

ASSESSING AID: THE HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE TO REFUGEE WOMEN ENGAGED IN SEX WORK

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ABSTRACT

In refugee camp settings, sex work has become an increasingly prevalent method of livelihood support. This thesis examines the attempts in the humanitarian sector to address resource gaps for women engaged in sex work in these contexts, analyzing how different actors interact with one another and the interventions themselves. Drawing on key informant interviews, mainly with international aid workers from UN organizations, I examine two specific interventions in refugee camps in Kenya and Bangladesh. Across both case studies, interviews revealed that the humanitarian sector has increasingly adopted structured, rights-based programming—largely shaped by the UNHCR and UNFPA operational guidelines—to address the needs of refugee women engaged in sex work, emphasizing service accessibility, community input, and local context-based adaptation. While many humanitarian workers demonstrated cognizance around personal biases and a commitment to program goals like nonpunitive service delivery, confidentiality, and agency, interviews also exposed tensions between individual, organizational, and operational attitudes—particularly in how institutional frameworks address ideas of stigma and exploitation— and challenges in how refugee and host communities perceived both humanitarian actors and sex workers.

Key Words: Humanitarian aid, sex work, refugee response, women, Kenya, Bangladesh

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CONTENTS

Acknowledgements.....	vi
Contents.....	vii
Figures.....	ix
Chapter 1: Introduction.....	1
Humanitarianism in Context: Female Refugees Who Engage in Sex Work	2
Research Questions	5
The Conversation.....	6
The Gap	11
Cases and Justification: Kenya and Bangladesh.....	12
Methods.....	16
Hypothesis.....	18
Thesis Roadmap.....	19
Chapter 2: The Debate On Humanitarianism: How Does Engaging with Sex Work Challenge Moralization Processes for Humanitarian Aid Workers?.....	20
Theory on Humanitarianism.....	21
Refugee Response: The Power Structures of Refugee Camps and Female Migration.....	32
Theories of Sex Work: Consensual Labor or Patriarchal Oppression?.....	38
Conclusion: Restating the Gap.....	44
Chapter 3: “Very Little Resources, Massive Impact”: A Case Study of Kenyan Humanitarian Programming	45
Introduction: The Refugee Crisis in Kenya.....	45
Kenyan Refugee Laws: Restricting Movement and the Right to Work.....	47
Sex Work in Kenyan Refugee Camps.....	48
Published Pilot Programs for Refugee Sex Workers in Kenya.....	51
Key Informant Interviews.....	55

Synthesis: Published Programming Versus Interviews	67
Conclusion	68
Chapter 4: Programming Unpublished: A Case Study of Rohingya Refugee in Cox's Bazar Bangladesh.....	69
Introduction: The Rohingya Refugee Crisis.....	69
Refugee Rights in Bangladesh: The Foreigner Status of Rohingyas.....	71
Employment and Sex Work for Women in Cox's Bazar.....	73
Key Informant Interviews.....	77
Conclusion.....	90
Chapter 5: Conclusion: Findings, Implications, and Future Work.....	92
Limitations of the Study	93
Revisiting Research Questions.....	94
Looking Forward to the Future: Further Research and Future Programming.....	100
Works Cited.....	104

FIGURES

Figure 1.1: Case Study Comparison.....	13
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Each year, hundreds of thousands of professional aid workers are dispatched globally to assist those affected by disaster and conflict.¹ These “humanitarian aid workers” follow four main principles to distinguish themselves from political, ideological, religious, or military support: humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence. They also follow the ‘do no harm’ principle, which underlines the importance of responses that do not “inadvertently exacerbate conflicts” or harm populations and environments.² By following these principles, these actors are able to gain access and acceptance in conflict zones throughout the globe.

“There’s a martyr complex in the humanitarian sector,” said 40-year humanitarian aid worker Joel Charny in a 2021 interview with NPR discussing the goals of humanitarian work and how to combat overly positive perceptions of aid workers. He worried that humanitarianism can create a “halo” effect for viewers outside the sector, where the work and workers themselves are taken as virtuous saviors.³ Aid workers do face incredibly real difficulties on the ground. In 2023, 595 aid workers were attacked and 280 were killed, a number larger than any previous year.⁴ Front line workers—workers who work directly in humanitarian crises, often local actors—frequently receive little support and face difficult working conditions, while being held

¹ Sean Kivlehan and Stephanie Kayden, “Humanitarian Aid Workers: Yellow Book 2024,” CDC Yellow Book, <https://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/yellowbook/2024/work-and-other-reasons/humanitarian-aid-workers>.

² “Humanitarian Principles,” European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations, https://civil-protection-humanitarian-aid.ec.europa.eu/who/humanitarian-principles_en.

³ Malaka Gharib, “A Retiring Aid Worker Reflects on How To Repair the World—Without Wearing A Halo,” *NPR*, September 6, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2021/09/06/1033227134/a-retiring-aid-worker-reflects-on-how-to-repair-the-world-without-wearing-a-halo>.

⁴ “Aid Worker Security Report 2024 Figured At a Glance,” Aid Worker Security Database, https://humanitarianoutcomes.org/sites/default/files/publications/figures_at_a_glance_2024.pdf.

unduly responsible for resource issues or problems coming from internationally-made decisions.⁵ However, this perspective of humanitarians as saviors can also hide challenges they face and mistakes they make in the field. This paradox—where the needs of aid workers are frequently overlooked, yet they are still positioned above those they are meant to support within the hierarchy of the humanitarian sector—adds to the complexity of delivering humanitarian aid safely and remaining in line with the four humanitarian principles.

Humanitarianism in Context: Female Refugees Who Engage in Sex Work

The complexities of delivering humanitarian aid are particularly apparent in contexts that emphasize the sometimes hierarchical nature of the sector. One area where this disconnect manifests itself is with regards to sex work. Not only does there exist a resource gap in the humanitarian sector surrounding programming related to sex work, but in these spaces “sex work” is often lumped in with “survival sex” or abuse and exploitation through human trafficking.⁶ “Sex work” as defined within the context of this project focuses on the working conditions under which sexual services are sold, whether “formal”/organized or informal. It also includes persons who may not identify as sex-workers or those who “may not consciously define these activities as income-generating,” but is meant to be a non judgemental all-encompassing term for those who are involved in the sale of sex.⁷ The term “survival sex,” as opposed to “sex

⁵ Julian Sheather, Ronald Apunyo, Marc DuBois, Ruma Khondaker, Abdullahal Noman, Sohana Sadique, and Catherine R McGowan, “Ethical Guidance or Epistemological Injustice? The Quality and Usefulness of Ethical Guidance for Humanitarian Workers and Agencies,” *BMJ Global Health* 7, no. 3 (March 2022): e007707. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjgh-2021-007707>.

⁶ “Sex Workers in Conflict Zones and Humanitarian Crises,” Global Network of Sex Work Projects, https://www.nswp.org/sites/default/files/pb_sws_in_conflict_zones_english_prf02.pdf, 3.

⁷ “Operational Guidance: Responding to the Health and Protection Needs of People Selling or Exchanging Sex in Humanitarian Settings,” The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the United Nations Population Fund, 2021, <https://www.unhcr.org/us/sites/en-us/files/legacy-pdf/60dc85d74.pdf>.

work,” can strip individuals of agency, framing their involvement as a negative coping mechanisms that needs to be intervened in.⁸

One context in which humanitarian programming and sex work overlap is in responding to the needs of people selling or exchanging sex in humanitarian—often refugee—settings. Humanitarian programming refers to the actions of global and local actors as they set out plans to prepare for, plan, manage, deliver, and monitor their response in humanitarian emergencies, such as armed conflicts, natural disasters, and famines.⁹ Currently, over 57.6 million women have been displaced by conflict/disaster or are living in stateless conditions, where they are not recognized citizens in any country.¹⁰ Women and girls displaced by conflict face heightened risk due to “breakdown of normal protection structures and support” as well as an increased burden of “care-related tasks” and domestic labor.¹² Because of this, these women also often have to engage in employment to support themselves and their families within refugee contexts. One of these means of employment is to engage in sex work.

Sex workers are particularly vulnerable to both physical and sexual violence, and for refugee women, the risk of engaging in sex work is even higher. In a survey of Ugandan sex workers, refugee women engaged in sex work were much more likely to experience sexual and

⁸ Rosenberg, “Let’s Talk About Sex Work,” 96.

⁹ “Humanitarian Programming Cycle IASC,” UNHCR, <https://emergency.unhcr.org/coordination-and-communication/interagency/humanitarian-programme-cycle-iasc>.

¹⁰ “Gender Equality and Gender-Based Violence,” UNHCR, <https://reporting.unhcr.org/spotlight/gender-equality-and-gender-based-violence#:~:text=Over%2057.6%20million%20women%20and,rates%20of%20gender%2Dbased%20violence>.

¹¹ “Statelessness,” US Department of State, <https://www.state.gov/other-policy-issues/statelessness/#:~:text=A%20stateless%20person%20is%20someone,or%20destruction%20of%20official%20records>.

¹² “Facts and Figures: Humanitarian Action,” UN Women, <https://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/humanitarian-action/facts-and-figures>.

physical violence than their host country counterparts.¹³ Additionally, refugee women often kept their work a secret due to cultural shame and stigma, as knowledge of their activities can lead to divorce or ostracization.¹⁴ These women engaged in sex work were also much more susceptible to sexually transmitted diseases or unwanted pregnancy.¹⁵ The lack of leadership and community structures available to these women further exacerbate these issues, which can lead to death from illegal abortion and other health risks. Coupled with possible isolation from their families and community, refugees who engage in sex work do not have access to the support systems they need to safely and unashamedly gain economic security for themselves and their families.

This lack of security accompanied by the resource gap in the humanitarian sector is also further heightened by a gap in how humanitarian actors engage with refugees who are involved in sex work. Refugee women and individuals engaged in sex work are often reluctant to discuss their involvement to service providers and humanitarian workers due to fears of stigma and discrimination, and the criminalization of prostitution globally. Additionally, until recently there was a severe lack of operational guidance for working with refugees in sex work.¹⁶ This is slowly changing: The first UN operational guidance document specifically focusing on the needs of sex workers in humanitarian settings was published in 2021 as a joint report from the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA)—the arm of the UN that deals with reproductive and gender-based

¹³ Jennifer S. Rosenberg, and Denis Bakomeza, “Let’s Talk about Sex Work in Humanitarian Settings: Piloting a Rights-Based Approach to Working with Refugee Women Selling Sex in Kampala,” *Reproductive Health Matters* 25, no. 51 (2017), [doi:10.1080/09688080.2017.1405674](https://doi.org/10.1080/09688080.2017.1405674).

¹⁴ Shamima Akhter and Kyoko Kusakabe, “Gender-Based Violence Among Documented Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh,” *Indian Journal of Gender Studies* 21, no. 2 (June 2014), <https://doi.org/10.1177/0971521514525088>.

¹⁵ Rabeya Yousuf, et al., “Safety and Security of Sexual-Reproductive Health and Gender-based Violence Among Rohingya Refugee Women in Bangladesh,” *International Journal of Human and Health Science* 5, no. 2 (April 2021), 165, <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/6208/cd64b457b5725cd466c6b7576955bbaf0e01.pdf>.

¹⁶ Yousuf et al., “Safety and Security of Sexual-Reproductive Health and Gender-Based Violence.”

protections—and the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR).¹⁷ The document draws from other practice standards from UN agencies in collaboration with sex worker organizations to “highlight how humanitarian practices should align with broader human rights frameworks.”¹⁸ It includes seven guiding principles for working with people who engage sex: ensure a human-rights-based approach; do no harm; use harm reduction approaches; ensure evidence-informed action; ensure a community-based protection approach; ensure an age, gender, and diversity (AGD)-sensitive approach; and coordinate with the host government and other community actors.¹⁹ The document mainly consists of two sections: health responses and protection responses, which include HIV testing, comprehensive health response, unintended pregnancy, contraception, information on legal provisions, advocacy for harm reduction, safe spaces, community empowerment, and much more.²⁰ As this conversation expands within the sector, this study aims to examine and analyze how these attempts are translating into direct experiences by exploring two contexts: refugee camps in Kenya and in Bangladesh.

Research Questions

The goal of this thesis is to answer the following questions: 1) What attempts are being made in the humanitarian sector to address the lack of resources for women selling sex in humanitarian refugee settings? 2) How do humanitarian workers perceive sex work? 3) Are their perceptions aligned with the official or unofficial attitudes of the organizations they work for?

¹⁷ “Sex Workers in Conflict Zones,” 4.

¹⁸ “Operational Guidance, 14.

¹⁹ “Operational Guidance, 17.

²⁰ “Operational Guidance, 4.

I also hope to explore how these attitudes and perspectives influence on-the-ground work. 4) Do humanitarian workers use their perceptions and attitudes towards refugees who engage in sex work to inform decisions that they make in the field or are they acting in line with other beliefs?

Additionally, I want to address how these programs are being framed. 5) How are these programs being directed, what are perceived goals of the programs, and what effect do these perceived goals have?

The Conversation

This thesis focuses on the impact of humanitarian efforts to support refugee women who are engaging in sex work as an attempt to understand best practices or consistent disconnects between aid workers and the people they work with. There are two lines of inquiry that have been frequently discussed around this topic: the theory and ethical concerns of *humanitarianism*—specifically humanitarian work with refugees—and the moralization that has occurred around *sex work*.

Can Humanitarianism Ever Be Ethical?

Humanitarian work with refugees is often “inhuman,” says Barbara Harrell-Bond in her piece “Can Humanitarian Work with Refugees be Humane?”²¹ The structure of refugee camps is frequently incredibly authoritarian and humanitarian actors have a monopoly on the distribution of resources, a monopoly that they exercise with strict control.²² Actions like “head counts” — where humanitarian workers count individual family members in order to distribute rations

²¹ Barbara Harrell-Bond, “Can Humanitarian Work with Refugees Be Humane?” *Human Rights Quarterly* 24, no. 1 (2002). <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20069589>.

²² Harrell-Bond, “Can Humanitarian Work,” 57.

equally — are often violent and militarized. “Voluntarily being unpleasant to strangers is one of the most frequent activities that working in a relief program involves,” argues researcher Alex De Waal in his 1988 book, but often this “unpleasantness” is an understatement.²³ Workers in humanitarian organizations may use violence, or at least threaten to, in order to control refugees. These incidents are rarely reported or observed, but occasionally there are viewers who are able to testify to these practices. For example, in 1997 a lawyer from Human Rights Watch reported an incident where UNHCR security beat a number of Somali refugees when they attempted to crowd under a building awning in the rain after requesting transport to a nearby refugee camp.²⁴ This incident, and the multitude of others similar that have likely gone unreported, reveals the undercurrent of how humanitarian aid efforts often perpetuate systems of control and violence on populations they are meant to support.

The Charity Framework

Instances of explicit violence are only one way that humanitarian work can be “inhuman.” The charity framework often used in humanitarian spaces can depersonalize refugees themselves while centering aid workers. Although humanitarian organizations are more recently attempting to reframe their work as “mutual aid” or “decolonized aid” — ideas that target community participation and collaboration in order to give agency and power to those receiving aid — much of humanitarianism still functions as charity.²⁵ Harrell-Bond argues there is a problem with the conception of humanitarian assistance as a “gift-giving” action. Based in Western notions of charity, she says that humanitarianism operates as a one-sided gift, lacking

²³ Harrell-Bond, 61-62.

²⁴ Harrell-Bond, 64.

²⁵ “The Future of Aid,” The New Humanitarian, <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/opinion/2020/11/12/future-of-aid>.

any possibility of reciprocity, and is therefore seen as more moral or altruistic.²⁶ This dynamic reinforces an imbalance of power, in which refugees themselves are deprioritized.

Good and Bad Refugees

Another important framework through which to understand humanitarian action in this thesis is the concept of “deservingness.” In their article “Who Deserves Compassion?” Gaja Maestri and Pierre Monforte discuss the difficulties that have emerged due to the increasing role of deservingness in determining access to humanitarian aid.²⁷

During the intense period of migration in the summer of 2015, the refugee crisis received high rates of media attention and support after the picture of Alan Kurdi — a young Syrian boy who died attempting to cross the Mediterranean Sea — circulated the internet. The Twitter hashtag #CompassionCrisis, and other internet campaigns, made the idea of “compassion” central to nonprofit and charity organizations who were attempting to garner donations.²⁸ However, this donation framework also then calls into question which refugees are the most vulnerable, and therefore deserving of help.

The emphasis on deservingness and vulnerability also contributes to the infantilization of refugees and a categorization of “good” and “bad” refugees. The caricature of a good refugee as a helpless, childlike individual informs much of humanitarian work. Harrell-Bond describes how aid workers perceive refugees as “malleable” and treat them like children. She gives an example of a refugee from the Democratic Republic of Congo who was not allowed to take language

²⁶ Harrell-Bond, “Can Humanitarian Work,” 55.

²⁷ Gaja Maestri and Pierre Monforte, “Who Deserves Compassion? The Moral and Emotional Dilemmas of Volunteering in the ‘Refugee Crisis,’” *Sociology* 54, no. 5 (2020): 920, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038520928199>.

²⁸ Maestri and Monforte, “Who Deserves Compassion?” 921.

classes for the university placement he was attempting to gain, and was instead forced to learn Swedish in a mixed age group where workers “tried to make [him] feel as if [he] was back to zero.”²⁹

Conversely, “undeserving” refugees are ungrateful, or possibly dangerous, people. In their article, Maestri and Monforte interviewed volunteers from the UK and France to understand how they viewed refugees. Many volunteers expressed that they would question the suffering of those they were working with to ensure they truly needed support, or found it more difficult to engage with refugees who were less “isolated” or “vulnerable.”³⁰ This framework of distinguishing between “good”/deserving and “bad”/undeserving refugees shapes how humanitarian workers and others perceive and treat communities they work with. By categorizing refugees based on their vulnerability, these organizations not only influence aid distribution practices, but also inform their own understandings and motivations to continue the work they do on the ground.

The Global Panic Around Sex Work: “Rehabilitation” Programs and Stigmatization

Sex workers are already one of the most stigmatized groups worldwide, facing the risk of daily human rights violations. Law enforcement and health professionals are often less willing to listen to the concerns of sex workers, and abuses against them are deemed “a waste of time” based on their perceived agency in their own vulnerability.³¹ They face high rates of stigma and discrimination, which is then magnified by sex work-related laws which further criminalize

²⁹ Harrell-Bond, “Can Humanitarian Work,” 60.

³⁰ Maestri and Monforte, “Who Deserves Compassion?” 927.

³¹ “Sex Workers at Risk, A Research Summary on Human Rights Abuses Against Sex Workers,” Amnesty International, 2016, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/POL4040612016ENGLISH.pdf>, 9.

them. This can range from actions like fines or probation, such as in Buenos Aires, to police evictions of sex workers from their homes in Norway.³²

Much of the literature analyzing the success of current humanitarian programming for women who engage in sex work is related to rehabilitation programs in the anti-human trafficking movement, a campaign to prevent and respond to the increase in global human trafficking. This movement is often marketed by those within as an attempt to end “modern-day slavery,” which Brown University Professor Elena Shih argues ignores not only the “labour relations of sex work” but also the systemic and legal dimensions that differentiate human trafficking from slavery.³³ These organizations often only promote opportunities for exiting sex work through vocational training rather than providing health or legal services.³⁴ In her research with former and current sex workers in China and Thailand, Elena Shih discusses how these programs rely both on moral rehabilitation and constriction of freedom, forcing workers to live in mandatory housing, under curfew, and curtailing their social behavior.³⁵ Many participants leave these programs because of their restrictive controls, ending up with “new emotional burdens” from their years in mandatory counseling within the program. This counseling often emphasizes messages of the immorality of sex work and the need for sex workers themselves to be fixed or “repaired.”³⁶ Shih’s research is part of a larger conversation within the humanitarian

³² “Sex Workers at Risk,” 11.

³³ Elena Shih, “The Anti-trafficking Rehabilitation Complex: Commodity Activism and Slave-free Good,” Open Democracy, August 19, 2015, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/beyond-trafficking-and-slavery/antitrafficking-rehabilitation-complex-commodity-activism-and-slavefree-goo/>.

³⁴ Jennifer S. Rosenberg, “Refugees Who Turn to Sex Work Need Support,” Al Jazeera, April 15, 2019, <http://america.aljazeera.com/opinions/2015/4/refugees-who-turn-to-sex-work-need-support.html>.

³⁵ Elena Shih, “The Anti-trafficking Rehabilitation Complex.”

³⁶ Rosenberg, “Refugees Who Turn to Sex Work Need Support.”

sector about making space for and promoting the agency of those that these programs are attempting to target.

