Beyond Vulnerability: Refugee Women’s Leadership in Jordan

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BEYOND VULNERABILITY: REFUGEE WOMEN’S LEADERSHIP IN JORDAN

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ABSTRACT

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While both men and women are affected by conflicts and humanitarian crises, 80 percent of the world’s refugees and internally displaced persons are women and children, indicating that women experience conflict and war differently. The emphasis on women’s vulnerability during conflicts and humanitarian crises leads to their exclusion from leadership roles and decision-making on humanitarian programs and issues that impact them. Though women experience numerous socio-cultural barriers to exercising leadership in humanitarian settings, they have taken on important roles in emergency response and in refugee camps. This paper traces the progress of UN and humanitarian agencies recognition and development of gender-sensitive response and their implementation. Next, it details barriers to women’s leadership in humanitarian settings and future strategies for overcoming them. Looking at the case of women in the Za’atari refugee camp in Jordan, the UN Women run Oasis Centre provides a model for supporting women’s needs while also encouraging participation and leadership.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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I am grateful to the Liberal Studies program at the Graduate Center for providing me with the opportunity to pursue a course study I am passionate about. Combining both my interests in International studies and Gender Studies, I was able to focus on women’s issues in the context of International Law and the humanitarian system. My professors and classmates made my experience at the Graduate Center an enriching one filled with critical discussions and engaging scholarly material.

I would also like to thank my parents for their patience and support, without which I would not have completed this task. And last but not least, thank you to the courageous women in my life, who I am blessed to call friends and sisters, including my mother, who have shown me that it is in our darkest times we learn our truest strength. Their perseverance through hardship and their passion to create positive change in times of conflict and war is the inspiration for this thesis topic.

Widad Hassan
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Introduction

While both men and women are affected by conflicts and crises, 80 percent of the world’s refugees and internally displaced persons are women and children, indicating that women experience conflict and war differently.\(^1\) However, the emphasis on women’s vulnerability leads to their exclusion from decision-making and the devaluation of their contributions. Though women experience numerous socio-cultural and economic barriers in exercising leadership during humanitarian crises, as well as fully participating in political life, they have taken on important roles in emergency response and in refugee camps. In many camp settings, women are the sole providers and the head of households. Yet, their contributions as first responders and leaders in humanitarian action have largely been absent from the stories that we hear about war and emergency responses.

Focusing on refugees, the way programs and responses are shaped can either support women or exacerbate their suffering. It is necessary to ask why in times of emergencies it is important to use gender as an analytical tool for shaping response and aid delivery. Chapter 1 discusses the adequacy of UN gender policies and strategies in addressing women’s needs in humanitarian programs and response as well as supporting their participation in decision making and leadership. Chapter 2 explores how social and cultural constructions of masculinity and femininity are translated into the humanitarian system. Using an anthropological approach, I argue that vulnerability and suffering are not feminine phenomena and that women’s experiences

during a humanitarian crisis cannot be homogenized solely on the basis of gender. Chapter 3 identifies the barriers for women’s participation in humanitarian action as well as how humanitarian space, in specific cases, has provided an unusual opportunity for women to exert agency and leadership. Chapter 4 explores women’s leadership in the Za’atari refugee camp in Jordan and suggests strategies for amplifying the voices and experiences of refugee women in camps as well as supporting them in taking on leadership roles.

This paper addresses and problematizes common, infantilized representations of women in humanitarian settings as helpless. The way humanitarian programs are shaped and implemented have an impact on women’s agency in times of crisis and as refugees. Recognizing their capabilities and strengths requires looking beyond their vulnerability to address obstacles in exerting agency as well as including them in decision making and humanitarian leadership.
I. Gender Mainstreaming in Humanitarian Action

Women’s distinct needs and challenges were not always a priority in humanitarian response. Over the last two decades, there has been a considerable attempt by the UN and humanitarian organizations to develop gender-sensitive programs and emergency response and incorporate gender mainstreaming to increase effectiveness and positive outcomes. What are the current gender strategies and policies? What was the precedent for recognizing the importance of gender-specific humanitarian response? This chapter begins with a discussion on how gender as a unit of analysis has increasingly become prioritized in humanitarian settings. The UN plays a key role in establishing new norms on the international level. I outline their gender mainstreaming strategies and polices as well as the challenges they may have in implementation.

It is important not to homogenize the experiences of all people in conflict settings on sole basis of gender. I briefly discuss the usefulness of incorporating an intersectional analysis in emergency response. My focus is on the refugee experience of women and girls, although not all of the UN’s gender policies cited in this paper are specific to refugees, since they address gender in all UN operations and agencies. It is nonetheless useful to explore how women’s needs and experiences are represented in the humanitarian and human rights framework.
Why Gender?

Gender, as a unit of analysis, allows us to recognize the distinct experiences and challenges of men and women within the context of the refugee experience. UN Women defines “gender” as referring to socially constructed opportunities and social attributes associated with being male and female and the relationships between women and men and girls and boys, as well as the relations between women and those between men. The UN tends to use the term “gender” interchangeably with “women and girls” and “gender-based violence” with “violence against women” in policies, programs and strategies addressing women’s needs and concerns in humanitarianism. In tracing the origins of UN’s interpretation of gender, the term was originally used to replace “feminism” in policy discussions. The term “gender” was aimed to pacify resistance and make feminism more palatable to those who resisted a narrow focus on women. In a study on language used by international and transnational NGOs centered on women’s issues, the term “feminism” represented a radical social movement that would not fit into the policy-focused discourse used by governments and international organizations. On the local and international level, the gender-binary framework is most frequently used because it is the one that is most recognizable and accepted. The framework is problematic because it makes invisible the experiences of non-gender conforming people in humanitarian settings. For the purpose of

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this paper, I will focus on the impact of gender mainstreaming and gender policies on women and girls.

Why is looking at gender important during humanitarian emergencies? The primary goal and purpose of humanitarianism is to mitigate suffering while respecting the principle of impartiality, which entails that humanitarian action must be carried out on basis of need without discrimination based on nationality, race, gender, religion, class or political opinions.\(^6\) Paying attention to gender in the rush to provide humanitarian response entails recognizing unique needs of women and men. Ignoring the distinct needs of a population can have serious implications on the survival and protection of victims. Using a gender lens allows for a better and more effective humanitarian response since women and girls can suffer differently from men and boys during humanitarian crises, just as they do outside of them.

