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Spaces of in/formality in the Turkish humanitarian field: Spatial and discursive practices impacting refugee women

Abstract

Drawing upon critical feminist theorising, this article intervenes in the debates about humanitarian aid organisations in the case of urban refugees to highlight the ubiquity of in/formal practices in their interlinkedness that increasingly shape aid distribution. By examining humanitarian enactments at three levels –the national, the district and the neighbourhood– in the case of Ankara, Turkey, the article advances theoretical discussions about how formality and informality are intertwined as spatial techniques and discursive practices are deployed justifying in/formality in practice. We argue that such spatial and discursive interventions have become normalised as local aid distributors seek legitimacy in a contested process to counteract their image as unregulated. By centring the experiences of urban refugee women and their engagement with in/formal humanitarian practices, we expose the gendered connotations underpinning these interventions at the three levels of humanitarian enactments as (1) detached paternalism at the national level creating refugee women's alienation, (2) a culture of Islamic charity at the district level prompting gendered performances of victimhood and (3) patriarchal ideology of male saviours linked to Islam at the neighbourhood level disciplining refugee women and leading to their (sexual) exploitation. In doing so, we problematise spatial and discursive modalities of in/formality, which produce profoundly gendered precarities, causing refugee women's subordination in multiple ways. Bringing attention to how in/formality– as a part of contemporary conditions of refugeehood– interacts with gender, and how legitimacy is attained through on-the-ground spatial techniques coupled with discourses, we contribute to a more sophisticated understanding of the humanitarian field.

Keywords: Turkish humanitarian aid organisations, informality, legitimacy, discursive and spatial practices, Syrian refugee women

Introduction

The rise in urban refugees has created a refugee context that differs significantly from that of refugees housed in physically demarcated spaces such as refugee camps, impacting how refugeehood is experienced. Predominantly located in big cities, urban refugees navigate a socially negotiated arena of contestations and challenges to claim their right to livelihood and dignity (Crawford, 2022). One characteristic of their refugeehood in urban sites is the informal practices they encounter in multiple spheres, from the informal economy to informal housing, creating both precarity and opportunities. Taking our cue from recent scholarly forays into discussing informality in the governance of refugee camps (Sandri, 2018) and border crossing (İşleyen, 2018), we move our gaze to the sphere of civil society in general and humanitarian aid organisations in particular.

The civil sphere has become a key component in delivering humanitarian aid, especially in the urban context (Crawford, 2022). Recognised in the multi-governance approach as a viable response to the 'refugee crisis', civil society includes a heterogeneous set of actors (Lewis, 2019). The noticeable rise of citizen volunteers and spontaneous grassroots humanitarianism at border cities (Fechter and Schwittay, 2019), particularly the spirit of volunteerism enacted due to the movement of refugees and migrants into Europe since 2015, all contributing to a citizen initiative for global solidarity (Haaland and Wallevik, 2019), has challenged our understanding of organised humanitarian enactment. Of particular note is the rise of faith-based humanitarianism, both organised and spontaneous, establishing itself as a source of material and spiritual support for many refugees who seek to mitigate and understand their suffering through a spiritual lens (Mavelli and Wilson, 2016).

Despite the significance of such actors in the humanitarian field, defined as the operational site where humanitarian encounters occur, the way they are structured – informally or formally, or in-between – is overlooked. The suggestion by Smart et al. (2016) to adopt the term in/formality

is useful in this context as it captures the interlinked nature of formality and informality that we observed. Eschewing a narrowed understanding of formality as linked to the state and involving codification and rigidity, and informality as a 'lack of, or reconstitution of, state power' (Waibel 2009 cited in McFarlane and Waibel, 2016: 16), we seek instead to highlight how both are intertwined. We find that unstructured practices can occur within structured hierarchies, fissures between rules can allow for unruly behaviour and predictable flows of actions have unpredictable interactions nested within them. Moving away from a discrete definition of informality as unofficial and illegal ways of acting and being moves our analysis beyond the state-organisation relationship. Instead, our conceptualisation of in/formality captures how the formal (regulated, coded, scripted, procedural and inflexible) is intertwined with the informal (unregulated, uncoded, unscripted, spontaneous and flexible), allowing us to explore how aid distribution unfolds in ways and purposes that has little to do with the agenda of the state.

We identify space as a key modality, regulating in/formal practices of aid distribution with the aim of producing the *proper* image, responding both to the need to project legitimacy for private donors and the desire to control and discipline aid seekers, mainly refugee women. We investigate discourses as a second modality of in/formalities, a mediating factor underpinning humanitarian practices and providing the rationale for how and why distribution activities are carried out. Both spatial and discursive modalities are thus geared towards attaining legitimacy, a critical concern for aid agents as aid distribution increasingly becomes localised. We argue that legitimacy becomes reformulated in the vacuum created when the sources of legitimacy become divorced from the state. Instead, as illustrated in the field study, legitimacy is attained through on-the-ground spatial techniques coupled with discourses which thrive in hybrid practices of formality and informality.

