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## **Beyond 'Helping': Gender and Relations of Power in Non-governmental Assistance to Refugees**

By Alice Szczepanikova<sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract**

This article pursues critical gender analysis of conditions of non-governmental (NGO) assistance in the Czech Republic. The study scrutinises practices of assistance in local, low-threshold NGOs working with immigrants, asylum seekers and/or recognised refugees. Although they provide refugees with essential support, this research shows that the NGOs can foster rather than challenge unequal power relations that define refugees primarily as dependent clients. They produce highly feminised spaces of assistance where these power relations produce gendered 'criteria of belonging' (Ong, 1996, 738) that impact differently on refugee women and men. The organisations have, often unacknowledged, vested interests in producing certain client identities in order to sustain their existence and to gain a desired social image. This study aims to provide an insight into gendered power structures of assistance to and representation of refugees provided by the representatives of privileged majority and characterised by informality and discretion.

*Keywords:* refugees, non-governmental organisations, assistance, representation, Czech Republic

### **Introduction**

Asylum seekers and refugees in today's Europe are more than ever in need of independent and professional legal and social assistance. Gradually restricting access to refugee status seems to be the major concern of the European Union as well as individual nation states and asylum is "*no longer a right but a prized status and expensive commodity*" (Zetter, 2007, 188). In this context non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have become increasingly responsible for securing refugees' access to basic social and economic rights (Lester, 2005; Raper, 2003). On the one hand, their new roles in the process of refugee reception and integration are framed by their ability to identify niches where they can do better than state institutions and by their determination to oppose a dominant restrictive political climate towards refugees. On the other hand, the position of NGOs has been strongly influenced by a wider process of restructuring and rolling back of European welfare states, privatisation of state-run services (Tazreiter 2004) and new modes of governance employed to control migration flows from outside and ethnic minorities inside the nation state.

Even though NGOs tend to be seen as a sign of a healthy civil society, a number of authors have argued that their increased presence should not be perceived as an

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unconditionally positive development. Questions have been raised about their accountability and legitimacy. For example, Tazreiter (2004) asks: “*To whom do NGOs answer? How transparent and open to scrutiny is their work and action?*” (68). Others point to a growing divide between responsibility and accountability as NGOs are effectively becoming ‘subcontractors’ of governments or of the United Nations (Lester 2005, 127). While a number of studies unravel complex and ambivalent relations between NGOs, states and/or large international organisations, there are fewer critical investigations of local NGOs’ involvement in the lives of refugees in Europe.

In the Czech Republic and elsewhere, NGOs are often the key mediators of individual refugees’ relation with the state by providing them with legal counselling during the asylum determination procedure and information about their rights in the host country. Besides, they also mediate refugees’ relationships with the wider public by organizing public events aimed at making refugees visible in a positive light and while fundraising for the continuation of their own existence. Furthermore, NGOs are usually the first contact points for the media; when journalists want to report on refugee issues and look for refugee interviewees, they turn to them. Last but not least, they are important sources of contacts for researchers looking for refugee interlocutors, thus, they also indirectly influence the production of knowledge about refugees. Local NGOs are usually at least partly based on voluntary or relatively low-paid work and tend to be associated with civic enthusiasm and a selfless drive to help others. In many respects, they provide the kinds of assistance which would otherwise not be available to refugees. Perhaps that is why social scientists are reluctant to subject them to a critical examination in the same way as they approach state actors or larger humanitarian organisations.

A starting point for this critique can be a growing body of literature that re-examines the ways refugees are represented and situated in both academic and humanitarian circles (e.g. Hyndman, 2000; Malkki, 1995b, 1997a; Nyers, 2006; Rajaram, 2002). The authors have alerted us to the fact that the world of humanitarianism can be a deeply dehumanising environment for refugees when it leaves them deprived of their particular histories and politics and when it disregards power relations that produce and sustain their displacement. In the context of NGO/humanitarian assistance a submissive client incapable of influencing his or her position in a host society may be a preferable object of ‘help’ as opposed to a complex individual capable of identifying her or his needs and ways of fulfilling them. Such construction of refugees leads to their silencing which should, according to Nyers (2006), be approached “*as something that is produced by power relations that require explanation and critical analysis*” (xiv).

