

UCL Migration Research

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Men at work: the role gender in refugee men's solidarity enactments in Athens

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Abstract: In recent years, there has been a burgeoning academic interest in both the solidarity enactments of European volunteers in Greece, and more recently the ways refugees' also enact themselves as political subjects. These studies have illustrated the alternative system of humanitarian provision, services exchange, solidarity and a sociability that can be shared. As a result, refugees have become more visible as political subjects. However, the role of gender in, especially, refugee men's responses to displacement remains largely overlooked. This paper seeks to remedy this by exploring refugee men's capacity for autonomous action in seemingly overwhelming conditions of precarity, and in doing so challenges assumptions about displaced masculinity and the gendered distribution of care.

1. Introduction

The scale of forced displacement to Greece is well known and documented, having reached unprecedented levels for any European Union country in 2015 (European Union, 2018). Despite significant spending on support of new arrivals since then (Refugee Deeply, 2017), many of the political and humanitarian agencies responsible have been unable or unwilling to provide sufficient support. In response, a network of alternative, grassroots humanitarian movements has blossomed in Athens, seeking to not only provide material and rights-based assistance to displaced persons, but also to do so in more egalitarian ways (Rozakou, 2016a). These have attracted a remarkable amount of material and financial donations from across Europe, as well as international volunteers (Rozakou, 2017:99; 2016a:102). Such initiatives have rightly received positive attention in public and political discourse, as well as significant academic interest (Cabot, 2014; 2015; 2016a; 2016b; Christodoulou et al., 2016; Grewal, 2018; Kalantzakos, 2017; Rakopoulos, 2014; Rozakou, 2012; 2016a; 2016b; 2017; 2018; Theodossopoulos, 2016; Valenti and Tzannetakis, 2018).

For a while, the role of refugees in these networks was largely overlooked. However, since 2018, there has been a burgeoning interest in the way refugees' enact themselves as political subjects in Greece (Zaman, 2019a; 2019b; Zaphiriou-Zarifi, 2019; al Qabbani and Habbal with Western, 2020; Reda and Proudfoot, 2020). These studies have illustrated the systems of services exchange, solidarity and sociability that refugees have enacted amid and to deal with the challenging circumstances they face. As a result, refugees have become more visible as political subjects in recent years. However, the

role of gender in, especially, refugee men's responses to displacement remains largely overlooked. This paper seeks to remedy this by exploring solidarity practices of refugee men in Athens. In doing so, it contributes to a growing body of literature that has begun to complicate considerably stereotypes about migrant men's incapacity and/or refusals to engage in caring practices (Kathiravelu, 2012; Ahmed, 2011; Pavilos, 2018).

The refugee-volunteer community in Athens is predominantly made up of young, single, refugee men – although there are highly effective refugee-women-led initiatives (see for example Zaphiriou-Zarifi, 2017). As in other contexts of displacement (Turner, 2018), in Athens men face far greater exclusion from humanitarian care and assistance than women and children—whether from the state, international agencies or grassroots organisations. As a response to this, many refugee men in Athens are responding to this marginalisation by creating networks of support for themselves and other refugees, male and female, and for those in both less and more fortunate situations than themselves.

What is significant about the predominance of male refugee-volunteers/humanitarians, is that their enactments of solidarity challenge assumptions about the relationship between displacement and the gendered distribution of care in ways we might not anticipate. The following pages seek to explore refugee men's capacity for autonomous action in seemingly overwhelming conditions of precarity, and in doing so centralise their conceptualisations and enactments of collective solidarity in Athens.

With this in mind, the questions that guide this research are: firstly, how is humanitarianism enacted, reflected upon, and interpreted by refugee men providing care? Secondly, what impact do refugee-volunteers feel their voluntary work has on their ability to reconstitute their lives, and those of the social groups they support, in exile? And finally, a key question that runs through this entire study, how, if at all, does gender, and more specifically notions of manhood and masculinity, relate to refugee-led responses to displacement in Athens? In addressing these questions, this paper seeks to disrupt commonly held assumptions about displaced masculinity, and the roles these play in shaping asylum policies, humanitarian discourses, as well as the experiences, performances and identities of displaced men.

2. Methodology

The significance and relevance of this study became apparent to me whilst volunteering in the legal team of the Athens Refugee Centre (ARC) for 5 months in the summer of 2017. Between May and July 2018, I returned to volunteer at ARC whilst also conducting fieldwork for this MSc. Dissertation. During this time, I interviewed ten refugee volunteers, from six different voluntary initiatives in Athens. The interviews lasted between one and two hours and were fully transcribed. The participants originated from Afghanistan, Iran, Syria, and Pakistan. They held different legal statuses in Greece and had chosen to travel to Greece for a variety of reasons. The names of the participants have been changed to protect their anonymity.

Attention to these processes is crucial when seeking to construct a politics that supports and recognises the complex social justice claims of *all* refugees.

