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Hassouneh, Nadine

Routledge
2022

Hassouneh , N & Pascucci , E 2022 , Nursing trauma, harvesting data : refugee knowledge and refugee labour in the international humanitarian regime . in M Kmak & H Björklund (eds) , Refugees and Knowledge Production : Europe's Past and Present . Routledge , Abingdon , pp. 199-214 . <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003092421-15>

<http://hdl.handle.net/10138/342670>
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003092421-15>

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Refugee knowledge and refugee labour in the international humanitarian regime

Nadine Hassouneh and Elisa Pascucci

Introduction

In 2019, in Northern Jordan, in villages not far from the Syrian border that had offered refuge to displaced Syrians for over eight years, a major European humanitarian organization was running an outreach medical programme targeting vulnerable groups. These encompassed pregnant and breastfeeding women, children under five years of age, the elderly, and people with chronic diseases. The community workers in charge of locating and reaching out to beneficiaries included a significant number of Syrian refugees. Unsurprisingly given the nature of the tasks assigned to them, many were women. One of them described the work as follows:

Our work was in the field, we would search for pregnant women, elderly people, and children, we have to work between 9 AM and 3 PM. We were not allowed to leave before 3 PM. We were located via GPS from nine till three and not allowed to move elsewhere. [...] We would give pregnant women barcodes, and there was no way of giving a barcode if we were not at the right place, at the pregnant women's homes. We used to take their information, their data, due date, rent, transportation – data collection, then they would receive some help, whether they gave birth naturally or through a C-section. Families with children under five years of age also received some help. Both Jordanians and Syrians – Jordanians without health insurance – would receive 130 Jordanian dinars [...] We had to conduct four visits to four houses every day. We had to search for four pregnant ladies every day, we had to knock on doors.

These words alert us to the fraught data politics of contemporary international aid, whose functioning depends on its ability to collect, store, and circulate information on vulnerable populations.¹ However, they also pose a radical challenge to the commonly held view of humanitarian aid as provided by wealthy donors and altruistic expatriates from the richest parts of the world, with refugees in the “Global South” on the passive receiving end. People like the Syrian community worker quoted above are part of the large workforce of development and humanitarian organizations, 90% of which is

estimated to be composed by people recruited locally – and often precariously or informally – in countries of intervention.² This workforce includes people with a refugee background serving international institutions as researchers, translators, social and community workers, IT technicians, project managers, logisticians, social entrepreneurs, cooks, and cleaners – to name but a few of the forms of labour that sustain the international humanitarian regime. These workers’ knowledge of local geographies, languages, social norms, and living conditions is essential for humanitarian aid to be delivered, and indeed for international donors to reach their aid targets.³ As the quote above shows, their labour is central to the production of knowledge about the populations that are governed by humanitarian apparatuses.

Refugees’ own contributions to international relief efforts have been essential since the early twentieth century.⁴ Yet they are rarely included in accounts of humanitarianism as “care for distant others” following a North–South trajectory. In this chapter we detail the forms of knowledge and labour that people with a refugee background bring to what are known as refugee and humanitarian regimes, namely the assemblages of international laws, institutions, and apparatuses that are tasked with providing protection and assistance to refugees. While rhetorically built upon “Western legal-normative conceptualizations of hospitality”⁵ and humanitarian care for vulnerable lives, such apparatuses, we argue, are reproduced by the embodied and localized knowledges of refugees.

Empirically, we focus on data collection, analysis, and logistics tasks performed by displaced Syrian aid workers for international humanitarian organizations and research agencies running medical and psychosocial projects in Jordan. We also offer examples of care and reproductive work performed by Syrian refugees, such as cleaners and psychosocial support group volunteers, for refugee and local communities alike. Highlighting the disregarded cultural and emotional performances such work requires, we move the discussion in this volume beyond academic intellectual production and its historically elitist social politics. In this regard, our aims are in line with those expressed in other chapters, particularly those that foreground and expand the Foucauldian notion of “subjugated knowledge”.⁶ Inspired by recent work that has explored the racial politics of humanitarianism,⁷ we foreground the role of the racialization and localization of labour, and of care and embodiment, in keeping these knowledges disregarded.