Informed both by the gender perspective on the private/public divide and on in/formality in organisational structures in critical feminist studies, we ask how gender is worked through

in/formality in aid distribution. Feminist theorising, which highlights the demarcation between men and women in their respective domains of public and private, has moved onto a more nuanced understanding, arguing that women are subordinated in both spheres, with both carrying the possibilities of emancipation (Pateman, 2017). This has unique implications for refugees in the humanitarian field, where gender unfolds as an entrenched logic of organising and distributing aid (Hyndman, 2000; Olivius, 2016) to reproduce essentialising social templates of women as docile and nurturing homemakers and refugee women as victims, casting women and children as the ideal refugee (Enloe, 1993).

Feminist theorising, furthermore, problematises the hierarchical structure in organisations as an important location of male domination maintained through dual systems of patriarchy and bureaucracy (Acker, 1990). In contrast, scholars studying women's community building through informal practices celebrate the horizontal/egalitarian relations in women's organisations with built-in feminist principles and criticise their lack of recognition in the male-dominated society (Dominelli, 1995). Important for our research, scholars such as Chappell and Mackay (2017) present the argument that gendered informal rules and their enforcement work in subtle ways, making it difficult to identify the work they do, basing it in the frame of formal rules as visible and codified and informal rules as unwritten, tacit and 'hidden from view'. Our study contributes to this literature as it seeks to analyse refugee women's experiences with in/formalities that interact with gender in the humanitarian aid organisations to produce a nuanced understanding of how it shapes their experiences of refugeehood.

While plenty of research ground their analysis in empirical evidence at the borders, particularly at 'hotspots' (Pallister-Wilkins, 2020), our analytical focus is urban sites. Opting for finer scales of analysis, we observe the hybrid practices of formality and informality at three levels; namely (1) professionalised Turkish aid organisations at the national level; (2) local organisations at the district level where we find foundations (*vakıf*)[1]; and finally what we label as (3) 'one-man'

humanitarian operations at the neighbourhood level where a male organiser coordinates loose and informal networks of donors.

Our data is primarily drawn from long-term field observations (2016-2022) in two sites in the Altındağ district in Ankara, a thriving and bustling metropole and the capital city, which, when compared to Istanbul −the Turkish mega city− offers limited job opportunities for refugees, making them more dependent on humanitarian aid. The two research sites are populated densely by Syrian refugees and characterised by poverty and stigmatisation. The opportunities for informal employment at the city's furniture industry thriving in the vicinity and the cheap rent of deteoriating slum houses that are the legacy of the rural migrants drawn to the area since the 1960s attracted refugees.

Our entry into the field began through visiting poverty-stricken families, both Turkish and Syrian, with both authors interacting with the residents, allowing an overview of the neighbourhoods. Insights were drawn from conversations that the first author had with the Turkish residents of the neighbourhoods, aid workers and volunteers in a foundation (*vakıf*) in one of the sites and a man single-handedly carrying out operations at the neighbourhood level in Altındağ. Our field research also included accompanying Syrian refugee women on multiple visits to several refugee support centres operated by professionalised organisations located outside of Altındağ and a distribution centre of a second *vakıf* located in Altındağ. Casual conversations that the second author had with refugee women on the way to, from and within the operational sites, as well as with Turkish volunteers in the *vakıf*, gave us essential insight into the everyday practices of humanitarian assistance and refugee women's encounters with aid distribution at different levels. These field observations were augmented by sit-down interviews with 16 Syrian refugee women and three aid agents (two women from the second *vakıf* and the 'one-man' operator). Our refugee respondents were mainly literate and were either primary school graduates or without formal

schooling, with ages ranging from early 20s to late 50s. The majority were widowed or divorced. While most had fled the city of Aleppo, some were from small farming villages around Aleppo.

To privilege feminist knowledge (Reinharz and Chase, 2002), we paid attention to the women's firsthand knowledge of the humanitarian context they find themselves in, which guided our research towards sources of aid that were relevant to *them*[2]. The presence of two female Arabic-English interpreters with whom the second author had previously collaborated in a personal capacity to deliver aid to the refugee communities in both sites facilitated effortless communication between researcher and interpreter. Both interpreters were non-Syrians with interpreting experiences in established organisations in Ankara, making them knowledgeable assets in our research.

The article proceeds by outlining the structural conditions that define the status of refugees in Turkey and discussing the specific nature of the Turkish civil sphere, which allows the modalities of in/formality to emerge as critical characteristics in aid distribution. This is followed by the empirical section, which discusses the in/formalities in the aid organisations in terms of spatial and discursive modalities, moving from the more formal to the more informalWe conclude by highlighting the importance of a critical reading of humanitarian enactments at different levels and by problematising the production of legitimacy in this era of humanitarianism where hybridity is under-researched.

Structuring In/formalities in the Turkish Refugee Context

The most salient point in Turkey's legal framework for refugee protection is the geographical limitation put on implementing the 1951 Geneva Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. In practice, this means that people displaced from countries outside of Europe are not recognised as refugees. Despite the unprecedented arrival of thousands of Syrians into Turkey (with 3.2 million registered as of 2023) , the Law on Foreigners and International Protection (LFIP) in 2014 reaffirmed the geographical limitation (DDGM, 2023) and crafted the Temporary Protection

Regulation (TPR). Various commentaries on the TPR argue that it undermines the protection possible in the implementation of the Geneva Convention by creating temporariness as an unproblematic feature of Turkish refugee governance (Şahin-Mencütek et al., 2023). By legally enshrining a differentiated system for different asylum seekers, it lends to the ad hoc manner of refugee protection in Turkey (Memişoğlu and Ilgit, 2017) and generates refugee policies that are reactive to domestic and international politics (Pacciardi and Casaglia, 2022). It also identifies Syrian refugee women in terms of their marital status to refugee men who are recognised as the actual recipients of Turkish temporary protection (Williams et al., 2020).

