Gender and power-structures in refugee camps: social changes following refugee movements

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Abbreviations

UNHCR   United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

This paper develops a framework for examining gender power structures within refugee camps. At this stage there are disproportionately more questions than answers. These questions, however, will guide future research to be undertaken in this area. The paper will provide a framework for future research by analysing terminology, raising the questions that need to be asked, and by drawing on some of the literature available on this topic. In terms of methodology, this paper will largely use a discourse and literature analysis approach. For future work in this area, more statistical data would be needed to illustrate social change and indicators reflecting gendered positions in power structures. An empirical approach would also be very appropriate as people's experience and perceptions largely inform gender relations and power structures.

Introduction

The issue of gender and power structures in refugee camps is interesting, because power structures within camps can determine the refugee's access to equitable shares of resources, decision-making processes, and the level of politicisation and militarisation in the camps. A gender analysis is important because women refugees can have limited input in decision-making, frequently face greater burdens, and need specific protection. It needs to be asked whether women's place in the power structure is artificially constructed by the aid 'community', and whether their inclusion or exclusion needs to be addressed.

An analysis of the main terminology will provide the background, and the basis, for a discourse analysis approach. It is important to understand the differences and similarities between the power structures in societies before they were forced to flee and the power structures that developed when the same society inhabited a refugee camp. It needs to be asked whether the chaos and trauma of refugee movements break apart the social structure or bind and strengthen it. This would include looking at how an exodus and refugee camp life affects women's position in the social and power structures of that group. The aid agencies' role in assuming a breakdown of social structures (and the imposition of new constructed structures) and the power relationship between aid agencies and refugees also needs to be addressed. Gender power struggles and the ways in which power is attained will also be discussed. Some initial hypotheses that arise from the framework are also put forward as starting points for future research.

Analysis of terminology

An initial discourse analysis is important in establishing a clear framework for researching gender and power structures in refugee camps. The meanings of several key terms, as they are used in this paper, need to clarified. These terms include 'power structures', 'gender', 'refugee' and 'woman refugee'.

What does the term 'power structures' mean? In this paper the analysis of power structures will be from a sociological perspective. Societies can be seen as frameworks inside which acting units develop their actions, and structural features, such as 'social systems', 'culture', and 'social hierarchies', set the conditions for their actions (Blumer 1991:541). According to this understanding, power structures would also be a part of the structural features that inform social actions. However, this essay will not hold to the common definition of 'society' that is put forward by Smith which says that only geographically distinct units with governmental institutions can be regarded as societies (1991:392). This explanation is too narrow for this paper's purpose, as I believe power structures can evolve in identifiable groups other than those confined by territory and organised by governments. The term 'societies' will still be referred to but will include broader notions of either a self-identified group, or a culturally and/or geographically identifiable group.

Power structures in societies include issues of class and gender and are changing over time. Power structures can be seen as hierarchies of status, decision-making, rule making and enforcement, resource access and control, and gender relationships. Gender relationships are informed by economic and political power, 'voice'[1], divisions of labour, cultural norms and external pressures. According to McSpadden and Moussa, '[p]atriarchal ideology shapes the identity of both sexes and institutionalizes values and the power relations between them both in the public and private realms'. Each culture constructs different gender relationships, and these relationships are crucial determinants of men's and women's place in the power structure (1993:204). Power structures are not static and will invariably change because of crisis situations, such as refugee exoduses. The ways in which they change and the effects of the changes should, however, be examined on a case by case basis.

The term 'gender' will be used in this paper to mean differences between the sexes that are culturally and socially constructed, rather than biological differences. It is pointed out that, because gender is created by society, its meaning will be different in different societies and will develop over time (Henshall Momsen 1991:4). A gendered analysis should not simply be seen as studying women in isolation—it should entail the interaction of men and women in their specific social and cultural context. An analysis of gender in a society is highly complex and can be very individual, but it is possible to identify some broad indicators of a society's gender interactions.

