An Analysis of the Relationship Between NGOs and Female Refugees in Za’atari

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by
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Certification of Approval

I certify that I have read ‘An Analysis of the Relationship Between NGOs and Female Refugees in Za’atari by Oreen Sofia Omair, and that in my opinion this work meets the criteria for approving a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree Master of Arts in International Relations at San Francisco State University.

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Abstract

This paper examines the reality of Syrian women refugees’ experience in Jordan’s Za’atari refugee camp. It contrasts this with the success of gender equality programmes (GEPs) which NGOs claim to benefit female refugees’ welfare. It does this in an attempt to answer how effective GEPs are for female refugees’ agency and wellbeing. Likewise, this study conducts a qualitative content analysis of 32 articles published by 13 local and international NGOs and also the book ‘Defiance in Exile’ which consists of 20 in-depth interviews of Syrian women refugees. The results of this study reveal that, regardless of intentions, NGOs are likely to use othering language, which evokes colonial legacies and takes agency away from women refugees. Whereas when women refugees represent themselves, they are more likely to use language which gives them agency and dignity.
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Chapter 1 - Introduction

Humanitarian crises impact both men and women, yet women experience more gender-specific obstacles within their migration. This implies that women are more vulnerable to having their rights violated and being excluded from decision-making on issues that affect them. Despite their social and cultural challenges, refugee women in Za’atari have assumed leadership roles within the camp’s embedded humanitarian framework. This is also possible because the camp is mostly funded by the West and has foreign aid workers. Many of the humanitarian organisations that contributed to Za’atari have also emphasized the great success of their programmes for women in achieving goals by minimizing the gender gap. Therefore, Za’atari is often viewed as an exemplary case in comparison to other refugee camps. However, despite its success, scholarly research and first-hand refugee testimonies portray a different reality highlighting the unequal power dynamics in the NGO-refugee relationship.

To investigate this reality, this study aims to critically evaluate both the Western liberal feminist and postcolonial feminist perspectives critically and objectively through the case study of the experience of Syrian women refugees in Za’atari. The Western liberal narrative emphasises the need for humanitarian aid which takes away the agency of refugees, whilst the postcolonial lens pays attention to the diverse gendered experiences of women in the Global South. On the surface, western liberal feminism has helped push significant gender issues into global governance institutions, agreements and processes. Nonetheless, gender inequalities persist worldwide and can at times be unintentionally reinforced by this view creating a contradiction. Therefore, this
questions the transformative potential of institutionalized liberal feminism as it has not exacted substantial nor purposeful changes for women in the non-western world.

An analytical critique of both perspectives will reveal how the welfare of female refugees in Za’atari is affected by the politics behind gender equality and its governing tools. This will be done with attention to the dynamics of power relations. When placed within wider debates of gender equality, the aim of my argument is to reveal how the overall wellbeing of the refugee is rarely viewed as a human right. This paper will argue that humanitarian NGOs in Za’atari are more concerned with the positive statistical outcomes of gender equality programmes (GEPs) that benefit their organizational goals, rather than the refugee’s social context and its implications, which I argue to be interconnected with their welfare.

The significance of this research further reinforces that men and women experience conflicts differently. This holds true even in a refugee camp amidst great uncertainty and prolonged encampment. Critically analyzing both the liberal and postcolonial perspectives also reveals the implications of this case study in shaping neo-colonial policies and the politics of gender equality. This is through revealing the institutional constraints of women refugees in getting sustainable access to their social and economic rights without a frenzy of competition of humanitarians in accomplishing internal goals.
### Summary of methodology

To understand the experience of female refugees in Za’atari, the use of language performed by humanitarian NGOs and refugees will be qualitatively analyzed through content analysis. Investigating how both sides perform language will identify power relations between them and whether they respectively follow any specific tropes. This will offer a holistic understanding of the issue, which an empirical quantitative approach would not be able to produce. I hypothesize that NGOs will use an ‘othering’ savior language to describe or speak on behalf of the refugees as opposed to giving them a voice, which echoes colonial legacies. In comparison, the hypothesis also adds that when refugees represent themselves, they are more likely to use language in a manner that gives them dignity, as they speak about their experiences and are not spoken for. The idea behind this is to evaluate if there is any difference in language when agency is given and taken away from refugees. The results of this study will then be used to answer the research questions of how effective humanitarian GEPS are for the wellbeing and agency of female refugees and its limitations.

Atlas.ti software will be used to perform a content analysis of a randomly selected sample of 32 articles published by 13 local and international NGOs. This will reveal how much agency is given to refugees by NGOs. The second part of the content analysis will be done on the book ‘Defiance in Exile’ which richly details interviews with 20 Syrian women in Za’atari in 2015. The results will be organized into three categories: savior narrative, othering and condescending language, and refugees’ self-description. The independent variable (IV) is the nature of the language used respectively by NGOs to describe refugees and by Syrian women when describing
themselves. The dependent variable (DV) is how much agency is afforded to refugees, which will reveal what is said by humanitarians and what is actually being said by refugees. This paper hypothesizes that NGOs use patronizing language evocative of colonial legacies, which takes away agency from Syrian women refugees. This is in stark contrast to how Syrian women use language to represent themselves, which is more dignifying and affords them agency.

**Conceptualizing the Za’atari Camp**

The overall success of the Za’atari camp is reflective of the power of Western NGOs, but not of the reality and lived experiences of the female refugee. This is because NGOs can implement strategies to achieve their institutional goals, yet these are insufficient for the refugees who are not adequately benefitting from their services. Furthermore, there is plenty of academic literature on the topic of humanitarian aid, mostly its critique. The key author that I will use in support of my argument is Elisabeth Olivius, who is one of the main scholars on this topic. She uses the Foucauldian and postcolonial feminist perspectives to explore how humanitarian organisations apply gender equality to refugees, whilst exploring the implications of power relations.⁴ Olivius argues that female refugees’ participation is strategically used to represent humanitarian organisations as effective, whilst portraying them as backward and uncivilized subjects who need to be rescued by rational and progressive humanitarian actors.

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In another supporting article, Olivius contends that humanitarian aid uses neoliberal governance focused on the measurement of performance and the transfer of responsibility to refugee welfare. She adds that this shapes the notions of gender equality, which becomes instrumental and superficial. This is because outsider expertise is viewed as superior, whilst gender equality is viewed as an administrative and quantitative issue, rather than a deeper analysis of power and gender politics making the refugee women invisible. This is a central point to my project, which will be used in my case study.

Despite strong critiques of humanitarian aid, there are many scientific and medical reports that show improvements in refugees’ wellbeing and physical healthcare. One example is by Salim et. al who investigated refugees’ satisfaction with healthcare services in Za’atari. They found a 72.5% satisfaction rate with medical services, but discontent with health administrative services. This challenges my argument, but I would argue that services can still be improved. This study also evokes Olivius’ arguments of refugees being viewed quantitatively on a surface level for the sake of ease. Although there may be improvements in their physical health, only a deeper personal


3 Ibid. Pg. 59.

analysis would reveal more to the findings and would require extra efforts by humanitarians to uncover enduring issues which are hidden and often unnoticed.

Similarly, Crawley explores debates between Western liberal feminism and postcolonial feminism. Using postcolonial theory, Crawley explains how colonization was not a one-way process, as it affected not only the colonized, but the colonisers ingrained the concept of the ‘other’ in our mindset, which persists today. She also argues how liberal feminism racially stereotypes female refugees, which ignores their experiences. This neglects how the international refugee regime is intertwined with its colonial past, as it simultaneously racializes Global South men as the main cause for women’s lack of protection. Crawley states that women refugees are not monolithic, which I will use as a central point in my project. She contends that liberal feminist efforts in the Global North have been beneficial to an extent and humanitarianism is beneficial for some refugees in expanding their economic and political opportunities.

**Case Study**

**Figure 1. Map of Za’atari camp**

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6 Pg. 355.

7 Ibid. Pg. 373.
Al Jazeera’s aerial map of overcrowded Za’atari camp at its peak in 2013.

Figure 2. Map of Za’atari and Syrian border
The Za’atari refugee camp was established on the 28th of July 2012 on a barren desert close to the Syrian border homing more than 80,000 Syrian refugees today. In 2014, female refugees represented 55% of the population. Now more than 10 years on with new generations being born into the camp, Za’atari resembles an entrenched city with an informal economy where 55% of the population are children. It contains over 25,000 caravan shelters, 1,800 shops and businesses, 58 community centers, 32 schools and 8 medical clinics. In addition, refugees receive limited access to electricity for 11.5 hours a day and some cash assistance. The camp is co-operatively lead and supervised by the Jordanian government and UNHCR working with local and international partner organisations who provide such amenities to the camp. The duties relating to the management of

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the refugee crisis are therefore split between the state and NGOs. Whilst the reasons for their collaboration, tasks and degree of responsibility may differentiate, both work together to manage refugees. The state is entrusted to provide security measures, whilst humanitarians provide services and aid. They also offer cash-for-work programmes for both men and women who are skilled and unskilled. Although there are more male refugees participating, there is a rotation system so more refugees can benefit and profit and income from the programmes, which gives them purpose and dignity. Moreover, Za’atari is also praised for strongly supporting working refugee women and offering many successful GEPs. In 2022, it safely delivered more than 14,000 babies without a single maternal death amidst the struggles of Covid-19, the challenging desert environment and staff shortages.¹² Therefore, in many respects, Za’atari is viewed as very effective in comparison to other refugee camps.

It is UN Women who spearhead, design and implement the GEPs in Za’atari with the goal of empowering female refugees. They understand that displaced refugee women are more prone to sexual harassment and gender-based violence, which is why there is a need for gender equality to be integrated into the camp. Their main way of achieving this is through promoting them to leadership positions and providing them with economic independence by giving them control over

health and food distribution services. This allows them to work and create networks with other women refugees so they are less secluded and prone to gender-based violence. UN Women express that the need for GEPs arises because men and women are impacted differently in crises and therefore have different needs, which is why gender equality is essential. They believe that GEPs will equally and positively benefit both men and women. All the services which GEPs entail include life skill classes, women-only cash for work self-reliance opportunities, protection referral services, medical fund and a Syrian women’s committee. Life skill classes include learning languages and building entrepreneurial skills, whilst protection referral services inform refugees on health, hygiene, registration, sexual and gender-based violence, child marriage and reporting these. These facilities can be referred to as a safe oasis created by UN Women, which has reportedly led to an increase in refugee women’s safety, as women’s empowerment is visible and not hidden in the camp. 94% of female refugees reported that participating in GEPs had a positive effect on them, as they acquired leadership roles in their households. Therefore, the increase in their social capital has also simultaneously increased their security, as women spend less time in

14 Ibid. Pg. 4.
16 UN Women. 2016. ‘Restoring Dignity and Building Resilience: Monitoring Report on UN Women’s Programming in Za’atari Refugee Camp (June-October 2015).’
their household, which has reduced domestic violence. This is the result of the GEPs, which assist women out of isolation and boredom by providing them with safe spaces to deal with their trauma and recover their self-esteem.