Our chapter is based on field research on labour in the humanitarian and development sectors carried out in 2016–2019 (Pascucci) and 2019–2020 (Hassouneh and Pascucci). More specifically, it draws on semi-structured interviews with Syrian aid workers conducted in Jordan (in person), Turkey and the UK (remotely) in 2019–2020. Recorded and transcribed in English, this material has been collected mostly in Arabic, and translated by one of the authors (Hassouneh), an Arabic native speaker. In this research, we draw from our previous academic work on the geographies of refugee protection and humanitarian aid (Pascucci) and displacement and diasporas (Hassouneh), as well as on years of professional experience as an analyst and

consultant in international non-governmental organizations (NGOs), with a focus on the Syrian conflict (Hassouneh).

In the following pages, we start from a review of critical approaches to humanitarianism, aimed at debunking Eurocentric assumptions of “aid to distant others in need”, and go through some historical examples of refugee involvement in relief provision since the early 20th century. We then outline our approach to refugees’ roles as workers in humanitarian organizations, foregrounding racialization, knowledge, and labour. Subsequently, we analyse interview material on research and data gathering and care work performed by Syrian refugees in Jordan for international NGOs. In conclusion, we reflect on the relation between inequality, justice, and humanitarianism as a form of government of knowledge and care relations in the “Global South”.

Beyond helping distant strangers: humanitarianism and refugee knowledges

Humanitarianism is defined as the ideals and apparatuses that emerged in the twentieth century to alleviate suffering in times of disaster and distress.⁸ As Adia Benton writes, it “is both a set of life-saving interventions and an underlying ethos for action, in which politically neutral – but empathic and compassionate – individuals risk their own lives to save the lives of distant others in distress”:⁹ conventionally, the narrative is that “professional humanitarians reach out to the vulnerable in times of crisis, and to those who are often marginalized from official mechanisms of justice and remedies for their suffering”. Benton¹⁰ sees coloniality, racialization, and distance from beneficiaries – real and imagined – as constitutive of humanitarian efforts. Similarly, Krista Maxwell¹¹ shows how humanitarian imaginaries and practices of relief targeting indigenous population were constitutive of settler colonial regimes in North America. Michael Barnett’s¹² genealogical work also exposes how the history of humanitarianism is tied to that of empire. Barnett and Stein¹³ suggest that the expansion of international aid and assistance in the early and mid-twentieth century mirrored the gradual consolidation of welfare states in the “Global North”. This foregrounds humanitarianism as a precarious, arbitrary form of social protection reserved for non-white bodies in the colonized world.¹⁴

Barnett¹⁵ considers being “directed at those in other lands” as a defining feature of modern aid. Scholars of biopolitics approach humanitarianism as a technology for the government of vulnerable populations that is essential for “the maintenance of modern (read Western) liberal sovereignty alongside and through the securing of life”.¹⁶ Although based on a more expansive and multi-scalar geographical imaginary, these definitions also maintain that “all humanitarian work contains within it issues of distance”.¹⁷ Drawing on the work of Ilana Feldman and Miriam Ticktin¹⁸ on the denied selfhood of recipients of humanitarian aid, Polly Pallister-Wilkins¹⁹ argues that the growing professionalization and managerialism of the sector in the last few decades “historically marks the shift from charitable giving ‘at home’ to more

expansive attempts at saving distant strangers”: she goes on to state that “the universalised ideals underpinning humanitarian sentiment [necessitate] distance, it requires that the humanitarian subject remains other, as a victim with needs rather than a person with full subjecthood”.

These abstract universalized ideals, and their constitutive “distance”, are increasingly being challenged in both humanitarian practice and scholarship. Many have argued for the need to be attentive not only to *what* aid does, but also to *how* it does it, and through *whose* labour.²⁰ On the ground, the reality of aid provision is made of precarious labour, militarized logistics, fortified architectures, and unequal infrastructures.²¹ Moreover, politicized, activist engagements in relief efforts,²² the emergence of alternative geographies of refuge beyond the “Global North” and its legal frameworks,²³ and the role of southern and refugee actors in the humanitarian arena²⁴ are questioning the boundaries of aid, politics, and life with growing urgency. In her work on encounters between established communities of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon and Syrian newcomers, Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh²⁵ argues that “refugee-led initiatives developed in response to existing and new refugee situations directly challenge widely held (although equally widely contested) assumptions that refugees are passive victims in need of care from outsiders”.

