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(Un)Governable Subjects: The Limits of Refugee Participation in the Promotion of Gender Equality in Humanitarian Aid

Abstract: In humanitarian aid to refugees, participatory and community-based approaches are today strongly emphasized as the path towards more efficient protection and assistance. Participation and community mobilization are particularly constructed as a vehicle for the promotion of gender equality. This paper explores how participatory and community-based approaches are used in efforts to promote gender equality in humanitarian aid to Burmese refugees in Thailand and Bangladesh. Refugees, especially women, in Bangladesh are problematized as passive and dependent due to their alleged lack of ‘community spirit’ and participation. In contrast, the political activism of refugee leaders and women’s organizations in Thailand is represented as problematic, illegitimate and unruly. While refugees in Bangladesh do not participate enough, it appears that the refugees in Thailand participate too much. Drawing on interviews with humanitarian workers, this paper examines this paradox through a governmentality perspective and draws out the meanings attached to the concept of participation in humanitarian policy and practice and shows how participation is employed in the government of refugees.

Keywords: Refugees, humanitarian aid, participation, gender equality, dependency, governmentality, Thailand, Bangladesh

Introduction

Participatory approaches to program planning, implementation and evaluation have been increasingly adopted in humanitarian aid to refugees, and notions of participation, empowerment and community development are now part of mainstream humanitarian policy discourse (Turner, 2001, Bakewell, 2003, Kaiser, 2004). Refugee participation in the delivery of humanitarian aid and the governance of refugee camps and settlements is thought to improve efficiency in protection and assistance, combat refugee ‘dependency’ and foster self-reliance. The participation of refugee women in particular is constructed as instrumental in achieving these humanitarian goals as well as in promoting gender equality in refugee contexts (Turner, 2004). The link between participatory approaches, humanitarian efficiency, and gender equality has, in recent years, been institutionalized in the Age, Gender and Diversity Mainstreaming (AGDM) strategy of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) (Buscher, 2010, Edwards, 2010, Grabska, 2011, UNHCR, 2008:34-35). In the AGDM strategy, participatory assessments (PAs) with refugees are envisioned as improving humanitarian planning and ensuring gender equality through age and gender segregated focus group discussions where refugees can share their concerns and experiences.

However, participation can mean many things and take many forms. For example, refugees can be asked for their opinions on questions already developed by others; they can be invited to bring new issues to the attention of humanitarian agencies; or they can be involved in ways that give them actual clout in decision-making, opportunities to shape humanitarian priorities and control the implementation of programs (Doná, 2007). The relations of power constructed through participatory practices may therefore be very different. Accordingly, an exploration of the use of participatory approaches in humanitarian aid to refugees must ask what participation is taken to mean and how it is used as a technology of government by humanitarian agencies (Rose and Miller, 1992:183).

Drawing on data from interviews with humanitarian workers in Thailand and in Bangladesh, the analysis presented here seeks to explore the meaning, limits and purposes of refugee participation as it is constructed in humanitarian aid work in the field. These interviews focused on humanitarian organizations' gender policies and the meanings they attributed to gender equality as a policy goal in their work. However, humanitarian workers in both contexts recurrently brought up themes related to refugee participation or the lack thereof when discussing the promotion of gender equality. The radically different ways in which refugee participation was discussed and problematized in these two contexts was puzzling. Humanitarians in Bangladesh spoke of the passivity of refugees, particularly women, and described how the lack of refugee participation and 'community spirit' presented challenges to their efforts to promote gender equality in the refugee camps where they worked. In Thailand, gender equality programming was the object of an ownership struggle between refugee organizations and international humanitarian actors. Refugee leaders' and women's organizations' activism was often represented as problematic and illegitimate by humanitarian workers who questioned the legitimacy and capacity of refugee actors. Despite the emphasis on participatory and community-based approaches in humanitarian policy discourse, the extensive refugee participation and activism in gender equality promotion as well as in other aspects of camp governance and program implementation in the Thai refugee camps was not welcomed by all humanitarian actors.

Contrasting the narratives of humanitarian workers in Bangladesh and in Thailand presents a paradox: in Bangladesh, refugees do not participate enough, and in Thailand they participate too much. What can this tell us about the meanings attributed to participation in humanitarian aid to refugees? What forms of participation are desirable, by whom, and for what purposes?

The next section develops the argument that participation constitutes a technology of government that works through the construction of certain forms of refugee subjectivities. The analytical strategy is then briefly outlined. Next, the analysis of the two cases is presented. Examples from humanitarian gender programming in Bangladesh and Thailand are used to illustrate different forms of refugee participation and how these are represented as more or less desirable or problematic by humanitarian workers. This is related to a discussion of how these forms of participation allocate decision-making power and ownership between different refugee and humanitarian actors, and what subjectivities refugees are invited to embody in processes of participation. In conclusion, I return to the question of what we can learn about the meanings attributed to participation as a humanitarian technology of government from an exploration of the paradoxical differences between how participation is practiced and represented in Bangladesh and in Thailand.