At the macro level the World Bank uses indicators such as female life expectancy, total fertility rate, female/male literacy rate, percentage of females in tertiary education, female participation rate in the labour force and female share of the agricultural labour force to illustrate regional patterns of gender differences (Henshall Momsen 1991:5). In a specific society within one of these regions macro indicators may have little relevance in understanding gender relationships. Indicators that may be more useful at a micro level include division of labour according to gender, power relations at the household level,

legal rights and ownership of businesses and property, equality of access to education, and incidences of sexual and domestic violence. Some of these indicators are quite problematic. For example, are relations within households reflective of the individuals or of the whole society, and how would this relationship be measured? A less scientific but equally important method of understanding gender in a particular society would be to talk to women about how they see their position in society and to men about how they see women.

What does it mean to be a 'refugee' and a 'refugee woman'? According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the term refugee applies to any person who '…owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself to the protection of that country' (UNHCR 1979:11). Zolberg et al. identify three sociological types of refugees: the 'activist', 'the target' and 'the victim', all three of which have equal rights to protection. The activist is a dissenter or rebel whose actions contributed to the conflict which forced him/her to flee. The target is a member of a particular group singled out to be targeted. The victim is caught in the cross-fire and vulnerable in the general violence of the conflict (1989:269).

The overriding implication of these definitions is that a refugee is in need of international legal protection from political conflict, discrimination and violence. It is essential that refugees are also accorded protection when faced with other types of threats, such as famine or drought, whether they are conflict-driven or not (Zolberg *et al.* 1989:270–1). These definitions are based on international law and what it means to be a refugee should also be looked at from the point of view of the refugee. A study of Ethiopian and Eritrean refugees illustrated the sense of shame and loss of self-respect that came with becoming a refugee. In their language 'refugee' also implied 'beggar', and in their culture to be a beggar shows a lack of independence and is considered shameful behaviour (McSpadden and Moussa 1993:210). To be a refugee may also mean a breakdown in traditional social, political and gender relationships, and the effects of this should be researched in individual refugee settings.

The crossing of national borders is implicit in the UNHCR definition of a refugee. Internally displaced people are, therefore, unable to be accorded protection, because of the way they are labelled. According to Wood, 'labelling refers to a relationship of power in that the labels of some are more easily imposed on people and situations than those of others'. Labelling is a political act in that it involves conflict and authority, and is also a scientific act of '…valuation and judgement involving prejudices and stereotyping' (1985:5–6). In the context of refugees, it is very easy for the aid agencies to hold the position of power and label individuals according to their personal bias and stereotyping. Imposing labels on refugees can mean the difference between life and death, and power and powerlessness. Zetter argues that 'refugee' is one of the most powerful labels, because

of the 'right' aid agencies have to label, and the vulnerability of those being labelled. Labelling or not labelling someone as a refugee is highly political and highlights the '…non-participatory nature and powerlessness of refugees' (1991:39).

Indeed both Wood and Zetter's arguments are valid. After an individual has, however, been accorded refugee status and granted a refugee identity card there is the possibility that the refugee holds a position of power and is able to use and misuse that power. It must be acknowledged that power structures do develop in camps. This process begins with people's status as refugees and all the rights that status entails. In analysing the discourse surrounding refugees and refugee camps, Hermione Singer makes the extremely valid observation that refugees are constructed as helpless beneficiaries, innocent and apolitical victims in need of international protection (1995:1–2). This construction is part of the labelling process and can obscure the realities and abuses of power within refugee camps.

It is important to acknowledge that neither the UNHCR nor the Zolberg definition specifically mentioned gender-based discrimination or violence that would cause women and their communities to flee. War tactics used in the former Yugoslavia to clear villages involved systematic rapes of women and children. These rapes not only violated the victims but also terrorised whole communities, forcing them to flee. The experience of refugee women should be seen as distinct from refugee men during the period of exodus and also after they are accorded refugee status. Women refugees are of course not a homogenous group. It is useful, however, to identify some commonalities that inform their experience and position in power structures. Often women form the majority of refugees[2] due to factors such as war, which enlists and kills mostly men (Forbes Martin 1991:1). Women often have dependants and are heads of households. The UNHCR has increasingly been recognising the specific needs and nature of women refugees. In 1988 a section called 'Refugee Women' was adopted by the UNHCR, in which women's physical vulnerability was identified and the need to promote women as agents and not merely beneficiaries of refugee programs was acknowledged (Forbes Martin 1991:107).