These phenomena tend to be conceptualized as external to institutionalized aid actors, rooted in community hospitality (and its discontents), and making up for the failures and voids of an often-dysfunctional international humanitarian regime. In a slight departure from these important bodies of work, we argue here for the relevance of refugee agency and knowledges not only in alternative forms of aid and relief, but also in the functioning and reproduction of established humanitarian apparatuses. In other words, rather than looking at refugee humanitarianism as alternative to the domain of institutional aid, we theorize refugee knowledge and labour as a constitutive, if unacknowledged, element in the modern international humanitarian order. Through their sustained reliance on precarious labour, humanitarianism and refugee aid mimic and intersect with other knowledge production enterprises. In particular, recent research highlights the “increasing interdependence” of the academic and humanitarian aid sectors.²⁶

“A (hidden) story of self-help”

Our argument is rooted in important historical analyses that have shed light on how relief agencies have employed displaced people since what we may term the “pre-history” of the modern refugee regime.²⁷ Commenting on the League of Nations’ efforts to assist Russian refugees at the end of the World War One, led by the Norwegian polar explorer Fridtjof Nansen, Peter Gatrell²⁸ highlights how “with no funds at his disposal and only a tiny office” Nansen’s agency could hardly provide services and papers to refugees directly. Nansen thus ended up employing displaced Russians as clerks in local branches. “Assisting Russian refugees”, Gatrell²⁹ concludes, “became a story of self-help”. After the World War Two, the United Nations Relief and

Works Agency (UNRWA), tasked with providing assistance and relief to Palestinian refugees after the mass displacement of 1948, was employing refugees in its own bureaucracies and services already in its early stages. As Ghada Talhami³⁰ has shown, “UNRWA’s early large-scale plans for the employment of displaced Palestinians served a primarily political purpose, namely the integration of Palestinians into neighboring countries”.³¹ Despite enormous financial and political constraints and widespread contestation by Palestinian communities, UNRWA continued to be a source of employment for refugees until Donald Trump’s administration cut its funding in 2018, which left hundreds of workers struggling for livelihoods and pensions.³²

Through twists, turns, political opportunities, and some recent neoliberal refashioning, the hidden story of humanitarianism as refugee self-help continued through the foundation of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) – the agency that constitutes the institutional pillar of the international refugee and humanitarian regimes – and, with it, well into the twenty-first century. In today’s policy domains, refugee self-help is often theorized as community-based governance, “localization agendas” and the economic and social “self-reliance” of refugee communities.³³ These are seen as “‘win–win solutions’ that put refugees to work in ways that maximise their contribution to host country development” merging “humanitarian and development goals”.³⁴ Refugees thus become the entrepreneurial protagonists of the social assistance provided to their communities through an increasingly privatized and outsourced aid model.³⁵

From universalized ideals to racialized inequalities

Agendas aimed at transferring responsibilities to local actors and involving refugee communities in implementing humanitarian interventions create opportunities for many. The less explored side to this story of self-help is that of the local and refugee aid workers precariously employed by international aid agencies. Despite the localization and participation rhetoric, humanitarian and development interventions are still mostly funded and planned by a small number of powerful international non-governmental, corporate, and state organizations.³⁶ Local and refugee workers are routinely deskilled and confined to low-status, labour-intensive jobs, in which they report to expatriate managers concerned with targets that often have little or no relation to local contexts.³⁷ Their conditions in the aid sector have been compared to that of labour in other service industries in poor countries, subject to “‘race-to-the-bottom’ work arrangements (that) deal indignities to low-paid, highly anxious project-based workers doing repetitive and numbing work for clients in the global North”.³⁸