In refugee camps, this stigma and moralization is just as prevalent. In refugee camps, camp structures are often hierarchical and create safety barriers for women who engage in sex work. For example, in Rohingya refugee camps in Bangladesh, camp leadership must give permission for refugees to engage in income-generating activities, giving them immense power over women who take part in sex work.³⁷ This can also make accessing any gender-based humanitarian programming difficult for female refugees. Often, women are prevented by family members from utilizing health care services for reproductive and sexual health.³⁸ Although community-based programming has had more success in circumventing these barriers, approaches like peer-education are not always the go-to solution within the humanitarian sector.

The Gap

While there exists some, if not enough, literature about the experience of refugee women as individuals: either as an ethnography about experiences of sex work or as insight into the day-to-day life in refugee camps, there is almost none dealing with perspectives of humanitarian workers and service provision by humanitarian workers directed at women who participate in sex work. This existing literature importantly acknowledges where the resource gap in supporting women's economic and reproductive agency in refugee camps comes from in the refugee perspective: challenges of safety, stigma, and difficulties with humanitarian workers or organizations. However, there is a lack of insight into why this gap exists from a humanitarian

³⁷ Akhter, "Gender-Based Violence Among Documented Rohingya Refugees."

³⁸ Yousuf, "Safety and Security of Sexual-Reproductive Health and Gender-based Violence."

perspective, as well as an absence of comparative perspectives between different refugee contexts within this issue.

The goal of this thesis is to provide a map of what the current humanitarian ecosystem is doing to support women who are engaged in sex work and what projects and best practices are succeeding in the sector. In order to understand how humanitarian programs are working internally, this project will attempt to combine an analysis of the messaging these organizations are sending out about the success of their work and if this aligns with the attitudes of humanitarian workers. This analysis is an attempt to uncover patterns between organizations, types of resources, and disconnects in how assistance is being framed and received.

Cases and Justifications: Kenya and Bangladesh

The focus of this research will be on humanitarian workers who work in two different contexts: within refugee contexts in Kenya such as Kakuma and Dadaab refugee camp and within Kutupalong camp in Cox's Bazaar, Bangladesh. What marks these cases is the severity of both refugee crises — with these camps comprising the three largest refugee camps in the world today. The chart below showcases the similarities between these two case studies and isolates one factor: whether or not they have published existence of humanitarian programming for refugee women engaging in sex work. Although male refugees and non-binary individuals also engage in sex work, this project focuses mainly and specifically on the experiences of refugee women who engage in sex work because of the emphasis in published materials on female experiences of sex work and humanitarian programming in both Kenya and Bangladesh. Analyzing the experience of gay men, bisexual men and other men who have sex with men, queer people, transgender persons and non-binary refugees engaged in sex work is incredibly

important and also requires recognition of the different kinds of violence and discrimination these groups may face. However, partially because of the large population of women in all of these refugee camp settings and the experience of the interviewees in this study in working mainly with populations of women, another project set in different contexts would be better placed to analyze these experiences, and it is important to acknowledge that this project does not reflect the whole terrain.

Figure 1.1: Case Study Comparison

	Longevity of Stay in Refugee Camp	Lack of Funding	Prevalence & Stigmatization of Sex Work	Negative Host Country Attitudes	Difficulty for Refugees to Work	Published existence of programs
Bangladesh	Yes, most of the 730,000 Rohingya refugees who fled in 2017 still remain, repatriation is almost impossible	Yes, among one of 17 top underfunded UNHCR operations in 2024. ⁴⁰	Yes, lots of evidence of sex work. Sex work is illegal and FSWs are afraid of being exposed to family and camp systems. ⁴¹	Yes, hostility about disruption of the labor market and cost of refugee hosting. ⁴²	Yes, very difficult for refugees to work legally. ⁴³	No

⁴⁰ “Underfunding Report,” UNHCR, <https://reporting.unhcr.org/underfunding-report-2024#:~:text=The%202024%20Underfunded%20Report%20highlights,in%2017%20operations%20and%20situations.&text=As%20we%20head%20into%20the.only%2035%25%20of%20its%20budget.>

⁴¹ “Crisis Mounts for Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh,” International Crisis Group, December 6, 2023. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/sites/default/files/2023-12/335-crisis-mounts-for-rohingya.pdf>.

⁴² Palah Kamruzzaman, Bulbul Siddiqi, and Kajal Ahmed. “Navigating the Shift in Bangladeshi Host Community’s Perceptions Toward the Rohingya Refugees: A Declining Sympathy,” *Front. Sociol.* 9, (February 5, 2024), <https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/sociology/articles/10.3389/fsoc.2024.1346011/full>.

⁴³ “Crisis Mounts for Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh.”

	³⁹					
Kenya	Yes, the average stay is 26 years. ⁴⁴	Yes, received only 52% of necessary funding for 2024. ⁴⁵	Yes, lots of evidence of sex work. Existence of laws that criminalize sex work. ⁴⁶⁴⁷	Yes, worry about refugees as a “national security” threat and as employment competition. ⁴⁸	Yes, it is very difficult for refugees to obtain work permits to work legally. ⁴⁹	Yes

Both populations have also faced hostile attitudes from host countries and populations, meaning that their physical movement is restricted and access to important services is limited. In Kenya, refugee camps have been governed in the past by a set of very restrictive refugee laws, which present difficulties for refugees who seek to integrate themselves into the workforce. They are required to obtain work permits, which are often incredibly difficult to receive and it is illegal to work in paid positions without them.⁵⁰ Under the 2006 Refugee Act, refugees and asylum seekers in Kenya are also required to remain in designated refugee camps and are issued

³⁹ Thomas Kean, “Five Years On, Rohingya Refugees Face Dire Conditions and a Long Road Ahead,” International Crisis Group, August 22, 2022, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-east-asia/myanmar/five-years-rohingya-refugees-face-dire-conditions-and-long-road-ahead>.

⁴⁴ Lorin Utsch, “Protracted Refugee Situations in Kenyan Refugee Camp,” Ballard Brief, 2020, <https://ballardbrief.byu.edu/issue-briefs/protracted-refugee-situations-in-kenyan-refugee-camps>.

⁴⁵ “Kenya Funding Update,” UNHCR, <https://reporting.unhcr.org/libraries/pdf.js/web/viewer.html?file=https%3A%2F%2Freporting.unhcr.org%2Fsites%2Fdefault%2Ffiles%2F2025-01%2FKenya%2520Funding%2520Update%252031%2520December%25202024.pdf>.

⁴⁶ “Breaking the Barrier; Meeting Sex Worker Needs in Humanitarian and Low-Resource Settings,” International Rescue Committee, https://gbvresponders.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/FSW-research-brief_Kakuma_Final.pdf.

⁴⁷ Joseph Newton Guni, et al. “Using Social Practice Theory in Measuring Perceived Stigma Among Female Sex Workers in Mombasa, Kenya,” *BMC Public Health* 23, no. 972 (2023), <https://bmcpublichealth.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12889-023-15809-2>.

⁴⁸ “Protracted Refugee Situations.”

⁴⁹ Guni, et al., “Using Social Practice Theory.”

⁵⁰ “Refugee Law and Policy: Kenya,” Library of Congress, <https://maint.loc.gov/law/help/refugee-law/kenya.php>.

“movement passes” if they wish to leave, further isolating them from economic and social development within the country.⁵¹ Government restrictions in Bangladesh also work to prevent Rohingya refugees from finding legal employment, similarly pushing them to work in more informal sectors and making them reliant on humanitarian aid.⁵² This is particularly relevant in the context of sex work, as local law enforcement attitudes towards refugees and access to health services like STD testing or abortion clinics can impact the safety of women engaging in sex work.

These two cases address particularly extreme versions of issues within the humanitarian sector, such as limited access to services, funding issues, and the effect of host country attitudes on refugee populations, which offer valuable insights into the broader dynamics of humanitarian aid work in displacement settings.

Although these two contexts are similar in many ways that are relevant to the experiences of refugee women who engage in sex work, there exists a key difference: there exists published humanitarian programming for these women in Kenya, but a lack of public and widespread response and intervention in Bangladesh. At least two separate programs have been created in Kenya to address the needs of refugee women engaging in sex work. The first of these is a peer education and “drop-in” center where peer leaders are trained in health and safety topics and can refer peers to providers or conduct outreach in camp hotspots. The second is a partnership between refugees and KESWA, an organization led by Kenyan sex workers, to create “rights empowerment forums” for refugee women and address access barriers and legal assistance

⁵¹“Access to Movement Passes: A Roadmap to Self-Reliance For Refugee Entrepreneurs in Dadaab,” Norwegian Refugee Council, <https://www.nrc.no/globalassets/pdf/briefing-notes/kakumas-refugees-freedom-of-movement/access-to-movement-passes---self-reliance-of-entrepreneurs-in-dadaab.pdf>.

⁵² “Crisis Mounts for Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh.”

networks in their work.⁵³ Compared to Kenya, Bangladesh has no publicized efforts to address this specific crisis. Picking two cases where humanitarian actors have uncovered widespread evidence of refugee women's involvement in sex work, yet in one context there exists a lack of targeted humanitarian programming in this area and in another context there is clear evidence of programming, will enable me to isolate the core issue at hand: what are humanitarian actors and organizations doing to address this critical gap in resources and what phenomena is leading to the creation of programming?

Methods

For data collection in this thesis, I used key informant interviews of humanitarian aid workers. In order to answer questions about the attempts in the humanitarian sector to address the lack of resources for women selling sex in humanitarian settings and how humanitarian workers perceive these programs and sex work itself, it is essential to gather input directly from these workers.

Additionally, to explore the alignment of worker perceptions with organizational policies and the women they work with, it is impossible to garner these perspective-based answers from non-interview data. Although this thesis attempts to gain understanding of humanitarian programming efforts to support sex workers, it is more concerned with understanding subjective viewpoints rather than discovering objective truths about the sector.

Strategies for Data Collection

Humanitarian programming that attempts to support refugee women who engage in sex work can take many forms. Besides workers who support counseling and the mental health and psychosocial side of these efforts, there are also physical health response workers who complete

⁵³ "Operational Guidance," 75-76.

programming on contraceptive services or STD testing. Additionally, many humanitarian environments have safe spaces or “drop-in centers” where people who sell or engage sex can form a peer network and hold group activities, or simply seek shelter and relevant services.⁵⁴

To identify prospective interviewees I began by targeting humanitarian workers in my two case study areas who contributed to key research and literature within the sexual health, gender-based violence, and sex work sectors. This includes the over 30 authors and contributors on the first UN operational guidance manual, many of whom have spent time in either Rohingya or Kenyan refugee contexts. To garner a range of perspectives and diverse set of key informants, I also attempted to use these international humanitarian workers to reach out to local organizations who provide services to women within my case locations in a type of “snowball sampling,” where initial subjects recruited more additional interviewees. One limitation of my project is that I conducted all interviews in English, which restricted the narratives I encountered to humanitarian aid workers who are fluent English speakers. Additionally, because of further limitations that are discussed in chapter five, the majority of interview data came from humanitarian workers with UN agencies. I also anonymized the interviews by removing names and identifiable information from all interview notes, and only referred to interviewees as “a humanitarian worker” or an “interviewee” within my final analysis. Interviews cover both first-hand objective accounts of available resources for women who engage in sex work, as well as subjective perspectives and opinions on the “success” of these attempts.

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS:

1. Tell me a little bit about the organization you work for and its core mission.
2. Tell me about your role within the organization.
3. Tell me a little bit about how you got involved with this organization.
4. Do you feel like some of the motivations you just mentioned have an impact on the way you approach your work?

⁵⁴ “Operational Guidance,” 44.

5. Through your work, have you seen or heard about refugee women engaging in sex work?
6. What is the general attitude/perception towards sex work in refugee camps among refugees? What about among humanitarian workers?
7. Has your organization created any programming for refugee women engaging in sex work? What types of programs?
 1. If not, has there been any discussion about supporting this demographic in your organization?
 2. If yes, what do these programs look like? What elements do they contain and what are they attempting to provide?
 - i. Have you worked on/with these programs yourself?
 - ii. Are they a part of any larger or more general gender-based programming?
 - iii. What has been your experience with these programs?
 - iv. How are these programs designed? Who is designing them and what criteria are they using?
 - v. What are your thoughts on the effectiveness of the programs you have seen in supporting women impacted by sex work?
8. How unique do you believe this approach is to the problem? Is it inspired by other locations, etc.?
9. If you could design the optimal program for supporting female sex workers, what would it look like?

Hypothesis

I first hypothesized that the framing of refugee women as a vulnerable population influences the way humanitarian programming functions in and outside of refugee camps by decreasing opportunities for female agency. I also hypothesized that the perception of international humanitarian actors will differ from local actors, which could result in inconsistencies in the local implementation of humanitarian aid efforts. Additionally I thought that the traditional “top down” nature of humanitarian assistance — as opposed to a “localized” community or rights-based approach that emphasizes input from refugee women themselves— would reinforce similar policing structures of refugee camps, creating a disconnect between refugees and humanitarian workers.

Finally, I hypothesized that this disconnect could manifest itself particularly for female refugees engaged in sex work by creating situations where NGOs are not providing adequate and accessible programming because of both personal stigma influencing their actions and support, as well as on-the-ground coordination issues. I believed all of these factors would enhance barriers for refugees to engage with sex work in a safe and informed manner, as well as challenge humanitarian workers in their implementation of programming because of conflicting responsibilities they feel to their organization, donor systems, and vulnerable populations they work with.

Thesis Roadmap

In chapter two I will continue to provide a review of literature that currently exists on the ethical concerns of humanitarian programming, going further into the divide between international and local actors as well as examining the effect of humanitarian principles on worker action. I will also examine literature on sex work—both in a refugee and non-refugee context—and how debates on sex worker agency can inform public opinion and trickle into the humanitarian sphere. In chapters three and four I will examine each case study: pulling together existing ethnographic and scholarly research on the lives of women in these refugee camps, humanitarian programming that exists in each location, and combining this with data from my respective interviews. In chapter five I will conclude by revisiting my hypothesis and summarizing how findings relate to each research question, as well as discussing limitations of data collection in the study. Finally, I will address what the future of humanitarian programming might or should look like in this area, and future research or questions that I have after completing this project.

CHAPTER 2: THE DEBATE ON HUMANITARIANISM: HOW DOES ENGAGING WITH SEX WORK CHALLENGE MORALIZATION PROCESSES FOR HUMANITARIAN AID WORKERS?

This literature review examines in-depth the three main strands of critical theory that this thesis revolves around: perspectives on humanitarianism, the experience of refugees (especially women) during displacement in refugee camps, and global perspectives on sex work. Within the idea of humanitarianism, which this thesis also takes for granted as an existing structure in the international system, there exist a variety of critiques. Some of these critiques are rooted in the origins of humanitarian aid as Western and Global North forms of governance that advance colonial powers, and others critique conceptions of charity that have arisen from humanitarianism. As the goal of this thesis is to examine the motivations and experiences of individual humanitarian workers through semi-structured interviews, it is also necessary to analyze scholarly literature that discusses the experience of individual humanitarian workers and how their motivations and perceptions influence their actions in the field. This first section on humanitarianism seeks to examine the moralizing processes that occur at all levels of the humanitarian aid system: the colonial structures that influence aid on an international level, the donor and charity frameworks that influence it on an organizational level, and the street-level influences that affect individual workers. By placing these theories in conversation with common perspectives on refugees and female agency (including non-Western ideas of agency), as well as differing opinions on the interaction between sex work and forms of gendered oppression, I attempt to explore the different rhetoric that surrounds these humanitarian workers as they engage in programming for refugee women who engage in sex work. I also aim to use this conversation to explain why this specific work is a particularly relevant lens through which to examine the moralizing processes that occur in humanitarianism.

Theory on Humanitarianism

Humanitarianism as Colonialism: What is Decolonizing Humanitarianism

One line of theory describes the connection between humanitarian work and colonial power structures, arguing that it is an extension of colonial systems and white supremacy. In her critique of humanitarianism, Polly Pallister Wilkins of the University of Amsterdam says that humanitarianism also plays a role in the creation of societal concepts of “whiteness.” She argues that humanitarian conceptions of a universal human — that the mission of humanitarianism is for the benefit, well-being, and survival of the entire human species — are actually covering up the erasure of non-white humans and attempting to perpetuate the idea that “humanitarianism is above race.”¹ Not only does humanitarianism serve as a function of Western and Global North control, but this Western control is also a securing of whiteness and white supremacy. By universalizing humanitarianism, and claiming that it is benefiting all people, Pallister Wilkins argues that humanitarianism is able to temper fears about the well-being of non-white populations while also securing whiteness in power positions and at the top of racial hierarchies.²

There are many separate critiques of humanitarianism as a colonial function: that it is a result of organizational dysfunction, that it is rooted in the beginnings of humanitarianism, and that humanitarian workers themselves are partially to blame. Pallister Wilkins discusses how humanitarianism is entirely rooted and based upon notions of colonialism, making it almost impossible to “decolonize” humanitarianism if its roots are based in supporting and upholding white supremacy.³ Tammam Aloudat and Themrise Khan, however, discuss possible ways to

¹ Polly Pallister-Wilkins, “Saving the Souls of White Folk: Humanitarianism as White Supremacy,” *Security Dialogue* 52: 102, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/09670106211024419>.

² Pallister-Wilkins, “Saving the Souls of White Folk,” 101.

³ Pallister-Wilkins, “Saving the Souls of White Folk,” 98.

decolonize humanitarianism in their article “Decolonising Humanitarianism or Humanitarian Aid?” and refer to decolonization as a term that “alludes to the imbalance of power and the potential to rebalance this power asymmetry” by giving agency back to those the sector is working to serve.⁴ They discuss how separating humanitarianism from the Global North, moving away from the false idea that it is possible to depoliticize humanitarianism, linking the sector with other social justice issues, and prioritizing a location’s indigenous humanitarian actors are all ways to separate humanitarian aid from ideas of Western global hegemony. One caveat in their work is that this colonial critique is directed only at “the humanitarian aid regime” and not at all at the individual level.⁵ American anthropologist Barbara Harrell-Bond however— whose work “Can Humanitarian Work with Refugees be Humane?” is introduced in chapter one — details numerous examples of individual level violence from humanitarian workers that perpetuates these same colonial power structures and structures of whiteness: where Western, often white, volunteers are able to use their humanitarian positions against those they are purportedly supporting.⁶ The solution for this “inhumane humanitarianism,” as she names it, is that we must work to strengthen national and local institutions so they can incorporate this within a larger host state human rights institutions, because humanitarianism should function almost entirely as a state responsibility.⁷

Humanitarianism as Charity: Critiques of Band-Aid Humanitarianism

⁴ Tammam Aloudat and Themrise Khan, “Decolonising Humanitarianism or Humanitarian Aid?,” *PLOS Global Public Health* 2, no. 4 (April 25, 2022): 1, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pgph.0000179>.

⁵ Aloudat, “Decolonising Humanitarianism or Humanitarian Aid?,” 2.

⁶ Barbara Harrell-Bond, “Can Humanitarian Work with Refugees Be Humane?” *Human Rights Quarterly* 24, no. 1 (2002): 63-67, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20069589>.

⁷ Harrell-Bond, “Can Humanitarian Work with Refugees Be Humane?,” 77.

Another frequent critique of humanitarianism is its connection to Western ideas of charity, and how this means humanitarianism often reinforces existing power imbalances rather than equalizing them. As Harrell-Bond argues, humanitarianism is often a function of “gift-giving.”⁸ She argues that the “dominant ethos of humanitarianism is charity, and charitable giving is carried out by persons voluntarily engaged in *giving* to those in need.”⁹ To understand the connection between humanitarianism and charity, it is first important to analyze the different conceptions of “charity” and how it is used in different theoretical frameworks. Within a neoliberal theoretical framework, charity is often pushed as a non-state response that is simultaneously supported by political authorities, argues Andrew Clarke and Cameron Parsell. Clarke and Parsell discuss how neoliberal governance attempts to emphasize “charity” — which they define as the “voluntary practice of giving money, resources, or time to an anonymous other” — in order to minimize the governmental welfare state’s role in mitigating poverty.¹⁰ The “voluntariness” and “anonymity” of charity are particularly relevant here: it is these two aspects that make the act of charity a moral and selfless decision by regular everyday citizens, which then reflect upon the morality and community-oriented values of the society itself. This idea of charity as a marker of a just and moral society is also prevalent outside of neoliberal thought, such as in 18th century economist and philosopher Adam Smith’s “The Theory of Moral Sentiments.” Smith distinguishes between ideas of charity and justice: that people feel an obligation to follow through on principles of justice, but that charity and generosity are up to the

⁸ Harrell-Bond, 55.

⁹ Harrell-Bond.