A gendered notion of being a refugee acknowledges that the

> …traditional social and cultural fabric of life is rent apart in unpredictable ways [and often]...takes away the assumed permanence of the social relationships between men and women. There is, therefore, the likely consequence of a shift in the previously experienced and expected power hierarchy and power differentials (McSpadden and Moussa 1993:205).

The question that needs to be asked in specific cases is, what changes has a shift in gender power structures caused, and who benefits from these changes?

The power structure in the society before the refugee movement and the causes of the exodus

An understanding of the society and the power structure of the 'home' society is crucial to an analysis of the changes to structures that may develop after the refugee exodus and living in camps. The following questions need to be asked

- What were the power structures like in the society before they fled to the refugee camp?
- What are the 'cultural' norms that prescribed gendered roles in the community and in the household (Callamard 1996:178)?
- If there has been a historical precedent of crisis and emergency in the society, what is that society's own conceptualisation of emergencies and vulnerability?
- Where did women fit into the society's power structure?
- What caused the refugee movement?

As mentioned previously, these questions should be answered from a sociological perspective that is culturally sensitive and includes gender concerns. Indicators of the power structure have to be determined, such as who holds the economic and political power, who is represented and who is invisible, the gendered divisions of labour, cultural norms and external pressures.

The factors that caused the refugee exodus must also be examined. If the push factors were political and violent, and militarism and conflict dominated original power structures, the situation in the refugee camp may reflect these structures and become a volatile, unsafe 'refuge'. If the push factors were more environmental the camp could have different qualities.

The aid 'community'[3] and refugee community: donor and beneficiary power hierarchy

The first experience of power hierarchies that refugees may experience when arriving in a refugee camp is the power of the aid 'communities' to label individuals as refugees or non-refugees. This is a very powerful and political act in two ways and has implications for the future workings of the refugee camp. Zetter points out that once individuals are labelled as refugees they have international legal rights and are seen as legitimate beneficiaries of protection and aid (1991:40). This act of labelling has duel implications. First, it means that the aid community has power over individuals when deciding their status. Second, the individuals with refugee status can possibly become powerful because of their status. Drawing attention to those with the power to label, and the lack of power of those who are labelled, will highlight the camp's power structures and the relationship between agencies and 'beneficiaries'.

There are two differentiated power structures in refugee camps, those of the aid 'community' and those of the refugee population. There are many questions that need to be asked in order to ascertain the interaction of the power structures of aid agencies and the refugee community

- How do the power structures of the humanitarian aid workers and the refugee populations interact?

- Is there a divide between the labellers and labelled in refugee camps?

- Does the aid 'community' ignore gender issues in the face of general suffering and chaos, and, if so, to what effect?

- Do aid organisations construct a gender-biased environment or accentuate existing gender inequality (Callamard 1996:178)?

- How do women refugees interact in official camp power structures? Are women encouraged to participate in decision–making? Do women demand participation?

- Is the interaction fostered by the aid workers policies or is it advocated from the women themselves——is the interaction 'top–down' or 'bottom–up'?

Aid organisations[4] set up refugee camps, because it is administratively easier to provide protection and basic needs in a confined, controlled area. Singer argues that camps appear to create dependency in the refugee populations (1995:4). If this is true, the balance of power is in favour of the aid community. This concept of dependency is mutually reinforcing. As much as refugees are constructed as dependent upon the aid organisations, so the aid community is dependent on this construction for their funding and for their very existence. Kibreab makes the extremely valid point that when aid agencies expect and construct refugees to be dependent, they are assuming that there has been a breakdown in the social structure. Assuming that the 'disaster' has destroyed refugees' traditional structures and coping mechanisms allows aid agencies to impose new organisational structures (1993:333). There needs to be serious consideration of this issue in refugee camps, and it needs to be asked whether traditional structures really have completely broken down or not, and on what basis is this determined. Structures imposed by agencies may be completely inappropriate and based on an inaccurate analysis of refugee initiative and coping strategies. Another issue arising from the construction of refugees as dependent is the cases where refugee leaders have manipulated the aid community, using the aid resources and camp itself to become very independent and powerful. These cases illustrate that not all refugees are dependent, innocent or victims.