In 1995, the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women recognized how women and girls are particularly impacted because of their status in society as well as their sex.\(^7\) According to UN reports, 60 percent of all maternal deaths take place in humanitarian settings.\(^8\) Of the 80 million people in need of humanitarian assistance in 2016, more than 75 percent were

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\(^6\) The case of Nicaragua v. the U.S (1986) was instrumental in defining the principles of humanitarianism. According to the case, humanitarianism is what the International Committee of the Red Cross does; and thus, the principles of humanitarianism are independence, impartiality and neutrality.


women and children.\textsuperscript{9} These alarming statistics indicate an urgent need to address gender in humanitarianism. Awareness of the high percentage of refugee women first began with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) report in 1980 at the World Conference for the Decade on Women in Copenhagen. The report revealed that 80 percent of the refugees under the protection of UNHCR were women and their dependents.\textsuperscript{10} The findings of this report led to the creation of the International Working Group on Refugee Women (IWGRW) in 1986 by the World Council of Churches and the World Young Women’s Christian Association in Geneva, Switzerland. In 1989, the IWGRW organized their first International Conference on Refugee Women, which set the groundwork for international research, policy, advocacy and programs to empower refugee women.\textsuperscript{11}

In the last two decades, the United Nations has taken steps to be more inclusive of gender in humanitarian responses. The UN Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights established the principle of freedom from discrimination on the basis of sex as an essential human right. The first definition of crimes against humanity, provided by the Nuremberg Tribunal of 1945, did not include gender-based crimes. The International Criminal Tribunal for former Yugoslavia of 1993 set a precedent for recognizing sexual violence and gender-based crimes as violation of the laws of war and crime against humanity.\textsuperscript{12} In the same year, the UN World Conference on Human Rights recognized violence against women during armed conflicts.


\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 3.

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid.
as a violation of human rights and in the following year, the UN Commission on Human Rights appointed a Special Rapporteur on causes and consequences of violence against women.¹³ The International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda in 1995 was the first to recognize rape as a means of perpetrating genocide.¹⁴

Examples of the UN’s recognition of the importance of gender in humanitarianism include the Beijing World Conference on Women and Platform for Action in 1995, which is a key global policy on gender equality. A five-year review of the implementation of this policy took place at the 23rd special session of the General Assembly in June 2000, indicating a commitment to promoting gender equality. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) adopted in 1979 established a national agenda for national action end discrimination against women. Security Council resolution 1325, adopted on October 31, 2000, reaffirms the key role of women in the prevention of conflicts, peace-building, peacekeeping and humanitarian response.¹⁵ There are numerous UN agencies, divisions and resolutions dedicated to gender issues and equality - UN Women, Division for the Advancement of Women, and the Inter-Agency Network on Women and Gender Equality. The Commission on the Status of Women, established by Council resolution 11 (II) in 1946, is exclusively dedicated to promoting gender equality and the empowerment of women.¹⁶ The Economic and Social

Council in resolution 1996/6 mandated that the commission take a leading role in monitoring and reviewing the implementation of gender mainstreaming in UN activities as well as the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. Each year the commission has a priority theme for all programs, discussions and annual sessions. Past themes have included access and participation of women and girls to education, empowerment of rural women and elimination and prevention of all forms of violence against women and girls.

*Gender mainstreaming in the UN*

Current UN strategies and policies for developing a more gender sensitive humanitarian response include the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action, which identified gender mainstreaming as the most important strategy for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of women leading to humanitarian agencies and organizations developing training manuals for staff to support achieving this goal. According to the *Inter-Agency Standing Committee Handbook*, a guide for humanitarian workers, “Two main strategies are needed to reach the goal of gender equality, namely gender mainstreaming and targeted actions in response to a gender analysis, as well as a number of programmes which together make up a gender equality programme.” The UN adopted a gender mainstreaming policy in 1997 to address gender inequality and gender-based violence.

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17 Caroline Moser and Annalise Moser, "Gender Mainstreaming Since Beijing: A Review of Success and Limitations in International Institutions," *Gender and Development* vol. 13, no. 2 (July 2, 2005): 11, [http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13552070512331332283](http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13552070512331332283).

On the UN website, gender mainstreaming is defined as:

the process of assessing the implications for women and men of any planned action, including legislation, policies or programmes, in all areas and at all levels. It is a strategy for making women’s as well as men’s concerns and experiences an integral dimension of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes in all political, economic and societal spheres so that women and men benefit equally and inequality is not perpetuated.19

The UNHCR, which focuses on refugees and those in refugee-like situations, defines gender mainstreaming as a strategy and process that,

ensures that the different interests, needs and resources of displaced women and men, girls and boys, are taken into consideration at every step of the refugee cycle, in UNHCR, protection activities, as well as in program design, planning, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation. 20

Since the 1980s, the UNHCR has mainstreamed a gender perspective in their policies and operations to enhance the protection of refugee women and actively consult with displaced women, men and youth in all aspects of their work. In 1989, the UNHCR adopted the Policy on Refugee Women and in 1991 the Guidelines on the Protection of Refugee Women (1991), as well as theme-specific guidelines on a variety of refugee women or gender-related issues.21

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There are six key components in a gender mainstreaming policy: targeted actions for gender equality; gender analysis; staff are supported by gender specialists; gender training; supporting women’s decision making and empowerment; and monitoring and evaluation. The second component, using gender as a category of analysis, entails recognizing that experiences of refugees are gendered, therefore require a more sensitive humanitarian response that addresses issues specific to their displacement. Gender is only one category of many used to assess refugee experiences. An exclusive emphasis of a gendered lens runs the risk of making invisible the intersection of other and often more compelling identities.

According to a 2010 report of the UN Secretary-General on mainstreaming a gender perspective in all UN policies and programs, there has been increased attention to incorporating a gender analysis in humanitarian emergency policies and responses. The gender mainstreaming plan for the Department of Peacekeeping Operations and its Department of Field Support was updated in 2008 so that both field offices and headquarters would be more inclusive of gender issues. Additionally, all field offices are required to develop gender action plans annually. The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) published a Gender Equality toolkit in 2005 to support the implementation of their policy on gender equality. The toolkit

includes definitions and international mandates related to gender equality. Importantly, it provides tools for humanitarian workers, specifically OCHA staff, to coordinate response as well as information management and analysis.

A tool used for gender mainstreaming is gender analysis, which requires humanitarian workers to assess the different impacts of a humanitarian crisis on a community based on gender. OCHA defines gender analysis as an examination of the relationships among males and females of different ages. This includes looking at the relationships to power that both male and females have as well as the distinct roles they have in a setting. When undertaking a gender analysis, some questions humanitarian workers ask are: Who has access to what and are there barriers to accessing services? Who owns what assets? What are the skills/capacities of each group?26

The Bureau for Europe and the Office of the Senior Coordinator for Refugee Women and Gender Equality developed a gender training kit on refugee protection and resource handbook, the first of its kind, to meet the specific needs of both women and men in refugee situations, as well as support incorporating a gender perspective in all aspects of operation and protection training.27 The intended goal and outcomes for gender mainstreaming are a more accurate understanding of the situation during times of crisis and tailored responses. It also aims to enable humanitarian workers to meet the needs and priorities of the population based on how women,

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27 UNHCR, *Gender Training Kit on Refugee Protection and Resource Handbook*
girls, boys and men have been affected by a crisis, ensuring that all affected populations are acknowledged and their needs and vulnerabilities taken into account.