Despite the TPR, the reluctance of the state to delegate autonomy to municipalities means that the responsibilities of local governments towards refugee protection are ambiguous (Lowndes and Polat, 2020). Thus, municipalities implement refugee protection programs, often according to ideological lines dividing them between faith-based and rights-based approaches (Betts et al., 2021), with insufficient resources and reach.

The nature of the Turkish civil sphere further complicates the temporariness which is a feature of refugee governance. Humanitarian protection can take the form of both political actions advocating for refugee rights and service provision addressing immediate day-to-day relief. Although the global 'right-based' humanitarian agenda has trickled down to local actors, the Turkish civil society has more experience with service provision than advocacy (Mackreath and Sağnıç, 2017). This may be due to design, as the civil spheres is kept in close entanglement with the state. Careful co-option by the government by showing favourable treatment towards charity work over political engagement (Yabancı, 2021) and empowering faith-based organisations acting as "auxiliary agent[s] alongside the state, taking over its duties vis-a-vis the refugee" (Danış and Nazlı, 2019: 145) serves to maintain the Turkish civil society engagements with refugees at the level of service provision.

International funding of local civil society also largely contributes towards depoliticisation, with Zihnioğlu (2019) arguing that aid organisations pursue a palatable agenda within the 'NGO/isation' process in order to compete for lucrative EU funding programs, designing highly visible projects based on measurable outcomes. Furthermore, the retrenchment of international humanitarian organisations triggered by stringent Turkish legislation and state scepticism of their motives (Aras and Duman, 2019) also splinters the potential for political solidarity between international and local groups, leading to the myopia of the local actors. Further complexity is introduced due to the increasing mobilisation of individuals organising themselves as informal civic volunteers in loose networks and embedding themselves in the aid architecture (Kayali 2022). Such individual acts of humanitarianism, usually drawing on Islamic fraternity and charity, have thrived in a post-coup atmosphere of suspicion and purges, which has eroded more structured organisations.

As the Turkish government increases its reliance on the civil sphere, it is invested in shaping the Turkish civil sphere in its image. A lack of regulation, transparency, and the empowerment of faith-based organisations, many of which are founded by civil servants themselves, serve this purpose (Danış and Nazlı, 2019). This opens up the space for in/formalities to abound, turning it into the defining feature of Turkish humanitarianism. Under conditions of precarity produced due to the temporary protection regime, refugee families have no choice except to pursue aid while tolerating the grey zone of in/formalities. Against this background, the enactment of humanitarianism becomes multifaceted.

Legitimising In/Formalities Through Space and Discourse

In the following sections, we discuss our data through a conceptual engagement with space and discourse as useful tools for investigating in/formalities as socio-spatial processes in the aid organisations in our study. In urban contexts, where refugee families compete for aid assistance, the lion's share of the burden to seek aid falls on women in a context where patriarchy is

reconstructed within the refugee community (Kutlu, 2020; Authors, 2022). We illustrate that when informalities crop up in these contexts, often undetected and free from formal control or at times observed and tolerated (Altrock, 2016), they serve the interest of the organisations far more than the refugees. Importantly, the legitimisation that organisations seek through informalities heavily depends on gendered connotations.

In/formality in professionalised aid organisations

Embedded in the international humanitarian network, professionalised organisations in this study often balance advocacy, research and service provision to refugee families. Following the recent inclination towards professionalising in the humanitarian field (Barnett, 2012), they frame humanitarian expertise as specialised knowledge, transforming humanitarian work into a career. Professionalised humanitarian organisations have complex hierarchies with deep layers of institutionalisation to project their legitimacy and authority (James, 2016). Existing and emergent humanitarian organisations in Ankara are keen to cater to the conditions of quality control and transparency of the often-western funding bodies. Although professionalising circumscribes the potential for uncoded and unscripted behaviour, subtle interactions and enactments mark the tendency towards informal practices, as we highlight below.

Location and spatial techniques: The institutionalised space of the refugee support centre shaping refugee women's behaviour

The professionalised aid organisations which we visited offer assistance through refugee support centres or offices rather than distribution centres. This self-professed distinction from distributing aid implies a broadness to their agenda. The support centres that the refugee women went to were far from where refugee families typically lived, requiring two buses and one and a half hours and located in upper-middle-class districts. Participants complained about how they found the vicinity disorienting, filled with boutique shops and cafes amongst residential apartment buildings,

significantly different from the slum settings that refugee families live in, often taking wrong turns as they struggled to communicate with the residents of the area. Lacking recognition for the gendered care work (Gilligan, 2014; Lachance-Grzela & Bouchard, 2010) that they carry out, which often ties them to the vicinity of their homes, they expressed weariness at having to go out of their way to these areas.

