

What Female Refugees in Egypt Get: A Look at How a Few International Non-governmental Organizations in Egypt are Helping Empower Refugee Rape Survivors

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I. Introduction and Rationale for the Present Paper

When Amal crossed the Sudanese borders into Egypt with her children, she thought she had left her troubles behind. Little did she know that they were only beginning. Having survived incarceration and separation from her husband, she decided to leave with her children so she can safely deliver her unborn child in Egypt (Allam, 2020). Employment as a domestic worker seemed like the silver lining she had prayed for after the friends who had put her up in their apartment kicked her out (Allam, 2020). But nothing could have prepared her for what happened next: Required to manage the house when her mistress went away, Amal was raped by the master of the house (Allam, 2020). Not knowing where to go, Amal resorted to the authorities to report the case but was not taken seriously (Allam, 2020). Her only savior was a non-governmental organization that helped her find meaning in life again (Allam, 2020). If it were not for them, she could not even think of where she would have ended up (Allam, 2020).

Unfortunately, Amal's case is not an isolated incident. Of all the sexual and gender-based violence incidents reported by refugees in Egypt, rape remains the highest (UNHCR, 2020). What is more regrettable is that refugees are deliberately targeted for their vulnerability since rape is a power-based crime (Allam, 2020). Although Article 17 of the Penal Code in Egypt criminalizes rape, cases of rape reported by refugees in Egypt are on the rise (OCHA, 2019). Furthermore, refugees complain that the police is often reluctant to seek justice for those who report the crime (OCHA, 2019) and this is where civil society in Egypt steps in.

Civil society organizations in Egypt—and anywhere else, for that matter—are established with the aim of effecting change in society. Neither affiliated with the state nor with the aim to generate profit, their primary goal is to serve the public. This begs the question of how much support these organizations provide female refugees with and how and why they decide on how to support them.

II. Refugee Rape Survivors: Weak Clients or Potent Resisters?

In the ultimate game of labeling refugees, there are two opposite sides of the spectrum that see refugees as either a group with agency that enables them to be selective of the support they need or vulnerable victims in need of help from aid organizations. On one such side is de Voe (1981) for whom the word refugee conjures up images of needy, weak clients and beneficiaries, especially in the eyes of the aid organizations. He explains that the not-so-amicable benefactor-beneficiary relationship is more premised on doubt than trust. Refugees often dubiously regard the intentions of the benefactor who also reciprocates the sentiment by singling out the helpless refugees who act like victims and exclusively gracing them with his charity. Those who fail to pose as typical needy refugees or display any form of agency forfeit their chance at assistance.

De Voe puts forward the idea of the *ma-baap* relationship between the refugee and the organization where the aid providers are the mother figure pouring out the unconditional support for the refugees and simultaneously the father figures who regulates the flow of cash, monitors how it is spent, and makes decisions as to how to best discipline the beneficiary. This gracious handout helps the benefactor feel more powerful and aims to maintain that feeling of superiority by fostering a relationship of dependency in the beneficiaries who soon catch up and start acting like victims to guarantee the continuity of the aid. This, consequently, creates a vicious cycle of dependency on the part of the refugees that is difficult to break out of, one where the refugee is the client or property that needs to be retained and “served” in the way deemed appropriate. Often times, de Voe regrets, this handout comes with further conditions of social change that align with the aid organization's—which has become synonymous with developed nations—vision of “development” regardless of whether or not this vision respects the culture of the client refugees.

At the other end of the spectrum are Scott and Butler. Scott's (1990) theory of everyday resistance posits that "resistance is virtually always a stratagem deployed by a weaker party in thwarting the claims of an institutional or class opponent who dominates the public exercise of power" (p. 52). This resistance, however, is non-confrontational. That is, it does not openly threaten authority--and is subsequently concealed--nor does it necessarily culminate in a revolution. Along the same lines is Butler's theory; Butler (2016) resents the implication that vulnerability is synonymous with weakness and requires protection. To her, it is reminiscent of the patriarchy that reveres the power of masculinity and juxtaposes it against the vulnerability of femininity in order to justify the oppression of women. She insists that, like other marginalized groups, refugees have agency. They are powerful enough to resist the status quo and change the outcome. It is marginalized groups--often dubbed "vulnerable"--that initiate change. They prompt "infrastructural mobilizations, including barricades, hunger strikes, the improvised character of informal groups at the checkpoint, modes of deliberate exposure, and forms of art and artistic intervention in public space that involve "laying bare" and opposing forms of power" (p. 6). Weakness entails passivity that contradicts the power in masterminding, mobilizing, and effecting change like what refugees are capable of.

