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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Manning Humanitarian Programs: The Impossible Bargain of Refugee Men

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Abstract

How do the gendered patterns of foreign aid operate in the rare occurrence when refugee men are the focus of aid programs? This article uses critical narrative analysis to understand refugee men's navigation of gendered hierarchies in the aid program Darfur United, a refugee men's soccer team formed in eastern Chad's refugee camps. Through juxtaposing the objectives and aims of Darfur United as a program for men with those of aid programs for refugee women and children, I argue that men must demonstrate innocuous and essentialized practices of masculinity to receive care, while ultimately serving as conduits for increased humanitarian support for refugee women and children. This analysis extends existing literature on the absence of humanitarian programs for refugee men and disrupts dominant understandings of gender and refugee men. By centering men's own understandings of aid's gendered patterns, it expands contemporary discussions on gender, displacement, and humanitarianism.

Keywords: Gender; humanitarianism; aid; refugee men

What happens on the rare occasions when humanitarian actors come to focus on refugee men? Scholarship shows that humanitarianism operates through feminized constructions of care and vulnerability, in which refugee women and children become the primary beneficiaries of aid programs and resources (Hyndman 2000; Freedman 2015; Paul and Masood 2024). In turn, recent scholarship demonstrates how refugee men and masculinity are marginalized and left out of aid actors' practices of care. Scholarship has thus called for greater attention to the experiences of refugee men (Brun 2017; Cornwall 2007, 73; Krystalli et al. 2018; Turner 2019ab). In this article, I extend existing analyses

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of aid actors' *absence* of care for men by exploring how gender operates in the unusual cases where refugee men *are* the primary beneficiaries of an aid program. I focus on a small California-based humanitarian organization called iACT, where I worked from 2015 to 2021. After establishing refugee women-led preschool programs for boys and girls, iACT extended its humanitarian efforts to refugee men. In 2012, the organization formed a men's refugee soccer team in eastern Chad's Darfuri refugee camps — called Darfur United — which would compete in global soccer competitions. I argue, nevertheless, that Darfur United only nominally positions refugee men as beneficiaries of care and ultimately reproduces aid's gendered patterns, creating what I call an impossible bargain for refugee men. In practice, refugee men are feminized by aid actors and within global sport competitions as passive participants whose self-identified needs and desires are overlooked in favor of western tropes about refugee men's love of sport. Simultaneously, refugee men are hypermasculinized in that the players' *work* so that the team becomes a conduit to increase care for refugee women and children. This argument speaks to contemporary conversations around the gendered dimensions of forced displacement, migration, and humanitarianism. It also calls for a re-visioning of gender mainstreaming initiatives as important only to women, and it might give pause to aid actors' assumptions about what refugee women and men want and need.

A major hurdle in better understanding the relationships between humanitarianism, aid, and refugee men is that aid programs *for men* are scarce *in practice.* This absence is tied to gendered assumptions in which refugee men are viewed as invulnerable, even threatening, and are thus dismissed or overlooked by aid actors as in need of care (Olivius 2016a; Paul and Masood 2024; Turner 2019ab). This dynamic rang true in eastern Chad. Over 400,000 Darfuris fled and came to live in thirteen camps in the early 2000s because of ongoing genocide against their communities in Sudan. Yet, when iACT started Darfur United in 2012, it was the only program that had been created specifically and only for refugee men. iACT started the program after it was asked by organizers of a global men's soccer tournament for unrecognized peoples and nation-states to bring a team of refugees to play. Darfur United would participate in men's tournaments in Iraqi-Kurdistan in 2012 and Sweden in 2014 — traveling back and forth from Chad's refugee camps. Darfur United thus provides an unusual opportunity to juxtapose an aid organization's gendered practices toward refugee men, women, and children and to consider how refugee men as-aid-beneficiaries understand aid's gendered patterns.

My intimate and sustained knowledge with iACT, including near-daily contact with the Darfur United players, allows me to center refugee men's narratives on aid's gendered hierarchies. I initially joined iACT due to the organization's named recognition of aid's colonial histories and violence, and only later learned of their soccer program. I connected with Darfur United through my own life-long soccer interest and the power relations of gender in sport more broadly. Over the years, I dealt with the financial challenges of raising money for a refugee men's aid program and soccer team, and the increasingly limited attention given to Darfur United by iACT as a result. These constraints were deepened after 2014, when many though not all the Darfur United players gained asylum in Sweden after

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playing in a tournament there. My study of International Relations helped me understand my time with Darfur United through the lens of gender, and I increasingly felt it was important to write about how the men navigated being part of Darfur United. Their interviews are complemented by interviews with iACT staff from the United States and Canada.