During casual conversations, they explained that they were prompted to visit these organisations by their friends and family, who followed the organisation's social media activity. They shared screenshots of the websites, which were filled with announcements of events and messages of solidarity and hope. While the locations and contact details of the professionalised organisations were openly provided, the spectacle of welcome did not hold up when refugee women attempted to access these places. This is encapsulated in one instance which we observed, where the nameplate of the centre was inexplicably hidden, pushing the participant through inconvenient and confusing detours in the unfamiliar urban setting. Upon protesting to the aid agent who met our participant at the doorsteps, we were informed that the support centre was an administrative hub organising for other branches in other cities. This fact was hardly communicated online.

In other instances, we observed how spatial arrangements were utilised as barriers to regulate refugee petitioners and subject them to a filtering process by staff at the reception area or sometimes right at the doorsteps before they were taken in, even in the centres with glass storefronts that otherwise signal transparency. Holding refugee women in a small space, often on their feet, imposes limits on how they can express themselves before they are granted access further inside – a space for a permitted few. Another instance we observed of refugee women greeted at the reception area with a small card of instructions (a protocol introduced during pandemic conditions and retained) preemptively curtailing conversation forcefully drove home the point that it is the humanitarian organisation rather than the refugee women who dictate the interactions with

aid agents. Practices emerging through everyday occurrence become informal codes of conduct, such as when refugee petitioners are invariably subjected to filtering at the doorsteps, and they can also be formalised, culminating in a card of instructions. Both these arrangements limit informal, spontaneous interactions, ensuring that refugee women and aid agents adhere to a set script; the overriding concern is the spatial regulation of refugee women within the humanitarian field while simultaneously portraying an image of a warm welcome.

Discourses and practices: Institutionalised paternalism in the donor culture governing refugee women's access to aid

The professionalised organisations we visited often announce their routine collaborations with Western funding bodies, such as the German Corporation for International Cooperation (GIZ), the World Bank, or multiple international agencies, such as UNICEF. Affiliating so closely with Western organisations requires them to align themselves with the international refugee protection agenda and adopt technocratic practices to carry out this protection.

The preoccupation with refugee women underlines the internationally institutionalised norm that gender is a critical component that must be addressed to provide refugee protection (Schnable et al., 2021) and is often nested in a paternalistic approach, attempting a top-down implementation of women's support activities (Barnett, 2012). It pushes the organisations to carry out a specific type of activity: leadership workshops, entrepreneurship workshops, or psychosocial support, which target young and educated women with the potential to be entrepreneurs. However, most refugee women in our study were mothers who had aged out of education and employment prospects when they sought refuge, while others were women whose education had been disrupted due to the war. Even those who were young and educated and who might aspire towards self-sufficiency as imagined by the organisations were mired by the precarious conditions of refugeehood. Without tackling their everyday concerns, such as food and shelter, they cannot

pursue the aspirational gender goals that the organisations favoured. In servicing a specific subset of women, aid organisations harness refugee women's potential for entrepreneurship and rationalise the exclusion of those who do not fit the criterion.

Discursive practices in interpersonal interactions between refugee women and the well-trained legal advisors that they met also revealed the constraint that the organisation wished to pursue. The encounters were scripted, tightly controlled, and geared toward assisting information dissemination. We saw caseworkers, fluent in the complexities of the legal system, assisted by equally fluent translators, respond to the harried, worried petitioning of the women with detached kindness: firmly correcting misinformation, deflecting complaints, and limiting the consultation to a transfer of information about recourses. There is little space for the women to express their worries about issues ranging from divorce procedures, accessing medical services and requests to shift permitted residency from one city to the other. Sunata and Tosun (2019) argued that professional NGOs with exclusive training and skilled people kept their services to the target community limited, ostensibly to maintain the quality of their services. The barriers to these skilled and trained individuals, as discussed above, bear out the notion that trained staff served the purposes of legitimacy that would garner funding rather than serving the purpose of broader refugee assistance.

While the narrow scope of the interaction (in terms of space and time) often minimises negative impacts such as humiliation, the detached style of interactions alienates refugee women as their appeals are reduced to facts about their circumstances, removing their ability to talk meaningfully about their hardships. Participants expressed their doubt that the organisations were interested in resolving issues, explaining how they came away with information but no workable solution on each previous visit. The rigidness they encountered made them feel isolated, unable to express how they were hindered from finding and implementing solutions independently. In the lack of the dearly needed material support, most refugee women turn away from such barren

organisations and pivot to faith-based organisations where in/formality allows them greater opportunities.

In/formality in the vakıf

Almost all the participants highlighted local foundations (*vakıf)* as vital humanitarian actors that profoundly impacted their everyday lives, proving a great source of support for the day-to-day needs of refugee families when all else failed. Unlike the professionalised character of large organisations, they prove to be spaces where in/formalities – vividly visible– are essential to the organisation's functioning and distribution process.

Location and spatial techniques: Islamic habitus shaping refugee women's behaviour

Most of our observations took place in a *vakıf* located inside the Altındağ neighborhood, which made it easier for refugee participants to access it. By no accident, the site looked like a poorly lit shop with a warehouse-type architecture providing storage of clothes, shoes, and accessories, which were sold at marked-down prices. Rooms at the back as a laundromat and another as a kitchen and storage for groceries such as meat, oil, and grains indicated the *vakıf*'s primary objective: aid distribution targeting women as aid is considered to be the purview of women (Authors, 2022). The entire structure was open, and refugee women and often children could freely roam about upon entry, which is a marked contrast to how refugee women were spatially organised in professionalised organisations. While the iron door remained symbolically shut, refugee women, once inside, had autonomy.

