Governing Refugees through Gender Equality: Rationalities of Efficiency and Development

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Abstract: In recent decades, international feminist activism and research has had significant success in pushing gender issues onto the international agenda and into global governance institutions and processes. The goal of gender equality is now widely accepted and codified in international legal instruments. While this appears to be a remarkable global success for feminism, widespread gender inequalities persist around the globe. This paradox has led scholars to question the extent to which feminist concepts and goals can retain their transformative potential when they are institutionalized in global governance institutions and processes. This paper examines the institutionalization of feminist ideas in global governance through an analysis of how, and with what effects, gender equality norms are constructed, interpreted and applied in the global governance of refugees: a field that has thus far received little attention in the growing literature on feminism, gender and global governance. This aim is pursued through a case study of humanitarian aid practices in refugee camps in Bangladesh and Thailand. The study is based on interviews with humanitarian workers in these two contexts, and its theoretical framework is informed by postcolonial feminist theory and Foucauldian thought on power and governing. These analytical perspectives allow the analysis to capture how gender equality norms operate as governing tools, and situate the politics of gender equality in refugee camps in the context of global relations of power and marginalization. The analysis shows that in the global governance of refugees, gender equality is rarely treated as a goal in its own right. The construction, interpretation and application of gender equality norms are mediated and shaped by the dominant governing projects in this field. Gender equality norms are either advocated on the basis of their usefulness as means for the efficient management of refugee situations, or as necessary components of a process of modernization and development of the regions from which refugees originate. These governing projects significantly limit the forms of social change and the forms of agency that are enabled. Nevertheless, gender equality norms do contribute to opening up new opportunities for refugee women and destabilizing local gendered relations of power, and they are appropriated and used by refugees in ways that challenge and go beyond humanitarian agendas.

Keywords: Global governance, feminism, gender equality, refugees, refugee camps, humanitarian aid, Bangladesh, Thailand, governmentality, postcolonial feminist theory

Introduction
In recent decades, international feminist activism and research has had significant success in pushing gender issues onto the international agenda and into global governance institutions and processes. Gender issues have entered mainstream international policymaking to a degree previously unimagined, and the goal of gender equality is widely accepted and codified in international legal instruments (Caglar et al. 2013, Lombardo et al. 2009).

In this thesis, I examine the institutionalization and application of feminist ideas in the global governance of refugees. This particular area of global governance became the target of feminist activism and research in the 1980s, when an international campaign for the rights of refugee women gained force. Prior to the mid-1980s, little attention was paid to gender issues in refugee policy, practice and research.

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1 This paper summarizes the findings of my doctoral thesis, which I defended in December 2014. For more detailed discussion of the themes highlighted in this paper, see Olivius, E. 2014. Governing Refugees through Gender Equality: Care, Control, Emancipation. Department of Political Science and Umeå Centre for Gender Studies, Umeå University. Umeå, 2014. Available from: urn:nbn:se:umu:diva-96379. As it stands now, due to its summarizing character this paper suffers from a shortage of empirical examples and contextual insight. I would very much welcome suggestions for how I can rework this into a publishable article manuscript which brings out and builds on the main findings of my thesis, and which can be read on its own. To this end the text needs to be empirically richer but also shorter; thus, I need to focus it better and would appreciate suggestions regarding what I should develop and what I should cut out.
Since then, humanitarian gender policies have evolved significantly. Today, all UN actors, many government donors and many larger humanitarian NGOs have policies that explicitly advocate for gender equality and endorse the importance of a gender perspective in humanitarian aid to refugees. During the last decade, there has been a proliferation of humanitarian gender policies, guidelines and handbooks, and there is a widely expressed commitment to gender equality and to the strategy of gender mainstreaming among humanitarian organizations. This in itself constitutes a significant change compared to the situation twenty years ago (Buscher 2010, Edwards 2010).

However, the meaning of gender equality remains contested in the humanitarian field (Baines 2004, Hyndman 2004). Therefore, the ongoing construction and interpretation of the meaning of gender equality in humanitarian aid, and the application of gender equality programmes and practices in the local dynamics of specific refugee situations, must be examined to understand how gender equality norms are implicated in the global governance of refugees, and what their effects are. Against this backdrop, this paper aims to analyse how, and with what effects, gender equality norms are constructed, interpreted and applied in the global governance of refugees. That is, how are gender equality norms given meaning, put to practice, and made useful as governing tools in this field?

This aim is pursued through a case study of humanitarian aid practices in refugee camps in Bangladesh and Thailand, and draws on a total of 58 interviews with humanitarian workers in these contexts.

In this paper I argue that in the global governance of refugees, gender equality norms are primarily given meaning and made useful in relation to two dominant governing projects. First, gender equality norms are represented and applied as tools for the efficient management of human displacement. In a technocratic project of managing, administrating and ordering people out of place, gender equality norms provides ways of making the delivery of aid and the governance of camps more efficient and effective. Constructions of refugee women as useful subjects, and aid practices that seek to marshal women’s agency and participation towards the efficient management of displacement are central here.

Second, gender equality norms are also taken up in a project of reforming and normalizing regions of the world that are seen as sources of insecurity and instability. Refugee situations are seen as expressions of governance failures and underdevelopment in the global “borderlands” (Duffield 2001), and as potentially global threats. Further, refugee situations are represented as “windows of opportunity” to reconstruct more developed, peaceful and secure societies after conflicts and crises. As symbols of modernity and progress, gender equality norms have become intrinsic components of a liberal peacebuilding package and present legitimate entry points for critique of and intervention into “other” societies.

