

Sustaining and complicating hierarchies of race and class in humanitarian protection

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Surrounded by friends in the comfort of her living room, Umm Mahmoud recalled going to a workshop designed for women on life skills. On entering the hall, she discovered that the training included information on washing your body properly and periods: ‘I know this!’, she exclaimed, ‘I’m an old woman’.

This intervention develops from a conversation with Umm Mahmoud, a middle-aged Syrian woman living in northern Jordan, in the small village of Zaatari. Umm Mahmoud’s story depicts the severe and potentially violent disconnect between what refugee communities need, and what international aid agencies finance and operationalise. We offer a much-needed critique of humanitarian protection and argue that the programmes implemented in predominantly Global South geographies¹ reinforce racial and class hierarchies which (re)produce binaries between those read as western aid workers, through their proximity to the Global North humanitarian industry, and the ‘other’ beneficiary, assumed distant from western modernity.

While a number of questions emerge from this vignette, we offer two observations to emphasise how race and class shapes not only who is worthy of humanitarian intervention but also the type of aid received. In making these observations, we come to this analysis as two middle-class white women, based at universities in the Global North, researching race, class, gender and coloniality in humanitarian practice. While recognising our own privilege we are cognisant of recent critiques of positionality statements as a function of coloniality (Gani and Khan, 2024) and are fully aware of the potential ways such outlining reinscribes our academic authority as ‘critical scholars’ and acts as a form of redemption. Yet it is important to acknowledge that we have the opportunity to observe the violence discussed here from a position of safety. In the following we unpack how specific aid programmes — workshops based on menstrual health and women’s hygiene — seep into community spaces. Our

¹ We say predominantly here, as similar programmes are also implemented in Global North spaces, such as in Greece, on aid recipients racialised as being from the Global South, assumed to be distant from western modernity.

intervention questions the ‘multilayered ways that race operates’ (Benton, 2016: 191) and intersects with class, highlighting how humanitarian norms, programming and practice is structured by and (re)produces itself through logics of modernity. Our contribution continues recent work that emphasises how race conditions assumptions around expertise (ibid.), professionalism (Ward and Bian, 2024), capacity (Turner, 2020), precarity (Pascucci, 2019), and proximity to western modernity (Pallister-Wilkins, 2022). Building on Black feminism, this work has drawn attention to the ways the universal human subject at the heart of humanitarianism is *homo economicus*, that is, racialised as white, gendered male, and classed as bourgeois (Ibid.)

In conjunction with this, critical work on humanitarianism’s localisation agenda has started to nuance the socio-political affects of localisation. It is often heralded as a way of both making aid delivery more efficient alongside addressing charges of Eurocentrism, racism and coloniality by increasing representation and elevating the importance of ‘local knowledge’. Echoing similar critiques of DEI initiatives (Ahmed, 2012), simply adding more staff of colour from the Global South, at all levels of the industry, does not automatically equate to a more equitable humanitarianism. As Ward and Bian argue ‘localisation trends that frame ‘local knowledge’ as a desirable ‘skill’ and form of ‘expertise’ may further compound the latter dynamics in terms of who can claim to be a humanitarian, while also masking critical class divisions within crisis contexts located in the Global South’ (2024: 253). Localisation, it has been argued, reproduces simplistic binaries between the local and the international (Roepstorff, 2020) and as such fails to consider the particular dynamics of individual aid settings within which intersecting dynamics of race and class operate. The following discussion builds on this cluster of critical work as it unpacks the situated intersecting dynamics of race and class in the programming efforts encountered by Umm Mahmoud in Zaatari village.

Race, class and the ‘localisation’ agenda

Existing scholarship critical of humanitarianism reflects on the racialised understanding of the ‘human’, depicting a ‘humanity devoid of social markers like race, class or gender’, where humanitarianism itself defines the encounter through the binaries of ‘beneficiary/provider’ (Benton, 2016: 190). Race and class hierarchies are therefore replicated in the choices made about whose life is worthy of being saved — the intervention

— and continues in the practices of humanitarian actors; demonstrated in the professional programmes undertaken in refugee-conceptualised spaces.

Specific spatial locations, such as the formal refugee camp, are run by international aid organisations, often in conjunction with the host state, where the infrastructure and material conditions are ripe for ‘white supremacist practices emanating from humanitarianism’s liberal universalizing claims’ (Pallister-Wilkins, 2021: 99). Refugee camps, constructed with the purpose of securitising displaced persons predominantly from the Global South, reproduce humanitarian protection logics that place those dwelling in the space as passive recipients or beneficiaries without agency. As the opening vignette depicts, such logics extend to urban refugees — those living outside of formal refugee camps — through the programmes implemented in local areas and the individuals expected to attend. In the case of Umm Mahmoud, the hygiene workshop encompassed Eurocentric, modernist logics which position Global North, or Global North adjacent actors as ‘experts in regions needing development, empowerment, and capacity building, relying on standardized technical experience’ (Ghanem, 2024: 2).