The question arises, therefore, as to what happens when the beneficiaries are both refugees and women. That is, would female refugee rape survivors be perceived as needy clients or agents of resistance by the organizations that provide them with aid?

III. The Research Question the Present Paper Set Out to Answer

My paper, therefore, aimed to answer the following question and sub-questions:

How do INGOs in Egypt support refugee rape survivors?

- a) What post-traumatic services are offered to refugee rape survivors by the INGOs in Egypt?
- b) What is the rationale behind the choice of services?
- c) What does the choice of services say about how they perceive refugees and rape survivors?

IV. Methodology

To answer the research questions, the present paper started with an overview of the de Voe, Scott, and Butler theories on framing refugees before interviewing INGO social workers and protection officers who work with refugee rape cases (see Appendix for interview questions) and drawing conclusions about the services provided and how refugees are perceived by the INGOs then highlighting the limitations of the paper and making recommendations for further research and INGOs.

V. Three Respondents for Three INGOs

Three respondents who have been working for INGOs for around 4 years each agreed to sit for the interview. One of them is a social worker and 2 are on-the-field protection officers who have worked with rape survivors in the asylum-seeking and refugee communities in Egypt. Their only condition was that I withhold the names of the INGOs for which they work despite assurances that only my Professor would read the paper. This was under the pretext that they had not obtained the consent of their organizations prior to the interview. Out of respect for their wishes, I complied and refrained from naming the organizations for which they work.

What I did do, however, was refer to the websites of the INGOs to get a clearer picture of their mission, which I did. On their respective websites, the three INGOs for which they work proudly boast that they empower female refugees who have endured acts of rape or gender-based violence (citations withheld in order to maintain their anonymity). In order to do so, they work with both the local government and civil society to empower female refugees to take charge of their own lives, make their own decisions, and pursue financial independence.

VI. Findings

6.1 INGOs' Perception of Refugee Rape Survivors

"Gender-based violence survivors are one of the most vulnerable groups of refugees". This is how one respondent started before she explained that this is further compounded by their vulnerability as refugees in the first place. Refugees, she elaborated, are already struggling to navigate their rights in the host country with limited access to services, and being subjected to one of the most traumatizing crimes like rape only makes it worse. They are often prone to blaming themselves for not being more alert or cautious and convince themselves that this could have easily been prevented. They walk around carrying this feeling of shame that what happened to them is their fault and thinking that everyone knows that they have been assaulted.

6.2 Egyptian NGOs' Support for Refugee Rape Survivors and Access to Services

Although there is no particular age group, class, or nationality that is rendered more at risk than others, most of the rape survivors are African refugees. Rape survivors are either spotted during on-site awareness-

raising workshops conducted by community-based organizations on female genital mutilation, early and forced marriage, gender-based violence, and sexual and reproductive health or find their way to the NGO through UNHCR and other service provider referrals, help hotlines, or emails. Reproductive health services and medical examinations are key for rape survivors to help them fight infections or terminate unwanted pregnancies. Legal services are also offered to guide them through the legal mechanisms to report the assaults and protect themselves from further ones. For those who need it, cash and shelter are offered to enable the survivors to start over. Mental health and psychological support are provided as well.

In order to decide on the best services for a rape survivor, all social workers meet, conduct case conferences, and agree on the appropriate course of action and support needed. Priority is given to high-risk cases that require urgent or immediate intervention. Those served first are the ones who are at risk of being further subjected to gender-based violence or rape. The others may need to wait a week or more for their turn.

6.3 Why those Services? What is the Rationale behind those Choices?

The case workers, lawyers, and psychologists who work with the rape survivors are recruited based on their academic background and degrees but are required to undergo further ongoing technical training on how to support rape survivors. The “package of services” the rape survivors are offered is one that is globally recognized by UN and INGOs. They include everything that the survivors need.

