Skewed allegiances: recalibrating humanitarian accountability towards gender

ABSTRACT

Humanitarian actors often face competing accountabilities that may skew "upwards" in favour of donors. With increasing requirements on humanitarian actors to demonstrate efficiency and impact, accountability has often become depoliticised, reduced to technical frameworks and bureaucratic processes. Within humanitarian work focused on promoting gender equality, the problems in how accountability is framed have particular ramifications, affecting how gender issues are positioned, how gender-related data are presented and the assumptions underlying interventions that seek to address gender inequality. This paper is based on ethnographic research in Jordan, specifically interviews with humanitarian practitioners and Syrian refugees. It explores how accountability for gender issues is positioned within the humanitarian sector. The paper challenges the fixation on collecting quantitative data on gender-based violence and suggests that humanitarian assumptions about refugee populations may lead to stereotypical and homogenous representations about refugees that fail to recognise complexity. It provides examples of gaps in humanitarian assistance experienced by Syrian refugees in Jordan. The paper also suggests that accountability for social transformation and change may be shifting from humanitarian actors towards refugees themselves. The paper recommends that approaches to humanitarian accountability should prioritise listening, and being honest about failures and gaps in knowledge.

1. INTRODUCTION

Despite the term "accountability" being recognised as important and relevant to humanitarian assistance, humanitarian actors do not always clearly or uniformly define what accountability means to them.[1] In forced displacement settings, accountability has often been framed in terms of accountability to donors, and less so in terms of accountability to refugee populations. Existing critiques of humanitarian accountability draw attention to the

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[1] Y.S.A. Tan and J. von Schreeb, "Humanitarian Assistance and Accountability: What Are We Really Talking About?", *Prehospital and Disaster Medicine*, 30(3), 2015, 264–270 .

technocratic, depoliticised approaches to accountability within the aid sector,[2] demonstrating how the structure of humanitarian aid itself emphasises "upward" accountability towards donors.[3] Accountability by humanitarian actors is often associated with efficiency, professionalism and "value for money", which has resulted in accountability being manifested through achievement of indicators and regular reporting from non-government organisations (NGOs) and United Nations (UN) agencies, towards donors. Through these often-performative administrative processes,[4] accountability becomes reduced to a tick-the-box exercise. Meanwhile, refugees themselves, as the recipients of aid, are often excluded from these accountability processes. Anderson, Brown and Jean draw a distinction between aid agencies and other service-based agencies, observing that "[a]n aid agency does not need to receive the approval of aid recipients to continue to receive donor funding".[5] The "asymmetrical relationships" between NGOs and UN agencies and refugees result in accountability being "skewed" towards donors not refugees – a critique which is not new, but which still holds true today.[6] While the humanitarian sector has recognised the problems in how aid does not emphasise accountability towards refugees, existing efforts to prioritise accountability still fall short.

This article draws on ethnographic research among Syrian women and men in Jordan, as well as interviews with humanitarian workers. It explores systemic barriers to humanitarian accountability to refugee populations for work on gender equality and gender-based violence (GBV). The article argues that a preoccupation with being donor-driven, combined with poor knowledge and evidence production processes and a reliance on technocratic solutions undermines "downwards" accountability to refugees on gender equality. In doing so, this article challenges assumptions made by humanitarian actors about the needs and experiences of refugees and questions the over-emphasis of certain kinds of gender-related data. It points to the troubling fixation with neoliberal narratives that over-simplify gender inequality, demonstrating how the preference for "upwards" accountability limits the progress made in

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[2] O. Aijazi, *Why Technocratic Understandings of Humanitarian Accountability Can Harm Local Communities*, 2020, Canadian Partnership for Reconstruction and Development, 2.

[3] S. K Chynoweth, "Rethinking Humanitarian Accountability : Implementation of Sexual and Reproductive Health Services in Two Complex Emergencies", PhD Thesis, University of New South Wales, 2015, 188.

[4] G. Hoffstaedter & C. Roche, "'All the World's a Stage': Structure, Agency and Accountability in International Aid", *Journal of the Asia Pacific Economy*, 16(4), 2011, 529–543.

[5] M.B Anderson, D. Brown, & I. Jean, *Time to Listen. Hearing People on the Receiving End of International Aid*, 1st ed., Massachusetts, CDA Collaborative Learning Projects, 2012, 37.

[6] B. Harrell-Bond, "Can Humanitarian Work with Refugees Be Humane?", *Human Rights Quarterly*, 24(1), 2002, 51–85, 53.

positioning gender as a cross-cutting issue within the humanitarian sector. This article suggests the need to recalibrate how humanitarian accountability is framed through practices of listening to refugees, gathering data transparently and bringing complexity to how the lives of refugees are depicted.

2. SYRIAN REFUGEES IN JORDAN

Since the beginning of the conflict in Syria in March 2011, 5.6 million Syrians have left Syria and sought asylum around the world. Millions are registered as refugees in the surrounding countries of Jordan, Turkey, Lebanon, Iraq and Egypt. As of June 2021, over 666,000 Syrian refugees are registered in Jordan, alongside at least 600,000 unregistered Syrian refugees in Jordan.[7] Around 80% of Syrian refugees in Jordan are "self-settled", living outside of refugee camps within apartments and shared housing and are referred to as "urban" refugees. This urban refugee context has raised questions (many of which still remain to be answered) around the efficacy of creating parallel versus integrated services for refugees, the attitude of the host state, the extent to which government and local actors are engaged in the response, whether host communities also benefit from services being accessed by refugees living in the same area, and how funding is disbursed between camps and urban areas.[8]

Jordan has not signed the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and is therefore not required to provide Syrian refugees with specific services. Syrians are required to register with the Jordanian government to access health and education services.[9] However, registration does not necessarily mean Syrians in Jordan have consistent access to services. For example, while Syrian refugees were initially able to access free health services in Jordan, this policy changed in late 2014, requiring Syrians to pay a subsidised fee for medical

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[7] UNHCR, "Syria Regional Refugee Response Operational Portal: Jordan", 2021, available at: https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria/location/36 (last visited 4 June. 2021); D. Carrion, *Syrian Refugees in Jordan. Confronting Difficult Truths*, London, Chatham House, 2015, 3, available at: https://syria.chathamhouse.org/assets/documents/20150921SyrianRefugeesCarrion.pdf (last visited 9 Apr. 2021).

[8] S. Culbertson, O. Oliker, B. Baruch, & I. Blum, *Rethinking Coordination of Services to Refugees in Urban Areas: Managing the Crisis in Jordan and Lebanon*, Santa Monica, RAND Corporation, 2016, 20–25, available at: https://doi.org/10.7249/RR1485 (last visited 9 Apr. 2021); J. Crisp, "Finding Space for Protection: An inside Account of the Evolution of UNHCR's Urban Refugee Policy", *Refuge*, 33(1), 2017, 87–96, 94.

[9] R. Davis, G. Benton, W. Todman, & E. Murphy, "Hosting Guests, Creating Citizens: Models of Refugee Administration in Jordan and Egypt", *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, 36(2), 2017, 1–32, 21–22.

services excluding family planning, prenatal care and postnatal care – which are free.[10] This created a situation where humanitarian agencies that previously relied on Syrian refugees being able to receive health services through existing Jordanian systems, had no choice but to create new, parallel health services to meet the demand. Changes to Jordanian government policies over time as well as funding gaps in the humanitarian system have sometimes led to gaps in access to services as well as confusion among Syrians about where and how to access services.

The right to work as a refugee in Jordan has been critical to discussions about refugee rights. Initially, Syrian refugees were not permitted to work without permits (that were almost impossible to obtain), resulting in heavy reliance on World Food Programme (WFP) food vouchers and cash assistance. This assistance has been inconsistent, with the WFP cutting cash assistance multiple times due to funding deficits.[11] Cash assistance is also provided by the UNHCR and several other humanitarian agencies, which coordinate with each other to ensure refugees are not receiving cash assistance from more than one source; this assistance is often given based on fulfilment of "vulnerability" criteria, such as being a female-headed household.[12] In early 2016 the Jordan Compact provided for up to 200,000 work permits for Syrians in specific sectors.[13] This was widely hailed as a positive step, however in practice the limitations on the type of work deemed permissible for Syrians to engage in has limited the wider success of this initiative, with only approximately 35,000 – 45,000 individual Syrians accessing these permits by January 2018;[14] only 4% of those were women.[15]

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[10] Amnesty International, *Living on the Margins: Syrian Rrefugees in Jordan Struggle to Access Health Care*, London, 2015, available at: https://www.amnestyusa.org/files/living_on_the_margins_-_syrian_refugees_struggle_to_access_health_care_in_jordan.pdf (last visited 13 Apr. 2021).

