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CONSTRUCTING HUMANITARIAN SELVES AND REFUGEE OTHERS: GENDER EQUALITY AND THE GLOBAL GOVERNANCE OF REFUGEES

Abstract: Contributing to ongoing debates about what happens when feminism is institutionalized in global governance, this article examines how gender equality is given meaning and applied in humanitarian aid to refugees, and what the implications are with regards to the production of subjectivities and their positioning in relations of power. Drawing on postcolonial feminist and Foucauldian perspectives, the analysis identifies two main representations of what it means to promote gender equality in refugee situations. Gender equality is represented as a means to aid effectiveness through the strategic mobilization of refugee women's participation, and as a project of development, involving the transformation of 'traditional' or 'backward' refugee cultures into modern societies. The subject positions that are produced categorically cast refugees as either passive or problematic subjects who need to be rescued, protected, assisted, activated, controlled and reformed through humanitarian interventions, while humanitarian workers are positioned as rational administrators and progressive agents of social transformation. In effect, gender equality is used to sustain power asymmetries in refugee situations and to reproduce global hierarchies.

Keywords: global governance, gender equality, refugees, humanitarian aid, governmentality, postcolonial feminism, Thailand, Bangladesh

INTRODUCTION

Considerations of gender have entered the mainstream of global policy-making and governance to an unprecedented degree. The goal of gender equality is widely endorsed, and the strategy of gender mainstreaming has been adopted by nearly every important international organization (Hafner-Burton and Pollack 2002; Caglar, Prügl et al. 2013). These developments have been prompted by a movement of transnational feminist advocacy, culminating in the establishment of gender mainstreaming as a global strategy for the achievement of gender equality in the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action (True 2003). Concepts and ideas originating in feminist activism and theorizing are now encoded in the policies of international organizations and institutionalized in their routine practices. While contributing to significant changes in the norms and practices of global governance, the meaning of concepts such as gender, gender equality and gender mainstreaming have also been transformed in the process, and they are employed in the work of international organizations in a variety of ways (Hudson 2012; True and Parisi 2013; Reeves 2012). This underlines the importance of analyzing how gender equality operates as a governing tool; how is gender equality constructed, interpreted and applied in global governance, and what are the implications?

This article focuses on how gender equality is given meaning and applied in one specific area of global governance: the management of refugees who are subjects of international

humanitarian assistance in sites such as refugee camps. While refugee camps are formally under the jurisdiction of the host state, they are often in practice governed by humanitarian United Nations (UN) agencies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Excluded from the privileges of national citizenship and frequently denied the rights to work or to move freely outside the camp, refugees are forced to rely on humanitarian aid for their survival. However, humanitarian organizations have become increasingly eager to do more than just meet basic survival needs: the promotion of gender equality, human rights, democracy and good governance are now routinely included among the objectives of humanitarian operations (Barnett 2005). The production of humanitarian gender policies, handbooks and training manuals has mushroomed after the turn of the millennium, and gender equality is now widely endorsed as an important policy goal by humanitarian UN agencies and NGOs (O'Gorman and Clifton-Everest 2009; Buscher 2010).

Based on an analysis of international humanitarian policy texts and interviews with humanitarians working in refugee camps in Thailand and Bangladesh, this article aims to examine the power relations that are (re)produced through humanitarian gender equality policy and practice. In order to do so, this article addresses two research questions: firstly, how is gender equality represented as a policy goal in humanitarian aid to refugees? In other words, what does it mean to promote gender equality in refugee situations? Secondly, which subject positions are constituted through the representations of gender equality that currently inform the global governance of refugees? This second research question draws attention to gender equality projects as sites where images of refugee others and humanitarian selves are constructed. These images both enable and constrain the agency of humanitarian workers as well as refugees, and position these subjects differently in global hierarchies of power.

In the analysis I identify two main representations of the meaning of gender equality in humanitarian aid to refugees. The first representation conceives of gender equality as synonymous with women's participation. Refugee women are represented as strategic partners in the delivery of humanitarian aid by virtue of the reproductive roles they are assumed to perform, and harnessing refugee women's specific contributions through increasing their participation is represented as essential to humanitarian aid effectiveness. By contrast, refugee men are represented as unreliable subjects who constitute problems, not resources, for the work of humanitarian organizations. Humanitarian workers are constructed as administrators with expertise in the rational management of gender difference.

Moreover, gender equality is also represented as a project of development, involving the transformation of 'traditional' refugee communities into modern societies. Gender inequality is constructed as an expression of underdevelopment, to be remedied by the introduction of international human rights norms. The promotion of gender equality is not only seen as essential to the immediate delivery of aid or the protection of women's rights in the short term, but as an aspect of the reconstruction of more developed, peaceful and stable societies in the long term. Refugee women are represented as victims of 'backward' cultures in need of protection from humanitarian workers, cast in the role as saviors, while refugee men are represented as perpetrators of 'uncivilized' masculinities in need of reform.