**Challenges**

Among the challenges of gender mainstreaming is that the effects are often minimal and the programs are inconsistently implemented and evaluated due to lack of funding. Dr. Noeleen Heyzer, former executive director of UNIFEM, comments on this challenge,

> Through regional and international conferences, we have achieved far-reaching agreements on gender equality. The challenge now is holding stakeholders - governments, UN agencies, the private sector, and civil society - accountable for implementation.\(^{28}\)

While there has been progress in gender mainstreaming in Jordan refugee camps, a 2015 inter-agency evaluation of gender-based violence prevention and response found that consultations were mostly ad-hoc and rarely followed up with a report back to women on why their input was not put into practice.\(^{29}\) At the 60th session of the Commission on the Status of Women, UN Women Deputy executive director Lakshmi Puri stated, “The 20-year review of the Beijing Platform for Action shows that underinvestment in gender equality and women’s empowerment has contributed to slow and uneven progress in all of the 12 critical areas of concern. Inadequate financing hinders the implementation of gender-responsive laws and

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\(^{28}\) Moser and Moser, “Gender Mainstreaming since Beijing: A Review of Success and Limitations in International Institutions,” 15.

policies.” She went on to report that the financing gaps of national gender equality plans were as high as 90 percent in certain cases. In certain cases, projects and policies are created without the involvement and consultation of local civil society groups.

The UNHCR’s “Policy on Refugee Protection and Solutions in Urban Areas” has only 11 out of 159 paragraphs that mention women and children or gender related issues. Throughout the policy, women and children are often mentioned together as one category, and the focus on women is mainly in the context of their reproductive capacity and role as mothers. It is critical that women are viewed as not only mothers, since this is not the experience of all women, but also as individuals.

**Intersectionality for Gender Sensitive Response**

An intersectional framework in gender sensitive response can help increase effectiveness and improve outcomes of programs and policies. Patricia Hills Collins and Sirma Bilge define the term intersectionality as “a way of understanding and analyzing the complexity in the world, in people, and in human experiences. The events and conditions of social and political life and


33 Ibid.
the self can seldom be understood as shaped by one factor. They are generally shaped by many factors in diverse and mutually influencing ways.”34 In humanitarianism, intersectionality can be a useful analytic tool for thinking about the many facets of one’s identity, including gender and its relationship to power. Individuals and communities often experience a multiplicity of issues such as racism, sexism and poverty. Who arbitrates which issue should be addressed and which ignored? Race, class, gender, sexuality, dis/ability, and age do not operate as discrete and mutually exclusive entities, but rather they intersect. The quote by Patricia Monture-Angus, a Mohawk scholar, perfectly encapsulates this dilemma, “My world is not experienced in a linear and compartmentalized way. I experience the world simultaneously as Mohawk and as a woman.”35

An intersectional framework can help effectively mitigate suffering by taking into account how power operates in multiple ways. Isolating one category, in this case gender, only partially addresses gender issues. While the focus of intersectionality was initially the interplay between race and gender, more recently this concept has been expanded to include sexual orientation, ethnicity, ability, religion, class and nationality. The intersectional framework is necessary for correct diagnosis of the issues that victims in conflicts experience. It also allows for a more accurate assessment of how to best shape humanitarian response that can reduce suffering in the long-term.

35 Hill and Bilge, Intersectionality, 145.
Maggie Corser, a research analyst for the Center for Popular Democracy and the winner of the Audre Rapaport Prize for Scholarship on Gender and Human Rights, suggests that UN entities can adopt a much more effective approach for dealing with gender-based violence by understanding the intersectional oppressions that victims experience. She argues that the questions typically asked in a gender analysis are insufficient for addressing a victim’s needs. To better assess the impact and effectiveness of programs and responses to gender-based violence, Corser lists questions that the UN should ask internally for evaluation purposes. Such questions include: Do the policies designed provide more rights and opportunities to one group while simultaneously disadvantaging another group? How do the survivor’s gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, sexuality, and/or refugee status play a role in her/his sexual assault and persecution? How do language barriers, social stigma, and inexperience navigating social service or legal networks affect a survivor’s ability to speak out? Not all survivors and victims are able to seek aid or speak out on the violence perpetrated against them due to social stigma, rendering their experience invisible.

Though gender in humanitarian delivery receives less attention than in other fields such as development, there has been considerable progress over the last few years in gender mainstreaming UN programs and operations, as outlined in the policies and resolutions discussed in this chapter. The question in UN agencies and humanitarian organizations is no longer, “why pay attention to gender in humanitarian response?” Rather, “how can we effectively address...
women’s needs and concerns in programs and response to minimize suffering and promote gender equality?” The next chapter looks into how women are represented within UN and humanitarian agencies as well as the portrayal of refugees. Programs that recognize women’s capabilities, as well as ensure that women are well represented in key leadership positions, are key to empowering women in humanitarian settings.
II. Women’s Representation

Women are underrepresented in leadership within humanitarian organizations and UN agencies, which may suggest a masculinization of the humanitarian field. The image of women as pure victims during times of conflicts has an impact on how responses are shaped as well as access to key leadership positions and decision making in camp settings. This representation does not speak to the reality of displaced and refugee women who are often the head of household and sole providers for their family. This section details and problematizes the representation of women in times of conflict as infantilized and without agency. I also look in to women’s representation in leadership roles within UN agencies and humanitarian organizations. A commitment to gender equality and women’s empowerment requires that women are granted the opportunity to serve in key leadership roles within humanitarian settings as well in UN organizations.

Feminization of Suffering and Victimhood

Humanitarian, academic, and media discourses tend to put forth a one-dimensional representation of refugees, which relies on feminized and infantilized images of “pure” victimhood and vulnerability.37 In the marketization of humanitarian work, women, as well as suffering, are often “feminized” and depoliticized to appeal to the public for more support and donations.38 Does this reflect an inherent masculinization of the humanitarian system? Infantilized portrayals of those impacted by violence and crisis effectively silence claims to

38 Ibid.
agency as well as involvement in the discussion process of designing programs/projects that would serve their locality. In revealing the emphasis on feminizing victimhood in humanitarianism, Liisa H. Malkki, a professor of Anthropology specializing in refugee studies, writes, “The visual prominence of women and children as embodiments of refugeeness has to do not just with the fact that most refugees are women and children, but with the institutional, international expectation of a certain kind of helplessness as a refugee characteristic.”39 The assumption of women as solely victims in times of crisis and the view of vulnerability as a feminine phenomenon can result in flawed analysis and response efforts as exemplified in the case of the 2010 cholera crisis in Haiti. According to the 2012 OCHA gender toolkit, responders assumed that women in Haiti were more impacted by the cholera outbreak than men since their role as caregivers supposedly increased risk of exposure.40 However, after the epidemic, a survey conducted found that 67 percent of cholera-related deaths were men. The assumption of women as victims led responders to target women for information, without analyzing how men may have contracted the disease.