6.4 What is Stopping INGOs in Egypt from Doing their Job

As is the case with other businesses, scarcity of resources is a major challenge for INGOs in Egypt. One respondent confides that the services are costly and staff overhead is so high that they are sometimes forced to shut down their operations in specific communities, reduce the case load that they receive, turn down cases, and/or are unable to provide comprehensive services to the survivors.

The respondent longed to see a legal framework enforced whereby refugees would feel safe to go and report their rape incidents to authorities and claim their rights. She also called on the government to step up and share the burden with INGOs and local NGOs. She revealed that the UN and INGOs are currently the entities entrusted with serving rape survivors but the financial resources are still minimal.

VII. Discussion and Interpretation of Findings

“Package of services”, “criteria”, “(check)list”, “management”, “operation”, “action plan”, “case”, “handle”, and “interest” were but some of the recurrent words that stood out to me from the interview. The words epitomized how the refugee rape survivors are perceived by the INGO workers, and a possible interpretation for said choice of words is that the INGOs might be subscribing to the framing-refugees-as-clients theory highlighted by de Voe (1981) where refugee rape survivors are seen as a vulnerable group worthy of being helped. Evident in the choice of words used to refer to the beneficiaries, refugee rape survivors are clients who have been gravely traumatized and are stuck in a game of self-blame. They are weak victims who do not know any better and are incapable of making decisions for themselves, while the service provider is the designated savior, the qualified expert who knows what is best for them.

INGOs are the knowledgeable entities that swoop in and whip out their readymade kit to “relieve” the rape survivors. They are the benefactors who know how to best serve their “clients”. Even without a needs assessment, they are ready with the protocol to save the victims. They might not have a rationale for their choices except for the fact that they come recommended by the powers that be who believe that this “package” includes everything that the client needs. This is why they find it redundant to hear from the client as to what they need when they have already anticipated and covered all those services. This standardized set of services is not changed because they, too, have to abide by the set of criteria dictated by the UNHCR and funding agencies or they would be denied the resources that keep them going. In true service provider spirit, they are the ones who decide on the group who needs to be prioritized and how they can further support them. To ensure that they have served their purpose, they require their clients to fill out an exit satisfaction survey—whose very name implies that it is already a success—and evaluate the answers against a set of criteria put together by a group of international professionals who have never met the client but assume to know what would best serve them because they have the credentials and training to qualify them to have all the answers. No matter who the client is, they still receive the same “kit” as others. It is this global indicator that decides the percentage of clients needed to deem them successful in delivering their service. The numbers they hit, not the voices of the rape survivors, tell if they have accomplished their mission. At no point in the process do they empower the client to fully take charge of her own life.

“You never change their lives to the better. There are no success stories; the act stays with the person forever”. In what was perhaps the most alarming statement I heard from one of the respondents, she chose to give me a reality check to remind me of the life-altering experience the victims have undergone, one where you never come back from the same, which might partially explain the lack of agency afforded the rape survivors.

They are not in a state that qualifies them to make their own decisions. At present, the INGOs are the ones who decide what policies and practices would be optimal for them. Left out of the equation are the beneficiaries themselves who remain voiceless.

It is not clear, however, how much of the victimhood should be credited to their status and how much to their gender. In other words, are they perceived weak because they are refugees or because they are women? To answer the question de Voe once posed when he lamented that “In the course of being “understood” as refugees, they have become forgotten as Tibetans” (de Voe, 1981, p. 89) and implying that being a refugee and being of a particular nationality were mutually exclusive, does the same apply to gender as well? Are the beneficiaries only refugees or only females or are they both? This is a question whose answer warrants a full-fledged study.

What is also ironic is that the rape survivors have not shown “resistance”, either. They never tried to take matters into their own hands. Not once have they challenged or asked for their own needs to be prioritized when their expectations clashed with those of the INGO. It is possible that the refugee rape survivors are acting as the weak victims they are expected to in order to remain in the good graces of the INGOs and enjoy the services bestowed upon them.

VIII. Conclusion

The present paper had set out to investigate the role INGOs play in providing support for refugee rape survivors in Egypt with the aim of understanding the rationale behind their choices especially in light of how they perceive refugee rape survivors. Interviews with 3 INGO workers in Egypt revealed that these organizations still have a long way to go when it comes to empowering refugee rape survivors. Instead of empowering female refugees so they can make an informed decision as to what their next step might be and enabling them to decide on their durable solution, they make all the decisions for them. This could be attributed to their perception of them as weak and in need of protection as per de Voe’s (1981) theory but also because it is more about business than it is about humanitarian assistance.