In both representations, the promotion of gender equality in refugee situations is constructed as something that is done *for* refugees *by* humanitarian aid organizations. Therefore, I argue that gender equality interventions in refugee situations constitute a site where power

hierarchies between humanitarians and refugees, and between western and non-western peoples, are reproduced. However, this claim does not imply that attempts to promote gender equality in refugee situations are not relevant or desirable: rather, precisely because the promotion of gender equality is important and holds potential to destabilize unequal relations of power, it is essential to examine the ways in which gender equality projects may entrench and reproduce forms of domination and marginalization despite their good intentions (Shepherd 2008:131).

The paper is structured as follows. The next section outlines the analytical framework of the study, drawing on the Foucauldian concept of governmentality and on postcolonial feminist perspectives. The material of the study, consisting of policy texts and interviews, is thereafter presented. The analysis then follows, showing how the two representations of gender equality in humanitarian aid to refugees are articulated in humanitarian policy texts on gender and in the interviews with humanitarian workers. The implications of each representation is examined through a focus on how they constitute different subject positions, ascribing different qualities, roles and opportunities for agency to the categories of refugee women, refugee men, and humanitarian workers. In conclusion, I discuss how power relations are (re)produced by current ways of representing and acting upon gender equality in the global governance of refugees.

ANALYZING GENDER EQUALITY AS A GOVERNING TOOL

In order to capture how gender equality operates as a governing tool in the global governance of refugees, and what its power effects are, I draw on the Foucauldian concept of governmentality and on postcolonial feminist perspectives. As an analytical perspective, governmentality directs attention to the relationship between power and knowledge, seeking to elicit how the production of ‘truth’ and knowledge about the objects to be governed presupposes and enables practices of government (Foucault 1991: 102-104). Conducting a governmentality analysis ‘is to start by asking what authorities of various sorts wanted to happen, in relation to problems defined how, in pursuit of what objectives, through what strategies and techniques’ (Rose 1999:20). Asking such questions makes it possible to identify how an aspect of reality is constituted as an object of knowledge, as a particular kind of problem that can be known and managed through practical solutions and reforms, and so made amenable to governmental intervention. In this study I use the term *problem representation* (Bacchi 2009) to describe how gender equality is constituted as a policy goal in humanitarian aid to refugees, and examine the assumptions about gender, refugees, and the role of humanitarian aid that underpin these representations. This analytical approach is useful to a critical analysis of the effects of normative projects such as the promotion of gender equality. While the adoption of feminist concepts and ideas in humanitarian aid is an important achievement, the contextualized meaning and effects of gender equality must be submitted to continued critical scrutiny in order to detect and challenge unintended and possibly harmful effects that creates new forms of exclusion and oppression (Halley, Kotiswaran et al. 2006). All normative projects create certain avenues for agency and change, but they may also benefit some at the expense of others, support existing unequal social relationships, or create new injustices (Bacchi 2009:44-46).

Moreover, every problem representation is productive of effects that shape how the world can be known and acted upon, and make particular subject positions and forms of agency available to groups and individuals. The constitutive effects of governing practices with regards to power relations and the production of subjectivities is a core concern in governmentality studies, seeking to understand how people are ‘objectified as certain kinds of subjects through the ways they are targeted by political power’ (Burchell 1991:119). Here, Bacchi’s concept of *subjectification effects* is used to consider the implications of the ways in which gender equality is represented. An examination of subjectification effects asks how different qualities, capacities, behaviors and attributes are expected and encouraged in those who are governed. The constitution of subjectivities shape how differently positioned subjects can speak and act, both enabling and constraining the agency of subjects (Bacchi 2009:40-42). However, problem representations and the governing practices they enable do not determine subjectivities, they elicit them, enjoining individual and collective subjects to embody particular positions (Dean 2010:43-44).

Furthermore, the provision of humanitarian aid to refugees is an encounter between western-dominated humanitarian organizations and refugee populations originating in ‘the global borderlands’ (Duffield 2001). In this context, the production of subjectivities is strongly structured by what Grewal and Kaplan term ‘the tradition-modernity split’ (Grewal and Kaplan 2001:669). This binary where the west is represented as modern and progressive and the rest of the world as traditional and primitive, especially in regards to sexuality and gender relations, is fundamental to western culture and to the western imagination. Through this binary, the west come to be seen the site of freedom and democratic choice, while other locations are seen as characterized by oppression. As Mohanty pointedly argues, western feminists have also relied on this binary in their representation of ‘oppressed’ third world women as the opposite of their ‘liberated’ selves:

This average third-world woman leads an essentially truncated life based on her feminine gender (read: sexually constrained) and being “third world” (read: ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, religious, domesticated, family-oriented, victimized, etc.). This, I suggest, is in contrast to the (implicit) self-representation of western women as educated, modern, as having control over their own bodies and the “freedom” to make their own decisions (Mohanty 1988:65).