Although there was a palpable atmosphere of freedom, it did not mean a lack of rules and regulations. The *vakıf* projected its Islamic underpinning through dressing, interactions, and posters lining the walls. Women, invariably veiled, often came to visit the veiled administrative staff as donors or volunteers, wishing them '*hayırlı işler'* ('God bless your working day'). The male humanitarian figurehead, who appeared now and then, was constantly referred to as *hoca,*

visibly denoting his status as a religious leader by donning a kufi cap, much like an *imam*. Activities rotated around prayer times on a day-to-day basis, and religious occasions and festivals were celebrated through social events reinforcing the spirit of Islamic charity.

Informality is preferred in tasks such as knowledge production about refugees, spearheaded by the *hoca,* who is embedded in informal networks and establishes himself as an expert. The legitimacy of the *vakıf* is pinned on the personhood of the *hoca.* Talks with the female aid workers revealed that he had been providing humanitarian assistance even before the arrival of Syrian refugees, both as a personal endeavour and within professionalised contexts. The legitimacy drawn from his background is necessary for the same reason as it is necessary for professionalised humanitarian organisations. It often translates into financial support from individual donors within his religiously conservative network and approval from the state.

While the *vakıf* almost entirely received refugee women, the staff comprised of women and men. Two female aid workers ran the day-to-day business of the *vakıf,* but the *hoca* had both financial control and decision-making authority overriding the female aid workers. This gendered division contrasts with the professionalised organisations where, despite the hierarchy, there is still space for expert authority to advise refugee women. In the *vakıf,* by virtue of his gender, the *hoca* is placed in a position of deference by the women –female aid workers, female volunteers (some of whom were Syrian refugees) and female seekers of aid.

This was apparent when, during one visit to the *vakıf*, the conversation with a female aid worker was cut short by his arrival, making it evident that he was intimidating to everyone on the site. In subsequent conversations, refugee women indicated that his attitude towards them was often cold and distant, perhaps prizing the value of minimal interaction between men and women in Islam. Lacking the type of codes of conduct, clearly established mandates and organisational hierarchy seen in professionalised organisations, the regulations of conduct marked by gender hierarchy intersecting with religious authority have become the norm, producing an image of

austerity and spirituality and constraining the women, workers, volunteers and aid seekers within

the bounds of conservative Islamic behaviour.

Discourses and practices: Islamic charity as the frame guiding refugee women's access to aid

The humanitarian discourse of civil society organisations in Turkey often aligns with the narrative

of solidarity with Syrians based on religion, underscored by a shared history under the Ottoman

Empire (Lowndes and Polat, 2020). In the *vakıf*, faith-based discourse attesting to helping Muslim

brothers and sisters in need becomes a legitimising tool that validates the existence of networks

enabling informal donation collection and distribution practices. In using the word legitimising in

this context, we want to emphasise the formalising aspect within the *vakıf,* where faith provides

rigidity and structure and is the basis of reasonable action and codes of conduct, contrasting with

professionalised organisations where formalised codes of conduct are based on liberal human

rights principles. In the *vakıf*, the faith-based formalising process still leaves vast room for informal

faith-based practices. For example, the flow of financial contributions from donors is carried out

without transparent record keeping and no accountability on how it is distributed, legitimised by

the Islamic precept '*Bir elin verdiğini öbür el görmez*' (one hand should not know what the other

hand has given).

Subsequently, the interaction between the aid agents and the refugee becomes an important

deciding factor: the performance of religiosity or victimhood embedded in the fluidity of the

interaction is crucial to accessing aid. The importance of such interactions was evident when a

refugee woman who newly discovered the *vakıf* was told to depend on a young Syrian boy to

translate for her in the tense atmosphere of a crowded administrative office to a distracted aid

agent. During the unsatisfactory exchange, the boy, with his minimal command of the language,

failed to convey the woman's desperation, who subsequently left empty-handed. Such instances

of arbitrariness occur openly, leading to patronising interactions. The asymmetric power

configuration is further illustrated by reports of the refugee women that aid agents acted '…as if the money came from their own pockets.'

The *vakıf* also uses the discourse of Islamic charity to solicit donations among their faith-based networks. They often use the personal stories of refugee women, particularly widowed refugee mothers whose privileged position as the ideal refugee stems from Islamic understandings about the duty owed to a widow of a martyr coupled with Turkish notions of patriotism, coding the martyrs as worthy and of being honoured (Sözer, 2019). "Giving our names and how many children we have helps them tell our stories. They also ask for our photos, especially the photos of children," a participant offered. The extra task of obtaining the image of women and children is helpful in private WhatsApp groups of people interested in donating. Such usage of images of women and children taps into the trope of vulnerability and helplessness associated with refugees (Johnson, 2011); it is utilised in donation soliciting of professionalised organisations as well, a practice which has been criticised. The *vakıf* nevertheless dismisses concerns such as privacy and feelings of being exposed and objectified and continues its de facto ownership of images and data. That refugee women feel this invasion of their privacy was evident to us in how uncomfortable they were when asked to pose for a photo, often hiding behind children. The contradictory feelings produced through such practices deepen when they know that by placing themself on the donors' radar, they have a higher chance of accessing aid, an impossibility in the case of professionalised organisations. Within the in/formal spaces of the *vakıf*, through images or narrations, refugee women can rise to the occasion of negotiating access to relief aid, opening up some space for their agency, however intrusive the process might be.