The paper is structured as follows. Next, I provide a brief introduction to the refugee situations in Bangladesh and Thailand, focusing on how the delivery of humanitarian aid and the governance of refugee camps is organized in these two contexts. The third section discusses the refugee camp as a context for the implementation of gender equality policies and programmes, and provides a postcolonial feminist reading of the politics of gender equality in the refugee camp context. The fourth section theorizes gender equality norms as governing tools, and presents the paper’s central analytical concepts, material and methods. The fifth and sixth sections thereafter present the analysis of how gender equality norms are constructed, interpreted and applied as tools for the efficient management of displacement, and for the normalization of the global borderlands. I conclude that these governing projects significantly limit the forms of social change and the forms of agency that are enabled. Nevertheless, gender equality norms do contribute to opening up new opportunities for refugee women and destabilizing local gendered relations of power, and they are appropriated and used by refugees in ways that challenge and go beyond humanitarian agendas.

**Refugees and humanitarian aid in Bangladesh and Thailand**

The long-standing armed conflict in Burma has its roots in the geo-politics and history of the Burmese state itself. Colonialism left a legacy of a weak state and politicized ethnic identities in one of Asia’s ethnically most diverse countries, and a number of ethno-nationalist movements have evolved after independence, of which many have been involved in armed struggle against the Burmese military. Armed conflict, economic mismanagement and poverty in Burma’s minority-populated border areas, and discrimination and persecution of ethnic minorities has during six decades of conflict forced millions of people to flee their homes, within Burma and across its borders (Smith 2007, South 2008).
Bangladesh and Thailand are the two main host countries for Burmese refugees, and the refugee situations in Bangladesh and Thailand are two of the most protracted in the world.

The first refugee camps on the Thai side of the Thai-Burmese border were established in 1984 when Karen refugees fled across the border following advances in the counterinsurgency campaign of the Burmese military against the Karen National Union (KNU). The number of refugees in refugee camps in Thailand has since steadily increased due to gradual losses of territory controlled by the KNU and other minority armed forces. Currently there are nine camps along the border, and a majority of the 120,000 refugees in the camps belong to the Karen minority (TBC 2014). Links between the refugee populations and the Karen armed insurgency in Burma have remained strong, and the camps have provided important bases for Karen nationalism and various forms of political activism (Lang 2002). The UNHCR did not begin operations on the Thai-Burmese border until 1998, and NGOs are the main humanitarian actors although the UNHCR has been expanding its role on the border in recent years. Humanitarian aid and services are mainly provided by a network of about 15 national and international NGOs. Further, services are coordinated and partly implemented by the refugees themselves through a system for community-based camp management. The camps are governed by elected refugee committees; the Karen Refugee Committee (KRC) in seven camps and the Karenni Refugee Committee in the two northernmost camps. A Camp Committee is responsible for the day to day running of each camp and coordinates education, health, and justice (Banki and Lang 2008).

The Rohingya Muslim minority in Western Burma has endured harsh discrimination and persecution, including denial of citizenship, since the onset of military rule. Waves of intensified violence following a population registration exercise in 1978 and in the aftermath of the 1990 elections have caused two mass exoduses of Rohingyas into Bangladesh in recent decades. In both cases, the majority of refugees were eventually repatriated by the Bangladeshi government, using significant amounts of violence and coercion (Pittaway 2008, Barnett and Finnegore 2004). Today, 32,000 Rohingyas are recognized as refugees and are living in two camps in Eastern Bangladesh, Kutupalong and Nayapara. Most of the registered refugees arrived in 1991/1992 and managed to remain after the last repatriation exercise. Rohingyas have continued to flee to Bangladesh, but later arrivals have been denied refugee status and access to the two official camps. An estimated 200,000 unregistered Rohingyas live in villages in Eastern Bangladesh and in camp-like settlements in the vicinity of the official refugee camps. Humanitarian aid is provided to refugees in the official camps by UN organizations such as the UNHCR and the World Food Program (WFP) and a small number of international and national NGOs. The Bangladeshi government does not authorize humanitarian interventions on behalf of unregistered refugees (UNHCR 2014, Lewa 2003, Refugees International 2011).

The Refugee Camp and the Politics of Gender Equality

Refugee camps constitute a preferred model for the provision of humanitarian aid to refugees (Verdirame and Harrell-Bond 2005, Hyndman and Giles 2011). Since the end of World War Two, the refugee camp has evolved as a “technology of care and control”, enabling both provision of life-saving relief and spatial containment of “people out of place” (Malkki 1992:34, 1995:498-500). Refugee camps are enclave ambiguously situated outside of the social and political systems of the host state, governed by a constellation of international humanitarian organizations. The governance of refugee camps involves complex relations of authority and divisions of labour, and the social world of the refugee camp is populated by a variety of actors such as host government authorities, UN agencies, humanitarian NGOs, and diverse groups of refugees. Further, the refugee camps is characterized by highly unequal relations of power, being a context where people in globally privileged and marginalized positions interact daily. The contrast between the reality of a refugee, prohibited from working or leaving the camp and left with no choice but to rely on humanitarian aid, and the reality a well-paid UN official able to move freely across the globe is indeed stark.

Not only the social relations in refugee camps, but also the very existence of refugee camps, is intertwined with global relations of power and inequality. Over 80 per cent of refugees globally are hosted in the South (UNHCR 2013:6), where also virtually all refugee camps are located. The post-Cold War shift towards promoting repatriation as the preferable solution to refugee situations has reinforced and legitimated the continued reliance on encampment; when “asylum is regarded as temporary, camps
become ‘acceptable’ as intermediate holding grounds until repatriation is effected” (Verdirame and Harrell-Bond 2005:288). Together with measures such as the externalization of asylum in the North, refugee camps serve the purpose of keeping refugees in the South (Hyndman and Giles 2011). Thus, in the contemporary world the refugee camp is not only a temporary arrangement for the management of emergencies. Rather, it has evolved into a technology for the indefinite containment of large numbers of people, where their human rights are suspended (Hyndman and Giles 2011). After the end of the Cold War in particular, refugee camps have increasingly become semi-permanent, closed villages and cities where refugees in some cases live their entire lives. The average duration of a refugee situation before a solution is found is now 17 years – far from temporary (Adelman 2008:8). Indeed, a regime of governance heavily relying on encampment of refugees, “the humanitarian apparatus has been transformed into a custodial regime for innocent people” (Verdirame and Harrell-Bond 2005: back cover).