Decision-making in the camps: political power and the creation of artificial refugee power structures

In order to assess decision-making and its role in creating power structures the following questions should be asked

- Who is involved (and powerful) in decision-making?
- How were the personnel for the decision-making process chosen?
- Do aid workers impose artificial power structures on the refugee population?
- Does the aid 'community' construct power structures that favour refugee men at the expense of women, and what are the forces determining this (re)construction (Callamard 1996:178)?
- Are these structures sensitive to representing the needs of women?
- What is private/domestic decision-making like within households?

As mentioned earlier, there are two distinct and parallel power structures representing the aid community and the refugees. The language of humanitarian aid suggests that the aid organisations, as the donors of aid, are in a position to control the 'beneficiaries' and 'victims' who are identified as helpless and innocent. Nyamwaya discusses the construction of ownership and control of beneficiary groups by development agencies (1997:189), and in an emergency aid context, portraying the project as 'controlled' could also be an organisational objective. The control and power aid organisations have over refugees is real, however, in that they decide who is labelled as a refugee and they control the provision of the means of survival. It is also real that many refugees are excluded from the decision-making processes that affect their lives in the camp. Therefore, those refugees who are included in decision-making wield substantial amounts of power and control.

Singer points out that '…socio-political structures, economic systems and kinship networks may have been greatly weakened by the crisis, and that in the oversized, crowded communities of strangers it may be difficult for new regulatory mechanisms to develop' (1995:5). It should also be acknowledged that in some cases the crisis may indeed help to bond the society rather than break it apart, and this should be examined on a case by case basis. If it is shown that traditional home structures are weakened, the way in which the new decision-making structure is (re)built is crucial. In creating this structure there should be an awareness of whether the representatives are the same as in the place of origin or whether they are chosen because of a fostered relationship with the aid organisations. The construction of an artificial power-structure would invariably cause tensions and would not provide an open link between the aid givers and refugee populations. In the Ukwimi settlement in Zambia, for example, the traditional chief was not seen as a representative of his people by the camp administration. This undermined the 'home' power structure and caused the refugees to complain (Singer 1995:31). UNHCR guidelines advocate participation of women refugees in the camp administration. This has to be done, however, in a culturally sensitive manner in order for women's participation to be accepted. In the

article 'Refugee women: in need of special protection', Quick reports on a situation in an African refugee camp where women's inclusion in the leadership council was met with resistance from both the men and women. The situation was resolved when UNHCR staff made attempts to understand the resistance and identified roles where women were traditionally leaders (1996:17).

'Section leaders' are refugee representatives of different sections of the camp and are either elected by the refugee population or nominated by the camp administration. Their role is to provide a link between the refugees and the camp administration and choose other refugee workers and representatives They are also charged with maintaining peace and security in their sections (Callamard 1996:179). In a study of the Lisongwe camp of Mozambican refugees in Malawi, it was observed that all the section leaders were men. This pattern also occurred in many other camps in the region (Callamard 1996:180). It can be seen that this position is very powerful. Consequently, in individual case studies the following questions should be researched

- How did the section leader attain the position?
- If it was by camp administration, what criteria or methods were used to choose the section leaders?
- If there was a vote amongst the refugee population, what was this process like?
- Were women involved in this process?
- How does the section leader communicate with the population?
- Does the section leader communicate all groups needs and concerns to the camp administration?
- If peace and security is a duty of the section leader, how is this achieved? Is the leader given rule enforcement powers or arms to achieve security?

According to Callamard, the absence of women's organisations and women's voices within the power structures of the camp lead to the increasing confinement of women to the domestic sphere and downgrading of their status in gender relations (1996:178). Gender biases of aid organisations can mean that refugee power structures are male-dominated, and if aid organisations make incorrect assumptions about the 'home' society's gender relations, gender inequities can be exacerbated. Alternatively, forcing women's participation may be culturally inappropriate. Women refugees' lack of participation in decision-making processes translates into women's lack of access to power, creating economic and health related vulnerability. According to a study of Lao and Hmong women in Thai refugee camps, women, collectively and individually, do not have formal channels for expressing their views to higher authorities other than through their husbands or male relatives. The study also found that men derived significant advantages from their formal authority and direct representation, including freedom to move outside the camps, participation in camp training programs and input into the repatriation process (Cha and

Small 1994:1047). In camps, it needs to be asked whether women's exclusion from decision-making is out of respect for cultural norms or whether aid organisations have constructed an image of refugee women that is exaggerated or not realistic.

