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RESEARCH ARTICLES

Navigating the Paradoxes of Humanitarian Aid: Dependency, Conflict, and Gender Dynamics in Refugee Communities

Jenny Xu[a]

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The paper interrogates social effects resulting from inappropriate humanitarian aid within refugee communities, including dependency, social conflict, and gender dynamics. Attempts to fill the lacuna in existing literature are made in this paper, discussing how aid that is not well coordinated leads to undesirable effects. This paper undertakes a qualitative thematic analysis of the secondary data concerning case studies in Uganda, Lebanon, and Kenya to show how programs that do not consider the capabilities, interests, and social contexts of the refugees themselves are most likely to perpetuate dependency and disempowerment. The findings confirm that context-sensitive, participatory interventions are long-term, empowering approaches to enabling recovery and dignity on a sustainable basis.

Introduction

Notwithstanding these positive intentions, a gap between the aid provided and the actual needs of the refugee communities continues—a condition often termed 'mismatched aid' (Omaha, 2017). When humanitarian efforts are not able to achieve their goals, they waste not only resources but also often contribute to the very issues they wish to redress, such as dependency and social tension. Rethinking how aid is delivered is not only necessary but a moral imperative. This paper seeks to answer the research question: What are the social consequences observed because of misaligned humanitarian aid, and how do these outcomes reflect the need for more tailored support?

To examine this, the essay is organized around three main themes: Dependence and Disempowerment, Social Frustration and Conflict, and Gender and Social Power Relations. Each theme engages the contributions to explore how inadequately coordinated aid can foster dependency, create conflict, and further gender inequity-all critical needs that implore an approach more considerate of context.

Methodology

This study utilizes a qualitative thematic analysis to investigate the societal implications of incongruent humanitarian assistance, with a specific focus on gender and the dynamics of social power among refugee communities. Secondary data was gathered from scholarly articles, reports, and case studies,

a Jenny Xu is a student at the BASIS International School in China

which were retrieved from academic repositories such as JSTOR and Google Scholar. The chosen sources were based on their pertinence, reliability, and recency of publication (within the past 15 years). Thematic coding showed prominent themes, such as the perpetuation of gender disparities, disempowerment due to tokenistic practice, and challenging of traditional masculinity. These were synthesized afterwards to develop connections throughout the literature. The identified themes will be critically scrutinized for how they represent the implications of humanitarian interventions on refugee populations at large. Ethical considerations were addressed by accurately representing the original sources, and limitations include the reliance on secondary data and the focus on qualitative analysis, which may limit generalizability.

Literature Review

Dependency and Disempowerment

Although humanitarian assistance attempts to alleviate human suffering and pave the way toward recovery, it tends to foster dependence and further diminish refugees' self-reliance. As Harrell-Bond (2002) criticized in regard to the paternalistic and hierarchical nature of aid systems, most of these programs consider refugees as passive recipients, which perpetuates their dependency. Krause (2016) discussed the case of Uganda's self-sufficiency approach, which favored agricultural practices despite many refugees lacking farm experience and interest. In doing so, it showed how poorly planned aid can trap refugees in long-standing dependence.

Creating Dependency with Short-Term Relief

The central problem with many humanitarian aid programs is that they only deal with short-term relief. Crucial as this is in times of emergencies, the continuous emphasis on providing basic needs without developing a viable solution breeds a dependency trap. Aid that just meets the immediate needs, with no planning for future self-sufficiency, leaves refugees reliant on external support for survival. This cycle is furthered by the homogenization of aid programs, which overwhelmingly neglect the difference in needs and potential of refugees, assuming that one solution could be applied to all.

Uganda's Self-Reliance Strategy targeted the use of farming as one way of refugees achieving self-sufficiency (Krause, 2016). Nevertheless, numerous refugees had neither the skills nor any interest in farming, and the poor quality of land acted as an additional obstacle. The consequence was that the refugees were left dependent on assistance. When assistance ignores the refugees' skills and ambitions, it supports dependency rather than independence.