I frame this paper within interdisciplinary literature on gender, refugeehood, and humanitarianism that shows how refugee women, children, and practices associated with femininity are prioritized in aid settings over refugee men and practices associated with masculinity. I first discuss this methodology, including both the ethical and reflexive considerations of foregrounding the perspectives of refugee men and my own positionality within the project.

I divide the subsequent analytical sections into four themes, which emerged from the Darfur United players' narratives. The first theme, "Humanitarian Aid's Gendered Priorities," argues in support of existing literature that there is an overwhelming degree of humanitarian inaction toward refugee men. This dynamic is crystallized in the Darfur United players' narratives on their experiences of losing humanitarian care as they transitioned from childhood to young adulthood as men. The men's recognition of how these gender dynamics manifest differently for refugee women and children stands in contrast to the lack of consideration by iACT staff of the gendered implications of forming a men's soccer program. The second theme, "Humanitarian Chances for Men," considers why refugee men chose to participate in Darfur United. I argue that iACT's creation of a soccer program for refugee men relied on gendered assumptions about men's love of sport while bypassing men's self-identified needs and desired support from aid actors. Despite this, the men chose to pursue Darfur United as perhaps their only chance to reach their personal goals, thereby enacting the politics of humanitarian living (Feldman 2018). The third theme, "Luxury Aid Programs," complicates the importance of Darfur United, even as the program relied on gendered assumptions about men and sport. I argue that Darfur United challenged aid's rigid boundaries of what constitutes lifesaving care in that the players' illuminate how a recreational program — considered a luxury in aid settings — created space for refugee men to feel and live identities beyond the confines of western-understandings of male refugeehood. The fourth theme, "Gendered Success and Failure in Aid," points to the gendered, able-bodied, and classed privileges that made Darfur United possible for the members of the team. These privileges intersect with hierarchies that distribute disproportional power to aid organizations and their program priorities. In so doing, iACT used a refugee program *for men* to reinscribe women and children as the primary targets of aid's practices of care. I conclude with a discussion about the implications of Darfur United in aid programming and the persistence of aid's gendered and heteronormative narratives to sustain the sector.

Gender, Humanitarianism, and Aid

Current understandings of the relationships between gender, humanitarianism, and aid are a result of feminists' hard-fought effort for gender to be recognized as

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critical to experiences of refugeehood and regimes of care. This labor led to the institutionalization of gender mainstreaming in the humanitarian sector (albeit imperfectly) — or the recognition of, and programs geared-toward, how gender shapes who and how one is cared for in aid settings (Carpenter, 2005, Baines, 2004; Buscher, 2010; Freedman, 2015; Hafner-Burton and Pollack, 2002). A core contribution of this work is tracing the *feminization* of refugeehood. Scholars argue that the *most* legitimate refugee is one perceived through western constructions of female passivity and vulnerability (Paul and Masood 2024; Turner 2019ab). Feminized refugees therefore do not pose a threat to aid workers while embodying racialized bodies to be "saved" by (mostly white and western-based) aid actors (Agier 2011, 152; Grabska 2011; Hyndman and Giles 2011; Johnson 2011). Consequently, the majority of the aid sector's gender mainstreaming efforts center on addressing the so-called needs and vulnerability of refugee women.

The feminization of refugeehood shapes and is shaped by gendered, racialized perceptions of refugee men as practicing so-called backward masculinity (Grabska 2011) in which men are "pushed…into the category of perpetrator" and blamed for conflict and displacement (Myrttinen et al. 2017, 110; Rajaram 2002, 251; Soguk 1999, 242). Olivius (2016a) argues that gender mainstreaming assumes men are emasculated troublemakers, the sole perpetrators of violence against women, or controversial allies of gender equality initiatives. In other words, refugee men are seen as less innocent, less at-risk of being victims of wartime abuse, and relevant to aid actors only in terms of how men may help or hurt refugee women (Touquet et al. 2020; Kreft and Agerberg 2024; Grabska 2011, 86; Lunkala 2011; Aasheim et al. 2008).

The gendered patterns discussed above led to calls for increased attention to the experiences of refugee men (Brun 2017; Krystalli et al. 2018). Paul and Masood (2024) argue that feminized conceptions of vulnerability fuel the affective economy of aid so as to displace and deny refugee men access to formal and informal regimes of care. In fact, Ingvars and Gıslason (2018) argue that when refugee men show vulnerability, they are seen as pitiful and weak — a so-called failure of masculinity (384). This is similar to Griffiths' (2015) research in Greece, in which humanitarian actors thought of asylum-seeking men as having full agency and that they should be able to "better cope" with displacement (484).