In this article I approach NGOs as key actors in constructing and maintaining refugee identities by creating arenas of power relations where certain expressions of ‘refugeeness’ are nurtured, enacted and occasionally also subverted. These performances render some kinds of behaviour possible and make others less acceptable. Thus, NGOs “*structure the possible field of action*” (Foucault, 1982, 221) for refugees. Foucauldian approach to power is particularly useful in analysing practices of assistance because it highlights its productive aspects in promoting particular subjectivities and identities. I analyse NGOs’ encounters with refugees as constitutive of the identities of both refugee individuals and providers of assistance.

## Methodology

The research was carried out between 2005 and 2008 and is based on primary qualitative data produced through semi-structured interviews with 45 asylum seekers and refugees (26 women and 19 men) from the countries of the former Soviet Union, mostly Belarus, Chechnya and Armenia<sup>2</sup> and 13 NGO workers (10 women and three men) representing four separate organisations. Moreover, I also conducted participant observations at a number of public events organized by NGOs in order to promote positive image of migrants and refugees to the Czech public and to fundraise. This article draws mostly on interviews with refugee women with whom I established a long-term contact and held successive interviews as well as a number of informal conversations. My position towards them was that of a researcher/friend knowledgeable about the Czech refugee system yet unconnected to any NGO or state institution.

At the beginning, almost everyone spoke about the help received from NGOs with appreciation. Most people found it very helpful that NGOs provided help with translating, explaining and answering various documents related to their asylum procedure or social benefits. Many also valued that they were received in a friendly and sympathetic way that differed from distanced and sometimes hostile treatment by Alien Police or state migration officials. Others made use of free language courses, professional retraining and leisure-time activities offered by NGOs.

Towards the end of my fieldwork, more sustained engagements with refugees engendered less straightforward and more critical comments about NGO assistance. It was only after a number of meetings and hours spent together that some (but not all) refugees started speaking more openly about the complexity of their experiences with NGOs and revealed their own critical understanding of the unequal power relations in which they were situated. Due to the predominance of women among refugee clientele (see below), the voices of refugee men are missing from this account. They either did not have a lot of experiences with NGO assistance or they were not particularly interested in discussing their position as NGO clients.

The most reflective narratives were presented by women who kept close relationships with NGOs but were no longer dependent on their assistance. As they themselves explained to me, they “*could afford*” to look at the NGOs more critically. At the same time, they often coupled their accounts with sentences like: “*but everybody knows this*” or “*all refugees are well aware of that*”, which indicate that they were referring to a shared experience which is nevertheless hidden to the public eye, to researchers, and to an extent also to NGO workers. Despite their voices being in the minority, I have been able to corroborate many of their arguments through participant observation and interviews with NGO representatives. For the sake of their privacy, markers of their identities which could make them identifiable will be omitted.

## Refugees and NGO assistance in the Czech Republic

The Czech Republic is a post-socialist society with a relatively short history of immigration as well as of an internationally recognised refugee system. The then

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<sup>2</sup> I would like to acknowledge that I have myself relied on NGO help and mediation when looking for refugee interlocutors. Almost thirty percent were contacted directly via NGOs or I met them at public events organised by NGOs.

Czechoslovakia became a signatory of the 1951 Geneva Convention and the related Protocol in the early 1990s, after the demise of the communist regime. Since then, over 3,000 people have been recognized as refugees out of more than 86,000 applicants (DAMP, 2007, 2008). From the late 1990s onwards, refugees from the countries of the former Soviet Union dominated among asylum seekers and were most likely to be granted asylum. The majority of 'successful' refugees came from Russia<sup>3</sup> and Belarus (DAMP, 2008). Although it has long been perceived as a transit country by asylum seekers passing through on their way to Western Europe, since the late 1990s the Czech Republic has gradually also become a destination country for some groups of refugees (Stola, 2001). Nonetheless, strong refugee communities capable of self-organisation and self-representation have not been established. Notwithstanding their shared experiences of displacement and difficulties in establishing a new life in an unfamiliar environment, my research findings indicate that refugees from the former Soviet Union constitute at most an 'accidental community' (Malkki, 1997b, 91). Their identity as a group is tenuous as is the support they can possibly expect from their compatriots. Thus, for some, their relations with NGO workers represent an important social network and an opportunity for social interaction outside their families. NGOs and the state also provide many of the functions which are, if they exist, usually performed by the ethnic community.