¹⁰ Andrew Clarke and Cameron Parsell, “Resurgent Charity and the Neoliberalizing Social,” *Economy and Society* 51, no. 2 (April 3, 2022): 308, 320, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03085147.2021.1995977>.

individual and represent their own altruistic motivations.¹¹ These theories represent a moralistic outlook on individual charity, but also how private charity can function as an excuse for governments to shirk their responsibility to the well-being of their citizens.

Humanitarianism as charity is often critiqued for similar reasons: it serves as a band-aid solution rather than a long-term shift of power structures and hierarchy. Marxist critiques of philanthropy, that are consistently echoed throughout humanitarian literature, argue that volunteer and humanitarian efforts “exonerate state inaction, without challenging the inequalities that perpetuate poverty.”¹² In his piece “Philanthropy or Solidarity?” Dimitrios Theodossopoulos simultaneously supports and challenges this argument, questioning how humanitarianism can function both positively and negatively. He maintains the “de-politicizing effect” of humanitarianism — that it focuses too heavily on individual suffering rather than oppressive systems — but argues that solidarity in humanitarianism can also support the formation of citizen networks and empower communities advocating for change.¹³ Roberto Belloni, a professor at the University of Bologna, discusses this band-aid concept as well, but with a much more negative outlook: arguing that band-aid humanitarianism functions as a control strategy for Western countries. Instead of changing structural circumstances, he believes that humanitarianism is often meant to prevent escalation of crises into cross-border conflicts and limit their impact on the West: it is “damage control parading as humanitarianism.”¹⁴

¹¹ Donald J. Devine, “Adam Smith and the Problem of Justice in Capitalist Society,” *The Journal of Legal Studies* 6, no. 2 (1977): 402. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/723997>.

¹² Dimitrios Theodossopoulos, “Philanthropy or solidarity? Ethical dilemmas about humanitarianism in crisis-afflicted Greece,” *Social Anthropology* 24, no. 2 (2016): 169, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1469-8676.12304>.

¹³ Theodossopoulos, “Philanthropy or solidarity?,” 180-181.

¹⁴ Roberto Belloni, “The Trouble with Humanitarianism,” *Review of International Studies* 33, no. 3 (July 2007): 464-465, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210507007607>.

Another way in which humanitarian action functions similarly to charity is through its connection with donors, and the ways in which these donors influence organizational missions and actions. Within his piece “The Trouble With Humanitarianism” Belloni presents nine thesis statements about humanitarian action. His first and seventh theses, which are most relevant to the theory of donor systems within humanitarianism, state: “humanitarianism simplifies too much” and “humanitarianism is organizationally dysfunctional” respectively.¹⁵ This first thesis argues that humanitarian crises are often portrayed in a “deceptively simple manner,” and that this is because humanitarians need to effectively bring media attention to their cause. Media coverage on crises draws international focus, which then also helps humanitarians raise the necessary funds. In order to do so, Belloni asserts that humanitarians and organizations sometimes “exploit victims for shock value,” a practice he refers to as the “pornography of suffering.”¹⁶ Besides media exploitation as a driver for donor support, humanitarian organizations also have to inflate their own importance and consistently make arguments about the need for their own existence. This creates “organizational dysfunction,” Belloni argues, where organizations remain in crisis locations even if their impact is unclear. If they pull out of a country or region, other organizations will remain and therefore maintain their reputation as “reliable implementing partners” with donor governments.¹⁷ The impact of donor considerations on humanitarianism is an inherent part of working in the sector for individuals both on the ground and those making bureaucratic decisions, as they are constantly weighing the effects of every decision on both donors and beneficiaries.

¹⁵ Belloni, “The Trouble with Humanitarianism.”

¹⁶ Belloni, “The Trouble with Humanitarianism,” 456.

¹⁷ Belloni, 469.

Barbara Harrell-Bond also discusses the phenomenon of donor systems and their importance in the way organizations implement humanitarian efforts. She frames it as a “consumer” problem: if humanitarian organizations function as a business, they do not have normal ways of measuring consumer satisfaction. Their consumers, which would be the citizens they are aiming to help and support, come second to the donors who are funding their projects.¹⁸ Harrell-Bond pulls from the work of Mark Walkup, who argues that organizational survival is only threatened by donor relations, and therefore humanitarians are “naturally more responsive to donor interests than to the needs of the affected population.”¹⁹ This responsibility to donor behavior is becoming increasingly relevant in the humanitarian sector as each year more and more people require humanitarian assistance, stretching funding thinner and thinner.

Humanitarians on the Ground: Organization vs. Individual

The disconnect between the desire of humanitarians and organizations to attend to the needs of the populations they support and their attentiveness to the desires of donors to maintain organizational survival also leads to a disconnect on the ground: between workers and their organizations. In his piece “When the State Meets the Street,” Bernardo Zacka details this disconnect for “street-level bureaucrats” — on-the-ground individuals who are tasked with delivering governmental public services and implementing public policy. He discusses the difficulty of this position: that there are scarce resources that must be distributed “fairly” in complicated moral decisions with often only vague rules and instructions to guide them, all of which can “erode and truncate [the] moral sensibilities” of these workers through desensitization.²⁰ Other literature has discussed the difficulty of being a “field-level” or “street”

¹⁸ Harrell-Bond, “Can Humanitarian Work,” 72.

¹⁹ Harrell-Bond, 72.

²⁰ Bernardo Zacka, *When the State Meets the Street: Public Service and Moral Agency* (Harvard University Press, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.4159/9780674981423>, 4.

worker and the toll it takes on workers themselves. Witnessing consistent trauma often causes workers to burn out or affects their ability to care for their own mental and emotional well-being, argues Dr. Safieh Shah.²¹ However, other scholars and humanitarian workers caution against overemphasizing this burnout at the risk of valorizing these workers without prioritizing those they intend to help. Joel Charny, whose interview with NPR was discussed at the outset of the introduction, cautions against the “martyr complex” as he believes it harms workers but also prevents humanitarian work from being challenged and critiqued.²²

Zacka takes a slightly different approach to the problems of being a street-level (or frontline) worker. He details his own experience as a street-level bureaucrat and discusses his first day on the job and his power to decide whether or not those in need could meet with case managers at his organization.

And so with this conditional, I was on my way from being a mere operator to being a gatekeeper endowed with circumscribed but very real discretionary power. And I quickly discovered that I could also disguise the boundaries of my discretion by claiming, as I had done earlier in the day, that I was “just doing my job.”²³

He argues that the often “reductive” attitudes of frontline workers are attempts to cope with the pressure of their work: both the immense power they hold as the gatekeeper to necessary resources, and the inability to provide everything that their clients might need. They “do not have the capabilities to live up to the demands of the role” and therefore “narrow their understanding

²¹ Safieh Shah, “Epistemic Violence in the Humanitarian Sector: A Call for Compassion and Kindness to Unlock Systemic Transitions,” *PLOS Global Public Health*, August 7, 2024, <https://speakingofmedicine.plos.org/2024/08/07/epistemic-violence-in-the-humanitarian-sector-a-call-for-compassion-and-kindness-to-unlock-systemic-transitions/>.

²² Malaka Gharib, “A Retiring Aid Worker Reflects on How To Repair the World—Without Wearing A Halo,” *NPR*, September 6, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2021/09/06/1033227134/a-retiring-aid-worker-reflects-on-how-to-repair-the-world-without-wearing-a-halo>.

²³ Zacka, *When the State Meets the Street*, 8.

of these demands” to line them up with what is actually possible.²⁴ This inability to cope with the stress and the impossible challenge of humanitarian work is also discussed by Harrell-Bond and Walkup: that this is a dilemma that arises from inherent “institutional contradictions between expectation and reality.”²⁵

There are a variety of factors that cause these contradictions for humanitarian workers and impede their ability to fully improve the lives of those they work with. These include budgetary constraints, cultural barriers, incorrect information, bad communication systems, transportation dilemmas, hostile military environments, and much more.²⁶ In his book, “Street-Level Bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the Individuals in Public Services” Michael Lipsky details two sets of conditions that contribute to this problem and limit the discretion of workers. Although these conditions are based on government workers and in-country bureaucracies, they are still applicable to the demands and conditions of international and national humanitarian NGOs. The first condition, similarly mentioned by Zacka and Harrell-Bond, is simply a chronic shortage of resources and an environment that can never catch up to the continuously increasing demand, meaning the “bureaucracy” must always be rationing.²⁷ This resource shortage also ties humanitarian worker behavior back towards the concerns of donor governments and systems. The second condition is slightly more within the control of humanitarian or bureaucratic organizations themselves: the absence of clear guidelines for the rationing decisions. Lipsky critiques how organizational goals are simultaneously ambiguous and conflicting, and that

²⁴ Zacka, 12.

²⁵ Harrell-Bond, “Can Humanitarian Work,” 72.

²⁶ Harrell-Bond, 72.

²⁷ “Review of *Street-Level Bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Services* by Michael Lipsky,” *Michigan Law Review* 79, no. 4 (1981): 811–14, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1288305>.

instead of goals being the driving force for decision-making, workers end up considering what is practical and convenient instead.²⁸ The confluence of these factors — along with the stressful psychological impact on humanitarian workers — can prevent them from successfully carrying out their obligations and adhering to organizational goals.

However, Zacka also proposes solutions for this conflict, as well as a method of reframing the conversation on frontline workers. He argues that most theoretical models of worker behavior are framed as top-models that “avoid relying on the moral agency of lower-ranking bureaucrats” and instead simply assign them the task of following rules and complying with organization priorities. These models ignore that these workers are making moral choices every day, even if their own interests align with those of their organizations and they are attempting to comply with a relatively “just and legitimate” set of rules.²⁹ He suggests that the emphasis on “fairness” is not actually the most beneficial, but that it is perhaps necessary for these workers to sometimes prioritize “responsiveness” and “respect” to individual needs.³⁰ Zacka stresses that it is also imperative for workers to understand that “*how* one is treated is just as crucial as *what* one gets”: that humanitarian worker behavior and demeanor is just as much a part of resource distribution as the actual quantifiable resources.³¹ Although it is almost impossible to understand the context of each individual worker and the motivations and drivers of their actions without interviews, these perspectives on street-level work offer a framework from which to view their experiences: that they are inherently constrained by the differing

²⁸ “Review of *Street-Level Bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Services* by Michael Lipsky.”

²⁹ Zacka, *When the State Meets the Street*, 20.

³⁰ Zacka, 22.

³¹ Zacka, 9.

expectations and realities of their profession, and yet they are also agentic workers with control over their own decisions and attitudes.

Localized Humanitarianism: Supporting Community Engagement

One proposed solution for the disconnect between humanitarian organizations and the communities they work with is the idea of localized humanitarianism: engaging local partners and communities in humanitarian efforts to ensure successful interventions. Localization has been touted as a positive step in humanitarian aid for many reasons. In the article “Community-Engagement in Research in Humanitarian Settings,” Luchuo Engelbert Bain et al., discuss how there exists a “knowledge gap” between humanitarians and the environment they work in, as workers have “frequently little time to fully absorb the most recent conversations among practitioners, academics, policymakers, and civil society.”³² To fix this knowledge gap, Bain et al. proposes that humanitarians use field research that is based in community-engagement, as local partners are more likely to understand cultural and historical context, as well as support the success of research implementation if they are more involved.³³ The idea that community-engagement and localization contributes to whether or not humanitarian aid is successful is not a unique perspective. In a study analyzing two peace-building humanitarian interventions in Bosnia and Somalia, Theodora-Ismene Gizelis and Kristin E. Kosek found that phases of interventions where there was more local involvement also saw lower levels of conflict. Gizelis and Kosek argue that this is because if local communities

³² Luchuo Engelbert Bain et al., “Community-engagement in Research in Humanitarian Settings,” *Front. Public Health* 11, (2023), <https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/public-health/articles/10.3389/fpubh.2023.1208684/full>.

³³ Bain et al., “Community-engagement in Research in Humanitarian Settings.”

are involved in interventions, they are more likely to feel “personal attachment” to the intervention.³⁴

Some scholars also have critiques of localization efforts: that although recently there has been increased discussion and promotion of localization as a tactic in humanitarian sectors, there is also a lack of clarity on what the terms localization and “local” really refer to. Kristina Roepstorff, an international relations and humanitarian studies professor, talks about how the misunderstandings and lack of clarification around localization has stymied its broader implementation in her article “A Call for Critical Reflection on the Localisation Agenda in Humanitarian Action.” Some international actors and organizations view localization as a time-waster, something that prevents immediate action and intervention, or see local actors as non-neutral characters who may take sides or have personal perspectives on armed conflicts. Roepstorff reconceptualizes localism to move away from the idea of “being local” as a resource that allows actors to become “gatekeepers” in the distribution of aid. Instead, who and what is local should be determined contextually by those engaged in and affected by a crisis response, rather than being framed as one specific set of insider actors.³⁵

The debate over localization has become increasingly prominent in the humanitarian sector over the last decade. Since the World Humanitarian Summit held in Istanbul in May 2016, which emphasized the inclusion and importance of local actors, this discussion has taken a center-stage position within the international humanitarian community.³⁶ At the summit, a variety

³⁴ Theodora-Ismene Gizelis and Kristin E. Kosek, “Why Humanitarian Interventions Succeed or Fail: The Role of Local Participation,” *Cooperation and Conflict* 40, no. 4 (2005), https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0010836705058224?casa_token=z5Mix38cDHMAAAAA:YRan_Mk ehTnPRao7gq1SXEmv8NAXIXrqpwVPU_WGXEOc1GTRsYxQq4HZSFTNq03tdJ692gSaaBCe.

³⁵ Kristina Roepstorff, “A Call for Critical Reflection on the Localisation Agenda in Humanitarian Action,” *Third World Quarterly* 41, no. 2(2019), <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/01436597.2019.1644160?scroll=top&needAccess=true#d1e321>.

³⁶ Roepstorff, “A Call for Critical Reflection on the Localisation Agenda in Humanitarian Action.”

of proposals were created to emphasize local support, culminating in the Grand Bargain: an agreement between donors and aid organizations to invest in local and national actors and improve their capacity.³⁷ The original compromise to allocate 25% of funding directly to local responders has led to an increase from 22.8% of funding in 2016 to 34% of funding in 2021 for local responders. The slogan “as local as possible, as international as necessary,” is a reflection of the shift in discussion, emphasizing the idea that international humanitarianism is meant to increase the power of local actors through coordination and funding support, but not overshadow it.³⁸

Refugee Response: the Power Structures of Refugee Camps and Female Migration

Within literature on humanitarianism and humanitarian aid lies specific examples of humanitarian crises. This thesis focuses on the international response and reaction to the global refugee crisis, specifically the reaction to refugee women and their migration. In order to understand the relevance of this case study — and why this project focuses on aid work within this population — it is necessary to examine the historical context of the global refugee crisis as well as how the humanitarian sector has responded to it. Examining the theoretical framework that surrounds humanitarianism with refugee women is imperative to understanding the different strands of literature that build the knowledge base that informs the approach humanitarian actors take on the ground. This includes exploring how intersecting ideas about migration, gender, and agency all shape humanitarian interventions and responses to the needs of refugee women engaged in sex work.

³⁷ “Localization,” UNOCHA, <https://www.unocha.org/localization>.

³⁸ “Localization.”

The response to the modern-day refugee crisis began in 1951, after the United Nations created the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugee (UNHCR) and wrote the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, which officially recognized the right to seek asylum for persons fleeing from the Second World War and was then extended in 1967 to cover all cases of refugeehood. Notably, it also institutionalized the idea of non refoulement: that no refugees could be forced against their will to a territory where they fear for their own life or freedom.³⁹ One of the largest responses to the refugee crisis and the flow migration that has occurred globally is the refugee camp. Within these camps there is an incredible amount of diversity of size, freedom of movement, and population spread, but they also function as a choice rather than an international mandate. Professor at the University of East Anglia Kirsten McConnachie discusses this choice in “Camps of Containment: A Genealogy of the Refugee Camp,” where she argues that the core features and functions of refugee camps are containment and segregation from the rest of the surrounding population. McConnachie also discusses how encampment is often perceived as an unavoidable response to the crisis, but that this ignores centuries of asylum history that points to a clear preference for refugee camps over any other responses in the humanitarian sector. While they are certainly sites for humanitarian action and protection, they are inherently identified by the ways in which they restrict the autonomy of displaced persons.⁴⁰

This idea of containment within refugee camps is made more prevalent by examining the power structures and hierarchies within camps. As Harrell-Bond frequently points out in her

³⁹ Office of the United States High Commissioner for Refugees, “Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees,” UNHCR, <https://www.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/legacy-pdf/3b66c2aa10.pdf>.

⁴⁰ Katherine McConnachie, “Camps of Containment: A Genealogy of the Refugee Camp,” *Humanity: An International Journal of Human Rights, Humanitarianism, and Development* 7, no. 3 (2016), <https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/hum.2016.0022>.

piece “Can Humanitarian Work With Refugees be Humane?” the power in refugee camps lies at the feet of these humanitarian organizations who can give “gifts” of resources to refugees, while refugees themselves are disempowered by this relationship of dependence.⁴¹ They are able to analyze refugees and often make distinctions about the “deservingness” of different refugee populations to receive aid. As discussed previously in chapter one, when refugees are deemed deserving of support—often when they are perceived as more vulnerable—they are treated better by humanitarian workers and volunteers, but when they do not fit the traditional picture of the refugee in need they do not receive the same kind of assistance, argue Gaja Maestri and Pierre Monforte.⁴²

Recently, there has been a shift within humanitarian structures in refugee camps to emphasize participatory and community-based approaches for refugee assistance, like the discussion of localization above. Elisabeth Olivius, an associate professor of political science at Umeå University in Sweden, details the responses to this phenomenon in her piece “(Un)Governable Subjects: The Limits of Refugee Participation in the Promotion of Gender Equality in Humanitarian Aid,” which argues that there exists an inescapable paradox in the way governments and humanitarian workers perceive refugee participation — specifically of female refugee. She contrasts two case studies: that of refugees in Bangladesh, who are perceived as passive recipients that are unwilling to engage in community, and that of refugee women in Thailand, who are perceived as overly participatory in a way that problematizes them to the humanitarian community. While she argues that humanitarian actors perceive the passivity Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh as an obstacle that prevents them from effectively

⁴¹ Harrell-Bond, “Can Humanitarian Work,” 55.

⁴² Gaja Maestri and Pierre Monforte, “Who Deserves Compassion? The Moral and Emotional Dilemmas of Volunteering in the ‘Refugee Crisis,’” *Sociology* 54, no. 5 (2020): 920, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038520928199>.

implementing gender-based humanitarian aid, they simultaneously see the rare self-governance that exists in Thailand refugee camps (where refugees themselves organize and govern the camps) as an obstacle to them, as they see refugee governance as “immature organizations” with less knowledge than themselves.⁴³ This paradox illustrates how the conflicting pictures of deservingness within refugee communities complicate humanitarian aid structures as well: even within their goal to localize and transfer the approach back to the communities, aid organizations falter when their conceptions of supposed aid governance are disrupted. The contradictions inherent in these participatory approaches, as well as the hierarchies of deservingness that inform humanitarian aid with refugees, all highlight the moralization that is embedded in these aid structures.

The Importance of Women: Agency Narratives of Female Refugees

The importance of humanitarian aid perceptions is particularly relevant within conversations of female refugee agency, as their roles within aid structures are being constantly renegotiated to align with the goals of humanitarian organizations. Humanitarian aid perceptions of refugees who are women vary from passive figures to unruly actors who complicate intervention. However, NGO workers also see the participation of these women in humanitarian initiatives as essential. One humanitarian worker said to Olivius that “To have women involved in the programme is a very good way to ensure the sustainability of the project. To enhance the impact of it,” as women transmit knowledge to their children and others in the community in a way they do not see from male refugees.⁴⁴ The importance of refugee women in humanitarian programming also exists on the donor side. Women (and children) are often promoted as the face

⁴³ Elisabeth Olivius, “(Un)Governable Subjects: The Limits of Refugee Participation in the Promotion of Gender Equality in Humanitarian Aid,” *Journal of Refugee Studies* 27, no. 1 (March 1, 2014), <https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/fet001>.