The portrayal of women only as victims in crises and conflict does not take into account that they can and have taken part in armed conflicts. In some cases, women have contributed to militarism by teaching children the ideology of violence as a proper solution to problems.41 In a study of conscientious objectors in the United States during the Second World War, many of the mothers opposed taking pacifist positions, apart from those who were members of peace

40 Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, OCHA Gender Equality Polity and Tool Kit, 1.
churches. In a study on women who participated in war and genocide in Nazi Germany, Wendy Lower, an American historian, contests the widely accepted notion of women as inherently nurturing and incapable of violence, which misrepresents historical examples of women’s role in supporting violence:

To assume that violence is not a feminine characteristic and that women are not capable of mass murder has obvious appeal: it allows for hope that at least half the human race will not devour the other, that it will protect children and so safeguard the future. But minimizing the violent behavior of women creates a false shield against a more direct confrontation with genocide and its disconcerting realities.

Women’s roles in supporting violence are largely absent from contemporary stories on war and conflict. However, between 1990 and 2000 girl soldiers were involved in armed conflicts in 36 countries. In the case of Nazi Germany, over fifty thousand books and monographs have been written on Hitler’s Germany, yet they scarcely cover women as actors in this part of history that made dictatorship, war and genocide possible. Obscuring the participation and or the ability of women to participate in armed conflict relies on faulty gendered notions that assume violence and power are masculine traits while weakness and victimhood are feminine.

Portraying refugee women as vulnerable and perpetual victims is part of the explanation for continuing patriarchal power relations in camps. In refugee camps in Jordan, during the initial

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stages of registration disaggregated data was collected through surveys with men in the camp because workers presumed they were head of household. As a result, information from humanitarian organizations and UN agencies were shared directly with male family members, assuming that they would share it with women in the household. This approach denied some women direct access and involvement in the information gathering process.

Refugees’ Agency

The label “refugee” often connotes desperate and suffering masses of people who are mute and faceless. When looking at images used in mainstream media, refugees are often captured in times of extreme tumult and vulnerability; behind barbed wire, on inflatable boats, in refugee camps, or washed ashore. What becomes apparent in these images and video clips is the dislocated and homogenous representation of refugees as universally suffering. Just as they have been physically removed from their homes, their experiences and stories too have been removed from its political and historical context. Viewed exclusively through a lens of trauma that suggests all refugees and IDPs experience suffering uniformly, their individual stories are made invisible and their voices are silenced.

The one-dimensional depiction of refugees and people in a humanitarian crisis as pure victims becomes necessary for them to receive assistance. Helplessness is directly linked with speechlessness, and thus it becomes the roles of the state, media and humanitarian organizations

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to speak for them. It is important to challenge the assumptions surrounding the existence of a singular “refugee voice”. There is no singular refugee experience or voice. Such a notion is problematic because it erases the diverse experiences refugees may have depending on various factors such as gender, age, class, race, ethnicity and orientation. “There are a thousand multifarious refugee experiences and a thousand refugee figures whose meanings and identities are negotiated in the process of displacement in time and place.”

To understand what it means to be political as a refugee, entails analyzing the root causes of displacement. The depoliticization of refugees on the micro-level takes place by neglecting and denying the importance of the political in their experience of displacement. The origins of contemporary humanitarianism and its primary purpose laid the groundwork for the relationship humanitarian systems have with refugees. Humanitarian organizations operate with the primary goal of mitigating suffering, not eliminate the underlying causes of suffering. The depoliticized origin of humanitarianism is what contributes to the depoliticized representation of refugees.

Historically, securing humanitarian space from the host government for aid workers to provide relief was contingent upon the neutrality and depoliticized characteristic of the humanitarian system, which was formed in the context of war and natural disasters. Since the end of the cold war, the focus of the humanitarian system has expanded to include development, peacebuilding and conflict resolution. One of the reasons for MSF’s, a prominent medical

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48 Ibid.
humanitarian organization, statement in 2016 on not joining the World Humanitarian Summit, was the expansion of the humanitarian agenda, which has politicized humanitarianism and endangered workers and traditionally safe zones such as hospitals. In 2015 alone, 75 hospitals were attacked and aid workers have increasingly become targets in war and conflict zones.

The existing marketing structure of humanitarian organizations maintains a singular lens of trauma and suffering through which refugees are represented. This in effect denies them agency and the right to make claims. Under this framework of humanitarianism, the one-dimensional depiction of refugees as victims becomes necessary for refugees to receive help. Helplessness is directly linked with speechlessness and thus it becomes the role of the state, media and humanitarian organizations to speak for them. In 2010, the UNHCR’s annual Nansen Refugee Award was given to Alixandra Fazzina, a British photojournalist who documented the lives of refugees through photo essays. In all of her featured photos, the subjects gaze is away from the lens and the photo is darkened. It is striking that some of the photos capture the refugee as a dark and distant shadowy silhouette that is either standing behind a wired fence or in a refugee camp; faceless and unrecognizable. This reflects the ongoing resonance of representing the refugee in their “bare humanity.”

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Refugees experience a lack of power in influencing administrative decisions relating to their life because their knowledge of their own problems are viewed as limited, biased and more subjective than those of experts. Women in particular are presented as more ‘true’ refugees, which in effect reduces them to the level of an infant, without agency and responsibility. Their identity and individuality are collapsed into the homogenous category of ‘victim’, unable and incapable of representing himself or herself, powerless and inconsequential. This results in the infantilization of the refugee. Humanitarian workers also hierarchize refugee needs and problems without their consultation. Refugees have very little influence on decision making pertaining to how programs are created and run because their knowledge of their problem is viewed as limited, biased and subjective.

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52 Kaapanda and Fenn, "Dislocated Subjects: The Story of Refugee Women,” 27.
54 Manchanda, “Gender Conflict and Displacement: Contesting 'Infantilisation' of Forced Migrant Women,” 4182.
56 Ibid.
The 2005 Sudanese refugee sit-in organized in Cairo is an example of the tensions that can rise with humanitarian organizations when refugees exert agency. Sudanese refugees and asylum-seekers organized a sit-in protest after long-held frustrations with the waiting time in Cairo to be processed and the way UNHCR was handling their cases. Protesters created a list of demands for UNHCR that were articulated using humanitarian vocabulary such as “human rights”, “resettlement”, “protection”, “refugee”. This was perceived by the UNHCR as a challenge to their monopoly of that type of language, and essentially power. In response, UNHCR rejected the demands of the Sudanese refugees, and in effect delegitimized their attempt to make requests and claims for rights. This event reveals the power relationship between humanitarian organizations and those they serve. By making claims for rights and exerting agency, the Sudanese refugees disturbed the purely victimized representation of refugees.