Governing Through Participation

During the 1980's, receipt of humanitarian aid provided in a top-down manner came to be thought of as leading to a 'dependency mentality' (Harrell-Bond, 1986). The free provision of food, water and services in refugee camps were claimed to ruin the active potential of refugees, strip them of their potential as liberal citizens and foster propensities towards crime and immorality (Lippert, 1999:10-13, Malkki, 1992:32). Discussions of a 'dependency syndrome' experienced by refugees bore remarkable similarities to discussions about 'dependency' among welfare recipients in Western welfare states, where dependency was constructed as a moral-psychological state rather than a set of economic circumstances (Dean, 2010:75-76, Fraser and Gordon, 1994).

The fear of a 'dependency syndrome' among refugees contributed to the adoption of participatory and community-based approaches in humanitarian aid in the 1990s (Lippert, 1999:13, Turner, 2001:86). In the UNHCR, this was institutionalized through the creation of the community services function, envisioned to work with and develop structures within the refugee community to ensure the effectiveness of the aid program (Bakewell, 2003). As expressed in the UNHCR *Handbook for Emergencies*,

It is important to involve the refugees in the provision of assistance and allow the community to share the responsibility of caring for itself and its vulnerable members. This minimizes dependency and encourages self-reliance (UNHCR, 1999).

However, the notion of dependency in humanitarian aid work has been challenged by research arguing that rather than becoming passive refugees often show creativity and resourcefulness in adapting to extremely difficult circumstances (Kibreab, 1993, Bakewell, 2003, Hyndman, 2000). Nonetheless, the quote above clearly exemplifies that participatory approaches have been introduced as a remedy to the problem of refugee 'dependency' and are thought to provide more efficient ways to deliver humanitarian aid and govern refugee populations (Turner, 2001). Lippert (1999:12-13) locates the turn towards participation in humanitarian aid in the context of a broader shift in governmental rationalities visible in Western states as well as in the international refugee regime. This shift can be described as a shift from a liberal welfare rationality to a post-welfarist, neo-liberal emphasis on marketization, audits, and decentralization of responsibility for welfare to individuals and communities (Rose and Miller, 1992:198-199, Rose 1996). Under this governmental rationality, refugees as well as citizens are encouraged to become responsible, autonomous subjects able to make rational choices (Dean, 2010:193). Participatory approaches seeking to empower, activate and responsabilize refugee recipients of humanitarian aid are clear examples of what Foucault has characterized as governmental forms of power. Distinguishing it from sovereign and disciplinary forms of power, governmental power is described as a form of power that works through the freedom and agency of individuals, seeking to optimize and develop the governed population (Foucault, 1991). Governmental power operates through the creation of free, self-regulating subjects who conduct themselves in accordance with certain norms (Dean, 2010:18). However, governmental power has not replaced more coercive forms of power. Refugee

camps are a case in point showing how practices that seeks to govern through the participation and agency of refugees are mixed with top-down practices of coercion and surveillance in sometimes contradictory ways (Foucault, 1991:102, Hyndman, 2000, Bakewell, 2003). In a world of nation states, refugees are deviant subjects who simultaneously threaten the national order of things (Malkki, 1995) and affirm the normalcy of territorial belonging and citizenship (Hindess, 2000, Lui, 2004, Haddad, 2008, Soguk, 1999). Like children, colonial subjects or welfare recipients, refugees are often not considered to possess the capabilities of mature and responsible freedom and citizenship (Dean, 2010:156-158, Lippert 1999:10, Stoler, 1995). Accordingly, these deviant groups are often targeted by interventions aiming to 'empower' them and transform them into active, self-managing subjects (Dean 2010:196-197, Cruikshank, 1994)

While participation is commonly emphasized as the path towards more efficient delivery of humanitarian aid and has arguably become a preferred technology of government of refugees, research shows that refugee activism is not always welcomed and that refugee-led initiatives are sometimes actively bypassed by humanitarian aid organizations. Turner (2001, 2010) shows that (male) political activism in refugee camps in Tanzania was seen as illegitimate and threatening and was not approved by humanitarian agencies. In contrast, women's participation was promoted as an alternative form of refugee participation in camp life and represented as embodying a selfless 'community spirit'. Kaiser (2004) describes how the UNHCR sidelined and marginalized a relatively developed system of refugee committees in refugee camps and villages in Guinea, instead establishing parallel structures for communication with the refugee communities that bypassed existing refugee leadership structures. Like the Thai case under analysis here, these examples indicate that despite the policy emphasis on refugee participation it is not always considered desirable by humanitarian actors in the field.

