

## Are clean cookstoves a cooked up ‘solution’ to sexual violence?

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Clean cookstoves are one of the ever-growing range of technological solutions proposed to make life easier for those living in poverty.

For those unfamiliar with the arguments made by clean cookstoves campaigners (such as the [Global Alliance for Clean Cookstoves](#)), they can help reduce deforestation from firewood collection, decrease health problems caused by household air pollution, free up women’s time from collecting fuel and boost women’s livelihoods.

But it seems some of the other justifications for distributing clean cookstoves may have been based on far shakier ground.

An article in the most recent edition of *International Political Sociology* by Sameer Abdelnour and Akbar M. Saeed, titled ‘[Technologizing Humanitarian Space: Darfur Advocacy and the Rape-Stove Panacea](#)’, looks at the way that clean cookstoves were promoted by some NGOs as a solution to rape and sexual violence in refugee camps (one of the authors has also summarised some of the research in an earlier piece [here](#)).

The authors discuss how a throwaway line in a report (that was later rejected by the same organisation that first promoted it) turned into a runaway narrative and advocacy message used to justify investment in and fundraising for clean cookstoves as a tool to reduce sexual violence in Dadaab, Darfur and internationally, despite a lack of evidence.

Advocates argued that women were venturing further away from the relative safety of the refugee camps to find firewood for cooking, putting them at heightened risk for rape and sexual assault. Fuel efficient cookstoves were offered up as a solution to reduce the number of trips women made outside the camps.

But the issue of sexual violence was far more complex and pervasive. Despite widespread distribution of the stoves, little evidence emerged of their effectiveness at reducing rape or sexual assault. One [report](#) [pdf] found that “fuel efficient stoves did not appear to significantly reduce the amount of firewood that women needed nor the amount of times they ventured out of the camps”. An [evaluation](#) [pdf] of a UNHCR program to provide firewood to refugee women found that it was ineffective at reducing the prevalence of rape: “analysis of rape reports demonstrates a decrease of 45% in firewood collection rapes during periods of full firewood coverage. However, these periods also see an increase in rapes in other locations and contexts by between 78% and 113%... Our findings suggest that firewood collection provides a convenient context or location for rape, but should not be viewed as its ‘cause’”.

Abdelnour and Saeed look at the issue as one of “problematization diffusion”, whereby complex crises are framed as “manageable problems” with actionable (often technological) solutions.

By framing the problem of sexual violence as one intrinsically linked with firewood collection, an idea which then gained widespread traction among activists and Western NGOs, consequently spreading to new contexts, the authors write that this limited “a more comprehensive understanding of the pervasive reality of gender-based violence elsewhere”.

It seems clean cookstoves are fine for cooking, but questionably useful when it comes to preventing rape. The article provides food for thought on how advocacy messages and associated ‘solutions’ in development can quickly emerge and gain support, even in the face of zero evidence, and why there needs to be some scepticism about any easy fix for a complex, multifaceted problem.