How, then, do humanitarian gender equality policies and programmes play out in the context of the refugee camp? What do humanitarian efforts to promote gender equality in refugee camps represent, and how can they be understood and theorized? In this paper, I draw on postcolonial feminist theory in order to approach the construction, interpretation and application of gender equality norms in refugee camps. Doing so allows me to take account of the multiple, overlapping relations of power that characterize the refugee camp and shapes how gender equality comes to operate as a governing tool in this context. Building on the above discussion, I argue that the refugee camp can usefully be conceptualized as a “contact zone”. Contact zones are social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination – like colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out across the globe today (Pratt 1992:4).

Conceptualizing the refugee camp as a contact zone pointedly captures the unequal relations of power that characterizes the encounter between refugee groups and humanitarian aid organizations, and the refugee camp’s embeddedness in colonial legacies and global inequalities. In addition, thinking of the refugee camp as a contact zone also allows me to highlight that despite its asymmetrical relations of power it is a space where negotiation, contestation and resistance takes place. Below, I outline three central themes and analytical points of departure that I suggest are especially pertinent to a critical examination of the politics of gender equality in the refugee camp context. I argue that it is important to understand the refugee camp as a context shaped by multiple global and local inequalities; to be sensitive to processes of representation and self-representation; and to analyse the meaning and effects of gender equality projects in relation to the local contexts where they take place.

First, to understand the gender politics in the refugee camp context, it is essential to stress that gendered positions and identities are always constituted in relation to other hierarches (Mohanty 2003, Hurtado 1989). Therefore the meaning and effects of humanitarian gender equality projects must be analysed in relation not only to gender but also in relation other relations of power based on race, location, and global socio-economic positions. Whether this is intended by humanitarian policymakers and organizations or not, gender equality policies and programmes does not only intervene in gendered relations of power, but are produced by, and contributes to produce, hierarchical relations between refugees and humanitarians, and the South and the North.

Furthermore, I suggest that gender equality projects, in refugee camps as in other locations, are arenas where representations of selves and others are constructed. As postcolonial feminist studies have shown, ideas about gender roles and gender equality have frequently been mobilized in imperial governing projects and used as markers of national or ethnic identity (Narayan 1997, Shell-Duncan 2008, Prins and Saharso 2008, Carbin 2014). A “tradition-modernity split”, where the West is represented as a site of “freedom” and democratic choice” while other parts of the world are represented as “backward” and characterized by oppression, underpin many approaches to issues of gender and sexuality in contemporary global politics and governance (Grewal and Kaplan 2001:669). In the global governance of refugees, such representations frequently reproduce images of refugee women as passive, helpless and victimized, and thus contribute to further silence them (Razack 1996, Oswin 2001).
Finally, while recognizing that the promotion of gender equality is always shaped by existing relations of power, it is also important to acknowledge that the meanings and effects of particular ideas or practices cannot be assumed to be universal. Moreover, despite the obvious inequalities between refugees and humanitarian organizations, refugees are not merely passive recipients of gender equality norms, but appropriate, negotiate and modify them for their own uses. Whether humanitarian gender equality policies have oppressive or emancipatory effects can therefore not be determined or theorized in any generalized way, but must be analysed in context. Just as gender equality norms can be mobilized for the reproduction of hierarchies in the context of the refugee camp, they can also be used to disrupt them.

Analyzing Gender Equality Norms as Governing Tools
In this paper, the institutionalization of feminist ideas is studied through a focus on how gender equality norms become utilized as governing tools in humanitarian aid to refugees. A conceptualization of gender equality norms as governing tools acknowledges their potential as tools for emancipation, opposition and resistance, but also their potential to be used in ways that reinforce or create new forms of dominance and oppression. As concepts such as gender equality travel across institutional and geographic contexts, they can become politically useful for a variety of agendas. Given that gender equality has no pure, unmediated or authentic meaning, what is analytically interesting is how it is ascribed meaning and made useful in governing practices in multiple sites (Grewal and Kaplan 1994:2).

As Fraser points out, no concept or vocabulary is intrinsically immune to be used for purposes of domination, or intrinsically empty of emancipatory potential. A concept’s capacity to generate critical leverage is entirely relative to its circumstances (Fraser 1989:63).

In order to study gender equality norms not as “things” with intrinsic meaning or as normative ideals, but as tools that are mobilized in governing processes, this thesis draws on the analytical framework of governmentality. The term governmentality was coined by Foucault (Foucault 1991b, Foucault 2007, Foucault 2008) and has since been developed by a number of social science scholars (Burchell et al. 1991, Rose and Miller 1992, Larner and Walters 2004, Dean 2010, Walters 2012). In its broadest sense, governmentality is a style of analysis that examines the exercise of power in terms of the conduct of conduct, focusing on the techniques and knowledges that underpin attempts to govern conduct in diverse settings (Walters 2012:11-12). In other words, the analytical focus of governmentality studies are mentalities of government: conceptions about what it is that should be governed, how, by whom, and to what ends (Haahr and Walters 2004:5, Dean 2010:24-28, Rose and Miller 1992). This perspective lends itself well to an analysis of how gender equality norms operate in global governance, or in other words, “what global governance is making of feminism” (Runyan 1999:210).