⁴⁴ Olivius, “(Un)Governable Subjects,” 49.

of the global refugee crisis, not just because they are also often the main victims of displacement but because they support the “international expectation of a certain kind of helplessness as a refugee characteristic,” argues Lisa Malkki, an associate professor of Sociology at Stanford University.⁴⁵ However, as Olivius discusses, women are often excluded from decisions about the way they receive humanitarian aid. Humanitarian organizations frame their assistance to women using “the norm of passivity” argues Shafinaz Sameen in her masters thesis for the University of Illinois, where intervention “perpetuates gender inequalities and reinscribes women’s subordination in the overall humanitarian power relations—first, by preventing their contributions and interests(voices), and second, by failing to see them as ‘actors’ with specific interests and choices.”⁴⁶ This idea of passivity also translates into how humanitarians promote ideas of empowerment. In “Emissaries of Empowerment,” Kate Cronin-Furman, Nimmi Gowrinathan and Rafia Zakaria argue that the perception victimhood and vulnerability in the aid industry for women serves to reinforce their depoliticization by the state, which in turn serves as the main cause of their marginalization.⁴⁷ “Schools built, charcoal stoves distributed, and first pregnancies delayed all lend themselves much more easily to quantification than does women’s political mobilization,” they argue.⁴⁸ These Western ideas of empowerment prioritize measurable

⁴⁵ Peter Nyers, “Refugees, Humanitarian Emergencies, and the Politicization of Life,” *Refuge: Canada’s Journal on Refugees / Refuge: Revue Canadienne Sur Les Réfugiés* 17, no. 6 (1998): 18, <https://refuge.journals.yorku.ca/index.php/refuge/article/download/21996/20665/0>.

⁴⁶ Shafinaz Sameen, “Refugee Women’s Agency Through Everyday Space Appropriation: An Investigation into Rohingya Women’s “Invisibility” In the Camps of Bangladesh.” Masters thesis, Department of Urban Planning, Graduate College of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2020. <https://core.ac.uk/reader/334979900>.

⁴⁷ Kate Cronin-Furman, Nimmi Gowrinathan, and Rafia Zakaria, “Emissaries of Empowerment,” Colin Powell School for Civic and Public Leadership, The City College of New York, September 2017, https://www.cuny.edu/colinpowellschool/emissaries-empowerment?srsId=AfmBOogrx-7AmaEQprJ2lFBaPEpjkxJ_UBLDGGhgBv7GqrKHAA0Vzli.

⁴⁸ Cronin-Furman, “Emissaries of Empowerment.”

interventions in humanitarianism rather than truly rights-based ones, creating not only ineffective but actively harmful programming.

Exclusionary forces that reinforce marginalization are also present outside of simply humanitarian aid assistance. Jennifer Hartmann and others argue for the applicability of social exclusion theory on female refugee experiences — where individuals are unable to participate to the fullest extent in economic, social, political, and cultural development because of processes of disempowerment and alienation.⁴⁹ Hartmann et al. showcase how female refugees encounter an inability to identify with and participate in society after displacement, and face additional challenges based on local host country dynamics and gendered social norms.⁵⁰ This discussion of the lack of agency for female refugees during migration is applicable throughout the entire process of displacement, and this lack of agency functions parallel to the ways in which women are utilized by humanitarian organizations for their own success and survival.

The tendency for humanitarian organizations to utilize female refugee agency for their own gain, while often excluding them from real participation, also excludes non-Western conceptions of agency that these women obtain in their everyday lives. Sameen argues that Western notions of agency utilized by humanitarian agencies focus only on visible contributions that can be touted to donors are real world impacts, again showcasing the priority of results and donor perceptions.⁵¹ But there are other frameworks through which to analyze more “invisible” forms of agency that refugee women create for themselves within refugee camps. Agency does

⁴⁹ Dave Muddiman, “Theories of Social Exclusion and The Public Library,” (2006), <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/11879329.pdf>.

⁵⁰ Jennifer M.K. Hartmann, Trena I. Mukherjee, Maysa Khadra, Neeraj Kaushal, Nabila El-Bassel, and Anindita Dasgupta, “Perceived Discrimination and Poverty Among Syrian Refugee Women in Jordan,” *Refuge: Canada’s Journal on Refugees* 39, no. 2 (2023): 3. <https://doi.org/10.25071/1920-7336.41107>.

⁵¹ Sameen, “Refugee Women’s Agency,” iii.

not necessarily have to be about resistance for women, but rather in their normal, private actions. French scholar Michel de Certeau understands agency by naming it “the practice of everyday life,” and focuses on how marginalized individuals use smaller moments within their larger oppressive context to resist. These moments are not always public, but help to devictimize women as they maintain their own identities throughout this often traumatic experience. Through this perspective, even decisions that are about maintaining their own survival and security can be seen as maintaining agency.⁵² By revising notions of agency to erase the dichotomy that Olivius points out, between non agentic submissive women and overly vocal ones, critical theory points out that it is possible for women to gain power in refugee contexts through a multitude of public and private behaviors. These notions of agency are further complicated within this project because of the specific focus on refugee women who engage in sex work, making it necessary to examine debates about female agency within sex work in conversation with the above literature on agency for refugee women to truly analyze the ways in which these women are being affected by global power structures and hierarchy.

Theories of Sex Work: Consensual Labor or Patriarchal Oppression?

The crux of this thesis surrounds humanitarian programming for refugee women who engage in sex work. Similarly to the extensive bodies of literature surrounding theories of humanitarian aid, practices of refugee response, and agentic norms in female migration, there also exist a variety of scholarly perspectives on sex work itself. These perspectives can largely be split into two groups: an abolitionist perspective that views all sex work as exploitative and

⁵² Sarah Linn, “Intersectional Identities, Space and Security: Syrian Refugee Women in Amman and Beirut,” PhD dissertation, Department of Urban Studies and Planning, University of Sheffield, 2020, <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/337803482.pdf>.

patriarchal, and a separate perspective that emphasizes the possibility of sex work to be legitimate and consensual labor. Both of these perspectives are relevant in examining different organizational frameworks individual opinions that could be influencing ground-level humanitarian work, as well as informing the motivations and experiences of women who are themselves engaging in sex work.

Two prominent scholars within the camp that advocates for abolition of sex work are Catherine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin. Catherine MacKinnon discusses the idea of sex inequality, that in the fight for legal equality of women and men the first step was to demand inclusion on the same terms as men: meaning that the legal system must be entirely devoid of sex. This also includes demanding the “end to intercourse under conditions of unequal power on the basis of sex” within the law, instead removing the gendered aspect and focusing on gender-neutral ideas of violence.⁵³ She acknowledges and simultaneously disagrees with this form of argument. To MacKinnon, one unique characteristic of sex inequality is women’s allocation to “disrespected work,” of which she includes sexual targeting for rape, denigrating entertainment, and forced prostitutions. Therefore, sexual violation is actually a representation of women’s subordinate social status to men: “it is both an indication and a practice of inequality between the sexes.”⁵⁴ She argues that prostitution and sexual exploitation, which she does differentiate from the act of consensual and compensated sex work, are inextricable from sex inequality and function as one of the oldest forms of oppression towards women.⁵⁵ MacKinnon

⁵³ Catharine A. MacKinnon, “Reflections on Sex Equality Under Law,” *The Yale Law Journal* 100, no. 5 (1991): 1286, <https://doi.org/10.2307/796693>.

⁵⁴ MacKinnon, “Reflections on Sex Equality Under Law,” 1302.

⁵⁵ Catherine Powell, “A Conversation with Catharine A. MacKinnon: Prostitution as Sex Work or Sexual Exploitation,” Council on Foreign Relations, July 22, 2021, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/conversation-catharine-mackinnon-prostitution-sex-work-or-sexual-exploitation>.

does not necessarily advocate for outright abolition of sex work, but rather the recognition that sex and sexual exploitation function as a gendered mechanism of oppression.

On the other hand, Andrea Dworkin vehemently argues against all sex work and pornography. Dworkin views sex work as inherently violent towards women, as it promotes their dehumanization and allows others to view women only as objects of sexual gratification rather than other human beings.⁵⁶ Unlike MacKinnon, who differentiates between exploitative prostitution and sex work, Dworkin views any form of sex work as abusive. Writing on sex work and prostitution from sex workers themselves is often discounted by scholarly audiences, but Dworkin herself worked as a prostitute before publishing her seminal writing “Woman Hating.”

⁵⁷ In her work “Prostitution and Male Supremacy” she argues that “It is impossible to use a human body in the way women’s bodies are used in prostitution and to have a whole human being at the end of it, or in the middle of it, or close to the beginning of it.”⁵⁸ Prostitution and sex work function as an expression of male hatred for the female body, reducing women to objects and elevating the men to their supposed rightful place in a gendered hierarchy.⁵⁹ Therefore, it is impossible to have institutions of sex work and prostitution because they are inherently tied to the inequality of women, Dworkin argues, making it necessary to abolish sex work in order for women to end their own subordination. It is important to acknowledge that Dworkin and her contemporaries exist within a line of radical feminist theory that is often critiqued by both sides

⁵⁶ “Feminist Theory: Let’s Talk about Andrea Dworkin,” Walnut Avenue Family & Women’s Center, September 28, 2022, <https://www.wafwc.org/blog/theory-andrea-dworkin>.

⁵⁷ Lauren Oyler, “The Radical Style of Andrea Dworkin,” *The New Yorker*, March 25, 2019, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2019/04/01/the-radical-style-of-andrea-dworkin>.

⁵⁸ Andrea Dworkin, “Prostitution and Male Supremacy,” *Michigan Journal of Gender & Law* 1, no. 1 (1993): 3, <https://repository.law.umich.edu/mjgl/vol1/iss1/1>.

⁵⁹ Dworkin, “Prostitution and Male Supremacy,” , 6-7.

of the political aisle for its severe critiques of patriarchal society, but also for the way it often reinforces a binary idea of sex that excludes queer and trans women. However, examining the perspectives of Dworkin and MacKinnon exemplify one theoretical approach to sex work: that it is incredibly difficult, or impossible, to experience sex work separate from violence against women.

The other side of this debate defends the idea of sex work as a form of labor, arguing that the criminalization of sex work is often rooted in hypocritical social and moral convictions. In his work “Consensual Sex Work: An Overview of Sex Workers’ Human Dignity in Law, Philosophy, and Abrahamic Religions,” Amin Yacoub condemns many of the critiques of sex work as “affronts” to the human dignity of sex workers.⁶⁰ He draws on the theory of Canadian Supreme Court Justice Wilson in the case *R. v. Jones*, arguing that in order to respect a person’s liberty — as one should in a free and democratic society — one must allow them to make their own choices and plan their own life. If a sex worker has consciously chosen to join the sex industry, “she should not be condemned by the society for her “ill” choice. Thus, any social condemnation would constitute an affront to her human dignity.”⁶¹ Within this camp of scholars that believe sex work can be consensual labor, there are also two separate ideas of whether or not it should be regulated. Many countries across the globe have begun to take a “decriminalization” approach, which is at the heart of this anti-abolition camp. This has become known as the “Swedish model,” where countries criminalize the purchase of sex but not the sale so as to protect the safety of sex workers themselves. However, very few countries have attempted this decriminalization effort without accompanying it with regulations on age limits, health

⁶⁰ Amin R. Yacoub, “Consensual Sex Work: An Overview of Sex Workers’ Human Dignity in Law, Philosophy, and Abrahamic Religions,” *Women’s Studies International Forum* 76, (2019), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2019.102274>.

⁶¹ Yacoub, “Consensual Sex Work.”

requirements, and registration.⁶² Adrienne Davis, professor of law at Washington University, claims that this “pro-sex work” or “decriminalization” approach has stagnated in its inability to analyze the two camps that exist within it. Davis argues that sex work must be maintained from “just” labor and cannot simply be assimilated into global labor institutions and work regulation, but that it is possible to regulate sex work by categorizing and regulating it using different risks of different institutional geographies.⁶³ By institutional geographies, she contends that it is possible to empower workers within commercial environments to shift the risk management onto those who run the establishments. In non-commercial environments where sex workers are often more isolated — such as in the debate of refugees who are sex workers — it is much more difficult for laws to mandate protection, but protocols like check-in systems with outside individuals can help maintain worker safety.⁶⁴

Sexual Humanitarianism

These perspectives on sex work also trickle into the humanitarian sector, forming a type of “sexual humanitarianism” as coined by Nicola Mai. Mai defines sexual humanitarianism as the “ways groups of migrants are strategically problematised, supported and face intervention from local, national and international humanitarian institutions and NGOs according to aspects of vulnerability that are supposedly associated with their sexual orientation and behavior.”⁶⁵

Based on the way migrants and migration are being increasingly restricted on a global scale, humanitarians progressively view these groups through colonial narratives of vulnerability and

⁶² Adrienne D. Davis, “Regulating Sex Work: Erotic Assimilationism, Erotic Exceptionalism, and the Challenge of Intimate Labor,” *California Law Review* 103, no. 5 (2015): 1197-1200.

⁶³ Dworkin, “Prostitution and Male Supremacy,” 1204.

⁶⁴ Dworkin, 1254.

⁶⁵ Nicola Mai, “ ‘Too Much Suffering’: Understanding the Interplay Between Migration, Bounded Exploitation and Trafficking Through Nigerian Sex Workers’ Experiences,” *Sociological Research Online* 21, no. 4(2016), <https://doi.org/10.5153/sro.4158>.

control. At the same time, Mai argues that moralizing around sexuality — including sex work — characterizes some migrants as “undesirable,” forcing them to “perform” according to these ideas of victimhood in order to be recognized for humanitarian support.⁶⁶ For example, using 240 interviews with migrant sex workers, Mai studied experiences of sex work in Australia, France, New Zealand, and the United States. The creation of laws in France that criminalized clients as opposed to sex workers themselves, the “Swedish Model” mentioned above, were discussed in interviews as increasing rather than decreasing stigma, as well as increasing the financial instability of migrant sex workers.⁶⁷ Additionally, migrant sex workers face further harm from these laws, saying how they now feared immigration controls and deportation more than exploitation from the sex work industry.⁶⁸ These kinds of client criminalization laws are touted as creating safer conditions for sex workers, but in a second surveyed study conducted by Mai 98% of workers were against them.⁶⁹ Although these studies were not based in refugee camps, they showcase how the perspectives of migrant and refugee sex workers themselves are often discounted in favor of perceived popular attitudes surrounding sex work. Mai argues that lawmakers and humanitarians need to shift popular concepts of exploitation and trafficking in the sex work industry to better encompass the unique experiences of migrants and refugees, rather than assuming what interventions would be most beneficial for them.⁷⁰

⁶⁶ Mai, ““Too Much Suffering.””

⁶⁷ Nicola Mai, P.G. Macioti, Calum Bennachie, Anne E. Fehrenbacher, Calogero Giametta, Heidi Hoefinger, and Jennifer Musto, “Migration, Sex Work and Trafficking: The Racialized Bordering Politics of Sexual Humanitarianism,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 44, no. 9 (2021), <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/01419870.2021.1892790>.

⁶⁸ Mai, “Migration, Sex Work and Trafficking.”

⁶⁹ Mai, ““Too Much Suffering.””

⁷⁰ Mai, ““Too Much Suffering.””

Conclusion: Restating the Gap

The literature suggests that humanitarian aid work becomes increasingly difficult for local and international workers when they are under psychological pressure and dealing with constraints on the feasibility of their programming. Contrasted with scholarly theories on the agency of female refugees and perceptions of sex work, it is clear that a humanitarian worker working in sectors of refugee women who engage in sex work would also then be impacted by the norms and contradicting approaches for these groups. However, this literature fails to explain what is driving — or, more importantly, not driving — humanitarian work with these women. Is the gap in resources simply a function of budget constraints, or is it a more sinister function of the complicated nature of this work: that it involves the balancing of multiple moral dilemmas that the humanitarian sector and large scholarly world has not yet come to a clear consensus on. Additionally, although these three facets of this project (humanitarianism, refugee response, and sex work) have clear ties and overlap, the literature I have examined fails to discuss the intersection of these three components in a comprehensive manner. The already controversial nature of sex work, as well as differing perspectives on female agency within humanitarian refugee response, highlight the moralization processes discussed in this literature review. The absence of work that analyzes the impact of these individual and organization-level struggles within the humanitarian sector highlights an important gap in the ability of humanitarian organizations and systems to understand how they can ethically engage with refugee women involved in sex work. In order to truly support the agency of these women within complex humanitarian environments, the sector must grapple with the unresolved tensions between efficiency and morality within their own field.

CHAPTER 3: “VERY LITTLE RESOURCES, MASSIVE IMPACT” A CASE STUDY OF KENYAN HUMANITARIAN PROGRAMMING

The following chapter examines the case study of Kenya and the programming offered for refugee women engaging in sex work in this context in the last 10-15 years. I begin by discussing the current refugee situation in Kenya, as well as Kenyan refugee laws that have restricted movement and the ability to work, both of which have impacted women seeking employment and increased the likelihood of participation in informal sectors like sex work. I then examine Kenya’s humanitarian programming for sex workers in refugee camps, unique in that it is publicly available. These published findings offer key insights into humanitarian programming: what is specifically offered, what numerical results have been, and who is organizing these programs. Next, I discuss the findings from my key informant interviews which are broken up into five thematic sections based on commonly discussed themes within the interviews: the program creation process, access and stigma challenges faced, the importance of HIV-focused programming, perceived goals, and results of the programming. Finally, I provide a short synthesis of the information in published documents on programming in Kenya versus the data garnered from interviews, comparing the differences and similarities to examine the relevance and implications of having access to these published, context-specific documents.

Introduction: The Refugee Crisis in Kenya

Kenya is home to the second and third largest refugee camps in the world: Dadaab and Kakuma refugee camps.¹ As of September 2024, there were 804,594 refugees and asylum seekers that reside in Kenya. 41% of these displaced persons reside in Dadaab refugee complex,

¹ “Hunger in the 4 Largest Refugee Camps in the World,” World Food Programme USA, June 28, 2023, (2023, June 28), <https://www.wfpusa.org/articles/hunger-largest-refugee-camps-world/>.

43% reside in Kakuma refugee camp, and 16% are in urban areas in Kenya.² Kenyan refugee camps are host to a variety of differing populations, but a 20-year civil war in Somalia and armed conflict in South Sudan beginning in 2013 has meant that Kenya, as a neighboring country, has seen a steady influx of refugees from both populations.³ There are also small percentages of displaced persons from the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Burundi, Uganda, Eritrea, and Rwanda.

The protracted nature of these refugee crises makes funding difficult to obtain, and the UNHCR received only 52% of necessary funding for 2024.⁴ The increasing refugee crisis in Kenya has led to key challenges including disease outbreaks, environmental shocks from dust storms and high temperatures, and severe hunger, all of which complicate the lives and experiences of refugees who reside there. These challenges are exponentially difficult for refugees who experience other, human-caused difficulties like discrimination, violence, and poverty. Three-quarters of the refugees in Kenya are also women and children, making this case study an important and relevant one to examine the experiences of refugee women engaged in sex work.

² “Kenya Refugee Population Statistics,” UNHCR, January 31, 2023, <https://www.unhcr.org/ke/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2023/02/Kenya-Refugee-Population-Statistics-Package-31-January-2023.pdf>.

³ “Somalia Refugee Crisis Explained,” UNHCR, July 17, 2023, <https://www.unrefugees.org/news/somalia-refugee-crisis-explained/>; “South Sudan Refugee Crisis Explained,” UNHCR, July 24, 2023, <https://www.unrefugees.org/news/south-sudan-refugee-crisis-explained/>.

⁴ “Kenya Funding Update,” UNHCR, <https://reporting.unhcr.org/libraries/pdf.js/web/viewer.html?file=https%3A%2F%2Freporting.unhcr.org%2Fsites%2Fdefault%2Ffiles%2F2025-01%2FKenya%2520Funding%2520Update%252031%2520December%25202024.pdf>.

Kenyan Refugee Laws: Restricting Movement and the Right to Work

Under the 2006 Refugee Act, refugees and asylum seekers in Kenya are required to remain in designated refugee camps, isolating them from economic and social development within the country. Refugees are issued identity cards once they obtain refugee status and are assigned to a specific refugee camp. If they wish to travel outside the camp they must obtain a “movement pass,” which has been touted as a national security measure to protect both refugee and Kenyan national populations. The overall number of movement passes issued to refugees is very low. Although there is no available data about how many passes are requested each year, in 2018 a UNHCR Assistant Protection Officer in Dadaab estimated that approximately only 5,000 movement permits are issued each year.⁵ Most of these passes are issued for educational purposes rather than business or employment reasons. Kenyan refugees have reported biases against certain nationalities or the necessity of bribing government individuals in order to receive movement passes.⁶ These movement restrictions not only further limit the ability of refugees to obtain employment, but also emphasize the hostile nature of their status within the country.

