

Syrian Refugee Men in Za'tari Camp: Humanitarianism, Masculinities, and “Vulnerabilities”

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Abstract

This paper summarises the findings of a research project on humanitarian work with Syrian refugee men, focused on Za'tari Refugee Camp in Jordan. It argues that, for humanitarians, refugee men present a challenge. They are read in gendered and racialized ways, as independent, agential, political and at times threatening, and thereby disrupt humanitarian visions of refugeehood as a passive, feminised subject position. In this paper, these arguments are demonstrated through an exploration of some of the key areas the research focused on: how Syrian men were understood as objects of humanitarian care, how humanitarians understood Syrian men's (non-)“vulnerability,” and Syrian men's attempts to create livelihoods opportunities in the camp. The paper is based on extensive ethnographic participant-observation in the camp, and interviews with humanitarian workers and Syrian refugees in Jordan, which was undertaken in 2015-2016.

Keywords: Masculinities, Syrian Refugees, Za'tari Refugee Camp, vulnerability, Jordan

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Introduction

“I'm really glad that you are asking these sorts of questions,” an NGO program manager said to me over coffee, as we sat in one of the most popular cafés for foreign humanitarian workers in Amman, “because there is no-one working on men, especially single young men.” I told him a story that another NGO worker had told me, that every six months or so in a meeting, someone would raise the lack of progress on a “men and boys’ strategy.” This lack of progress would be lamented, briefly, but then the meeting would end, everyone would be busy, and nothing would happen until the same issue was brought up again six months later. He looked me straight in the eyes and replied: “It is exactly like that!”

I was intrigued by this reaction to my research project, which was framed around refugee men and masculinities in the Syria response in Jordan. Was it really the case that there was “no-one” focusing on refugee men? What did “men and boys’ strategies” seek to achieve? What areas of work did they (not) include? And what did the answers to these questions tell us about humanitarian workers’ understandings of refugee men and masculinities? Were these understandings formed from the “transferable” knowledge that is operationalised across different humanitarian contexts, or were they

specifically about Syrian men? Arab men? Muslim men? These are some of the central questions that animated my PhD research, which this paper summarises.[1](#)

These questions link very closely to the theme of this issue of the Civil Society Review, which invites us to rethink inequalities and informality in contexts of migration, mobility, and circulation in the Middle East. In its close-knit examination of the life and governance of Za'tari Refugee Camp, the largest refugee camp for Syrians in the Middle East, my research analyses the ways in which humanitarian governance of refugees perpetuates inequalities of power and social injustices, and reduces the possibility for refugees to exercise agency. My approach, which centres on an intersectional analysis of gender,[2](#) is a particularly appropriate way to explore these questions, and to shed new light on them through an examination of a topic that has not typically gained significant attention in research.[3](#)

In exploring these questions, my work takes as a starting point two crucial insights from critical, feminist scholarship that has examined humanitarian work with refugees. Firstly, scholars have documented numerous ways in which central aspects of the refugee regime have been based on “gender-blind” assumptions that privilege the (expected) experiences of heterosexual, cisgender men. These include the kinds of persecution included in the definition of refugeehood in the 1951 Refugee Convention, and the patrilineal models that have been used in some contexts to establish refugee status.[4](#) At the same time, and consistent with patriarchal assumptions, refugee “womenandchildren”[5](#) become a central object of concern for humanitarian actors in contexts of displacement.[6](#) These valuable insights, however, do not reveal how humanitarian workers think about or relate to refugee men in their everyday work, how they conceptualise their responsibilities towards this demographic, or how understandings of masculinities shape humanitarianism. In this short paper, I will offer an overview of the arguments offered by this research project. After outlining the methodology used to conduct the research, and some of the relevant questions of positionality and ethics, I will subsequently explain the key arguments of the research, with reference to three themes: refugee men as objects of humanitarian care, refugee men and “vulnerability,” and refugee men and livelihoods. Finally, I will explain the contributions this research makes to both scholarship and humanitarian practice.

Methodologically, the research is based on extensive primary fieldwork that was undertaken in Jordan between September 2015 and August 2016. During this period, I conducted a total of 70 interviews with humanitarian and NGO workers, security personnel in Za'tari, employers, donor agencies, Syrian refugees living in Za'tari, and in host communities. I also conducted a group discussion with 12 Syrians at the Questscope Youth Centre in the camp, as well as extensive participant observation in Za'tari with the NGO Arab Renaissance for Democracy and Development (ARDD).[7](#)