The possibility of agency within the in/formal spaces of the *vakıf* is further complicated by the presence of refugee 'volunteers' who act as gatekeepers actively co-opting and deploying the discourses of deservingness to guide the *vakıf* in their aid distribution. One such woman explained her task at the *vakıf* as 'fact-finding':

'I ask...where they stay—the address. If I know someone in that area whom I trust, I ask

them about the woman... whether this detail is correct...if her neighbours confirm, then only

will I help her...I take my time asking many people to be sure.'

Such refugee women are agentive and gather some authority as they embed themselves into the

aid infrastructure. In our talk, the refugee 'volunteer' indicated that she favours women she

identifies as honest and pious women in need, indicating again the importance of the interpersonal

relationship refugee women need to foster, not only with aid agents but also with other refugee

women in authoritative positions. With her cooperation, the *vakıf* embeds in the refugee

community and demonstrates that they are targeting the right recipients for their work.

In/formality in 'one-man humanitarian operations'

Societal norms reifying widowed women in the Turkish socio-cultural context have led to a

focused interest in assisting refugee widows and orphans, attracting many individual enactments

of humanitarianism. Such enactments exist in tandem with refugee-led aid efforts labelled the

"shadows of the shadow state" at the periphery of the refugee governance system (Benson, 2022).

However, while refugee-led grassroots organisations have come under scholarly scrutiny, the

existence of humanitarian efforts which is local and carried out by a single person has escaped

notice. Entirely detached from the state and firmly embedded in refugee communities through

locating themselves in refugee neighbourhoods, what we call the 'one-man humanitarian

operations' can be of particular interest in the discussion about how informality brings in

heterogeneity in the humanitarian field, especially as it intersects with religiosity and gender.

 Location and spatial techniques: Disciplinary space acting upon refugee women's behaviour

Spatial arrangements materialise the specific type of neighbourhood-based humanitarianism

favoured in the two instances of 'one-man operations' we came across. Operations housed in cheap

and spacy storage areas on the ground floors of buildings differentiated them from random

everyday acts of assisting refugee families and the under-resourced efforts of refugee-led organisations. Lacking any nameplates to shroud itself in anonymity, it would escape notice if not for crowds of women who gather in the area to register their names and collect aid.

Having a designated area of operation is not only for logistics; it allows the 'one-man operations' to claim structure. Space itself serves to project a level of professionalism and, with it, authority: the men's offices are separated from the storage spaces by a partition or a wall, and files containing information about aid receivers are piled up on the desk, emulating the offices of a registered NGO. Rules of conduct are vigorously enforced to counteract the informality of the operation and produce the effect of control over refugee women. The large groups of refugee women it draws are at times rudely lined into queues and allowed into the man's office one by one, their names, addresses and household details recorded in Excel sheets, creating a humanitarian database in the hands of an unregistered operator. The diligence of the men may be for practical reasons, but this quickly turns into efficiency in policing refugee families as the men become privy to who has access to what food and when and decide on what refugee families can get.

Such regulation of behaviour mimic those enforced in professionalised organisations as discussed above, but what is different is that it is decided singularly by the one man in control of a personal aid operation and not by the bureaucracy of the professional organisation. Having adopted the Arabic self-moniker, which recalls holy Islamic struggles, Abu Jihad, one of the men controlling an aid operation, indicated the need for disciplining Syrian women whom he claimed were 'ignorant' of proper conduct befitting Muslim women.

> 'The Syrians here don't know about true Islam. Under the rule of Asad (the Shiite president of Syria), they have been estranged from their faith. [...] They live in the age of *Jahiliye* (Age of Ignorance before Islam). Here, I try to teach them about decency...about manners. I ask them to wait in line to get aid.'

Abu Jihad's preoccupation with disciplining the refugee women stems from his belief that part of serving the Syrian refugees was also proselytising because he did not believe that the Syrian community were proper Muslims. Thus, shaping the refugee women into proper Muslims is the ultimate goal of his humanitarian activities, with their conditions of poverty and marginalisation drawing them to his preaching.

These humanitarian operators can move their regulatory presence outside operational sites by embedding themselves in the neighbourhood and expanding the scope of their surveillance over refugee women. Women described encounters where the men approach them on the street and strike up conversations, converting the entire neighbourhood into a humanitarian field as refugee women have to be on standby to express their needs at any moment. It gives the men the power to catch women unprepared and deepens their control. Such an expansive level of control impacts the ability of refugee women to relate to their new surroundings in any other way except in their role as humanitarian subjects, impeding the re-territorialisation of their identity (Brun, 2001).

Discourses and practices: Patriarchal ideology to provide for women shaping refugee women's access to aid

By echoing local cultural precepts fusing Islamic understanding of women's position as war widows and patriarchal understandings of the woman's subservient position in the household, the 'one-man' operators frame their intervention into the refugee women's private lives as an unavoidable duty so as to fill the role of the male guardian who disciplines, protects and shelters them, naturalising women's dependency on men. That 'one-man' operations deliberately targeted refugee women, particularly widowed and divorced refugee women, was immediately made evident to us in our interviews with refugee women. The lack of needy or disabled men in both sites corroborates this.