Despite its relatively short existence, the Czech refugee system can be described as a substantial institutional apparatus composed of both state and nongovernmental actors. There are probably about as many state and NGO workers who deal with recognized refugees in their daily agenda as the average annual number of recognized refugees in the past years.<sup>4</sup> This ratio, however, does not make the system particularly efficient in facilitating refugees' integration. A number of reports indicate that in comparison with the Czech population as well as other groups of legally residing foreigners, refugees suffer from disproportionate levels of unemployment, live in overcrowded and generally inadequate housing, have difficulties with having their education recognized and perceive themselves as poor (MLSA, 2007; Uherek et al., 2005). On the other hand, it should be acknowledged that once granted asylum, refugees become eligible to benefit from the relatively developed welfare system (Haney, 2003; Wallace, 2001) and have access to free healthcare and education at all levels.

Most of the major non-governmental players in the Czech refugee field were established in the early 1990s. At the moment, there are about ten NGOs that specialise in assistance to migrants and refugees. The gender imbalance among the 13 interview partners (10 women and three men) was not coincidental. In the four selected organizations, women represent on average over 80 percent of employees who are dealing directly with refugee clients. NGO assistance to refugees should not be seen as homogenous. While some organisations put more emphasis on informal, friendship-like relations with refugees, others have been moving towards greater professionalization and further specialisation of their services. For example, they require any future employee to have a higher education degree in social work or other relevant field (an interview with a female NGO social worker, September 2006). They also differ in their involvement in addressing the wider public by organising public cultural events promoting positive representations of refugees.

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<sup>3</sup> The vast majority of these "Russians" were refugees from Chechnya, North Caucasus.

<sup>4</sup> Between 1999 and 2007, the average number of asylums granted was 161 (DAMP 2008).

NGO workers are also a diverse group. However, two types of ‘a typical NGO employee’ working with migrants and refugees can be identified: ‘former dissidents’ and ‘young professionals’. As for the former group, a number of members or the initiators of the NGOs were connected with anti-communist dissident movement active in an informal civic initiative known as the Charter 77.<sup>5</sup> Especially its female members have been active in the field of NGO advocacy since the early 1990. While their male dissident collaborators joined the official political scene after the regime change in 1989, many women preferred to devote their energies to the emerging civil society – a factor that contributed to the feminisation of the civic sphere according to some commentators (True, 2003, 147). The need to help refugees was easily legitimised by the reference to the recent past when Czechoslovak citizens were fleeing the oppressive communist regime and were generally well received in the West as the Cold War rhetoric provided them with an image of freedom-fighters (Xenos, 1996). Although the politics behind their moves have become much more complex than the Cold War framework could encompass, the abstract reference to an obligation to ‘reciprocate’ by providing shelter to refugees has remained in place. The association with the dissident movement gave some NGOs a certain level of prestige as well as an ability to occasionally draw on their networks with other dissidents who made it into formal political circles. Interviews with some of these NGO advocates revealed that their own self-definition as former freedom fighters provided them with a strong sense of moral righteousness, which has sometimes prevented them from critical reflexivity of their own actions. Within their organizations they have encouraged the idea of ‘helping refugees’ as an unequivocally positive and unproblematic mission and loaded the figure of a refugee with deep emotional commitment. As I show later in this paper, the preoccupation with positive images of refugees has inadvertently contributed to simplified, one-dimensional representations. The latter group – ‘young professionals’ – are also mostly women. The majority of them are young university graduates for many of whom, working in an NGO assisting refugees provides a good start for their professional careers. NGOs where this group predominates are often characterised by higher staff turnover as the employees respond to better professional opportunities in other areas. Their perception of ‘a refugee’ is less emotionally loaded. From their annual reports as well as their public activities, it is clear that refugees are seen as yet another category of clients alongside migrants with other kinds of residence.

What do the NGOs have in common? Most organisations are increasingly dependent on the financing from the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs and the Ministry of Interior which are both responsible for the redistribution of both state and European Union funds supporting migrant integration and development of the Czech refugee system.<sup>6</sup> NGOs can access financial support by responding to project calls defined by these institutions. Therefore their offer of services has become somewhat standardised in the past years with less emphasis put on advocacy that can place the

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<sup>5</sup> The Charter 77 initiative was active in Czechoslovakia from 1977 to 1992 and is considered to be the most prominent action against the communist regime between the late 1970s and the 1989 “Velvet Revolution”.