However, the creation of GEPs and the consequent visibility of women’s empowerment has not eliminated gender-based violence and not all women feel entirely secure and safe. Young girls have reported that they feel unsafe and are unable to move around the camp unless with the company of a male chaperone, in a group or with married women. Although UN Women envisioned the GEPs to benefit men and women alike, another unanticipated consequence of women’s visible empowerment has led to low self-confidence and increased frustration of refugee men. This is because the economic initiatives have caused an imbalance of traditional gender roles in their homes and challenged their gender identities, as women are now breadwinners. This may have adverse effects on harassment and gender-based violence, whilst bearing in mind that these incidents may be underreported due to social norms. Also, if domestic violence is not an issue in the household, GEPs still may cause rifts in the household. Likewise, there are women who are more than happy with performing traditional gender roles, which may be a form of empowerment in itself for such women, which UN Women does not speak much of nor mention.
alternative solutions to gender equality for those refugee women. Additionally, for women participating in GEPs, it is unclear whether adequate security measures have been put in place for their protection. Likewise, this reported data only applies to women participating in the UN Women initiatives.
Chapter 2 – Literature Review

Political narratives are important in understanding how and on what basis humanitarian organisations operate and express their visions, ideology and policies. Today’s neo-colonial legacies embedded within the NGO-refugee relationship are reminiscent of the relations between Empire building and Christian missionaries, who focused on the suffering of the native populations to solicit sympathy. Investigating these historical parallels produces insight into the significantly persuasive influence of the humanitarian narratives used. Zabel describes a savior humanitarian narrative that is masculine, Western, White, morally correct and wealthy or having access to resources to resolve the permeating issues in the developing world. In addition, humanitarian missions encompass masculine traits like leadership, which is combined with maternal strength and nurturing, which further highlights the problematic aspects of aid. This narrative paints a stark contrast in imagery, which uses blatant othering to spur human sympathy, support and funding to help those suffering in geopolitically charged locations. This is what drives the savior narrative. Sympathy is produced from the refugees’ suffering, which propels humanitarian actions and retains their power to function, whilst concealing the unequal power dynamics within the NGO-refugee relationship. This is reinforced by the persuasive savior narrative that encourages its target audience to think sympathetically and act by funding the organisations. Therefore, this narrative

is powerful in shaping facts and the understanding of reality, whilst absconding any critical thought and changes in the institutional processes.

As for the refugees, there is a resilience narrative that has risen within refugee camps in Jordan that has grown from humanitarian workers in their perpetuation of both wanting to help refugees, whilst securitizing them.\textsuperscript{22} The resilience narrative describes when refugees perform resilience through showing courage and determination, despite their detrimental circumstances to overcome their adversities and make their voices heard. In the Azraq camp, refugees who are identified as the most vulnerable and the least threatening to organisations are viewed as easier to control under care. This makes it possible for humanitarians to maintain their vulnerability and increase their dependence on aid and reduce their resilience and self-sustenance. Gatter explains that preventing resilience is important for aid workers to remain in control of the camp. This is because when female refugees are employed to work within the camp, they reach a certain level of trust and eventually grow in power which threatens the work of the humanitarians, and it is more beneficial for the aid workers for the refugee to be restrained especially since refugees often contained in camps for long periods of time.\textsuperscript{23} This brings to question the usefulness of training programmes offered by NGOs to build refugees’ skills and agency, since over time it may prove


\textsuperscript{23} Ibid. Pg.2 and 5.
to be dangerous for organisations, as aid workers try to balance between development and maintain organizational control.

To truly understand the depth of the women refugees’ situation and their lack of agency, Tyrell offers a contextual analysis of spatial practices in refugee camps in Jordan and their political consequences on refugees. She frames the camps as dehumanizing biopolitical environments that homogenize refugees. This is whilst depriving them of agency and embedding them in a state of prolonged fleetingness and uncertainty. The indefinite entrapment of refugees in the camp itself fractures their mobility and lengthens their journey for safe legitimate asylum. From the liberal view, this restricts their freedom of movement, as they are confined in an environment for prolonged periods with no access to safe and legal pathways to protection. Therefore, liberal humanitarian projects have become legislated practices that maintain refugees’ entrapment, exacerbating their vulnerabilities, instead of providing them with enduring long-term benefits.

This type of inaccessibility to agency and rights is described by Vries and Guild as the “politics of exhaustion”, which complicates and obstructs migrants from accessing host states for

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25 Ibid. Pg. 93-94.
asylum. This is by restrictively containing them in a camp and denying their rights, which prolongs their journey to safety. It can be argued that humanitarianism unintentionally contributes to this, as they reinforce this institutionalized system in which humanitarian programmes can be used to adapt refugees to their conditions. Many camps are designed to exhaust migrants of all options for many years, which accumulates uncertainty and increases their displacement across time and space. Therefore, their physical and mental exhaustion is politically institutionalized as a deterrence that intensifies over time.

On the other hand, it can also be argued that humanitarian projects can help to alleviate this issue. Vandevoordt argues that the politics of exhaustion is reminiscent of Agamben’s ‘bare life’, which asserts that contained migrants are essentially existing with no purpose or recognition. In this context, humanitarian projects can offer short-term support to help reduce the effects of bare life for the refugees and giving them a purpose through increasing their self-confidence and empowerment in the midst of uncertainty and isolation. Western humanitarianism can help refugees reclaim their humanity by fighting their political exhaustion even if it is for immediate relief. Hence, this perspective reveals how humanitarian projects can be a double-edged sword. It

27 Ibid. Pg. 6.
can aid in providing immediate relief, whilst also reinforcing asymmetrical power relations that are reminiscent of colonial legacies. It raises the question of how genuine the human approach of humanitarians is and whether it is reflected in any substantial progress for women refugees without creating dependency.

Oftentimes, NGOs will apply Western values such as independence and individuality in the programmes and initiatives they offer, as they view such traits to be catalysts of change in alleviating the refugee conditions. This contrasts with the refugees’ cultural view of dignity being self-sustainability, economic independence and equality, as Burne highlights that refugees define dignity as a means of livelihood and opportunity.29 His work also raises the concern that not many humanitarian publications write from the view of the refugees, rather about them. By speaking for them, Burne adds that this creates a strong dependency on NGOs and financial aid, which acts as the main obstacle to achieving dignity, whilst undermining refugees’ cultural values.30 This raises a concern for humanitarianism being an extension of neo-colonialism, especially with the backdrop of historical Western interventions.

I believe Burne’s focus on the refugee’s dependency on aid highlights how humanitarians may inadvertently obstruct refugees’ wellbeing and rights. To flesh this impact out more, one can

30 Pg. 15.
refer to Paulo Freire who writes from a Marxist perspective, which analyses the power dynamics between the colonisers and the colonized. Freire writes that oppressors use humanitarianism to change the ‘consciousness’ of the oppressed as opposed to the causes of their oppression. This concept applies to Za’atari since refugees adapt to their camp environment and context for prolonged periods with very minimal rights making it easier to control and manage them. Likewise, it implies that humanitarian institutions are entrenched in dominating refugees, which is reflected in how providing aid and services becomes rights-centered and a liberal concept.

The politics of language plays a significant role in the works of NGOs. The normative power of the human language in garnering sympathy is very persuasive in its commitment to alleviating suffering and saving Global South lives. It is very clear that the current dominating humanitarian processes are West-centric and top-down and the significance of language is reflected in these power dynamics. Book argues that popular buzzwords such as ‘empowerment’, ‘the field’, ‘mission’, ‘South’ and ‘the poor’, to name some, are outdated and produce artificial security and void purposeful change. They reek of neo-colonial expressions that imply a sense of generous bestowing upon the underprivileged as a selfless courtesy from the West.

This type of humanitarian language is also a type of soft power tool that is institutionalized in international development in seeking to accomplish internal targets and political agendas, for example, as set out in the UN sustainable development goals.\textsuperscript{33} It is important to recognise that language is not solely used for communication, but also used to employ power and legitimate oppression and submission historically and today.\textsuperscript{34} Examples of this is how NGOs use emotionally charged language to illustrate to suffering and trauma of afflicted refugees to acquire support and funding. Albeit very successful in its intention, a consequence of this soft power is the reduction of human value for refugees to gain more sympathy from target audiences and therefore more funding. Ultimately, there is a failure to conduct a deeper analysis of the female refugee context to develop an inclusive and culturally embedded language and keywords in humanitarian campaigns to produce lasting solutions. However, it is unclear whether giving women refugees agency in their use of language would garner the same level of sympathy from Western audiences for support and funding and whether their suffering is truly the key.

Moreover, similar trends can be seen in faith-based organisations, which reveal that the issues of othering and colonial legacy are part of a bigger problem, as every organisation is susceptible to it. In an example, Wagner uses Boltanski’s theory of ‘politics of pity’ to explore the

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\textsuperscript{34} Vitantonio, Carla. 2022. \textit{The Relationship between Language and Neo-Colonialism in the Aid Industry}. Centre for Humanitarian Leadership. Pg. 4.
\end{footnotesize}
power dynamics between faith-based humanitarianism and Syrian refugees in Jordan.\textsuperscript{35} This theory concerns distant suffering in which refugees perform suffering, which volunteers use as sympathetic testimonies to a Western audience back home. The volunteers also perform detachment, which is facilitated through linguistic and cultural challenges. This superficiality raises serious concerns about the purpose and intentions of foreign humanitarian actors in providing aid to refugees. It questions their motives and their willingness to still help refugees if the latter do not perform suffering and deservingness. Another example which questions the motives of humanitarians is an account of aid workers contradictorily viewing refugees as both vulnerable and dangerous, whilst protecting themselves from refugees.\textsuperscript{36} Hoffman explains that in theory, humanitarians should focus on providing proper security measures for refugees, aid workers and the host state. However, in practice, there is a confusing balance between providing humanitarian control and merging into authoritarian control.

