Sexual violence in war-affected countries. Samer Abdelnour examines why part of the solution will be to give women fuel-efficient stoves.

The UK will invest millions of pounds to reduce the rampant rates of sexual violence in war-affected countries. Samer Abdelnour examines why part of the solution will be to give women fuel-efficient stoves.

Fuel-efficient cooking is a long-standing preoccupation in global development. Since the 1990s, agencies like the World Bank have been encouraging women to adopt fuel-efficient methods to reduce deforestation and the effects of smoke inhalation. But over the last decade or so, the idea that traditional fires must be replaced by specially engineered technologies has become a kind of dogma in the humanitarian community, an outsourcing of investment from a variety of sources.

The battle against sexual violence in crisis situations is a key reason why many agencies and donors – UN agencies, NGOs, as well as USAID and DFID – have made projects for better cooking technology. In September 2010, for example, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton launched the Global Alliance for Clean Cookstoves, an initiative to promote a global industry for producing fuel-efficient stoves. In addition to the traditional environmental and health concerns, the Global Alliance also claimed the right kind of stove could reduce the “personal security risk” faced by displaced women and girls (US Department of State, 2011).

Personal security risk is sanitised language for “sexual and gender-based violence” (SGBV), which is itself a rather vague term that humanitarian advocates use. “Efficiency” transforms it’s not difficult to see why the connection between cooking technology will reduce a woman’s risk “of being raped” (Borger, 2013). The assumption among public figures is clear: women are safe inside camps. Sexual violence is expressed over concerns that traditional fires must be replaced by specially engineered technologies has become a kind of dogma in the humanitarian community, an outsourcing of investment from a variety of sources.

The reports from conflict-affected areas speak volumes to the appeal of this phenomenon. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, the International Rescue Committee (2013) recently found in one camp that “in 45 per cent of the cases, the perpetrator was someone known to the woman, typically a family member, partner or someone from the local community.” Numbers like these raise a crucial question for UK policy makers: if wandering to collect fuel exposed women to increasing in fuel efficiency can decrease the overall risk of sexual violence in conflict-affected areas.

Here’s why this category is ambiguous: the wider western public imagines that when a humanitarian organisation arrives to deliver goods and services to a warzone, it also brings some measure of stability and safety. This is simply not true. Establishing security among displaced populations is extraordinarily challenging. The line separating civilians from perpetrators can be blurry, and partisans from all sides of a conflict often live and operate side by side within the same refugee camps. For instance, “combatants,” themselves displaced by violence, may become recipients of aid. Similarly, the displaced may take up arms “as refugees warriors” or resort to banditry. What is more, the presence of competing security apparatuses inside camps makes their internal atmospheres volatile to say the least.

The cold hard truth is that people who have become accustomed to cooking grass or wood for sale for personal use, and must visit nearby towns and markets to find work. Since one of the reasons Darfuri women constantly leave camps is to search for cooking fuel, a peculiar logical connection emerged to explain where and in what circumstances these women were most vulnerable; if wandering to collect fuel exposed women to heightened risk of sexual violence, then reducing need for fuel should reduce the risk of attack.

In late 2005, a Washington-based humanitarian advocacy organisation called Refugees International (RI) released a significant “call to stoves” which crystallised a framework of action specific to Darfur. The document stated that “by reducing the need for wood and emission of smoke, a switch to simple, more fuel-efficient stoves could reduce the time women spend collecting wood, a task that exposes them to the risk of rape and other forms of gender-based violence.”

It’s not difficult to see why the connection between fuelwood and sexual violence has appealed to humanitarian advocates. “Efficiency” transforms an overwhelming social and political issue into a resolvable technical problem. Rather than focus on the overall incidence of sexual assault, stoves isolate one dimension of the violence afflicting Darfur women and other to control it. Once increased fuel-efficiency gained currency as a generalisable tool of rape reduction, NGOs and donors had a clear programming objective. They began experimenting with different stove technologies, designs and plans for product dissemination.

Stoves benefitted from the influx of international aid for Darfuris to become a taken-for-granted part of the humanitarian toolkit and a lucrative industry. As I have documented elsewhere stove promoters showcased up to a dozen different models to compete for these dollars, compared in terms of efficiency, cultural appropriateness, and cost (Abdelnour, 2015). At one point, the jockeying was so intense that one international efficient stove expert described the situation as Darfur’s “stoves war.” Tens of thousands of efficient stoves have since been delivered in Darfur by various agencies. One Darfuri woman I met sometime after 2006 had received six stoves from six separate NGOs.

Over time, the stoves available to the world’s low-income women have without a doubt become more energy-efficient. Many smart people – political advocates in New York, engineers in Berkeley, and NGO directors in Khartoum – have worked tirelessly to design them this way. The result of pouring money into stove design has returned a thoroughly predictable result: more efficient stoves and a booming humanitarian stoves industry. But there is no real evidence that these technical increases in fuel-efficiency can decrease the overall risk of sexual violence in conflict-affected areas.

The logic that stoves can prevent sexual violence is a media-friendly dead end. It raises public awareness of global sexual violence, but masks the root causes of the phenomenon. The forms of violence taking place in conflict-affected areas. Today’s “new wars” are extremely messy. They are not confined to warzones. They are not confined to warzones. They involve all kinds of crime. This is why the humanitarian industry is spending millions on cooking stoves in a futile endeavour to keep them there.

The bottom line is that pervasive sexual abuse cannot be solved by humanitarians handing out domestic products. “Stoves reduce rape” is a distracting rhetoric; because it unduly transfers the burden of security into the private lives of the most vulnerable.

References
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Written with Martha Poon, RfP Editor.

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