The real problem is that the international organization and donors are trying to turn the areas they intervene in into another version of themselves. Instead of empowering the locals to exact their version of justice, they impose theirs regardless of whether or not it converges with the values of the locals. They make decisions based on their own priorities, not those of the local community, and the consequence is not always desirable to either party. They believe they will waltz in, deliver the funds, collaborate with local actors in the region and the problems will magically be resolved, but not all problems could be addressed in the same manner. They assume the vulnerability and implicit weakness of the local community who would be molded into their version of “developed” and neglect the power of the local communities to resist what goes against their societal norms (Butler, 2016).

Wright (2001) fears that these excuses are the ones given by former colonial powers to intervene in certain Third-world countries to save the oppressed women. She explains that it was always the aim of the White European colonizers to impose their legacy on the non-White European world. To the West, Third-world countries were always savages that needed to be introduced to the European proper way of life in order to be saved from their inferior selves. The First World, therefore, considers it a moral obligation to invade the developing countries in order to save their oppressed women. She also laments that, historically, women were considered inferior to men, and that explains why they are always thought of as a vulnerable group who are incapable of standing up for themselves and claiming their rights, and thus, need saving.

Still, in keeping with Butler’s (2016) conceptual theme of labeling refugees as resisters, perhaps the answer might be hidden in ontology. A long overdue proposition is to observe how we phrase the terms we use to refer to rape survivors. Embedded in the word “survivors”, for example, is the presumption that they merely live, exist, or get by. It fails to capture their fighting spirit, their resilience, their agency. Labels, terms, and words are more powerful than we give them credit for. Language not only captures reality but also dictates it and herein lies the problem. Words also influence how we see a person or group of people. If we continue to refer to this group as “rape survivors”, this might reinforce negative connotations for the group and corner us into only seeing them as such. What is worse is that it might lead this group to live up to that term in order to secure more privileges from INGOs.

Limitations of the Present Paper

Only 3 INGOs were sampled in the present paper. This does not give much insight into what other INGOs in Egypt are doing to support refugee rape survivors or how they perceive them. More INGOs need to be sampled in order to be able to draw conclusions about the INGO scene in Egypt. Another major limitation of the present paper is that it represented the perspective of the INGOs, not the refugees. This might be problematic not just because it is one-sided, but also for the politics of it; no INGO--or an employee of one--would ever admit to offering deficient services to refugees. More comprehensive results would have been yielded had the

present paper attempted to interview rape survivors to get firsthand accounts of the support they need and receive from INGOs. However, the tight timeframe and lack of access to participants prevented that. Also, obtaining an IRB prior to the study would have posed another challenge.

IX. Recommendations for INGOs in Egypt

Although proposing programmatic changes is beyond the scope of the present paper, I feel the need to make a relevant recommendation. Instead of envisioning the needs of rape survivors and acting accordingly, INGOs in Egypt might want to take their cue from refugees themselves as to what they most need to be protected and validated if/when assaulted. Support for rape survivors—as is the case with psychosocial needs—merits case-by-case decisions. There is no one-size-fits-all program that might cater for the needs of all survivors alike. Each survivor might have different needs that will only be provided through communicating with and listening to them. In addition to the basic medical examination, psychosocial support, and legal aid provided, therefore, individual needs assessment should be adopted as standard procedure for survivors so that optimum support is guaranteed for each.

Recommendations for Future Research

Perhaps future studies may want to heed and address the limitations of the present paper. Researchers may want to sample refugee rape survivors for future research in order to yield more reliable data. Due to the personal—and even traumatic—nature of the topic and interview questions, participants might be reluctant to take part in the study or open up to interviewers, however. Gaining the trust of the participants and establishing rapport with them before embarking upon the study/interview, therefore, is key.

Researchers should further emphasize that the survivors' input will be used strictly for research purposes and that their confidentiality and anonymity will be maintained by removing or changing any information (names, places, events, and dates) that might render them identifiable. Moreover, if they are not comfortable answering any of the interview questions or sharing any of their personal documents at any point, they should not be required to do so. They should also be allowed to review the paper once it is written up to assure them the anonymity of the data collected and allow them to propose any changes they deem desirable.

