

Serving the Afghan Refugee Women of Diavata Camp: Considerations and Future Implications  
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**Executive Summary:**

The refugee crisis is a pressing concern in the modern world. Forced displacements and mass migration occur for multiple reasons, and it is important to realize that refugees are not a monolith. They each carry unique stories, histories, and cultures. Unfortunately, many of the foreign actors and NGOs that intend to aid refugees have a tendency to generalize their needs and identities. My thesis aims to overturn some of this generalization by focusing on a very specific group of individuals: Afghan refugee women. It can be easy to construct refugee narratives that fit the current discourse around them, but it is more difficult to speak with refugees on their own terms and convey their authentic voices to a wider audience. Through a critical analysis of my fieldwork in a Greek refugee camp, I hope to provide some considerations for NGOs to take into account when approaching vulnerable populations, like Afghan refugee women. I offer some suggestions to alleviate some of the generalizations that were apparent during my time in Greece.

**Introduction**

Since 2015 (BBC, 2016), images of refugees arriving ashore into Greece have captured the public eye. The Syrian humanitarian crisis has been widely covered by the press, especially following the death of Aylan Kurdi, a Syrian child whose body was found on a Turkish beach after a failed attempt to reach Greece (UNHCR, 2015). Because of this media coverage, when one thinks of refugees, Syrians may immediately come to mind. However, one may not think of a camp filled with an ethnically diverse group of Afghan families, and that is the picture I hope

to illuminate.

I am interested in the space between the arrival to and departure from Greece. My thesis speaks to stories of migration, struggle, and triumph that involve this in-between space. What happens after refugees come to Greece and are settled in camps? What are the images that we do not see? I delve into the nature of living in a camp through my thesis work and speak with Afghan women for whom the camp is their daily, lived reality. These women are doing the best they can to live under the conditions within the camp. The camp is a place of cultural diversity where multiple nationalities and ethnicities are lumped together. Tensions do arise with this lumping and generalization of the camp's diversity. Because of this generalized image of the refugee, I believe that the lives of Afghan women deserve greater attention, as the multiplicity of their roles is enabled but overlooked by the camp. My goal is to make these women not only seen, but heard.

My thesis specifically focuses on the Afghan refugee women of Diavata Camp, the refugee camp I used as my field site. My methods primarily consisted of ethnographic fieldwork and participant observation. As a partial outsider to my field community, I was cognizant of the fact that my informants would question my motives and wonder if my American background could help them in their migration process. I was clear to introduce myself as a researcher, and as someone who was simply trying to better understand and voice the lives of Afghan women.

In planning my thesis fieldwork, I had the intention of working with NAOMI, a non-governmental organization that works with Afghan women in Diavata Camp. This NGO is located in the city of Thessalonik, Greece, and it has a clothing workshop where refugee women can attend sewing classes and make clothing for themselves or to sell for income. Because NAOMI holds a weekly sewing workshop for the women of Diavata Camp, I planned to use this

NGO in gaining access to my field community.

## **Findings**

I arrived to Greece having a clear vision of how I wanted to conduct my research, but as prior experience has shown me in my work with NGOs, things usually do not go according to plan. NAOMI was much less organized than I had thought—in fact, the entire staff was on vacation for the entirety of August, which was the only month I would be in Greece. Despite confirming my presence at the NGO prior to arriving, no one had been expecting me. I managed to get in touch with a NAOMI staff member, who put me in contact with another NGO in the area. Through this NGO, I was able to speak with a few single Afghan mothers in the first week of my trip. These women were living in apartments in Thessaloniki and mainly received services from one NGO.

After my first week, the staff member of NAOMI was gracious enough to take me to Diavata Camp, where many Afghan women live and take part in the NAOMI sewing workshop. I introduced myself to each woman and explained my research project. Being an Afghan myself, the women were happy to speak with me about their experiences with NAOMI and other NGOs. A common theme shone throughout—the women were not very pleased with NAOMI. It turned out that while the NAOMI staff workers felt as though they are doing these women a great service, the women felt that the NGO was disorganized. NAOMI used to bus the women to their workshop in the city where the women would attend sewing classes and have a chance to leave the confines of the camp, but instead NAOMI workers now come to the camp, simply cut fabric for the women, and leave. Due to the small sewing space in the camp, arguments easily erupt amongst the Afghan women, over seemingly simple matters like whose turn it is to receive

fabric. The Afghan women also have a common distaste for Arab refugees in the camp and shift blame to other nationalities