Research that has looked into issues of race in refugee aid, and humanitarianism more broadly, can reveal the dynamics and genealogies of this global inequality.³⁹ This work has foregrounded race as a social condition that both precedes and frames “the humanitarian encounter”,⁴⁰ and critiqued the resilience of the “white saviour complex” and the exploitation of non-white bodies in the visual and discursive tropes of contemporary aid.⁴¹ Lewis

Turner⁴² has examined the profoundly racialized entrepreneurship and resilience frameworks through which “Levantine” Syrian refugees are constructed as industrious workers, as opposed to the backwardness and passivity attributed to black African displaced people – a phenomenon he describes as “humanitarian anti-blackness”.⁴³ Bringing together discussions of race and labour, Turner⁴⁴ has exposed the exploitation and inequalities behind framing Syrian refugees’ work as a developmental opportunity for host countries, and the relentless promotion of their capacity for self-help within communities and camps. Inspired by these critiques, in the following two sections we examine interview material that shed light on the relation between humanitarianism and racialized labour.

Refugee care and emotional work

According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), working Syrian refugees in the Irbid governorate in Northern Jordan “took up a large percentage of craft professions as well as sales and services professions inside the host communities”.⁴⁵ While they tend to reproduce the cliché of the industrious Levantine refugee so aptly critiqued by Turner,⁴⁶ however, ILO reports capture a challenging economic reality. Even after Syrians were able to receive work permits through the so-called “Jordan Compact” of 2016, and despite the genuine integration efforts promoted by staff in many local Jordanian municipalities, informal work prevails, while the public sector remains the main employer for local Jordanians. Patterns of gendered, classed, and racialized employment continue to relegate a large number of Syrian men to sectors like construction and agriculture, where conditions are often the harshest. In this landscape, women often find employment through aid organization programmes recruiting care and psychosocial workers.

When we visited the governorate in early 2020, as the so-called reconciliation process in Syria advanced and international donor policies towards refugees started to focus more on return, such employment opportunities were becoming scarce. Many major international NGOs had left the area, withdrawing social and financial assistance and essential medical services. Among our Syrian interlocutors, a middle-aged trained nurse recalled the time spent working for UN agencies and a major international NGO. She could not keep her first, demanding full-time job because of health problems. Next, she volunteered for a period, when she was promised formal employment that did not materialize because of the organization’s lack of funding. After a short contract as an interviewer-data gatherer, the UN offered her an employment opportunity, conditional upon her availability to move to Amman, the capital, to take a six-week training course. This precarious work trajectory reflects those of many low-status local and refugee aid workers. While going through it, the nurse – who was energetic, skilled, and in dire need of work to support her large family, including adult children and grandchildren – did not shy away from other job opportunities. She worked for two months for the local Jordanian municipality, in a programme co-funded by the ILO, as a

cleaner in public gardens and parks – one of the many examples of refugees serving local communities through essential, yet underpaid work in the service sector. In order to get that job as cleaner, she often hid her qualifications and degrees. “If people asked me whether I have a degree”, she commented, “I would say no. Degrees are of no importance”. Her husband and daughter also had no source of income apart from a few occasional jobs at the time of our encounter; like the nurse, they all believed that your connections (*wasta* in Arabic) get you jobs, whether in international NGOs or in the Jordanian local administration.

Beyond formal qualifications and personal networks, refugee aid workers bring something far more crucial to the humanitarian programmes that employ their labour: intense emotional work and physical presence in an often-dangerous, uncomfortable “field”. Expatriate professionals – particularly, but not exclusively, white people from the “Global North” – are often unable to effectively access that field, because of insurance restrictions, lack of language skills, or their own racist prejudices.⁴⁷ Refugee workers, in contrast, know local languages and social norms. This knowledge is essential to the aid machine and keeps these workers in a subaltern position through precarious contracts and “local” salary conditions, often significantly worse than those of expatriate workers.⁴⁸ Yet refugee workers’ capacity to be proximate to beneficiaries bridges the gaps between policy and practice, transforming international humanitarianism from a universal idea into actual assistance. For NGOs, international agencies, and donors, refugee and local labour is the only way to reach their targets and carry out their mandate.⁴⁹ For workers from a refugee background, especially women, it is often the only available employment opportunity, limited in time, precarious, and badly paid. In some cases, like that of the Syrian aid worker quoted in the introduction to this chapter, it involves walking across large camps and towns, under the summer sun and through the desert dust, to identify or visit beneficiaries at home. The emotional involvement can also be draining and retraumatizing. Recalling her time spent doing psychosocial work, employed by international NGOs, the Syrian nurse described her renewed exposure to trauma as follows:

