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# Stanford SOCIAL INNOVATION REVIEW

## 10<sup>th</sup> ANNIVERSARY

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## If Stoves Could Kill

Political advocacy, humanitarian intervention, and the “manageable problem.”

By [Samer Abdelnour](#) | 7 | Sep. 17, 2012

When San Diego-based Invisible Children (IC) released [KONY 2012](#), a short film advocating the capture of Ugandan rebel Joseph Kony, it drew intense criticism for fundraising and promoting military intervention by way of [misinformation and oversimplification](#). IC’s campaign exemplifies how domestic political advocacy can re-construct complex crises into [simple scenarios](#), influencing thinking on a global scale. Perhaps equally pernicious is the role advocacy can play in transforming far-away crises into “manageable problems” that can be solved through simple technical solutions. A telling example is the portrayal of efficient cookstoves as a tool for preventing rape and other forms of gender-based violence, first in Darfur and now globally. I discuss below, drawing on an ongoing research project I’m conducting with my colleague Akbar Saeed.



Newly produced mud stove in El Fashir, North Darfur.  
(Photos by Samer Abdelnour)

## Cooking up the case for Darfur's stoves

Fuel-efficient stoves, a docile domestic technology, have been **promoted for decades** as tools to combat deforestation and the negative health effects of traditional cooking. During the Darfur crisis, they took on an entirely new function as a technology to prevent sexual violence. In 2005, Washington-based Refugees International (RI) released a **widely publicized call** advocating stoves:

“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.”

Backed by USAID and public donations, dozens of NGOs began to promote stoves as a way to protect Darfuri women and girls from attack.

How did stoves come to be thought of a solution to sexual violence?

During the 1990s, in Kenya's Dadaab refugee camps, NGOs and advocacy organizations (including RI) sought solutions to pervasive sexual violence. Unable to provide comprehensive protection for women inside the camps, RI advocated for the **provision of firewood** to address one spatial dimension of rape: that which occurs when women leave camps to gather firewood.



Producing metal stoves in Nyala, South Darfur.

When Darfur emerged as a significant domestic political issue in the US, advocacy networks—including the Save Darfur Coalition and RI—drew from longstanding racial and gender frames to form a **US-centric understanding** of the conflict as an Arab-led genocidal rape.

This, combined with the idea that firewood provision would help prevent rape, permitted efficient stoves—for the first time—to emerge a solution to sexual violence in Darfur. Encino-based Jewish World Watch succinctly captures the **tragic narrative**:

“Women and girls who have fled the genocide in Darfur, Sudan, are particularly vulnerable to rape while performing the critical task of collecting firewood for cooking.”

## Realizing the complexity of risk

Having spent time in Darfur researching the competitive dynamics of stove-promoting NGOs, it became clear to me that the overly simplistic assumptions on which stove solutions are predicated do not reflect the complex intersection of ethnicities, violence, and gender roles.

This recognition is not without precedence.

In fact, multiple **assessments** reveal the provision of firewood to have been an erroneous “solution” to rape:

“Banditry and acts of sexual violence, especially rape, were known to occur frequently in the camps. Considerable publicity highlighted the rape of women while collecting firewood outside the camps.”

And in a 2007 report, RI **withdrew its claim**, saying that in Darfur: “There is little evidence that producing fuel-efficient stoves reduces violence against women.”

Furthermore, in a **2009 report**, Amnesty International reveals that Darfuri refugees in Eastern Chad, also recipients of stove interventions, are just as vulnerable to sexual violence inside camps as they are outside of them.

## No simple, global solution

In Darfur, the “stove solution” persists through a number of untruths, including simple notions of “Arab” and “African”—and that only “Arabs” rape. Camps are construed as safe, and no consideration is given to women and girls who must travel for work, to markets, or to collect grasses. These untruths are reinforced through the work of US-based advocacy networks and NGOs.

Amazingly, despite RI’s retraction and historical experiences, determined US-based organizations continue to promote efficient cookstoves as a technology that reduces incidents of rape—not just in Darfur, but **globally**.

For global promotion, narratives of sexual violence are further generalized. For example, Berkeley-based Potential Energy markets **a blanket experience of displaced women** in Darfur and Ethiopia: “Outside the relative safety of refugee camps, they are vulnerable to acts of violence”.

It is unethical, not to mention impossible, for advocacy organizations and NGOs to claim or

guarantee that vulnerable, displaced, conflict-affected women and girls are safe in camps, let alone that they can be made safe through using cookstoves. Yet to step away from this claim undermines the suggestion that stoves can “solve” rape. The elaborate risks facing women and girls should never be simplified such that simple technologies are thought to solve complex humanitarian crises.

Across the US, well-intentioned people are working hard to design, develop, promote, and fundraise for stoves to help poor, vulnerable women in Darfur and elsewhere. Unfortunately, the underlying assertions holding up the stoves as a solution to gender-based violence are based on US domestic worldviews rather than actual realities of conflict-affected people.

**Research is beginning to question** the ability for efficient stoves to effectively reduce fuel consumption and health risks. It is time to unearth the notion that stoves are a comprehensive solution to sexual violence and other issues. NGOs must be aware of the power of political advocacy to re-construct complex realities into “manageable problems” with simple technical solutions.



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