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Making these beautiful resolutions real

Sara E. Davies in conversation with Devanna de la Puente

Devanna de la Puente grew up in Chile in the 1980s during Augusto Pinochet's military regime. During that period, Chile experienced a political crisis resulting in severe human rights violations and abuses, including forced disappearances and widespread and systematic sexual violence. In witnessing her country's political struggles, she saw the particular toll these struggles took on the lives of women. Devanna was not directly affected by any of these incidents, but the turmoil and the political discourse of the time heightened her sense of justice, prompting her to work for women's rights in humanitarian and emergency settings with both United Nations (UN) agencies and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

She is currently the regional gender-based violence (GBV) advisor for Asia-Pacific, part of the global cluster for GBV (known as the GBV AoR) and the Gender Standby Capacity Project (also known as GenCap).ⁱ In this interview with Devanna, we learn about the challenges of, and opportunities for, preventing and responding to GBV by local and international actors in some of the most difficult and complex emergencies in the world. Her perspective offers important insights into how UN actors outside the diplomatic and donor hierarchy in New York, Geneva, Washington or London respond to the challenges of WPS implementation "on the ground." The interview draws our attention to the practical and conceptual obstacles faced by those whose job it is to coordinate, prioritise and mainstream gender awareness and WPS in specific regions. Devanna identifies three priority issues that she has regularly encountered in her role as GBV advisor for Asia-Pacific. First, the need to prioritise preparedness as a prevention measure; second, the need to challenge the ongoing gender bias in conflict situations that GBV in the 'private sphere' is unrelated to GBV in the 'public sphere'. Finally, she argues that a successful response to GBV in humanitarian situations (whether natural disaster or conflict) must involve and empower actors already there, namely, local women's groups.

Sara Davies: Devanna, could you outline what the daily role of a GBV advisor in emergencies in the Asia-Pacific involves?

Devanna de la Puente: I spend most of my day reaching out to different country teams to monitor an existing crisis, provide remote technical support, and prepare for deployment to a sudden crisis. These teams, or 'focal points', are primarily located within the UN or international NGOs and they are the ones tasked to coordinate GBV prevention and response efforts across agencies. My primary task is to coordinate among multiple organizations in-country to respond to and prevent GBV in a specific crisis, and to develop preparedness in natural disaster-prone countries and conflict situations.

When I am not actually on deployment to an emergency – for instance, to Typhoon Hainan/Yolanda in Philippines in 2013, Cyclone Pam in Vanuatu in 2015 and the earthquake in Nepal in 2015 – I am engaging with people in a country that we have identified as having a high risk of GBV and of disasters, having a low capacity to respond to GBV and/or still recovering from a recent emergency. This involves understanding the underlying factors, gender inequalities and power dynamics that exacerbate GBV in the specific crisis.

Preparation and Rapid Response

Sara: How do you begin discussions about GBV in countries where political sensitivities are high?

Devanna: To take the example of the 2012 breakout of conflict in Rakhine state in Myanmar, during the initial phase when fighting erupted between Rakhine (Buddhist) and Rohingya (Muslim) communities, thousands of Rohingya were forced into displacement camps (where they continue to live today). This crisis triggered an immediate response from the humanitarian community and technical staff was deployed to the affected area. I was one of the persons deployed to support the coordination and response to GBV as part of the emergency response. However, while I was in Rakhine I understood my mandate to also mean that I was to mount a protection response for women and girls for *future* emergencies.

One issue I faced, which can be seen across Asia-Pacific, is that the government is unwilling to recognise their context as a conflict situation. This has implications for our work. For example, if we wish to refer to Security Council resolutions on protection of civilians, children in armed conflict, or sexual violence, we may be opposed. Even if we want to mobilise resources to a particular area it may be difficult for us to gain access.

Sara: How did this affect your work in Myanmar?

Devanna: I was deployed there to support the humanitarian response on mainstreaming gender equality, and I set up an institutional mechanism for responding to GBV. When I arrived very few international actors were present, due to sensitivity with the government and Rakhine community. Little to nothing was being done on GBV, primarily because little was known about the extent of the problem. My time in Rakhine was spent visiting displacement camps, having focus group discussions with women and then reporting my findings to technical staff and senior management to raise the protection needs of women and girls. My role was to give voice to those who couldn't speak and find solutions. While Rohingya still face a dire humanitarian situation today, there is now a large GBV programme sustained in Rakhine that began with those emergency efforts.

Sara: How do you make the case for prevention when you may not yet have the data, such as in the case of Rakhine state, to support your presence there?