Imagine that you are trying to help people in something that you yourself suffer from. Imagine hiding your tears in front of people who are telling you about their losses, which are minimal compared to yours, or with similar losses and fears as yours. I know what they will answer, because I suffer from the same issues. I don’t tell them that I am Syrian, to create or maintain a distance. However if I had to, I would say that I am Syrian, but I always hope that people do not end up asking me this question.

These words point to fatigue and exhaustion, but also to a knowledge that is emotional and thus unspoken, embodied, and therefore disqualified. The involvement of refugees as care workers in the international aid and development sector relies on this affective and emotional involvement, as well as on

individualization and flexibility.⁵⁰ Blurred boundaries between work and the private sphere, it has been argued, characterize humanitarian work across the divide between expatriates and locals.⁵¹ Yet for refugee workers, personal involvement runs deeper. It exploits moral commitment to one's community, often subsuming emerging political subjectivities into the dull discipline of paid work. In the following passage, another Syrian aid worker, a woman in her twenties, details her motivations for taking up first volunteer and then paid jobs in the refugee aid sector.

When the Arab spring started and arrived in Syria, it felt that our identities as Syrians were restored. Before that, I did not have any meaning in my life or a cause to focus on, but when the Syrian cause started it gave us a goal and identity. I was suddenly proud to be Syrian, seeing people seeking freedom made us proud. [...] I discovered all these local Syrian organizations that work on documentation and accountability and human rights. All the survivors and refugees are asking for justice and accountability.

In this case, personal involvement was not limited to care and emotional work and embodied knowledge. It mobilized the worker's identification as Syrian and her condition as a politicized refugee or exile. Aid and development have been discussed as "anti-politics machines" for at least three decades.⁵² Thus, this trajectory from political awakening to paid work in NGOs is all but surprising. There is much to explore in these experiences of global inequality and alienation. Rather than being erased, refugee workers' political subjectivities and knowledges are recast in these encounters with humanitarian apparatuses.⁵³ Far from being a prerogative of intellectual elites, germinal reflection on the condition of exile characterizes the experience of refugees across social divides.⁵⁴ However, the knowledges and knowledge work of refugees with limited access to financial resources and safe international mobility are silenced through exploitative patterns that reproduce racialized inequalities. Before landing a job with satisfactory conditions in an international NGO, a few of our interviewees, all university degree holders, went through experiences that they describe as exploitative and alienating. These were in research projects linked to humanitarian programmes, funded through large international schemes and managed primarily by European academic institutions. In the following section, we go through the intricacies of these refugees' work at the intersection of research and humanitarianism.

Refugee knowledges and the humanitarian–research continuum

I started working closely with the refugees, with the people in need, with kids, I worked with them for three years and a couple of months. [...] I was planning everything in Jordan, collecting data, doing surveys for the places where we were going to do our humanitarian missions. So [the

US-based humanitarian organization] came twice a year, for a week-long mission, doing surgeries, treatments, dental clinics, medicine for children and women, general medicine. So I was gathering volunteers and planning and organizing, or getting permissions. I was working in Amman, collecting data, and organized everything before the mission started.

At the time of our encounter, the Syrian man quoted above, an engineering student in his twenties, was working for a relatively small international NGO founded by Syrian expatriates and registered in the UK. We met him in his office, in Amman, where he recalled for us how his career in the humanitarian sector started. It was several years earlier, when he was helping to coordinate the twice-yearly missions of a US-based medical charity. As his words show, such missions, however short and focused, required lengthy preparation in the form of collecting data on the target population. The data were collected by young Syrian refugees with good networks and knowledge of English, like him. Without their work, mostly offered on a volunteer basis, the missions of US-based medics among Syrians in Jordan would have been impossible.