Analytical Strategy

During 2010 and 2011 I conducted a total of 58 interviews with actors involved in humanitarian aid to Burmese refugees in Thailand and Bangladesh. In Thailand, I conducted 32 interviews with humanitarian staff of the UNHCR, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and refugee community-based organizations (CBOs) in the Mae Sot area and in Bangkok. In Bangladesh, I conducted 20 interviews with humanitarians working for UN agencies and NGOs in the Cox's Bazar area and in Dhaka. Interviews conducted during fieldwork were complemented with six additional telephone interviews. The humanitarian workers interviewed consisted of a mix of international and national staff members and men and women of various ages, and each interview lasted for approximately an hour.

The interviews were analyzed drawing on a Foucauldian governmentality perspective, seeking to explore the forms and technologies of government embodied in humanitarian gender equality programming and uncover the underlying assumptions and the possible effects of the exercise of power (Foucault, 1991, Dean, 2010, Rose and Miller, 1992). As discussed above, I found that refugee participation was a central technology of government employed in the promotion of gender equality specifically and in the management of refugees and refugee camps more generally. To interrogate the notion of participation more closely, I have focused on how problems and goals relating to participation

are represented by humanitarian workers and how refugee subject positions are constructed through different discourses and practices of participation (Bacchi, 2009). *Problem representation* and *subjectification* are central concerns in a governmentality perspective and enable me to explore questions regarding the underlying rationalities and political effects of participatory practices; what forms of participation are desired, by whom, and for what purposes? How are refugees encouraged to practice their agency, and when does their agency become a problem? What forms of refugee participation are useful in the governing of refugee populations, and when do refugees become ungovernable subjects through their participation in camp life?

I now turn to the case studies.

Bangladesh: Activating ‘Dependent’ Refugees

The Rohingya Muslim minority in Western Burma has endured harsh discrimination and persecution, including denial of citizenship, since the onset of military rule. Waves of intensified violence following a population registration exercise in 1978 and in the aftermath of the 1990 elections have caused two mass exoduses of Rohingya into Bangladesh in recent decades. In both cases, the majority of refugees were eventually repatriated by the Bangladeshi government, using significant amounts of violence and coercion (Pittaway, 2008, Barnett and Finnemore, 2004). Today, 28, 000 Rohingya are recognized as refugees and are living in two camps in Eastern Bangladesh, Kutupalong and Nayapara. Most of the registered refugees arrived in 1991/1992 and managed to remain after the last repatriation exercise. Rohingya people have continued to flee to Bangladesh, but later arrivals have been denied refugee status and access to the two official camps. An estimated 200, 000 unregistered Rohingya live in villages in Eastern Bangladesh and in camp-like settlements in the vicinity of the official refugee camps (UNHCR, 2012, Lewa, 2003). Humanitarian aid is provided to refugees in the official camps by UN organizations such as the UNHCR and the World Food Program (WFP) and a small number of international and national NGOs. The Bangladeshi government does not authorize humanitarian interventions on behalf of unregistered refugees (Refugees International, 2011).

Drawing on the interviews, I identify and examine three examples of refugee participation that are employed in the implementation of humanitarian gender programming in the two official Bangladeshi refugee camps: efforts to establish committees for refugee participation in camp management with gender equal representation; programs targeting women in areas such as food, water, hygiene and childcare; and participatory assessments under the AGDM strategy.

Fostering ‘Community Spirit’? The Establishment of Camp Management Committees

Humanitarians working with the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh routinely describe them as a population who lack ‘community spirit’ and mechanisms for collective problem-solving, and that are characterized by passivity, individualism and dependency. This representation of the Rohingya refugee population is echoed in UN reports (WFP&UNHCR, 2010, WFP&UNHCR, 2008, UNHCR, 2007). The

lack of community spirit or cohesion is represented as an effect of the dependency mentality caused by the long-term receipt of humanitarian aid, making refugees 'lazy and aimless'. Women's passivity and lack of community engagement are described as particularly problematic and, as expressed by an NGO representative, dependency and lack of community spirit are seen as making refugee men prone to crime, deception and repression of women:

It is plainly logical that when everything is free it makes you crippled. There is nothing worse, nothing to destroy a community like that. Their good senses are being crippled and bad senses come in. This leads to repression of women...trouble (Interview 42).

The lack of community spirit and collective action in the refugee population are also represented as a major obstacle to the implementation of humanitarian gender policies. To make such policies effective, the refugee community is needed as an active partner in promoting social change. As emphasized by a UN worker, 'the change...is never going to come from us; people have to change their own communities' (Interview 34). Therefore, 'trying to make refugees self-manage their lives is really critical...and that affects gender equality like nothing else' (Interview 46). 'Building community cohesion' is seen as crucial to gender equality:

Once you build a little more community cohesion...you'll also find that this aspect of gender equality will slowly pick up as well...if you include women as part of the process, it will eventually pick up (Interview 41).