<sup>6</sup> In the past, the United Nations Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) funded many NGOs and gave them more space to engage in advocacy activities. This support has been minimised since the early 2000s, because the Czech refugee system is considered to be developed enough to sustain itself without the finances of the UNHCR.

NGOs in opposition to the ministries that are primarily interested in controlling or restricting migration. The forms of assistance vary from more standardised legal, social and psychological counselling, language, computer and retraining courses to less formal encounters in community centres, organising of recreational activities and cultural activities for refugees and various informal group meetings.

Another common feature is that people with experience of being a refugee are only a rare exception in the NGOs. At the time of research, three of the NGOs employed a woman with an experience of being a refugee. However, in total, only two women had a position with some leverage within the NGOs. The others were in the position of part-time assistants. Thus refugees' needs are being identified and fulfilled by members of the Czech, white middle-class majority. The organisations also lack mechanisms of feedback and incorporation of refugees' representatives. Refugees are in a position of clients who have to fit themselves into existing programmes and who have little or no say about the running of these NGOs designed to provide solutions to their problems.

At the level of public representations of refugee issues, most NGOs pay much less attention to the political, social and historical particularities of refugee displacement and trauma understood as a *political* rather than psychological injury (Pupavac, 2008, 279). In NGO discourses, forces of displacement are often dealt with by general references to human rights abuses, undemocratic conditions and intolerance (Roubalová, Günterová, & Kostlán, 2005). These accounts not only position refugees as a homogeneous group of victims but since they can easily be applied to a number of contexts without detailed qualifications, they lack a critical urge which might encourage deeper interest in specific origins and consequences of refugees' experiences. Moreover, as I will show below, the representations of 'refugeeness' fostered by NGOs are highly gendered.

### **Feminisation of refugee clientele**

Women predominate not only among NGO workers, but also among the refugee clientele. Although women constitute, on average, only thirty percent of asylum seekers and forty percent of recognized refugees in the Czech Republic (CSO, 2007), my observations and the reports of NGOs corroborated that refugee women are much more likely than men to reach out for assistance from NGOs. This situation is caused by the gender division of labour in refugee households and by NGOs' preference for particular kinds of refugee clients.

In the majority of families, whose members I interviewed, it was perceived as undignified for a man to go and ask for assistance from strangers. Religion (Muslim and Christian in this case) seemed to play no particular role. Some refugee women explained that their husbands do not feel comfortable pleading for help and acknowledging their incapability and dependency. This woman in her late thirties provided a more nuanced interpretation of how she saw her/women's role in interactions with NGOs:

A woman, when necessary, is able to lower herself, to ask for something when a man cannot do it. He will, for example, never go somewhere and ask for help; that's not the way we do it. He doesn't abandon his upbringing from home only because he's here now. That is why I can better explain our situation when I go somewhere. I shed a tear, if needed; these are the things that women can do. [December 2006]

Refugees are expected to 'perform' emotionally as refugees in a variety of contexts ranging from the asylum interview with state immigration officials to interactions with NGO workers (see also Graham, 1999, 152). Pupavac (2008) aptly observes that these situations simultaneously create "*the identities of the impaired refugee and empowering capable advocate, distinct from the idea of political solidarity between equals*" (285).

The feminisation of refugee clientele is further enhanced by the fact that refugee women are perceived as easier and more manageable objects of assistance than men (see also Ong, 2003). I observed that NGO workers often liaised with women even over subjects related to their husbands or sons. They found women generally more communicative, adaptive and less likely to openly express their anger or dissatisfaction. Moreover, communication with women is often easier simply because they tend to speak the Czech language better than their husbands. In line with the above outlined division of labour in refugee households, from the very beginning of the asylum procedure it is women who are more likely to approach social workers in NGOs and in refugee accommodation centres and to discuss issues related to their children's school attendance, healthcare, food and so forth. These responsibilities, together with internalised expectations of being a good mother in the eyes of 'Czech hosts', prompt women to learn the Czech language more quickly. Many soon become the key mediators between NGOs and their households.