Focusing on gender, the language of empowerment is not consistently adopted in humanitarian scenarios, despite the emphasis on empowerment as a goal in humanitarian action. And gender equality is often put aside as a development issue. Research shows that western humanitarian organizations frequently resort to a vocabulary of trauma and vulnerability to describe the condition of refugees and others who have survived conflict and persecution. Yet, the kind of sympathy mobilized by the trauma-centered discourse, as opposed to solidarity, “is not based on a relationship between equals, but one of dependency, in which those with impaired

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capacity are released from normal responsibilities’ and their capacity for self-determination and political subjectivity is called into question.”

Additionally, emphasis on women’s issues as primarily existing in the two areas of reproductive health and gender-based violence limits women’s capacity and involvement in long-term development and nation building.

_Representation in Humanitarian Leadership_

Women, as both leaders within humanitarian organizations and in times of crisis are significantly underrepresented. As of January 2016, of the 29 UN Humanitarian Coordinators, only nine were women. According to Oxfam International, humanitarian responses often fail to appreciate the importance of women’s existing roles and their capacity as leaders in emergency response with leadership within the humanitarian community as predominantly male. In a 2011 survey of over 270 senior and mid-level representative of humanitarian agencies, 68 percent of senior managers were male. Additionally, between 1992 to 2011 women only made up 9 percent of negotiators in formal peace processes and 2 percent of chief mediators. Their activism

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and contributions are consistently devalued while “women’s issues” continue to be treated as marginal to the main peacebuilding agenda.\textsuperscript{63}

On International Women’s Day in March 2000, the Security Council issued a Presidential Statement recognizing women’s full participation in peace operations as essential to sustainable peace.\textsuperscript{64} When women are involved in planning, research suggests that they are generally more inclusive, less hierarchical, and more accountable.\textsuperscript{65} Researchers with UN Women and the Institute of Development Studies found that involving women in humanitarian programs helps reduce gender inequalities, improves access to services, and increases the effectiveness of humanitarian responses. Facilitating women’s leadership within humanitarian organizations and UN agencies can also ensure that the unique needs of women and girls in conflict are addressed and lead to a more effective emergency response. In October 2000, the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security called for greater representation and participation of women at all levels. In practice, women often run into structural and cultural obstacles that make it difficult to participate in humanitarian action and leadership.\textsuperscript{66} To


\textsuperscript{65} However, Anne Marie Goetz argues that this idea fails to account for the ways in which gender relations may limit women’s opportunities to engage in corruption, particularly when corruption functions through all-male networks and forums from which women are excluded. Anne Marie Goetz, “Political Cleaners: Women as the New Anti-Corruption Force,” \textit{Development and Change}, vol. 38, issue 1 (January 31, 2007): 87–105. doi:10.1111/j.1467-7660.2007.00404.x.

empower women in humanitarian settings, more crucial leadership roles on both the local and international level must be taken up by women.

As discussed, it was only in the last two decades that women and girls’ protection and issues were acknowledged and addressed in the context of the refugee experience. The process for deconstructing the masculine worldview, which has dominated our understanding of human rights and even the refugee experience, is an ongoing one.\textsuperscript{67}

\footnotesize\textsuperscript{67} UNHCR, \textit{Gender Training Kit on Refugee Protection and Resource Handbook}, 15.
III. Barriers for Women in Humanitarian Action

There are many challenges women experience in a humanitarian setting such as accessing aid, security, finding support networks and inclusion in decision-making on issues that directly impact them. While there has been a concerted effort by humanitarian organizations to include gender analysis in their programs and surveys, the analysis is limited to recognizing the different needs of women, girls, men and boys. It does not always result in promoting the empowerment of women or the larger goal of gender equality. In order to support and empower refugee women in humanitarian action, we must recognize the barriers that hinder their participation. Some of these barriers are applicable to both women and men. This chapter highlights the numerous challenges refugees, and refugee women in particular, may experience in humanitarian settings.

Isolation and Trauma

Women in refugee camps often lament on life prior to conflict and displacement. The breakdown of supportive community networks and separation from male family members who are either held captive or killed in conflict, have left women feeling isolated with the added responsibility of being sole providers and head of household. The loss of social and economic support leads to women taking on multiple jobs so that they can provide for their families. Their demanding work schedule leaves no time for engage in social activity, further isolating them.
Refugees are at a high-risk of developing mental health problems due to multiple traumas of witnessing conflict, experiencing displacement and losing loved ones. Refugees may also experience survivor’s guilt, which acts as a barrier for their sense of well-being and safety. Women may further be isolated in humanitarian settings by language barriers, making it difficult for them to access resources, secure employment and seek assistance. In the United States, over one-third of the 6.3 million refugees reported difficulties in speaking English and found that learning a new language added to their emotional stress. Learning a new language also raised fears of losing their cultural identity as well as reminding refugees what caused them to be in this position. One South American refugee explained in Spanish, “It hurts every time I speak English. My head hurts because I have to constantly think and try to remember what words to use and how to say the words correctly. I have a pain in my heart when I speak English because it reminds me of where I am and how I came to be here, it makes me miss my home.”

On the experience of dealing with isolation, Lina, a Syrian refugee in Lebanon says, “When left alone, you have to push boundaries and make things happen. When you are weak, you are done. You have to be strong to defend yourself, your kids, and the household.”

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70 Ibid., 36.

Gender-Based Violence

Women and girls are especially vulnerable to sexual violence inside refugee camps due to lack of security or their economic weakness. Women in refugee camps based in Jordan reported that they were asked for sexual favors in exchange of humanitarian goods.\footnote{Women’s Refugee Commission, \textit{Unpacking Gender: The Humanitarian Response to the Syrian Refugee Crisis in Jordan}, 9.} Camp distribution sites are considered the second highest area of risk of physical violence for women, after the home. The lack of security has leads to increase in child marriages as well as denying young girls from going to school due to safety concerns. In 2014, UNICEF reported that percentage of child marriages among Syrian refugees in Jordan increased to 31.7 percent from 12 percent in 2011. In that same report, parents that consented to their daughters marrying under the age of 18 cited armed conflict and displacement as an incentive, viewing the arrangement as protection from rape.\footnote{UNICEF, \textit{A Study on Early Marriage in Jordan 2014}, (Amman: UNICEF, 2014), 27.}

During a 2010 Third Committee meeting at the 65th General Assembly, which discussed the advancement of women and the implementation of the Fourth World Conference on Women, a representative from Swaziland asked about the role of family in dealing with gender-based violence.\footnote{United Nations, “Calls for Gender Equality, Women’s Empowerment ‘Must Be More Than a Mantra; It Must Become a Lived Reality’ For Women in All Countries,” \textit{UN Meetings Coverage And Press Releases} (2010), \url{https://www.un.org/press/en/2010/gashc3977.doc.htm}.} Rashida Manjoo, the Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women, answered that there is a need to go back to the grassroots level to deal with this issue because though there are
laws and policies in place, there are implementation gaps that UN entities have not yet looked into as well as the lived realities of women.