Kenya’s new Refugee Act in 2021 was meant to increase refugee access to employment and the labor market in the country, however it still upheld many of the previous challenges that refugees faced with movement restrictions. This new act gives refugees the right to work if they have qualifications recognized by the Kenyan government, a slightly less restrictive employment law than the 2006 Act. In order to have their qualifications recognized, however, refugees must travel to qualification authorities in Nairobi — outside of refugee camps — and must therefore

⁵ “Doing Business in Dadaab,” UNHCR and ILO, 2019, file:///Users/sabinatopol/Downloads/Doing-Business-in-Dadaab-April-2019_Final-Report.pdf

⁶ Lorin Utsch, “*Protracted Refugee Situations in Kenyan Refugee Camps*,” Ballard Brief, 2020, <https://ballardbrief.byu.edu/issue-briefs/protracted-refugee-situations-in-kenyan-refugee-camps>.

still obtain a movement permit.⁷ Most refugees do not have all their necessary documentation to obtain qualifications (such as their diplomas) and seeking work outside of refugee camps can put their safety at risk with local citizens, police, and militants.⁸ If refugees are caught outside designated areas without documentation they could be subject to heavy fines or months in prison.⁹ The law also provides options for refugees from the East African community — who make up less than 40% of current refugees in Kenya — to be treated as EAC citizens, with an automatic right to live anywhere in Kenya without a movement permit.¹⁰ Although these new laws may potentially have positive impacts on the economic inclusion of refugees, specifically from EAC countries, the difficulties refugees have in obtaining employment opportunities can push them into informal sectors in order to support themselves.

Sex Work in Kenyan Refugee Camps

In Kakuma refugee camp, over half of refugee households are headed by women, much more than the 32% headed by women at the national level. These women-headed households are more likely to have economic and social stress from balancing domestic and caretaking responsibilities with employment responsibilities.¹¹ Women are also less likely than their male

⁷ Izza Leghtas and David Kitenge, “What Does Kenya’s New Refugee Act Mean for Economic Inclusion,” Refugees International, May 4, 2022, <https://www.refugeesinternational.org/what-does-kenyas-new-refugee-act-mean-for-economic-inclusion/>.

⁸ Leghtas and Kitenge, “What Does Kenya’s New Refugee Act Mean for Economic Inclusion”; Utsch, “Protracted Refugee Situations.”

⁹ “Doing Business in Dadaab.”

¹⁰ Leghtas, “What Does Kenya’s New Refugee Act Mean?”

¹¹ “Understanding the Socioeconomic Conditions of Refugees in Kenya: Volume B: Kakuma Camp.” World Bank Group and UNHCR, 2021, <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/443431613628051180/pdf/Understanding-the-Socio-Economic-Conditions-of-Refugees-in-Kenya-Volume-B-Kakuma-Camp-Results-from-the-2019-Kakuma-Socioeconomic-Survey.pdf>

refugee counterparts to engage in both educational opportunities and paid work. In a 2019 survey, The World Bank and UNHCR found that women in Kakuma are more likely to cite a lack of adequate skills and language barriers as well as family responsibilities as the reasons they are not employed in paid positions. Additionally, most married refugee women in Kenya need their husband's permission to work, which can add an additional obstacle to finding employment.¹² Because of the difficulties women face in finding paid employment within refugee camps, combined with movement and work restrictions and high poverty rates for refugees in Kenya, many refugee women turn to informal work for economic survival. This informal work can include working in small businesses or domestic services or engaging in sex work.¹³

Although specific data is difficult to obtain because of the stigmatized nature of the work, the International Rescue Committee (IRC) has seen a marked increase in Turkana County — where Kakuma refugee camp is located — in the number of women and girls engaging in sex work. Some reasons these women and girls engage in sex work are poverty, lack of economic opportunities, and having to support their dependents.¹⁴ Specifically, women cited food insecurity as a key challenge to them and their children's livelihoods, and sex work as one of the only ways to combat this food insecurity. After severe droughts in the region in 2016, food insecurity within the country skyrocketed, with food prices increasing fivefold.¹⁵ Food insecurity

¹² World Bank Group and UNHCR, "Volume B: Kakuma Camp," 30.

¹³ Emilie Gettliffe, Stanley Jawuoro, and Sana Khan, "Scaling Economic Opportunities for Refugee Women: Understanding and Overcoming Obstacles to Women's Economic Empowerment in Kenya," International Rescue Committee, 2020, 23, file:///Users/sabinatopol/Downloads/IRC_WomensEcon_CaseStudy_Kenya_vf.pdf.

¹⁴ "Breaking the Barrier: Meeting Sex Worker Needs in Humanitarian and Low-Resource Settings," IRC, https://gbvresponders.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/FSW-research-brief_Kakuma_Final.pdf.

¹⁵ "Kenya: Women and Girls Forced to Engage in Sex to Survive Near-Famine," International Rescue Committee, July 5, 2017, <https://www.rescue.org/press-release/kenya-women-and-girls-forced-engage-sex-survive-near-famine>.

exists in all contexts in Kenya, with refugee residents in Dadaab receiving only 80% of their usual rations from the UN World Food Programme as of 2023.¹⁶ Female refugees engaging in sex work report that this method of employment helps provide a solution for both the “quantity and quality of the food rations in the camps.”¹⁷

Although food insecurity and poverty are some of the main reasons cited for female refugees in Kenya who begin engaging in sex work, these women face additional challenges because of their choice of employment, including gender-based violence and health risks. Sexually transmitted diseases such as HIV and AIDs are increasingly prevalent in Kakuma refugee camp, and refugee women who engage in sex work are less likely to be able to seek treatment because of the stigma they face if discovered.¹⁸ In Kenya, the existing criminalization of sex work is doubled for refugees because of both their vulnerable status within the country and their employment and movement restrictions.¹⁹ Many refugee women also report instances of severe gender-based violence, including from police and military authorities who are meant to serve as safety resources. Within these experiences of violence, 77% of reports characterized it as sexual and 23% as physical, displaying the pervasive nature of sexual violence faced by refugee women.²⁰ Overall, the cycle of violence, stigma, and lack of available safety-nets for these women put them in increasing danger as they work to support themselves and their families.

¹⁶ “Hunger in the 4 Largest Refugee Camps.”

¹⁷ “Breaking the Barrier.”

¹⁸ Rasika Sundaram, “Large-Scale Sexual Violence: Kakuma Refugee Camp,” Gender Security Project, <https://www.gendersecurityproject.com/crsv-observatory-cases/large-scale-sexual-violence-kakuma-refugee-camp>

¹⁹ Joseph Newton Guni, et al. “Using Social Practice Theory in Measuring Perceived Stigma Among Female Sex Workers in Mombasa, Kenya,” *BMC Public Health* 23, no. 972 (2023), <https://bmcpublichealth.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12889-023-15809-2>.

²⁰ “Breaking the Barrier.”

Published Pilot Programs For Refugee Sex Workers in Kenya

In most contexts where refugees engage in sex work, there is a marked lack of published humanitarian programming for this population, creating a difficulty in outside understandings of what humanitarian resources these women have access to. However, Kenya is a unique humanitarian context in that there exist multiple different published pilot interventions all targeted towards specifically sex workers who are also refugees. By examining these resources, as well as the messaging and evaluations that these pilot programs have published, this section provides context for the key informant interviews in this location.

Pilot Program #1: Peer Education and “Drop-In” Centers in Kakuma

The first published pilot program is a partnership between the IRC, UNHCR, and Kenya’s National Ministry of Health, which was launched in 2011 and set up a targeted health and social services program for refugee women engaged in sex work. The program is made up of two pillars: 1) peer-led empowerment and education and 2) a holistic drop-in center (DIC) in the Kakuma camp referral hospital.²¹ The peer-led empowerment program consists of female refugees who volunteer as peer leaders and are then trained by a Kenyan sex-worker run community organization in a variety of health and safety issues targeted towards sex work. These topics and activities include condom usage, understanding cervical cancer screenings, distributing condoms and lubricant, alternative livelihood programs, as well as psychosocial and peer support — including referring peers to providers and accompanying them to check-ups. Outreach is also part of the job of a peer leader: they are instructed to conduct outreach in hotspots of sex work within the camps. The second part of this humanitarian intervention is a drop-in center, which is a place that provides health and support services to a targeted group

²¹ “Operational Guidance: Responding to the Health and Protection Needs of People Selling or Exchanging Sex in Humanitarian Settings,” The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the United Nations Population Fund, 2021, <https://www.unhcr.org/us/sites/en-us/files/legacy-pdf/60dc85d74.pdf>.

often at all hours of the day.²² In this case, four trained staff run a 24 hour, no-appointment-needed center where women can have access to a variety of clinical services and support. The center also provides a space for peer leaders to meet and for get-togethers for knowledge sharing and community building among these women.²³ The two pillars of the program work together to provide comprehensive support for refugee women in as many areas as possible, targeting the challenges they face with stigmatization, increased vulnerability to STDs, and violence.

The program has also undergone evaluation from the IRC, who judged that it was overwhelmingly successful. Since its launch in 2011, 944 women have joined the project and — as of the evaluation in 2017 — 708 women were currently enrolled: a retention rate of 75%.²⁴ From a variety of interviews and focus group discussions, as well as quantitative data monitoring, the IRC touted that enrolled women experienced a multitude of benefits. These discussed benefits for women who joined the peer-leadership groups included emotional support, information sharing, medical services, counseling, and access to a safe unstigmatized space. In one published interview, a female sex worker showcased the importance of these resources, saying “sometimes I’m thinking even to suicide myself, but because of the counseling we are given, sometimes I am feeling ok.”²⁵ In their health programming, the IRC found that 100% of the people enrolled in the program received treatment if they were HIV positive, and that there were zero positive new cases of HIV after enrollment. 78% of female sex workers were screened for cervical cancer, and the 0.6% that tested positive were subsequently treated. Although they

²² “What is a Drop-In Center?” Penny Lane Centers, www.pennylane.org/resources/benefits-of-drop-in-centers.

²³ “Operational Guidance.”

²⁴ “Breaking the Barrier.”

²⁵ “Breaking the Barrier.”

did not provide specific numeric data, the evaluation claims that they were able to reach nearly half of all female sex workers within the camp, showcasing the success of their peer outreach.

Within their evaluation, the IRC also published a variety of recommendations for future programming. Although integrating drop-in centers into secondary health facilities (as this program has done) is ideal, they argued it is also important to place centers in high-density areas. The evaluation also recommends engaging staff with “favorable attitudes towards female sex workers,” highlighting the impact of non-stigmatizing services.²⁶ Within the peer leader program, future steps published by the IRC included ongoing mentoring for peer leaders themselves, and ensuring that these leaders have help with complex cases and do not experience the effects of secondary trauma. The IRC also suggests prioritizing a multi-sectoral approach, specifically adding more livelihood programming to address the root causes of sex work: poverty and food insecurity, as well as reinforcing collaboration with local authorities to prevent sex workers from experiencing violence at their hands.²⁷ Overall, the IRC concluded that their evaluation displays the incredibly effective nature of these interventions: characterizing the program as “very little resources, massive impact.”²⁸ The published language of their evaluation and report seems to indicate how successful the program has been, but that there is still room for improvement and a long way to go to expand and reach as many as possible. This language also highlights the need for funding: the evaluation is likely essential for the IRC in securing additional funding, making it probable that these positive results are being emphasized to present the best picture to current and future donors. Additionally, this evaluation only mentions the experience of women and girls who engage in sex work in their programs. While it is unclear if men or non-binary refugees had

²⁶ “Breaking the Barrier.”

²⁷ “Breaking the Barrier.”

²⁸ “Operational Guidance.”

access to this specific program, it also showcases the necessity of interventions that specifically target all groups of sex workers.

Pilot Program #2: Kenya Sex Workers Alliance (KESWA) Partnership

The second pilot program is a rights empowerment forum run by a coalition called Kenya Sex Workers Alliance (KESWA), which was formed in 2010 led by male, female, and transgender sex worker-led groups, organizations, and individuals.²⁹ Although the organization mainly targets local Kenyan sex workers, they discovered that despite the prevalence of sex workers within Kenyan refugee camps, very few of these women were accessing “sex worker-friendly services” at local clinics.³⁰ These forums are meant to work with these refugee women to address the access barriers they face in receiving services. For example, KESWA worked with Muslim refugees to provide solutions to their preference to be treated by only female health-care workers for STI treatment. Additionally, KESWA works with these women to provide them with legal networks in case local authorities detain or harass them. Similar to the IRC pilot program, KESWA also trains refugee women as peer outreach workers and media advocacy volunteers.

A secondary part of this intervention is the Sex Worker Academy Africa (SWAA), a learning program for national teams of sex workers from across the continent. This academy is hosted by KESWA and the African Sex Workers Alliance (ASWA) with the goal of community empowerment and capacity building, providing curriculum surrounding safety, health, advocacy skills, peer support networks, and what rights they have. Although the academy is not designed specifically for refugees, a variety of South Sudanese refugees residing in Kenya have taken part

²⁹ “KESWA Key Affected Population Health and Legal Rights Alliance,” Global Network of Sex Work Projects, <https://www.nswp.org/members/africa/keswa-key-affected-population-health-and-legal-rights-alliance>.

³⁰ “Operational Guidance.”

in this program.³¹ Compared to other humanitarian interventions for sex workers, SWAA has been running for an extensive period of time. As of 2020, SWAA had its 24th session, which lasted one week for in-person meetings, debates, and community-building.³² It is also unique in that all of the curriculum is taught by trained faculty members who are also sex workers. Although this program differs from other humanitarian interventions by virtue of its more formal, less crisis-focused approach, it serves as an important next step for integrating the experiences of refugee sex workers into a larger conversation about the sector.

Key Informant Interviews

Program Creation Process in Kenya

The development of humanitarian programming in Kenya was and is still shaped by a variety of factors, taking input from the overarching guidelines formation and localized research. Although the UNHCR and UNFPA “Operational Guidelines” document forms the backbone of the program, much of the context-specific design is from these local efforts. Through key informant interviews for the Kenyan context, two key factors in program creation were frequently mentioned: **research reports** and **community input** from the **women engaging in sex work and the host community**.

One humanitarian worker for a UN agency referred to a collaboration with a professor at Kenyatta University, a prestigious public research university in Kenya. This professor had done previous field-based research on the topic of sex workers, and was able to provide more access and knowledge about the local context than UN agencies had. She designed questionnaires to

³¹ “Operational Guidance.”

³² “Successful 24th Session of Sex Workers Academy Africa,” Global Network of Sex Work Projects, December 7, 2020, <https://www.nswp.org/news/successful-24th-session-sex-workers-academy-africa>.

begin community discussion and introduced the technique of “snowballing” in order to bring more refugee women engaged in sex work into the programs: each person brings in other people they know who are in need of the resources.³³ Another humanitarian worker from a UN agency also referred to this partnership, commenting on how the professor used data collection, providing sex workers with diaries for more than a year while building service capacity and looking at correlations to track things like reduction in the number of sex partners.³⁴ This research collection was inherently tied to community input and participation, and so was the initial phase of creation. One interviewee discussed bringing community members who were engaged in sex work into the original training and sensitization process for humanitarian workers, as well as initial snowballing and “hostpot mapping:” identifying areas where sex work was commonly practiced.³⁵

Besides understanding the needs of the refugee women themselves, research efforts also took input from non-refugee host communities in Kenya. Instead of separate efforts, or “working in silos” as one interviewee described it, they looked at national hospitals to see the services they offered and what models had been working for them.³⁶ Partnering with host communities was not just about learning from them, but also integrating the two approaches. “Working with the government made it easy because we created an integrated approach targeting both refugees and the hosting community because these communities interact. So if you target one and not the other, then you do not mitigate the risks,” said another interviewee.³⁷ The research was meant to

³³ Interview 3.

³⁴ Interview 5.

³⁵ Interview 3.

³⁶ Interview 3.

³⁷ Interview 5.

uncover the drivers of sex work, but also more specifically the risks and drivers of HIV.³⁸ In the end, the research themes of **host community and refugee community input and integration** were also all discussed with a similar goal in mind: **tailoring analysis to the Kenyan context.**

Challenges at the Outset: Access and Stigma

There were also **two common challenges in the program creation process and at the beginning of service provision: access and stigma.** Access refers to whether humanitarians and aid organizations were able to gain trust and participation from the community in both the services themselves and feedback conversations, but also in the initial research process. Stigma refers to the disgrace and bias that surrounded sex work: both within the refugee and host communities, and within the humanitarian worker community itself.

The Stigma of Sex Work

Community Reaction: Religion and Sex Work

Stigma had two connotations in interviews, one of which was the negative bias that refugees within the camps associated with the practice of sex work. Much of this stigma was related to practices of religion in the camp, both Muslim and Christian. In one interview, a UN humanitarian worker discussed a story that stuck with her about a sex worker who had been stabbed by her client and died.

The Muslim clerics refused to pray for her before burial. And this is a culture where you have to be prayed for, otherwise they can't leave, you know? And this was the thing which hurt the women the most. Almost as if it was even more painful than the fact that she had died. It's like, she's dead, can't you just pray for her? And that was like something which hit me. **It's just like even in death, she wasn't forgiven. She was still**

³⁸ Interview 5.

being punished because she was having sex.³⁹

Another interviewee echoed this sentiment, arguing that in communities that are very religious, like many refugee camps in Kenya, there is an increased stigma surrounding sex work.⁴⁰

There was also religious stigma surrounding STIs and HIV transmission. In Dadaab refugee camp, which is primarily made up of Somali Muslim refugees, HIV is associated with Christians and non-Muslims.⁴¹ Therefore, sex workers who were HIV positive were also considered an “enemy of the community,” as the assumption was that they had gotten it from non-Muslims outside of the community.⁴² High stigma could also lead to community violence: Women who engaged in sex work, as well as their children, were more likely to be attacked in these scenarios.⁴³

This was also an issue for refugee men who were engaging in sex work. On top of the stigma surrounding sex work itself, there was also cultural homophobia that influenced the perception of these men as often they were selling sex to fellow men. This could “double” the protection risks these refugee men faced.⁴⁴

Humanitarian Actor Reaction

The second source of stigma was from humanitarian actors themselves. Much of the framing around sex work originally revolved around the idea that it was a “negative coping

³⁹ Interview 3.

⁴⁰ Interview 5.

⁴¹ “Dadaab Refugee Complex,” UNHCR, <https://www.unhcr.org/ke/dadaab-refugee-complex>.

⁴² Interview 5.

⁴³ Interview 5.

⁴⁴ Interview 3.

mechanism,” a form of sexual violence and exploitation that was always inherently wrong. This framing has shifted in recent years, towards nonpunitive services that don’t shame refugees for participating in sex work. However, one interviewee talked about the nuance in the idea of sex work as an agentic action. They argued that these women are not comparable to the experiences of sex workers in places like Europe, where they have alternative means of income. The people who are receiving humanitarian programming in refugee camps are “conflict affected, displaced, and poor” and are paid next to nothing for the work, complicating ideas of agency and choice.⁴⁵ They also emphasized that whether or not sex work is always a choice for these women, the important thing is providing access to services because what they do know is that these women are exposed to disproportionate levels of violence and stigma.⁴⁶

The initial response of humanitarian actors to sex work, that it was a negative action, led to a lack of programming. Instead, the main goal of humanitarian work was to shut it down and break it up: it should be “completely prohibited.”⁴⁷ However, in the past decade this has shifted somewhat. One humanitarian worker from a UN agency said that although you may encounter “one or two people who still come at it as negative coping behavior,” the sector has mostly come full circle.⁴⁸ These one or two people can still have a massive impact on programming. The same interviewee discussed an example of a doctor who was part of the programming, whom they had discovered was trying to convince the women he provided services for to stop sex work. He didn’t lose his job, but they asked him to step aside and remove himself from the center of the service provision efforts.

⁴⁵ Interview 3.

⁴⁶ Interview 3.

⁴⁷ Interview 3.

⁴⁸ Interview 3.

If the women pass on the message to other women that you as the focal point, your job is going to tell them to stop, then they're not going to come to you for services because they'll come to you. They say, yes, I stopped. So when she has a [new] infection, she can't come back because she told you she stopped. You know, so you're closing doors.⁴⁹

Another interviewee echoed this sentiment, arguing that even if it was not as obvious, the stigma existed in the humanitarian community just as it did in the refugee community.⁵⁰

This stigma within humanitarian aid organizations was not left unchecked, but constantly combatted through a variety of channels. One interviewee discussed the importance of examining their own personal biases.

As staff we also come with our own religious biases, community biases, our own ideas because we've grown up, at least I came from a traditional background where it's still frowned upon, but then I've now learned to understand that I've got to come open. **Because if I come with my stigma or my stereotypes, then I can't really work with a community that's involved in actually selling sex.**⁵¹

One way they found to be successful at combating these biases was including the community and the sex workers themselves in humanitarian worker meetings. In training sessions for aid workers and program discussions, UN agencies and NGOs would bring refugee women to the meetings. "It's very easy for me to read a guideline and say, I am going to address this and look at it very clinically. But **when you are confronted with the community members,** and they question your stereotypes and question you every time you fall into those traps, **then it helps you wake up.**"⁵²

Another interviewee mentioned the importance of feedback and complaint mechanisms for combating humanitarian actor misconduct and bias. Humanitarian workers needed to be

⁴⁹ Interview 3.