Men, on the other hand, are more likely to be constructed as obstacles in women's development, as potential aggressors who, after losing their role as breadwinners through unemployment, are struggling hard to preserve their manliness and dignity, sometimes at the expenses of their female family members (CCR, 2005). While women were often admired by NGO workers for their ability to perform their roles as mothers, wives and homemakers well even in difficult material conditions, refugee men's unemployment and their inability to financially secure the family were presented as the main features of their dysfunction. In a number of interviews, NGO social workers presented various versions of the same idea of how gender relations in refugee families are being transformed in exile. It is best expressed by this account of an NGO social worker:

It works like this: women are faster in finding some sort of a position for themselves. Even if they are still at home, but the fact that they take care of the household make them feel up and running. It's different with men, if they can't find a job, be it a regular or an illicit one, then it is usually pretty bad. I have a lot of female clients who function perfectly, they take care of their families, but their husbands do not function at all. [August 2007]

Although many NGO workers acknowledged that the process of settlement may be in many respects more difficult for men, refugee women remain the prime objects of their assistance.

Women who have established closer links with NGO workers are more trusted and get more offers for work and opportunities for further education and retraining. This can heighten already existing shifts in gender power in refugee households. Some NGO workers were well aware of the fact that such a gendered structure of opportunities can



create tensions in refugee families. The problem of empowering women within the framework of the persisting unequal family relations in which they live was occasionally acknowledged but generally not addressed by NGOs. A female social worker expressed the frustration she experienced when counselling refugee women:

You simply don't go further in this short-term counselling because it is a sort of addition you cannot afford if you don't have a special project to do it. You are not able to really empower these people. Most typically, you know that this family is totally not functioning in a sense that the husband is at home, does not handle the situation, he is depressive and cannot find a job. It all rests with the wife, who is able enough but overloaded. And so you work with her, because she is the one who comes and you solve the problems with her. But you don't tackle the problem of what to do to make him move his ass and come as well, because he will always send her. [July 2006]

Referring back to the increasingly project-driven character of NGO work which is increasingly dependent on the demands of funding bodies, this observation indicates that some activities, however needed, are not taken up by NGOs. It is not because NGO workers are not aware of their importance. It is rather because there was simply no call for projects under which this kind of a program could be financed or because individual social workers were not able to push through the appropriate agenda within organisations that remain largely unaffected by the practice of gender mainstreaming<sup>7</sup>.

### **Gendered assistance: empowerment or condescension?**

Studies from other contexts show that women's embeddedness in NGO networks can represent an important source of social capital that can facilitate women's access to resources and opportunities and improve their bargaining position vis-à-vis their husbands and families (Kibria, 1993; Ong, 2003; Ui, 1991). The Czech case demonstrates similar tendency, however with some limitations. Although many refugee women were able to benefit from their close relations to NGOs, my observations indicate that overall construction of a refugee women through NGO assistance remains essentialising and rather disempowering.

In the past seven years a group of women working in NGOs started to organize a so called 'Women's Group' in the city of Prague. The idea was to bring together refugee, immigrant and Czech women in an informal space which would allow them to share their experiences but also some of their resources such as contacts and information. These encounters were remembered and greatly appreciated by many refugee women I met. The groups were initiated in refugee camps helping women during the long periods of insecurity and social isolation while waiting for the outcome of their asylum proceedings. The rationale behind these groups is that women are somehow connected by their experiences as mothers, wives and daughters and it is only necessary to create a space

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<sup>7</sup> Walby (2005) defines gender mainstreaming as a process to promote gender equality which is also "intended to improve the effectivity of mainline policies by making visible the gendered nature of assumptions, processes, and outcomes" (321).

where they can meet and share these experiences as well as support each other, despite their different nationalities, class or religious backgrounds. After all, as one social worker said: “*women are used to get together and gossip*” so it seemed like a natural thing to do. One of the organizers and main initiators of the Group described why she decided to focus on women in the first place:

It was simply closer to my heart, I am an emotional person. I think that men ... of course they can speak about feelings ... but it seems to me that they prefer to speak more in a rational way, show their knowledge, what they have read, discuss some particular topics ... and because I am not cut out for it, I preferred debates about relations and emotions, so that is why it suited me well to work with women. [April 2006]

I have been told by a number of women that the Groups have been a source of enormous support and strength for them, especially at the beginning of their stay in the city, when they did not know many people and had little opportunities to socialise. On the other hand, what is problematic about them is that they are organized on the basis of a set of preconceived ideas about women as more emotional, less rational and always willing to share their intimate experiences with other women. It constructs immigrant women as a homogeneous group. They can perform their difference but in a prescribed way; for example, when cooking or talking about traditions and customs in their countries. The Group received wide coverage by the media and it has become a model of a successful project supporting immigrants’ integration.

