



Refugee men as perpetrators, allies or troublemakers? Emerging discourses on men and masculinities in humanitarian aid



Elisabeth Olivius

Department of Political Science, Umeå Centre for Gender Studies, Umeå University, 90187 Umeå, Sweden

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SYNOPSIS

The importance of including men and boys in order to successfully promote gender equality has been increasingly emphasized in international policymaking and governance. This article examines emerging discourses on men, masculinities and gender equality in the field of humanitarian aid to refugees. Through an analysis of key policy texts as well as interviews with humanitarian workers, three main representations of the role of refugee men in relation to the promotion of gender equality are identified. Refugee men are represented as perpetrators of violence and discrimination; as powerful gatekeepers and potential allies; and as emasculated troublemakers. These ways of conceptualizing men and masculinity are problematic in ways which significantly limit their potential for the transformation of unequal gender relations: gendered power relations are obscured; refugee men's masculinity is pathologized as "primitive"; and attempts to take the needs of men into account are often turned into an argument against the empowerment of refugee women.

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Introduction

Throughout the past decades, approaches to gender in humanitarian policy and practice have evolved significantly. In 1990, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) adopted its first *Policy on Refugee Women* (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 1990), and twenty years later all UN actors, many government donors and many larger humanitarian NGOs had developed their own gender policies (Buscher, 2010; Edwards, 2010). Thus, humanitarian aid in general and international refugee protection in particular have left gender-blindness behind, and a considerable collection of policy documents, field handbooks and programmatic responses aiming to take gender into account have been developed.¹ The goal of gender equality is now widely endorsed as an intrinsic aspect of the humanitarian imperative to save lives and relieve suffering in situations of emergency and displacement. This change represents substantial steps forward and testifies to the success of long-term feminist advocacy (Baines, 2004; Buscher, 2010; Edwards, 2010; Freedman, 2010; Hyndman, 2004).

Until today, however, the promotion of gender equality in humanitarian operations has primarily been understood as equivalent to special measures to ensure women's protection and access to assistance. While this may be explained as a reasonable response to women's subordinate position in many contexts where humanitarian aid is delivered, feminist scholars have also critiqued the way in which women-focused humanitarian policies represent and approach women. The overwhelming focus on women as vulnerable victims in need of special protection has been problematized as contributing to reinforce women's marginalization (Kneebone, 2005; Manderson et al., 1998; Szczepanikova, 2010). Efforts to increase refugee women's participation have often been driven by a desire to increase aid effectiveness rather than to realize women's rights, and have not necessarily contributed to change in existing gender relations (El-Bushra, 2000; Hyndman & de Alwis, 2008; Olivius, 2014). Further, representations of refugee women as victims of "backward" non-western cultures have reproduced cultural and racial hierarchies (Macklin, 1995; Razack, 1995).

However, recent years have seen a shift in humanitarian policy and practice. Increasingly, the importance of including

men in gender equality efforts is emphasized. This shift can be seen as a logical effect of the previous change in policy terminology from “women” to “gender,” and the more recent trend towards recognizing multiple forms of diversity and vulnerability, exemplified by the Age, Gender and Diversity Mainstreaming (AGDM) approach of the UNHCR (Edwards, 2010). In the Age, Gender and Diversity Policy, gender equality is defined as “the equal enjoyment of rights, responsibilities and opportunities of women, men, girls and boys. Gender equality implies that the interests, needs and priorities of each gender are respected” (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2011: 1). “Promoting and supporting the positive engagement of men and boys” is further described as “a fundamental step towards ensuring access to protection and equality for all” (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2011: 4). Increasing attention to the role of men and boys in the promotion of gender equality is, however, not a phenomena unique to the humanitarian field, but can be seen in wider United Nations (UN) policy discourse (United Nations Commission on the Status of Women, 2004; Connell, 2005) and in the growth of masculinity studies as an academic field of research (Kimmel, Hearn, et al., 2005).