Drawing on governmentality as an “analytical toolbox” (Rose et al 2006:18), I make use of three main analytical concepts to structure the analysis: rationalities, technologies and effects. Rationalities are the particular forms of representation, thought and knowledge that render reality thinkable and governable, while the term technologies denote the practical techniques, methods, instruments and institutions that enable authorities to act upon the conduct of individuals and groups so as to transform it. The analysis thus links the practical things that authorities of various kinds do with the underlying systematic thinking and ideas about what it is that should be governed, the problems to be addressed, and the aims and objectives of government (Rose and Miller 2008:16). Moreover, the term effects draw analytical attention to the political implications of particular governmental technologies and the rationalities they embody. The constitutive effects of governing with regards to power relations and the production of subjectivities are core concerns in governmentality studies (Dean 2010:43-44). All ways of constructing and applying gender equality norms in governing practices generates effects with regards to that shape how the world can be known and acted upon, how people understand themselves and their lives and act accordingly. Thus they shape possibilities for political action and change as well as the material realities of people’s lives, and must be critically assessed (Bacchi 2009:40).

These analytical tools direct attention to the practices, ideas and consequences of humanitarian gender equality policies and programmes. Practices, concrete programmes and strategies for action, are used as the point of entry to identify and understand the rationalities and effects of humanitarian gender policies and programmes. Starting from what humanitarian organizations do I move on to examine the
underlying rationalities through how concrete practices and actions are motivated, understood and explained. Finally, based on the ways in which issues surrounding gender and gender equality are problematized and governed I consider the power effects with regards to the discursive construction of reality, the subject positions made available, and the conditions and constraints imposed on the lives of refugees. This analytical framework, I argue, enables a detailed and contextualized analysis of how gender equality norms are constructed, interpreted and applied in the global governance of refugees. Thus it can show how gender equality norms operate as governing tools in specific ways in different institutional and geographic contexts. Moreover, by emphasizing the power effects that are generated by technologies and rationalities of governance, this framework gives a critical assessment of how governance (re)shapes relations of power a prominent position in the governmentality toolbox. It is therefore well suited to a critical feminist analysis of how gender equality norms have effects when they gain a life of their own in the institutions and processes of global governance.

The analysis presented here is based on a total of 58 interviews with humanitarians working in the refugee camps in Bangladesh and Thailand, conducted by the author in 2010 and 2011. The interviewees consisted of women and men of various ages, representing both national and international staff members, and each interview lasted for approximately one hour. The interviews focused on how the promotion of gender equality was organized in the work of the interviewees, and on the meanings they ascribed to gender equality as a policy goal in the context of humanitarian aid in refugee camps. In addition, I have analysed a number of key international humanitarian policy texts on gender, notably the UNHCR Handbook for the Protection of Women and Girls (UNHCR 2008) and the Inter-agency Standing Committee (IASC) Gender Handbook in Humanitarian Action (IASC 2006). These documents are written for a target audience of humanitarian workers engaged in the planning and implementation of aid programs. The function of these handbooks as modes for the dissemination of gender knowledge makes them very useful in an analysis seeking to grasp how the meaning of gender equality in humanitarian aid work is constructed.

Primarily, this paper draws on a case study design to explore how gender equality norms are constructed, interpreted and applied in practical humanitarian aid work in two refugee camp contexts, in Bangladesh and Thailand. This choice is due to the conviction that in order to understand how gender equality norms operate in the global governance of refugees, it is necessary to examine how they come into play in the locally specific contexts where the structures and norms of the international refugee regime encounter the people it is meant to govern. However, the combination of policy texts and interviews makes it possible to identify patterns in how the meaning of gender equality is constructed in the humanitarian field, and examine how international policy discourses are taken up in humanitarian field practices.

The policy texts as well as the interviews are analyzed using the analytical framework presented above, with the concepts of problem representations and subjectification effects at the center of my reading.

Next, I turn to the results of the analysis of how gender equality norms are constructed, interpreted and applied in the global governance of refugees.

**Gender Equality and the Efficient Management of Displacement**

The evolution of the current system for the global governance of refugees has been driven both by a desire to relieve suffering and save lives, and by “a technocratic approach to the ‘disposal’ of refugees” (Saunders 2014:69). At its core, it is intended to substitute the protection of an unwilling or unable sovereign state with the protection of international humanitarian organizations (Martin 2010). The objective of safeguarding the protection of individuals reflects humanitarianism’s roots in ideas of charity and philanthropy (Calhoun 2008). In addition, however, the primary rationale has always been to protect the “international system of states that is threatened when states fail to fulfil their proper roles” (Keely 1996:1057).

In this paper, I argue that a dominant rationality in the global governance of refugees is to efficiently manage human displacement: to provide sufficient care to sustain refugee lives and reduce suffering, and to control the spatial disposition and movement of refugees. People out of place constitute disorderly threats to the international system of states, and to manage displacement is thereby largely a matter of ordering refugee bodies. Confinement in refugee camps is an effective strategy to this end,
enabling both spatial control and efficient delivery of food aid, health care services, and other interventions vital to the care of refugees.

In particular, I argue that gender equality norms have gained significant traction as ways of making the management of displacement more efficient and effective. Below, I show how gender equality is closely linked to notions and practices of participation: participation, particularly women’s participation, is widely represented as essential to make refugee camps governable and to administer aid efficiently. Moreover, I discuss the effects of mobilizing gender equality norms for the efficient management of displacement in this way. In particular, I discuss the implications of the strong focus on refugee women’s usefulness in humanitarian aid to refugees.

**Governing through (Women’s) Participation**

A prominent feature of how gender equality is constructed, interpreted and applied in humanitarian aid to refugees is its close intertwining with notions and practices of participation. In policy texts as well as in interviews, the pursuit of gender equality is constantly associated with various practices that seek to encourage the active participation of refugees in general and of refugee women in particular (Olivius 2014b). Participatory practices are linked to the promotion of gender equality in several ways. First, encouraging refugee participation and community mobilization in general, for example through involving refugees in camp management or through consultative processes such as AGDM, is frequently assumed to foster or lead to more gender equality. Participation is seen as a remedy for refugee “dependency”: by activating passive, dependent refugees, participatory practices are assumed to create self-managing subjects who can take responsibility for their situation (Lippert 1999, Turner 2001). The link between refugee participation in general and gender equality thus lies in the development of dependent refugees into self-managing, responsible, and active subjects. This modernization process involves fostering “modern” values such as democracy and gender equality (Olivius 2014c).