In addition to the disorganization and dissatisfaction the women felt, there was a lack of cultural competence when it came to NGO workers. One NAOMI staff member emphasized that she could not distinguish between refugees of different nationalities: “I cannot tell the difference between Arabic and Farsi,” she laughed. Seemingly innocent comments like these are representative of the discourse that universalizes the refugee. The power imbalance between humanitarians and those they are helping (Harrell-Bond, 1992) enables generalizations to take shape. Refugees begin to embody a universal struggle, making it difficult to distinguish between individual voices. We see this power imbalance in practice when aid is distributed in a universalized way without regard for cultural differences and circumstances. It is not my belief that NGOs have the intention of silencing their beneficiaries, but I do believe that we need to problematize the consequences of actions carried out with “good intentions.” There is a difference between intent and impact, with the impact of a lack of understanding of cultural differences and circumstances being that refugees are restricted in expressing themselves. Although NGOs and humanitarian organizations are typically founded with intentions of helping the vulnerable, ethnographers should be able to challenge them in order to improve their methods of implementing aid. We can start by overturning the universalized, dehistoricized image of refugees as a symbol of humanity because this image ultimately influences policies that affect refugees in real time (Malkki, 1996). There is a seemingly paradoxical relationship between refugees and humanitarianism in which the way refugees are universalized as victims undermines their traumas: “liberal UN humanisms mask historical continuities of injustices” (Suzuki, 2016, p. 1). This blanket approach toward refugees proves to be invalidating and a

hindrance to establishing trust. Because the humanitarian world is built on the idea of a universalized humanity (Agier, 2010), the refugee's voice is easily silenced, ensuring that the organizations that care for refugees are in control.

The ultimate consequence of policies implemented to assist refugees has been the development of dependency and the de-politicization of the refugee (Harrell-Bond, 1992). The authority that NGOs carry creates dependency by reinforcing vulnerability and overlooking the politics that provoke situations of displacement where refugees must flee their homelands. The current method of distributing aid reinforces the cyclic nature of refugees having to demonstrate vulnerability in order to receive aid from NGOs. This sense of control and reliance on NGOs can hinder refugees from forming a collective cultural identity because it fosters competition and mistrust within the camp. Though refugees are placed in groups of shared history and language, their trauma still exists and they are forced into a camp environment where they must re-define their social ties and lived realities. They may view themselves the way that authority figures view them and internalize these views of what it means to be acceptable, having to demonstrate vulnerability and proving neediness.

The UNHCR categorizes refugees according to vulnerability, assigning resettlement priorities of "emergency," "urgent," and "normal" (2011, p. 246). Aside from this assignment of priorities, there are distinct categories of vulnerability that refugees can be classified under, essentially comparing the vulnerability of individuals from different backgrounds. But, how can we quantify or categorize a person's trauma? Who is determined to be more worthy of aid? These questions expose a flawed system in humanitarian work. When refugees arrive in Greece, they are processed and placed in camps. While mass arrivals are in the public eye, the camps themselves are out of sight, allowing potential abuses of power to go overlooked. While this

categorization system of vulnerability may be intended to help those in the field identify those who need the most aid, it places marginalized persons in positions of competition with other marginalized persons. Refugees are made to provide evidence of their suffering. They are made to justify and showcase their trauma to foreign actors simply to have a chance at finding refuge.

Anthropologist Michel Agier writes that the refugee camp becomes a dictatorship in a sense, by maintaining order and shutting down dissent. The desire to control and maintain conformity allows the refugee voice to be ignored. The space of the camp is policed and restrictions are placed upon the vulnerable with the public intention of protecting them, analogous to “striking with one hand, healing with the other” (2010, p. 29). This paradoxical nature of foreign intervention is exemplified by the limitations placed upon residents of the camp. Diavata Camp is surrounded by barbed-wire fencing, containing refugees who come from regions stricken with conflict and poverty. While the fence has the public purpose of protecting the refugees from outside forces, it reinforces the practice of containing and isolating those who are disadvantaged and marginalized. The camp is interested in providing care, but also in maintaining control. And because the nature of living in the camp is uncertain and temporary, the refugee woman has little say in what happens in the camp or where she lives.

Despite these trials, refugees can reclaim and redefine vulnerability. Agier points to the use of *vulnerable* as a political term, in which refugees push back against the ascribed identity of a silent, complacent victim. This vulnerable image allows them to take ownership of their situation, drawing public attention and making demands. However, ownership is difficult to maintain as a refugee. A makeshift camp in Patras, Greece was self-organized by Afghan refugees, but destroyed by Greek police because it was in plain sight of tourists (BBC, 2009). This exemplifies how refugees are perceived as a threat once they have the opportunity to create

their own space on their own terms. Often, foreign actors feel an inherent need to maintain the power, even if it means displacing people again, re-traumatizing them, and discarding resources.

