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Mainstreaming Gender to Remedy Inequality: Refugee Groups in Turkey Show the Way

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INTRODUCTION

The number of forcibly displaced people in the world has recently reached a record high: 89.3 million.¹ Women and girls make up almost half of the world's forcibly displaced populations, while lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, or queer (LGBTIQ+) persons are increasingly seeking refuge outside of their countries of origin.² Displaced individuals' sexual and gender identities shape their experiences of and strategies for access to rights and services in their countries of origin, during their flight and its aftermath. Research and policy work have pointed out the desirability of contextualized and local-led humanitarian operations, while also recently emphasizing that diverse gender identities need to be catered for as part of that context.³

Against a backdrop of the increasing prominence of the impact of gender dynamics on displacement and discussions around the ethics and efficiency of localized refugee response, humanitarian aid to refugees has increasingly pushed two ideas into the global agenda in recent decades: i) enhancing displaced individuals and communities' meaningful inclusion in all steps of humanitarian decision-making processes, i.e., *localization*, and ii) redressing gender inequalities in humanitarian response through gender mainstreaming policies. Broadly speaking, gender mainstreaming is an approach

that focuses on integrating different gender identity-driven experiences, needs, and approaches into policymaking and execution processes.

Humanitarian non-governmental organizations (NGOs), international organizations (IOs), policymakers, and donors have devoted significant attention to mainstreaming gender in refugee response, further amplifying the gender-sensitive work of local actors such as refugee-led organizations (RLOs).⁴ Goals of gender equality are now widely codified in international policy instruments, including the 2016 New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants and the Global Compact on Refugees.⁵ Yet, despite these promising policy discussions on gender equality in the context of localized humanitarian assistance, policymakers have paid limited attention to how refugee communities understand gender mainstreaming. Their neglect has been detrimental to gender-sensitive policymaking, as shown in this brief. Enacting gender equality within Turkey's refugee response remains an elusive goal for women refugee-led organizations.⁶

Drawing on 60 in-depth interviews with self-identified women members of women refugee-led organizations in Turkey from 2021 to 2023, this brief focuses on how women refugee-led organizations make sense of gender mainstreaming. Using the words of refugee women,⁷ "developing gender mainstreaming plans



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that are more sensitive to definitions of forcibly displaced persons” and “centralizing RLOs’ strategies of addressing gender inequality in [the] humanitarian policymaking field” are important steps for turning gender mainstreaming into reality.⁸

GENDER MAINSTREAMING IN HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE

Gender mainstreaming eludes an easy definition. Widespread contradiction and confusion exist about the meaning of gender mainstreaming, its content, and how it should be realized.⁹ For some, gender mainstreaming is a beacon for producing policies that take into consideration various gender-driven interests. But others see gender mainstreaming as a form of governmentality around which certain subjects are rendered worthy of protection. In this view, gender mainstreaming remains part of neo-colonial power relations and Eurocentric definitions of gender equality.¹⁰ However, despite disagreements over its definition, most policymakers agree that the concept of gender mainstreaming is a context-specific step forward in addressing gender injustices within any community.¹¹

Putting aside the contested and varied definitions, I use gender mainstreaming in reference to the promotion of gender equality and fighting gender-driven marginalization through the integration of gender perspectives into the preparation, design, implementation, and monitoring of a wide range of policies.¹² Gender mainstreaming for refugee communities includes (but is not limited to) recognizing how gender plays a role in:

- the processes of claiming asylum and determining refugee status;
- approaches to and practices of traditional durable solutions, namely voluntary return, local integration, and resettlement;
- inequalities in access to rights, services, and justice;

- vulnerability to gender-specific forms of violence;— changing definitions of family and family dynamics; and
- shifting notions of masculinity and femininity in displacement.¹³

LOCALIZING REFUGEE RESPONSE AND MAINSTREAMING GENDER IN TURKEY

In Turkey, which is now the largest refugee-hosting country in the world, gender mainstreaming policies for refugees have recently received increased attention from policymakers.¹⁴ Despite the sheer number of refugees and the considerable presence of women and LGBTIQ+ refugees in the country, these groups still face a number of challenges. Lack of access to information, legal rights, and registration; language barriers; obstacles preventing access to health, education, and livelihood opportunities; and sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) are some of the most common challenges that women refugees experience in Turkey. Research participants from UNHCR and UN Women in Turkey noted that Turkey has received extensive funding for projects that integrate gender-sensitive components into refugee response programming, reflecting the hopes that increasing support for mainstreaming gender in refugee protection could help tackle gender injustices among refugee communities.