Abuses of power by refugees in positions of power do occur in refugee camps. It is vital that those people who were involved in causing the initial refugee movement are not allowed to legitimise their power through the aid community. This process should begin at the outset—when refugee status is given—and should continue through the process of creating decision-making structures. If highly politicised and militarised power structures evolve through decision-making structures, the refugee population will not only be artificially represented, but the camp may also become a very dangerous and unsafe 'refuge'. Ben Barber warns of the dangers of guerrillas and militarised groups using refugee camps as bases to launch attacks, as a means of obtaining aid resources, and as a pool for recruitment. For example, in an Algerian refugee camp, tribal men were used as fronts for a guerilla movements fighting against Moroccan troops, and in Zairean camps for Rwandans, Hutu[5] militiamen ran the camps and were even responsible for determining access to food aid and medical care (1997:8–9, 11). The question of demilitarising camps is extremely problematic, and yet solutions must be sought so that camps can maintain their role as a place of protection.

Power and control of resources and food aid

In refugee camps the primary tool of power and means of increasing one's status in the power structure is through the control of food aid and other aid resources. Therefore, the most pressing question is; who has control over the resources and their distribution, and what does this control mean?

The ways in which control over resources and food aid translates into power in refugee camps must be understood so that resource allocation is equitable and so that individual refugees are not in a position to control the majority of refugees. Hypothetically, control of food and other essential resources may be taken by armed force, leaving both the aid agencies and refugees at the mercy of that group. These resources can then be used to supply military groups inside and outside the camp, and to control the refugee population. Refugee men could face forced recruitment and women could face sexual violence or prostitution in order to gain access to controlled resources. These types of controls are the worst case scenario and would not always be present in camps. A more common means of controlling aid resources and gaining power would be through petty corruption. According to Callamard, in Malawi, 'Petty corruption in the food distribution process is…a part of the power-building process within the refugee communities—section leaders assert their power and create a patronage system by distributing benefits to their followers' (1996:180–1). The effects on the nutritional and health status of the refugee population are a major issue when a patronage system favours some refugees and not others. The risk of not receiving the required allocation of resources means many refugees often accept the power of the distributor.

Callamard describes the changes in the gender division of labour to illustrate how the control of food aid in refugee camps is central to power, gender and power structures. In Mozambique, food related activities were predominantly in the sphere of 'women's work'. In the Malawi camp, however, refugee men took over some of these activities, enabling them to gain more power. The refugee men were involved in food distribution and trading food for cash, whilst women were left with the food related activities that were close to the domestic sphere (such as cooking and carrying the food to the household). Callamard asks why refugee women were expelled from the allocation and trade of food, when it was part of their 'home' culture, and how this translated into unequal political power for men and women (1996:177). In other cases, the gendered division of labour and its proximity to the domestic/private sphere should be studied. The changes between the 'home' division of labour and those in the camp are the key to understanding which activities and resources convey power to individuals.

David Keen argues that providing cash for refugee households will mean the benefits are not equally distributed amongst its members. The provision of food aid, however, will not ensure equal distribution because of unequal power within households (1992:52). If men are in control of food aid and selling it for cash, not only may the men's families be deprived of food, nutrition and health benefits, but this cash may also provide a means of creating power. Cash gives people the ability to buy items that are in demand and become involved in corruption. Callamard also notes that, in the Malawi camp, trade for cash was a male-dominated activity, whereas women were confined to bartering (1996:182). The use of aid resources for activities other then those intended by the providers should be further investigated as to its effect on power and power relations between men and women.

Gender and sexual power structures/struggles

Gendered power structures entail divisions of labour and decision-making power based on gender. The exclusion of women from access to power may be closely connected to their reproductive capacities and their constructed place in the domestic sphere. Sexual power structures are also based on gender and often include sexual violence. The following questions should be asked in order to understand better the nature of sexual power structures and struggles in refugee camps

- Are women labelled in a way that excludes them from power in decision–making and representation? If so, how are they labelled?
- What kind of power and representation do women have?
- Is violence perpetrated in different ways according to gender?
- Is sex used as a means of accessing resources?
- Are there power struggles based on gender? If so, does this include rape and forced prostitution?