Humanitarianism functions through specific ways of knowing, categorizing, triaging, and socially sorting vulnerable populations, as scholarship has explored in detail.⁵⁵ Professionalization of aid work, stricter insurance requirements for expatriate staff, and extensive reliance on global positioning systems (GPS), biometrics, and other information technologies for remote management make the sector increasingly reliant on data collection and processing.⁵⁶ Much has been written on digital humanitarianism and the knowledges upon which it is founded. Duffield⁵⁷ has theorized this “datafication” of aid as an erasure of the experiences of immersion, linguistic and cultural competency, and capacity to analyse local socio-political dynamics that earlier eras of the international NGO movement had promoted. Here we argue that, rather than erased, these local knowledges have been outsourced, feminized, racialized, and relegated to tasks performed by locally-recruited staff. While they are as essential as ever, today they are disqualified and made invisible. The labour of aid workers with a refugee background, we show, is the backbone of data collection processes and field research tasks that are central to humanitarian programming and donors’ policymaking.

Humanitarianism and academic research have much in common, not least because international humanitarian organizations promote and fund research, including academic research. Academic and humanitarian projects also tend to share the same environments, infrastructures, access techniques, and local workforce “in the field”.⁵⁸ In the research domain, especially in anthropology and other social sciences, the exploitation of local assistants has a long history.⁵⁹ Today, the number of players on the research field in the “Global South” is much larger, and highly diverse. Biomedical, public health, psychological, engineering, and economics researchers, too, regularly visit refugee camps and settlements. They work with or alongside humanitarian organizations, and employ local staff, including refugees, to collect data. The conditions in which this work is carried out are mostly

precarious and unequal.⁶⁰ While hyper-mobility is central to career-making in both the aid industry and neoliberal academia, production of knowledge about refugees in both sectors relies on research labour that is kept subordinate through the reproduction of immobility (or constrained mobility) of local assistants and data workers. Many of those we met when conducting research for this chapter referred to their limited access to mobility rights – through passports and visas – as a crucial determinant in their precarious working conditions, as well as in their relational construction as racialized subjects.⁶¹

One of the Syrian university degree holders introduced above shared with us memories of assisting a research project at the interface of the medical, psychological, and social sciences. For it, workers were briefly trained to collect biological samples from refugees, and then sent out to camps to fill in trauma-evaluation questionnaires with refugee youth and children.

We had this questionnaire, so we were asking youth and children about what traumatic events they went through. Because I did not have experience about that, I did not know what impact that would have on me and on them. It was very stressful, especially this questionnaire part. The data sampling was normal, but the questionnaire was very stressful. As data collectors, we were not helping them as humanitarian workers, we were not giving support, we were just collecting data and then let them go without any further support. [...] I think the main impact on me was that I was just listening and recording their stories. I felt like I was exploiting them, I wasn't able to give them anything. That was the most painful. At a psychological level I was very impacted by all the stories, especially the youth and the children we were interviewing, I felt helpless, we could not help them in any way, also after interviewing many mothers, I was alone listening to this, and working alone on this, I think I had secondary trauma.

Like those of many other research assistants recruited to collect data in what Sukarieh and Tannock⁶² have called “the Syrian refugee research industry”, this account highlights that for both research subjects and interviewers, this data collection process is labour-intensive and emotionally draining. To be sure, there are differences between extractive data gathering for an academic research project, like the one which involved obtaining biological samples, and surveying populations planned with the purpose of delivering assistance. However, similarities abound. In both cases, the work could simply not be done without refugee assistants. Yet in both instances, the refugee work is precarious in its contractual and insurance conditions, and often remains unacknowledged. For the person interviewed above, this lack of recognition manifested itself in lack of authorship and acknowledgement in the final, published product of the research process – a form of exploitation which is anything but rare, and a division of labour which, across the research–humanitarian continuum, reproduces colonial relations.⁶³