One way of addressing the intertwined problems of lack of 'community spirit' and lack of gender equality described by the UN employees quoted above has been the establishment of elected refugee committees with gender equal representation in recent years. These have replaced the former system of refugee leadership, the Mahjee system, which was the source of high levels of government-sponsored corruption, violence and insecurity in the refugee camps (WFP&UNHCR, 2010, Pittaway, 2008). Now there are Camp Management Committees (CMCs), Block Management Committees (BMCs) and Food Management Committees (FMCs) in both camps that are intended to provide representative refugee leadership and forums for refugee participation in camp governance.

The CMCs, BMCs and FMCs are not decision-making forums with any real power over the allocation of resources and the design and implementation of humanitarian programs. Rather, they are forums for consultation where refugees are given 'a voice or an avenue to express their views and concerns' to humanitarian organizations through their elected representatives (Interview 36). The main function of the committees, as expressed by humanitarian workers, is to make information flows and communication with the refugee population more efficient. Refugee representatives are to 'act as intermediaries to pass messages onwards', thereby facilitating the implementation of humanitarian aid programs (Interview 36).

The creation of refugee committees is an example of what Rose (1996) calls a 'politics of community', where populations constructed as problematic, vulnerable or 'at-risk' are enjoined to perceive themselves as a community, become active and take responsibility for the management of their own

‘community’ (Rose 1996). The forms of refugee participation that are promoted through the refugee committees in the Bangladeshi camps are primarily designed to respond to the humanitarian community’s needs to address problems of efficiency and information-sharing, and not to give refugees influence in the delivery of humanitarian aid. Refugee representatives are enlisted as intermediaries passing information and helping to activate the refugee community in the pursuit of goals defined by the humanitarian community. Refugee participants are merely channels of information helping to inform, educate and activate other refugees to foster the ‘community spirit’ required to facilitate humanitarian aid and combat refugee dependency. While the committees do provide forums where refugees can bring their concerns to the attention of humanitarian decision-makers and seek to hold them accountable, it is solely up to humanitarian organizations to choose to listen.

Empowerment or Efficiency? Mobilizing Women as Agents of Development

Programs and activities that specifically seek to solicit the participation of women are common in the areas of food, water, hygiene and childcare. Women are targeted by a range of activities such as workshops on hygiene promotion, health and nutrition education, kitchen gardening programs, and sessions on good childcare practices. Women are represented as having a ‘natural’ or culturally assigned responsibility in these reproductive areas of life, and humanitarian organizations therefore emphasize the importance of their participation in program planning and implementation. The perspective of women is seen as important to achieve efficient humanitarian planning. Refugee women are often represented as unselfish, family-oriented, and more easily convinced to adopt ‘modern’ approaches to hygiene, nutrition and childcare while men are represented as conservative, corrupt and unreliable. In the interviews, representations of women as progressive and family-oriented and men as obstacles to the achievement of humanitarian goals are very prevalent with regards to food management:

We disseminate that women should come and take the ration. If they do it will go to the family, but if men take it they sometimes take the salt and go to the salt market and sell it. We try to motivate women to come (Interview 37).

A representative of a UN agency explains that women’s participation in the management of food is promoted as it is ‘good to place food in the hands of women, because that makes sure that it actually goes into the mouths of the family’ (Interview 35). Women’s participation in the implementation of humanitarian programs is seen as instrumental to their success, as expressed by an NGO worker:

To have women involved in the program is a very good way to ensure the sustainability of the project. To enhance the impact of it. To have for example a woman that gets the hygiene promotion messages, that would ensure that they will transmit this knowledge to their children, which is not the case...with men. So it will benefit the whole family (Interview 47).

Paradoxically, these interventions seek the participation of women both as agents of tradition and modernity. Women are empowered in their traditional, reproductive roles to undermine male power in the household and power over essential resources such as food. At the same time, they are represented as allies of humanitarian attempts to ‘modernize’ and ‘develop’ the refugee population. Appealed to as mothers and carers, refugee women are made responsible for the welfare and development of their families and community.

Workshops and training sessions targeting women provide rare spaces where women meet and share their experiences, and may well have a transformative potential, opening up new and more active subject positions for women (Bacchi, 2009:16-17). However, this is not the main purpose of these programs and their call for women to participate. Women are primarily mobilized as agents of development that are encouraged to contribute to the achievement of humanitarian goals and called to participate in ways that limits their space of agency to reproductive spheres of life. They are consulted, educated, and encouraged to adopt ‘modern’ approaches to their reproductive responsibilities, but they are not included in the design of humanitarian programs or given opportunities to influence goals and priorities.