The situation in Uganda also points to another issue: the one-size-fits-all assumption for how refugees will become self-reliant. Aid programs are forcing opportunities on refugees to break free from dependency, without options matched to their skill levels and individual circumstances. A greater

issue in humanitarian aid, one tipping into an emphasis on efficiency and uniformity over the highly complex and individual nature of needs it seeks to resolve, is mirrored in this lack of diversification in support. The agricultural program in Uganda, for example, was not simply farming; it represented a question of aid structures that enforce dependency by failing to consider forms of alternative livelihood support that could have enabled refugees to pursue forms of livelihoods suitable to them according to their skills and goals.

Dis-empowerment through Lack of Agency

Disempowerment is another critical outcome of humanitarian aid that is at least as important as dependency.The view of refugees as passive recipients circumscribes self-determination. According to Benslama-Dabdoub (2024), this portrayal represents epistemic violence that is linked to colonial legacies, placing refugees, especially women, in subject positions of aid rather than as active agents. Often, this disempowerment is reinforced through the top-down structure of so many aid programs designed and implemented with little meaningful input from those whom they are supposed to serve.

Barbara Harrell-Bond's criticism of top-down humanitarian aid systems is instructive (Harrell-Bond, 2002). According to her, too often have refugee clients been absent from decision-making processes in the structuring of programs that precipitated the actualization of programs with little or no bearing on the reality of their lives. In that respect, when refugees are not involved in shaping the aid they are receiving, this is missing out on the chance of guiding their own recovery process and further increasing dependency and disempowerment. This again reflects a broader paternalistic attitude that characterizes so many aid organizations: refugees are seen as passive subjects of aid, not as actors who can themselves contribute to their recovery.

The effects of this sort of disempowerment are also signaled in Harrell-Bond's text: when refugees are not permitted to take part in designing programs and initiatives that concern them, these programs very often cannot suit the needs of refugees. The lack of participation leads to a gap between the aid provided and realities on the ground. In the case of food distribution systems, for example, Harrell-Bond illustrates how the somewhat inflexible, downward approach to providing aid often leaves the refugees without power because they are not allowed to make choices on what should be provided or how it is delivered. Such a loss of agency disempowers not only refugees but also the effectiveness of this aid itself by not taking into account the nuanced realities of refugee life.

Social Frustration and Conflict

Humanitarian aid has generally been conceptualized as an inevitable intervention, but where this intervention does not fit into the context, it breeds suspicion and introduces an element of social frustration and conflict. This theme is based on the premise that social frustration and social conflict

mostly result from bad humanitarian aid, where contexts for interventions remain sensitive and regard first and foremost cooperation and understanding above mentality of competition and imposition.

One of the salient social frustrations in refugee communities is the gap between the expectations of humanitarian aid programs and those expectations or realities faced by refugees. Aid organizations often assume that refugees will fit into the desired audiences of their intervention, and when such outcomes do not take place because of extraneous factors, frustration builds on either end.

In Ghana, UNHCR introduced ICT training programs to help refugees achieve self-reliance. However, refugees used these skills to seek sponsors online, frustrating aid workers who had misunderstood the refugees' goals and limitations (Omata, 2017). This mismatch between aid expectations and refugee realities created further frustration and tension.

This is frustratingly so because most of these aid programs are designed to meet the expectations of donors rather than really help the refugees. As Krause (2016) notes, many NGOs have been more intent on creating projects that were oriented towards securing funding and portraying almost instantaneous, measurable results, rather than making actual attempts to resolve the issues on the ground. An obsession to generate "good projects" creates the chasm between what is delivered and what needs to be provided, bringing forth programs that have missed the point in changing the reality leading to the social problems in the first place (Krause, 2016). In these ways, the frustration that flows from this disconnect is not just frustration over unmet expectations but reflects deeper disillusionment with the aid system as a whole where refugees believe their needs take a back seat to donor priorities (Krause, 2016).

When humanitarian efforts fail to include the social factors in working communities, they are much more likely to cause tension and may even provoke new conflicts. One of the major causes of this conflict is the competition for limited resources. To illustrate, Bjorkhaug (2020) points out that in the Nakivale Refugee Settlement in Uganda, aid programs only fueled tensions when refugees began fighting over already limited resources with the host community, therefore precipitating increased hostility. Carpi (2020) shows that in Lebanon, vocational training programs for refugees caused anger among local people, who saw refugees as competition for jobs. These examples show how badly planned aid efforts can make relationships between refugees and their hosts worse.