Devanna: This can be a real problem. In countries where the whole situation is one of limited or poor gender equality my work on GBV is even more complicated. A gender equality approach is so interlinked with GBV prevention and response that you cannot

really do one without the other. Reporting, gender-sensitive evidence, and gender-disaggregated data collection are your constant challenges. If you don't have any of that then it can be very hard to justify the need for resources and an actual response. Despite that, we have clear guidelines such as those provided by the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), which state that we shouldn't wait for evidence to act on GBV prevention and response.ⁱⁱ That is crucial – the IASC guidelines state the need to realise GBV is happening regardless of data availability.

I see my role as building preparedness for emergencies and ensuring everyone understands this relevance of GBV. Through training and mentoring, mobilising resources, deployment of staff and services and – most importantly – promoting coordination, I help create linkages between GBV coordinators from the UN, INGOs and government. It is not as common sense as we might think, and it becomes harder at the onset of a crisis. Building trust and rapport *before* the crisis is essential.

Sara: Why is it more difficult to build trust and rapport at the onset of a crisis?

Devanna: A crisis – whether natural or conflict-driven – can bring people together to help; it also brings egos and power games between organizations, between people and between levels of government. This can be particularly difficult in a sensitive environment. The government may be territorial about their message and control of the situation, or senior management might not be supportive of the programme. Doing that early outreach work to know who will block you and who will help you facilitates the best response when the crisis breaks. Sometimes you can be surprised by who is willing to help you, even within government. Knowing that there are people there who have known you prior to the crisis when things were calmer can be essential. That prevention work relies a lot on personal relationships to build something longer term. In Asia-Pacific, building trust and personal rapport is particularly crucial to provide technical support in a crisis. Without strong relationships you might not have the openness from government or national staff to take your advice, even in an acute emergency. In my experience, these are sensitive environments where you have to gain access to states that have denied humanitarian access in the past.

Responding to Resistances – at all levels

Sara: What do you do when there is resistance from the government or relevant actors on the ground?

Devanna: This comes back to the sensitive environment in which you may be deployed, and managing what the guidelines stipulate versus what you're hearing from other INGOs and the government on the ground.

To take another example, I was deployed to Afghanistan in September 2015 as regional GBV advisor to provide support following the humanitarian crisis in Kunduz, northwest Afghanistan, after the Taliban took over. We heard from Amnesty International that there were reports of rape – gang rapes and targeting of women for sexual violence (Amnesty International 2015). Amnesty had collected a lot of this information from women's rights organisations in Kunduz.

I arrived soon after the Kunduz crisis to support the GBV coordination mechanism. With limited data and evidence, we had to rely on reports, including the one from Amnesty International, to understand the situation and the particular risks for women and girls. However, I quickly found that many in-country actors were suspicious of the Amnesty report. Some would ask whether this was the deliberate seeding of stories by people connected to the government seeking to attract international attention with anti-Taliban propaganda. When I asked why humanitarian responders should doubt the reports, the same people would say, “Well, you know, we rarely hear of the Taliban deliberately using sexual violence in conflict in the same way as it is widely used in other countries like in Africa.” In these same conversations no one denied that sexual violence was widespread, but the response was sometimes, “This is [just] a *problem in the homes*. Sexual violence exists amongst families and communities, but it is not well documented in-country as a deliberate strategy in conflict as a weapon of war.” It was a strange argument to me.

Sara: How can you challenge these ideas?

Devanna: In talking to a lot of the humanitarian colleagues, including protection experts across different agencies, I found myself having to say things that (to me) were obvious, like, “We must always assume that GBV is happening,” “Even one case is too many – why do we need more to do something about it?” or, “If it is in the home, it is in the streets.”

I found myself, like other feminists, challenging the idea that silence meant an absence of GBV. There was this sense amongst many within international agencies that we would know and hear more cases if they existed. It was incredible to have to convince others, particularly those with related mandates, to see the obvious and major limitations on reporting GBV for civilians.

Sara: What has the Kunduz experience revealed about how international agencies approach and understand sexual violence versus GBV?

Devanna: So much of this comes back to data. It was amazing to hear senior management in Kabul saying, “Afghans don't use sexual violence in war. There is little to no evidence – this is not the Congo.” I was not saying the situation in Afghanistan was similar to Congo. I felt that we should not compare contexts, and that many were forgetting about the challenges of collecting data about GBV. Of course the data is not there; it is not even safe to collect data in those situations. So because of access and because of safety we are never going to have perfect data or to be able to really show in that way that GBV is happening.

Sara: What did your experience in Afghanistan teach you?