4. Differentiating Men's Experiences of Displacement in Athens

The representational frames through which displaced men and masculinity are made visible in the contemporary 'refugee crisis' have broad implications for how refugee men experience displacement, including their attempts to secure international protection and humanitarian assistance (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2016a). The current humanitarian framework in Greece is imbued with representations of refugee men that completely disregard their experiences, understandings, and responses of displacement. There exists a cruel mixture of on the one hand, political abandonment, waiving their obligations to establish adequate systems for the provision of human rights (Cabot, 2014), and, on the other, securitisation, in the form of police harassment, detention and deportation, leaves few opportunities for refugee men to enact themselves as political subjects within the strictures of the state.

In terms of the design and implementation of policies, discourse and evaluation procedures men are often left outside the humanitarian purview. This is no more evident than in the process of applying for asylum itself. Since the increase of asylum applications from 2015, the Greek State was compelled to invest in a more comprehensive and regulated asylum procedure, including the establishment of Regional Asylum Offices (RAOs). The RAO of Attica has struggled to be fit for purpose. Soon after it opened, it ceased to accept asylum claims in person for those who do not qualify as "vulnerable" (Greek Forum for Refugees, 2017). A "vulnerable group", according to Greek Law #4375, refers to *inter alia* pregnant women, victims of sexual and gender-based violence (which rarely recognises men), as well as unaccompanied minors (Greece National Legislative, 2016). These categories are predominantly inapplicable to the young, single, men in Athens. As Pezhvak, a resident of a squat and volunteer at ARC noted, "because I am a single man, it is really hard [to register]" (Interview with Pezhvak, 2018).

Mehdi, another ARC volunteer, elaborates:

"If you are a woman, or a sick person, or a family, the [GAS] help you more. If you are a single man, without sickness, they won't help you. They are not accepting of you. We are at the end of the queue *because* we are single men." (Interview with Mehdi, 2018).

Men (as well as women), like Mehdi and Pezhvak, who do not qualify as vulnerable under Law #4375 are instructed to apply for asylum using Skype, at specific and very narrow time slots during the week, according to their language preference. The Skype lines are interminably unavailable however,

In Athens, as in other contexts (Turner, 2018), young refugee men are the target of police

This triggers feelings of insignificance and powerlessness, especially with regards to men's volunteer work. As Noor recounts:

“I was the only refugee in the demonstration, and a policeman told me, “If you cross this line I will put you in there [a police van], with them, you are a refugee also”. I can't get out of this circle of being a refugee, I can't be a normal human being who is just helping here. No. Still, I am a refugee” (Interview with Noor, 2018).

Yet, Noor's encounters with police by no means constricts him to the image of the powerless

5. Solidarity and Care Among Refugee Men

Many refugee men in Athens have begun to develop alternative resource and aid distribution networks, through which their political and gendered subjectivities can emerge on their own terms. In other contexts of displacement, participating in humanitarian initiatives has been identified as an opportunity for men to fulfil gender roles as ‘provider’ and regain a sense of power, in circumstances where encampment is seen to have undermined their ability to perform masculinity (Turner, 2000; Turner, 2018). Although, in Athens, similar processes may also be at play, I found that volunteering offered young, single, refugee men opportunities to rebuild familial and familiar bonds of care and responsibility that were lost during displacement.

Liisa Malkki (2015) has highlighted in her study of Scandinavian volunteers that humanitarian participation “often helps the “benefactor” in surprising and vital ways” (8). The vital forms and practices of sociality fostered through voluntary and/or humanitarian labour in Athens are even more pronounced for single, male refugee-volunteers, who more commonly travel alone to Greece. Here, Noor’s emphatic need for kin-like relations inverts the location of ‘need’ in typical humanitarian relations of giving and receiving: “The people volunteering is a huge part here, for that I have a lot of friends. I know when I am in a crisis of emotion, I can consult them. That’s what I need, basically I need family” (Interview with Noor, 2018).

In these circumstances of solitude and abandonment, volunteers appear to gladly, perhaps even gratefully, engage in the types of “affective labour” (Muehlebach, 2011:68), and in doing so challenge dominant understandings of masculine care. As Hasan describes, the refugee squats mobilised around the recreation of family and everyday familial practices that had been lost as a result of displacement:

“We were like a family at the squat. We had all lost our homes, and we had lost our family also. It was building a new family, a new relationship. We acted like a family. We felt like we were at our home, in the squat, facing each other every day. We were having the same breakfast, lunch and dinner. It means a lot to build a new family, and to feel that you are belonging to something. When you are among these people, sharing the food, sharing everything, caring about them [...] it gives you the feeling that you are among your family.

I lost that in Syria, but I found it here.” (Inte(he)9.2n.6 (i)--4.6 (t)19.2 ((he)9.2.1 (o)9 (i)-4.6 (t)-4.6 (n)10.H (w)

Such practices of sociality are crucial both for the realisation of refugees' initiatives (*Ibid.*), and for the needs of single men to care and be cared for.

Many of the interlocutors identified in the processes of displacement, a greater capacity for

they don't have a family here, so we just try to become closer to them, and make them feel

For single refugee men, whose lives during conflict and displacement may feel disposable, this research has highlighted their capacity to build and sustain refugee communities, and the inherently gendered

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