In this study, postcolonial feminist perspectives constitute a useful analytical lens to reveal how efforts to promote gender equality in refugee situations function to represent the refugee other as well as the humanitarian self. Postcolonial feminist theory draws attention to how the subject positions that are constituted in humanitarian gender equality policy and practice are structured by the tradition-modernity binary and its assumptions that humanitarians and refugees, the west and the rest, are always essentially different from each other. Thus it enables the analysis to attend to how this ‘third-world difference’ (Mohanty 1988:63) is reproduced and mobilized in different ways in humanitarian gender equality projects.

Applying this framework in the analysis of policy texts and interviews, I first seek to identify *problem representations* surrounding the concept of gender equality. That is, how is gender equality constructed as a policy goal? What are the problems gender equality should address; what is the role of humanitarian aid in addressing these problems; and what are the purposes

and goals of gender equality interventions? Thereafter I examine the *subjectification effects* of the problem representations that are identified in the material. How are different categories of people constituted in each problem representation, and what qualities and characteristics are attributed to them? How are they encouraged to act, and what forms of conduct are represented as unwanted or problematic? And, importantly, what forms of power relations are produced by current ways of representing and acting upon gender equality in refugee situations?

GENDER EQUALITY IN HUMANITARIAN POLICY AND PRACTICE

This article is based on an analysis of two types of materials; humanitarian policy texts on gender, and interviews with humanitarian workers engaged in the delivery of humanitarian aid to refugee camps in Thailand and Bangladesh. International policy and local aid practices are approached as interlinked sites of governance where the meaning of gender equality is constantly in the making (Zwingel 2012). The combination of policy texts and interviews makes it possible to identify patterns in how the meaning of gender equality is constructed in the humanitarian field, and examine how, and with what effects, international policy discourses are taken up in humanitarian field practices. The policy texts as well as the interviews are analyzed using the analytical framework presented above, with the concepts of *problem representations* and *subjectification effects* at the center of my reading.

The documents selected for analysis in this study are the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) *Handbook for the Protection of Women and Girls* (UNHCR 2008) and the Inter-agency Standing Committee (IASC) *Gender Handbook in Humanitarian Action*, subtitled *Women, Girls, Boys and Men: Different Needs – Equal Opportunities* (IASC 2006). These documents are written for a target audience of humanitarian workers engaged in the planning and implementation of aid programs. The handbooks have the character of comprehensive training manuals, but are also central policy statements of their respective organizations. The handbooks educate and socialize humanitarian workers to adopt particular forms of gender knowledge and apply it in the delivery of humanitarian aid programs. The function of these handbooks as modes for the dissemination of gender knowledge makes them very useful in an analysis seeking to grasp how the meaning of gender equality in humanitarian aid work is constructed. The UNHCR is the UN agency that has a mandate specifically focused on the protection of refugees, and its policies and ways of working are widely influential among NGOs working with refugees and other emergency-affected populations. The IASC is a coordinating mechanism comprised of all humanitarian UN agencies and many NGOs, and the IASC gender handbook therefore enjoys broad support and can be expected to represent widely endorsed principles and positions. While its policies do not exclusively apply to refugee situations, they are widely used to inform humanitarian aid programs in refugee situations. Together, these two handbooks provide a comprehensive collection of the current state of humanitarian gender policy and practice and occupy a central position in the construction and dissemination of knowledge about gender in the humanitarian field.

The interview material consists of 58 interviews with humanitarian workers employed by UN agencies and NGOs. The interviews were conducted by the author in 2010 and 2011. For decades, Thailand and Bangladesh have both hosted large numbers of refugees who have fled armed conflict and ethnic persecution under military rule in Burma. Currently, 28,000

refugees belonging to the Rohingya Muslim minority are living in two refugee camps managed by the government in Eastern Bangladesh. In addition however, an estimated 200,000 Rohingya who are denied recognition as refugees live in villages and in camp-like settlements in the vicinity of the official camps (UNHCR 2013). 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. Interviews were conducted in the town Cox's Bazar, from where most of the aid to the refugee camps is organized, and in the capital Dhaka, where the country offices of many humanitarian organizations are located.

In Thailand, nine camps along the Thai-Burmese border are hosting 130,000 refugees, a majority belonging to the Karen minority (TBC 2013). Humanitarian aid and services are mainly provided by a network of about 15 national and international NGOs, and the UNHCR is present in a primarily monitoring role. Further, services are coordinated and partly implemented by the refugees themselves through a system for community-based camp management (Banki and Lang 2008). Most interviews were conducted in the border town Mae Sot, a key hub for humanitarian aid to the camps along the border, and some interviews with humanitarian officials at management level were conducted in the capital Bangkok.

The interviewees consisted of women and men of various ages, representing both national and international staff members, and each interview lasted for approximately one hour. The interviews focused on how the promotion of gender equality was organized in the work of the interviewees, and on the meanings they ascribed to gender equality as a policy goal in the context of humanitarian aid in refugee camps.