However, the case of the Thai camps demonstrates that refugees can also become ungovernable subjects through their participation in camp life if it does not conform to humanitarian agendas and goals (Olivius 2014c). The rationality of refugee participation is not to redistribute decision-making power and ownership, but to alter the psychological state and the subjectivities of refugees (Turner 2001). Forms of refugee participation that are promoted by humanitarian organizations are often coupled with mechanisms that regulate, monitor and control the activities of participating refugees. Practices that involve refugees in the implementation of humanitarian aid programmes rarely give refugees any opportunity to shape these programmes or influence goals and priorities. Rather, refugees are included to carry out tasks defined by humanitarian organizations, and mechanisms are in place to ensure that the participation of refugees stay in line with the objectives of humanitarian organizations. As the case of Bangladesh shows, resistance to requirements to participate in ways defined by humanitarian organizations can sometimes take the form of non-compliance. While such resistance is clearly an active choice, it is nonetheless interpreted as passivity and dependency by humanitarian organizations (Olivius 2014c).

Second, refugee women’s participation is represented as particularly important to the project of managing displacement situations efficiently. Women are promoted as models for the governable, active but compliant refugee subject. To promote women’s participation is thereby a way to bypass or sideline less governable subjects, such as refugee men, assumed to be more “ politicized”, corrupt, and self-interested, or traditional elites such as religious leaders (Olivius 2014c). Moreover, women’s participation is seen as an important source of information and as a useful vehicle for programme implementation. Women’s participation in consultative processes, such as AGDM, and in the implementation of programmes is thought to provide more accurate information about the needs of the refugee population and the context for the humanitarian operation. Tapping into women’s gender-specific knowledge and experiences thus enables the humanitarian operation to run more smoothly and meet the needs of the refugee population in a more effective manner (Olivius 2013, Olivius 2014a).

Furthermore, the responsibilities for the welfare of their families and communities that women shoulder are used to “outsource” the achievement of humanitarian goals and make humanitarian operations more efficient. This is exemplified by efforts to mobilize women as humanitarian partners,
particularly in areas where they are expected to already perform a traditionally female role. In effect, women’s assumed gender-specific qualities and responsibilities are made useful for the purposes of humanitarian organizations. This entails “an optimization of systems of difference” (Foucault 2008:259) where the aim is not to counteract gender difference, but to make it productive. This logic is integral to neoliberal forms of governing that has become very pronounced in the international refugee regime (Olivius 2013, Olivius 2014a). Further, as True points out, increasing women’s participation as a proxy for gender equality has gained considerable traction in global governance because it is so amenable to measuring, monitoring, and evaluation, practices that are central to neoliberal governance (True 2013:352). However, strategies seeking to govern a population more effectively through “winning over” the women can also be traced back to colonial practices (Fanon 1970).

In effect, in humanitarian aid policy and practice women’s participation – that women are active or present – is in and of itself seen as constituting gender equality. However, the nature, purposes and outcomes of women’s participation is rarely discussed. Thus, in effect this amounts to a very procedural conception of what gender equality means: if women participate, there is gender equality. This procedural conception tends to replace or crowd out a conception of gender equality as a normative and political goal related to outcomes in terms of power, privilege, and disadvantage. In addition, limiting the meaning of gender equality to the mere fact that women participate makes the substantive aspects of women’s participation available for other purposes than the pursuit of gender equality. Specifically, the when, how, and why of women’s participation is in policy texts as well as interviews overwhelmingly linked to goals of operational effectiveness and efficiency.

Refugee Women in the Spotlight: Blessing and Curse?
If refugee women only two decades ago remained largely invisible to humanitarian organizations (Edwards 2010, Buscher 2010), this is certainly no longer the case. While images of refugee women’s vulnerability and victimhood are still rife in humanitarian policy and practice, women’s agency is also emphasized and their active participation is desired and encouraged by humanitarian organizations. Refugee women are frequently represented as key actors and strategic partners in the provision of humanitarian aid and in the governance of refugee camps (Olivius 2014a).

However, being placed at the centre of attention can be a blessing and a curse (Prins and Saharso 2008). Refugee women are now called upon, indeed required, to actively participate and to speak up and share their experiences and perspectives. While this has given refugee women opportunities to speak and to act, the ways in which they are able to do so are simultaneously limited (Carbin 2014, Minh-Ha 1987). Representations of refugee women’s agency disproportionally cast them in the roles of mothers and caregivers, and it is from these positions they are called upon to speak, share their experiences, and participate in ways that are useful for humanitarian organizations (Olivius 2014b). Accordingly, when refugee women exercise their agency in ways that do not conform to humanitarian expectations and agendas, they are represented as unruly and problematic (Olivius 2014c). When women are included because of their expected usefulness for efficient programme implementation, the needs and interests of humanitarian organizations, not refugee women themselves, are in focus. Thus, the question is not what humanitarian organizations can do for refugee women, but what refugee women can do for humanitarian organizations.