⁵⁰ Interview 5.

⁵¹ Interview 3.

⁵² Interview 3.

trained on and sign codes of conduct to combat biased perspectives, but also to prevent sexual exploitation and abuse.⁵³

Access: Negative Perceptions of Humanitarian Workers

This theme of humanitarian misconduct also ties into the second challenge: the idea of access difficulties and a lack of acceptance of humanitarian workers that often stemmed from community-held negative perceptions. When discussing the same research efforts and early programming attempts, specifically the work with the professor from Kenyatta University, one interviewee talked about the benefits of using outside actors to combat feelings of mistrust in the community towards humanitarian actors. There were two different strands of mistrust: 1) that humanitarian workers were exploiting refugees and 2) that these workers would only respond punitively to confessions of sex work.

These worries of exploitation were not entirely unfounded. Another interviewee discussed discovering through the diaries given to sex workers that one or two humanitarian workers had been involved in sexual exploitation and abuse, an act both blatantly against humanitarian code of conduct and promises of protection but also extremely damaging to the women as individuals and the program as a whole.⁵⁴

Besides these serious examples of misconduct, interviewees also discussed how community members were often unwilling to participate in programming. If UN agencies went into the community, conversations around sex work were often difficult because of deep mistrust. This mistrust stemmed from previous UN and NGO efforts to dismantle sex work hostpots and frame them as harmful and exploitative, as discussed above. “If you went to talk to the

⁵³ Interview 5.

⁵⁴ Interview 5.

community, they [would say] those [are] UNHCR people, don't say anything because you will be in trouble."⁵⁵ To combat this mistrust, they were supported by the professor from Kenyatta. One interviewee discussed how useful she was in rebuilding trust and being able to create open, constructive conversations using community input.⁵⁶ Using refugee women who were engaged in sex work during snowballing efforts and hotspot mapping was another way to surmount this obstacle, as they would have more specialized knowledge and were also trusted in the community.⁵⁷

Overall, although both of these challenges created difficulties for humanitarian programming efforts, **they were surmounted in similar ways. The key focus was always on community input:** whether from **refugee women** engaging in sex work, the **refugee camp community**, or **host community knowledge** of national resources.

Framing Sex Work Response: Health + HIV as Key Drivers in the Kenyan Context

One key point in all of the interviews was the uniqueness of the Kenyan refugee context in how programming around sex work was often through a health and HIV focused lens. Although the initiatives were holistic endeavors that combined a variety of protection and gender-based response programming, health served as a key entry point. These programs consisted of reproductive health efforts like STD screening and testing, ensuring access to condoms, and a variety of other HIV risk reduction efforts like early diagnosis, preventing

⁵⁵ Interview 3.

⁵⁶ Interview 3.

⁵⁷ Interview 3.

mother to child transmission, and treatment with PEPFAR.⁵⁸⁵⁹ PEPFAR is the U.S. President's Emergency Plan for Aid Relief, a global initiative to combat the HIV epidemic that the US government has invested over \$100 billion dollars in since its creation in 2003. The program works with partner countries, like Kenya, to achieve control and long-term sustainable responses to the epidemic.⁶⁰

One interviewee, who had worked in both contexts of Bangladesh and Kenya, described the nature of the relationship between HIV and sex work in Kenya as a spotlight: “HIV brought out sex work from the [floor boards].”⁶¹ Sex workers were considered key populations and targeted in HIV interventions as programs expanded. Other key populations that were targeted included truck drivers who brought food from other parts of the country into the refugee camps, men who had sex with other men, and drug users. One part of the treatment that was particularly specific to Kenyan humanitarian programming was the elimination and prevention of mother to child transmission mentioned above, including close monitoring of HIV positive women who were pregnant.

Goals of Programming

When talking about programming that existed, there were many goals that were discussed. The three most common ones were: **ensuring confidentiality, understanding risk factors to possibly prevent entry into sex work, and promoting agency/increasing choice through economic and health empowerment.**

⁵⁸ Interview 3.

⁵⁹ Interview 5.

⁶⁰ “PEPFAR,” HIV.gov, December 23, 2024, <https://www.hiv.gov/federal-response/pepfar-global-aids/pepfar>.

⁶¹ Interview 4.

The goal of ensuring confidential treatment was contested between interviews. One interviewee talked about how the UN worked to ensure refugees had access to national services so that they didn't need to be tested and screened by members of their own community. By accessing national clinics, they are able to make their own choice whether or not to divulge their participation in sex work.⁶² Another interviewee, however, argued that the need to seek anonymous treatment wasn't really necessary in the Kenyan setting.⁶³

The second goal was understanding risk factors so that the program could also focus on prevention efforts, in addition to responding to existing needs. One interviewee discussed how sex work often took place around local alcohol brewing, and children would function as servers. This could introduce children to the space and cause clients to target them for sex work. One function of programming was to then take the children out of that vicinity, but also understand that if selling alcohol was a risk factor, it could be replaced as a form of income.

This ties into the third frequently voiced goal of promoting agency and increasing choice: allowing women to reduce sex work if they so chose. One way of doing this was through economic empowerment and livelihood programs that helped women to develop other skills or alternative income streams.⁶⁴ These livelihood programs could give them alternative streams of income if they wished, but also increase their bargaining power. Since they would now have other sources of livelihood, the idea was that women would be better able to ask for increased payment for sex work and not simply take whatever was offered out of necessity. Economic empowerment was also connected to health empowerment programs. Within health programming like provision of condoms and HIV screening, another component was giving

⁶² Interview 3.

⁶³ Interview 5.

⁶⁴ Interview 3.

women negotiating tactics to ensure their clients used condoms.⁶⁵ This goal — and the “empowerment” programs that came with it — was discussed with nuance by interviewees. The point was not to work with these women as victims or survivors of exploitation. “Whatever the circumstances, if she feels empowered, that’s her. And then just try to work with them as equal partners,” one interviewee said.⁶⁶

Livelihood programming also came second to basic needs: if these needs weren’t addressed and humanitarian workers simply focused on what they believed to be “empowering” this can **“replicate those power dynamics and inequalities and sometimes also reinforce some of the violence.”**⁶⁷ The point of programming meant to empower was not to force new choices or lifestyles onto refugee women, but to work with them and let them influence programming so that they could have access to forms of livelihood and health support if they wanted.

Success or Failure?

Overall, interviewees discussed these programs in positive terms: they believed that implementing the programs did much more good than harm. However, there were some areas that could be improved in the future, most of which involved humanitarian organizations including more space for community involvement.

One of these was economic empowerment, as mentioned above. These empowerment programs could be “questionable” because they offered such a small amount of livelihood support, rather than allowing women to be self sustaining and independent from sex work if they

⁶⁵ Interview 5.

⁶⁶ Interview 3.

⁶⁷ Interview 3.

wished. Also, one interviewee argued that these programs weren't as community-driven as they could have been.

I think we would need to review the strength engagement around the women's own agency and their ability to mobilize. And also receive funding to do their own activities because we were giving them peanuts really. **And yet now there's more opportunity for, to, to work with communities for them to do their own proposal writing, get their own funding, design their own programs and implement them themselves.**⁶⁸

Another area that needed strengthening was the partnership between UN organizations and host community leadership. These partnerships were incredibly helpful to the program, creating more opportunities for specialized organizations to support the work of the UN.⁶⁹ However, one interviewee wished there was less push from UNHCR or UNFPA and more from national organizations towards an advocacy based approach, as including national organizations in support of sex worker rights would create long term, lasting impacts rather than just short-term benefits.⁷⁰

Finally, funding issues frequently came up in interviews as a hindrance to the success of the program. Interviewees discussed having too few case workers and facing continuous funding challenges. In particular, HIV treatment was limited by low resources for nutritional support: meaning that participants in the program were not able to access good nutrition, a key component of viral suppression.⁷¹ These funding issues have now been exacerbated tenfold at the beginning of 2025 with recent executive orders from USAID, which will be discussed further in the

⁶⁸ Interview 3.

⁶⁹ Interview 5.

⁷⁰ Interview 3.

⁷¹ Interview 5.

conclusion chapter as UN organizations and NGOs look forward to the future of humanitarian programming.

Synthesis: Published Programming Versus Interviews

The published description of the IRC, UNHCR, and Kenya’s National Ministry of Health intervention (Pilot Program 1: Peer Education and “Drop-In” Centers in Kakuma) was overwhelmingly positive, emphasizing mainly the success and expansion of the program. The IRC touted benefits like emotional support, safe spaces, information and access to services for women engaged in sex work. Although it is impossible to compare this published description entirely to the information from key informant interviews because no humanitarian workers from the IRC were interviewed, interviews from UN agencies spoke to similar intervention processes and experiences. They too discussed the programs as successful operations, especially in their ability to provide services and their attempt to use best practices from across the sector.⁷² However, interviews were much more candid about improvements and challenges in the programming process, including stigma and access challenges or failures of livelihood attempts and advocacy efforts. The IRC programming document did discuss further improvements — and also mentioned increasing livelihood programming — but the tone of the document indicated that the efforts were simply ways to make a great program better, rather than providing recommendations to mitigate humanitarian failures. While these published documents provide important information on the numbers and exact aspects of the programming, the addition of interview data lent a more nuanced perspective that could be utilized by future attempts in the humanitarian sector.

⁷² Interview 3; Interview 5.

Conclusion

Overall, refugee women in Kenya who engage in sex work were met by threefold challenges: the restrictions they face on their ability to seek employment and move freely in the country as refugees, the barriers they face socially and culturally as women for their own economic empowerment, and the stigmatization and safety issues that come from their engagement with sex work. As more and more refugee women turn towards this method in order to sustain themselves and their family during protracted refugee crises driving displacement into Kenya, it is imperative that international and local refugee organizations turn their funding and attention to ensuring the well-being and agency of this group. Key informant interviews highlighted both the challenges and opportunities for growth within humanitarian programming for these women. Particularly in the Kenyan context, HIV and health services served as a key focal point, but interviewees also emphasized other important factors of programming like protection and livelihood support. The common thread of community input: from host community, national organizations, and refugee sex workers, also showed up in interviews as an important pillar within programming. As they looked to the future, interviewees emphasized the necessity of continuing these feedback mechanisms and pivoting away from UN-leadership. In the next chapter, I will examine how programming for refugee women engaged in sex work manifests in Bangladesh: first looking at the legal framework and general attitudes towards refugees and sex work, and then following a similar framework to analyze findings from key informant interviews on specific humanitarian programming.

CHAPTER 4: PROGRAMMING UNPUBLISHED: A CASE STUDY OF ROHINGYA REFUGEES IN COX’S BAZAR BANGLADESH

The following chapter examines the second case study of Cox’s Bazar, Bangladesh and the programming offered for refugee women engaging in sex work in this context. I begin by discussing the current refugee situation in Cox’s Bazar, as well as the lack of national refugee protections that impact both refugee movement, education, and employment. Similarly to Kenya, these laws — and the hostile political attitudes they indicate — impact women in their participation in sex work. As Bangladesh doesn’t have any data published on their humanitarian programming for sex workers, I will next discuss findings from my key informant interviews for Bangladesh and how they compare to interviews from Kenya. This discussion will be split up into the same five thematic sections as Kenya to provide a contrasting perspective that analyzes key similarities and differences from both case studies. Additionally, because of the lack of published data on these programs, this chapter will not include the same synthesis between interviews and written data from chapter three as all available data comes from one type of source: interviews.

Introduction: The Rohingya Refugee Crisis

As of 2025, Bangladesh currently hosts just over one million displaced persons and is home to the largest refugee settlement in the world: a network of 33 camps in the Cox’s Bazar region. The refugee situation in Bangladesh is unique in that almost all of the one million displaced persons originate from the neighboring country of Myanmar and belong to the Rohingya ethnic group.¹ The Rohingya people are descendants of an Indo-Aryan language

¹ “Rohingya Refugee Crisis Explained,” UNHCR, August 22, 2024, <https://www.unrefugees.org/news/rohingya-refugee-crisis-explained/>.

speaking group that migrated to Arakan, which became part of the modern state of Myanmar when conquered by the ruling dynasty in the 18th century. They have been living in the Rakhine state of Myanmar for hundreds of years, but are not considered citizens of Myanmar and are the world's largest stateless population.² Since the country's independence in 1948, Rohingyas have been consistently denied full citizenship and have faced persecution and violence since the military took power in 1962.³ The specific crisis that led to the displacement of hundreds of thousands of Rohingya occurred in August 2017, when the Myanmar military targeted Rohingya in the Rakhine state, leading to the displacement of more than 700,000 refugees to Cox's Bazar, adding to the already 200,000 person population of Rohingya in the camp. Since then, violence has continued to escalate, causing further displacement of Rohingya refugees to Bangladesh.⁴

Although both the UNHCR and government of Bangladesh have stated that the long term goal for this displaced population is their eventual repatriation to Bangladesh, the protracted nature of the displacement so far and the escalation of the conflict in Rakhine since November 2023 highlights the importance of humanitarian aid for the Rohingya population in Bangladesh.⁵ As of March 2025, the UNHCR had only received 21% of its goal of 255.5 million USD in humanitarian aid funds.⁶ Bangladesh is also one of the world's most climate-vulnerable

² Mahbubur Rahman, Al Jamal Mustafa Shindaini, and Taha Husain, "Structural barriers to providing basic education to Rohingya children in the Kutupalong refugee camp, Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh." *International Journal of Educational Research Open* 3, no.1 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedro.2022.100159>.

³ Nozomi Abiru, "Exploring the Human Rights of the Rohingya: A Case Study of Kutupalong Refugee Camp in Bangladesh" (Masters Thesis, Norwegian University of Life Sciences, 2018), <https://nmbu.brage.unit.no/nmbu-xmlui/bitstream/handle/11250/2559599/Abiru2018.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>.

⁴ UNHCR, "Rohingya Refugee Crisis Explained."

⁵ "Bangladesh," UNHCR, <https://reporting.unhcr.org/operational/operations/bangladesh>.

⁶ "Bangladesh Funding Update 2025," UNHCR, March 31, 2025, <https://reporting.unhcr.org/bangladesh-funding-update-2025>.

countries, meaning that refugee settlements are constantly affected by weather-related hazards like cyclones, fires, flooding, and landslides, all of which leads to severe challenges in infrastructure when the UN effort is underfunded.⁷ As in Kenya, the current population of the camps is 75% women and children, with more than half the population under 18 and 95% of Rohingya households in Bangladesh dependent on humanitarian assistance, further highlighting the necessity of proper funding.⁸

Refugee Rights in Bangladesh: The Foreigner Status of Rohingyas

Bangladesh is not party to the 1951 Refugee Convention or its 1967 protocol, UN treaties that outline the protections of refugees and specifically the principle of non-refoulement that prohibits states from returning refugees to a country where they face threats to their life or freedom.⁹ Additionally, Bangladesh has no national laws to officially define and regulate the status of refugees in the country.¹⁰ Instead, refugees are governed by the Foreigners Act of 1946, which denotes that all persons who are not citizens of Bangladesh are “foreigners” and gives the government considerable powers restricting the entry, stay, and departure of foreigners in the country.¹¹ However, although Bangladesh did not officially sign the 1951 Convention, they are

⁷ UNHCR, “Bangladesh.”

⁸ UNHCR, “Rohingya Refugee Crisis Explained.”

⁹ “About UNHCR: The 1951 Refugee Convention,” UNHCR, <https://www.unhcr.org/about-unhcr/overview/1951-refugee-convention>.

¹⁰ Nour Mohammad, “Refugee Protection Under the Constitution of Bangladesh: A Brief Overview,” *Refugee Watch* 39, (2012): 141, http://www.mcrg.ac.in/rw%20files/RW39_40/12.pdf.

¹¹ “The Foreigners Act, 1946,” Laws of Bangladesh, Government of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh, <http://bdlaws.minlaw.gov.bd/act-details-216.html>; Manzoor Hasan and Arafat Reza, “Evaluating Bangladesh’s Legal Framework for Rohingya Refugees: Gaps and Solutions,” *Blog of the European Journal of International Law*, January 10, 2025, <https://www.ejiltalk.org/evaluating-bangladeshs-legal-framework-for-rohingya-refugees-gaps-and-solutions/>.

still currently following non-refoulement obligations. In a 2017 case, the High Court Division of the Supreme Court of Bangladesh ruled that even though Bangladesh is not a signatory, the convention has now become international law and “is binding upon all countries of the world” whether or not they have signed.¹²

Although the government of Bangladesh has followed through on the promise of non-refoulement, Rohingyas have extremely limited rights in Bangladesh. Similar to refugees in Kenya, Rohingyas lack both the right to work and freedom of movement, as they are required to live within the camps.¹³ Additionally, educational rights of Rohingyas in Cox’s Bazar are significantly curtailed. The government has not allowed Rohingya children to enroll in schools in local communities or take national school exams, and has also barred humanitarian agencies from providing them with any formal, accredited education.¹⁴ In December 2017, the government's National Task Force on Rohingya issues stated that Rohingya children who arrived after August 2017 could receive only informal education and no instruction in Bangla, the official language of Bangladesh. By enforcing the rule that instruction can only be taught in Burmese and English, the government is further affecting their desire to prevent integration. Despite the protracted nature of the refugee crisis so far, the government of Bangladesh has claimed that formal education for Rohingya children is unnecessary as they will soon return to Myanmar.¹⁵

¹² *Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit (RMMRU) v. Government of Bangladesh*, Writ Petition No. 10504 of 2016, Bangladesh: Supreme Court, May 31, 2017, 10, <https://www.refworld.org/jurisprudence/caselaw/bansc/2017/en/122883>.

¹³ Helen Dempster and Nurul Huda Sakib, “Few Rights and Little Progress: The Rohingya in Bangladesh,” Center for Global Development, January 21, 2021, <https://www.cgdev.org/blog/few-rights-and-little-progress-rohingya-bangladesh>.

¹⁴ “‘Are We Not Human?’ Denial of Education for Rohingya Refugee Children in Bangladesh,” Human Rights Watch, December 3, 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2019/12/03/are-we-not-human/denial-education-rohingya-refugee-children-bangladesh>.

¹⁵ “‘Are We Not Human?’”

Since December 2020, the government of Bangladesh has also been forcibly relocating Rohingya refugees to the island of Bhasan Char. The government claims that relocation is entirely voluntary and one way to solve the problem of overcrowding in the Cox's Bazar camps. However, a report from Human Rights Watch describes how both the refugee and donor community were misled about conditions on the remote island, as well as the lack of informed consent many refugees had in the process of relocation.¹⁶ Although this relocation falls outside of this project's study on humanitarian programming for refugees in Cox's Bazar — and as of 2024 only 32,574 individuals had been relocated — it reflects the larger relationship between Rohingya refugees and their host communities in Bangladesh.¹⁷

Employment and Sex Work for Women in Cox's Bazar

Women within the Cox's Bazar refugee camp face issues of gender-based violence, lack of education and literacy, and limited access to mental and physical services — including sexual and reproductive health resources. Over 51% percent of respondents in an Oxfam Gender Analysis of the camp reported that their male partners were the sole deciders for spending family income, showcasing how agency is often restricted for women.¹⁸ Additionally, many female Rohingya refugees lack knowledge about reproductive health and STD transmission, or are

¹⁶ “‘An Island Jail in the Middle of the Sea’ Bangladesh’s Relocation of Rohingya Refugees to Bhasan Char,” Human Rights Watch, June 7, 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2021/06/07/island-jail-middle-sea/bangladeshs-relocation-rohingya-refugees-bhasan-char>.

¹⁷ “Rohingya Refugee Response/Bangladesh: Bhasan Char Population Factsheet,” Relief Web, February 11, 2024, <https://reliefweb.int/report/bangladesh/rohingya-refugee-responsebangladesh-bhasan-char-population-factsheet-31-january-2024>.

¹⁸ “Gender Profile No. 2 for Rohingya Refugee Response Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh,” ISCG, March 2019, 3, https://rohingyaresponse.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/isgc_gender_profile_no_2_rohingya_refugee_response_30march2019.pdf.

reluctant to seek treatment, all of which can further restrict agency in the sexual sphere.¹⁹ Women also do not often leave their houses unless of an emergency, and public spaces are predominantly occupied by male refugees.²⁰

Within Cox's Bazar, there do exist some formal work opportunities through humanitarian aid organizations. There are over 150 NGOs, including the UNHCR, providing assistance to the government of Bangladesh to support the Kutupalong refugee camp, the largest camp in the Cox's Bazar network. As of 2017, these organizations have established a gender-based violence sub sector to combat the high rates of violence within the camp. This sub sector has coordinated to begin programs on preventing sexual violence, reducing HIV transmission, preventing maternal morbidity, and planning for comprehensive reproductive health services, all of which are meant to fill gaps in education and access for Rohingya women.²¹ Many community members, including Rohingya women, participate in these initiatives, and they can provide both monetary support and educational opportunities. One member stated to the UNHCR that before these programs "people never understood the impact of this violence on their families," but UN efforts have helped raise community awareness.²² Humanitarian initiatives also provide other community volunteer jobs to women, offering them an opportunity to work outside the home that

¹⁹ Semonti Jannat, Ridwan Islam Sifat, and Manila Khisa, "Sexual and Reproductive Health Conditions of Women: Insights from Rohingya Refugee Women in Bangladesh," *Sex Research and Social Policy* 20, (2023): 855–868, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13178-022-00758-z>.