Conclusions

Throughout its history, humanitarianism has been a key way through which modern Europe has come to know, categorize, and extract resources from its colonial others, including refugees. Today, “white saviourism” and the humanitarian gaze are still central to the political self-definition of European and “Global North” legacy powers and their citizen-subjects.⁶⁴ Through them, humanitarianism remains a space where the disqualification and exploitation of refugee knowledges is reproduced and normalized. From its early origins in the relief efforts after the First World War to its late modern neoliberal turns in which subcontracting, privatization, and the “responsibilization” of beneficiaries are ascendant, humanitarian discourse has both appropriated and obscured refugee communities’ embodied, caring knowledges and capacities for “self-help”.⁶⁵

In this chapter, we have invited you to look at humanitarian aid as a global phenomenon founded on the labour and knowledges of refugees themselves. Refugee aid workers are central to all the stages of humanitarian intervention, from exploratory surveying and preliminary planning to data collection for monitoring and evaluation. Syrian social workers and volunteers nurse the traumas of Syrian refugees. Syrian women working under GPS surveillance identify and classify the vulnerabilities of other Syrian women and their children. Syrian scientific degree holders collect biological samples from refugees in the camps, for research projects funded by European agencies and benefiting mostly European scientists.

Along these internationalized “research supply chains”,⁶⁶ the tasks assigned to refugee workers are often the most labour-intensive and least prestigious. They require knowledge that is constructed as local and embodied, remains unrecognized, and is underpaid, if not totally unpaid. As emerges from our interviews, there is often no other discernible reason, beyond their being Syrians and being in a refugee condition, for the inequities to which these workers are subjected. In sharp contrast with the transnational mobility that characterizes expatriate aid workers from the “Global North”, the immobilization of Syrians through restrictive migration regimes and their construction as workers with local expertise are central to this process of racialization.

Reproducing a division of labour that follows colonial lines, mainstream humanitarian organizations manage knowledge and knowledge production in ways that uphold, rather than question, global racialized inequalities. These divisions and inequalities often go unnoticed, even in critical scholarly literature on humanitarian aid, due to our failure to attend to race and labour as a social dimension that shapes the humanitarian encounter.⁶⁷ The narratives examined in this chapter underscore the relevance of new scholarship that has started to dissect the racialized tropes reproduced by neoliberal aid through its paradigms of refugee self-reliance, entrepreneurship, developmentalism, and community aid. It is essential that this attentiveness to race and labour is applied to social studies of knowledge production, within and

beyond academia, including those that involve migrants and refugees. The dynamics we have examined here point to the consolidation of global “data value chains”, characterized by racialized divisions of labour.⁶⁸ As other contributors to this volume show, “increased competitiveness, pressure by donors and funders to produce ‘value for money’, and an impetus for original empirical data which requires extensive labour”, which are shared by the academic and humanitarian aid sectors, compound these racialized divisions.⁶⁹

For many refugees, employment in humanitarian organizations sustain their family livelihoods, and even bring new skills and knowledges. For the most part, our interviewees did not demand different work in different sectors. Rather, they expected better working conditions, decent compensation and salaries, and to have their hard work in sustaining their communities acknowledged and respected. Similarly, research workers with a refugee background employed in academic contexts need to be empowered “in contractual negotiation and in data stewardship, sharing, and protection”.⁷⁰ Far from being silenced by the inequities they are exposed to, these workers’ subjectivities call for a re-evaluation of humanitarianism as liberal government of knowledge, care relations, and social reproduction. This requires a commitment to decolonizing the production of knowledge on refugees, starting with acknowledgment of the essential role their labour plays in humanitarian, care, and knowledge economies.

Acknowledgments

We wholeheartedly acknowledge and thank Umm Odai, Bana, Umm Ayham, Umm Aya, Umm Nasha’at, Umm Muhammad, Ahmad, Abu Ahmad, Abu Aline, Abu Haidar, and Bilal for all that they generously shared with us. Your contributions were vital to this chapter.

نود أن نقدم خالص شكرنا وتقديرنا لأم عدي وبانا وأم أيهم وأم آية وأم نشأت وأم محمد وأحمد وأبو أحمد وأبو آين وأبو حيدر وبلال لكرمهم في مشاركة خبراتهم وتجاربهم مما أسهم في كتابة هذا النص.