[11] D. Chatty, "The Aid Crisis for Syrian Refugees", *OpenDemocracy*, 2015, available at: https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/aid-crisis-for-syrian-refugees/ (last visited 9 Apr. 2021).

[12] L. Turner, "Are Syrian Men Vulnerable Too? Gendering the Syria Refugee Response"*,* Middle East Institute, available at: https://www.mei.edu/publications/are-syrian-men-vulnerable-too-gendering-syria-refugee-response (last visited 13. April. 2021).

[13] Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, *The Jordan Compact: A New Holistic Approach between the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan and the International Community to deal with the Syrian Refugee Crisis,* 2016, available at: https://reliefweb.int/report/jordan/jordan-compact-new-holistic-approach-between-hashemite-kingdom-jordan-and (last visited 13. Apr. 2021).

[14] K. Lenner & L. Turner, "Learning from the Jordan Compact", *Forced Migration Review*, 57, 2018, 48–51, 48.

[15] M. Kattaa, *ILO's Support to the Formalization of Syrian Refugees in the Labour Market in Jordan*, Infographic, Amman, International Labour Organization, 2017, available at: https://reliefweb.int/report/jordan/ilo-s-support-formalization-syrian-refugees-labour-market-jordan-11032017 (last visited 7 Apr. 2021).

Since 2015, the yearly "Jordan Response Plan", which outlines the scope of the interagency humanitarian response in Jordan, has included increasing focus on "resilience".[16] Resilience is seen as representing "the crossroad between the humanitarian response and development in the face of a prolonged crisis"[17] and has become more prominent in humanitarian narratives related to Jordan. The resiliency rhetoric also placates the anxieties of the Jordanian government regarding the "burden" refugees create, because of the focus on strengthening national institutions and systems.[18]

3. ACCOUNTABILITY TO REFUGEES, POWER & HUMANITARIAN BUREAUCRACIES

This broad context helps frame the setting within which humanitarian accountability emerges. Existing literature affirms that the structures surrounding humanitarian aid may lead to skewed accountabilities in favour of donors.[19] This is tied to shifts in aid modalities over time. Until the 1970s, most aid was given bilaterally, between governments. As new actors emerged in the humanitarian space, other geopolitical changes began to influence the way assistance was provided. Humanitarian assistance became positioned as a means of reducing armed conflict, and became more explicitly tied to foreign policy agendas of governments. Aid became more visible, increasing the impetus that governments demonstrate that they would intervene in humanitarian situations.[20] Hilhorst suggests that the focus on improving the quality of humanitarian action increased after the Rwandan genocide in 1994, triggering critiques of humanitarian action and principles.[21] Alongside these shifts, there were greater calls for governments to be accountable for their spending. By the 1990s, these drivers meant

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[16] Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, *Jordan Response Plan for the Syria Crisis 2016- 2018*, 2015, 9, available at: https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/JRP16_18_Document-final%2Bdraft.pdf (last visited 6 Apr. 2021).

[17] Culbertson, Oliker, Baruch, & Blum, *Rethinking Coordination of Services to Refugees in Urban Areas: Managing the Crisis in Jordan and Lebanon*, 15.

[18] Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, *Jordan Response Plan for the Syria Crisis 2016- 2018,* 9.

[19] See A. Ebrahim, "Accountability Myopia: Losing Sight of Organizational Learning", *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 34(1), 2005, 56–87; D. Hilhorst, "Being Good at Doing Good? Quality and Accountability of Humanitarian NGOs", *Disasters,* 26, 2002, 193–212; M. Edwards & D. Hulme, "Too Close for Comfort? The Impact of Official Aid on Nongovernmental Organizations", *World Development*, 24(6), 1996, 961–973.

[20] J. Macrae, S. Collinson, M. Buchanan-Smith, N. Reindorp, A. Schmidt, T. Mowjee, & A. Harmer, *Uncertain Power: The Changing Role of Official Donors in Humanitarian Action,* London, Overseas Development Institute, 2002, 11–12, available at: https://cdn.odi.org/media/documents/291.pdf (last visited 9 Apr. 2021).

[21] Hilhorst, "Being Good at Doing Good? Quality and Accountability of Humanitarian NGOs", 194.

that more became required of government donors; they needed to show their constituencies that they could not only provide funds quickly, but also have a strong field presence, and be able to coordinate activities swiftly in the face of humanitarian emergencies.[22] With these increased requirements on government donors came a greater focus on efficiency and value for money upon implementing agencies as well, with donors demanding evidence that interventions had impact.[23] This resulted in the streamlining and standardisation of reporting mechanisms, creating challenges for humanitarian agencies who now had to fit into the frameworks donors required.[24] This includes result-based management frameworks like the logframe, which have been critiqued for reinforcing the notion that programmes result in predictable, fixed results, while requiring that results always be quantified.[25] These tools were designed to enhance accountability and professionalise the industry, but have been said to instead cause "accountability myopia"[26] that prioritises "upwards" accountability.

Accountability within NGOs can be defined using Edwards & Hulme's definition: "the means by which individuals and organizations report to a recognized authority (or authorities) and are held responsible for their actions".[27] Edwards & Hulme observe that NGOs hold multiple accountabilities, including "upward" accountability to donors, trustees and governments and "downward" accountability to beneficiaries, partners, supporters and their own staff. Others expand on the upward-downward model to emphasise "sideways" accountability that NGOs owe to other aid providers.[28] Existing literature recognises that NGOs struggle to manage these competing priorities,[29] resulting in accountability to donors

[22] Macrae, Collinson, Buchanan-Smith, Reindorp, Schmidt, Mowjee, & Harmer, *Uncertain Power: The Changing Role of Official Donors in Humanitarian Action,* 11–12.

[23] Anderson, Brown, & Jean, *Time to Listen. Hearing People on the Receiving End of International Aid*, 45; D. McConville & C. Cordery, "Charity Performance Reporting, Regulatory Approaches and Standard-Setting", *Journal of Accounting and Public Policy*, 37(4), 2018, 300–314.

[24] Anderson, Brown, & Jean, *Time to Listen. Hearing People on the Receiving End of International Aid*, 80.

[25] R. Eyben, "Uncovering the Politics of 'Evidence' and 'Results'. A Framing Paper for Development Practitioners", Big Push Forward, 2013, 8–11, available at: http://bigpushforward.net/wp-content/uploads/2011/01/The-politics-of-evidence-11-April-20133.pdf (last visited 6 Apr. 2021).

[26] A. Ebrahim, "Accountability Myopia: Losing Sight of Organizational Learning", *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 34(1), 2005, 56–87.

[27] M. Edwards & D. Hulme, "Too Close for Comfort? The Impact of Official Aid on Nongovernmental Organizations", *World Development*, 24(6), 1996, 961–973, 967.