²⁰ Shafinaz Sameen, "Refugee Women's Agency Through Everyday Space Appropriation: An Investigation into Rohingya Women's "Invisibility" In the Camps of Bangladesh," (Masters thesis, Department of Urban Planning, Graduate College of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2020): 64, <https://core.ac.uk/reader/334979900>.

²¹ Annekathryn Goodman and Iftkher Mahmood, "The Rohingya Refugee Crisis of Bangladesh: Gender Based Violence and the Humanitarian Response," *Open Journal of Political Science* 9, no. 3 (2019), [10.4236/ojps.2019.93027](https://doi.org/10.4236/ojps.2019.93027).

²² Matthew Saltmarsh, "Young Rohingya Volunteers Confront Gender-based Violence in Crowded Bangladesh Camps," UNHCR, December 9, 2022, <https://www.unhcr.org/news/stories/young-rohingya-volunteers-confront-gender-based-violence-crowded-bangladesh-camps>.

they would not receive in Myanmar and providing an active type of agency as well as continuing to fill in gaps to reconstruct a more normal life.²³

However, although Rohingya women and other female refugees receive benefits from humanitarian work, participation in these organizations can often be marred by feelings of dissatisfaction on the truly empowering nature of the work. There is resentment within the community about the process of getting paid jobs with humanitarian organizations, and many women feel that male members are prioritized for this work, lamenting that “in big families all of the male members take up jobs,” leaving less work for others.²⁴ Women also often get worse jobs: In the study mentioned in chapter two by Shafinaz Sameen within refugee camps in Bangladesh, the majority of Rohingya women with community jobs were cleaners. “If we had studied further, we could take up better jobs,” said one participant.²⁵ While these experiences of dissatisfaction showcase how humanitarian work can cause problems for women and remake gender hierarchies, the resistance and active dissatisfaction many Rohingya women show in relation to this intervention also acts as another form of agency — they are not just passive recipients of aid, but actors who can make informed decisions and have strong opinions.

Additionally, safety concerns can also affect the participation of Rohingya women in humanitarian work, which can reinforce Western and Global North perceptions of female passivity. Women in Kutupalong often do not visit prevention and protection centers set up by humanitarian organizations because of worries about sharing their own experiences, or facing violence as a result of participation. One group in particular, the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), has a history of violence against women who fight against the current system of

²³ Sameen, “Refugee Women’s Agency,” 70.

²⁴ Sameen, 76.

²⁵ Sameen, 77.

gender hierarchy, including threatening women who seek divorce or independent income. In 2019, ARSA also forced over 150 women to quit their teaching jobs, which were connected with NGOs in the camp.²⁶

All of this makes informal work — including sex work — increasingly common as a means of livelihood. A 2021 study from the UNHCR found that over half the Rohingya refugees and 30% of children ages 15-17 participated in informal work.²⁷ Sex work is one form of informal work that is common in Cox’s Bazar camps. In a 2017 news article, Stefanie Glinski interviewed Rohingya women about their participation in sex work and the stigma that comes with it. “If anyone finds out what we do, they will kill us,” she quoted from a 26-year-old refugee.²⁸ Brothels exist in Kutupalong and also in tourist areas of Cox’s Bazar. Another report for PBS by Tania Rashid, who posed as a sex worker in the Kutupalong camp, detailed the different experiences of sex work. She spoke to one Rohingya woman who ran a brothel in Kutupalong, discussing how she is suspicious of Bangladeshi men as clientele as she worries about Rohingya women being trafficked from the camps into the city.²⁹ Both of these reports detail how sex work is a necessary form of livelihood support for these women. Similar to the experience of sex workers in Kenya, women cite inadequate food rations and supporting their

²⁶ Kathy Win, “Cox’s Bazaar: Insecurity, Criminality and Rohingya Women,” LSE South Asia Centre, February 6, 2023, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/southasia/2023/02/06/coxs-bazaar-insecurity-criminality-and-rohingya-women/>; Sabina Topol, “Hierarchies and Homemaking: How Rohingya Refugee Women Gain Agency Through Everyday Actions,” Unpublished class assignment, Brown University, 2023.

²⁷ “Bangladesh: New Restrictions on Rohingya Camps Authorities Demolish Shops, Close Schools, Curb Movement,” Human Rights Watch, April 4, 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/04/04/bangladesh-new-restrictions-rohingya-camps>.

²⁸ Stefanie Glinski, “Clandestine Sex Industry Booms in Rohingya Refugee Camps,” *Reuters*, October 23, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/clandestine-sex-industry-booms-in-rohingya-refugee-camps-idUSKBN1CS2WD/>.

²⁹ Tania Rahid, “Inside the Bangladesh Brothels Where Rohingya Girls are Suffering,” *PBS News*, April 26, 2018, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/inside-the-bangladesh-brothels-where-rohingya-girls-are-suffering>.

family as push factors for them to begin sex work.³⁰ Although sex work in Cox's Bazar is a common experience, UN agencies have no official published figures for the number of sex workers in the camp. "We don't collect data on how many sex workers are in the camps," said a UNFPA worker to Glinski.³¹ This lack of official data reflects both the stigma surrounding it and the humanitarian approach to this stigma, which will be discussed further in the following key informant interview section of the chapter.

Key Informant Interviews

Unpublished Programming: What Exists in Bangladesh?

Because of the unpublished nature of the programming, to compare the programming to the Kenyan context it is first important to describe what exists in Bangladesh. Like in IRC descriptions of programming in Kenya, interviewees from UN organizations working in Bangladesh described programming set up around drop in centers. These consisted of four centers that provided holistic services including basic health services (including HIV testing and support, family planning etc.), protection, and counseling (mental health and psychosocial support) for women, and then one or two additional drop in centers for men and transgender populations. These drop in centers were all outside of the camps themselves, sometimes quite far away. There were also referral programs that people could be directed to for livelihood components, as well as one to national health facilities for services that were not provided in the drop in centers.

Besides the drop in centers, there was also programmed community outreach to people engaging in sex work. Outreach was done through community educators — women who were

³⁰ Rahid, "Inside the Bangladesh Brothels Where Rohingya Girls are Suffering."

³¹ Glinski, "Clandestine Sex Industry Booms."

former sex workers — and they reached out to other women to provide information, condoms, and referrals to treatment or drop in centers. There was also awareness raising and training to address the gender-based violence component within sex work.

To implement these programs, UN organizations would partner with local NGOs to implement the direct services of the program. The Bangladesh Ministry of Health was also involved in decision-making and health service support.³²

Program Creation Process in Bangladesh: Why Remain Unpublished?

The program creation process in Bangladesh was in many ways very similar to the process in Kenya: it focused on **research (including integration with host communities)**, and **input from the community of sex workers**. However, interviewees in Bangladesh who worked for UN organizations also discussed in more detail how their work related to the larger operational guidelines published by UNHCR and UNFPA. Although one interviewee in Kenya mentioned how the “Operational Guidelines” document served as the backbone for their program, multiple interviewees in Bangladesh discussed how the guidelines informed their work. One interviewee participated in finalizing the guidelines that were already being created. They discussed how the larger blueprint of activities that the guidelines describe is very helpful, but that implementation does really differ from context to context.³³ Another interviewee also reiterated the process of how this larger organizational guidance is “tailored” by looking at “the additional needs of what, what can be allowed, what is not allowed, given the guidance that you get from our global office.”³⁴

³² Interview 2; Interview 4.

³³ Interview 2.

³⁴ Interview 4.

At the very beginning of the program creation process, around 2017 or so according to one interviewee, there was an assessment done by an outside consultant to look into the topic of sex work. In the humanitarian sector there was a lot of uncertainty about the actual prevalence of sex work in the camps. There were questions about how many people, what type of profile of person — was it just women or were men also engaging— and what the perception of sex workers was. One interviewee discussed a key difference between this and the Kenyan context: why this type of work remained unpublished. “[It’s] still highly stigmatized, so **we purposely, actually don’t publish a lot about it, and much of the work is easier to do under the radar,** instead of, you know. **Just doing it, rather than, you know, talking about it.**”³⁵

Like in Kenya, the research effort also included communication and partnership with host communities. One interviewee mentioned that the drop in centers in question were originally serving national sex workers in the region.³⁶ Another interviewee echoed this, discussing integrating sex workers who are Rohingya refugees with services for sex workers who are Bangladeshis.³⁷ Besides national health centers, the UN intervention also engaged with the national Ministry of Health, as discussed above. One interviewee described how they were involved from the outset in order to make access and decision-making easier. There was a steering committee to design the project in conjunction with the Ministry and both the local ministry and ministry from Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh, participated in the effort. “The Ministry of Health, I felt, was really strongly engaged, which is not usually the case or is not always the case I should say.”³⁸

³⁵ Interview 2.

³⁶ Interview 2.

³⁷ Interview 1.

³⁸ Interview 2.

As discussed above, refugee women were also partners in the programming, serving as a form of outreach and education in the community. Through this partnership, the UN organizations were able to learn that sex work was occurring both outside and inside the camps, when previously they believed it to only be outside.³⁹ Just as in Kenya, these women—and others who came to the drop in center—would serve to inform others in the community about the services, like snowballing. One interviewee discussed how these women helped promote the services, “For people they know and trust, you know, women leaders in the community, then they will refer them to here.”⁴⁰

Overall, the program creation as discussed by interviewees was relatively similar between the contexts of Bangladesh and Kenya. Host community partnerships were emphasized more in interviews about Bangladesh and outside research efforts were emphasized less, but the **components of the process were similar: preliminary research into sex work in the context, programs informed by the larger UN operational guidance, and tailoring with the research and feedback from women who engage in sex work to ensure context-specific programs.**

Challenges: The Problem of Stigma

Unlike in Kenya, interviewees did not seem to discuss challenges that fell into two themes of access and stigma. In Bangladesh, **stigma seemed to be the most overwhelmingly faced challenge: refugee community stigma, humanitarian worker stigma, and also host community stigma**, which was not brought up in Kenya. Additional challenges were also mentioned by interviewees: including the setting of Cox’s Bazar as a tourist destination and addressing minor participation in sex work.

³⁹ Interview 2.

⁴⁰ Interview 4.

The Stigma of Sex Work in Cox's Bazar

Community Reaction

Stigma around sex work in the Rohingya refugee community was discussed very similarly to the refugee community perception of sex work in Kenya. One interviewee described how the stigma was uncovered during the process of the outside research effort. This caused UN organizations to originally believe that sex work was mainly happening outside of the camps because of the intense stigma and the crowded nature of the camps.⁴¹ Another interviewee echoed this sentiment, saying there was lots of stigma attached to sex work and that it also had religious connotations — like in Kenya. This religious community stigma was also worsened by the prevalence of STIs and STDs, said the interviewee. A different interviewee, one who worked in a local NGO, also discussed the conservative nature of the Rohingya population and how it increases the concealment of sex work.⁴² Community stigma also increases the danger of participation in sex work: refugees would always engage in sex work at night “where no one is watching and anything can happen.”⁴³

Humanitarian Actor Reaction

Like in the Kenyan context, there was also stigma from the humanitarian actors. The discussion of this stigma was incredibly similar to that of the Kenyan interviews as well. Personal biases were a big reason for this stigma: sex work is something that for many people touches on “very personal beliefs” and that the important thing for humanitarian workers is to

⁴¹ Interview 2.

⁴² Interview 7.

⁴³ Interview 4.

then be aware of what your personal bias is and to address it, said one interviewee.⁴⁴ One way that humanitarians attempted to combat these biases was through value clarification exercises.

When we started the project we had a very open conversation with our colleagues about it, since it is a very quite traditional society, to really discuss what it means to be a sex worker, the backgrounds, but also do these value clarification exercises... to just break down these barriers for people also to reflect themselves on their own beliefs and their own ideas around that topic.⁴⁵

Another interviewee agreed that there was stigma from humanitarian actors, but that this stigma was to “a lesser extent” than among the refugees themselves.⁴⁶ Interestingly, another interviewee talked about their own personal experiences with stigma — in terms of minors engaging in sex work:

I really really struggled with that component. Because obviously you cannot tell the girls you should not do this, I mean, you can offer a path out, but in the end, **I found that also a personal ethical dilemma** to know that there were girls out there who were selling themselves.⁴⁷

Because of the nature of humanitarian aid work — that people are given tools like value clarification and are taught to examine their biases — stigma like that discussed above is something aid workers are possibly less expressive about outwardly while having their own inner conflicts.

Host Community Reaction: Rohingya Relations with Bangladesh

The stigma discussed in relation to the host community of Bangladesh was with regards to two things: sex work and the Rohingya population itself. As discussed above in the literature review, the relationship between Rohingyas and the host population/government is fraught with tension. Almost all of the interviewees for Bangladesh echoed this sentiment. In an interview

⁴⁴ Interview 2.

⁴⁵ Interview 2.

⁴⁶ Interview 4.

⁴⁷ Interview 2.

with a humanitarian worker — a doctor who oversaw parts of UNHCR and WHO’s Covid-19 response in Cox’s Bazar — they talked about this relationship.

[One of the] very first things we had to do to get host buy-in, because everything theoretically was being controlled by the Bangladeshis and ministry of health... everything had to be supplied both to the hosts and to the refugees for political reasons.⁴⁸

The interviewee also added that Rohingya refugees had to be referred to in front of government officials as ‘temporarily displaced nationals of Myanmar:’ “The Bangladeshis don’t want them.”⁴⁹

This stigma over being a Rohingya refugee also translated into stigma about sex work. One interviewee described how Rohingya refugees were associated with STD-related stigma. The host community had a perception that Rohingyas had a higher HIV rate than Bangladeshis. This meant that it was doubly important to get the Ministry of Health on board the project, to combat the widespread negative press.⁵⁰ Another interviewee echoed this idea, discussing the feasibility of advocacy efforts with the negative stigma of sex work and the refugee population. For the advocacy component of the programming UN organizations held a “16 days of activism” but chose not to do mass campaigns, instead holding smaller meetings with administrators in the Ministry of Health to address stigma and get access to services for refugees. “**Sometimes you don’t want to rattle the feathers,**” said the interviewee, “**if you confront, then you fail.**”⁵¹ The negative stigma associated with both refugees and sex work lent better to this type of one-on-one advocacy for the rights of Rohingyas, showcasing the pervasive nature of the stigma and the ways in which UN organizations and NGOs dealt with the challenge.

⁴⁸ Interview 6.

⁴⁹ Interview 6.

⁵⁰ Interview 2.

⁵¹ Interview 4.

Host community stigma also showed up in interactions with law enforcement. Sex work is illegal in Bangladesh, so when sex workers report violence or sexual assault they are often blamed for it by police, said one interviewee.⁵² This exemplified the necessity of engaging all community stakeholders in the protection effort in order to most effectively support refugees engaged in sex work. However, another interviewee discussed further challenges with law enforcement. “**Security agents exploit them a lot.** I mean, some of them, they'll do raids, but they'll also get bribes. Cause if they're doing raids to eliminate, then you'd expect those brothels will close, but they don't close, they continue.”⁵³ This quote highlights how law enforcement interactions were not just a failed partnership, but that this community was actively working against humanitarian programming efforts and contributing to abuse, reinforcing the need to challenge host community attitudes and protection efforts.

Other Challenges: Minors, Police, & Cox Bazar as a Tourist Area

Interviews for both contexts discussed a multitude of challenges, but interviewees in Bangladesh spent much more time describing issues outside of access and stigma that were specific to the context of Bangladesh. The first thing interviewees would often bring up when discussing programming for refugee women who engaged in sex work is that Cox's Bazar was a tourist town. Instead of in Kenya where truck drivers were often seen as the clientele and driving force for the popularity of sex work, Bangladeshi and international tourists were the focus for this context. “For weddings, people go to Cox Bazar, but also young men [go] to Cox Bazar to have a good weekend, what they define as a yeah, and that often involves going to sex

⁵² Interview 2.

⁵³ Interview 4.

workers.”⁵⁴ Another interviewee also talked about the tourist drive for sex work and how it led to brothels throughout the city that would employ refugee Rohingya women.⁵⁵ The tourism context was something unique to the refugee situation in Bangladesh: that Cox’s Bazar camps happened to be in a tourist hotspot and this increased the demand for sex work outside of UN and NGO-managed areas.

The second challenge that was discussed frequently in interviews was that of minors engaging in sex work. This challenge had also briefly been brought up by both interviews in the Kenyan context, and was by no means unique to Cox’s Bazar, but the rate and length of discussion was much higher in the interviews for Bangladesh. “That’s a totally different legal framework,” discussed one interviewee describing the issues that came with addressing sex workers who were less than 18 years old, the same interviewee who had talked about the personal dilemmas that came with knowing minors were engaged in sex work.⁵⁶ To combat this, there were 2-3 day work shops for adolescent girls on education awareness about sex work in order to work on preventing entrance. However, another interviewee discussed the challenges that came with programming for minors and how difficult it was to get them involved. They wanted the drop in centers to be more “adolescent friendly” with entertainment centers and other ways to attract them to actually visit. Additionally, the interviewee discussed the need to further address the root causes for teenagers and how current prevention methods were not enough: “Just addressing issues of marital issues, family conflicts that may drive these adolescent girls, teenagers, out of their homes, and then they end up coming to sex work. Really scaling up our

⁵⁴ Interview 2.

⁵⁵ Interview 4.

⁵⁶ Interview 2.

MHPSS and adolescent... would be useful in terms of prevention because now we are kind of on the response side.”⁵⁷

Framing Sex Work Response: Are Health/HIV Drivers in Bangladesh as It Is in Kenya?

As discussed above, HIV and health framing does affect the refugee community in some ways as it does in Kenya: refugee populations are more associated with the stigma of STDs and this association then increases negative perceptions. Health was also quoted as being “the driving force” in conjunction with protection by one interviewee.⁵⁸ However, HIV was not nearly the same challenge as it was in the Kenyan context. One interviewee even specifically discussed this: “In this setting as well, I mean, HIV is not an issue. And there is a lot of stigma for the few cases that happened.”⁵⁹ This quote reflected a sentiment echoed in other interviews: that HIV carried the same stigma it did in other locations and that interventions (like testing and treatment) were similar in Bangladesh, but it was not hugely present in the community and so did not receive the same level of spotlight and focus that it may have in other contexts, like the way it was described in Kenya.

Goals of Programming

The goals of programming discussed in interviews were very similar to those discussed in Kenya. **Ensuring confidentiality, understanding risk factors to possibly prevent entry into sex work, and promoting agency/increasing choice through empowerment** were all commonly discussed goals. As most of the discussion around risk factors involved minors and

⁵⁷ Interview 4.

⁵⁸ Interview 2.

⁵⁹ Interview 4.

was discussed above, this section will only focus on agency and confidentiality. In addition, interviews discussed the idea of ensuring services were accessible.

Unlike in interviews in Kenya, there was no disagreement about the importance of maintaining confidentiality for women engaging in sex work when accessing programming. The drop in centers were not within the camps in order to maintain anonymity, as women could claim they were going to the market.⁶⁰ This was reiterated by another interviewee, who discussed how anonymity was meant to lessen stigma. Sometimes Rohingya women who went into the city were then automatically associated with sex work, which programming worked to avoid.⁶¹ There were also confidential referrals that UN organizations were able to make for services outside of the centers.⁶²

Just as in the Kenyan context, the goal of promoting agency and using economic and livelihood to increase women's ability to choose their level of participation in sex work was highly emphasized. Part of the programming was livelihood opportunities: either cash based, helping women to set up businesses, or some other method of economic empowerment.

Maybe that will either make them negotiate better or give up the sex work. But again, this is done in a way that we are not judging them. We are providing them that option. But of course ensuring that the choice eventually is up to them to make.⁶³

Another interview also mentioned this livelihood component, emphasizing that in order to be successful these programs shouldn't just be time-consuming things like a "knitting class," but something that gives women the opportunity to genuinely make a living. However, the

⁶⁰ Interview 2.

⁶¹ Interview 4.

⁶² Interview 2.

⁶³ Interview 4.

interviewee also mentioned that all of these programs give women less money than sex work.⁶⁴ Although livelihood programs, like in Kenya, provide refugees engaged in sex work with more choice, they do not always offer an economically viable way out of sex work.