I would also propose that future studies compare the support INGOs in Egypt provide different groups of rape survivors and why there might be discrepancies, if any. For example, is ethnicity a factor that might lead some INGOs to provide African rape survivors with less or more services than their European or Asian counterparts? And if so, then why? Would their perception by the INGOs have any bearing on how they are served? If so, then how?

Also, a comparative study that investigates how aware INGOs in Egypt are of the needs of rape survivors could bridge the gap between the INGO services and refugee expectations. The proposed study would compare the rationale and programs set up by INGOs in Egypt to support refugee rape survivors with the actual needs of refugee rape survivors by interviewing both. This might help put some INGOs back on track when it comes to the needs of the survivors.

What might be even more insightful is for researchers to explore how INGOs cater for male rape survivors. That is, are they perceived differently by the INGOs and front liners and offered different services and/or accommodations than their female counterparts accordingly? Further investigating whether the treatment they receive is predicated on how the male rape survivors behave or act would also help refute or reinforce the refugee framing theories.

Finally, the resistance of rape survivors—whether males or females—to the power the INGOs have over them also merits further investigation. Future research should, therefore, explore how much agency the refugee rape survivors have when it comes to the support they are offered and how they exercise this agency.

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Appendix

Narrative Interview

Introductory Questions:

1. What INGO do you work for?
2. How long have you worked for them?
3. Could you tell me a little bit about your line of work (job title and responsibilities)?
4. Would you mind if I included the name of your organization in the paper? No one else will have access to it except for my professor.

Interview:

It says on your website that one of the aims of your INGO is to help empower victims of gender-based violence. I am particularly interested in rape survivors who also happen to be refugees. This is the focus of the present interview. Your answers will help me understand how we might better empower refugee rape survivors in Egypt.

1. How would you describe the (female refugee) rape survivors you serve? In other words, what comes to mind when you hear the words “female refugee rape survivors”? You can use words, phrases, sentences, or images.
 2. Do the refugee rape survivors come to you or do you find them? If they come to you, how do they know about you? If you find them, then how do you do so?
 3. Is there a particular group (of a certain ethnicity, for example) who uses your services more than others? If yes, why do you think this is the case? And do you aim to rectify the present situation? How so?
 4. Have you ever found yourself prioritizing a certain group over another? If yes, then who are they and why?
 5. What post-traumatic services do you offer refugee rape survivors? What do these services include? Walk us through what happens as soon as you receive a rape case.
 6. What is the rationale for offering those particular services?
 7. Who decides what services to offer? Are the rape survivors involved? Why/Why not?
 8. Do all the survivors receive the same care/services or is the service tailored on a case-by-case basis?
 9. Do you assess the rape survivors' needs before you provide them with support? How so? Why?
 10. Did you ever find yourself tweaking/modifying the support/services you provide a rape survivor with to cater for her specific needs? Why did you choose to do that? What about the services did you change?
 11. Did it ever happen that a rape survivor refused or had something to say about what they needed? If so, please share how and why they did so. How did you deal with that?
 12. Who are the on-the-field workers who deal with the refugee rape survivors? How are they chosen? What are their credentials/qualifications?
 13. Can you share some of your success stories with rape survivors? How do you know that you have changed the lives of the rape survivors for the better? What do you feel you still need to work on?
 14. How do you know if you are empowering the rape survivors in the way they need to be? In other words, how do you and your INGO self-evaluate? What questions do you ask yourself as you do that? Are rape survivors involved? Why (not)?
 15. What kind of support/assistance (financial, technical, training, or other) do you seek/have from other INGOs or local NGOs, if at all? Does it come with any consequences? If so, what are they?
 16. Where do you want to be in 5 years when it comes to empowering refugee rape survivors? How do you plan to get there?
 17. May I ask who funds your organization? Do you accept donations as well? If so, from whom? Does that in any way impact the decisions made by you (in your line of work) or the organization? If yes, then how?
 18. What do you feel is stopping you from delivering the optimal support you think the refugee rape survivors need? How so? How do you address that?
- Thank you so much for your time. Is it okay if I get in touch again for a follow-up interview if needed or should I need any clarification on any of the data while transcribing it? If yes, how would you like me to contact you?