[28] D. Hilhorst, "Taking Accountability to the Next Level", in CHS Alliance (ed.) *On the Road to Istanbul. How Can the World Humanitarian Summit Make Humanitarian Response More Effective? Humanitarian Accountability Report*, Geneva, CHS Alliance, 2015, 104–112, 108, available at: https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/CHS-Alliance-HAR-2015.pdf (last visited 7 Apr. 2021)

[29] Edwards & Hulme, Too Close for Comfort? The Impact of Official Aid on Nongovernmental Organizations", 967; B. Ramalingam & M. Barnett, *The Humanitarian's Dilemma: Collective Action or Inaction in International Relief? Background Note*, 2010, 5–6, available at: https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-

being prioritised over accountability to "beneficiaries".[30] However, it is important to note that humanitarian actors have intentionally sought to improve accountability to communities through efforts including the Sphere project, Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action (ALNAP) and others.[31] In 2003, the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership (HAP) was created to prioritise "downward" accountability. HAP created tools for self-assessment of accountability, including the HAP Standard which emphasised seven principles of accountability. In 2014, HAP and others published the Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability (CHS), and in 2015 merged with another organisation to form the CHS Alliance.[32] These accountability initiatives have received increased attention amidst other developments within the humanitarian sector, including the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit where humanitarian actors committed to reform humanitarian aid through the "Grand Bargain" which included, among others, a focus on improving accountability to communities.[33]

Despite these initiatives to improve humanitarian accountability, scholars critique the humanitarian fixation on "technical and procedural" instead of "political and ethical" approaches to accountability,[34] with some arguing that this tendency is a result of NGOs being incentivised towards priorities geared towards ensuring their survival, through increased funding and visibility, instead of moral objectives.[35] Part of the reason for divided accountabilities within humanitarian agencies is the nature of humanitarian bureaucracies themselves. Bureaucracies are focused on efficiency and professionalism, while other aspects of a humanitarian response linked to the "humanity" – for example, ensuring people's dignity – may not be prioritised. Results become important because they are tied to the survival of the humanitarian actor. This may result in other principles slipping from focus: "the desire to

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assets/publications-opinion-files/5840.pdf (last visited 8 Apr. 2021); Chynoweth, "Rethinking Humanitarian Accountability : Implementation of Sexual and Reproductive Health Services in Two Complex Emergencies", 185.

[30] D. Kennedy, "The Inherently Contested Nature of Nongovernmental Accountability: The Case of HAP International", *Voluntas* 30, 2019. 1393–1405.

[31] P. Knox-Clarke & J. Mitchell, "Reflections on the Accountability Revolution", *Humanitarian Exchange,* 52, 1999, available at: https://odihpn.org/magazine/reflections-on-the-accountability-revolution/ (last visited 12 Apr. 2021).

[32] See Kennedy, The Inherently Contested Nature of Nongovernmental Accountability: The Case of HAP International".

[33] J. Lafrenière, C. Sweetman & T. Thylin, "Introduction: Gender, Humanitarian action and Crisis Response", Gender & Development, 27 2019, 187–201, 190.

[34] Aijazi, *Why Technocratic Understandings of Humanitarian Accountability Can Harm Local Communities,* 2.

[35] Ramalingam & Barnett, *The Humanitarian's Dilemma: Collective Action or Inaction in International Relief? Background Note,* 5–6.

measure places a premium on numbers - for instance, lives lost and saved, people fed, children inoculated - to the neglect of non-quantifiable goals such as witnessing, being present, conferring dignity, and demonstrating solidarity".[36] Indeed, Eyben likens the "categorizing, counting and objectifying" of agencies like the UK's Department for International Development as similar to "colonial bureaucracies" whose approaches "saw people as objectified subjects requiring intervention and treatment".[37] While there is value in generating data to ensure that interventions are meaningful, the danger becomes that data itself becomes the goal rather than the means to an end.

If people need to be counted to show that funding has been appropriately spent, and if humanitarian agencies face pressure to show "impact", it is perhaps inevitable that the interactions between "beneficiaries" and agencies become characterised by unequal power relationships. Power hierarchies within humanitarian aid have long been critiqued. Fassin argues that humanitarianism is based on "an unequal relationship between the one giving aid and the one being aided".[38] Refugees are subject to these external decision-making processes, meaning that their lives are often characterised by uncertainty; uncertainty about their future in the hosting state and uncertainty about decisions from the aid bureaucracy about their assistance.[39] In this way, the humanitarian bureaucracy itself may become an extension of humanitarian power.[40]

Efforts to improve "downward" accountability in humanitarian settings are thus situated within discussions about power, morality, responsiveness to crisis and demonstrating impact. Improving accountability is not necessarily a new concept for humanitarian actors, but has received more emphasis in recent years. The humanitarian sector, however, has responded with processes that tended to reinforce accountability to donors, rather than "beneficiaries".[41]

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[36] M. Barnett, *Empire of Humanity. A History of Humanitarianism,* Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 2011, 216.
[37] R. Eyben, "Uncovering the Politics of 'Evidence' and 'Results'. A Framing Paper for Development Practitioners", 19.
[38] D. Fassin, *Humanitarian Reason. A Moral History of the Present,* Berkeley, University of California Press, 2012, 193.
[39] C. Horst & K. Grabska, "Introduction: Flight and Exile - Uncertainty in the Context of Conflict-Induced Displacement", *Social Analysis*, 59(1), 2015, 1–18, 10.
[40] M. Agier, *Managing the Undesirables: Refugee Camps and Humanitarian Government,* Cambridge, Polity, 2011.
[41] D. Kennedy, "The Inherently Contested Nature of Nongovernmental Accountability: The Case of HAP International", *Voluntas* 30, 2019. 1393–1405.

4. METHODOLOGY

This article draws on anthropological research conducted in Jordan over a nine-month period from 2016 to 2017. This research sought to understand humanitarian narratives on gender norms among self-settled Syrian refugees living in Jordan. It explored mobility, social and family relations and gender roles. The research methods used were participatory photography, focus group discussions, life story interviews, semi-structured interviews and participant observation with Syrian women and men, as well as semi-structured interviews with humanitarian workers whose work focused on gender equality and women's empowerment issues.

This paper primarily draws on data from interviews with humanitarian workers and Syrian refugees. These included ten semi-structured interviews with international and local humanitarian workers who were NGO staff, UN agency staff and consultants. All were female and had worked or currently worked in Jordan. During interviews, these humanitarian practitioners drew not only on their experiences working in Jordan but also other settings. Twenty semi-structured interviews and life-story interviews with ten participants were also conducted with Syrian men and women. Refugees who participated in the research lived in Zarqa, Irbid, Jerash and Amman. These refugees were self-settled and lived in apartments or shared government housing. They were aged 18–60. Prior to the war in Syria, these refugees had lived in the governorates of Dar'a, Damascus and Homs in Syria.

The research used a feminist methodology, in order to recognise and seek to address power hierarchies within people's lived experiences as well as within the research process itself. Feminist research seeks to "to produce useful knowledge that will make a difference to women's lives".[42] It recognises that knowledge is subjective and challenges the notion that research might reflect a "neutral" perspective.[43] Instead of seeking to prove a hypothesis, feminist research centres on people's experiences, using their accounts to generate theory.[44]

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[42] G. Letherby, *Feminist Research in Theory and Practice*, Buckingham, Open University Press, 2003, 4.
[43] U. Narayan, "The Project of Feminist Epistemology: Perspectives from a Non-Western Feminist", in *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader: Intellectual and Political Controversies*, S. Harding (ed.), New York, Routledge, 2004, 213–224, 218.
[44] Letherby, *Feminist Research in Theory and Practice,* 67.

Feminist researchers urge the importance of incorporating intersectional analysis, in order to recognise how different power hierarchies and identities such as gender, race, age and economic status may intersect to shape the lives of individuals.[45] Feminist research methods may include participatory methods that seek to reduce the power imbalances within research processes,[46] while acknowledging that using participatory methods is not a panacea for addressing the power hierarchies inherent in all research.[47]

The research began with participatory photography workshops. These workshops included focus group discussions over a five/six-week period. During these sessions, participants discussed their daily experiences in Jordan, compared to Syria, taking photographs to capture their experiences. Based on relationships that were built with Syrian women and men during workshops, some participants were then invited to participate in either semi-structured interviews or life story interviews which were conducted across multiple sessions. Participant observation was also carried out in multiple settings, such as people's homes, local humanitarian agencies, cafés and markets. The research was conducted with support from two research assistants, who assisted with translation during workshops and interviews, as well as transcribing the exact words of participants into English.

While the focus of the main research project was not accountability specifically, issues related to accountability arose during the course of the research. Humanitarian workers directly spoke about accountability when describing their relationships with refugee communities and donors. Syrian women and men also discussed the role of NGOs in providing aid during interviews and FGDs, including their experiences navigating aid bureaucracies. The section that follows articulates key themes that emerged related to humanitarian accountability.

5. FINDINGS

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[45] K. Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color", *Stanford Law Review*, 43(6), 1991, 1241–1299.
[46] P. Liamputtong, *Researching the Vulnerable. A Guide to Sensitive Research Methods*, London, SAGE Publications, 2007, 13.
[47] G. Doná, "The Microphysics of Participation in Refugee Research", *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 20(2), 2007, 210–229, 212.