It then appears that the humanitarians’ good or poor intentions are irrelevant, since in either case they will reinforce suffering and power inequality, which echoes colonial legacies. It evokes the savior narrative which prevents a deeper analysis of the privilege and power. Therefore, regardless of even good will, the current system is a relic of the past in covertly perpetuating an international system of oppression. This becomes very problematic, as it is clear that major NGOs

\textsuperscript{35} Wagner, Ann-Christin. 2018. \textit{Giving Aid inside the Home}. Migration and Society. Pg. 44.

who take a top-down approach act without fully comprehending women refugees and their situation. In this case, sympathy is facilitated for humanitarians due to their distance and utter difference from the refugees, which overstates the role of the humanitarian.

It is evident that liberal democratic norms are embedded in refugee camps and institutionalized into humanitarian organisations. However, these incidents reveal that humanitarianism is not without its flaws, including the liberal agenda which promotes it. Hyndman explains that they are never neutral and camps usually exist in contested territories with histories of geopolitical disputes or colonial rule.37 Her critique reveals that humanitarian programmes teach refugees how to be liberal subjects by teaching them civics and human rights from the liberal democratic view.38 These ideas further support my argument, which I will use to argue how refugees are denied the human rights and concepts they are taught in temporary programmes whilst indefinitely stuck in camps.

Such humanitarian programmes, which are often celebrity-endorsed in the West, are influenced by neoliberal concepts set on empowering women through developing their entrepreneurial skills. Using the postcolonial feminist theory, Rosamond and Gregoratti strongly

38 Ibid. Pg. 14.
criticise the view that refugee needs to be saved by the market to work beyond the household. This reproduces and reinforces a Western White Savior logic that this is the best solution to the issues facing refugees such as war trauma, gender-based violence, etc. In the absence of a genuine understanding of the cultural traits and values of refugees, such solutions cannot be endurable, rather they can only reap short-term benefits without dealing with the deeper issue at hand. These solutions are more akin to short-term distractions rather than viable for refugees to make a livelihood out of their entrepreneurial skills when they are stuck in camp indefinitely. This also evokes Gatter’s refugee resilience narrative because, from a temporal lens, neoliberal programmes can threaten aid workers in the long-term, since refugees with newly developed skills will not find substantial ways to perform those skills. Therefore, when such initiatives are combined with the organic passing of time it can be dangerous, as it preserves refugees’ vulnerability and increases their dependence on aid. Consequently, it questions the usefulness of the NGO programmes, as aid workers try to balance between development and maintaining organizational control.

Since the current scholarship on this topic depicts a bleak outcome for refugees and the limitations of humanitarians, there are some researchers who have proposed alternative solutions. Guruge and Khanlou offer resolutions using the postcolonial and feminist views that are inclusive.

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of refugee women’s intersectionality and health. They strongly encourage drawing aspects from different theoretical approaches that are just and equitable. This is in contrast to relying on one concept, which is found in NGOs who secure themselves in solely liberal normative frameworks. This article provides a starting point in my project to propose some rational solutions to this thesis’ recommendations.

A different solution to these issues is proposed by Wardeh and Marques who argue that foreign actors should encourage host states to employ solutions that will engage refugees’ decision-making skills. They found that the humanitarian procedures in Za’atari did not align with the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable development as it fell short of ensuring refugees’ basic rights. These NGOs failed to significantly improve refugees’ quality of life, self-reliance and dignity, which could have also benefitted the Jordanian state. In researching the webpages of a variety of humanitarian organisations, I found that bigger and well-known NGOs such as Oxfam, Mercy Corps, REACH, and Noor al Hussein Foundation, to name some, all have statements regarding their UN sustainable development goals. An exception to this was Forever Playground, a smaller grassroots organisation that did not mention such institutional goals. They were also the

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41 Ibid. Pg. 16.
only NGO that I came across to give refugees agency and let them speak for themselves instead of taking their spotlight. address the issue of stealing refugees’ voices. It was difficult to find organisations that took this approach, which can potentially reflect a lack of approaches thereof and also at the same time a sense of change in the current humanitarian processes.

This solution proposed by Wardeh and Marques is called developmental humanitarianism, which Pasha defines as Global South actors in leadership positions of humanitarian responses to transition away from foreign aid. Nonetheless, some may argue against encouraging host states to engage refugees’ decision-making skills. Pasha argues that even well-intentioned local developmental humanitarianism in Jordan can weaken meaningful refugee empowerment. Her reasoning for this is due to funding since humanitarian governance from UNHCR has provided better services, security and infrastructure at the cost of taking away refugees’ decision-making powers. This would oppose the postcolonial critique which is suspicious of Western intervention, as neither foreign nor domestic intervention can genuinely benefit refugees. This argument, nevertheless, raises an important issue of funding as the majority of funding comes from the West.

45 Ibid. Pg. 256.
and it has led to ameliorating refugees’ conditions to an extent. Therefore, to maximize endeavors, efforts should be used to find improved solutions to make better use of funding.

Furthermore, since this project will also evaluate the postcolonial perspective, it is also important to look at the impact of refugees and humanitarian aid on the Global South host state of Jordan in addition to funding. Qaralleh argues that refugees have exhausted Jordan’s economy, which has inadvertent effects on its citizens and refugees.46 This research shows how heavily dependent Jordan is on aid and financial resources from international states and organisations to manage their large refugee population. It is clear without this Jordan would have to resort to refoulment or closed borders, which would worsen the crisis. I will use this to emphasize the lack of sustainable options for all actors to depict how volatile the humanitarian and refugee crisis is.

It is evident that it is vital for humanitarian organisations to achieve their goals and implement GEPs. This raises the question of the criteria of refugee women, which humanitarian projects are specifically aimed towards. Lupieri explores the concept of not all lives can be saved by investigating who decides who gets to be saved with limited resources. Lupieri states that women and children are prioritised over the elderly. Given the latter’s vulnerability and reduced

life span, according to neoliberalism, they would be classed as little ‘value for money’. I will apply this logic to who vocational programmes are aimed towards and offered to, more specifically to understand who is ‘deserving’ of such services. Lupieri states that older refugees are excluded, despite the goals of humanitarians to improve gender equality. She adds how humanitarians are driven by market logic, which reinforces ageist and gendered hierarchies within the camps.48

Alternatively, there is also scholarship written in support of the liberal view, which favors humanitarian aid and would oppose my argument. Particularly Zaza and Jabbar’s study of vocational training programmes offered to female refugees by Western humanitarians.49 Their findings highlight the positive impact of the program on their wellbeing, increasing self-esteem and confidence whilst enhancing business and entrepreneurial skills to generate an income.50 However, such programmes can be viewed as a type of informal opportunity that occurs in a decontextualized environment. Economic empowerment results in more independence for women, but it is unclear whether their skills can be transferred outside of the camp into formal employment. Likewise, many female refugees suffer from socio-economic marginalization and it becomes more

48 Ibid. Pg. 7.
50 Ibid. Pg. 9.
complex if it is unknown how adequately Jordan would protect them from abuse and exploitation in search of substantive long-lasting solutions. Similarly, this research fails to address other social issues such as sexual harassment and men being threatened by women’s financial independence.

Another opposing research is by Davidson who refers to the origin of the humanitarian venture by outlining the emergence of interventions alongside liberal theory since the Cold War. She admits that humanitarianism has often had questionable motives, but the benefits cannot be ignored as they outweigh the costs which are unnecessary human suffering. Therefore, it can be argued that total non-intervention would morally be more dangerous than Western liberal imperialism today. I can somewhat agree with this, in that humanitarian aid is much needed by the women in Za’atari yet what I implore is an urgent need for it to be reimagined from a bottoms-up approach that prioritizes the refugees’ specific needs. Similarly, Reid-Henry also posits that contemporary humanitarianism is not necessarily an exploitative liberal agenda, but it justifies its role concerning issues of capital accumulation and global order. He adds that it can also reinforce and limit market forces and state powers, potentially improving them. I agree to accept that despite its shortcomings, institutionalized humanitarianism can meet real needs effectively to relieve conditions immediately. Yet, I would argue that the current inner workings and processes of


institutionalized liberal humanitarianism set poor precedents for the future industry, in that neo-colonial legacies will be reproduced without addressing it.

In a critique of postcolonialism, Ball and Mattar disagree with the concept of postcolonialism as they argue that colonialism has evolved and persists today in different forms. They suggest a more appropriate term is neo-colonialism. They critique postcolonialism for its selective geographical focus, especially ignoring the Middle East. This is an insightful perspective to my thesis, which challenges the post-colonial perspective that I will be arguing. I will admit that many Global South nations had their own empires, and postcolonial theory can at times become divisive in separating the East from the West. This is critical, as I wish to avoid this and be as objective as possible, as I critique both the liberal and postcolonial feminist perspectives.

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53 Ball, Anna, and Mattar, Karim (2019). Edinburg Companion to the Postcolonial Middle East. Pg. 185.
Chapter 3 – Context and Methodology

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce the research design and methodology for this study regarding how beneficial NGO GEPs are for the wellbeing of women refugees in Za’atari. The chosen methodological approach is a qualitative content analysis, which allows for a deeper understanding and analysis of refugees’ experiences within humanitarian operations. Likewise, it reveals how much agency they are able to possess and express with the help of foreign aid. It will begin by introducing the research question and hypothesis. This will be followed by a justification of the selection of methodology and the applicability of the content analysis. The subtle power of language is discussed in-depth in this chapter. Next will be the research strategy in which the exact methodological plan and steps will be detailed for transparency to facilitate replicability by other scholars. Finally, this chapter will conclude with a discussion of its methodological limitations.

Research question and hypothesis

\[ RQ = \text{How beneficial are humanitarian gender programmes for female refugees’ agency and wellbeing?} \]

\[ H_1 = \text{Regardless of intentions, NGOs are likely to use othering language, which evokes colonial legacies and takes agency away from women refugees. Whereas when women refugees represent themselves, they are more likely to use language which gives them agency and dignity.} \]
Methodological approach and selection

The ontological assumption that my research will challenge is how humanitarianism produces the best solutions to refugee problems and how they are uncritically accepted as the norm. This research argues that regardless of motives and intentions, the work of NGOs has repercussions affecting the agency and the overall wellbeing of female refugees. It also reiterates how the unequal power relations within the NGO-refugee relationship reinforce the hidden and visible gender equality of the latter.