GENDER EQUALITY AS A MEANS TO AID EFFECTIVENESS

In humanitarian policy and in humanitarian aid practice in refugee camps, gender equality is frequently associated with the pursuit of aid effectiveness. This problem representation is premised on an assumption that gender differences are fundamental to the social organization of refugee communities, and thus shape the experiences, needs, and capacities of refugee women and men:

[W]omen, girls, boys and men often have different needs, face different threats and have different skills and aspirations. Ignoring this can mean our assistance is not properly targeted. This can be both wasteful and harmful...It is simply about good, common sense programming. Understanding gender differences, inequalities and capacities improves the effectiveness of our humanitarian response (IASC 2006:i).

Gender differences must therefore be understood and taken into account in order to deliver aid and achieve operational goals in an effective and efficient manner. The main strategy to manage and utilize gender difference is to increase refugee women's participation, described as 'a *priority*' in the IASC handbook (IASC 2006:32, emphasis in original). The UNHCR also emphasizes the importance of women's and girls' participation, describing them as 'key sources of information' and actors who can 'offer valuable insights needed to design effective assistance and protection measures' and 'offer significant support in the delivery and distribution of humanitarian assistance' (UNHCR 2008:98).

The expectation that women can contribute to the effectiveness of humanitarian aid in specific ways is linked to the assumption that refugee communities are characterized by pervasive gender differences. In particular, it is taken for granted that refugee women in general are primarily occupied with domestic and reproductive labor while refugee men are absent from the domestic sphere (IASC 2006:97). Reflecting ideas from the Women in Development approach that informed early policies on refugee women, integrating refugee women's 'special' needs and contributions into existing humanitarian practice, thereby making it more effective, is the logic of the representation of gender equality as a means to aid effectiveness (Baines 2004:47). Notably, the meaning of gender equality is treated as synonymous with women's participation in and of itself, while the purpose and envisioned outcomes of women's participation are linked to the goal of aid effectiveness rather than the realization of refugee women's rights. In this sense, this representation is one incarnation of the neoliberal 'business case' for gender equality that has become prominent in global governance (True 2003; Kardam 2004).

Further, harnessing the efficiency gains that are expected from increasing women's participation is also linked to notions of modernity and rationality: failing to effectively utilize women's gender-specific qualities is represented as an irrational expression of the traditional nature of refugee communities. As a humanitarian worker in Thailand explains, promoting gender equality in the refugee camps requires changing the mindsets of the refugees to embrace a utility-perspective on gender:

So I think that it is probably raising awareness and then working towards an understanding of what you gain when you've got the perspectives of both gender into decision-making and planning... and if they're in a traditional culture, that may not even be something they have thought about.¹

Below, I further examine the subjectification effects of the representation of gender equality as a means to aid effectiveness, showing how the categories of refugee women, refugee men, and humanitarian workers are constituted.

Women as strategic humanitarian partners

The representation of gender equality as a means to aid effectiveness constitutes women as key actors and strategic partners in the design and delivery of effective and efficient aid. Women's active participation is seen as essential to effective program implementation because of the specifically female qualities they are assumed to embody, and their usefulness as partners derives from the reproductive responsibilities they are assumed to perform. By virtue of their key roles in managing families and households, women are thought to possess special knowledge that must be harnessed to ensure the effectiveness of aid programs:

In many cultures, the responsibility for collecting water falls to women and children, especially girls. We must recognize this central role of women in managing water, sanitation and hygiene... Women are key actors in influencing the

¹ Interview 25, NGO worker Thailand, Mae Sot 19 November 2010.

public health of the household. They are also a huge source of (often untapped) knowledge regarding the community and culture. (IASC 2006:105).

This point is reiterated by an NGO worker in Bangladesh, stating that having women involved ‘allows us to increase the impact of the project and make it more sustainable’.² Elaborating on why this is the case, the interviewee explains that involving women rather than men in hygiene promotion programs ensures that knowledge is passed on to their children and so comes to benefit the whole family.

Further, women are commonly assumed to be more reliable and efficient food managers than men, thought to put available food resources to use for the good of their families and not divert them for other purposes. Therefore, the IASC recommends that women should, as routine practice, be designated as contact points for food distribution and that ‘each household ration card for free food distribution should be issued in a woman’s name’ (IASC 2006:66, 69). In Bangladesh as well as in Thailand, there have been efforts to increase women’s participation in the distribution of food and to encourage women to collect the food rations for their family, as corruption and misuse of food is expected to decrease if it is controlled by women. Such efforts have contributed to open up new employment opportunities for women, but have in some cases also increased women’s domestic workload.³ Thus, the construction of women as strategic humanitarian partners does not only reproduce and utilize gendered divisions of labor that confines women to the domestic sphere, but also exploit women’s unpaid domestic labor as a means of program implementation.

Refugee men as irresponsible and unreliable

In humanitarian policy texts, refugee men are constituted as the implicit opposite of refugee women’s usefulness. For example despite the consistent use of the phrase ‘women, girls, boys and men’ throughout the IASC handbook, concrete examples and recommendations for action almost exclusively focus on women’s assumed experiences, roles, needs and contributions. For example, while it is stated that women and men have complementary roles in relation to food and nutrition, no further information about what the role of men might be is provided (IASC 2006:57).