Such fused understandings underpin the different meanings projected onto the work by the men themselves, as in the case of Abu Jihad, whose concern for Syrian refugee women is for their immortal souls as much as his own, as he describes his interactions with them as instances of seduction that he needs to circumvent:

'Women look into my eyes, flirting so that I give them aid. There is a widow with six children, one of them disabled. She dresses up when I visit her at her place to attract me. She lives in the *Jahiliye*...manipulates me to get aid.'

This same preoccupation with Syrian refugee women absorbs the second man Muawiyat (pseudonym), who also heads a 'one-man operation' in the second site. Referring to the many allegations of sexual misconduct between him and refugee women, a participant reported him telling her that: 'A Syrian woman's honour is worth only one BIM card (debit card with money).' Such an explicit reference to women marking them out as sexual objects has to be reconciled by the generosity of the men towards refugee women – if they are favoured. One divorced participant described how much more helpful Muawiyat was compared to the *vakıf*: 'I am only able to offer you hospitality in my home because of him. He provided the furniture, the coal to heat the place, the rent, everything. Without him, we would be on the street.' Strong sentiments describing his efforts as though they are his personal generosity indicate the high regard generated through his work, legitimising his place in the Syrian refugee community.

On the other hand, several women provided accounts of verbal and sexual harassment in the makeshift operational sites of Muawiyat, where they were inappropriately touched, with one account describing his transgressions as follows:

'I was with him because he said I could pick out some furniture. The place is small and cramped; I don't know why he did not wait outside...I felt him touch my shoulder. I thought it was an accident, but he moved around behind me and touched my lower back and hip as if to push me forward. This is not appropriate touching. I pulled back and left.'

The refugee woman expressed her frustration because she expected monthly assistance from him, but she suspects he only allowed her assistance every other month because she was cold to him. It is clear from such accounts of interpersonal interactions that performances of victimhood and religiosity, as in the *vakıf,* are ineffective. Instead, sexual availability becomes a key strategy to gain favour.

Widowed and divorced women were also utilised for their fundraising appeal. Speaking about Muawiyat, a refugee woman reported how much he relied on the widows: 'He has lists with names, and he would say, I have this many widowed women asking me for help and this many orphaned children. He uses their names.' He would also bring donors straight to the houses of widowed women and children to demonstrate their need: 'He calls and asks if we are home […], they will come and see our circumstance and give us the money directly the first time. If they donate again, then it goes straight to him.' As discussed above, the ability to question women anywhere and enter their homes invests in these men, unchecked power and an immense hold over the refugee family, which is entirely unrecognised even as the refugee families are used for fundraising purposes.

Conclusion

This article discusses in/formality in its interlinkedness, bringing into relief how uncoded, unscripted and fluid interactions, discourses, and behaviours are embedded practices in coded, scripted and rigid humanitarian procedures. Informality in the humanitarian field emerges in the context of the heterogeneity of actors who become the prominent organisers of aid distribution as the state withdraws from direct engagement with the humanitarian field, sometimes purposefully. With professionalised organisations becoming increasingly compromised due to their alignment with the international donor culture, grassroots efforts outside the control of centralised bodies become the more significant source of aid. Notably, the slummified characteristics of the sites under analysis in this study, distinct from other urban spaces, attract informal humanitarian aid

actors, lent credence by the poverty and clustering of Syrian refugees in the area who are discursively identified as Muslim brothers. This strongly influences individual donors whose contributions allow such free-floating humanitarian actors to embed themselves firmly in the area, making the site and the refugees even more visible.

We began our observations with professionalised organisations at the national level, funded internationally and with well-fortified operational sites that we argued are the most regulated, with tight constraints on informal practices nested in formal procedures to facilitate routine activities. Maintaining a tranquil environment that serves the flow of organisational bureaucracy rationalises everyday informal practices. The physical remoteness of their support centres, fails to consider the burden of refugee women's gendered care work. In the same vein, despite having a discourse of human rights and a greater capacity to protect refugee women, their paternalistic approach rooted in the organisational blueprint, prioritising the global donor's agenda. Spatial control deployed to creates a physical barrier to the accessibility of the operational site minimises the scope granted to refugee women to engage freely with aid workers alienating them. The activities of professionalised organisations, underpinned by discourses of gender equality are geared at a specific category of women – those interested in and capable of entrepreneurship– frustrating the women in our study whose urgent needs are more primary and whose commitment to traditional care duties are ignored. This marginalisation pushes the majority of the refugee women in our study into an overreliance on faith-based humanitarian actors such as the *vakıf* and the 'one-man' operators.

The *vakıf* and 'one-man' operators base their practices on gendered connotations and religiosity. The *vakıf*, operating from modest single-story houses, engages in informal practices and draws legitimacy by embedding in a culture of Islamic charity, enacted in an Islamic habitus. Spatial arrangements at the *vakıf* allow for refugee women to contest and negotiate with aid workers, making the *vakıf* a site of opportunity and exploitation. An environment of organised

chaos and a rationale of victimhood-based charity, allows such informal practices as capturing images of refugee poverty in the bodies of women and children roaming the distribution centre and passing them around their networks without critique. Informal practices of anonymity of donors primarily drawn from the Muslim community justified by Islamic precepts lead to a lack of transparency in the flow of finances and arbitrary decision-making that relies on interpersonal interactions where refugee women are prompted to perform victimhood. An unconditional obedience to the figurehead of the *hoca*, moreover, produces the basis of subordination of women, for both aid workers and aid seekers. We argue that while such aid efforts purport to act in solidarity and assist vulnerable refugee families through an Islamic ideological framing, implicit goals are uncovered when viewed through the analytical lens of gender. The multiple asymmetries of power between the aid giver and aid receiver are reproduced when the latter is conditioned by being poor, a woman and a refugee, leading to the reduction of refugee women as needy victims.