**Participation**

The ActionAid report *On the Frontlines: Catalysing Women’s Leadership in Humanitarian Action*, which was prepared for the World Humanitarian Summit in May 2016 in Istanbul, highlights the lack of funds to support gender-sensitive responses and local women’s rights organizations as one of the most significant barriers to women’s leadership in humanitarian response.75 In one case study provided in the report on refugee women living in camps, women in Gaza reported that they were not consulted or included in the design and implementation of emergency response, by both local and international humanitarian actors, despite their role as informal and active leaders. One explanation for their exclusion was that they did not have roles in formal community structures.76 There were also numerous reports of humanitarian actors distributing aid and resources exclusively to men, rather than both women and men. This further excludes women from having any decision-making power in the community.77 Aid programs that require going through men reproduces and reinforces patriarchy, while excluding women from decision making, thus maintaining a state of infantilization.

76 Ibid., 18.
77 Ibid.
Despite steps taken by humanitarian organizations and local groups to address women’s needs and include them in response efforts, women recognize that this is not enough. The 2011 Humanitarian Response Index (HRI) focused on addressing gender found that assessment and responses to specific needs of women were still not consistently prioritized. Women’s needs continue to be viewed as secondary, and a luxury, rather than a priority during a humanitarian crisis. In explaining the lack of urgency for incorporating gender analysis in humanitarian response, one donor representative was quoted saying, “gender is something that comes later, in the recovery phase.” Women’s issues are often deprioritized in times of crisis even though they are often on the frontlines of local emergency response.

The structure and organization of humanitarian work and development does not make it easy for women to participate. Holding important meetings during times that conflict with women’s schedules, based on traditional roles, will more likely result in the absence of women in discussions on both aid and development. This was the case with women in Ethiopia who reported that in many cases they could not attend the local government meetings because the meetings extend into the night and do not consider domestic and safety concerns. Additionally, women with children are unable to participate because there is no childcare available and they are not permitted to bring children to meetings.

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78 “Addressing the Gender Challenge,” Humanitarian Response Index 2011, 55.
79 Ibid., 56.
80 Barclay, Higelin, and Bungcaras, On the Frontline: Catalysing Women’s Leadership in Humanitarian Action, 12.
Women’s participation in these meetings does not guarantee that they will have any influence over decision making. In cases presented in Action Aid’s 2016 report, even when they are present women rarely felt empowered enough to speak up on issues affecting them because their concerns were often dismissed by men in attendance. One woman in Nepal reports, “They listen to us, but it doesn’t come into practice… Even if we attend, we don’t speak much. Our suggestions are not taken seriously.”

In patriarchal communities, when women are allowed to participate in public meetings, they report that they face criticism and harassment for seemingly trying to challenge traditional gender roles and are not considered capable leaders.

**Accessing Aid and Services**

Women experience challenges in accessing humanitarian goods from cases of sexual harassment without male accompaniment to the issue of not wanting to leave children alone at home. In Jordan, Syrian refugee women reported experiencing harassment from service providers as well as demands to provide sexual favors in exchange for basic services and aid. Solutions to put an end to this issue included having staff from municipalities accompany refugees and setting up distribution points in public spaces so that women could collect aid without being harassed. The presence of a male figure does not necessarily guarantee women will have access to aid and services. Registration of refugees under male head of household can

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81 Ibid., 17.
exclude women from having control over aid distribution and direct access to services and economic opportunities.

Unpaid & Gendered Labor

Women are the first to become unemployed or under-employed in conflicts even though they may be the primary provider for their household. The lack of viable employment opportunities increases risk of labor and sexual exploitation, child marriages for girls, and turning to illegal activities such as prostitution to earn an income. In some cases, women seek employment in mostly the informal sector, where they are at risk of exploitation and harassment due to their precarious legal status in the country. Others are forced to send their children to work, again in the informal sector, or to beg.

Women carry out at least two and a half times more unpaid household and care work than men. In Jordan refugee camps, notions of traditional gender roles are channeled into the training and work programs, resulting in majority of life skills training and cash-for-work programs employing mostly men. Women on the other hand are only employed in cleaning and cooking activities. Organizations providing these programs should provide women with training

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85 Howard Mollet, She is a Humanitarian: Women’s Participation in Humanitarian Action Drawing on Global Trends and Evidence from Jordan and the Philippines, (United Kingdom: CARE, 2016), 11.
and access to non-traditional jobs, especially since there are many female-headed households in camps.
IV. Beyond Vulnerability: Refugee Women’s Leadership in Jordan

This chapter explores the significance and positive impact of supporting women’s leadership in humanitarian settings. The stereotyping of refugee women as helpless acts as a barrier to recognizing their rights and demands. Though they have experienced tremendous loss, they have also struggled for survival and the protection of their families. Moving beyond representation of women as a vulnerable group allows us to recognize their capabilities and resourcefulness during times of conflict. Women living in camps have organized schools, rebuilt health centers, and helped facilitate the deliverance of aid. Focusing on the case of women in the Za’atari camp in Jordan, I examine how women were able to exercise leadership and play an active role in humanitarian response and sustainable development as well as how humanitarian actors, both local and international, have supported them. The UNHCR’s guidelines on the protection of refugee women recognizes the importance of women’s participation:

Participation itself promotes protection. Internal protection problems are often due as much to people’s feelings of isolation, frustration, lack of belonging to a structured society and lack of control over their own future...Refugee participation helps build the values and sense of community that contribute to reducing protection problems.

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Women’s Leadership in Humanitarian Action

Humanitarian crises and displacement can either exacerbate gender inequality or produce an opportunity for social change towards gender equality by breaking away from patriarchal control. For refugees in Jordan, the situation is no different than in any similar crisis around the world where women may find themselves stepping outside their prescribed gender roles to ensure their own safety and survival and that of their families. However, despite these disruptions in power relations, we must be careful not to romanticize displacement. Refugees, and particularly refugee women, are a vulnerable category of people who deal with profoundly traumatic experiences that can undermine their sense of self as well as threaten their physical well-being.90

According to Beth Woroniuk, a gender equality and women’s issues consultant who has designed tools and training for UN agencies, all initiatives in conflicts and peacebuilding should aim to increase women’s participation in conflict resolution at decision-making levels as well promote them as a group with agency as opposed to a vulnerable one.91 In a 2016 report produced by the Humanitarian Unit of Women, The Effect of Gender Equality Programming on Humanitarian Outcomes, researchers found that involving women in humanitarian responses and programs reduce gender inequalities, improves access to services, and increases the effectiveness of humanitarian responses.92 At a March 15 event titled “Women as First Responders” OCHA’s

Assistant Secretary-General, Kyung-wha Kang, highlighted the important role women and girls play during humanitarian emergencies,

In Fiji, following Cyclone Winston, women looked after the sick and elderly, they helped one another source food and water, and provided one another with support...In conflict-ravaged Sana’a in Yemen, women got involved in every aspect of response, from search and rescue and assessing needs, to using social media to convey information, and setting up a mass hosting network to house the displaced.93

The next section is a case study on the gender-specific programs in the Za’atari refugee camp in Amman, Jordan. The Za’atari camp is one of the largest refugee camps and provides a base model for programs that support and empower refugee women.

