the narrow interests of their own communities. In order not to replicate existing biases embedded within the humanitarian system, donors should be aware of existing intra-community politics, and how RLOs balance narrow ethnic, national and religious interests against cooperating with other local informal organisations.

Despite these challenges, the opportunities for donor and humanitarian aid agencies to affect positive change through RLOs are great. As RLOs fulfill aid efforts, donors must be cautious of duplicating or creating parallel competition among NGOs and other actors. Funding and accountability systems should be established to ensure funding is directly benefiting RLO programming.

Feminist development policy provides an overarching framework for this, and an intersectional approach can guide development actors to

engage with RLOs to create sustainable cooperation and localisation that enhances the rights and opportunities for women and all refugees.

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