More Gender Equality or Better Information? Participatory Assessments

The ADGM strategy is the main UNHCR methodology for incorporating the promotion of gender equality in the planning process and operations of the agency. A key component of the AGDM strategy is to conduct regular PAs with the refugee populations with whom the UNHCR is working. During a PA, focus group discussions are carried out with refugees grouped according to gender, age, and other ‘diversities’ such as ethnicity or religion. In focus groups, refugees are invited to discuss their situation and bring up problems and needs that they are experiencing. In Bangladesh, PAs have been carried out regularly at least once a year since the introduction of AGDM as a global UNHCR strategy. Humanitarian workers generally describe the PAs as important arenas for refugee voices from different segment of the population to be heard in a systematic way. In particular, this gives humanitarian organizations access to valuable information that helps them to improve and target their programming. An example given was that refugee women had drawn attention to the fact that over 60% of the solar lights in the camps were not working. As the UN worker interviewed pointed out, if the opinions of women had not specifically been sought out, this problem of camp security might not have come to the attention of humanitarian organizations (Interview 46).

In addition to giving humanitarian organizations access to the opinions and experiences of a diverse range of refugees, the PAs are also represented as a means to activate the refugee population and encourage them to think about what they can do to solve the problems they bring up themselves. In the Bangladeshi context, this is seen as an important intervention to combat the ‘dependency attitude’ and lack of ‘community spirit’ that humanitarians represent as major problems. Resistance and unwillingness to accept this transfer of responsibility for problems back to the refugees themselves are interpreted as further confirmation of the ‘dependency’ of the refugees:

You ask them what their solutions are, what the capacity of the community is, and often they'll be like "yeah, the community has no capacity"...which really showed their dependency (Interview 51).

The example illustrates that behavior represented as 'dependency' is often not characterized by passivity but by resistance or noncompliance with calls to participate in ways defined by humanitarian actors. Further, the construction of dependency as a moral-psychological state is clearly visible in humanitarian representations of the purposes and value of the PAs in Bangladesh. As expressed by the UN representative below, to be listened to and encouraged to become active and responsible for their own situation is seen as therapeutic for the refugees, but the possibility of providing for actual refugee influence on humanitarian aid through the PAs is rarely mentioned:

The benefit is that we are listening and we are trying to make...we're trying to help them make some changes within the community. We're trying to listen to them. The fact that we are listening to them is a pretty big deal for a lot of them, because nobody's been listening to them for decades. And it's also very therapeutic for them to let go of a lot of pressures (Interview 46).

The participation of refugees in PAs is envisioned as activating them and making them feel empowered and involved, and thus changing 'dependency attitudes'. Through reform of refugee subjectivities and attitudes they are to be made more governable (Dean, 2010:43-44). However, like the two types of participatory practices discussed above, refugees have no access to decision-making power and no means to hold humanitarian organizations accountable for what they choose to do with the information given to them in focus group discussions.

Next, I turn to the second case study, where a different picture of participation emerges.

Thailand: Too Much Refugee Participation?

The first refugee camps on the Thai side of the Thai-Burmese border were established in 1984 when Karen refugees fled across the border following advances in the counterinsurgency campaign of the Burmese military against the Karen National Union (KNU). The number of refugees in refugee camps in Thailand has since steadily increased due to gradual losses of territory controlled by the KNU and other minority armed forces (Lang, 2002). Currently there are 140,000 Burmese refugees in nine camps along the border, of whom a majority belong to the Karen minority (TBBC, 2012). Links between the refugee populations and the Karen armed insurgency in Burma have remained strong, and the camps have provided important bases for Karen nationalism and various forms of political activism (South, 2007:62-63). The UNHCR did not begin operations on the Thai-Burmese border until 1998, and NGOs are still the main humanitarian actors although the UNHCR has been expanding its role on the border in recent years. Humanitarian aid and services is mainly provided by a network of about 15 national and international NGOs. Further, aid and services are coordinated and partly implemented by the refugees themselves through a system for community-based camp management. The camps are governed by

elected refugee committees; the Karen Refugee Committee (KRC) in seven camps and the Karenni Refugee Committee (KnRC) in the two northernmost camps. A Camp Committee (CC) is responsible for the day to day running of each camp and coordinates education, health, justice etc. through its sub-committees and a system of local representatives down to household level (Banki, 2008:66-67).

Below, drawing on the interviews, I examine refugee participation in camp management and programs addressing violence against women, showing how humanitarian workers react to and represent the more extensive forms of refugee participation present in this case, and how gender equality is used as a tool to delegitimize refugee ownership. The implementation of the AGDM strategy in Thailand, initiated and designed by the UNHCR rather than the refugee community, is examined as an effort to introduce alternative forms of refugee participation.

An Obstacle to Gender Equality? Problematizing Refugee Self-Governance

Throughout the first decade, the refugee camps were relatively self-reliant as refugees could grow crops across the border, complemented by only minimal assistance by international NGOs already present in Thailand. Refugees organized and governed the camps modeled after the villages they left behind, and the Thai government accepted their ‘temporary’ presence without much interference (Thompson, 2008). When the first NGOs arrived, they were impressed by what they found to be well-organized refugee communities, and took an approach of working in partnership with the refugee governance structures (TBBC, 2004:19). With changing Thai policy and a growing number of refugees the camps were eventually consolidated into fewer and larger camps, and the refugees were no longer allowed to move and work outside the camps. The reliance on humanitarian aid increased as a result, as did the international humanitarian presence in the camps (Thompson, 2008).