However, humanitarian workers in Thailand and Bangladesh are more explicit in their descriptions of refugee men. In interviews, refugee men are frequently represented as unreliable, irresponsible, corrupt, less governable and more resistant to humanitarian programs than women. For example, men are recurrently accused of selling food to gamble, buy alcohol, and pursue their own interests at the cost of the welfare of their families.⁴ They are described as ‘lazy and aimless’ and said to ‘indulge in more and more vices, like involvement in criminal activities’, and to ‘create problems’.⁵ Familiar stereotypes of non-Western men as childish and immature, but also dangerous, are here invoked in the

² Interview 47, NGO worker Bangladesh, Dhaka 15 March 2011

³ Interview 36, UN worker Bangladesh, Cox’s Bazar 7 March 2011; Interview 14, NGO worker Thailand, Mae Sot 29 October 2010. See also Olivius 2014a and 2014b.

⁴ For example interview 16, NGO worker Thailand, Mae Sot 1 November 2010; interview 37, NGO worker Bangladesh, Cox’s Bazar 8 March 2011.

⁵ Interview 42, NGO worker Bangladesh, Cox’s Bazar 12 March 2011.

construction of the male refugee as a problem for, rather than a potential partner to, humanitarian aid organizations (Loomba 1998:217). However, some humanitarian workers suggest that the strong focus on women's participation exacerbates the problems of refugee men's behavior:

Women only-approaches increase problems. Community workers are more female than male in for example education, health, nursery schools. And in addition there are women's organizations initiating projects and giving women responsibilities. Almost all women are busy – not men. More and more men are unemployed. When they have a lot of free time, they go out and drink, gamble, etc.⁶

Thus, while refugee women are privileged as humanitarian partners because they are expected to be useful, compliant subjects, refugee men are given less attention because they are seen as unreliable and problematic.

Humanitarian workers as administrators

The responsibility of humanitarians to promote gender equality in their work involves paying careful attention to the mapping of difference, the distribution of resources, the implementation of set goals and the measurement of effectiveness. Tools and strategies suggested in policy texts often take the form of checklists, constituting a significant portion of the IASC handbook, and standardized methodologies and reporting systems such as the UNHCR AGDM strategy. The role of humanitarians working with gender is thereby largely represented as an administrative role, and the promotion of gender equality becomes a technocratic project that requires certain forms of expertise. This is consistent with Prügl's discussion of the bureaucratic logic of gender mainstreaming. According to Prügl, gender mainstreaming target bureaucrats or public servants in different fields and seek to make them better program administrators through the production of subjectivities attuned to difference and skilled in the application of techniques such as gender analysis and gender budgeting (Prügl 2011:83-84).

The construction of the humanitarian worker as an administrator engaged in the promotion of gender equality as a technocratic project for the management of difference reflects broader shifts towards neoliberal forms of governing humanitarian aid, emphasizing measurable outcomes, audits and evaluations. When the promotion of gender equality in refugee camps is understood and organized through such a neoliberal, technocratic framework, international 'expertise' is privileged at the expense of refugee ownership (Olivius 2013, 2014a). In addition, it positions the humanitarian worker as a distant, detached observer who creates knowledge based on the application of standardized models rather than based on experience of the particular local context. As a UN worker in Bangladesh who is critical of AGDM relates, such standardized systems for analysis and reporting requires a lot of time, at the cost of time spent in the field:

I am not really into all the forms you have to fill in, I mean, frankly I don't even know where it goes. I know that AGDM is supposed to somehow filter into the

⁶ Interview 6, NGO workers Thailand, Mae Sot 4 May 2010.

planning for the following year, but the planning in UNHCR is so complicated. I never understand it.⁷

Mastering these complex technical systems, where the meaning of gender equality is captured through a number of measurable, generalized indicators, is the task of the humanitarian administrator. This subject position is distinctly constructed as masculine and white, revolving around notions of rationality and calculation (Swan 2010:477). Gender equality is depoliticized as a technical, administrative issue rather than an issue of power and politics; for example, promoting gender equality in education means ensuring that gender-balanced program data can be reported but not interrogating the gendered relations of power behind school dropouts (Olivius 2013). As a result, the ability of humanitarian gender equality programs to critically engage with structures of disadvantage and marginalization in refugee camps is seriously blunted.

GENDER EQUALITY AS A PROJECT OF DEVELOPMENT

In addition to the representation of gender equality as a means to aid effectiveness, the promotion of gender equality is also frequently represented as a project of development. In this representation, discrimination and violence against refugee women is described as an expression of the ‘traditional’ and ‘backward’ nature of refugee communities. Drawing on ideas from the Gender and Development approach, increasingly influential in the humanitarian field since the adoption of gender mainstreaming, gender relations are described as socially constructed, changeable, and rooted in social, cultural, political and economic structures (UNHCR 2008:13). However, the societal structures in which gender inequality is described as rooted are specifically to be found in societies that are traditional, religious, illiterate, and male dominated:

Cultural and religious practices which violate women’s and girls’ rights tend also to be underpinned by low literacy levels, limited female presence in public life, lack of information and a certain cultural fatalism surrounding such practices (UNHCR 2008:28).