## **Recommendations**

In Diavata Camp there is no refugee representative who collaborates with or speaks to NGOs or camp directors, necessitating the consideration of how decisions are being made without direct input from beneficiaries. Implicit in the camp organization is the belief that prescriptive behavior has the best impact for refugee wellness and integration. Decisions are made with a top-down approach, given the constant influx and efflux of people in and out of the camp. Because the function of a representative is missing, someone who is perceived to have power can be assigned a leadership role. I believe that I fulfilled this role as a pseudo-representative. I did not communicate between the women and NGOs, but I was a person that women would come to and speak candidly with. The relationship between the women and myself was different from the relationships they had with each other. The women of the camp sought my time and attention; I presented as both an insider and outside who would not betray their trust. I did not have any reason to do these women harm, because we were not competing for the same goal of relocation. Perhaps there could be a more democratic way of enacting decisions within the camp. As it currently stands, the women do not have a say and are often unaware of what is occurring in the camp.

Throughout conducting my fieldwork, I have realized the importance of anthropology in illuminating the ongoing process of migration of displaced persons and the injustices they continue to face. Anthropology allows us to be in the space in-between arrival to and departure from Greece. The fieldwork process places the ethnographer in the informants' domain, allowing

them to be experts in their own lives. Anthropology is a means of historicizing and culturally relativizing refugees by accounting for their past and not just isolating them within the current situation we see. The enterprise of humanitarianism can be rethought through anthropological work. Anthropology plays a role in contributing to policy by commenting on and critiquing power relationships. The ethnographer has the unique ability to move between insider and outsider roles, unveiling behaviors within the group from the inside while critiquing structures of power on the outside (Fassin, 2012).

Anthropology shines a light on the work NGOs do on the ground. Anthropologist Didier Fassin writes that “ethnography provides insight into the convictions and doubts of the actors, their blind spots and lucidity, their prejudices and their reflexivity: we owe our informants the respect of restoring these dialectical tensions,” which have been missing from the enterprise of humanitarianism (2012, p. 13). It is common for foreign actors, like those of NAOMI, to view their beneficiaries as a monolith. Ongoing fieldwork keeps them accountable for their actions and points out flaws in systematic practices, like communications with their beneficiaries and other organizations. We can understand victimhood in the context of injustices that are created by politics of suffering. In other words, we can recognize that vulnerability is not created from pure chance but from intentional actions, such as when “U.S. planes drop food parcels on Afghan populations at the same time as bombs” (p. 252). Anthropology allows us to question the social, political, and ethical implications of foreign actors: what does it mean to help, and what are the consequences of helping? By asking these questions, we can rework the narrative in which refugees are validated through their victimhood rather than through their history and culture. Ethnography can connect us to the larger political and societal picture, providing alternatives to the abstraction of the refugee. It can allow us to critique the generalizations made about refugees



and vulnerable persons. Through my fieldwork, it became clear to me that NGO workers must understand the histories and cultures from which refugees are coming.

Based on my experiences in the field, I believe that to the issue of foreign actors presenting as culturally incompetent, NGOs could consider incorporating refugees into their staff. Fatimah, one of the Afghan women I spoke with, works for the Alkyone Refugee Day Center, an NGO in Thessaloniki, Greece. She is a living example of this practice. She came to Greece as a refugee with her family and was a beneficiary of the Day Center. However, her involvement in the NGO allowed it to realize her contributions. Not only could she provide translations from Dari to Greek, but she also had a cultural and historical understanding of fellow Afghan refugees. As a result, the Center has a culturally competent worker who is part of the community it is serving. In turn, Fatimah has economic stability, is part of the Greek workforce, and is better integrated into society.

## **Conclusion**

I believe we need to distinguish between the institution of humanitarianism and its practiced realities. My ethnographic fieldwork has documented the conditions that refugees must adapt to when coming into foreign environments. With a better understanding of such conditions, we can identify the root of these issues and ultimately change the discourse around refugees. In writing this thesis, I by no means wish to discredit or demean the efforts of NAOMI staff. They serve populations aside from the Afghan women at Diavata camp, and it does appear that some women do profit from the workshop. My critique is not with foreign actors helping, but with the

mindset and attitudes that may be driving some of that help. Can we acknowledge our own complicity and role in the state of refugees' lives today?

Through this work, I wish to offer an alternative to the normative refugee narrative that focuses on the plight and suffering of displaced persons. I have shown here that the women of Diavata Camp are limited by the foreign actors surrounding them. I revealed a glimpse into their everyday lives and critiqued generalizations, showing that they are not pure examples of victimhood or humanity. They have flaws; they carry with them both extraordinary and ordinary stories. The Afghan women of Diavata Camp have needs and insights that are not being properly communicated to those around them. And it is our responsibility to engage refugees in a respectful way by hearing their individual voices and keeping ourselves informed. If NGOs continue to generalize displaced persons of different cultures and nationalities, how can we expect them to see the nuances within a group of Afghan women?

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