In this section, the main themes on humanitarian accountability are outlined, with specific examples mostly focusing on gender equality. The findings are structured according to six main themes. Firstly, the challenges in ensuring accountability in humanitarian action on gender equality are outlined. The second theme focuses on gaps in accountability that are evidenced from decision-making of humanitarian actors. The third theme draws attention to the politics of data. The fourth theme explores questions of humanitarian knowledge and how this shapes gender-related interventions. The fifth theme outlines gaps in humanitarian assistance as experienced by refugees. Lastly, the sixth theme discusses how accountability for social transformation and change may be shifting from humanitarian actors to refugees themselves.

5.1.   Gender within humanitarian action

Within both international humanitarian and development agencies, gender is referenced both as a "cross-cutting theme" to be mainstreamed within sectoral programs, as well as an issue in its own right. Historically, narratives, humanitarian responses and research on refugees reflected a "male paradigm".[48] Women and their needs were largely "invisible" in the humanitarian response.[49] Although humanitarian and development agencies sought to remedy this by focusing on women, through what is referred to as the "Women in Development" approach, it became clear to practitioners and activists that merely adding women into humanitarian activities was insufficient and failed to recognise the power hierarchies structuring their lives. The focus for programming shifted to the "Gender and Development" approach and the concept of "gender mainstreaming", as programs sought to (at least in theory) address the structural dynamics of unequal power.[50] As part of this humanitarian focus on gender, this meant that humanitarian actors were now required to explain how their programs would address underlying gender issues, or how their interventions would result in gender equality and women's empowerment.

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[48] D. Indra, "Gender: A Key Dimension of the Refugee Experience", *Refuge*, 6(3), 1987, 3–4, 3.

[49] B. Harrell-Bond, *Imposing Aid. Emergency Assistance to Refugees*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1986, 267.

[50] E. Rathgeber, "WID, WAD, GAD: Trends in Research and Practice", *The Journal of Developing Areas*, 24 1990, 489–502, 492–493.

While it can certainly be argued that any focus on gender is better than no focus at all, there remains ongoing debate on the extent to which gender inequalities are meaningfully addressed by humanitarian actors. Humanitarian actors face their own challenges in institutionalising gender equality in their policies and procedures, leaving gender inequality within their own organisational cultures unaddressed: "the elephant in the room".[51] Scholars have also drawn attention to how efforts to address gender inequality within programmes have been technicalised through checklists or referring any issues to an "expert".[52] As such, gender equality is treated "as a technical, administrative issue rather than an issue of power and politics".[53] "Technocratic" approaches over-emphasise the importance of technical standards, resulting in "mechanistic" solutions to problems like GBV,[54] making political issues appear as technical issues.[55]

A key example of how work on gender equality has become reduced to a technical tool is the Inter-agency Standing Committee's "Gender Marker" developed and maintained by the GenCap team. The Gender Marker is a mandatory self-assessment tool designed to improve accountability for considering gender in humanitarian programmes. As a subjective process, the Gender Marker has been criticised for resulting in agencies over-marking themselves with no consequences or accountability.[56] In an interview, the Gender Marker was described by one humanitarian practitioner as "having no teeth".[57] She explained that originally, a Gender Advisor would be responsible for assessing the quality of integration of gender within programming. When the tool was introduced, the responsibility for marking quality then

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[51] J. Sandler & A. Rao, "The Elephant in the Room and the Dragons at the Gate: Strategising for Gender Equality in the 21st Century", *Gender and Development*, 20(3), 2012, 547–562.

[52] U. Kothari, "Authority and Expertise: The Professionalisation of International Development and the Ordering of Dissent", *Antipode*, 37(3), 2005, 425–446, 440; D. Mosse, "The Anthropology of Expertise and Professionals in International Development", in *Adventures in Aidland. The Anthropology of Professionals in International Development*, D. Mosse (ed.), New York & Oxford, Berghahn Books, 2011, 1–31; R. Eyben, "Subversively Accommodating: Feminist Bureaucrats and Gender Mainstreaming", *IDS Bulletin*, 41(2), 2010, 54–61, 60; A. Cornwall & A.M. Rivas, "From 'Gender Equality and 'Women's Empowerment' to Global Justice: Reclaiming a Transformative Agenda for Gender and Development", *Third World Quarterly*, 36(2), 2015, 396–415, 400.

[53] E. Olivius, "Constructing Humanitarian Selves and Refugee Others", *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 18(2), 2016) 270–290, 280.

[54] COFEM, "Finding the Balance between Scientific and Social Change Goals, Approaches and Methods", *Feminist Perspectives on Addressing Violence Against Women and Girls Series*, 2017, 2–4, available at: https://cofemsocialchange.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Paper-3-Finding-the-balance-between-scientific-and-social-change-goals-approaches-and-methods.pdf (last visited 6 Apr. 2021).

[55] R. Eyben, "Subversively Accommodating: Feminist Bureaucrats and Gender Mainstreaming", 55.

[56] S. Foran, A. Swaine, & K. Burns, "Improving the Effectiveness of Humanitarian Action: Progress in Implementing the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Gender Marker", *Gender & Development*, 20(2), 2012, 233–247, 244.

[57] Interview with humanitarian worker, May 2017.

shifted to organisations themselves, who were required to give themselves a score for how they planned to consider gender issues when applying for funding. She expressed her frustration at seeing projects in Jordan which were "completely gender blind" with "no gender component" being funded based on the scores the organisations gave themselves. Ironically, the Gender Marker represents what many felt to be an important step in requiring organisations to prioritise gender, despite the fact there were no consequences for over-marking yourself or giving yourself a "zero". She added, "That's our main product, I don't believe in it". In creating a formal accountability mechanism for integrating gender, the underlying rationale for addressing gender inequalities was undermined. This example of the Gender Marker demonstrates how creating a bureaucratic process reduces work on gender to a technical or procedural issue.[58]

5.2.   Humanitarian decision-making

Accountability may also be undermined by humanitarian decision-making, which is shaped by the way the humanitarian system operates. During interviews, a few humanitarian practitioners discussed how they are subject to the interests and demands of donors. One practitioner said:

> All the organisations who receive funding from the donors, they have to apply the donor's rules, to comply with the donor's requests, the way the donors if they are interested in gender, [we say], "Ok we will do gender issues…"[59]

Within the rapidly-changing pace of a humanitarian crisis, keeping up with what is "trending" was discussed by another practitioner as particularly challenging.[60] Donors may wield power to determine such trends because they control the funds. Another practitioner discussed the example of how funding was prioritised for Za'atari Camp despite the majority of Syrian refugees in Jordan living outside camps. She felt this meant funds were not allocated where

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[58] See Cornwall & Rivas, "From 'Gender Equality and 'Women's Empowerment' to Global Justice: Reclaiming a Transformative Agenda for Gender and Development"; Eyben, "Subversively Accommodating: Feminist Bureaucrats and Gender Mainstreaming.
[59] Interview with humanitarian worker, January 2017.
[60] Interview with humanitarian worker, May 2017.

they were most needed – to the unregistered or urban refugees who were not living in camps.[61] This critique is also present in literature; existing evaluations have censured donors for being "keener to be in the limelight in Zaatari, even if they are superfluous, rather than to be essential but invisible in the open settings".[62] This particular example highlights how donors themselves are driven by pressures to be visible. The focus on Za'atari Camp has been heightened by high profile visits to the camp by celebrities, world leaders and donors, while many needs in urban areas are unaddressed.[63]

In discussing the challenges they face in responding to donor demands, a few practitioners mentioned the fact that they are unable to change their programmes from the approved project proposal submitted to the donor, even if they feel a programmatic intervention is not working. They emphasised both the pressures they feel from donors as well as their own lack of proactiveness in challenging donor expectations:

> [W]e see that certain things are not working, or certain things are not delivering, but we never go back to the donor to make these adjustments to the assumptions that we have made. We keep going with this.[64]

> I feel that we don't have enough space as an organisation who received funds from the donors to put our rules, to put our conditions, to say, "Look, we don't want to work on this anymore, we won't work on this anymore."[65]