Moreover, the emphasis on women’s participation is not often accompanied by an ambition to change unequal gender relations. For example, in policy texts and interviews it is frequently acknowledged that women are responsible for the bulk of the burden of keeping refugee families and homes up and running and alive and healthy in extremely limiting circumstances. However, such inequalities are rarely represented as structures that should be changed. Instead, gender difference, or specifically women’s difference, should be better known so that it can be utilized to make humanitarian operations more effective. Women’s performance of reproductive roles is of particular interest, as it provides opportunities to “outsource” responsibilities for refugee welfare to “partners” who constitute a source of free or very inexpensive labour. In effect, humanitarian gender policy and practice reproduce and utilize existing gender relations rather than seeking to challenge and transform them (Olivius 2014b, Olivius 2014a).
Further, when gender equality norms are mobilized as means to the efficient management of displacement there is a strong tendency to de-politicize and instrumentalize gender equality. Its meaning is often reduced to an issue of numbers or of women simply being involved or present in a programme. This construction renders the promotion of gender equality measurable, but simultaneously limits the forms of change that can be envisioned. Emptied of power and politics, gender equality becomes a technical, administrative issue of good, efficient, and well-targeted programming (Olivius 2013). This sidelines concerns over the substance and outcomes of women’s participation, and obscures gender equality as an issue of justice, privilege and disadvantage.

Nevertheless, the emphasis on women’s participation in the Thai and Bangladeshi refugee camps has contributed to opening up some new opportunities for women. In Thailand, efforts to increase women’s representation in camp management and food distribution were largely motivated by women’s assumed ability to improve efficiency and reduce corruption. These efforts did nonetheless contribute to opening up new employment opportunities for women, increasing women’s influence in camp governance, and to challenging previous notions of men’s and women’s work. Further, refugee women’s organizations explain that international endorsement of the importance of women’s participation has enabled them to strengthen their positions within the refugee communities. Accordingly, refugee women have been able to capitalize on the construction of women’s usefulness to put weight behind their own claims for influence. Thus, the avenues opened up by humanitarian organizations’ promotion of women’s participation are also used by refugee women to pursue their own agendas, exercising their agency in ways not envisioned by humanitarian organizations (Olivius 2014a). Notably, refugee women have challenged the idea that the purpose of their participation is to facilitate the work of humanitarian organizations; instead they have represented women’s participation as an issue of justice and rights within a broader struggle for Karen self-determination (Olivius 2011).

In Bangladesh, there are numerous variants of training workshops and counselling sessions targeting women in order to educate them on issues such as child care, hygiene, nutrition and health. These practices are motivated by women’s assumed key roles in managing households and caring for their families. Instead of challenging such gendered divisions of labour, the logic of these practices is to utilize women’s reproductive labour as vehicles of programme implementation. Yet, training workshops and counselling sessions do create social spaces where women meet outside of their homes, providing rare opportunities to talk and share their experiences with no men present. Such spaces may well hold transformative potential, even though this is not the aim of these programmes (Olivius 2014c, Olivius 2014a). Further, while the actual possibility of the women representatives in the Camp Management Committees, Block Management Committees and Food Management Committees to have any real influence is questionable, the fact that women are represented could arguably constitute a first step towards increased acceptance of women in public roles and leadership roles (Olivius 2014c).

Improvements in the situation of refugee women that result from efforts to have women participate are often treated simply as side effects in relation to the dominant goal of operational effectiveness and efficiency. Nevertheless, despite its constraining effects the instrumental promotion of women’s participation does open up for other effects than those pursued by humanitarian organizations, and can in some cases contribute to destabilize and challenge gendered relations of power. While refugee women are called upon to act and speak in certain limited ways, they do not conform to these expectations but creatively negotiate, resist and expand these positions.

**Gender Equality and the Normalization of the Global Borderlands**

In recent decades, the global governance of refugees has become increasingly concerned with addressing the “root causes” of displacement rather than just managing displacement situations when they arise. That is, humanitarian organizations increasingly aspire to not only patch up the victims of conflicts and crises, but to prevent conflicts and crises from occurring in the first place (Calhoun 2008). The root causes of displacement are described as underdevelopment, governance failures, and instability in the states and regions from where refugees flee. To prevent refugee flows, humanitarian organizations have therefore joined a broader liberal peacebuilding agenda which aspires to spread development, democracy, and human rights, and build stable, effective and legitimate states in the global borderlands (Barnett 2005, Barnett and Weiss 2008, Barnett 2001, Duffield 2001).
Thus, a second dominant rationality in the global governance of refugees is to normalize the global borderlands from where the majority of refugees originate in order to prevent threats to global stability and security. Refugee situations are seen as windows of opportunity for interventions promoting development, democracy and human rights with the purpose of rebuilding better societies after conflicts and crises. Gender equality, I argue, has achieved a prominent status as a symbol of development, modernity and progress in this context. A powerful rationality underlying humanitarian gender equality policies and programs is thereby the idea that aid interventions in refugee situations can contribute to the long-term development and improvement of refugee communities and, when they eventually return “home”, of their states of origin.

Below, I elaborate on how gender equality norms are used to construct a hierarchy between humanitarians and refugees. In humanitarian policy and practice, gender equality norms are frequently represented as “international standards” and contrasted with representations of the “traditional” character of refugee cultures and societies. Further, I discuss the effects of this way of mobilizing gender equality norms in a project of normalizing the global borderlands. In particular, I emphasize how it contributes to silence and exclude refugee actors from defining and working for gender equality in their own communities, removing ownership from refugees in favor of international “expertise”.

**International Standards vs. Traditional Culture**

Humanitarian gender policy and practice is permeated by the assumption that refugee communities are traditional cultures where gender equality norms are unfamiliar. By contrast, humanitarian organizations are assumed to be carriers of modernity and progress, bringing gender equality into new and possibly hostile territory (Olivius 2014b). Thus, a very sharp dichotomy is constructed between traditional refugee communities which subordinate and oppress women, and humanitarian organizations which promote the international standards of gender equality. Through this dichotomy, boundaries between humanitarian selves and refugee others are constructed, and “refugee-producing” states and region in the South are constructed as morally inferior to the wealthy states in the North who provide the funds for humanitarian aid. Gender equality is used as the basis for an imagined ladder of cultural development, reinforcing hierarchies between refugees and humanitarians, and between the South and the North. In ways familiar from colonial, nationalist and developmental discourses, gender is used as a boundary marker that separates the superior self from the inferior other (Narayan 1997, Narayan 2000, Yuval-Davis 1996, Yuval-Davis 1997, Anthias and Yuval-Davis 2005).