Case Study: Za’atari Refugee Camp, Jordan

Figure 2. Map of Jordan and the Za’atari

The Syrian civil war, which began in 2011 as part of the Arab Spring Protests, resulted in over two million Syrian refugees in the first year of conflict. The Jordanian government and the UN built and opened the Za’atari refugee camp in 2012, located 12 kilometers from the Jordan-Syria border, to deal with the influx of Syrian refugees into Jordan.94 As of February 16, 2017, there were 4,957,907 registered Syrian refugees across the world of which 48.5 percent are women.95 Jordan is currently the sixth highest refugee-hosting country in the world, with 87 refugees per 1000 inhabitants.96 The country hosts 656,170 Syrian registered refugees, with 50.6 percent of them women, spread across 12 governance.97 However, according to the Jordanian

government, they host more than a million Syrian refugees with over 400,000 unregistered.\textsuperscript{98} The Za’atari refugee camp is host to around 82,000 refugees who have largely been provided by the UNHCR with shelter.\textsuperscript{99}

The way that humanitarian spaces are designed and organized can determine whether women have more or less access to political participation and representation in decision making and leadership roles in times of crisis as well as involvement in post-conflict resolution. According to the 2014 UNHCR report \textit{Woman Alone: The Fight for Survival by Syria’s Refugee Women}, 145,000 Syrian refugee women run their household alone.\textsuperscript{100} In a 2013 survey conducted by UNHCR they found that women-led households have less access to work opportunities and are at more risk of being exploited when trying to make a living. Of the 15,000 households surveyed, only 9 percent of women-led households reported work income, compared to 53 percent of male-headed households.\textsuperscript{101}

Despite the growing number of women who are head of household in refugee camps as well as the sole providers for their family, humanitarian organizations consistently categorize women and girls as “vulnerable” without specifying what they mean by that term. They fail to recognize their capacity for survival and their previous aspirations, as lawyers, teachers,

\textsuperscript{98} Denis Sullivan and Sarah Tobin, "Security and Resilience Among Syrian Refugees in Jordan," \textit{Middle East Research and Information Project}, October 14, 2014, \url{http://merip.org/mero/mero101414}.
\textsuperscript{100} UNHCR, \textit{Woman Alone: The fight for survival by Syria's refugee women}.
counsellors, doctors or engineers. There have been numerous efforts to support and address women’s needs in emergency response. The UN-NGO Sector Gender Focal Points (SGFP) network plays a key role in coordinating and piloting gender-mainstreaming responses in Jordan through organizing trainings and providing advisory support. Initiatives supported by this network include gender training for staff and safety audit of the Za’atari camp, which provided key lessons in addressing women’s safety in the design of the Azraq camp in Jordan.

![Figure 3. A view of Za’atari camp stretching towards the horizon (Source: Oxfam)](image)

In an ethnographic study on women in the Za’atari refugee camps published in the Forced Migration Review, “Humanitarian action and the transformation of gender relations,” Geeta Kuttiparambil and Melinda Wells explore how the Women and Girls Oasis Centre creates new spaces for women’s engagement in post-conflict recovery and participation in decision-making. The Women and Girls Oasis Centre opened in 2012 in the Za’atari refugee camp in Jordan, with the aim to empower Syrian refugee women in the camp by giving them the

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103 Ibid.
104 Ibid.
opportunity to gain new skills and provide for their families. According to the World Food Programme, most of the women working in the Oasis center, prior to displacement, were homemakers who relied on their husband’s financial support in Syria, and were forcibly made the head of household due to the conflict. There are currently three Oasis centers serving women and girls, one of which is co-managed by WFP and UN Women.105

The Oasis Centre is unusual because it provides a space for women to escape the “displaced” and “victimized” labels customarily placed on them; and it explores their aspirations, while supporting them to take on leadership roles. The Centre helps women deal with security challenges by providing protection referral services for gender based violence, disability and legal status. Emergency medical support and technical assistance on gender equality and women’s empowerment is also provided. Workshops and classes are offered to develop their leadership and life skills (such as language, literacy training and health and well-being). The Centre supports mothers working at the Oasis by providing a nursery on site.106 To help develop their self-confidence, women who attend the Centre can volunteer to run workshops. This model breaks away from standard humanitarian programs that often keep refugees and women especially, on the receiving end, excluded from participating in any decision-making or facilitating roles.

The UNHCR conducted fieldwork in 2014 to better understand the experiences of Syrian refugee women in Jordan, Lebanon and Egypt.\textsuperscript{107} They interviewed 135 women who were head of households and focused on the areas of housing, food, health, changing roles, work, financial security, and gender-based violence. According to the report, prior to displacement, many of the women interviewed were supported by men who headed their households before the war. They had emotional support networks, family and friends close-by and comfortable lives, all of which was destroyed when the war in Syria broke out in 2011. The women interviewed attributed their feelings of insecurity, and experiences with gender-based discrimination and violence, to the fact that they were living without an adult male who would provide social and physical protection.\textsuperscript{108} A solution women found for combating feelings of insecurity and isolation, was turning to support networks within their local and refugee communities, which provide both emotional and material support.\textsuperscript{109} Despite the new challenges they experienced as heads of households and providers, there were women who embraced their new role in camps. Kholoud, a Syrian refugee woman and mother, who works in the Oasis in the Za’atari camp teaching sewing classes to other women, says,

My role changed for the better...People recognize that I am strong and worth the toughest man. In Syria, my husband provided everything. My duty was to be a housewife and a mother. That didn’t require that I go out of the house. That has all changed and I will never go back to that. When I go back to Syria I will have to work. I can’t go back to being a housewife.\textsuperscript{110}

\textsuperscript{107} UNHCR, \textit{Woman Alone: The Fight for Survival by Syria's Refugee Women}, 12. \\
\textsuperscript{108} Ibid. \\
\textsuperscript{109} Ibid., 57. \\
\textsuperscript{110} Ibid., 66.
On how the center has transformed their sense of self, one woman reported, “I cannot imagine myself not working and relying on someone for money again. Even if I go back to Syria I will continue to work. Who knows, maybe I’m better off staying in Jordan.”

Lessons Learned in Jordan

Creating a physical space for all women to gather and amplify their voices and concerns can be a catalyst for them to claim more social and political rights as well. Women at the Oasis say they want the opportunity to define their lives, their needs and their aspirations. Many of the women link their participation in the Oasis to a restored sense of dignity. Creating and investing in spaces and programs for women that go beyond addressing immediate needs require reorienting our view of women as victims of humanitarian crisis and conflict, particularly refugee women, and viewing them as inventive survivors. UNHCR recommendations for supporting women refugees, particularly those who are head of households, is to first listen to their voices. Hear their specific concerns and capacities to better assess how responses should be shaped and which issues to prioritize. Second, promote community-based protections by expanding community centers like the Oasis.