The KRC can be described as a refugee government in the seven camps primarily inhabited by Karen refugees, and the coordinating function performed by the CC in each camp is usually the responsibility of the UNHCR or an agency designated lead agency by the UNHCR (Harrell-Bond and Voutira, 1995:209-218, South, 2007:63). Thus, the degree of refugee self-government present in the Thai camps is significant and unusual. Though similar in name to the committees recently established in the Bangladeshi camps, the Thai refugee committees have a much more extensive and autonomous role in camp governance. Among the refugees there is a strong sense of being a distinct community or a nation in exile that should rightly enjoy self-determination. However, the model of community-based camp management has come under criticism in recent years from international humanitarian organizations and donors, who question the links between refugee leaders and the KNU armed insurgency, representing the ‘politization’ of the camp governance structures as a breach of humanitarian principles of neutrality and impartiality. To some humanitarian organizations and donors, the political goal of Karen self-determination in Burma disqualifies refugee organizations as humanitarian actors. Yet, many NGOs strongly support refugee self-governance and community ownership and question the relevance of the critique:

I think a lot of what it is about is neutrality versus politization. Donors see it as politization if the community is in charge because they have a political agenda, but then don't governments and humanitarian organizations? (Interview 9)

NGOs who have been working along the border for many years are often more supportive of refugee self-governance, and many describe how increased international presence and dependence on large international donors have contributed to undermine this model and disempower refugees. They argue that international organizations and donors do not understand a system where the host government and the UNHCR are not in charge, which leads to skepticism and a lack of recognition and trust in refugee CBOs as legitimate actors. Donors often require international ownership of programs to grant funding, reflecting a view of CBOs as illegitimate or unreliable channels for humanitarian aid but possibly also simply a lack of donor awareness of their existence. Regardless, it effectively denies refugee control over services in the camps. Despite having governed the camps for many years, CBOs tend to be seen as immature organizations:

I've had a few people say to me lately "oh, well, when the CBOs become self-sufficient"...They've been running their own projects for twenty years or something like that, and you don't think they are self-sufficient? (Interview 16)

The tendency to disregard the competence and experience of community actors is very clear in the area of gender equality promotion in the camps. A strong and influential women's organization, the Karen Women's Organization (KWO), is implementing a variety of activities ranging from women's rights education and programs addressing violence against women to nursery schools and care for the elderly. Moreover, the KRC is working to increase formal representation of women in camp management.¹ Despite this, many international humanitarian workers assume that refugee self-governance is an obstacle to gender equality. In the quote below, no mention is made of refugee women's activism or efforts by the refugee community to increase gender equality. Rather, camp governance is assumed to be male dominated and international organizations are represented as the key actors trying to change this imbalance:

We have very little control over the camp committees, because they are more related to KNU and other political forces. This means that when you look at gender....well, I think our colleagues the past years have made efforts to increase a bit, to balance a bit, the representation of women in these structures. It is to a great extent, I think, predominantly male. (Interview 2)

The lack of humanitarian control over camp governance is here represented as a problem with regards to gender equality. This attitude is underpinned by a construction of refugee culture as traditional and patriarchal in contrast to progressive international norms of gender equality. Further, male leadership is also assumed to be closely linked to the armed insurgency and therefore 'politicized' and illegitimate.

¹ In 2011, women held 33% of camp management positions. See TBBC 2011:58-59

Through this assumption of international normative superiority, gender equality is used as a tool delegitimizing refugee control and ownership in camp governance. Even when acknowledging the existence of the KWO, international humanitarian workers question 'if the fact that there is a women's organization is good for gender equality or not' because their understanding of the meaning of gender equality is allegedly 'different from a Western approach' (Interview 2).

The increased reliance on humanitarian aid and the internationalization of the Thai refugee camps have put significant constraints on the space for refugee self-governance of the camps. There has been a shift towards forms of partnership where refugees nonetheless have significant negotiating power and control over the delivery of aid and the implementation of various programs. The criticism and skepticism towards this system from international humanitarian organizations and donors show the limits of the meaning of participation in humanitarian discourses. Donor requirements and procedures for the funding of humanitarian aid as well as attitudes towards CBOs of some international humanitarian workers in Thailand clearly show that the availability of subject position as autonomous actors setting agendas and controlling the implementation of programs for refugees is not self-evident within the international humanitarian regime of government (Dean, 2010:193).