The construction of refugee communities as traditional, backward and underdeveloped is central to the legitimation of the self-perceived right and responsibility of humanitarian organizations to define the meaning of gender equality and control its promotion in refugee camps, even in a case such as Thailand where strong advocates for gender equality exist among the refugees. Because the culture of refugees is generally assumed to be an obstacle to gender equality, programmes or activities initiated or driven by refugees are also frequently assumed to constitute obstacles to gender equality by default. While humanitarian organizations want refugees to participate in ways that facilitates programme implementation, they cannot easily accommodate refugees who strive to govern themselves in accordance with their own priorities, goals, and political visions (Olivius 2014c). As McConnachie observes, “the problem is not simply a failure to recognize that refugee self-governance exists, but a perception that where it does exist it is in competition with or even threatening international ideals and norms” (McConnachie 2012:7). In order to ensure adherence to international standards, refugees’ participation in gender equality programming is regulated and monitored, and refugee initiatives are sometimes bypassed and duplicated (Olivius 2013). Fostering active refugee participation aims to cultivate modern subjectivities and make the camps governable, but because refugees are not yet considered capable of responsible freedom and autonomy, their agency is constrained and shaped to ensure it is exercised in the right way (Olivius 2014c, Lippert 1999).

Moreover, the juxtaposition of gender equality and refugee culture reflects a conception of culture as a barrier that has to be removed through education in order for social progress and development to take place (Merry 2006). Implicitly, this juxtaposition also constructs international standards as beyond culture. Culture is imagined as a feature of traditional societies, which must be overcome in order to become part of the modern world. Accordingly, educational interventions occupy a prominent place in
humanitarian gender equality policy and practice, echoing humanitarianism’s roots in philanthropic movements seeking to enlighten society’s poor and unfortunate in order to address social problems (Calhoun 2008).

In the Bangladeshi and Thai refugee camps, the emphasis on education as the solution to gender inequality is particularly prominent in relation to violence against women, or SGBV as it is termed in humanitarian lingo. SGBV is predominantly represented as a problem originating in the cultural practices and beliefs of the refugees which needs to be addressed through changing refugee attitudes and behaviours (Olivius 2014b). In order to do so, various forms of awareness-raising and education on gender issues and human rights are the main strategies to address violence against women. Workshop sessions on issues such as domestic violence or early marriage target different groups of refugees such as women, men, youth, or religious leaders. Social workers offer individual and family counseling in cases of domestic violence, and billboards throughout the camps display messages promoting women’s rights and condemning violence against women. Campaigns and events such as the celebration of International Women’s Day and 16 Days of Activism against Gender Violence also contribute to the dissemination of messages encouraging changed beliefs and practices in the refugee population with regards to issues of family, marriage, education and decision-making.

While the attitudes and behaviours of refugee men are constructed as particularly problematic, women are nonetheless the targets of the majority of educational interventions to promote gender equality (Olivius 2014b). Some forms of education, frequently labelled “capacity-building”, train women to participate in ways encouraged by humanitarian organizations, such as being a member of a women’s support group or SGBV committee (Olivius 2013). Others aim to train women to carry out their reproductive responsibilities in more effective ways, for example by teaching them how to improve their “care practices” and prevent child malnutrition (Olivius 2014a). As I have discussed above, refugee women are widely represented as potential humanitarian partners. In this position, women can not only facilitate the management of displacement situations, but also provide strategic inroads for changing and developing refugee communities. Education is essential to recruiting refugee women as humanitarian partners and agents of development: it is expected that they will pass the modern values they are taught on to their families and thus have a civilizing influence on their communities (Olivius 2014c, Prins and Saharso 2008).

Agency, Ownership and the Transformation of “Other” Societies
The construction, interpretation and application of gender equality norms as tools for the normalization of the global borderlands has a number of effects with regards to agency, ownership and possibilities for social transformation. Simply put, humanitarian organizations and workers are positioned as the agents of change, and refugees are positioned as objects to be changed. When gender equality is represented as international standards alien to the refugee communities, humanitarian organizations consequently achieve a status as experts on gender equality, and as the only legitimate interpreters and promoters of gender equality in the refugee camp context. Humanitarian actors are constructed as morally superior and able to reform, enlighten and modernize underdeveloped and traditional refugee communities. This simultaneously neglects and de-legitimizes the role of refugee actors, and denies the possibility of change towards gender equality that is driven by refugees. In effect, making gender equality the basis of a cultural/developmental hierarchy legitimates international humanitarian control over gender equality programming, and denies refugees a role as political actors in the transformation of their own communities (Olivius 2014b).

In Thailand, where strong refugee advocates for gender equality exists, such attitudes and assumptions have resulted in considerable tension and conflict between humanitarian organizations and CBOs. Conflicts over ownership between international humanitarian organizations and refugee community actors have in recent years been especially manifest with regards to the SGBV committees. By the time of the establishment of the SGBV committees in the early 2000s, refugee women’s

2 The 16 Days of Activism against Gender Violence is an international campaign originating from the first Women’s Global Leadership Institute sponsored by the Center for Women’s Global Leadership in 1991. 16 days of Activism against Gender Violence has been recognized in UNHCR programming since 2007. The 16 days begin with November 25, International Day against Violence against Women and end with December 10, International Human Rights Day, in order to symbolically link violence against women and human rights and to emphasize that such violence is a violation of human rights. UNHCR 2007.
organizations, notably KWO, had already been running their own programmes for years. With time, the role of the UNHCR-initiated SGBV committees expanded and came to increasingly overlap and duplicate the work of refugee CBOs. This was not accidental, but motivated by a belief that international standards would not be met if international humanitarian organizations did not establish and control their own SGBV programmes. In response, CBOs protested against what they saw as international arrogance, unwillingness to recognize the work of CBOs and failure to consult and coordinate with them. The conflict around the SGBV committees has left the relationships between refugee CBOs and international organizations involved in SGBV programming severely strained (Olivius 2011, Olivius 2014c, Olivius 2013).