Now organized in the city of Prague, their description posted on the NGO’s website is informative as it implicitly communicates some of the ideas about its participants:

... women talk about worries and joys of their everyday lives [...] about their traditions and life expectations, all this is accompanied by an aroma of traditional food they prepare for the meetings.<sup>8</sup>

The gender message becomes clearer in comparison with a description of a ‘Men’s Group’. As noted above, NGO social workers have been aware of men’s difficulties in coping with the process of settlement for some time. In an attempt to tackle this situation, an idea to organize ‘Men’s Groups’ emerged. Initially built on the same principle of talking and sharing, this attempt quickly failed because men did not respond in the same way as women. Consequently, the idea was transformed and immigrant men were asked what is it that they would like to do at these meetings. They came up with a set of activities such as watching a movie, playing music or going for a drink together. On the NGO website, the ‘Men’s Group’ is described as open to:

... all men who, while drinking coffee or tea, like to debate and want to learn more, who are not indifferent to what is happening around them, would like to get to know new faces and customs...<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Available in Czech at [www.berkat.cz/dokument.php?id=187](http://www.berkat.cz/dokument.php?id=187)

<sup>9</sup> Available in Czech at [www.berkat.cz/dokument.php?id=187](http://www.berkat.cz/dokument.php?id=187)

Comparing the two descriptions reveals different NGO constructions of refugee/immigrant men and women. Women are closely tied to their traditions and ‘traditional’ activities such as cooking – things not expected from men. While women are encouraged to speak about more inner aspects of their lives such as their worries and joys, men are depicted as ready to share knowledge, discuss issues, and get to know something new. In terms of the actual running of these groups observed during the fieldwork, men are expected to take an active role in defining the content of the meetings and redirecting it according to their own interests. Women’s groups, on the other hand, have a given structure. Although they are occasionally labelled as self-support groups in NGO’s reports and media presentations, they are actually directed by a few NGO coordinators who set the agenda and decide about activities. It underlines NGO attitudes to migrant and refugee women built on taken-for-granted ideas of women as emotional and less rational beings closely tied to the rigid conception of culture as a set of cuisines, traditions and festivities. Bringing migrant women together and providing a space for sharing of information and experiences of coping in a new environment undoubtedly produces a structure of strategic support, but it also nurtures unequal and even condescending relationships between NGO workers and refugee women based on the authoritative and homogenizing constructions of women’s needs constructed through these groups.

Where does the condescension come from? In his theory of social space and symbolic power, Bourdieu defines strategies of condescension as “*those strategies by which agents who occupy a higher position in one of the hierarchies of objective space symbolically deny the social distance between themselves and others*” (1989, 16). He argues that such strategies do not make distance disappear but its denial allows social actors to accumulate advantages of proximity while at the same time securing the recognition of distance. This observation helps us to grasp what kind of a social space is constituted by the NGOs discussed here. In their more intimate encounters with female refugee clients, distance between those who set the framework and those who participate is denied; for example, by social workers’ and therapists’ emphasis on sharing of their own personal “*worries and joys*” with women in the Group and in preparing and eating food together. But the hierarchies and distance are still clearly in place, as it is they who set the framework of the meetings. These moments of denial cannot hide its artificiality.

What was refugee women’s response to this? Some of them realise that it is sometimes advantageous for them to temporarily accept these essentialising roles and bring forward their ‘group identity’ in a simplified way to achieve certain goals. Others retrospectively disassociate themselves from the roles constructed for them in NGO spaces. As this woman put it:

I used to go there when I was pregnant, my head was empty then. Sometimes, I enjoyed these meetings but I cannot stand it now, it was a bit like in a kindergarten. Now, I have other things in life than idle chatter. They sometimes call me that they haven’t seen me for a long time and want me to come again. But I always say I am too busy, I am not afraid to say this anymore, I don’t need them now. [March 2007]

The above quote also refers to relations of power between NGO workers and refugee women that are also closely related to constructions of women and malleable clients.

Those who have benefited from NGO assistance in the past are often expected to contribute to various NGO activities, especially when the organisations public presentation and fundraising is in question. For example, women are asked to cook their 'traditional food', participate in leisure-time activities or talk to the media when asked by NGOs.