Refugees are allowed to register and become members of non-governmental organizations in Turkey, and Afghan and Iranian refugees have long exercised this right. Refugee-led organizations grew in number and capacity with the arrival of Syrian refugees and after the passing of UNSC Resolution 2585, which authorizes humanitarian aid to be delivered to northern Syria through the border crossing from Turkey.

RLOs vary in their composition, outreach, funding, and survival strategies according to the constellation of actors and interests at the local level. Often, they facilitate labor-market integration; shelter and livelihood support; SGBV response;

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access to registration, health, and education; vocational training; and advocacy work against impunity for war crimes.

Despite the diverse services that women refugee-led organizations offer and an increasing number of projects that set gender mainstreaming as a precondition for structured humanitarian funding to organizations operating in the country, my research shows that gender mainstreaming remains a contentious concept and a hard-to-attain policy framework for many women refugee-led organizations. This is an ironic outcome as one of the central goals of these policies is to ensure refugee women's ownership of gender mainstreaming norms.¹⁵

This observation is in line with earlier findings on the limits of localization efforts in refugee responses.¹⁶ However, barriers to localization and challenges to integrating a gender mainstreaming approach into humanitarian policy are a closely knit but separate phenomena in Turkey. The success of localization efforts falls short of expectations due to limited direct funding for local NGOs and RLOs, international actors' self-propagated suspicion about the capacities of RLOs, and the lack of dialogue between IOs and NGOs as well as RLOs. Although these challenges do have negative impacts on gender mainstreaming efforts, two practices in particular hinder efforts to mainstream gender in refugee response: 1) The use of gender-mainstreaming strategies that rely on the secular Western script of humanitarianism can marginalize some refugee communities' faith-based practices of addressing gender inequality, and 2) a reliance on binary and cisnormative understanding of gender in formulating policies of gender mainstreaming isolates trans women refugee-led organizations.

Contesting Gender Mainstreaming: "It is not ours, if it does not speak to our realities"

In conventional IO-led strategies of gender mainstreaming for refugees, the displaced groups' gender-driven experiences are considered in a limited way.¹⁷ Many refugee participants in this study emphasized

that although ongoing efforts to enhance gender justice and address various forms of gender inequality in refugee communities in Turkey are to be applauded, these policies are "externally imposed" on them and remain distant to realities of how their gender shapes their everyday lives. When asked about how she approaches gender mainstreaming, a women-refugee leader in Gaziantep stated:

"It is their gender mainstreaming, not ours. It is not ours if it does not speak to our realities. Of course, we want to improve the condition of women in our communities, yet we cannot turn a blind eye to the realities of our lives. Yes, we support the idea of gender equality, but for us, gender mainstreaming as NGOs and UNHCR do it is not a way to better our condition."

Similarly, a member of an organization led by trans women refugees echoed other refugees' concerns around the gulf between gender mainstreaming efforts led by international actors and the realities of refugees' experiences on the ground. She emphasized how transgender refugee-led collectivities were not included in structured humanitarian platforms and collaborations, such as protection working groups and GBV sub-working groups. They added that when gender is talked about in humanitarian circles, it is often treated as a binary concept that turns a blind eye to experiences of gender fluid refugees.

What is striking here is how often refugee women have a similar cynical take on gender mainstreaming. They have repeatedly found that these policies "pay only lip service" to the difficulties they face and "silence various ways refugee women navigate the refugee system in Turkey and define [their] own solutions." Also noteworthy is their emphasis on the gulf between IO-driven gender mainstreaming strategies and the "realities of [their] lives." When asked if they could give an example of these realities, one woman immediately pointed out the difficulty of spending time outside the home due to the heavy domestic workload and values associated

with the domestic sphere and femininity. In response, RLOs have devised novel gender mainstreaming practices that do respond to the marginalization of women, by tailoring conventional mainstreaming activities to their everyday realities. For example, they use scheduled hospital appointments for women refugees who are survivors of domestic violence to also arrange meetings with a psychologist and the police. This allows a woman to be “filing a complaint claim and getting psychosocial support while her husband is not suspicious of her going to the police as she is at the hospital for her hurting throat.” This is an important reminder for policymakers that sometimes gender mainstreaming is most effectively achieved by operating in a clandestine way; not everything has to be visible or public.

Women Refugee-led Organizations Address Gender Inequality

As my interlocutors expressed poignantly over and over again, gender mainstreaming policies in refugee response in Turkey often use strategies that rely on Western female stereotypes and therefore do not take account of the experiences of refugee communities. Many NGO and IO workers, for instance, believe that economic empowerment of women refugees is the panacea for achieving gender equality — a belief that directly aligns with notions deeply-rooted in their European experience. Economic independence itself is assumed to yield improvements in other aspects of women’s lives, meaning that other ways to amplify refugee women’s voices and strategies to achieve their aims are viewed as secondary concerns.