This work has been supported by the Academy of Finland funded Centre of Excellence in Law, Identity and the European Narratives (funding decision numbers 312431 and 336678).

Notes

- 1 Duffield, 2018; Lemberg-Pedersen and Haioty, 2020.
- 2 Ong and Combinido, 2018; Egeland, Harmer, and Stoddard, 2011; Pascucci, 2019.
- 3 Ward, 2020.
- 4 Easton-Calabria, 2015; Gatrell, 2017; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2019.
- 5 Cole, 2020, 1.
- 6 Rajaram, in this volume.
- 7 Benton, 2016a; Turner, 2019.
- 8 Barnett, 2011.
- 9 Benton, 2016b, 189.
- 10 Benton, 2016a; Benton, 2016b.

- 11 Maxwell, 2017.
- 12 Barnett, 2011.
- 13 Barnett and Stein, 2012.
- 14 Duffield, 2018; on the colonial and racial origins of the welfare state see also Bhambra and Holmwood, 2017.
- 15 Barnett, 2011, 21.
- 16 Pallister-Wilkins, 2018, 3; see also Vernon, 2014.
- 17 Pallister-Wilkins, 2018, 7.
- 18 Feldman and Ticktin, 2012.
- 19 Pallister-Wilkins, 2018, 7.
- 20 Smirl, 2008.
- 21 Lopez, Bhungalia, and Newhouse, 2015; Pascucci, 2017; Pascucci, 2019; Smirl, 2008; Ziadah, 2019.
- 22 Pascucci and Jumbert, 2021; Rozakou, 2017; Vandevoordt, 2019.
- 23 Cole, 2020.
- 24 Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2016; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2018; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh and Qasmiyeh, 2017; Malkin, 2015; Richey et al., 2021.
- 25 Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2016, 1.
- 26 Marchais, Bazuzi, and Lameke, 2020, 373; Pascucci, 2017.
- 27 Easton-Calabria, 2015.
- 28 Gatrell, 2017, 1.
- 29 Gatrell, 2017, 1.
- 30 Talhami, 2003.
- 31 Talhami, 2003, 139.
- 32 Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2019; see also Farah, 2010.
- 33 Lenner, 2019.
- 34 Lenner, 2019, 1.
- 35 Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2019; Turner, 2019.
- 36 Ong and Combinido, 2018; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2019.
- 37 Ong and Combinido, 2018; Pascucci, 2019; Ward, 2020.
- 38 Ong and Combinido, 2018, 90.
- 39 Benton, 2016a; Benton, 2016b; Ong and Combinido, 2018; Richey, 2016; Turner, 2019.
- 40 Benton, 2016a, 190.
- 41 Richey, 2016.
- 42 Turner, 2019.
- 43 Turner, 2019, 145.
- 44 Turner, 2019.
- 45 ILO, 2016, 29.
- 46 Turner, 2019.
- 47 Turner, 2019.
- 48 Pascucci, 2019.
- 49 Ward, 2020.
- 50 Ong and Combinido, 2018; Malkin, 2015.
- 51 Fechter, 2012.
- 52 Ferguson, 1990.
- 53 Kallio, Häkli, and Pascucci, 2019.
- 54 See the Introduction to this volume.
- 55 Kallio et al., 2019 and Pallister-Wilkins, 2018 among others.
- 56 Duffield, 2018; Lemberg-Pedersen and Haioty, 2020.
- 57 Duffield, 2018.

- 58 Pascucci, 2017.
59 Sukarieh and Tannock, 2019.
60 Sibai et al., 2019; Sukarieh and Tannock, 2019.
61 See Carpio, 2019.
62 Sukarieh and Tannock, 2019.
63 Sukarieh and Tannock, 2019.
64 Richey, 2016.
65 Gatrell, 2017.
66 Desai and Tapscott, 2015.
67 Benton, 2016a; Benton, 2016b; Turner, 2019.
68 Marchais et al., 2020.
69 Marchais et al., 2020.
70 Sibai et al., 2019, 1599.

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