Research in contexts of forced displacement is characterised by power inequalities, which can readily lead to the exploitation of refugees, and disrespect for their time, needs, and perspectives.[8](#) In my case, as a white man holding UK citizenship, these inequalities ran along (at least) lines of gender, race, and citizenship, in addition to other resultant inequalities, such as access to space and territory, which made my research possible in the first place. Working in accordance with established ethical guidelines,[9](#) I attempted to ensure that I was constructively contributing to humanitarian work and assistance throughout the research process, by doing volunteer work and giving donations, and I have continued to contribute to multiple humanitarian organisations in the years after my fieldwork. In choosing my research topics, I was also cognisant of the broader political context in which it would be interpreted,

and prevailing narratives about Syrian refugee men, who are often assumed to be (potentially) violent, and a threat to “western” states and societies.¹⁰ This context informed my decision to centre my analysis on humanitarianism, and thereby to “study up;” that is, to study those who hold power in a particular context.¹¹

Refugee Men, “Vulnerability,” and Autonomy in Humanitarian Spaces

The central argument of this research is that, for humanitarians working in the Syrian refugee response,¹² refugee men present a challenge. They are read in gendered and racialized ways, as independent, agential, politically active, and at times threatening — and thereby disrupt humanitarian visions of refugeehood. Syrian men in Za’tari refugee camp are often read as troublemakers who are difficult to govern and work with, for example when they attempt to exercise influence over the spatial organisation of the camp, when they pursue independent economic activities, and when they protest humanitarian decisions. Refugee men thus become a problem for humanitarians to repress, reform, regulate, or ignore, while, in contrast, refugee women, with whom many humanitarians are more comfortable working, become a canvas onto which humanitarian agendas can be imposed. In these governance strategies, humanitarian actors rely on supposedly “global” knowledge, while the knowledge and priorities from both the Syrian community and the Jordanian context are deemed inferior due to their designation as “local.” In doing so, humanitarians consistently prioritise their own goals, logics, and understandings of gender, over those of Syrians themselves, actively disempowering their “beneficiaries.” In the remainder of this paper, I will demonstrate these arguments by focusing on three key aspects of this research project. Firstly, whether Syrian refugee men are understood to be objects of humanitarian care; secondly, whether Syrian refugee men are understood to be “vulnerable,” and thirdly, I will highlight Syrians’ attempts to create livelihoods opportunities in the camp.

One of the major findings of this research is that, for many humanitarian actors, Syrian refugee men have an uncertain position as objects of humanitarian care. As feminist scholars have demonstrated, the vision of the refugee in the “Global South,” particularly in contexts of encampment, is of a passive, feminised, and de-politicised subject position.¹³ Syrian men, by contrast, were assumed to be independent, agential, and in particular to be able to rely on their own participation in the labour market to provide for themselves. These ideas were based on a racialised vision of masculinity, in which Syrian men, as Arab men, were understood to somehow be immune to the violence and precarity of the labour market in Jordan. Refugee women, on the other hand, were assumed to need “empowerment” (in the specific ways imagined for them by humanitarians), even if that “empowerment” ended up increasing women’s burdens,¹⁴ or encouraging women’s participation in initiatives they found exploitative.¹⁵

Similar ambiguities and uncertainties emerged in discussions of Syrian men’s positions within, and relationships to, humanitarian work on “gender.” Humanitarians knew that their grant and project proposals needed to show “gender awareness,” and that the key way to demonstrate this was to linguistically emphasise accounting for the distinct needs of “women, girls, boys and men.” However, only rarely were refugee men considered as people who were themselves living through gendered experiences of displacement.¹⁶ Therefore, as one of my interviewees said, it is difficult for humanitarian workers to “actually choose to be against” refugee men, because they are part of the broader population humanitarians are there to work with, but that does not necessarily mean that they are “for”

them either.¹⁷ This analysis demonstrates, I argue, that for many humanitarians, refugee men's position and status within humanitarian work was ambiguous. I characterise this ambiguity as Syrian refugee men having an uncertain position as objects of humanitarian care.

Humanitarian determinations of “vulnerability” were one central field in which these dynamics played out. In the earlier years of the Syria refugee response in Jordan, “vulnerability” was often calculated using the “group approach.” For example, according to a document from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and International Relief and Development (IRD), refugee populations contain six “vulnerable” groups: women at risk, elderly/older person at risk, child at risk, single parent or caregiver, people with disabilities, and people with serious medical conditions.¹⁸ In Jordan, this system was largely replaced, because it generalised groups, and could not account for the causes of, or changes in, “vulnerability.” The new system was the Vulnerability Assessment Framework – a large-scale survey designed to measure refugees’ “vulnerability” – but informal understandings of who was, and who was not, “vulnerable,” continued to be widely shared and influential among humanitarian workers.