'One-man' operations work out of storage spaces in buildings with meagre means of donations and are the most under-regulated. The aid distribution entirely depends on the decision of the one man in charge, who extends his power beyond the operational site of the storage space into the wider neighbourhood in which he becomes embedded. Detached spaces with almost no volunteers or workers in place ensure his complete authority, and organisational features that convey a sense of professionalism distract from the arrangement of space within which he can exert his physical power if a lone woman comes to pick up aid. Informality is enacted on the singular will and whim of the man who runs his 'business' as he chooses. The patriarchal ideology of the family in which men provide for women and claims that he is *the* Islamic figure representing *true* Islam frames his humanitarian enactments. By way of the aid the man distributes, he projects himself onto the role of missing husbands and fathers in a saviour mission that interacts with the dependency of refugee women to produce a new power constellation, with spatial techniques and

patriarchal religious discourse cloaking exploitive practices that exacerbate the gendered vulnerability of refugee women.

Left to their own, often without a male figure in the family, refugee women go along with the informal script as they struggle to access aid, which often subordinates them to the male authority of the 'one-man' operator as he utilises religiosity to (sexually) abuse and exploit them. Practices such as home visits, normalised even in professionalised organisations to identify 'deserving' refugees, become a transgression, blurring the boundary between the public and private; they convert the private space of the family into the public space of aid distribution, where the man in charge can enter and emulate a disciplinary role. Thus, it is of paramount importance to spotlight actors such as the 'one-man' operators who are entirely divorced from state control.

The issue of legitimacy in the presence of the in/formality in humanitarian aid organisations emerges as a significant theme. Instead of conceptualisating legitimacy as connected to state validation, we argue that it is blurred, dispersed, and decentralised in the humanitarian field. The organisations at the different levels approach the issue of legitimacy according to their location in the grid of in/formality and seek to generate it through the production of the '*proper*' image. As Gonzalez Benson et al.(2023) have demonstrated, this is built on the tension between the 'scientific' (formal) and 'culturally-specific modalities'(informality), diffusing via spatial and discursive practices in our study.

The professionalised organisations, as a registered entity, generate legitimacy on the international front and conveys the '*proper*' image through collaborating with international funding agencies. Grassroots efforts such as the *vakıf* and the 'one-man' operations have to produce legitimacy for their network of religious donors as a far more contested process. The *vakıf*, also a registered part of the civil society, already possesses some legitimacy and conveys the '*proper*' image by dispensing an Islamic understanding of charity under the figurehead of the *hoca*, whose personal piety is crucial, making it distinct from the right-based understanding of aid in

international organisations. It draws on the victimhood of refugee women to appeal to the charitable nature of its donors. 'One-man' operations are relatively more vulnerable, needing to balance the necessity to remain hidden from the state with the need to appeal to their donors, prompting their efforts to look 'professional' to capture the financial contributions from their networks. They also utilise discourses of Islamic charity to engage with donors and convey the '*proper*' image by staking the legitimacy of their operation on both religiosity and professionalism. Informality in the humanitarian field opens space for their operations to exist and becomes part of the reason to seek legitimacy as they attempt to 'correct' their informality to become 'legitimate' for their donor base.

The similar discourses in the *vakıf* and the 'one-man' operations hinge on creating commonalities between private donors and aid agents, generating and sustaining a symbiotic relationship based on faith. In this way, legitimacy stops being about top-down legal frameworks. Instead, it becomes a bottom-up validation extended to informal humanitarian enactments empowering aid agents almost as much as a legal framework would. In the production of legitimacy in all three organisations, refugee aid seekers – mainly women– carry no weight except as tools to strengthen the claims of the organisation, producing an immense power disparity between refugee women and aid agents, as they are prevented from challenging the legitimacy of the aid organisations.

We have brought to academic notice the need to discuss how in/formality shapes the contemporary conditions of refugeehood and have highlighted its gendered consequences; as refugee protection devolves from the state and international control, exploring in/formalities and the work they do in the practices of humanitarian aid organisations becomes all the more important.

Declaration of conflicting interests

Notes

1. In the Turkish civil sphere landscape, foundations draw their funding from private

endowments.

2. The refugee participants noted several sources of humanitarian assistance:

Professionalised Organisations	Foundations (*vakıf)*
The Association for Solidarity for Asylum seekers and Migrants (ASAM),	Infak Vakfı
Turkish Red Crescent	Önder Vakfı
İltica ve Göç Araştırma Merkezi (IGAM)	Sadakataşı
Mülteci Destek Derneği (MÜDEM)	
Deniz Feneri Derneği	

We accompanied refugee participants to four professional organisations and two foundations. As

we accessed these sites with difficulty through the refugee women themselves, we will refrain

from stating which ones are included. In addition, we observed two sites where 'one-man'

operators were active.

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