Passing references to subsistence agriculture (IASC 2006:59) and repeated mentions of ‘harmful traditional practices’ such as female genital mutilation (See for example UNHCR 28-29, 62, 384) make it clear that these texts implicitly describe non-western societies. In interviews, many humanitarians describe gender inequality as a symptom of ‘backwardness’ rather more bluntly:

The refugee’s religious and social background from their ancestral homes across the border is a very backward looking, orthodox Muslim society. The society, social norms, culture and tradition is the root, and they bring this along. It is a very male-dominated society. And an uneducated society in general...The scenario of gender inequality is very clear if you only walk through the camps. Women are less active, women are restricted to the house, the domestic sphere...It is a less progressive society.⁸

⁷ Interview, UN Bangladesh, Cox’s Bazar 7 March 2011.

⁸ Interview 42, NGO worker Bangladesh, Cox’s Bazar, 12 March 2011.

While this is a typical description of the Bangladeshi camps, similar descriptions of the refugee camps in Thailand are equally frequent. The Thai camps are described as ‘traditional societies’ where male dominance is upheld because the refugees are ‘clinging to their traditions and values.’⁹ Consequently, in order to achieve gender equality, humanitarian workers argue that the refugee community needs to move forward and adopt more modern ideas and behaviors. For example, to make the refugee-led camp governance systems more accountable and gender representative, an NGO representative argues that it is necessary to ‘make these systems develop and face up to life today’.¹⁰

Thus, the promotion of gender equality in refugee situations is represented as a process of social and cultural transformation and modernization in which humanitarian organizations have a vital role to play, not only to protect refugee women in emergencies but also to lay the foundation for the reconstruction of better, more developed and more peaceful societies. Refugee situations and other emergencies are constructed as ‘windows of opportunity’ (IASC 2006:6) to ‘build back better’ (IASC 2006:83), for example through educational programs:

Education in emergencies provides a channel for conveying health and survival messages; for teaching new skills and values, such as peace, tolerance, conflict resolution, democracy, human rights and environmental conservation. An emergency can be a time to show and teach the value of respecting women, girls, boys and men equally in society (IASC 2006:50).

Notably, values of peace, tolerance, democracy, human rights and gender equality are assumed to be absent in societies affected by emergencies. Humanitarian interventions are thereby seen as providing the foundation for the improvement and development of these societies.

Next, I show how the subject positions of refugee women, refugee men, and humanitarian workers are constituted by the representation of gender equality as a project of development.

Refugee women as victims of backward cultures

Representations of refugee communities as traditional and underdeveloped are intertwined with images of refugee women as vulnerable and ‘at risk’. Refugee women are predominantly described as passive subjects in need of humanitarian protection. Generalized descriptions of refugee women as uneducated, unaccustomed to interact with authorities, and ‘relegated to the domestic sphere’, by husbands who refuse to let them leave the home (UNHCR 2008:17, 39) underline the image of women’s passive and subjugated position. These representations of refugee women, conjuring up the stereotypical image of Mohanty’s ‘average third world woman’ (Mohanty 1988:65), support the representation of crisis-affected societies as traditional, oppressive and in need of reform. Despite token references to refugee women’s agency, courage and resilience, key policy texts such as the UNHCR handbook predominantly reproduces protective stereotypes of refugee women as vulnerable and victimized (see also Edwards 2010:32). In the Bangladeshi refugee camps, representations of women as vulnerable and in need of protection from their own culture are pervasive. Discussing the risks that

⁹ Interview 24, NGO worker Thailand, Mae Sot 19 November 2010

¹⁰ Interview 9, NGO worker Thailand, Bangkok 10 May 2010.

refugee women face in the camps, a UN employee concluded, with some despair, that ‘it’s a dangerous world here for women’.¹¹ Moreover, descriptions of Rohingya women as subjugated, uneducated and easily manipulated frequently feature in narratives linking violence against women with the underdevelopment and backwardness of Rohingya society:

Women are controlled by men. Traditional leaders, religious leaders. They need permission from husbands, fathers, brothers to do everything. And they accept it: they are uneducated, illiterate; they believe what they are told. Beliefs in ancestors and spirits are used to motivate rules and constraints on women. They believe it; it is in their religious views. And many think it is normal that husbands beat their wives, and they accept it.¹²

When refugee women are expected to be the ‘exotic, vulnerable other’ (Baines 2004:36), ‘helplessly entangled in the tentacles of regressive Third World patriarchy’ and in need of salvation from the modern world (Parpart 1993:453), there is little room for refugee women to be recognized as political actors. The case of the Thai refugee camps illustrates this point. In these camps, there are strong and influential women’s organizations who have worked to promote gender equality and combat violence against women for years. Despite this, humanitarian workers still assume the refugee community to generally constitute an obstacle to gender equality. Because humanitarian workers cannot imagine change towards gender equality to come from within the refugee community, the activism of refugee women is disregarded:

...some of the women working in these organizations have the same perceptions...so for someone who is working to promote what we call international standards and guiding principles, from my point of view I see that as problematic. You know, some of them are part of this culture which is accepting of some forms of SGBV against women.¹³

Thus, when refugee women act in pursuit of their own visions and goals rather than to implement aid programs designed by humanitarian organizations, they are no longer useful humanitarian partners; instead they are met with suspicion and their legitimacy as agents of change is questioned.