It Is necessary at this juncture to unpack and situate the race and class dynamics animating humanitarian work in Zaatari village and Jordan more broadly, taking Roepstorff’s critique of the ‘localisation’ agenda seriously in avoiding flattening the ‘local’, but instead to uncover — even if only briefly — the particular of the local in the Jordanian context. There is a long history of humanitarian work in Jordan, from long-running responses to Palestinian exile to more recent responses to Iraqi and Syrian displacement. As a result, Jordan has become a key political space (with important differences between the camp, urban and rural) and Jordanians key political actors in the humanitarian governance of refugees (Ghanem, 2024). These responses have historically and contemporarily been patterned by local class dynamics where urban-rural divides, access to education, and by extension, often precarious, work with western aid agencies signal proximity to western notions of modernity (Pascucci, 2019; Sukarieh, 2016).

It Is within this particular context that the women’s hygiene workshop run by local Jordanian aid workers, and attended by Umm Mahmoud (a refugee from rural Homs) took place. More broadly within the humanitarian industry, women’s hygiene programmes enhance the notion that ‘Refugeehood in the Global South is imagined as a passive, feminized subject position,

[where] gender work is work that “helps women” (Turner, 2019: 597). These gender dynamics intimately entangled with racialised logics, specifically target, and in turn infantilise, women and girls with, in this instance, the human in *humanitarianism* identified and translated into a worthy, feminised, and ‘safe’ recipient. Women empowerment projects place the responsibility of family health onto women, positioning them firmly within the domestic sphere, (re)producing traditional gender roles, and suggesting all Arab women share in such duties. This is a relationship ‘structured by hierarchies of privilege’ (Benton, 2016: 190), where, in this context, Syrian refugee women are gendered, raced and classed and found in need.

Operationalising programmes based on cleanliness and the promotion of hygiene practices speaks to a humanitarian practice that, even though organisations may claim otherwise, has never been neutral or ‘apolitical’. Rather, humanitarianism, past and present requires women like Umm Mahmoud to fit within ‘geo-political perceptions of who and where is ‘civilised’ versus those people and places considered to be ‘barbaric’ (Narayanaswamy 2024: 216). These women are conceptualised as unable, not only in the context of emergency and crisis, but in response to everyday life; women like Umm Mahmoud lack the ability to look after their family’s wellbeing. Rather than challenge these assumptions, humanitarian action revives ‘logics of care’ based on racial hierarchies of whiteness as superior (Pallister-Wilkins, 2021: 101) and localised class dynamics structured by urban-rural divides, levels of assumed educational attainment and neoliberal subjectivity.

Importantly, hierarchies are not so easily delineated along simple binaries between Global North and South. Instead we see how humanitarian work becomes a site of localised processes of racialisation (through proximity to whiteness) and class (re)production based on individuals’ relationships to humanitarian assistance, as provider or recipient. As Ward and Bian (2024: 254) make clear:

“[A]id workers from ‘the local’ context with this so-called ‘local knowledge’ skill are often middle-class and much more privileged in terms of their economic resources than the ‘vulnerable communities’ and ‘beneficiaries’ [like Umm Mahmoud] affected by poverty, disaster, and conflict from ‘the local’ context that they work with. They might also ‘come from’ particular places

within ‘the local’. Notably areas in which aid organisations and operations are concentrated (e.g. capital or major cities).”

This analysis is certainly reminiscent of the particular dynamics animating the women’s hygiene workshop, where Umm Mahmoud, a rural Syrian refugee woman was treated to the skills of Jordanian aid workers from Amman.

Unsettling protection projects

Project-based delivery is short-term, embracing objectives that are timely, easily monitored, and translatable across the Global South. As such they fail to take account of local contexts and, while they may employ ‘local’ aid workers in their delivery, the content of such programming efforts and those they seek to target, like with the women’s hygiene workshop, are subsumed under modernist and universalised rubrics. Often emerging after the initial crisis, when funding dwindles, they are deliverable projects likely to be awarded funds, justifiable, and quick to organise. Projects thus seek to work with local partners; those with connections to community members who can ensure individuals in a room. In other words, the focus is not as relevant as the convenience: ‘a checkbox on their schedule’ (Ghanem, 2024: 5). Remaining suitable to Global North funders is the priority which often ignores the everyday needs of refugee communities.

Ensuring a family’s nutritional needs, ability to pay rent and bills, and access to healthcare, employment and education are much harder to deliver. These objectives are associated with the host state and the broader dynamics of migration governance, where ‘tackling the power structures that underpin all types of inequality, including racial inequality...takes time’ (Narayanaswamy, 2024: 213). This requires an intersectional approach to aid which demands contextual knowledge and refugee stories; a radical departure from current forms of humanitarian practice. However, it is crucial that in any programming efforts that demand it, contextual knowledge and refugee stories have a discernible impact on operations on-the-ground. Otherwise, such demands of both the localisation and decolonisation agendas risk becoming liberal diversity, equity and inclusion efforts, where structural conditions remain, only this time produced by middle-class humanitarians of colour from the Global South. Failing to unsettle the dynamics of unequal aid or structural conditions within a host state, violent cycles continue, unquestioned and sustained.

What we have sketched above necessarily opens up more questions than it answers, and in doing so, intends to draw out and complicate the race and class hierarchies present in humanitarian protection in the particular local context of Zaatari and national context of Jordan. These hierarchies, we argue, have become intrinsic to the success and organisation of the humanitarian sector itself.

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