These accounts illustrate that humanitarian actors perceive that there is inflexibility to change interventions to respond to needs identified by refugees because they have been approved by donors. This perception which may result in "upward" accountability being preferred over "downward" accountability. However, the apparent inflexibility of donors may also be used as an excuse for inaction.[66] It may be that donors are open to discuss changes, but that

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[61] Interview with humanitarian worker, August 2017.
[62] S. Healy & S. Tiller, *A Review of the Humanitarian Response to the Syrian Refugee Crisis in Jordan, 2012-13,* Medicins Sans Frontieres, 2013, 10, available at:
https://www.msf.org/sites/msf.org/files/jordan_case_study_final_external.pdf (last visited 5 Apr. 2011).
[63] Healy & Tiller, *A Review of the Humanitarian Response to the Syrian Refugee Crisis in Jordan, 2012-13*, 21.
[64] Interview with humanitarian worker, February 2017.
[65] Interview with humanitarian worker, January 2017.
[66] N. Bondokji, "The Expectations Gap in Humanitarian Operations: Field Perspectives from Jordan", *Asian Journal of Peacebuilding,* 4(1), 2016, 1-28, 23.

humanitarian practitioners themselves feel uncomfortable to broach these issues. This may be due to the power imbalances between humanitarian agencies and donors,[67] fear of future funding being threatened, or even reticence to acknowledge that assumptions humanitarian actors have relied on have not been accurate. This last factor about the assumptions underlying humanitarian programming is explored in more depth in the section below.

5.3.   The politics of data

The findings highlight that within humanitarian programmes focused on promoting gender equality, there are sometimes accountability gaps in how data is obtained and how knowledge is produced. These gaps in accountability may be linked to a fixation on gathering certain kinds of data in order to make gender issues more visible. The international agency, CARE, comments on the importance of measuring women's empowerment with these compelling words:

> Saying women and girls are the best investment in the world has a louder ring of truth when you're holding the bottom-line analysis to prove it. Imagine how many more people will buy into this idea — with their hearts, their time and their support — when we have the answers to these questions.[68]

When it comes to GBV, there appears to be an even stronger imperative to make quantitative declarations. This is notwithstanding the Inter-Agency Standing Committee guidelines on GBV in humanitarian settings, which specifically state: "Waiting for or seeking population-based data on the true magnitude of GBV should not be a priority in an emergency due to safety and ethical challenges in collecting such data".[69] This caution on GBV data, which also appeared in the 2005 edition of the guidelines, also states that GBV is always occurring and does not need to be proven to justify intervention. Despite this, there is pressure to

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[67] See Agier, *Managing the Undesirables: Refugee Camps and Humanitarian Government.*
[68] CARE, *Reaching New Heights: The Case for Measuring Women's Empowerment*, 2012, 6, available at: https://insights.careinternational.org.uk/media/k2/attachments/2008_CARE_IWD_report_CI_version_2012.pdf (last visited 4 Apr. 2021).
[69] Inter-Agency Standing Committee, *Guidelines for Integrating Gender-Based Violence Interventions in Humanitarian Action*, 2015, 2, available at: https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/gender-and-humanitarian-action/news-public/guidelines-integrating-gender-based-violence (last visited 8 Apr. 2021).

demonstrate the prevalence of GBV in humanitarian settings, creating space for inaccuracy and misinterpretations. One guidance document on GBV notes: "GBV data is one of the most sensitive types of data collected in humanitarian contexts, and it is notorious for being misused, misunderstood, and misrepresented".[70] A humanitarian practitioner commented on this capacity for data to be misrepresented, saying, "I think we have become good at manipulating data".[71] She gave the example of how agencies make problems seem bigger than they are by using percentages instead of numbers, explaining, "We can say 60% of women have reported that they have been raped, but in reality 60% out of how many women... but we don't say that... We want to use the percentage...". Indeed in the early years of the Syria Crisis, humanitarian actors sought to quantify the extent of GBV, resulting in problematic practices, such as reports with a sample size of twenty people using percentages to describe GBV data[72] and questions about whether GBV was occurring being asked in ways that threatened the confidentiality of survivors.[73] Even if actual quantification was not possible, these initial reports used the language of quantification, for example to refer to "rampant" and "endemic" GBV).[74] Such pressure to quantify GBV may at times also be driven by donors themselves, who want to justify their investment in GBV prevention and response activities.

For one humanitarian worker, the pressure on the programme to meet specific numerical targets had significant consequences, resulting in data being falsified: "[M]y staff were actually lying to me in terms of meeting the numbers. They weren't actually doing the work".[75] While she linked this to the motivations of staff, which she felt were less about "doing good" and more about getting a salary, it is worth noting that the pressure to achieve

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[70] K. Robinette, *Handling GBVIMS Data Sharing Requests from External Actors*, 2020, 3, available at: https://www.sddirect.org.uk/media/1950/20200511-handling-gbvims-data-sharing-requests-from-external-actors.pdf (last visited 15 Feb. 2021).

[71] Interview with humanitarian worker, February 2017.

[72] International Rescue Committee, *Syrian Women & Girls: Fleeing Death, Facing Ongoing Threats and Humiliation. A Gender-Based Violence Rapid Assessment*, 2012, 6–7, available at: https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/36572 (last visited 6 Apr. 2021).

[73] UN Women Iraq, *"We Just Keep Silent". Gender-Based Violence amongst Syrian Refugees in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq*, 2014, 6, available at: https://uniraq.org/images/documents/We%20Just%20Keep%20Silent%20final%20English.pdf (last visited 10 Feb. 2021).

[74] Refugees International, *Syrian Women and Girls: No Safe Refuge. Field Report*, 2012, Available at: http://www.refworld.org/docid/50a9e8ad2.html (last visited 20 Feb. 2021).

[75] Interview with humanitarian worker, February 2017.

certain numerical targets is not necessarily conducive to accountability and programme quality.

The challenges in meeting numerical targets becomes all the more difficult when the targets themselves are determined after the fact. One humanitarian practitioner talked about her experience having to wrangle indicators for an existing programme to match what donors required. She gave the example of a UN agency who were trying to standardise their indicators across multiple contexts. The indicators mandated by the UN agency were so different to what was happening in the programme, that it ended up being about "figuring out how to bullshit our way through".[76] She said that they couldn't redesign the programme, so had to twist data and language to make it fit to what the donors wanted: "At the very end, the indicator had nothing to do with our programming".

In these examples, the focus on certain kinds of data resulted in misrepresentations about the extent of GBV and the realities of GBV programmes, reinforcing the notion that what matters is accountability to deliver specific, pre-determined data and outcomes to donors. The "downward" accountability to refugees to reflect their lives and programmes accurately may thus shift from focus in the fixation on delivering specific results.[77]

5.4.   Whose knowledge shapes interventions?

The pressure to deliver results may short-circuit efforts to understand issues facing forcibly displaced communities. A few humanitarian practitioners discussed how humanitarian aid has changed from "really going and talking to people"[78] towards top-down approaches to understanding needs.[79] One humanitarian practitioner reflected:

> [W]e've made this super top heavy humanitarian system where there's like a lot of directors coming from headquarters and you know, a lot of experts kind of developing

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[76] Interview with humanitarian worker, March 2017.
[77] Eyben, "Uncovering the Politics of 'Evidence' and 'Results'. A Framing Paper for Development Practitioners"
[78] Interview with humanitarian worker, February 2017.
[79] Interview with humanitarian worker, January 2017; Interview with humanitarian worker, May 2017.

their silo and issuing reports down to the ground. And if people were more closely tied to being right there in the field, you know, and going and doing that food distribution, or doing the dignity kit distribution, or sitting in the car for a long distance or sitting in the camps where it's hot and there's no water… You know, it would help them keep a better, kind of, sense of what it means like to live in those situations and be more tied to the ground.[80]

Another humanitarian practitioner discussed the term "monitoring and evaluation" which is sometimes expanded to "monitoring, evaluation, accountability, and learning", reflecting on the fact that within this terminology, "accountability" is missing".[81] She added, "We don't talk to the women, we don't ask them. We don't follow up, we don't see what were really the impact of it". She also shared her personal experiences investing in getting to know communities:

[R]ecently we had donors who came and we took them to one of the safe houses. And the donor approached me at the end and she says, "I was really surprised that they actually know you by name." No, because I invest time, I come here, I get to know them. I know their stories.