This episode is especially illustrative of how the construction of gender equality as international standards limits the forms of refugee agency that are perceived as acceptable by humanitarian organizations. In particular, there is not much space for refugee women to be recognized as political actors. Refugee women are seen as victims of oppressive cultures or as accomplices involved in upholding oppressive cultures, who can therefore not be seen as legitimate actors in the promotion of gender equality. When women are recruited to participate in the implementation of humanitarian programmes, they are ascribed a role as cultural brokers who can contribute to the modernization of their communities. By contrast, when they act on their own initiative, their participation in camp life is seen as problematic and illegitimate. This reflects a widespread de-politzation of refugee women, either as victims in need of protection or as selfless, family-oriented natural partners in the pursuit of humanitarian goals (Olivius 2014b).

Further, contrasting gender equality with refugee culture can be seriously counterproductive for efforts to change unequal gender relations. In Bangladesh, humanitarian workers clearly express that promoting gender equality means to educate refugees to abandon the traditional beliefs and practices of Rohingya culture. In the context of the Bangladeshi camps, this is deeply unhelpful to any effort to actually improve the situation of Rohingya women. Rohingya refugees have experienced discrimination and persecution on the basis of their claims to ethnic, religious and cultural specificity in Burma and in exile, and many refugees are therefore sensitive to “attacks” on their culture and consider it important to preserve what they perceive as traditional features of group identity. As Narayan has argued, when gender equality is mobilized as a weapon of cultural conflict it effectively eliminates the space for feminist politics from within the refugee community and makes any proposition for change in women’s roles and opportunities deeply sensitive (Narayan 1997, 2000). In this context, it is perhaps not surprising that some refugees oppose the activities of humanitarian organizations due to fear that they are “turning our women into westerners”3 (Olivius 2014b).

However, resistance to humanitarian gender equality programmes has also taken the form of creative appropriation and negotiation. In Thailand, CBOs have challenged the construction of gender equality as external to the refugee communities by representing humanitarian gender equality programmes as a recent complement to their own long-standing struggle (Olivius 2014a). Further, they also challenge humanitarian organizations’ claims to gender equality expertise by turning the language of international norms and standards back at them and using it to support their own agendas. For example, questioning the competence of an international organization, a refugee woman activist notes that “sometimes their staff does not know about international norms like Security Council Resolution 1325. I guess they think that refugees know nothing”4 (Olivius 2014b).

Moreover, in contrast to the rejection of gender equality due to its association with Western culture in Bangladesh, CBOs in Thailand have appropriated the notion of gender equality as an indicator of development to support the struggle for Karen self-determination. The idea that more gender equal representation in camp governance means to “move forward” (Olivius 2014b) has provided legitimacy to refugee women’s long-standing struggle for representation and influence within their communities. In addition, the promotion of gender equality has become one avenue where the Karen refugee leadership seeks to prove worthy and capable of governing their own community by demonstrating their adherence to international standards (Olivius 2011). Thereby the construction of gender equality as an

3 Interview 33, UN worker Bangladesh, Cox’s Bazar, 6 March 2011.
4 Interview 15, CBO worker Thailand, Mae Sot 1 November 2010.
indicator of development is made useful for a political project far beyond the goals and intentions of humanitarian organizations.

**Concluding Remarks**

In the global governance of refugees, gender equality is rarely treated as a goal in its own right. Gender equality norms are either advocated on the basis of their usefulness as means for the efficient management of refugee situations, or as necessary components of a process of modernization and development of the regions from which refugees originate. This is perhaps not surprising: just as gender inequalities do not exist in isolation from a broader social context, it is difficult to imagine or define gender equality outside of broader visions for social change and social order. Accordingly, in the global governance of refugees, the construction, interpretation and application of gender equality norms is mediated and shaped by the overarching governing projects of this field. The important question, then, is whether the governing projects in which gender equality is taken up reproduce or challenge dominant hierarchical orders and forms of oppression and marginalization.

The efficient management of displacement and the normalization of the global borderlands are not governing projects that question or challenge the status quo. They do not draw attention to the unequal global histories and relations of power that have created specific refugee situations, and they do not question whether the existence of refugees, or their confinement in camps, is an unavoidable feature of world order. Indeed, at the level of world order and world politics, humanitarian aid is a conservative endeavor that does not challenge existing global relations of power, but mitigates some of their effects. The global governance of refugees is not about solving the problems that refugees experience, but rather about solving the problems that refugees pose to a world order of nation states (Saunders 2014). Considering this, it is perhaps to be expected that an interpretation of gender equality as a goal focused on improving refugee women’s lives is easily sidelined in favor of constructions that makes gender equality useful for the dominant governing projects in this field.

Nevertheless, in local refugee camp contexts, gender equality norms do open up new opportunities for refugee women (and sometimes men), create new avenues for refugee women’s organization and activism, and destabilize local gendered relations of power. Gender equality norms are also appropriated and used by refugees in pursuit of political projects that challenge and go beyond humanitarian agendas. Thus, while the mobilization of gender equality norms for governing projects that sustain or reproduce inequality and marginalization must be uncovered and critiqued, it is also important to acknowledge that gender equality norms are nonetheless also made useful as tools of emancipation from within diverse local contexts. In future research, the diversity of local practices of resistance, appropriation and negotiation could usefully be further explored through more ethnographic approaches. Such studies could nuance and complement the image of how gender equality norms operate in the global governance of refugees through further revealing how they are received and made useful by refugees themselves.
References