Refugee men as perpetrators/victims of uncivilized masculinity

As mentioned above, men are given far less attention than women in humanitarian policy texts on gender. However, in recent years the importance of including men and attending to the role of masculinities has increasingly been recognized (Edwards 2010). The UNHCR handbook features a section on working with men and boys to promote gender equality and protect women and girls (UNHCR 2008:55-63). In this section, violent and oppressive masculinities are described as socially constructed and possible to change, although male attitudes, identities and roles are represented as a particularly problematic aspect of community resistance to gender equality. While men are represented as perpetrators of violence and oppression, they

¹¹ Interview 34, UN worker Bangladesh, Cox’s Bazar 7 March 2011.

¹² Interview 32, NGO worker Bangladesh, Cox’s Bazaar 3 March 2011.

¹³ Interview 58, UN worker Thailand, Mae Sot 11 November 2011.

are also seen as victims of the social structures and norms that have socialized them into this position. Therefore, humanitarian efforts to promote gender equality and transform refugee societies promises improvements for refugee men as well; 'The experience of displacement can provide an opportunity for men to realize the advantages and benefits that gender equality may hold for them' (UNHCR 2008:59).

Thus, refugee men are represented as subjects in need of reform, or, as Shepherd puts it, '[m]en also need assistance in overcoming their (natural?) violent tendencies' (Shepherd 2008). The role of humanitarian gender equality interventions is thereby to change male subjectivities as to produce less violent and more 'civilized' masculinities. To this end,

It can be useful to identify boys and young men exhibiting positive male roles, whether during workshops or in public life, and encourage them to act as role models for their peers. Boys who grow up around positive male role models are more likely to question gender inequalities and harmful stereotypes and are less likely to become perpetrators of SGBV (UNHCR 2008:58-59).

Supposedly, humanitarian workers are the judges of what constitutes 'positive male roles'. As previously argued by Eriksson Baaz and Stern, narratives of the construction and reform of violent masculinities are decidedly racialized and interwoven with a narrative of progress and development. 'Civilized', gender-equal masculinities are contrasted with the violent, oppressive masculinities of the barbarian other (Eriksson Baaz and Stern 2013:26). This link between development, civilization and gender equality is pointedly articulated by a UN worker in Thailand when describing the causes of male dominance and violence and the difficulties he experienced in addressing these issues:

Even though we have camp justice, camp security, everything seems to be in place, however they [camp governance mechanisms] do not have any authority to do anything. So that is why we are going back to the dinosaur era...people come together and they want to get whatever they want. Equality is difficult to happen in the camps.¹⁴

Here, in a comparison between refugee camps and nation states, the refugee camp is described as an anarchical, primitive and pre-civilizational context where refugees act in a purely self-interested way in order to 'get whatever they want'. In the view of this interviewee, gender equality can therefore be achieved in states but not easily in refugee camps.

Humanitarian workers as liberal reformers

The representation of gender equality as a project of development reflects a shift within the field of humanitarianism from a traditional focus on the provision of relief to victims of conflicts and disasters towards more long-term strategies for transforming the structural conditions that produce humanitarian emergencies. Humanitarianism has become increasingly implicated in a broader peacebuilding project seeking to build stable, democratic states and prevent future wars and refugee flows (Barnett 2005). Gender inequality is

¹⁴ Interview 2, UN workers Thailand, Mae Sot 28 April 2010.

constructed as a symptom of underdevelopment that can be overcome through the transformation of traditional societies into modern, democratic societies with liberal values. According to Paris, the contemporary peacebuilding agenda echoes the colonial 'mission civilisatrice'; the belief in a duty to 'civilize' populations on the global margins (Paris 2002). In this context, gender equality is constructed as one aspect of a liberal norm package which prescribes the correct path towards development, stability and security.

In the framework of this broader civilizing mission, humanitarian workers are represented as progressive, liberal reformers able to initiate processes of social and cultural change. As discussed above, humanitarians are described as having a responsibility to contribute to rebuilding more developed and more peaceful societies. While this representation of the role of the humanitarian worker reproduces historically familiar colonial and developmental ideas, it constitutes a break with previous norms of humanitarianism as apolitical, neutral and non-interventionist. Not long ago, the promotion of gender equality was controversial in the UNHCR, as interventions in matters of culture were considered to be at odds with humanitarian principles (Baines 2004:63). Such attitudes are now strongly condemned in UNHCR policy discourse:

Some UNHCR staff have also resisted taking action to promote and protect the rights of women and girls on the grounds that it would interfere with local culture...cultural relativism is the greatest challenge to women's and girls' rights and the largest obstacle to eliminating harmful traditional practices (UNHCR 2008:28-29).