She explained that through spending time with communities, "the response becomes richer, legitimate, impactful, meaningful because it's rooted to something that is real". She emphasised the importance of learning and listening in informing action: "[Y]ou were there, you spoke to them about it, you invested the time. You really understood that this indeed is a problem".

While this may be viewed as time-consuming work which clashes with the need to respond swiftly in a humanitarian crisis, the danger of failing to listen to forcibly displaced communities is that the needs of communities may become the last focus. Some humanitarian workers might even feel refugees are an obstacle to humanitarian interventions. One humanitarian practitioner shared this example:

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[80] Interview with humanitarian worker, May 2017.
[81] Interview with humanitarian worker, February 2017.

Someone said once to me, "Humanitarian aid would be so easy if all the beneficiaries would just get out of the way". They were giving a spiel, they said it as a spoof, just to say, you're planning and planning and trying to get your programme to go well and do all this stuff and then people come with you know, complaints or they want this or they want that. I think sometimes it's people's human nature to feel like, I already did this and now you're asking for that? You know?[82]

While it may be that the comment was made partly in jest, it reflects a particular narrative: that humanitarian actors know what to do and how to do it. Within this sort of mindset, humanitarian accountability becomes framed in terms of what humanitarian actors themselves know about "what works" and less about what may be important to refugees. There is no room for humanitarian actors to admit mistakes or acknowledge failures. This may be because humanitarian actors believe they are best-able to identify the needs facing refugees and the solutions to address these needs.[83] It may also be that admitting lack of knowledge might risk future funding opportunities. One humanitarian practitioner discussed her frustrations in having to display confidence in the knowledge she had about GBV issues: "I constantly had to position all the things we knew, you had to position it like we knew everything and everything would be fine".[84] Her ability to come up with solutions to GBV were linked to the expectation that results be achieved. She added, "Part of me wanted to say, 'You know what, I really don't know how we get armed men to stop raping women'… As the GBV person, you had to put together this plan, 'We will stop GBV in [country name]' and say it with confidence".

The assumption that gender inequalities can easily be resolved may be linked to the simplistic analysis that sometimes informs programmatic interventions. For example, the topic of "gender roles" among forcibly displaced communities has often been of interest for humanitarian actors. While some agencies like Oxfam & ABAAD acknowledge that shifts in roles are complex,[85] others like CARE have made stronger claims about gender roles being

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[82] Interview with humanitarian worker, March 2017.
[83] See Bondokji, "The Expectations Gap in Humanitarian Operations: Field Perspectives from Jordan".
[84] Interview with humanitarian worker, March 2017.
[85] Oxfam & ABAAD, *Shifting Sands. Changing Gender Roles among Refugees in Lebanon, Oxfam International*, 2013, available at: http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/shifting-sands-changing-gender-roles-among-refugees-in-lebanon-300408 (last visited 8 Apr. 2021).

"reversed" during forced displacement,[86] often based on anecdotal reports and rapid assessments rather than thorough analysis. It is assumed by agencies that prior to displacement Syrian men were the "sole providers" and women did not work[87] – accounts which multiple women in my research contradicted in describing their own and their families' lives in Syria.[88] Such humanitarian agency narratives fail to recognise the intersectional power hierarchies and identities that may shape people's experiences, including socio-economic status, education level, marital status and, particularly relevant for understanding life in Syria, geographical location. Instead, generalised statements dominate NGO reports.

For example, humanitarian actors not only state that Syrian families are torn apart by the war - which may well be the case - but have then gone further to make generalisations about Syrian women being forced to live alone and manage their households for the first time.[89] While the phenomena of "female-headed households" may be relevant to other forcibly displaced communities in sub-Saharan Africa, this narrative does not align with a historical understanding of shifts within Syrian families before the war, with an understanding of the middle-income context of Syria, or with Syrian refugees' own lived experiences. From the 1970s in particular, Syrians began seeking work in the Gulf.[90] One young Syrian woman explained how, one by one, her older brothers left Syria to work in Saudi Arabia, because of better economic opportunities.[91] Another older woman explained how her husband worked in Saudi Arabia for several years, returning only in the summer, while she remained in Syria with her young children.[92] An older man said he was away during most of his children's

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[86] B. Buecher & J.R. Aniyamuzaala, *Women, Work and War: Syrian Women and the Struggle to Survive Five Years of Conflict*, CARE, 2016, 4, available at: https://insights.careinternational.org.uk/publications/women-work-war-syrian-women-and-the-struggle-to-survive-five-years-of-conflict (last visited 2 Feb. 2021).

[87] Centre for Transnational Development and Collaboration, *Syrian Refugees in Turkey: Gender Analysis,* 2015, 13, available at: https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/54509 (last visited 20 Feb. 2021).

[88] Key examples include: Semi-structured interview with Syrian woman, November 2016; Semi-structured interview with Syrian woman, January 2017; Life story interviews with Syrian woman, November 2016 – May 2017; Life story interviews with Syrian woman, December 2016 – February 2017; Life story interviews with Syrian woman, January 2017 – February 2017.

[89] UNHCR, *Woman Alone. The Fight for Survival by Syria's Refugee Women*, 2014, available at: http://womanalone.unhcr.org/mobile/#_ga=1.212173140.1924729538.1444225257 (last visited 2 Feb. 2021); CARE, *On Her Own: How Women Forced to Flee from Syria Are Shouldering Increased Responsibility as They Struggle to Survive*, 2016, available at: http://www.care-international.org/files/files/CARE_On-Her-Own_refugee-media-report_Sept-2016.pdf (last visited 3 Feb. 2021).

[90] H. Batatu, *Syria's Peasantry, the Descendants of Its Lesser Rural Notables, and Their Politics*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1999, 9.

[91] Life story interviews with Syrian woman, December 2016 – January 2017.

[92] Life story interviews with Syrian woman, November 2016 – February 2017.

childhood and early adulthood, visiting only during the summer.[93] Displacement is therefore not necessarily the first time that women have been heads of households. Many Syrian women shared that they were responsible for "men's" tasks in Syria when their husbands or fathers were absent.[94] Further, even having absent male family members did not mean that women were alone; they had support from extended family networks, which are an important fixture in Syrian society.[95] Many women discussed how they had support from extended family members in caring for their children and managing households, both in Syria as well as after coming to Jordan.[96]

In contrast, humanitarian narratives emphasise women's vulnerability, especially the challenges faced by "female-headed households", who are assumed vulnerable by default. These narratives, often based on assumptions about refugees' lives, have direct impacts for interventions. They result in certain groups being prioritised over others in receiving aid, or in paternalistic attitudes towards certain women. Female-headed households, for example, are assumed to be automatically disadvantaged, without recognition of women's autonomy, decision-making and existing social capital. These women are assumed to experience not just gaps in economic security, but also low awareness of how to care for their children, how to protect themselves and what their rights are. This kind of narrative reaffirms the role of humanitarian actors in "raising awareness", justifying future funding. The problematic assumptions underlying these conclusions are not necessarily questioned or interrogated further, instead it is assumed that humanitarian actors know what they need to know in order to respond.