### **One-dimensionally positive 'refugeeness'**

As already mentioned NGOs play an important role in introducing refugee issues to the Czech public. In their publishing activities, they try to insert unquestionably positive images of refugees into the public sphere. The rationale for these representations is that as far as refugees tend to be represented in a negative and stereotypical light by the state and the mainstream media, the role of NGO advocates is to balance the negative images by "*showing them as decent people*" (interview with an NGO worker, April 2006). This 'decency' is most likely to be delivered through feminised and depoliticized refugee imagery. The stories of refugee women prevail in NGOs' publications (Centre for Migration, 2001; Roubalová, 2003, 2005, 2007) as do the images of them and their children on their websites. As argued by Malkki (1995a), the predominance of women and children in refugees' visual representations is not accidental because it associates 'refugeeness' with powerlessness and neediness while leaving men to occupy images of 'dangerous aliens'(11) or truly political dissidents. This argument is not only an observation of social scientists; some refugee women were well aware of their role in this game:

Even though we are one family, we have experienced a hundred percent difference in how we were shown by the media. My husband is always asked about those bad, awful things that happened; they want to hear something dreadful and shocking. When they invite me, you know I have two children, then it is like showing some nice pet, a little dog that is pleasant to look at, that is how I feel. [May, 2006]

Indeed, the public does not want to hear women speaking about 'dirty' things like rape, killings, torture, it prefers to read something about how they and their families are getting used to the Czech environment, how the children are doing at school and so forth. The same woman, who was herself often named by NGOs when asked to recommend someone for an interview, reflected on her role in representing the desirable face of 'refugeeness':

I am myself an average representative of a woman who keeps being invited to places to make the image of a refugee look kind of nice. I know that if they organise something, if they want to present a refugee to the public, they will not chose a man who has been waiting for his asylum decision for many years, is angry and exhausted. I know that if it is for a TV or something, they will invite me to conjure up a smile, say a few words in Czech... They know I can be endearing: look, this refugee can say something, she has children, she looks happy... And the women who are not dumb are well aware of this. I

think that this is also why you don't see many men participating. [September 2007]

Even though she admitted that this role presented her with some 'moral weight', she said she was willing to carry on playing it in order to improve the public image of refugees. Her accounts remind us how simplifying and one-dimensional these representations are. Promoting refugees as an apolitical 'womenandchildren' group (Enloe, 1993) erases the complexity of their experiences of displacement. It does create space for discussing women's involvement in politics or their critical ideas about the workings of the Czech refugee system. Their identities are abstracted into a positive image of blameless figures (Pupavac, 2008, 276) that seem to be the only ones worthy of public attention and support.

## **Conclusions**

The analysis presented here does not aim at disputing the efforts of NGO advocates to help refugees and a number of clearly positive roles they play in the refugee system. Rather, I wished to encourage a reflection of some of the less tangible and gendered effects of their assistance to and representation of refugees.

NGOs have become imperative in structuring the possible field of action for refugees by drawing the spaces of articulation of refugees' needs and identities in the public sphere. They exercise substantial power in determining which aspects of refugees' identities are to be recognised as worthy of public attention and support. Indirectly, they set the boundaries of the public sphere that is accessible to refugees and the terms of their inclusion within this sphere.

By casting refugees as essentially positive yet unspecific in the politics and histories that create and perpetuate their displacement in the first place, NGOs may be creating a comfortable, palatable image of refugees to a particular society, but then risk silencing refugees. This silence is greatly disempowering as it leaves them without spaces where they could develop political means to influence their position in a society and assert themselves as objects of political solidarity rather than as submissive clients of assistance.

While the feminised character of NGO assistance can provide refugee women with new skills and opportunities and strengthen their bargaining position vis-à-vis their husbands, it needs to be acknowledged that it comes at a price of essentializing constructions of their femininity in public representations as well as through NGOs' assistance. In this way, the practices of friendly NGO assistance also act as lessons on which aspects of refugees' identities are to be recognized and which have to be suppressed as a precondition for acceptance. They create specific gendered criteria of belonging.

On the other hand, it should not be forgotten that NGOs are dependent on particular refugee performances in sustaining their identities as humanitarians and in convincing the wider public and particularly the funders that their activities are worthy of further support. The acknowledgement of mutual dependency and gendered power relations could serve as a starting point for further debate about possibilities of refugees'

empowerment given that their critical reflections of their position in the non-governmental webs of the refugee system will be taken seriously.

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