Rather, 'deliberate efforts to influence values' and effect social and cultural change are represented as an integral part of the mission of the humanitarian liberal reformer (UNHCR 2008:31). This view is generally shared by humanitarian workers in Thailand and Bangladesh. As one humanitarian worker in Thailand puts it, 'changing culture is possible, right? It is not something you cannot do. If it is for the good of the society, why not?'¹⁵ While some interviewees do acknowledge the existence of competing conceptions of what constitutes 'good' cultural change, the relevance and desirability of changes promoted through humanitarian aid programs are rarely questioned or discussed.

In the representation of gender equality as a project of development, the humanitarian worker is enjoined to take up the colonial project of 'saving brown women from brown men' (Spivak 1994:93). The existence of violence and discrimination against women in refugee communities is taken as evidence of their need to be reformed and improved, and thereby it legitimizes humanitarian organizations' engagement in a top-down project of developing and stabilizing the global margins.

CONCLUSIONS

This article set out to examine how gender equality is given meaning and applied in the global governance of refugees, and what the implications are with regards to the production of subjectivities and their positioning in relations of power. The analysis has identified two main

¹⁵ Interview 27, NGO worker Thailand, Bangkok, 30 November 2010

problem representations: a representation of gender equality as a means to aid effectiveness, and a representation of gender equality as a project of development. Further, the subjectification effects of these problem representations has been examined, showing that refugee women are either positioned as useful partners by virtue of their domestic roles as mothers and managers of households, or as vulnerable victims of backward patriarchies. Refugee men are constituted as irresponsible and unreliable, as perpetrators of inequality and oppression but also as victims of uncivilized masculinities in need of reform and assistance. Humanitarian workers are constituted as rational, technocratic administrators capable of utilizing gender difference for the optimization of humanitarian performance, but also as liberal reformers engaged in the development and improvement of traditional, crisis-affected societies.

These findings show that in humanitarian policy and practice, the promotion of gender equality is categorically constructed as something that is done *for* refugees *by* humanitarian organizations. Humanitarian workers are constructed as the active party in this encounter; the administrator as well as the liberal reformer is characterized in masculinized terms of rationality, modernity, progress, and expertise. In contrast, stereotypes of refugees as feminized, passive recipients of aid are reproduced; refugees need to be rescued, protected, assisted, activated, controlled and reformed through humanitarian interventions. Even in descriptions of refugee women as key actors and important participants, they must be made to act as such by humanitarian workers.

Somewhat paradoxically, refugee women's assumed domesticity is both represented as the reason for their usefulness, and as an oppressive condition which they need to be rescued from through the transformation of traditional gender roles. This relates to a broader tension with regards to whether humanitarian organizations should aspire to change gender relations and counteract gender differences, or whether these should merely be taken into account to target aid efficiently. This tension can be seen as one incarnation of broader debates about the purpose and scope of humanitarianism in the contemporary international order; debates that are also reflected in the difference between a humanitarian role as administrator or liberal reformer. While these positions are not necessarily contradictory, they reflect a tension between a focus on the immediate delivery of aid versus a focus on long-term visions of development and social change.¹⁶

Further, representations of gender equality in humanitarian policy and practice do not only sustain power asymmetries in the encounter between refugees and humanitarian workers, they also feed into, and reproduce, more general global relations of power. The portrayal of refugee women as victims of barbaric, underdeveloped cultures sustains a binary between dysfunctional, illegitimate and persecutory non-western states and well-functioning, legitimate and human rights-abiding western states that allows western states to appear as superior (Macklin 1995; Oswin 2001). Gender inequality in refugee communities is constructed as a symbol of the inferiority of 'less developed' societies. In effect, gender equality is used to reproduce cultural hierarchies and racist images of non-western peoples, and legitimates top-down interventions to 'develop' their societies.

¹⁶ The tensions between these representations of gender equality are discussed in more detail in Olivius 2014c.

However, this claim does not deny the potential for subversion of gender equality agendas introduced by humanitarian organizations. Indeed, contrary to the expectations of humanitarian organizations, refugee women do appropriate and modify gender equality norms and practices imposed from above to further their own political struggles (Olivius 2011). In addition, the top-down manner in which gender equality is promoted by humanitarian organizations does not exclude the possibility that it can contribute to expand the political spaces and economic opportunities available to at least some refugee women (Baines 1999; Hyndman and de Alwis 2008). Thus, I do not argue that the implementation of gender equality policies in refugee situations is a completely unilateral relation of dominance: rather, all governing projects are to some extent unstable and open to contestation, negotiation, and resistance. Nonetheless, gender equality currently operates not only as a tool of emancipation, but to a troubling extent also as a tool of domination, in the global governance of refugees.

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