In these examples, humanitarian practitioners emphasised the need to spend time with refugees to understand their needs. They also identified challenges to being able to admit mistakes within a sector where humanitarian actors are expected to know "what works". Examples from humanitarian agency reports highlight that even within the complex space of

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[93] Life story interviews with Syrian man, November 2016 – February 2017.
[94] Key examples include: Semi-structured interview with Syrian woman, December 2016; Semi-structured interview with Syrian woman, February 2017; Life story interviews with Syrian woman, December 2016 – February 2017; Life story interviews with Syrian woman, November 2016 – February 2017; Life story interviews with Syrian woman, November 2016 – May 2017.
[95] A. Rugh, *Within the Circle. Parents and Children in an Arab Village,* New York, Columbia University Press, 1997, 215.
[96] Key examples include: Semi-structured interview with Syrian woman, January 2017; Semi-structured interview with Syrian woman, April 2017; Life story interviews with Syrian woman, November 2016 – May 2017; Life story interviews with Syrian woman, January 2017 – February 2017.

understanding gender norms and relations, humanitarian actors might make assumptions about refugee needs and experience. As others have highlighted, assumptions about the needs of refugees results in gaps in "downward" accountability and simplistic depictions of their lives.[97]

5.5.   Gaps in assistance: accounts from refugees

The notion that humanitarian actors have created systems and processes to manage a humanitarian crisis and that this tried-and-true approach will generate impact, may have particular consequences for the lives of forcibly displaced communities. During interviews and FGDs with Syrian women and men, refugees shared examples of where they and others had fallen through the cracks of bureaucratic humanitarian processes.[98] The most common issue raised by refugees was lack of follow-through from humanitarian actors about access to cash assistance and decisions on resettlement claims. Refugees appeared stoic about the fact that at times, their household may not be prioritised because the needs of others might be greater. However, many refugees expressed frustration at the lack of communication on the status of humanitarian decision-making processes, similar to what others have found in Jordan.[99]

One older woman, who lives with her adult children and their families in Jordan said they do not receive assistance from humanitarian actors. She expressed confusion at how decisions are made about who receives assistance and who does not: "But most of the people they receive and other people I don't know why maybe they don't have much luck and don't receive anything. I don't know!"[100] One young Syrian woman who lives with her toddler and husband mentioned that while some people receive cash assistance, their family does not receive anything from UNHCR.[101] Her account raised the fact that there are many humanitarian actors and it can be difficult for refugees to understand humanitarian processes,

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[97] See Bondokji, "The Expectations Gap in Humanitarian Operations: Field Perspectives from Jordan".
[98] Key examples include: Semi-structured interview with Syrian woman, November 2016; Life story interview with Syrian man, November 2016 - January 2017; Life story interview with Syrian woman, April 2017 - May 2017; Life story interviews with Syrian woman, November 2016 – February 2017.
[99] Bondokji, "The Expectations Gap in Humanitarian Operations: Field Perspectives from Jordan", 16.
[100] Semi-structured interview with Syrian woman, April 2017.
[101] Semi-structured interview with Syrian woman, November 2016.

let alone who exactly is supporting them. She had been visited to deem eligibility for cash assistance, but was unsure who exactly had come to her home: "They told me we are from Save the Children, we follow the World Food [WFP], to UNHCR, to World Food, I don't know...". She said she had called UNHCR multiple times after the visit to find out about whether a decision had been made about the cash assistance: "I called a lot, and I asked, but each time they tell me, 'There is no result, you need to wait'… I called UNHCR a lot, each month I call, but no one, they do not answer me, every month I call". After some months, during one of her calls, someone from UNHCR told her they had never visited and they didn't know who had come to ask questions about her family's eligibility for cash assistance.

These examples illustrate that the sheer number of humanitarian actors involved in a response can create confusion for refugees, who are not always told what processes are or why certain decisions are made – let alone which organisation is communicating with them. While actors like the CHS Alliance continue to emphasise the importance of communication as part of improving accountability to communities, communication remains a significant issue.[102] In the absence of information, refugees may come to their own conclusions about how humanitarian assistance is distributed. One young woman said, "When we first came to Jordan, we didn't immediately register with UNHCR because my father thought this help goes only to poor people, people who needed it – not us".[103] An older woman felt that receiving assistance is based on who you know: "If you worked in an association and you were my friend, you will call me when help arrives. If you don't know anyone then...". Her daughter added, "[Y]ou need to have connections".[104] In interviews, Syrian refugees used the term *"wasta"* to refer to the personal connections that enabled them to obtain passports, cross the border or obtain opportunities. This Arabic term is used to refer to nepotism or favouritism. One young woman used the term "*wasta"* to explain how assistance itself can be a form of *wasta:* "Food coupons are *wasta* because God wanted to send food to use".[104]

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[102] CHS Alliance, *Humanitarian Accountability Report. Are We Making Aid Work Better for People?*, Geneva, 2020, 40, available at: https://d1h79zlghft2zs.cloudfront.net/uploads/2020/10/01450-CHS-2020-HAR-Report-FA2-WEB2.pdf (last visited 12 Apr. 2021).
[103] Life story interview with Syrian woman, December 2016.
[104] Joint interview with three Syrian women, January 2017.
[104] Semi-structured interview with Syrian woman, December 2016.

In these examples, the humanitarian bureaucracy itself became an obstacle to humanitarian actors demonstrating accountability towards refugees.[105] Lack of transparency and communication led to refugees being uncertain of their status and entitlements. In these accounts, the power imbalances between humanitarian agencies and refugees[106] become more vivid; refugees are subject to decisions made by others and are left to come to their own conclusions about how humanitarian aid is allocated.

5.6. Shifting responsibilities? From humanitarian actors to refugees

The earlier sections of this paper explored the challenges and obstacles to humanitarian accountability. In this last section, refugee and humanitarian worker accounts outline how responsibility to respond to humanitarian need may shift from humanitarian actors towards refugees themselves.

During interviews, a few refugees shared their own experiences in addressing humanitarian needs because they felt humanitarian actors were not responding to these issues. One young man explained that in the area where he lives there were two community-based organisations that had not distributed anything to Syrians for two years.[107] The significant needs of Syrians living in that community resulted in his involvement in creating their own means of raising funds and distributing aid to Syrians. Their group would take donors from the Gulf to visit Syrian families, urging them to provide funds for food and basic necessities. In a similar example, an older Syrian man explained how he used his connections in the Gulf to raise money for Syrians who couldn't pay their medical bills.[108] He acted as a go-between, moving funds between donors and Syrians. In these two examples, refugees felt they had specific knowledge about important gaps in humanitarian assistance and themselves mobilised to address these issues. In a slightly different example, for an older Syrian woman who lives with her adult son in Jordan, paying rent was a significant problem due to her son's poor health.[109] She was not eligible for cash assistance because living with her working-age son

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[105] See Bondokji, "The Expectations Gap in Humanitarian Operations: Field Perspectives from Jordan", 16.
[106] Fassin, *Humanitarian Reason. A Moral History of the Present,* 193.
[107] Life story interview with Syrian man, November 2016.
[108] Life story interviews with Syrian man, November 2016 – February 2017.
[109] Life story interviews with Syrian woman, November 2016 – February 2017

was deemed to not make her "vulnerable" enough. The response to her humanitarian need was less formalised: her friends in Jordan (who extended beyond Syrians alone, to Jordanians and Palestinians) collected the funds to pay for her rent when she was unable to meet this expense. In each of these examples, individual actors sought to meet needs which they felt were unmet by existing humanitarian actors. They used their own knowledge and networks to address problems that were not being addressed by other humanitarian actors. In these examples, it may also be that being forcibly displaced caused people to feel they had to become more self-reliant in order to survive or help others survive in a new context. For example, one young Syrian woman explained her desire to work like this: "To be in a foreign country teaches you to depend on yourself. If you wait, no one will help you. Do it yourself and don't wait for someone else".[110]

The example of gender narratives among humanitarian actors perhaps more clearly demonstrates how responsibility for responding to need may shift from humanitarian actors to refugees. One humanitarian practitioner outlined the challenges she faced in changing direction based on donor interest, particularly on the issue of work focused on gender and work focused on girls:

> [T[he way the donors if they are interested in gender, [we say], "Ok we will do gender issues". If they are interested now in girls, [we say], "We'll work with girls". So yes, I think because they are giving the money they can control, sometimes, the scope of our work.[111]

The need to pivot to respond to new donor agendas is not unusual or unique to work on gender equality. Cornwall and Brock discuss the way "buzzwords" emerge in development and humanitarian work. As certain issues gain traction, organisations are expected to respond to these trends.[112] The example of working with girls mentioned above demonstrates broader neoliberal trends that at times instrumentalise girls in the advancement of gender equality,

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[110] Life story interview with Syrian woman, January 2017.
[111] Interview with humanitarian worker, January 2017.
[112] A. Cornwall & K. Brock, "What Do Buzzwords Do for Development Policy? A Critical Look at 'Participation', 'Empowerment' and 'Poverty Reduction'", *Third World Quarterly*, 26(7), 2005, 1043–1060.

positioning girls as the solution to poverty.[113] The popular "Girl Effect" video,[114] viewed over 1.4 million times on YouTube, declares girls to be the "unexpected solution" to poverty, AIDs, hunger and war. The message of this video is: "Invest in a girl and she will do the rest". Critiques of empowerment narratives draw attention to the neoliberal underpinnings of "empowering women and girls"; such empowerment is "smart economics"[115] that lifts families out of difficult situations.[116] In the example above, a donor's interest in programming focused on girls can result in humanitarian actors experiencing pressure to demonstrate alignment with those interests. Instead of need necessarily determining a humanitarian response, a donor's agenda may dominate programmatic decision-making.