The Za’atari camp’s Oasis Centre is only one case and while the evidence and study suggests that this model supports and empowers refugee women, a review of other models and

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cases is necessary to make a definitive statement on the effectiveness of the Oasis in supporting refugees in other locations. No case is representative of all camp experiences but certain key lessons would seem to be relevant for further research. One of the limitations of this study is that many of the works cited on the Oasis Centre were published by UN Women or the WFP, which do not provide a critical assessment of this program.

The impact of national policies of hosting governments on refugees’ sense of safety must be considered when supporting refugee women’s leadership. Several Syrian refugee women in Jordan felt their participation was constrained by the fear that if they voiced critical perspectives on protection and assistance provided to them, they would risk being jailed or deported. Supporting women’s leadership requires that their security needs are being met. Is there a recognition that women and girls are at more risk of experiencing gender-based violence? Are women provided with adequate support and resources to report and seek justice in cases of gender-based violence? Are aid distribution sites set up in public open spaces to prevent cases of harassment? Are women included in early warning systems? To address these needs, humanitarian organizations can create, as well as highlight, existing referral pathways with local women’s rights organizations. In the case of Jordan, these referral pathways already exist, however they are overlooked as local women’s rights groups are not brought into the discussions to support refugee women’s rights and build on their strengths. Working with local women’s rights and feminist organizations can also help empower and support refugee women in developing self-confidence and taking on leadership roles both in the household and in camps.

They can do this through trainings and workshops that help women start to assume the identity of “leader” and make a claim to human rights.¹¹⁴

Figure 4. Photo by Shada Moghraby of World Food Programme of children in day care at the Oasis Centre in Jordan

Overall, the Oasis Centre provides a positive model for supporting and empowering women by addressing their basic needs as well as long-term personal development and sustainability. Both women and girls of all ages can access a multitude of services and build a sense of community in a safe space. Offering on-site day care services makes it possible for mothers to be included in events as well as work. Children at the daycare are taught the alphabets and how to draw using educational material created by refugee women in the Za’atari camp. The interviews of women who are beneficiaries of the Oasis Centre clearly indicate that the centre also helps develop their self-confidence.

V. Conclusion

Women experience incredible challenges and adversity living as refugees as these reports detail. Yet, they demonstrate resilience, strength and a resolve to survive for their self and for the sake of their children and family. Gendered notions of vulnerability are deeply problematic and lead to incorrect analysis of a humanitarian situation as exemplified in the case of the 2010 cholera crisis in Haiti. Beth Eggleston, director and co-founder of the Humanitarian Advisory Group, and Emma Jidinger argue that humanitarian agencies must move beyond acknowledgement of the need for women to be agents of change in humanitarian action, and take practical steps to engaging them on the leadership level.115 ActionAid made eight recommendations to governments, UN agencies and civil society actors to empower women and girls.116 These included increasing training opportunities for local women leaders in emergency preparedness and early warning and response in humanitarian action; ensuring direct funding to local and national women’s organizations; recognizing the burden of unpaid work on women’s participation and leadership in humanitarian action; ensuring protection from gender-based violence.

Gender-sensitive humanitarian programs need to also address the needs of the most vulnerable women, not just the idealized and empowered ones. In the case of the Sahrawi refugee camp in Algeria, Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh argues that the beneficiaries of initiatives to

116 Barclay, Higelin, and Bungcaras, On the Frontline: Catalysing Women’s Leadership in Humanitarian Action,
support women’s leadership are rarely the most vulnerable, but rather women who are already empowered and have received formal education.\textsuperscript{117}

A leadership-training manual developed by UNHCR suggested that younger women are matched up with older, established women leaders, who can be their role models and mentors as well as protect them from any risk in the community.\textsuperscript{118} The aim of the training was to provide women with an understanding of refugee women’s potential as leaders and build their capacity and confidence to take an active role in the decision-making processes and advocating for the rights of refugee women.\textsuperscript{119}

The gender framework for all humanitarian policies must make space for alliance between different genders to help support positive and potentially transformative roles men and boys can take in addressing the broader issue of gender inequality and violence. Oxfam International, one of the largest independent non-governmental organizations working to alleviate suffering and poverty, clearly states that violence against women is just one example of gender-based violence, and that men and boys can also be victims of gender-based violence.\textsuperscript{120}

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\textsuperscript{118} Pittaway, \textit{Leadership Training for Young Refugee Women}, 18.
\textsuperscript{119} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{120} Oxfam, \textit{Gender Issues In Conflict And Humanitarian Action: Oxfam Humanitarian Policy Note}.
\end{flushleft}
UN agencies and humanitarian organizations have developed gender sensitive policies and guidelines, as well as numerous training manuals to ensure that the needs of women are addressed in humanitarian action. However, many continue to face challenges in the effective utilization of these tools. As we have seen in the case of the women in the Za’atari refugee camp in Jordan, changes in traditional gender roles and urgent needs of the community create opportunities for women to take on new roles in that community and more broadly. The lines between the public and private spheres in these societies become blurred when survival is the priority. Research shows that men’s mobility during war is often significantly reduced due to the risk of being seen as suspicious and killed; and therefore, they rely on women for food, medicine and other necessities. These extra responsibilities can lead to increased leadership status or further burden women who are not supported or compensated adequately. Nonetheless, these new roles provide them with decision-making power that may not have existed before.

Though the experiences of the women who participate in the Oasis Centre program is positive, we must be cautious of idealizing refugee women’s experience with new leadership roles. While recognizing instances of women’s empowerment and leadership, we cannot deny cases of gender-based violence in camps. The women in the Za’atari refugee camp are not representative of all refugee women’s experiences.

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In many of the reports cited in this study, local women have called for humanitarian responses to engage them in early-warning mechanisms, preparedness planning, rapid needs assessment and relief distributions. Women have shown that they want to be involved in leading response efforts, and that they need support from humanitarian agencies to build their capacities to do so. More concerted efforts are also required to address cultural and social barriers for women to take on more meaningful roles in humanitarian settings. There needs to be a conscious effort by humanitarian actors to ensure that women are not exclusively assigned to feminine roles that are often unpaid and undertaken on a voluntary basis. Additionally, there needs to be recognition and appreciation of women’s contributions to humanitarianism. The representation of women as perpetual victims in conflict settings diminishes their agency and capacity for creating positive change in their communities.

There must be a much more concerted effort by the UN and humanitarian organizations to empower women on the local level and effectively reduce gender gaps. We need to not only mitigate suffering and assist women in humanitarian response, but also support and facilitate their role in decision making of how responses are shaped as well building on their strengths and capabilities for emergency response. For women’s leadership to become a more common reality, transformational change needs to happen within the humanitarian system, including at an operational level, where women are on the frontline of disaster relief and crisis management for their families and community.

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