As Olivius’ research states that due to the neoliberal governance model of humanitarianism, NGOs become too lost in measuring their organizational performance that they neglect refugee welfare. This means that refugee wellbeing is instead viewed as a quantitative issue negating any deeper analysis of power and gender inequality. This is supported by countless medical studies showing improvements in refugees’ physical health, but it was limited to just this, whilst satisfaction with those services and deeper intangible health issues such as pertaining to mental health go underreported. Therefore, the methodology of this paper must be qualitative to discover the hidden deeper issues of gender and power inequality facing refugee women in Za’atari. Qualitative methods are diverse and not restricted to the limitations of quantitative methods, which allows for an interpretive approach. This would also ensure that their experiences are reflected more holistically. This will also enable me to be more flexible and targeted in my investigation, as a qualitative approach will offer me specific insights, which statistics alone cannot reveal.
Humanitarian aid is more concerned with action than words, but it is evident that the use of language is a very powerful tool. It inherently frames how we view the world and decision-making in the realm of international development. Whether this is through producing extensive acronyms and jargon relevant to institutionalized and legislative processes or using an othering language that echoes colonial relations. Either way, it reflects the unequal power dynamics in the NGO-refugee relationship. This methodology concerns the latter in which the power of language is subtle. The colonial language of saving lives and alleviating suffering is never neutral, but rather an essential reflection in understanding humanitarian aid.

To understand the experience of female refugees in Za’atari, the use of language performed by humanitarian NGOs and refugees will be analyzed qualitatively and interpretively through content analysis. Investigating how both sides perform language will identify power relations between them and whether they respectively follow any specific tropes. This will offer a holistic understanding of the issue, which an empirical quantitative approach would not be able to produce. I hypothesize that NGOs will use an ‘othering’ savior language to describe or speak on behalf of the refugees as opposed to giving them a voice, which echoes colonial legacies. In comparison, when refugees represent themselves, they are more likely to use language in a manner that gives them dignity, as they speak about their experiences and are not spoken for. The idea behind this is to evaluate if there is any difference in language when agency is given and taken away from refugees. The results of this study will then be used to understand and determine how effective humanitarian training programmes are for the wellbeing of refugees and its limitations.
Existing scholarship and my literature review reveal that neo-colonial legacies are present in NGOs’ operational procedures and language use. However, so far in my research I have not come across any empirical data nor is much substantial research available on how refugees verbally express themselves. However, what comes close is a short book called ‘Defiance in Exile’ written by scholars Athamneh and Masud on their trip to Za’atari. This is compiled of short stories told by women refugees about their experiences in the camp.\(^{54}\) This will be used as the main source for how refugees use language, which will reveal the extent of their agency. Nonetheless, it is unclear whether refugees use an equivalent or counterpart language to othering or if they completely diverge from this. This is another aim of the study to investigate. Due to these reasons, a deductive research approach based on the literature review was necessary to guide the research forward and build on the previously existing scholarship. Likewise, it will also become apparent to what extent Gatter’s refugee resilience narrative applies to them. In other words, the degree of resilience refugees verbally display in order to avoid dependency on humanitarian aid.

Due to the emphasis on language, selecting suggestive words will be done subjectively. As a researcher, my worldly view and social knowledge can influence how data should be interpreted, which may affect the choice of research methodology and in turn influence the data analysis. Both observable scientific data and subjective meanings produce knowledge. However, given the nature of this research, I am more likely to take an interpretivist approach. In order to minimize this bias,

\(^{54}\) Waed Athamneh, Muhammad Masud. Defiance in Exile. 1\(^{st}\) ed. University of Notre Dame Press
I will use a list of categories and specific words published by Oxfam to reduce their problematic usage in a bid to improve their operations and organizational processes to use more inclusive language. The CDC (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention) also has published a similar terminology list for the same reasons, which will also be referred to.

Both lists are supported by the literature review. Oxfam’s list includes words and categories. The latter provides a broader room for interpretation of the language that is patronizingly neo-colonial, outdated and so highly repetitive that it has lost its meaning. Specific words include: empowerment, vulnerable populations, pro-poor, local staff vs. international staff and hostile environment awareness to name some. In my research, I found other words and phrases which the CDC and Oxfam did not specifically include but could fit into their terminology. Some of these are not limited to: lucky, desperate, at least, in need, homeless, hopeless, suffering and third world.

Research strategy

This study will conduct a comprehensive qualitative content analysis of the words and phrases respectively used by NGOs and refugees in describing the conditions and situations of the refugees in the Za’atari camp. This textual data will be conducted through the Atlas.ti software. The sources will include only those articles published by local and international NGOs relating to Za’atari refugees. A total of 13 NGOs were randomly selected, which includes: CARE International, Mercy Corps, ACAPS, Global Fútbol, Arab Renaissance for Democracy and Development, Japan Emergency NGO, Jordanian Hashemite Fund for Human Development, Borgen Project, Vision Hope International, Artolution, United Nations Population Fund, World Food Program and Questcope. Most of these follow a top-down approach to providing aid services. All sources will be informed by the research-supported list of terminologies provided by the CDC and Oxfam, which will be used as a guideline in this study to minimize researcher bias. These carefully selected words, which will be analyzed will be referred to as the neo-colonial word list.

To conduct the content analysis in Atlas.ti, it is necessary to classify and code data from the sources by building a Codebook. The units of analysis will be the neo-colonial word list used in relation to the refugees in these sources. All sources will be thoroughly examined for such words and their frequency will also be recorded. This will be done thematically to filter and condense the huge data for better organisation of relevant information to discover any nuances linked to the issue of language use from both sides. Then, all sources will be organized into three corresponding categories, which will facilitate the coding of common themes. By smoothly condensing the
documents into manageable categories, it will help with the collation of data so a critical interpretive analysis could be easily performed. The categories include:

1. Savior narrative
2. Othering and condescending language
3. Refugees’ self-description

The first two categories pertain to the NGOs in how they perform language. The savior narrative category is derived from Zabel’s research and it will relate to language which depicts a Western NGO wanting to save or alleviate the suffering of the refugees. Specific words for the savior narrative will include: rescuing, saving, protecting and alleviating. The words ‘rescuing’, ‘saving’ and ‘protecting’ is highlighted in the CDC guideline as savior words. The reason for including ‘alleviating’ is due to an imbalance of words across categories and also because it prominently appears in most articles. However, to reduce subjectivity, I avoided adding further words of my own judgement and adhering to the guidelines. The second category concerns othering and condescending language, which will also highlight words and phrases that are outdated and portrays refugees inhumanely. This category will include words such as: influx, vulnerable, empowerment, poor, insecurity, combat, resilience, poverty, mission and desperate. Most of these words overlap across Oxfam and the CDC guidelines such as: vulnerable, empowerment, poor, poverty, resilience and mission. It was necessary to avoid the words ‘influx’ and ‘desperate’ since they also prominently appeared across the articles, which is justified by the guidelines’ descriptions. Both Oxfam and the CDC explicitly state that any other words or phrases
can also be included if they invoke despondency of the ‘other’, since it may invoke a superiority complex.

The examples of words for both categories make up the neo-colonial word list in which any variation of the specific words will be accepted. For e.g., with the word empowerment, these will also be accepted: empowering, empowered and empower. Lastly, the third category of refugees’ self-description will be informed by doing a content analysis and following the same steps above in the short book ‘Defiance in Exile’ by Athamneh and Masud. Focusing solely on this text is necessary since it contains a rich comprehensive and detailed accounts of first-hand refugee experiences. Athamneh and Masud interviewed 20 Syrian refugee women living in Za’atari in 2015 who provided in-depth oral histories of their struggle and reality from leaving Syria to living in the camp and the challenges they have faced in each step of their journey. The content analysis results of this book will identify the commonly used words and phrases by refugees independent of the NGOs. This will then be examined with the UN women’s report which was presented in the case study. The report itself was also published in 2015, therefore both of these sources correspond and the selection of this book is consistent with this study and when GEPs were first implemented.

For the first two categories, a total of 32 documents were randomly selected, which date from July 2013 to April 2023 from a total of 13 local and international NGOs. The IV is the type of language used respectively by NGOs to describe refugees and by refugees when describing themselves. This will be measured to see how it influences the DV which is how much agency it
gives refugees. By examining the compiled documents and reviewing the suggestive words through a content analysis, the findings of this study will help to contrast and analyze what is said by humanitarians and what is actually being said by the refugees. This will reveal whether they differ and highlight if any power or gender inequality define the NGO-refugee relationship.

**Authenticity and limitations**

A disadvantage of interpretive analysis is that it can be time consuming, especially in my study to code each text, which is why a limited number of NGOs and articles were chosen due to time constraints. Likewise, word frequency and word cloud can also be reductive when interacting with complex texts, which may ignore their context. The reason for choosing this over discourse analysis is that my research is not concerned with understanding the social context behind the language used in the NGO articles. This is because the context is already known which is the refugee crisis. My research is more interested in understanding the content of the NGO articles in the words that it produces, which implies how it views and portrays refugees. Therefore, an advantage of content analysis is that it is flexible in examining large quantities of text through coding and categorizing. It also allows for both quantitative and qualitative analysis, which can reduce researcher bias to an extent in interpreting results whilst providing insight into complex human thought.

Furthermore, the subjectivity of interpretivism may present researcher bias in the interpretation of data without empirical facts. This would question the reliability of the research and therefore replicability. Likewise, the findings would only be applicable to this specific research
and the sample of articles collected from these specific NGOs and would be difficult to generalize to other NGOs and refugee camps. Nonetheless, the interpretive approach broadens the focus of the research knowledge to incorporate more patterns and insight into the social dynamics of the NGO-refugee relationship. Therefore, it goes beyond the rigidity and restrictions of quantitative analysis and its empirical results. Qualitative analysis requires subjectivity. As a researcher, it may be difficult to ignore any previous knowledge I may have, which could influence the data analysis. Likewise, categories and themes may also be influenced by my expectations. Therefore, in order to minimize researcher bias, the neo-colonial word list has been informed by research-based publications produced by Oxfam and the CDC. These guidelines establish an essential element in fortifying the validity of my methodological approach and analysis. Likewise, a clear coding scheme, well-defined categories and directions for content analysis have been provided. In addition, transparency is crucial to any study and this research has done its best to ensure this by providing a detailed and descriptive account of the investigation. Therefore, it has high replicability. The Atlas.ti codebook and data are also available if needed.
Chapter 4 – NGOs: Finding and Analysis

This chapter contains the results and analysis of the qualitative content analysis of the 32 NGO articles conducted to answer in part the research question of how beneficial GEPs are for female refugees’ agency and wellbeing. It also includes graphics and tables to present the constructed codes and categories to emphasize the themes present in all the sources. It will begin with the visualization of the neo-colonial words in the form of a word frequency and word cloud, followed by expressing the results of each category.