Devanna: Well, it helped me understand how far we have to go in explaining and presenting the relationship between the prevalence of GBV and the use of sexual violence in armed conflict. It helped me realise that while it is obvious (to me and some of the other GBV technical colleagues) that sexual violence in a conflict-affected country like Afghanistan will be taking place, it is not as obvious to others. There is clearly a huge knowledge and resource gap that requires education and support. That said, there were many colleagues who understood the problem and took

immediate action to support the GBV response after the insurgency in Kunduz, and they helped challenge those who were in denial of the problem.

In my job I am pushing primarily for resources and services. I am not pushing for prosecutions. I don't feel the need for proof in order to be a champion for GBV services and protection. It frustrates me, as a humanitarian worker, when I am told I need "proof" to demand protection or that we should be diplomatic in our advocacy. The IASC GBV guidelines clearly state that we do not need proof to act and that GBV should always be a priority. So we just have to continue educating those who think otherwise.

Moving Forward: Working with Women's NGOs.

Sara: What example(s) of groups protecting the rights of women and girls have you witnessed? What role can/should external actors play to support these local efforts?

Devanna: There are great local initiatives that, with the right will and leadership, make a difference in women's lives – and when witnessing that, you know change is possible. Going back to Afghanistan, we have GBV sub-clusters, or local coordination bodies, in most regions. I travelled out and met the sub-cluster in the northern Afghan region that covers Kunduz, led by a very active women's NGO. Meetings like that have always kept me going. In Afghanistan the women's NGOs are very active and they have a lot of information that they want to provide to people like me to change things.

This sub-cluster requested support from us about what to do next time in a similar emergency situation – in this case, a sudden transition of authority. How they should organise themselves, how they should be activated. I think groups like this are our untapped resource – they are the ones who understand how GBV is going to manifest itself, so that you can then prevent it ahead of time. They know exactly when widespread violence is about to happen because violence against local women increases. They just don't know who to approach in order to respond to what they are witnessing.

In my work, the emergency framework requires us to embed these groups in our coordination response. They have the information, they should be part of the early warning and outreach. They have the skills we international workers don't have in the field, but it can be hard to hear from these groups because they are often seen as implementers but not leaders. In my experience – with the Pakistan earthquake, Typhoon Haiyan in Philippines and the Nepal earthquake – it was the women's NGOs that led the response and remained in place for recovery and reconstruction.

Sara: How can local voices be heard and prioritise prevention, protection and participation agendas for women?

Devanna: We need to pay more attention to local women's NGOs. One of my first jobs was to help set up a women's NGO in Honduras. It was a community-based organisation, and we had a rape case that we had to take forward to the Supreme Court. At one point we wanted to bring it to the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, but we had no idea and no one around had any idea on how to access this huge

process. Where do you get the resources? How do you fund it? How much do you promise to those who are risking everything? What if you fail? That experience made me feel for community-based organisations. Local NGOs need to be given the opportunity to come together to be briefed on the practical part of the rights process and its delivery in humanitarian emergencies.

We have an opportunity with the adoption of multiple global processes and commitments – the Global Study of 1325 and its recommendations, the Hyogo Framework, the World Humanitarian Summit, the Sustainable Development Goals and the GBV Global Call to Action – to ask how we can make sense of all of these commitments at the country level. How will we link gender and GBV in the humanitarian, peacebuilding and development processes? There is no end to GBV without addressing structures of gender inequality, and there is no peace without the elimination of sexual violence and GBV.

We have these beautiful Security Council resolutions and beautiful gender equality commitments. Now we just need to make them real. We need to make landfall on gender equality and protection from GBV in the humanitarian sector, as well as the peacebuilding and development sectors. We cannot continue working in silos and we cannot continue making promises and resolutions that we fail to deliver.

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ⁱ The Gender Standby Capacity Project (GenCap) is an UN Inter-Agency Steering Committee initiative created in 2007 with the Norwegian Refugee Council that seeks to “facilitate and strengthen capacity and leadership of humanitarians to undertake and promote gender-sensitive programming to ensure the distinct needs of women, girls, boys and men of all ages and backgrounds, are taken into account in humanitarian action at global, regional, and country levels” (GenCap n.d.).

ⁱⁱ The purpose of the IASC Guidelines for Integrating Gender-Based Violence Interventions in Humanitarian Action is to: “assist humanitarian actors and communities affected by armed conflict, natural disasters and other humanitarian emergencies to coordinate, plan, implement, monitor and evaluate essential actions for the prevention and mitigation of gender-based violence (GBV) across all sectors of humanitarian response” (IASC 2016: 1).