This approach is now largely criticized. Instead, the need for a holistic approach to attaining gender equality and utilizing gender mainstreaming has been highlighted. Echoing this, refugee women-led organizations have aimed at adopting “a gender mainstreaming strategy that does not prioritize only one domain of social life” and “address[es] women refugees’ needs by using what is most relevant to their everyday lives,” as noted by participants. This does not mean that women’s economic

needs and difficulties accessing the labor market are sidelined. For many refugee women, economic concerns are quite central and shape their short- and long-term life plans. However, they criticize the assumption that improving their conditions in one realm will “magically solve [their] problems,” as one interlocutor expressed at length. This includes faith-based notions that inform how to overcome the challenges at hand. An RLO representative explained how they incorporate gender mainstreaming into their services:

“When we consider ways to mainstream gender in our work, we start with what is the most basic tool of recovery for us. Religion is something important in our people’s lives. If we turn a blind eye to the role of spirituality in our recovery processes, we are detached from reality. That is why we provide vocational training, foster connections with employers, and offer training on SGBV prevention in tandem. When we do this, we try to connect the rights of women with the Hadiths and Qur’an. We tell them that you have rights, so you do not deserve this treatment.”

Another RLO representative emphasized the importance of religion as a bridge between UN-led humanitarian action, which is often seen as foreign intervention by refugee communities, and local values.¹⁸

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The current approach to mainstreaming gender in humanitarian responses has focused mostly on policies that are led and defined by international actors, leaving out the refugee-led organizations as entities whose capacities are to be strengthened by those international actors. My research has demonstrated that, for many forcibly displaced women in Turkey, gender mainstreaming policies remain a top-down policy process. There are, however, some strategies that policymakers can adopt to redress the imbalance between

refugee experiences and the way gender mainstreaming has recently been promoted. The following policy recommendations are drawn from the interviews I conducted with refugee women:

Recognize the Role of Religion. It is vital to understand the context in which gender, gender roles, performances, and relations take place. For some refugee women, their pious identity is an integral way of advancing their position within their communities. Religion shapes their strategies for demanding their rights and expressing their needs and desires. The first step in this process is to question the Western bias in international agencies' current practices. Policymakers should then engage in deeper dialogue about humanitarian ideals and faith-driven values, acknowledging that religion plays an important role in how refugee women exert their agency in everyday interactions with other humanitarians.

Recognize the Gender-sensitive Work of Refugee Women-led Organizations. The gender-sensitive work carried out by refugee women-led organizations and their role in advancing gender equality on their own terms is often disregarded by other humanitarian actors. Platforms where various humanitarian actors can share their approaches to central policy toolkits, such as gender mainstreaming, as well as explain how and why different refugee-led organizations have varying understandings of gender mainstreaming can be a fruitful start for an open dialogue between RLOs, NGOs, and IOs.

Integrate a Non-binary Approach to Gender. Because of deep-seated biases in favor of heteronormativity and cisnormativity, trans women-led organizations are often the most marginalized entities within structured humanitarian policy platforms, such as gender-based violence and protection working groups. To be all-inclusive and non-discriminatory in execution, a non-binary approach must be integrated into gender mainstreaming policies.

Credit and Incorporate the Work of RLOs.

Women refugee-led organizations provide a range of services to their communities, and tailor their responses to refugees' gender identities, but their work is not credited and incorporated into national and global gender mainstreaming frameworks. Not only must IOs, NGOs, states, and donors better recognize the RLOs' vital contributions to advancing a more gender-sensitive humanitarian response, but RLOs also need to gradually assume a leading role in gender-sensitive protection responses. This requires broadening sustainable mechanisms to finance RLOs, as structured humanitarian funding often remains inaccessible to women refugee-led organizations.

ENDNOTES

1. UNHCR, *Figures at a Glance*, June 16, 2022, <https://www.unhcr.org/figures-at-a-glance.html>.
2. UNHCR, *Women*, 2022, <https://www.unhcr.org/women.html>; UNHCR, *LGBTIQ+ Persons*, 2022, <https://www.unhcr.org/lgbtiq-persons.html>.
3. UNHCR, *UNHCR Policy on Age, Gender and Diversity*, 2018; Kerrie Holloway, Maria Stavropoulou and Megan Daigle, "Gender in Displacement: The State of Play," *Humanitarian Policy Group*, 2019; Veronique Barbelet, "As Local as Possible, As International as Necessary: Understanding Capacity and Complementarity in Humanitarian Action," *Humanitarian Policy Group*, 2018.
4. Within the context of this brief, the term refugee-led organizations encompasses two actors: 1) formal refugee-initiated associations that are registered with the government and/or UNHCR, and 2) refugee self-help groups that are often informal. On refugee-led organizations in Turkey see: Zeynep Sahin Mencutek, "Refugee Community Organisations: Capabilities, Interactions and Limitations," *Third World Quarterly*, 2021, 42 (1): 181–99.