Word frequency

Figure 3. Word frequency list
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word</th>
<th>Length</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>vulnerable</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>protection</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>poor</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>empowerment</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>security</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>insecurity</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>desperate</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>influx</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>insecure</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>protective</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>saving</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>13</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>protected</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>alleviating</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>combat</td>
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<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>empowered</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mission</td>
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<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>poorest</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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<td>protect</td>
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<tr>
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<td>alleviate</td>
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<td>combatting</td>
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<td>desperation</td>
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<td>empower</td>
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<td>empowering</td>
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</tr>
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<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>poorer</td>
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<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>protecting</td>
<td>10</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>rescue</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>saved</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Word frequency depicting the number of occurrences of each neo-colonial word list and its variations.*
The word frequency table depicts each neo-colonial word and its variations in the order of the most to least occurrences with the word ‘vulnerable’ being the highest. Since this study is also inclusive of variants of a particular word, then ‘vulnerable’ appears a total of 60 times followed by the word ‘protect’ occurring 55 times across the 32 NGO articles analyzed. With this in mind, the word ‘rescue’ appears 1 time. Similarly, the word cloud also helps to visualize this neo-colonial word frequency list through the size of the words. Words such as ‘vulnerable’ and ‘protection’ are the largest, which indicates they were the most common words used from this list, whilst ‘rescue’ is amongst the smallest, which was the least occurring word. Both the word frequency and word cloud are consistent with one another, which reaffirms the findings. Therefore, these graphic visualizations are helpful in identifying the most common neo-colonial words in the study and the
number of times they appear. This will also reveal patterns and relationships among them, which will be explained in the data analysis.

Savior narrative

**Figure 5. NGO article categories**

Coding categories depicting the concentration of neo-colonial languages.

Neo-colonial words in this category include: protect, rescue, save and alleviate. This screenshot depicts that the occurrence of the neo-colonial words from the savior narrative category was surpassed by the othering and condescending language category. There was a total of 83 instances across the articles of a savior narrative with the most common word being variations of ‘protect’ and the least being ‘rescue’. This also includes instances of certain words or phrases which implied the savior narrative but did not directly use the listed words.
Othering language

This category includes the following neo-colonial words: influx, vulnerable, empowerment, poor, insecurity, combat, resilience, poverty, mission and desperate. Othering and condescending language vastly outnumbered and was more concentrated across the articles than the savior narrative with a total of 209 words. There was also not much difference in this between local NGOs in Jordan compared to international NGOs, as they both used such vocabulary to the same extent.

Critical analysis of NGO articles

This presentation of the data analysis will answer the research question of how beneficial GEPs are for female refugees’ agency and wellbeing, whilst providing its implications. This will be done concerning the Western liberal feminist and the postcolonial feminist perspectives. The analysis will be based on the subjective interpretation of the data produced from the qualitative content analysis of the random sample specifically of the 32 articles and 13 NGOs from July 2013 to April 2023.

A slight limitation to the study is that some sources directly talked about Syrian refugee women in Za’atari, whereas others grouped both men and women together as ‘refugees’. Nonetheless, based on this specific selection of the 32 articles published by the 13 local and international NGOs, it is evident NGO language can be evocative of colonial legacies which also highlights inherent power inequalities in the NGO-refugee relationship. This study revealed that there was an overwhelming use of othering and condescending language which outweighed the
use of the savior narrative. Even local Jordanian NGOs used neo-colonial language, to position themselves and Syrian refugees through an othering frame despite Jordan also being formerly colonized. In the contemporary world, Jordan has greater power over the Syrian refugees whom they are hosting, which justifies why this may be the case. It is possible that different NGOs and articles would produce varied results from a qualitative content analysis. Nevertheless, it is likely that even then a language of supremacy will be present across them whether subtle or clearly apparent.

It is also important to acknowledge that the othering and condescending language category includes more words than the savior narrative category. This is because of reducing researcher bias by adhering to the terminology guidelines of Oxfam and the CDC, which offered alternative words for problematic words. Therefore, the words to represent the savior narrative category were far fewer in comparison to the other category. The CDC only highlight three problematic savior words which are: protecting, saving and rescuing. Due to the imbalance of words across the categories, I felt it necessary to also add the word ‘alleviate’ since it also prominently appeared across the articles. There were also other words present in the articles, which I could have added in the savior narrative such as: assist, help, invest and enhance to name some. The reason for this is that it implies it is something that the West must do out of goodness for the helpless other. However, I limited the addition to only one word to minimize subjectivity and potential researcher bias. Similarly, it must be emphasized that it is possible to carefully use some of the words from the neo-colonial word list in humanitarian campaigns, as it specifically depends on the context. This must be done with great attention to detail to prevent belittling refugees.
An explanation of why NGOs may use such language can be explained by the concept of poverty porn, which was briefly implied in the literature review by Wagner’s article through how Christian missionaries gave sympathetic testimonies to a Western audience back home after their fieldwork. Poverty porn is essentially exploiting a victim, or in this case, a refugee’s condition to produce sympathy to increase support and funding for a cause, which is prevalent amongst all types of NGOs. This may be through a written or photographed medium. The neo-colonial word list is very expressive and emotional since it is used to evoke sympathy and intense passion from the audience who are potential donors to support and fund the cause. In the NGO articles, the descriptive words also illustrate clear pictures of refugees suffering in the readers’ minds. Narrating how devastating the refugees’ condition creates a sense of urgency of unfulfilled desperate needs by highlighting the severity of their crisis. This may cause distress in the audience by eliciting shock, guilt and sorrow for which they may support the cause to suppress their negative feelings. In comparison, if NGOs were to convey positive narratives of refugees, it may not represent urgency to the same extent but rather that their needs are fulfilled. Therefore, this justifies the NGOs’ usage of the savior narrative and othering and condescending language to fund and maintain their organisations and fulfil their mission of providing aid to refugees. For them, it then becomes necessary to sustain the perception of helpless refugees.

A consequence of poverty porn through the strategy of savior narrative and othering and condescending language is that it raises serious ethical concerns. Using neo-colonial words is a highly successful strategy in drawing attention to the cause and is effective in persuading the audience to take action. However, this is done at the expense of exploiting refugees by perpetuating racialized stereotypes. This produces an over-simplification of humanitarian crises skewing how a Western audience may view those far removed from them reinforcing a colonial mindset. It can pose a long-term risk of grave harm offsetting any short-term benefits of fundraising and raising awareness. This is because this strategy violates the agency, dignity and privacy of refugees whether they seemingly agree to it or not. It contributes to a problematic framing of a helpless refugee in need of saving from their geopolitically charged regions at the mercy of the rational privileged West. This distortion of truth presents only an incomplete and inaccurate image of the refugee. Since ‘empower’ was the fourth most occurring word from the content analysis, there is nothing empowering about portraying refugees through poverty porn rather it is a severe and dangerous misrepresentation.

A necessary evil?

Regardless of the NGOs’ intentions, their marketing strategy can cross into the exploitation of refugees and its excessive use may desensitize the audience. The saturation of shock value may render some audience unaffected by guilt. Likewise, neo-colonial vocabulary makes othering seem acceptable. Therefore, humanitarian NGOs have the duty to address this and correct their wrongs by finding sustainable solutions to promote their cause. They should not have to resort to savior narratives and othering and condescending language as a necessary evil. The NGO-refugee
relationship must be re-established and nurtured since the future of the organisation and the welfare of the refugee depend on a reciprocal foundation of honesty and respect.

Oxfam and CARE are among the NGOs that have recognized how humanitarian work can be problematic and are working in a bid to improve this. In an effort to reduce the savior narrative and othering and condescending language, a possible solution is to use positive narrations and imagery of refugees. This can be done by showing the aftermath of a cause being fulfilled whilst adhering to the terminology guidelines by the likes of Oxfam and the CDC. A dire need for support can be produced using appropriate and inclusive vocabulary and depicting how donor funds can have an impact through positive imagery. This shifts the focus from evoking trauma in the audience to eliciting contentment through the positive result of the donor’s contribution. This is more likely to produce healthier ways of how support can make a difference without reinforcing neo-colonial legacies.

It is important to recognise that out of the study sample, each NGO article was not completely entrenched with neo-colonial words, rather at times it was used occasionally. Some NGOs were better than others at being culturally appropriate and inclusive. From the content analysis, the worst were Vision Hope International and Borgen Project, which illustrated high levels of savior narrative and othering and condescending language. The Borgen Project also used other words not part of this study’s neo-colonial word list, which included ‘resource-poor’ and ‘food-deficient’ to describe Jordan. This becomes contradicting when Jordanian NGOs also use othering to describe Syrian refugees as poor as opposed to themselves. Other words from the
Borgen Project also included ‘ravaged’ and ‘swelling population’ as if to inadequately depict refugees as an infection. Vision Hope International, on the other hand, used variations of the word ‘poor’ at least six times in 1 article, which read as very patronizing. However, the dates of the article should also be recognized, as it may be possible some NGOs may have made some organizational changes in a bid to include more sensitive and appropriate language. In comparison, CARE had minimal to no use of neo-colonial vocabulary, as they appropriately established the main point of the article whilst still seeking support for donations. This establishes that it is possible to be morally correct without having to degrade Syrian refugees.

One could argue why there should even be a focus on the impact of subtle language even with good intentions when so many are suffering since it may be a serious distraction from the real pressing problems. However, highlighting these issues gives a better understanding of how something seemingly small can exacerbate refugees’ conditions. It is done in the hopes of coordinating better strategies and improving current processes. Critically evaluating the language, which the investigation shows to be a parasitic issue rooted in humanitarianism, gives a more holistic view of the problems which need to be addressed. The way in which neo-colonial vocabulary refers to refugees is not humane. It completely deprives them of personalization and homogenizes them as one identity when in reality they are not a monolith. This is evident in the diverse personal stories conveyed in ‘Defiance in Exile’.
Chapter 5 – Refugees: Findings and Analysis

This chapter contains the results of the qualitative content analysis of the book ‘Defiance in Exile’ conducted to answer in part the research question of how beneficial GEPs are for female refugees’ agency and wellbeing. It also includes a visualization of the coding to present the constructed codes and categories thereby emphasizing the themes present in this source.