Women who were living with children but not with men, in so-called “female-headed households,” were assumed, by virtue of this family arrangement, to be particularly or especially “vulnerable.” This same designation of “female-headed household” is used generically regardless of the reason why the woman is living without a partner. When a woman is living with a partner who is a man, the household is typically assumed and understood to not be “female-headed;” that is, women only “head” their households in the absence of a man. As Susie Jolly argued, this terminology is troublingly heteronormative, ignoring “the possibility that [the household] could be female-headed by choice,” run by a lesbian couple, for example, or by a woman who prefers to live without a husband.¹⁹

Refugee men, on the other hand, were typically assumed not to be “vulnerable.” The consensus that refugee women and children were (the most) “vulnerable” appeared to form part of the “common sense” of the everyday world of humanitarian workers, and thus not to require explanation or justification. Whether one is deemed to be “vulnerable” by humanitarian actors (as well as by states and judicial systems) can have important implications for refugees’ lives and welfare – being recognised as (among the most) “vulnerable” is often a prerequisite to accessing humanitarian aid and programmes, as well as resettlement opportunities. Humanitarians, it therefore appeared, were much more comfortable working with, and far too comfortable holding power over, refugee women, rather than refugee men.²⁰

Nevertheless, as I have argued at length elsewhere,²¹ understanding refugee men's lives and needs through an analytical framework of “vulnerability” could also have negative implications for refugee men themselves. Doing so would perpetuate an oppressive system where resource distribution is done according to humanitarian frameworks, ideas, and calculations. Researchers and humanitarians alike need to, instead, centre their analysis of refugees’ lives on the frameworks, concepts and ideas that are meaningful to refugees themselves.²²

The third area through which I wish to explore and demonstrate the central arguments of this research project, is the attempts of Syrian men to build livelihoods opportunities outside of the control of humanitarian and state actors. As soon as Za'tari camp opened, Syrians began to conduct informal

economic activity, exchanging and marketising goods that were distributed to them by humanitarian agencies. This market grew to contain approximately 3,000 businesses, which were overwhelmingly set up, run, and staffed by men. The gendered nature of this activity reflected the centrality of “breadwinning” to many Syrian men’s understandings of masculinities, broader gendered understandings of work and responsibility, but also other (often interrelated) factors such as access to capital.

Humanitarian responses to this activity were varied. Humanitarian workers “on the ground” in Za’tari were more likely to be relatively sympathetic to Syrians’ actions in setting up a market, and to recognise the inevitability of informal economic activity in a camp context. Other humanitarian actors, however, would lament that Syrians were using resources in ways that humanitarians had not intended, and undertook extensive efforts to limit Syrians’ capacities to re-shape the space and life of the camp in these ways. UNHCR’s leadership in the country, and the Jordanian government, were both troubled by the market, the independence it allowed, and the permanence that they thought could potentially develop from it. While humanitarians were, at times, happy to promote Syrians as “entrepreneurs,” Syrians’ activities extensively disrupted the authoritarian governance strategies that many humanitarian and state actors aim to employ in refugee camps. In this context too, therefore, refugee men were seen as too agential, too political, and a “problem” for humanitarians to repress or regulate.

In the broader research project,[23](#) these arguments and analysis are applied to a wider range of topics and humanitarian interventions, including: work that attempted to “engage” Syrian men as allies in preventing sexual and gender-based violence, humanitarian “Cash for Work” programmes, refugee camp governance, and the humanitarian “innovation” agenda. Taken together, these findings have extensive relevance to both academic scholarship and humanitarian practice, the most important of which are summarised below.

Moving Forward: Researching and Working with Refugee Men

In examining humanitarian understandings of refugee men and masculinities, a topic that has rarely received systematic attention, this research offers substantive new contributions to scholarship. Existing academic analysis on humanitarian work with refugee men tends to focus only on gender programmes or gender-based violence work;[24](#) in contrast, my research examines the ways in which understandings of refugee men and masculinities are sutured throughout, and have a profound influence on all aspects of, humanitarian work. It is thereby of particular relevance to scholars, often working in feminist International Relations, who seek to explore and uncover the ways in which gender, and the structures of power and differentiation with which it intersects, are central to the operations of international power. It will also be of extensive interest to those working on the Syria “crisis” and responses, and offers a novel vantage point from which to analyse and understand these events. Its in-depth and layered exploration of the life, governance and politics of Za’tari will be of relevance to scholars of contemporary Jordan, of humanitarianism, and of gender and refugeehood.

Similarly, this work is of extensive relevance to individuals and organisations working in the humanitarian and NGO sectors, especially (but not exclusively) those working with Syrian refugees or in contexts of the Middle East. It offers a new perspective from which to understand and reflect on humanitarian work. It does not offer a conventional “evaluation” of humanitarian work, nor does it

answer whether it was “successful,” according to donor or humanitarian criteria. Rather, it follows in a line of critical, ethnographically-informed scholarship that asks how such projects and interventions work.²⁵ In doing so, it calls for a deep re-evaluation of the ways in which humanitarian work with refugees is conducted. A running theme of the argumentation, as discussed above, how humanitarian actors consistently centre their own – rather than refugees’ – values, frameworks and priorities, including their own understandings of gender. The takeaway for practitioners and policy-makers should therefore not be to simply “include” refugee men more in humanitarian work. Instead, the analysis begs the question of how humanitarian work can instead genuinely centre refugees – their lives, their understandings, and their conceptual frameworks – to build a more emancipatory humanitarianism for those who will need solidarity in the days, months, and years to come.

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