5. UNHCR, *New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants*, September 19, 2016, <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/new-york-declaration-for-refugees-and-migrants.html>; UNHCR, *The Global Compact on Refugees*, December 17, 2018, <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/the-global-compact-on-refugees.html>.

6. While some RLO members have expressed their support for gender equality to better provide refugees with rights, services and solutions, other refugee participants have approached gender equality as a Western norm, unattached from their everyday realities. This critical approach to gender equality brings to mind postcolonial feminist critiques of the notion of policy-driven focus on gender equality and gender mainstreaming as part of the Western episteme that constructs itself as a global ideal.

7. All unattributed quotations are taken from my field notes of the interviews.

8. Gender is neither a binary (women/men) nor a static concept. It is rather a relational concept which goes beyond a singular focus on women and girls. Similarly, gender mainstreaming in humanitarian assistance is not within the purview of women refugees and their organizations only. In fact, my ongoing dissertation fieldwork investigates a diverse group of refugee-led organizations' perspectives on gender mainstreaming, ranging from LGBTIQ+ refugee-led organizations, refugee women-led organizations, and other refugee-led organizations. I also study the ways in which gender mainstreaming policies shift and respond to various masculinities. However, considering the diversity of these groups, this paper focuses only a subset of my overall research and addresses women refugee-led organizations' perspectives on gender mainstreaming.

9. Gülay Caglar, "Gender Mainstreaming," *Politics & Gender*, 2013, 9 (3): 336–344.

10. Suzanne Clisby and Athena-Maria Enderstein, "Caught between the Orientalist–Occidental Polemic: Gender Mainstreaming as Feminist Transformation or Neocolonial Subversion?," *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 2017, 19 (2): 231–246.

11. Jacqui True and Michael Mintrom, "Transnational Networks and Policy Diffusion: The Case of Gender Mainstreaming," *International Studies Quarterly*, 2001, 45 (1): 27–57.

12. This definition draws from Hennebry and Petrozziello's conceptualization of gender mainstreaming. See: Jenna L. Hennebry, and Allison J. Petrozziello, "Closing the Gap? Gender and Compacts for Migration and Refugees," *International Migration*, 2019, 57 (6): 115–138.

13. Eileen Pittaway and Linda Bartolomei, "From Rhetoric to Reality: Achieving Gender Equality for Refugee Women and Girls," WRC Research Paper, 2018, no. 3: 28; Jane Freedman, "Mainstreaming Gender in Refugee Protection," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 2010, 23 (4), 589–607.

14. UNHCR Turkey, *Turkey Fact Sheet February 2022*, 2022, <https://www.unhcr.org/tr/wp-content/uploads/sites/14/2022/03/UNHCR-Turkey-Factsheet-February-2022.pdf>.

15. Elisabeth Olivius, "(Un)Governable Subjects: The Limits of Refugee Participation in the Promotion of Gender Equality in Humanitarian Aid," *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 2014, 27 (1): 42–61.

16. Kristina Roepstorff, "A Call for Critical Reflection on the Localisation Agenda in Humanitarian Action," *Third World Quarterly*, 2020, 41 (2): 284–301; Merve Erdilmen and Witness Ayesiga Sosthenes, "Opportunities and Challenges for Localization of Humanitarian Action in Tanzania," *LERRN Working Paper Series*, 2020, 8.

17. Jennifer Hyndman and Malathi de Alwis, "Reconstituting the Subject: Feminist Politics of Humanitarian Assistance" in *Not Born a Refugee Woman: Contesting Identities, Rethinking Practices*, edited by Maroussia Hajdukowski-Ahmed, Nazilla Khanlou, and Helene Moussa, 83–96 (New York: Berghahn Books, 2009).

18. Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, *The Ideal Refugees: Islam, Gender, and the Sahrawi Politics of Survival*, Syracuse University Press, 2014; Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, Chloé Lewis, and Georgia Cole, “‘Faithing’ Gender and Responses to Violence in Refugee Communities” in *Gender, Violence, Refugees*, edited by Susanne Buckley-Zistel and Ulrike Krause, 127–151 (New York: Berghahn Books, 2017).

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