Refugees self-descriptions

Figure 6. ‘Defiance in Exile’ categories

Coding categories depicting the most occurring themes from Syrian women refugees’ accounts.

In ‘Defiance in Exile’, Syrian women gave richly detailed first-hand accounts of their life before becoming refugees, their travels to the camp and finally living in the camp in the period of
2015. They described their life in the camp in the first year and compared it to how their life is now. The content analysis mostly paid attention to their life in the camp, especially in relation to NGOs’ aid services and how it affected them and their loved ones. Four main categories have been produced from the content analysis of the 20 interviews. These include:

1. Religious sentiments
2. Strained family relations
3. Praise of camp/NGOs
4. Critique of camp/NGOs.

The religious sentiments describe references made to God and the Islamic faith since the female Syrian refugees who expressed this were all Muslim. The strained family relationships category had 2 common themes, which are inclusive of the women’s relationships with their husbands and with their children. The common factor in this was mental health issues. The women’s relationships with their husbands were complicated due to the latter’s prolonged unemployment issues, whilst the women’s relationship with their children was complicated due to the children’s depression and trauma of war. Women expressed that their husband’s unemployment led to an increase in boredom and depression and them wanting to go back to Syria to fight in the war due to having nothing to do. All women stated they wanted more job opportunities for their husbands, as they would rather prioritise nurturing children. This also included women who were breadwinners, and even those interested in working preferred their husbands to be the breadwinner. In terms of children and the lack of adequate education facilities, many adopted anti-social behaviors and would disrespect their mothers. All children had
depression with some attempting to commit suicide, whilst others sought out early marriages, as a result of boredom, lack of opportunities and suffering in the camp.

The remaining two categories of critique and praise of camps/NGOS include the women’s view of the camp’s amenities, services, facilities and employment opportunities provided by the NGOs. The camp and the NGO were mentioned concurrently as one element by all women. The majority of the women disliked the camp services provided by the NGO. They complained of issues such as lack of water, electricity, food, employment opportunities, inadequate medical and education facilities and fragile tents and housing. Those who praised the camp services provided by the NGOs, initially women expressed great dislike of it, but then came to accept it not because aid services improved, but rather because they had gotten used to life over time and adapted to their circumstances. An overwhelming factor which facilitated this praise was their expression of gratitude to God, which is an important aspect of Islam that almost all but 1 interview conveyed. Hence, it was necessary to include religious sentiments as a category in itself. It is important that religious sentiments be taken seriously since it was the second highest category mentioned. Likewise, across the NGO articles, the only relative words used were ‘mosque’ mentioned once and ‘God’ mentioned twice, depicted in the word frequency list and word cloud above. Moreover, the women also expressed that they were grateful because although life in the camp is not perfect,

it could be far worse for them in Syria. They also praised the improved services of the camp but would also simultaneously highlight a deficiency or a need for further improvement.59

**Critical analysis of ‘Defiance in Exile’**

The presentation of the data analysis will answer the research question of how beneficial GEPs are for female refugees’ agency and wellbeing, whilst providing its implications. This will be done in relation to the Western liberal feminist theory and the postcolonial feminist perspective. The analysis will be based on the subjective interpretation of the data produced from the qualitative content analysis of ‘Defiance in Exile’, which was published in 2015 at the same time as the UN Women’s report on the impact of the GEPs.

This book challenges the savior narrative and myths which cast Syrian women refugees as voiceless oppressed victims, as they defiantly tell their stories. There is a stark comparison between the othering and condescending language used in the NGO articles and how Syrian women speak in a dignified manner. This book depicts greater levels of refugee agency in relation to the lack of voices in the NGO articles where they are being spoken for. The women express their agency by confidently voicing their opinions of becoming disillusioned by NGO services and showing their determination to survive and protect their families in the face of enduring times and poor camp conditions. As Za’atari has been commended by the West for providing the best services and

59 Ibid. Pg. 56, 63, 67, 70,72,76.
programmes, especially highlighted in the UN Women report, refugee women confined in the camp illustrate a very distinct reality.

   It is also important to recognise that the women directly criticise NGOs and also indirectly through complaining about inadequate, unsafe or delayed services.\textsuperscript{60} All but one interviewee heavily critiqued the NGO services, especially the lack of job opportunities, clean public bathrooms, food supplies, electricity, delayed medical services, inadequate education facilities and expensive costs.\textsuperscript{61} These issues are continuously referred back to by the women throughout the book. It is also depicted as the third highest mentioned category in Figure 6, which highlights the seriousness of the issue. On the other hand, it is also important to mention that some women admitted to later appreciating the NGO services after some improvements. They had accepted this long after initially being horrified by insufficient services due to a combination of their Islamic belief of being grateful for their circumstances and also adapting to their new life.\textsuperscript{62} They often repeated that although the camp had its deficiencies and was also a very unsafe and insecure environment for their families, it was a means of survival in comparison to life in Syria. Many expressed choosing the lesser of two evils with some even expressing going back to Syria due to facing extreme hardship in the camp. The reason for staying either in the camp or going home was

\textsuperscript{60} Waed Athamneh, Muhammad Masud. Defiance in Exile. 1st ed. University of Notre Dame Press. Pg. 51, 73, 86, 77.

\textsuperscript{61} Ibid. Pg 83.

\textsuperscript{62} Ibid. Pg 95.
context-dependent for each family. Some were widows, disabled, had abusive family members back home or Syria was too unsafe for them as they fled persecution. Whilst for others their reasons for wanting to leave the camp were due to poverty, struggles in finding a job to support family, extreme boredom and depression, abusive family members and men preying on women in the camp or simply wanting to be reunited with loved ones in Syria.

Out of the 20 Syrian women, the exception of 1 woman whose sentiments did not align with the others, greatly commended the work of the NGOs. She also highlighted that the UN had employed her in the camp and also received benefits which supported her household.63 This also shows that better work opportunities are present in the camp amidst high unemployment. It raises concerns about how organizational processes affect camp refugees and how funds and resources can be used more sufficiently to improve services and offer better livelihoods. Another reason for poor services and low employment can be equated to what the NGO articles describe as a never-ending ‘influx’ of refugees. With so much demand and so few supplies, this also becomes a contributing factor to the overcrowded, unsafe and dangerous environment of the camp. Likewise, there is also the factor of overworked and drained humanitarian workers on the ground who directly interact with the refugees. This again highlights a greater need to re-assess the organizational processes in order to enhance refugee support and reduce operational costs. This will be discussed in detail later by offering solutions to these problems.

63 Ibid. Pg 108.
Religiosity as a form of self-empowerment

Nevertheless, these issues highlight how Vries and Guild’s concept of the politics of exhaustion affects both refugees and some humanitarian workers. The exception is that the latter can freely come and leave, whereas refugees are confined for prolonged periods to the point new generations of refugee children are being born who do not know of life beyond the camp. The inescapable exhaustion has become an incumbent part of daily life for Za’atari refugees. Combined with the element of the extended temporality of years of unresolved uncertainty, it renders the refugees cynical, hopeless and weary. As revealed in the results of the content analysis, Islam remains an especially important aspect, which refugees utilize to self-soothe and pacify their own mental and emotional burdens. This prompts Gatter’s refugee resilience narrative, as these interviews reveal that Islam is something that pulls them out of their lethargic mental state by giving them hope. The religion reminds them to survive regardless of circumstances and to contentiously resist this state of being to shape their new lives beyond fleeing Syria.

The research has come to this conclusion due to how the women negatively talked about the NGO services and the camp in comparison to how much joy they expressed when communicating religious sentiments. This is apparent in the religious wordings they would frequently use, the most repeated throughout the book being variations of thanking God to express their immense gratitude for survival regardless of their new circumstances. This was followed by statements in which the women spoke of entirely trusting God, performing prayers or reading

64 Ibid. Pg. 3, 35, 37, 77.
the Quran.⁶⁵ One woman, in particular, explained the reason why she did this was that her prayers and worship gave her peace, which implies that their religion may be a form of escapism from not only the dangerous and insufficient camp services and living conditions but also from the trauma they faced in Syria.⁶⁶ These religious sentiments reveal that even the GEPs which are intended to uplift and alleviate their circumstances are not having a substantial impact on them. Yet, the reason for their enduring courage and determination to survive is driven by their faith.

One may question why or how NGO services could even have anything to do with their religion. The interviewees complained of dirty water and communal bathrooms in the first year of living in Za’atari. The bathrooms in particular were located very far away which, women and their children were embarrassed and also struggled in walking long distances.⁶⁷ In addition, since the majority of Za’atari refugees are Muslim, ablution for their everyday prayers is a fundamental part of the faith and their daily routines. This type of cleanliness must adhere to Islamic rules which cannot be ignored. This is one of the many examples in which camp services obstructed the refugees’ religious practices. Regardless of religion, dirty public bathrooms are a serious safety hazard, especially in an overcrowded camp. For the interviewees, this inconvenience took away their dignity and added to their feeling of humiliation.

⁶⁵ Ibid. Pg 21, 34, 36, 37, 52, 78
⁶⁶ Ibid. Pg 48.
⁶⁷ Ibid. Pg. 42.
There is plenty of academic research supporting the religious empowerment of refugees and why this may be the case for some. In their study, Schweitzer et al. argued that Sudanese refugees used faith as a coping mechanism to regain meaningful control over their lost and new lives.\textsuperscript{68} There are also other forms of empowerment through social support networks for example. However, Khawaja et. al found that amongst the many forms of empowerment, the religion of the refugee was the most performed during various migratory stages of their journey.\textsuperscript{69} Religiosity has evidently been shown to be a protective component against the tensions facing refugees.\textsuperscript{70}

As in the book’s title, ‘Defiance’, this is exactly what the women are doing in forms that are familiar, such as Islam, despite the tremendous odds stacked against them. This in itself is a form of empowerment, which is to have a voice no matter how bleak the situation may be. There is a huge contrast between this and the sole economic independence of a woman, which UN Women imposes. Consequently, this has led to most Syrian women defying poor services and demanding improvements from humanitarians whose mandate is to protect and give proper care


to the refugees. Undoubtedly, NGOs do want to help and alleviate their conditions. However, oftentimes, the approaches of NGOs fall short of accommodating the refugee’s own will in shaping their lives, which results in their resistance. This in itself again reveals that NGO provisions such as amenities, facilities, GEPs and other services are not meeting refugees’ basic needs.