In the Jordan context, neoliberal narratives focus not only on girls but on women more broadly. These discourses feature most strongly in the focus on women's work that emerged alongside and after the Jordan Compact. Relying on another common assumption, that Syrian women did not work prior to the war and that forced displacement represents the first opportunity to work outside the home, reversing gender roles,[117] narratives about Syrian women's work have emphasised their ability to produce income for their families. Women's work is presented as necessary for self-reliance.[118] Shifting from earlier visual depictions of Syrian women and children being vulnerable and subject to GBV, recent reports feature Syrian women being productive, sewing, working together with other women and using mobile-phone technology to obtain new forms of work, which results in empowerment and resilience.[119]

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[113] S. Calkin, "Post-Feminist Spectatorship and the Girl Effect: 'Go Ahead, Really Imagine Her'", *Third World Quarterly*, 36(4), 2015, 654–669; S. Chant, "Women, Girls and World Poverty: Empowerment, Equality or Essentialism?", *International Development Planning Review*, 38(1), 2016, 1–24; H. Switzer, "(Post)Feminist Development Fables: The Girl Effect and the Production of Sexual Subjects", *Feminist Theory*, 14(3), 2013, 345–360; J. Hickel, "'The "Girl Effect': Liberalism, Empowerment and the Contradictions of Development", *Third World Quarterly*, 35(8), 2014, 1355–1373.

[114] Girl Effect, "The Girl Effect", 2008, available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WIvmE4_KMNw (last visited 20 Feb. 2021).

[115] A. Cornwall, "Taking off International Development's Straightjacket of Gender", *Brown Journal of World Affairs*, 21(1), 2014, 127–139, 131.

[116] Cornwall & Rivas, "From 'Gender Equality and 'Women's Empowerment' to Global Justice: Reclaiming a Transformative Agenda for Gender and Development", 400; A.Cornwall, "Introduction: Masculinities under Neoliberalism", in *Masculinities under Neoliberalism*, A. Cornwall, F. Karioris, & N. Lindisfarne (eds.), London, Zed Books, 2016, 10.

[117] Buecher & Aniyamuzaala, *Women, Work and War: Syrian Women and the Struggle to Survive Five Years of Conflict*.

[118] S. Almasri, *Tailor Made. How Syrian Refugee Women Are Finding Their Own Way to Join the Jordanian Economy*, 2018.

[119] IPSOS Group SA, *Unpacking Gendered Realities in Displacement: The Status of Syrian Refugee Women in Jordan*, 2018, available at: https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/68233.pdf (last visited 4 Apr.

In shifting the "power" to girls and women to transform their families and communities, there is less pressure on humanitarian actors to address the structural constraints to poverty alleviation or inequality. The agenda of gender equality is thus not only something that generates funding interest, but may also make humanitarian actors less accountable for the tougher work of social transformation and change under the guise of resilience and self-reliance. Instead of investing the time in ensuring that humanitarian actors are accountable to refugee communities, responsibility to respond to the challenges of forced displacement may shift to refugees themselves, who are expected to solve their own problems and demonstrate productivity. Poor aid mechanisms and gaps in humanitarian services and communication may drive refugees to find their own solutions, while the bigger issue of humanitarian accountability owed by humanitarian actors to refugee communities remains unaddressed and refugees themselves remain excluded from official humanitarian decision-making processes.

6. CONCLUSION

This paper builds on existing critiques of accountability within the humanitarian sector, particularly focusing on humanitarian accountability for gender equality. It affirms that humanitarian accountability has often been "upwards" focused, resulting in less attention on how humanitarian actors are accountable to forcibly displaced communities.

The findings highlight that efforts to prioritise gender equality within humanitarian assistance should not be taken at face value. In fact, tools like the Gender Marker may undermine the rationale for humanitarian action on gender inequality; even where humanitarian actors appear to prioritise gender, this may merely be in response to donor requirements, reducing integrating gender to a tick-box exercise. Accountability for gender equality may be less "downwards" focused towards refugees and instead more driven by what donors require or what humanitarian actors feel they need to achieve. This has implications for how gender is

2021); Almasri, *Tailor Made. How Syrian Refugee Women Are Finding Their Own Way to Join the Jordanian Economy*; A. Hunt, E. Samman, and D. Mansour-Ille, *Syrian Women Refugees in Jordan Opportunity in the Gig Economy?*, Overseas Development Institute, 2017, available at: https://cdn.odi.org/media/documents/11742.pdf (last visited 9 Apr. 2021); Buecher and Aniyamuzaala, *Women, Work and War: Syrian Women and the Struggle to Survive Five Years of Conflict*.

positioned by humanitarian actors, threatening to undermine the long-fought efforts to place gender on the humanitarian agenda.

The pressure to gain visibility for gender may result in certain kinds of gender-related data being prioritised over others. Humanitarian actors may invest in collecting quantifiable data on GBV because of the pressure to generate funding, but this emphasis on quantification may result in gaps in accountability as certain kinds of knowledge are prioritised over others. When these attempts at quantification are not robust, it undermines humanitarian efforts to prioritise gender. For GBV in particular, poor attempts at quantification reinforce the incorrect assumption that quantification is indeed needed to begin with.

The drive to generate data that demonstrates impact may also mean that humanitarian actors invest less time in understanding issues before responding. Instead, humanitarian actors may presume they have knowledge about refugee communities and may design interventions based on their assumptions rather than based on what refugee communities themselves want. "Expert" knowledge may inform interventions instead of humanitarian actors investing in understanding refugee communities, resulting in decreased accountability to refugee communities themselves and refugees being excluded from humanitarian decision-making processes. Instead of recognising the complexities of refugee experiences, the pressure to present a cohesive narrative may result in quick fix solutions or template solutions – a longstanding critique of gender-related humanitarian interventions.[120]

Lastly, the findings identify accountability gaps in how humanitarian actors communicate with refugee communities. In the absence of information or guidance on bureaucratic processes, refugees themselves may take action to respond to their own needs and the humanitarian needs of others. Specifically for work on gender equality, the findings highlight how humanitarian actors may shift the accountability even for the work of social transformation, relying on neoliberal narratives about the power of girls as an alternative strategy to addressing the structural drivers of complex issues like poverty. This kind of

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[120] D. Barakat & G. Wardell, "Exploited by Whom? An Alternative Perspective on Humanitarian Assistance to Afghan Women", *Third World Quarterly*, 23(5), 2002, 909–930, 910; J. Hyndman & M. De Alwis, "Bodies, Shrines, and Roads: Violence, (Im)mobility and Displacement in Sri Lanka", *Gender, Place & Culture*, 11(4), 2004, 535–557, 539; Cornwall & Rivas, "From 'Gender Equality and 'Women's Empowerment' to Global Justice: Reclaiming a Transformative Agenda for Gender and Development", 397.

mindset has particular consequences for work with refugee communities, especially with the increased focus on refugee "resilience" in settings like Jordan.[121] More research is needed to understand the consequences of shifting accountability for change towards refugee communities instead of focusing on challenging the structural and political constraints they face.

This paper argues that there is a need for a recalibration of what humanitarian "accountability" means, especially to ensure that gender equality is meaningfully considered within humanitarian interventions. While the focus on efficiency and evidence is important, it has resulted in "upwards" accountability being prioritised over accountability to refugees. Humanitarian actors must recalibrate and (re)incorporate specific strategies to improve accountability to refugee communities. This includes spending time understanding the lives of refugees and listening to their needs, exercising greater care in how and which data is collected and presented, improving communication and transparency to refugee communities about humanitarian decision-making processes, intentionally seeking to create space for refugees to participate in humanitarian decision-making, and being willing to acknowledge that complexities and heterogeneity in refugee experiences may at times result in the need to alter programme direction.

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[121] S. Ilcan & K. Rygiel, "'Resiliency Humanitarianism': Responsibilizing Refugees through Humanitarian Emergency Governance in the Camp", *International Political Sociology*, 9(4), 2015, 333–351.