Women refugees are often cited as needing specific protection because of their vulnerability to sexual violence (Quick 1996, Campus–Jacques 1989). In a study of Ethiopian and Eritrean refugees, the refugees were very clear in differentiating the ways violence was perpetrated against men and women. Men were beaten, imprisoned, killed or threatened with repatriation, whereas violence against women was always sexual, in the form of rape and forced prostitution (McSpadden and Moussa 1993:213). In each case it needs to be ascertained whether violence is gendered and whether the violence has further social as well as psychological implications.

As mentioned earlier, the use of systematic rape in the Former Yugoslavia as a means of forcing whole communities to flee illustrates the hidden agenda of sexual violence. Rape of women and children not only physically and mentally devastates the victims but it can achieve the aim of humiliating the whole group (Campus–Jacques 1989:146). In refugee camps it must be ascertained whether there is a prevalence of sexual violence, and if so, what the perpetrator's motives are. Possible motivations, such as the maintenance of power structures and submission of refugees, should be investigated. Campus–Jacques argues that sexual violence against refugee women should be seen in the wider context of a breakdown in social and cultural norms resulting from the crisis that caused their exile (1989:146). This argument may be valid in some cases, but first it must be asked whether social structures have really collapsed, and from whose perspective this understanding comes.

In terms of agencies' part in the gendered structures of power, does the camp administration have mechanisms for understanding women's problems in this structure, and how are these problems dealt with? If there is no attempt by agencies to give women a 'voice' it implies that aid agencies are accepting or promoting the construction of women as powerless and confined to the private/domestic sphere.

The UNHCR has developed guidelines to address the issues of sexual violence against women refugees and protection against this violence. The guidelines include better mechanisms for reporting sexual and physical abuse, improvements in camp design, and security patrols (Quick 1996:17). While these measures, if implemented, will be useful, there is no attempt to identify and address the root causes of the gendered violence, nor any attempt to empower women through decision-making processes.

Changes in the society's power structures: differences and similarities between home and refugee camps

The notion of breakdown in the refugee society should be challenged as a generic assumption, and a more careful analysis of individual cases should be applied. If it is falsely assumed by aid agencies that the society's power structures have broken down, it then becomes acceptable to impose a new structure on the refugee population—a structure that may not reflect the society's values and may ignore its strengths. The traditional

power structure should be fostered and encouraged, and changes in this power structure should be understood in terms of society being dynamic in its adaptation to a new environment. Changes in the power structure which adversely affect some groups in the society should also be studied so that solutions to redress the imbalance can be found. The following questions should be asked for each future case study of refugee camps

- Did the power structures of the group change after living in the camp, and if so, how did they change?
- What were the similarities of, and differences between, the home power structure and the camp power structure?
- Is there any evidence that the upheaval of becoming refugees strengthened or weakened the pre-existing power structure of that society?

Conclusion

The framework that has been developed through this paper suggests three main hypotheses that need to be tested and proved or disproved by future research. An initial hypothesis is that gender power structures do change as a result of both the initial exodus and subsequent life in refugee camps. The effects of this change, however, must be examined on a case by case basis. A second preliminary hypothesis is that women's position in the power structure is lowered because of inequities in the camp decision-making process, male domination in control of resources and sexual violence. A third hypothesis is that aid agencies impose artificially constructed structures on refugee populations, because of inaccurate assumptions about social breakdown.

Notes

[1] By 'voice', I mean representation of views and influence in the society.

[2] One figure estimates that 80 per cent of refugees are women and children (Forbes Martin 1991:1).

[3] For lack of a better word, aid 'community' is used to describe the multitude of humanitarian aid organisations and UN bodies that are invloved in working with refugees and refugee camps.

[4] The term 'aid organisations' is used to encompass all types of organisations that claim to 'help' refugees.

[5] Hutu Rwandans perpetrated genocide against Tutsis in 1994 and then launched attacks against the Tutsi-led government from refugee camps located on the border (Barber 1997:10)

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