**Children of Za’atari**

The politics of exhaustion has become so deeply rooted in Za’atari that it has left no corner unturned. Today, children make up 55% of Za’atari and it is well-documented that refugee children also suffer from mental health issues, which supports the interviewees’ statements.\(^\text{71}\) Therefore, the testimonies of the women are consistent with research. Za’atari presents a challenging environment to children due to some reasons including camp insecurity, parents’ lack of employment, limited access to education and exposure to abuse and violence. These are circumstances no child should face, yet it is a reality that jeopardises refugee children’s healthy development. The women reported that the combination of boredom and poor mental health has led to children becoming dissociative.\(^\text{72}\) This led to children not going to school, in addition to the rife aggression and bullying from other children.\(^\text{73}\) What could also contribute to this is the


\(^\text{73}\) Ibid. Pg. 76, 81, 84.
refugees’ belief in the transience of their encampment. The anti-social behaviour of bullies can also be attributed to the politics of exhaustion, which reveals a dangerous cyclical element.

Aside from education, some women also reported their children resorting to early.\(^74\) This was not only attributed to boredom and mental health issues but also because of the issues of harassment and rape within the camp. Women and girls felt safer with the protection of men from their families against other preying men.\(^75\) This in their cases would reduce the likelihood of abuse. However, the interviewees also emphasized some of these marriages were successful whilst others were not. They also expressed that they were completely against the early marriages of their children, yet their children strongly persisted otherwise. This strikes a huge contrast between the racialized stereotypes of early marriages and the reality of which in the camp. These issues highlight if these children were to have a regular childhood outside of the camp, they would be likely to follow the same patterns. This would seem unlikely, as it is not a norm for children to mature far early for their age due to trauma and violent exposures. Similarly, children pursuing early marriages also fall short of recognizing how they could provide for their new families despite high unemployment and poverty. Another option which children saw for themselves was leaving for Syria to fight in the war.\(^76\) This may again reveal not only their tender age but also desperation and lack of hindsight, whilst reiterating the importance of prioritising their childhood.

\(^{74}\) Ibid. Pg. 74.
\(^{75}\) Ibid. Pg. 75.
\(^{76}\) Ibid. Pg. 88-89.
Not all children fall into these classifications. Some also remarkably go on to show resilience.\textsuperscript{77} In the book, this was seen in the actions of children who assumed their share of the burden of providing for their families. Despite their parent’s adamant pleas, some snuck out of the camp to work illegally risking being refouled to Syria just to make ends meet.\textsuperscript{78} Consequentially, children are shouldering the responsibilities with their parents with no choice and are being robbed of their childhoods. The scale of the refugee children’s resilience narrative cannot be confirmed solely by their mother’s testimonies and would require additional research. However, their sacrifices are evident when faced with financial constraints.

Due to their own hardships and witnessing other families’ adversities, many Syrian women also stated not wanting to raise any more kids in the camp, despite a desire to increase the family.\textsuperscript{79} Some expressed fear due to how the camp environment significantly impacts the children. In addition to the lack of basic needs being met like clean water, steady income, electricity, contraception and sexual health services, let alone baby food and diapers. Due to the refugee women’s perception of the temporary encampment, they expressed having children outside the


\textsuperscript{78} Waed Athamneh, Muhammad Masud. Defiance in Exile. 1st ed. University of Notre Dame Press. Pg. 89.

\textsuperscript{79} Ibid. Pg. 77.
camp would be more worthwhile to preserve their children’s childhood. What remains inconclusive is whether those children who are born and raised in the camp with little to no experience of their homeland and culture, follow the same patterns as children who have fled Syria. One could assume that they are likely to be shaped by their confined encampment and see it as a norm but it cannot yet be ascertained. Regardless, of this it is evident that refugee children like their adult counterparts are also susceptible to the politics of exhaustion and suffering from mental health issues.

There is a perception in Western liberal feminist theory that in the Global South, men are the perpetrators of violence and oppression against women. To an extent, this may be true and also present in the Global North. However, one interviewee admitted to being emotionally and physically abusive to her daughter.80 The woman’s reason for this was releasing pent up stress and poor mental health from the hopelessness and lack of control over her situation. She admitted this was an issue but could not stop herself from harming her child. The purpose of the GEPs is to provide women with economic independence to subsequently reduce the domestic abuse and gender-based violence they face. However, GEPs fail to address situations in which women are abusers whether towards their husbands or children. Liberal feminism makes it appear that only men are capable of abuse, yet the interview reveals that such dynamics exist amongst females regardless of location and gender.

80 Ibid. Pg. 68.
Refugee men of Za’atari

It is established that the early stage of arriving in Za’atari concerned survival and to many extents it still is, yet the women have adapted. The women were occupied with coping with their trauma through faith, protecting themselves against the insecure camp environment and taking on the responsibility to provide for their families. With the implementation of UN Women’s GEPs, there has been a huge shift in the traditional gender roles of many households in the camp. This shift produced mixed reactions amongst the interviewees. Despite whether their reactions were positive or negative, all women were determined to take on the provider role due to the severe lack of options and out of religious gratitude. Although some were happy about their newfound financial independence, even those in healthy households, still preferred their husbands to be the main provider.81 Similarly, women who were not happy to be the sole breadwinner also preferred the same for their husbands.82

UN Women’s GEPs are fueled by a Western liberal feminist framework that prioritizes women’s economic independence. However, these first-hand accounts of Syrian women in Za’atari reveal that they find it more dignifying to nurture and protect their children, which is a different way of providing for the household.83 This is also explicitly repeated throughout the book. This type of provision is emotional rather than financial, and it aligns with their religion and

81 Ibid. Pg. 92.
82 Ibid. Pg. 95.
83 Ibid. Pg. 59, 98-99.
culture. It reveals that nurturing the household is more gratifying and significantly more important to them than gender-based economic independence. The reason for women participating in GEPs is also due to the severe lack of options for them and their husbands. Their unwavering determination to learn, work and earn was done with their children and families in mind.

This encapsulates Burne’s argument from the literature review. He emphasises that Western values of individuality and independence are inherent in the NGO programmes which clash with the cultural values of Syrian refugees in Jordan. He explains that the Syrian culture views dignity as also including equality and economic independence, but through self-sustainability.84 One has dignity if these elements align with their culture and tradition, which may explain why even independent women preferred traditional gender roles. This is significant considering that none of the 32 NGO articles wrote from the perspective of Syrian refugees in Za’atari, but rather about them from a Western liberal lens. Through the women’s testimonies, ‘Defiance in Exile’ is also consistent with these themes and findings. This reveals that the Western liberal imposed GEPs with values of independence and individuality is not the catalysts of change in alleviating a refugee’s conditions. Therefore, the programmes may undermine their cultural and religious values. This inadvertently creates tensions and mistrust in the NGO-refugee relationship, as their humanitarian approaches resemble civilizing missions that hamper the refugees’ cultural and religious identities.

For Syria, and many MENA countries, the element of religion and culture cannot be separated. Since the 7th Century, Islam and Middle Eastern culture have intertwined and reinforced each other in the social, political, economic, public and private spheres. Therefore, NGOs and governmental organisations can fall into orientalism, as they depict Syrian women as being oppressed by their religion and culture. A glance at history would reveal Arab Muslim women’s participation within all spheres of life from fighting in alongside men in battles, protesting against sexual harassment to fighting state corruption from the ground up. Such would imply self-sustainable independence. In addition, many Arab Muslim women have fought alongside men outperforming them in wars and battles. This shows that the ‘other’ woman is capable of going beyond traditional gender roles. Despite their involvement and capabilities, it may raise questions about why the interviewees still preferred their husbands to be the breadwinners. This can be explained by the rights afforded to them by their religion.

87 Ibid. Pg. 12.
Islam asserts traditional gender roles of men as providers and women as maintainers, whilst justifying each of their rights equitably. When Islam was established, Muslim women were afforded their rights centuries before Western women through the suffrage movement in 1928. During this time, Western narratives emerged of Islam oppressing Muslim women from European colonies of Muslim nations. This was contradictory to what was happening in Western societies of European men denigrating European women, whilst highlighting orientalist tropes of Muslim women. This reveals how historically women in pre-Islamic Arabia and Western civilisation were barred from basic human and civil rights, and treated as the property of men. To some extent, this occurs today in all parts of the world including the West which claims to be a leader in gender equality. Islam substantially improved the status of women by explicitly ordaining upon them the rights not limited to inheritance, education, employment and consent in legitimate marriage and divorce.

Likewise, in Islam, men must bear all financial responsibility of the household, whilst providing and caring for their wife and children. A woman owes no financial responsibility to her husband or her household and her husband has zero rights to her wealth, regardless of whether she is affluent or works. This is optional for her out of her own free will. However, she is obliged


91 Ibid. Pg. 1218.
to nurture and care for her household for which men are also encouraged to help women in their duties. This shows that Islamic traditional gender roles do not deem women to be incapable nor compromise their rights, but rather extend and protect them. It also reveals that Syrian refugee women are not marginalised by the main tenets of their religion but rather by a multitude of other contributing factors like patriarchal cultural practices and colonization. Their divinely ordained rights are also impeded by the GEPS that follow a Western liberal feminist framework promoting the sole economic independence of women.

The NGO operations and GEPS can reinforce the dangerous myth, which racially stereotypes Muslim women as passive and silent victims. This is despite the equitable economic independence that Islam affords them, which NGOs can be ignorant of. Therefore, this requires to be challenged and debunked in an attempt to decolonize the GEPS, as viewing Syrian women solely through a Western liberal feminist lens is reductive. The women’s testimonies emphasized that they wanted their men to work. One woman described her life as the sole breadwinner. She mentioned her old age and how it was a burden for her to walk long distances for work, whilst her husband was struggling with unemployment, which pained him to watch his wife struggle to provide for the family.92 This was consistent across the interviews since most women were employed due to the GEPs, which resulted in the high unemployment of men.93 This was an

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93 Ibid. Pg. 98-99.
inadvertent consequence of the NGOs in achieving gender equality, as it failed to fairly achieve this.

It is evident from the interviews that most women are working out of sheer necessity, whilst men and young boys are willing to work.94 However, competition for work is rife against men, as there is very little work and very high demand to work.95 Due to having nothing to do many men find themselves having no purpose due to boredom and feeling de-emasculated, even in healthy households, which has led to severe mental health issues for them. Due to the gravity of the situation, many men were desperate to escape back to Syria to fight or for employment due to experiencing the phenomena of the politics of exhaustion.96 This was an issue, which persistently came up across the interviews. Similarly, in one instance, refugees were also threatened with refoulment from camp administrators if refugees did not behave accordingly to what the local aid workers wanted.97 This reveals the lack of agency, dignity and rights refugees have, as they are treated as sub-human. This shows that local and international NGOs may fail to value lives consistently. It ultimately highlights a pressing need for the GEPs to be culturally and religiously inclusive whilst paying attention to men and children.