The last goal that was most commonly emphasized in Bangladesh was the word “access.” Ensuring that women could access services when they needed or wanted it, including health, protection, psychological services etc, and *maintaining* this access was the most important part of humanitarian programming. This also included legal support, where aid workers would follow up with law enforcement to ensure women could access justice if they wanted, and access the referral system mentioned above — for both health and livelihood referrals.⁶⁵ The goal of access reaffirmed other principles of humanitarian aid work: that programming was meant to give refugees engaged in sex work the access to whatever choices they wanted to make.

Success or Failure

Similar to general feedback in the interviews for Kenya, interviewees in Bangladesh were generally positive about the results of the programming. Highlights for interviews were the quick expansion of the programs and success in goals such as providing confidential and accessible health and protection services. One interviewee discussed the expansion of the program in the first two and a half years to about 1500 women, and additional funding made expansion possible from the outer edges of the camp to the inside and to other camps in Cox’s Bazar. “I think [it was] successful progress that we were managing to expand this quite rapidly, which we had not expected.”⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Interview 2.

⁶⁵ Interview 2; Interview 4.

⁶⁶ Interview 2.

While interviewees' ideas of program failures, or weak spots, were not exactly the same as those in Kenya they got at many of the same themes of addressing structural injustice rather than band-aid solutions. In Kenya economic empowerment programs, host community leadership, and funding issues were all discussed as failures. In Bangladesh, interviewees talked about **scaling up prevention efforts and addressing root causes of sex work and engaging the rest of the community into programming and advocacy efforts.**

As discussed in the section about challenges for minors engaged in sex work, one interviewee talked about needing to “do more in terms of addressing some of the root causes,” both for refugees engaged in sex work in general and young teenagers.⁶⁷ This also ties into the discussions from another interview about livelihood opportunities and how humanitarian programming only offers opportunities with much less monetary opportunity than sex work will provide.⁶⁸ Although programming is successful in offering refugees engaged in sex work with more choice, both prevention and exiting opportunities are not as robust.

Additionally, interviewees found that there was a necessity for more partnerships to get at long-term systemic issues rather than just emergency response.

Working with partners, **looking at more of the long term in terms of any structural legal hurdles**, because we don't, we never take time to analyze and see what specifically disenfranchise them or do a proper assessment to better understand any bottlenecks, any hot points that really predispose them to, especially the major events.⁶⁹

This quote also gets at the connection between long-term efforts and prevention efforts: that both are often ignored because of the urgency of response programming for necessary services. One interviewee, when asked about anything they would add to the program, said “**How do you then**

⁶⁷ Interview 4.

⁶⁸ Interview 2.

⁶⁹ Interview 4.

engage all the other stakeholders that you need to effectively help women and men? ... How do we get people to engage on a higher level?”⁷⁰ The sentiment also ties into both a strength and weakness of UN organizations spearheading the project. UN organizations have a “a different negotiating power” that they can use at this higher level, compared with local NGOs that have different capabilities and day-to-day access.⁷¹

Conclusion

Refugee women engaged in sex work in Cox’s Bazar faced similar challenges to those in Kenya: restrictions on their ability to work and move freely, and cultural stigmatization for both their status as “foreigners” and as sex workers. The decision to leave findings unpublished in Bangladesh further showcases how these issues manifest in the humanitarian context: the perceived necessity of programming means that it is easier, and perhaps better for those the programming is meant to support, if research and findings are kept within the humanitarian sector in order to avoid exposure. Key informant interviews confirmed the challenges of stigma: highlighting that this negative perception came from all areas — the refugee community, the humanitarian community, and the host community of Bangladesh. Although there was not an emphasis on HIV as a driver of humanitarian aid like in Kenya, the nature of Cox’s Bazar as a tourist center was emphasized as a unique facet of program creation. Additionally, while refugee participation was not mentioned as much as in interviews for Kenya, the idea of creating structural change that lasted beyond humanitarian efforts was a key point of interviews. To do this, interviewees emphasized the possibility of using UN leadership to engage other key actors like governments and host community leadership to ensure a safe and nonpunitive environment

⁷⁰ Interview 2.

⁷¹ Interview 2.

for refugees engaged in sex work. In the next chapter, I will combine my findings from both case studies of Kenya and Bangladesh in order to answer my original research questions and look forward to the possibilities for future research on this topic.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION: FINDINGS, IMPLICATIONS, AND FUTURE WORK

This final chapter synthesizes the key findings throughout the thesis and provides implications for future studies in this area. I will first discuss how my findings in both case studies of Bangladesh and Kenya match up with my original hypothesis, then what the limitations of the study are through data collection. I will then revisit my initial research questions with synthesized answers from the two case studies, and finally I will discuss the directions I believe this research could take moving forward.

My original hypothesis discussed how: 1) refugee women being framed as vulnerable would impact programming and decrease opportunities for agency; 2) international humanitarian actors and local actors would be perceived differently; 3) top-down structures of humanitarianism would reinforce negative power dynamics and; 4) that these disconnects would prevent humanitarian actors from delivering comprehensive, unbiased care. After collecting data through key informant interviews and reading about published programming, it is clear that my initial hypothesis and results did not entirely match up.

Although there were clear access issues for international humanitarian actors — which will be discussed further below — much of the programming attempted to involve the women and communities they were providing services to. In both case studies, refugee women were engaged in community outreach and peer education efforts, supporting programming techniques with snowballing and hotspot mapping to ensure local knowledge was included. Women involved in sex work were also included in conversations about programming, providing feedback and a check against personal biases that could arise in humanitarians. Additionally, interviewees were conscientious of the ways this agency should be increased and promoted. Stigma within humanitarian circles was also discussed in data collection, but was combated,

pushed back against, or addressed by humanitarian aid workers themselves. Overall, my original hypothesis addressed many of the concerns that program creators and humanitarian actors were dealing with themselves in implementing the programs, and so therefore made conscious efforts to address — whether these efforts were entirely successful or not.

Limitations of the Study

It is important to address the limitations of this study in truly answering my original research questions as well as revisiting my hypothesis. The main limitation for this study was in the quantity and breadth of the interviews. Originally, I had planned to interview a broad range of humanitarian actors, including both local and international actors. I was able to use snowball sampling as I had planned to, starting with contributors on the UN operational guidance manual and then those they had referred me to. However, in the end I was left with around half my desired number of interviews: one background interview with a UN agency worker, two interviews from UN agency workers in Bangladesh (one who also worked in the Kenyan context), two interviews from UN agency workers in Kenya, one interview from a humanitarian worker at a local NGO in Bangladesh, and one unstructured interview with a doctor who helped oversee the COVID-19 response in Cox's Bazar. This is a total of seven interviews, but only four of these were the main focus of the discussions in chapter 3 and 4 and all of these main four were from UN agencies.

This means that the bulk of the data collected was from the perspective of UN humanitarian workers, and the local perspective cannot be correctly extrapolated from this. Additionally, the one interview with a local NGO that was conducted for Bangladesh was also hindered by a language barrier. The interview was conducted in English, and there seemed to be

a translator present, but communication was hindered by the connection and the difference in language.

Based on these limitations, the study's original aims could not be fully realized. Therefore, this thesis can only speak to the perspective of UN agency workers on programming for refugees engaged in sex work. The limited number of interviews also means that these findings are not necessarily able to be widely extrapolated, but both the consistency and differentiation in all five UN interviews showcases the importance of the discussion as is. Additionally, while these two case studies provide a strong framework for comparative analysis against one another, they do not necessarily supply enough information or evidence to draw larger global claims about the extent and effectiveness of this kind of programming worldwide.

Revisiting Research Questions

This section of the conclusion aims to synthesize the findings from the key informant interviews based on research questions rather than by case study or thematic content. This information is in Chapters 3 and 4, but is condensed here by question in order to provide a space to revisit the goals of the introduction.

- 1) *What attempts are being made in the humanitarian sector to address the lack of resources for women selling sex in humanitarian refugee settings?*

To address this question, it is first important to emphasize how data collection has showcased the relevance of the operational guidelines document from UNHCR and UNFPA. In both case studies, interviewees discussed this idea of an overarching template of programming for refugees engaged in sex work. This guidelines document sets up a human-rights-based

approach, centers harm reduction and community empowerment, and provides specific guidelines and objectives for each core section of health and protection.¹

At the outset of this project, it was unclear to me how much these guidelines were truly evidence of the humanitarian sector making moves to address this resource gap. However, discussing with key informants about how they themselves have used the guidance and tailored it in their own programs showcases its impact beyond the scholarly sphere. In both case studies, these guidelines were mentioned or discussed in depth. Two interviews for Bangladesh explicitly discussed how these guidelines offered “a larger blueprint of activities” at the agency level that were then tailored to the specific context.² Another interview for Kenya mentioned the early work in developing these guidelines, but again also how they were tailored to different communities and contexts.³ **The consistent presence of the UNHCR and UNFPA guidelines in interviews demonstrated that this attempt to address a programming gap had successfully proliferated on a global scale.**

Besides the prevalence of the operational guidelines document, both Kenya and Bangladesh had organized programming that was specifically designed to address this population on both an international and local level. Chapters three and four discuss the specifics of these programs and the clear focus on addressing the needs of refugee women (and also the lesser numbers of refugee men and nonbinary persons) participating in sex work. This programming was not only UN-led, but included actors at all levels. In all key informant interviews with workers from UN agencies, partnerships with local and international NGOs were emphasized.

¹ “Operational Guidance: Responding to the Health and Protection Needs of People Selling or Exchanging Sex in Humanitarian Settings,” The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the United Nations Population Fund, 2021, <https://www.unhcr.org/us/sites/en-us/files/legacy-pdf/60dc85d74.pdf>.

² Interview 2; Interview 4.

³ Interview 3.

Interviewees discussed how UN organizations often functioned as the overseers in these projects and then national partners would implement the programs and serve as the first point of contact.

Overall, this project showcases that over the last decade and a half there have been many direct attempts made to address this resource gap. Although the data from these two case studies cannot be entirely extrapolated, interviews mentioned the availability of these kinds of programming in multiple other countries and regional areas, displaying that this is a global trend towards increased programming rather than a localized one.

2) How do humanitarian workers perceive sex work?

This research question was answered in a way different from that which I had originally intended. At the beginning of the project, I expected this data to be revealed only subconsciously or between the lines in key informant interviews. In reality, it was addressed head on by all interviewees from UN organizations. The personal biases and stigma that international humanitarian workers held themselves in terms of sex work was openly discussed, as were solutions and ways to address these stigmas. Interviewees discussed things like “there are certain needs people feel more comfortable addressing than others,” or “acknowledging that we may come with our own individual biases,” or “We all have our own personal beliefs. And I think the important thing is to be aware of what you are biased about and to address it.”⁴ In both case studies, humanitarian workers used things like **value clarification**, **additional training for workers**, and **including refugees in programming leadership and design** to combat their own automatic negative or judgemental feelings towards sex work.

Interviews also uncovered more serious negative reactions to sex work: ones that did not just show up in the minds of aid workers but in their actions. Interviewees in Kenya discussed

⁴ Interview 1; Interview 3; Interview 2.

perceptions of sex work as a “negative coping behavior” that needed to be eradicated, and examples of humanitarian workers that inhibited the provision of services because of their stigmatized ideas about sex work.⁵ In Bangladesh, the unpublished nature of the programming was also related to humanitarian (and non humanitarian) perceptions of sex work that made undercover work easier.⁶

Additionally, although these were discussed as rare examples rather than indicative of trends, interviewees provided examples of sexual abuse and exploitation from humanitarian workers themselves.⁷ While this is not directly correlated with humanitarian worker “perceptions,” it is relevant in their actual actions towards sex work as well as how refugees themselves perceive humanitarian worker interactions with sex work. These examples showcase egregious violations of the humanitarian principle “do no harm,” and failures of the sector as a whole to protect refugees even from those meant to support them.

Overall, these interviews simultaneously showcase the failures and strengths of the humanitarian sector. Interviewees were reflective of their own biases, while also providing examples of the ways in which humanitarianism can reinforce power dynamics of exploitation. However, in many ways these interviews are self selecting. **Those who are passionate about addressing the needs of refugees engaged in sex work are perhaps more likely to consider their own personal biases about the action.** This data is still relevant to the delivering of services via humanitarian programming for those engaged in sex work, but does not adequately address the perceptions of all humanitarians that those engaged in sex work will encounter.

⁵ Interview 3.

⁶ Interview 2.

⁷ Interview 5.

3) *Are their perceptions aligned with the official or unofficial attitudes of the organizations they work for?*

This research question is perhaps less sufficiently answered by the discussions for each case study, which were more focused on individual programming efforts than organizational attitudes, but by the first background interview. This interviewee talked about the complications and tensions in creating the guidelines document between official UN organizational attitudes and other approaches. One of the tensions was on the organizational attitude towards sex work, which fell under similar lines as the discussion in the literature review: the two pillars of abolition versus decriminalization. The original attitude when formatting the guidelines in organizations like the UNHCR was a push towards the idea that all sex work in these contexts is “de facto” sexual violence or gender-based violence. In other organizations like the Red Umbrella Alliance, a sex worker-led fund promoting the rights of sex workers globally, there was a push against this focus on abolition.⁸ However, the interviewee also expressed that the original guidelines needed to be reformatted because the debate over de facto versus no de facto lacked truly operational value — that it would not be useful for implementing partners in the field.⁹

Although the interview itself is evidence of a misalignment between organizations and workers, it also highlighted one difference between organizational attitudes and humanitarian worker attitudes: **that organizational priorities of formatting overarching frameworks and language use do not always align with “operational” concerns of humanitarian workers themselves.**

⁸ Interview 1.

⁹ Interview 1.

- 4) *Do humanitarian workers use their perceptions and attitudes towards refugees who engage in sex work to inform decisions that they make in the field or are they acting in line with other beliefs?*

As I was mostly able to interview humanitarian workers who worked on aspects of overseeing programming rather than those “in the field,” this research question cannot be answered in its original form. However, UN humanitarian workers who oversaw programming seemed to both consider their own original biases while also acting in line with programming goals — which are also touched on in research question five. As discussed in chapter four, one interviewee confessed to the “ethical dilemma” they faced in interacting with young women engaged in sex work: “obviously you cannot tell the girls you should not do this, I mean, you can offer a path out, but in the end, I found that also a personal ethical dilemma.”¹⁰ This quote showcases one example of a humanitarian worker **acknowledging their own attitudes towards sex work, but acting in line with other values.**

In another interview for Kenya, a humanitarian worker discussed this dilemma as well: “In one breath you say it's exploitative, in the other breath you say, but I have to respect a woman's decision and **provide services and not provide stigma.**”¹¹ This quote displays the same inner fight: despite concerns over exploitation or stigma, **refugee women's choices must be valued higher than any personal bias.**

- 5) *How are these programs being directed, what are perceived goals of the programs, and what effect do these perceived goals have?*

This research question is much more explicitly answered in chapters three and four, but will also be summarized here to provide further comparison and synthesis with other themes that

¹⁰ Interview 2.

¹¹ Interview 3.

came from data collection. Although interviewees never explicitly outlined programming “goals,” there were clear recurring themes that stood out as being defining intended characteristics of service delivery and programming. The most frequently discussed goals were **ensuring confidentiality, nonpunitive programming, understanding risk factors, service accessibility and increasing agency and choice**. These goals showed up in both case studies and in almost every individual interview with a UN humanitarian worker.

These perceived goals were also incredibly relevant to the ways in which humanitarian actors carried out programming. As discussed before, interviewees expressed that these goals were a way for them to remain in touch with larger value-based methods, rather than personal priorities. They also seemed to streamline programming approaches across case studies: creating clear institutional targets that individual country contexts could find different ways to address that suited their needs.

Looking Forward to the Future: Further Research and Future Programming

To conclude this project, I want to first discuss the ways in which future research could better address these questions, and additional questions that have arisen after data collection. Further study should be done: 1) with a larger pool of interviewees from each case study location and 2) with a larger pool of humanitarian interviewees who worked for local organizations, in order to gain a data set that could be better extrapolated from. Although discussion with interviewees provided incredibly valuable information that was inaccessible simply from examining published documents, it also represented a limited amount of perspectives from aid workers who currently worked in leadership positions rather than direct service ones. While interviewing a more diverse range of aid workers and having more interviews overall would

provide an important and evidence-based perspective, the most necessary group to interview in future research efforts would be the refugees themselves on their experience and critiques of humanitarian programming. While I had neither the resources and ability to interview refugees in international locations, nor the experience and qualifications to interview non-key informant populations on personal and private topics in accordance with Brown Institutional Review Board requirements, research by someone with these capabilities would be incredibly valuable and complement this thesis. Interviewing refugee women who are or have engaged in sex work would support a practical evolution of guidelines and programming based on the knowledge of those who have the most expertise and relevant experience. Although interviewees described how refugee women were involved in feedback processes, it would also be an important endeavor for someone outside of the humanitarian sector who has no monetary or professional stake in the programs to perform this independent research.

Additionally, after data collection there are themes and questions that I believe future study would be improved by answering. As someone who has no direct experience with humanitarian programming, discussions about programming for refugee women engaged in sex work were stand-alone initiatives. Putting this kind of programming in conversation with other programming that does not target this population — as well as interviewing humanitarian workers who are part of other types of programming — would be an interesting way to examine if these are truly new attempts at implementation. Also, I believe that further study on programming for male refugees who engage in sex work is needed. In both the Kenyan and Cox's Bazar context, female experiences of sex work and humanitarian programming were emphasized. This is perhaps partially because of the makeup of these camps, and a lower population of men meant male refugees engaging in sex work was less common, but also

because the interviewees mainly had experience working in programming for women. One interviewee mentioned that men engaging sex work was more common in other contexts, such as Afghan refugees in Greece.¹² Analyzing attempts at programming in these contexts would be valuable to understand similarities and differences.

Overall, programming analyzed in this project gives a small look at an incredibly important intervention: one that should be **locally-driven and geared towards expanding choice and promoting safety for refugees who engage in sex work in humanitarian settings**. Key takeaways from interviews showcased the importance of **having refugee women engaging in sex work be the decision-makers in this process, adapting programs in ways they see fit**. Furthermore, interviewees expressed the necessity of **ensuring that any kind of guidelines or written documents were truly *operational*, with evidence based research informing their development**, that could be circulated to local actors for their own implementation. Especially because interviews expressed how guideline documents can sometimes focus on overarching organizational priorities rather than functional and workable actions that can be utilized in practice by humanitarian workers, these **guidelines should be continuously revised and improved upon with feedback from local actors and the communities they are intending to serve**. By incorporating these recommendations and continuing to emphasize the importance of bottom-up localized humanitarian aid — all of which was expressed as a priority for interviewees — humanitarian programming for refugee women engaged in sex work can hope to more effectively address community needs while avoiding traps of colonial humanitarianism and programming that overemphasizes Global North perspectives and priorities of agency.

¹² Interview 1.

All of these humanitarian programming initiatives are now put in danger with recent funding cuts in the Trump administration to humanitarian aid. As of February 2025, Trump has terminated 90% of USAID foreign aid contracts, 21.4 billion of which contributed to the United Nations and other international organizations in 2022.¹³ Although data collection and interviews took place mainly before these cuts, humanitarian workers that I spoke to afterwards expressed extreme worry about the future of their programming. “Some of the interventions may slow down now... I don’t know what to say now to this [lack of] clarity, but for sure it’s a wake up call.”¹⁴ These cuts have also been increasingly unstable, with the administration shifting back and forth on exact amounts and programs that would be cut, creating mass chaos and confusion in the sector. Just on April 8, 2025, the Trump administration moved to reinstate six recently canceled aid programs for emergency assistance, but had also cut many programs the previous weekend that it had pledged to preserve just days before.¹⁵ Whether or not these programs are able to grow and evolve is now not just up to humanitarian organizations or the communities they work with, but the willingness of the larger international order to fill this new gaping hole of funding.

¹³Gerald Imray, “Trump’s Permanent USAID Cuts Slam Humanitarian Programs Worldwide: ‘We are Being Pushed Off a Cliff,’” *AP News*, February 27, 2025, <https://apnews.com/article/trump-usaid-aid-cut-doge-musk-dbaf0e89d72938caabee8251f7dfb4a7>; “USAID OIG’s Oversight of Funding to the United Nations,” USAID, <https://oig.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/2023-05/UN%20Orgs%20Graphic%20051823.pdf>.

¹⁴ Interview 5.

¹⁵ Karoun Demirjian and Edward Wong, “U.S. Slashes Many of the Aid Programs It Had Promised to Keep,” *New York Times*, April 9, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/04/09/us/politics/usaaid-cuts.html>.

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