These developments beg the question of whether the growing emphasis on men and masculinities in gender equality policies represents a welcome shift away from a narrow understanding of gender as equivalent to women that can foster more complex analyses of gender relations, or, as some feminists suggest, it represents a diversion of attention and resources away from the yet unfinished struggle for women's rights towards instead addressing men's needs (White, 2000). Will the shift towards men and masculinities encourage a critical deconstruction of masculinity as well as femininity, or will the desire to include everyone in equal measure, “regardless of disadvantage, patriarchy, or hierarchy” obscure the power relations at issue (Edwards, 2010: 39)?

This article contributes to a critical examination of the implications of the shift towards men and masculinities in global gender equality policies through focusing on how men and masculinities are represented in humanitarian gender equality policy and practice. The inclusion of men and masculinities in approaches to gender equality is arguably still in its infancy in this field, and has not previously been systematically analyzed. This article thereby sheds new light on an understudied aspect of humanitarian policy and practice. It does so through an analysis of two types of material: policy texts on gender from key UN humanitarian agencies and interviews with humanitarian workers assisting refugees in camps in Thailand and Bangladesh.

The analysis presented here identifies three main representations of the role of refugee men in relation to the promotion of gender equality. First, refugee men are represented as perpetrators of violence and discrimination against refugee women. Refugee men are thereby actively creating women's vulnerability and subordination, and must be made to stop if gender equality is to be possible. Second, refugee men are represented as gatekeepers who, as power holders and decision makers in their families and communities, can both obstruct and enable change towards gender equality. The potential role of men as partners and allies for gender equality and the importance of convincing them to act as such are therefore strongly emphasized. Third, refugee men are represented as emasculated troublemakers. In this representation, their

inability to perform masculine roles as providers and protectors due to the constraints of situations of emergency and displacement, in combination with aid agencies' efforts to empower women, is said to leave men disempowered, emasculated, frustrated and bored. Male violence against women, alcohol abuse and criminality are represented as consequences of this situation, and gender equality policies that better respond to the needs of men are offered as the solution.

While consciously conceptualizing and addressing men and masculinities is no doubt indispensable for the pursuit of more equitable gender relations in refugee situations and other contexts, I argue that the currently dominant ways of representing refugee men are problematic in ways which severely limit their usefulness to a project of gender equality and liberation: refugee men's masculinities are pathologized through a representation of refugee communities as primitive; the power relations constitutive of gender differences are obscured; and the representation of refugee men as emasculated is frequently employed to make an anti-feminist argument against the empowerment of women and the transformation of unequal gender relations.

The article is structured as follows. Next, I introduce discourse-theoretical analysis, the analytical approach used in this article. Then, I present the material for the study, consisting of six humanitarian policy texts on gender and 58 interviews with humanitarian aid workers in Thailand and Bangladesh. The analysis then follows, exploring the three main representations of men and masculinities that I have identified in the material and discussing their political implications. In conclusion, given the limitations of these ways of conceptualizing and approaching men and masculinities in humanitarian aid to refugees, I consider how these could be done in ways more conducive to the transformation of gender inequality.

Discourse, power and representation

The analytical approach used in this article can be described as a discourse-theoretical analysis (DTA), a method which seeks to demonstrate the contingency as well as the political implications of dominant discursive constructions (Shepherd, 2008: 19). Like Shepherd, I argue that “DTA provides me with analytical strategies that allow me to identify, problematize and challenge the ways in which ‘realities’ become accepted as ‘real’ in the practices of international relations” (2008: 20). It is therefore suitable for an analysis of how men and masculinities are given meaning in the humanitarian field, and what the implications might be when these meanings come to inform humanitarian aid practices in sites such as refugee camps.

DTA builds on an understanding of discourses as “practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak” (Foucault, 1972: 49). The conceptualization of discourse as practice underlines that discourses do not only comprise language, but are embedded in institutions, technical processes, and general ways of working or behaving in a particular context. In Doty's apt phrase, “[a] discourse delineates the terms of intelligibility whereby a particular reality can be known and acted upon” (1996: 6). Thus, discourses shape how we perceive the world and how we seek to govern it. How concepts such as men, women, gender and power are discursively constructed thus determine how humanitarian policies and programs will

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