Unruly Women: Sexual and Gender Based Violence Programming and Conflicts over Ownership

Programs aiming to prevent and respond to violence against women, commonly termed sexual and gender based violence (SGBV), have recently been the arena for conflict over ownership between CBOs and international organizations, and provides an illustrative example of the difficulties facing refugees who claim the right to define priorities and control the implementation of programs, not merely to be consulted and solicited to carry out programs designed by others. The lack of recognition of CBOs as legitimate actors in camp governance in general and gender equality promotion specifically discussed above have been at the core of this conflict over the right to set the terms for the participation of refugee actors. As expressed by a CBO representative,

We feel like [name of humanitarian organization] never recognizes our work and our leadership, our longstanding struggle and the results of that struggle. They never consult with us...They have never been to our office. They do not really trust us. They say we are not neutral. Even though we have not worked together yet and they have not approached us, there are already accusations being made. (Interview 15)

From the perspective of CBOs, this lack of trust and recognition of their work has led to a failure of humanitarian organizations to consult with CBOs and build on the programs already in place; instead, international actors have been seen as duplicating the work of the CBOs. The programs of international actors are perceived as driven by externally defined priorities and not by local needs as defined by the community, thus undermining refugee ownership.

In relation to SGBV programming, international actors have represented CBOs such as the KWO, who have been running their own programs in this area for many years, as political, illegitimate and less

able to adhere to 'international standards' (Interview 1). International standards here refers to procedural requirements for transparency, reporting and statistical documentation and are used to motivate the establishment of parallel structures and programs to those already run by CBOs.

The various actors involved in programs addressing violence against women tried to resolve the conflict in a series of meetings in spring 2010. The KWO attempted to reassert their leadership in addressing SGBV in the camps, while an international organization questioned the neutrality and legitimacy of the KWO in this role. Finally, the KRC called a meeting where the SGBV committees originally initiated by the UNHCR were incorporated into the administrative structure of the KRC (KRC, 2010).² This episode was clearly a move to reassert refugee ownership of programs addressing violence against women in response to a perceived lack of recognition for the role of refugee actors, failure to respect and consult with them, and duplication of programs by international actors.

On Who's Terms? Constructing Desirable Refugee Participation

The examples from the Thai camps above show that despite the emphasis on participatory and community-based approaches in current humanitarian policy discourse, more extensive forms of refugee participation in camp governance and delivery of humanitarian aid are met with skepticism and are not easily compatible with institutional arrangements and procedural requirements of the international humanitarian system. In 2005 the AGDM strategy was introduced into the Thai camps. A pilot exercise in 2005 and a second AGDM exercise in 2008 were carried out under the leadership of UNHCR missions with participants from Geneva and Bangkok. Representatives from all NGOs were invited to participate in the planning of the PAs and be part of the teams conducting focus group discussions with refugees. However, refugee leaders and CBOs were not invited. An NGO representative described in strongly critical terms how the UNHCR mission and the representatives for various humanitarian organizations working along the border sat down in the UNHCR office during the most recent AGDM exercise, with no refugees present, and arbitrarily divided the refugee population into groups representing different 'diversities':

We sat there and we literally said "ok, who do you think we should meet with?" And you know, it was almost Monty Python-ish, "Let's meet with the widows! Muslims, should we meet with the Muslims? What about old people? Yes, old people!" And so, you know, we just came up with these groups, just by ourselves in half an hour, and we just wrote them down on a piece of paper and that was the ADGM process. (Interview 14)

Focus group discussions were conducted and the results were summarized in a brief report. According to many NGO representatives, the information generated by the process was useful, but follow-up and feedback to the refugee community were non-existent despite the promises made in the focus groups. The idea of the AGDM strategy was generally supported by NGOs, but many were

² The SGBV committees were groups comprised of refugees established by the UNHCR to work from within the community with the prevention of violence against women and the management of cases of violence.

uncomfortable with the rushed nature of the processes, the lack of follow-up, and the lack of refugee participation in planning which was seen as a deliberate attempt to bypass refugee leadership structures and organized CBOs:

I don't have a problem with AGDM...I think it sounds great, but the roll-out was like, someone's going to come for two weeks, and you're going to do a bunch of focus groups, and then you're going to go away and then we're never going to hear about it again. That was it. So it seemed that they had a momentary interest in asking refugees for their opinions, but organized refugees seemed to...they seemed to be very threatened by the idea of refugees forming organizations and asking for things or demanding things collectively. That seemed to run counter to their idea of what a refugee ought to be. (Interview 17)

The sentiment that humanitarian actors at the global level do not understand and do not support the Thai system for refugee self-governance is echoed in this description of the visiting UNHCR missions that led the AGDM exercises. The NGO representative quoted above interprets their actions as based on a view of refugees who organize outside the control of humanitarian organizations as threatening. Contrasting the form of desirable refugee participation encouraged in the AGDM strategy with the forms of more substantive refugee participation in the Thai camps that are questioned, criticized and rejected by some international humanitarian organizations and donors, this interpretation appears quite pertinent. A form for refugee participation initiated and designed by the UNHCR at global level, AGDM as it was carried out in Thailand encourages refugees to participate by sharing their opinions and experiences when asked to do so, but they are not invited to influence the shape of the AGDM process or the follow-up of recommendations given by consulted refugees. As a technology of government, participation in this form seeks to foster a disciplined refugee agency that is exercised within the limits of humanitarian rationalities (Dean, 2010:188). However, the implementation of AGDM in Thailand also highlights the existence of conflicts and resistance within the humanitarian community. In this case, many NGO workers adopted a more local perspective defending refugee self-government and challenging a dominant humanitarian governmental rationality of participation.