Programs to help needy people in the Halba area, Lebanon, were initiated towards supporting refugees in becoming independent and improving relationships between refugees and the local community. The same initiative, Carpi (2020) argues, introduced competition for limited resources such as jobs and services pitting the refugees and the local community against each other. This further illustrates a similar situation in Nakivale, Uganda, where Bjorkhaug (2020) found that humanitarian assistance favored competition for

scarce goods, increasing tensions between refugees and local residents. The asylum seekers were also supported to develop vocational training schemes and self-employment projects, most of which ventured into the areas that the indigenous people depended on for their livelihoods. In such instances, host communities began to resent them as they viewed refugees not just as weak people who needed solidarity but as competitors in business (Carpi, 2020). A mismatch between the goals of the aid programs and local economic reality created good ground for conflict, where both refugees and locals struggle to secure livelihoods in a competitive environment getting increasingly hard (Carpi, 2020).

Such conflict is not limited to the relations between refugees and their hosts, but also arises within refugee communities. As seen in Nakivale, Uganda, where competition for resources exacerbated conflicts between refugees (Bjørkhaug, 2020), similar patterns emerge in Nairobi. Aid programs that unevenly distribute resources among refugees intensify tensions, leading to competition and, at times, protest and unrest. This has been seen in Nairobi, where efforts to integrate refugees in the economy occasioned competition within the labor markets, sometimes even erupting in protest and social unrest (Omata, 2020). This is often a source of conflict because humanitarian assistance programs have been severed from the greater socio-economic context in which they operate, and it is this shortage of resources that both refugees and citizens perceive as a point of contestation.

Need for Context-Sensitive Interventions

The social frustration and conflict resulting from misaligned humanitarian aid must be met with a move toward more context-sensitive interventions. Aid programs need to be made with a view of the specific social, economic, and cultural dynamics within the communities where they serve. Not a one-size-fits-all solution, aid organizations require engaging both refugees and communities with whom they cohabit in developing strategies that create cooperation, not competition.

One such approach would be to position participatory methods at the center when designing and implementing aid programs. By having refugees and their host communities involved in decision-making processes, it empowers them to ensure the activities are tailored to local needs and are collaborative, not conflicting. For instance, if the refugees in Halba region in Lebanon had been more involved in the actual designing of self-reliance programs, competing initiatives could have been designed in ways that would not have put them in direct competition with the locals, which at least could have reduced the tensions that emerged (Carpi, 2020).

In addition, aid programs are to be designed with considerations of fairness and inclusiveness; resources are to be allocated equitably without discriminating some over others. This would reduce the risk of conflict within refugee communities and between refugees and their host communities. What it would take in Nairobi, for example, to really get at the roots of

competition between refugees and local workers over things like jobs and services is a fair distribution of resources and efforts to integrate refugees into the local economy in ways that will benefit both communities.

Gender and Social Power Dynamics

Humanitarian assistance initiatives frequently aim to rectify gender inequalities prevalent among displaced individuals and there is hope to elevate the status of women to that of equality with their male counterparts. However, in the process, these initiatives may sustain or even establish new forms of discrimination if the intricate dynamics of gender relations and the corresponding power issues are not fully acknowledged. It is important to note that inappropriately organized support-mostly those intended to empower genders-may as well result from other existing power imbalances when such basic social structures and cultural backgrounds are disregarded and, as such, deepen social divisions. This signifies a holistic approach that allows men and women to work together in causing strong positive changes within their societies safely and yet at the same time while avoiding reinforcement of patriarchal norms.

Reinforcement of Gender Inequalities

The greatest problem with gender-related humanitarian programs is that they may perpetuate the very discrepancies they allegedly seek to resolve. As Olivius (2016) points out, humanitarian interventions frequently depict refugee men either as aggressors of violence or as passive supporters, neglecting to engage with the intricacies of their roles within traditional gender power structures. This oversimplification runs the risk of reinforcing established gender hierarchies instead of breaking them down. When programs are designed without a deep understanding of the social power relations within refugee communities, they often export gender roles to local settings in ways that generate furious resistance from men whose traditional roles are seen as being attacked. The assumption that access to resources and opportunities will always empower women is dangerously narrow, to the extent that it fails to consider the necessary complement to challenge the changing roles of men in these altered social structures (Olivius, 2016).