94 Ibid. Pg. 49.
95 Ibid. Pg. 72, 88.
96 Ibid. Pg. 21, 51, 54, 71, 83, 88, 90, 93
97 Ibid. Pg 90.
Likewise, the NGOs do not mention single mothers participating in the programmes and experiencing strained relationships with their children. They may gain economic independence to provide for their children, yet it does not alleviate the tensions in the household or if mothers have afforded childcare measures when they are at work. Therefore, the GEPs should not solely focus on gender equality between men and women but explore the recurring themes in the strained family relations category. As many of the interviewees were either single mothers or wives of disabled husbands who could not work yet struggled with this. It is also unclear how GEPs support women who do not wish to work or those who fail, drop out or do not perform well in the programmes. Similarly, women may take advantage and utilize gender performance to claim vulnerability to receive more aid or they may be given new degrees of power to inflict abuse onto their households, whether it is men or children. NGO articles also mainly push success stories, which highlight surface satisfaction and also appeal for support and donations. Overall, a focus on gender equality in humanitarian does have benefits such as providing income, immediate relief and some security, however, it can become dangerous when focused explicitly on only women’s vulnerability. Likewise, women’s economic-based solutions have been shown to be inadequate in addressing refugees’ needs due to a clash between the Western and local culture of the refugees in Za’atari. Therefore, the effectiveness of the GEPs is questionable.
Chapter 6 - Conclusion

From the sample, this study has shown that GEPs solely aimed at increasing the economic independence of women are a double-edged sword. It can produce benefits and shortcomings for all refugees within Za’atari. Therefore, this research concludes that the effectiveness of GEPs in increasing female refugees’ agency and welfare is debatable. The analysis is based on this specific research sample with ample evidence, but results can fluctuate with a wider sample of testimonies. Nonetheless, it is evident that GEPs limited short-term benefits do deliver immediate relief for women refugees to provide for their households. However, the superficial statistical success promotes NGOs’ organizational goals to appeal for support and donations. It negates a deeper analysis of the reality of refugees’ wellbeing, lived experiences and social context, which is rarely viewed as a human right in itself.

The GEPs are built on the foundation of Western liberal feminism which does not accommodate women refugees’ religion and culture. Although NGOs do not view themselves as political actors, they have involuntarily become one and fail to recognise refugees as political actors. Regardless of intentions, this study has shown that the current approach of local and international NGOs can inadvertently obstruct refugees’ efforts in reconstructing their lives in the encampment, as they resiliently hold on to their religion and culture. NGOs seek to ignorantly conjure cultural change amongst Syrian refugees in their traditional gender roles in the short-term. The values, meanings and policies of gender do not geographically and temporally correspond. This is what results in the refugees’ resilient narrative, in which their resistance can be viewed as
a form of protest against the current system of humanitarian aid. Similarly, the findings of this study revealed that women refugees showed agency in becoming the breadwinners of their households. However, they all preferred for their husband to be the main breadwinner. This was consistent across the testimonies, including women who have financial freedom in healthy households. The reason for this was the greater economic benefits already provided to them by their religion, which in contrast the GEPs did not match up to, as women were only working out of sheer necessity and lack of men’s employment. Syrian refugees are inseparable from their religion since it was the main effective source of self-help in defeating their debilitating symptoms of the politics of exhaustion.

The refugees’ choice to work or not and make demands to improve NGO services in culturally and religiously appropriate ways is inherently a liberal concept. Yet ignoring it by prioritising GEPs directly contradicts the liberal framework by appearing to function as empowerment but resulting in concealed oppression. Consequently, the humanitarian commitments of empathy and alleviating suffering blind NGOs to its direct political implications. Moreover, the current humanitarian system cannot be separated from its colonial history and civilizing missions. Neither can its implications in shaping neo-colonial politics and refugee policies. The unequal power dynamics and gender inequality have evolved historically and continue to persist in the NGO-refugee relationship. It also bears some resemblance to the language concerning humanitarian aid. This research reveals how NGOs frequently use a supremacy language which encapsulates the savior narrative through the use of othering and condescending language to describe refugees as passive and helpless subjects. This linguistically reinforces their
power hierarchies by profiting from refugees’ trauma. However, it is possible to use carefully and responsibly some of the highlighted neo-colonial vocabulary in humanitarian campaigns since the meanings of a word can greatly change depending on the context.

This research does not call for GEPs to be completely ceased, rather it should be revised to the circumstances and demands of Syrian refugee women in Za’atari. An adapted framework is required to comprehensively address the short-term solutions to long-lasting crises.

There are women who prefer to work and those who do not want to, and neither is less than the other. Therefore, UN Women and NGOs should recognise their respective needs and that means of empowerment are not homogenous. Likewise, this research calls for religiosity to be taken seriously in political and humanitarian discourse. This should be present in long-term aid solutions that focus on improving structural means since Za’atari has transformed into a permanent settlement.

**Recommendations**

There is no one solution to answer all the issues discussed in this study, since the circumstances of every Syrian refugee in Za’atari varies. Discontinuing the GEPs or aid all together is not an option either. Rather this research calls for a need to re-examine and re-adjust the current gender equality efforts, as there is a need for improvement. Local and international NGOs should begin by acknowledging that gender equality for men, women and children should not be treated as supplemental, rather it should be integrated within the regular operations of humanitarian aid. It is the norm to do whatever one pleases when coming from a place of safety
and privilege, but in the urgent and insecure camp environment, the sole economic independence of women cannot be treated as the ideal solution. Therefore, the orientalist assumptions of Western liberal feminism needs to approach Syrian women from a more nuanced conscious lens that is inclusive of their religion and culture. There is an erasure of the Syrian concept of autonomy, empowerment and dignity, which removes and dictates the agency of refugee women. Likewise, NGOs should be cautious of superficially publishing the success of their programmes quantitatively through statistics without honestly addressing shortcomings. Doing this would also garner the organisations with legitimacy for their genuineness.

Since current solutions are mostly top-down yet have shown to be inadequate, grassroots solutions must then be explored and consolidated which prioritizes refugee voices. This study recommends two main long-term solutions: Islamic-based mental health programmes and re-assessing employment to equally create more opportunities for men and women. Due to the findings of the content analysis, this study calls for a bottom-up Islamic-based solution that is inclusive of the refugees’ culture. It is evident that men, women and children suffer from mental health issues, however religion is taken very seriously by the refugees. Therefore, with the re-assessment of resources, funding can also be diverted to employing trained Muslim professionals who can offer faith-based therapy and counselling services, which may also reduce the cultural stigma around mental health. 98 Due to the considerable influence of religion and culture, the

involvement of vetted and objective Islamic leaders, scholars and other authority is also required to reconcile the NGO-refugee relationship. It is evident that Islam protects and extends the rights of Muslim women, therefore these figures can be greatly beneficial. For example, in matters of abuse and gender-based violence or harmful patriarchal culture, Islamic figures can help in the construction of programmes, talks or lectures in correcting this. This is crucial since Islamic figures are more likely to garner support from traditional men and women to respectfully adhere to Islamic principles. In such a way gender equality specifically pertaining to Muslim Syrian refugees could also be attained through Islamic legitimacy. This would alleviate their conditions from the politics of exhaustion, whilst preserving their dignity and maintaining harmless cultural customs. It would also help in dispelling the orientalist Western perceptions of Muslim women.

The Islamic-based solutions would have a positive effect on Syrian men, women and children in Za’atari by reconciling the NGO-refugee relationship through incorporating religion and culture. However, this may not be taken seriously by Western NGOs since such solutions would give refugees more power, which could threaten the organisations who require a power imbalance in their favour to provide aid. Yet, power equality is the result of achieving gender equality, which is the very goal of the NGOS. The two are intertwined. When one gains gender equality, their power also increases, which contradictorily are the very goals of UN Women and NGOs. This brings into question how genuine humanitarians are in accomplishing this at the cost of organisations losing power, the consequence of which Gatter explains in detail. Additionally,

99 Ibid. Pg. 72.
NGOs may not pursue this solution since it also undermines the principles of Western liberal frameworks and due to the West’s fears of Islamic indoctrination. If such is the case, then meetings should be established in which refugees, aid workers and officials who oversee projects can air grievances and discuss collective solutions.

The second solution considers the reassessment of current work opportunities for all skilled and unskilled refugees. Where possible, unskilled refugees should be trained and hired by NGOs and government institutions to work in the camp. This would practically reduce NGO costs in hiring foreign or local works, whilst income and aid can be diverted to refugees. This is based on the interview of one Syrian woman who was employed by the UN and was given many benefits.\textsuperscript{100} Likewise, many other interviewees stated that they were overworked as were NGO workers, which calls for a greater need to follow this solution.\textsuperscript{101} It is evident from the interviews that all refugees are willing to learn and work any profession.\textsuperscript{102} Therefore, skilled refugees can also be taught, go through examinations and be trained to become mental health counsellors to be employed in the Islamic-based mental health programmes. This will not only be a form of self-help but it will also be gratifying and empowering for them to help their communities become self-sufficient in a dignified manner. This reassessment of employment opportunities gives men, and especially women who are willing to, the prospect to work. However, such a shift may require humanitarian

\textsuperscript{100} Ibid. Pg. 108.
\textsuperscript{101} Ibid. Pg. 87, 89, 110.
\textsuperscript{102} Ibid. Pg. 85.
actors to make tough changes, which may be unwilling to do so, since in a bottom-up solution
refugees have more influence and power in designing the programmes. Any new decision-making
authority given to refugees could threaten the existing power hierarchy of the NGO-refugee
relationship.

This paper does not necessarily push for drastic changes, but rather incremental changes
over time that is more likely to reinforce improvements in the long term rather than in one
generation of Syrian refugees in Za’atari. The impact of these changes would also no longer portray
refugee women as victims nor would it neglect them from discourse. A downside is that in one
way we should not be looking to confine refugees for indefinite periods. Long-term solutions may
contribute to their prolongation and may inadvertently contribute to the politics of exhaustion. The
solution should ultimately be supporting them to live lifestyles outside of the camps. However,
since circumstances may appear bleak, the option should be to improve current GEPs to become
more religiously and culturally appropriate.
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