Conclusions

The analysis of practices of refugee participation in gender equality promotion in Thailand and Bangladesh clearly shows that the forms of refugee participation called for in humanitarian policy discourses and institutionalized in humanitarian aid practice are very limited. To have refugees 'participate' means to encourage them to perceive themselves as active subjects responsible for their own lives and communities; mobilize them to facilitate the effective implementation of humanitarian programs; and to solicit their opinions and experiences as resources for humanitarian planning and evaluation. Thus, participation serves two main purposes; to create active refugees who will govern themselves in accordance with norms and rules disseminated by humanitarian organizations, and to make refugees feel involved and responsible for matters of camp life and in them foster the capabilities

of self-regulation, activity and responsibility, countering the 'dependency syndrome'. As a technology of government, the rationality of refugee participation is not to change relations of power or redistribute decision-making power, but to alter the subjectivities and the psychological state of refugees (Hyndman, 1997, Hyndman, 2000:141, Turner, 2001:91-92). As the Bangladeshi case clearly illustrates, participation is used as therapeutic intervention, not structural reform. Further, the Thai case shows that forms of refugee participation initiated by refugees, where refugees set the agenda or control the implementation of programs do not easily fit within the global humanitarian system. While the community-based model for camp management in the Thai camps does have strong support among some humanitarian workers in Thailand, it is also strongly criticized and delegitimized by others and has been weakened by the increased international humanitarian presence and reliance on international humanitarian donors.

Failure to 'participate' in ways approved by humanitarian organizations is represented in different ways in Bangladesh and in Thailand. In Bangladesh, the refugee population is described as 'dependent' and humanitarian narratives focus on the need to activate them and foster 'community spirit' and self-management. However, the analysis shows that in humanitarian representations, 'dependency' is not primarily constituted by passivity but by lack of compliance with humanitarian programs and agendas. In Thailand, self-organized refugees who claim a right to ownership and agenda-setting are represented as 'politicized', echoing the polarization between 'good' apolitical participation and 'bad' politization that has been highlighted by Turner (2001, 2004, 2010). Forms of participation, community organization and collective action represented as desirable are generally those initiated by humanitarian organizations, while those accused of 'bad' politization are forms of participation and activism that pursue agendas defined by refugees. Without discounting the problematic aspects of links between refugees, delivery of humanitarian aid and armed insurgency movements, it is important to note that this construction denies refugees a role as political actors. In effect, refugees should participate when told to do so in ways defined by others, but not set the agenda for their participation or for processes of change within their communities.

Moreover, the analysis shows that when refugees do not comply with desired forms of participation, notions of gender equality are often used to construct an image of international normative superiority and to legitimate ownership and control by humanitarian organizations. Humanitarians in Bangladesh represent refugee 'dependency' and lack of 'community spirit' as closely intertwined with repression of women and lack of gender equality. International interventions in the Thai camps are often represented as a precondition for gender equality despite the presence of strong refugee advocates for gender equality. Thus, while the promotion of gender equality is often associated with efforts to activate refugees and have them participate, it can also be used to legitimate their exclusion when they are not considered capable of self-management.

The refugee subjectivities that are fostered through desirable forms of participation have a strongly gendered dimension. The promotion of women's agency and participation is intertwined with the rejection of 'dependency' and 'politization' through a representation of women as altruistic and family oriented, embodying a true community spirit, in contrast to men who are represented as more politicized, corrupt, and self-interested. Women's participation in camp life is represented as crucial to the welfare and health of families and communities, and to the quality and accountability of refugee

leadership and self-management. Women are promoted as models for the governable, active but compliant refugee subject. While programs underpinned by these representations may strengthen the role of refugee women in some cases, they simultaneously constrain the possible ways in which refugee women can participate. Women's active participation as welfare providers and partners in humanitarian reform efforts is indispensable to the creation of self-regulating, governable refugee communities, so when women act politically in other ways and for other purposes than those envisioned by humanitarian agencies, as the Thai case illustrates, they are seen as especially problematic, unruly and illegitimate. Accordingly, governing through participation requires that the freedom of refugees is constrained and shaped to ensure it is exercised in the right way, making their agency and subjectivity 'an ally, not a threat, to the orderly government' (Rose and Miller, 1992:189) of refugees and refugee camps.

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