Katarzyna Grabska's analysis of gender-mainstreaming in the Kakuma refugee camp highlights how such well-intentioned programs can backfire (Grabska, 2011). These efforts to empower women with resources and opportunities for leadership within their communities did not take into account how such changes would threaten the traditional positions of men as providers and leaders in the community. Consequently, domestic violence and other social disturbances mounted as men strove to regain their position of power, viewing these development programs as a personal attack on their status in society (Grabska, 2011). This situation illustrates that changing the deep-seated social structures that create gender inequalities is more important than readjusting resources from males to females.

Moreover, Grabska (2011) highlights the peril of emasculation, wherein men, perceiving a threat to their roles, may either oppose or deliberately hinder initiatives aimed at empowering women. If men are not included in the efforts to confront and redefine gender roles, aid programs may unintentionally intensify conflicts and reinforce gender disparities

Disempowerment Through Tokenism

Humanitarian programs often fall into tokenism, which involves promoting women to leadership but without substantial support or authority. Such superficial inclusion nullifies empowerment and perpetuates negative stereotypes about women's inability to do certain things.

In Kakuma, the placing of women in leadership structures was largely a means of fulfilling gender quotas; at other times, being placed in such structures tended to reduce to symbolic incorporation. Such tokenism, according to Grabska (2011), not only negates women's empowerment but would also cultivate the belief that women are incapable of performing well as leaders and contribute toward the perpetuation of inequality, which these processes sort to break down.

The problem is clear: tokenistic inclusion does not address the structural barriers that prevent women from exercising real power. Merely placing women in positions which are not supported by training, resources, and authority only perpetuates the existing inequalities rather than challenging them. Real empowerment requires tearing down those barriers and arming women with the tools to be effective, rather than making them place holders in a system that is not working.

Disrupting Conventional Masculinities and Social Stability

Humanitarian programs aimed at women's empowerment, when excluding men, can unsettle established notions of masculinity, resulting in social unrest. Olivius (2016) contends that refugee men, often portrayed as 'perpetrators' by their displacement, face significant challenges in redefining their roles amidst the transformed social dynamics. As men find themselves stripped of their traditional identities as protectors and providers, they may respond with frustration or aggression as a means to reassert their masculinity. Such disruptions might fuel the increase in domestic violence, as was witnessed in the Kakuma refugee camp, where the backlash from men was a result of women's empowerment initiatives that did not consider the impact on male roles (Olivius, 2016).

The direct access to resources and increasing leadership roles of women greatly marginalize the men in Kakuma, hence grossly undermining their roles as heads of families and community protection. The process, in turn, gave way for a backlash that saw the number of domestic violence cases increase greatly by men. They saw women's empowerment projects as direct challenges to previously unquestioned roles in society hitherto (Grabska,

2011). The findings of this research show that male involvement in programs to deal with gender issues can enable the changing of gender roles to foster social cohesion, not conflict.

Similarly, In a similar vein, Simon's critique in 2021 of cash-based interventions points out that, although such programs can empower women with financial independence, they may also serve to exacerbate intrahousehold conflicts. In that regard, males may tend to capture finances to restore their power and neutralize any hypothetical social benefits for the empowerment of women. Simon furthermore added that community-based interventions needed to be "designed with attention to local gender dynamics," and men needed to be brought into the process in order to ensure that the intervention was supportive rather than disruptive of social stability.

Epistemic Violence and Colonial Legacies in Representation

This often portrays epistemic violence that humanitarian assistance not only perpetuates but is representative of stereotypes depicting refugee women as passive victims. Benslama-Dabdoub (2024) supports that such representations reflect a colonial heritage and dismantle any possibilities of fostering resilience and autonomy. Freedman (2021) reported one such form of characterisation which has precipitated the increased marginalization of refugee women within their societies and in broader humanitarian interventions.

Against these negative discourses, what is required is more of an intersectional framework that takes into consideration the different experiences and identities of the women as refugees (Krause, 2016). This would make humanitarian assistance sensitive to their multi-dimensional experiences so as not to re-embrace colonial legacies but rather support refugee women in authority over their own life stories and futures.

Need for Integrated and Context-Sensitive Approaches

The mismatch between humanitarian assistance provided and needs therefore underlines the critical need to develop context-sensitive, inclusive approaches to aid interventions that take into consideration the dynamics of gender and social power. Programs addressing gender issues must challenge such social structures and relations of power that impact refugees beyond superficial measures. Benslama-Dabdoub (2024) has reflected that decolonization of aid would disrupt epistemic violence, which undermines refugee women's agency and reinforces patriarchal discourses.

It is clear, therefore, that humanitarian organizations should take all actions necessary to guarantee that men and women play an equal role in developing and implementing the programs related to the assistance. This should be done within the local cultural context of social organization—what shapes gender relations at the impact level—so that it would not directly end up reinforcing gender inequities or causing new forms of social disruption. However, Krause (2016) states that the success of any activity geared to addressing gender matters can be possible only if it has the potential and

ability to consider peculiar needs and situations in which the communities reached out to find themselves in. Moving from rigid standardized strategies towards flexible responsive approaches means those capable of adapting themselves according to contexts.

Synthesis: Intersecting Patterns of Social Consequences

The concepts of reliance and disempowerment, societal frustration and discord, as well as the dynamics of gender and social power intersect in the manner in which humanitarian assistance, when improperly aligned, has the potential to undermine the social frameworks it intends to bolster. Social Capital Theory, especially as described by Robert Putnam, offers a perspective for comprehending these interconnected issues.

Putnam defines social capital as the "characteristics of social organization, including trust, norms, and networks, which can improve societal efficiency by enabling collective action" (Putnam, 1993). This concept would be especially important for studying ways in which humanitarian assistance might either enhance or erode the social ties between refugees.

This arises when solutions are developed which create little or no opportunity for contact with the concerns and needs of refugees. A consequence of this might be the erosion of social capital, that which would have enabled self-sufficiency. Equally, social conflict and factionalism appear whenever humanitarian programs fail to take into consideration the intricate refugee camp social structures and processes of power, thereby jeopardizing the most irreducible inter-personal trust necessary for cooperation and cohesion. This is further complicated by the interaction between gender and social-power dynamics: aid that doesn't appropriately consider the cultural and social structures reinforcing gender roles risks sustaining prevailing inequalities and might contribute to the breakdown of those social networks forming, in more positive ways, the basis of resilience and strength.

In essence, the inability to coordinate humanitarian aid with the level of social capital among refugee communities leads to an erosion of trust, which is a key ingredient that would have allowed them to recover and become more empowered. The preceding analysis underscores how a deeper understanding of social capital informs the crafting of aid programs which not only meet immediate needs but also lay the groundwork for longer-term social cohesion and social empowerment in such communities.

By leveraging social capital in a manner that strengthens the existing network but at the same time builds new networks which mutually reinforce trust, humanitarian aid can make significant contributions toward the self-reliance and resilience of refugee communities. Taken together, these contributions illustrate the way such a nature of aid has to be decidedly much more mature, governed by an explicit role of social capital in aiding sustainable development by reducing the chances of dependency, conflict, and gender-based inequalities.

Conclusion

This has proved much less consistent-in terms of resulting social change occurring-where developed forms of aid have not corresponded with the specific requirements of the refugee population. Issues such as dependency and disempowerment, social instability, conflict, and gender inequity are just a small cross-section of some of the issues that have been compounded by well-intentioned, yet misguided, efforts. These results reiterate that humanitarian aid programs need to go beyond simple and direct relief measures, anchored in an empowering, context-based approach in which refugees play an important role in planning and implementation.

These findings have particular implications for the framing of humanitarian interventions by public health policy: long-term sustainability and social empowerment. This would mean that programs should be tailored to the needs of refugee communities, yet cultivated with self-reliance and social cohesion in mind. It would also ensure that invoked gender-sensitive strategies involve men and women equitably, so interventions promote social stability rather than increase tension.

Future research should be directed toward participatory models that place refugees as agents in humanitarian aid programs, while further studying the impact that long-term community resiliency and recovery have on such individualized interventions. An intersectional perspective is important to understand that each different subgroup in refugee populations sees humanitarian assistance in a different way; it builds better concepts for more effective and inclusive humanitarian interventions.

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