When considering the relationships between gender mainstreaming programs and refugee men, Turner finds that Syrian men expressed surprise at being asked about their needs as men (601) and that aid workers did not necessarily understand caring for men as part of their jobs. This body of scholarship points to what Turner (2019ab) argues is the position of refugee men as "uneasy objects of humanitarian care" in that men and masculinity "clash with humanitarian understandings of refugeehood, gender, and power and politics" (597).

While scholarship analyzes relationships between gender, masculinity, and the lack of care for refugee men (Turner 2019ab; Paul and Masood 2024; Suerbaum, 2018; Sözer, 2019), as well as men's own production of care (Paul, 2025), there has been little opportunity to consider how gendered power relations unfold when men seemingly become the hyperfocus of a humanitarian program. Darfur United provides a unique opportunity to ask what care looks like for men

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and how such care disrupts and (re)produces the feminization of refugeehood and humanitarian practice. I build on this literature by foregrounding the perspectives of refugee men on aid's gendered practices, rather than centering on how aid workers think of refugee men, to provide new insights into the intersection of gender, aid, and humanitarianism and scholarship that is attuned to the persistence of inequitable power relations that sustain aid.

Methodology: Gender and Narrative Analysis

This study conceptualizes gender as (1) socially constructed practices associated with masculinity and femininity and (2) a relation of power that "organize (s) access to resources, rights, responsibilities, authority and life options" (Cohn 2013, 4–5; Ramazanoğlu 1993, 6; Tickner 1992, 7). While those who participated in this project may have other understandings of gender, my focus is on the disjuncture between western and Eurocentric *gendered hierarchies* employed in aid and how those hierarchies are understood and navigated by refugee men.

Gendered hierarchies are interlocked with systems of race, class, ethnicity, nationality, and sexuality that result in numerous and interlocked hierarchies of power. Thus, for example, aid hierarchies place women and children as the most in need of care, especially over hyper-racialized and masculinized refugee men. I gesture toward interlocked power relations in this piece; at the same time, the study's analytical focus on gender and a men's soccer team (re)produces dominant scholarly and practice-based attention to cis-hetero men and women in aid settings. Work such as Camminga (2022) and Greatrick (2019) contributes important insights on queer experiences in aid and critiques of the heteronormativity aid uses to enact care.

I spoke with ten Darfur United players for this project over Zoom. Each person asked me to do their interviews in English and to use their names. I offered them the opportunity to use an interpreter in French or Arabic, but perhaps they preferred English because we had already established channels of communication in that language. The project also draws on interviews with seven current and former iACT staff members who each worked globally with Darfur United and who are citizens of the United States or Canada. I transcribed interviews and asked participants were asked for feedback on their interview transcripts.

Interviews with the Darfur United players and iACT staff were open-ended conversations — which I understand in two ways. The first understanding is as "purposive conversations" (Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2015, 150) in which I asked questions that provided space for reflection and contradiction (Wibben 2011). My second understanding of conversations is quotidian in that this study is a result of friendships with Darfur United players and iACT staff built and maintained for close to a decade. From 2015 to 2021, I was a full-time team member with iACT. My role was to manage operations for Darfur United and serve as an assistant coach for the team. I have had countless personal and professional conversations with everyone involved in this project.

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As a staff member of iACT, I realized I had to navigate the discomfort of participating in an organization that recognized aid's colonial histories, while inevitably itself partaking in gendered, heteronormative, and racialized boundaries of humanitarianism. While much more could be said about the internal dynamics and conflict this caused, ultimately the resulting tensions shaped this study's critical lens on humanitarianism, which does not deny that aid saves lives, even as it shapes what kind of lives are possible and for whom.

For example, the Darfur United players often began by repeating the "company line" about the importance of Darfur United, exactly as iACT staff had written it for fundraising campaigns. Such answers encouraged me to ask about their understanding of aid for refugee men including and beyond the team. My positionality, in other ways, helped. I was not part of iACT when Darfur United formed, nor when many of its players gained asylum in Sweden after competing in a tournament there. I was not associated with what I perceived as the indebtedness that the players felt toward other iACT staff. Further, as a young woman, I did not have the same level of authority or decision-making power (about team selection, for example) as iACT's founders and male staff. I believe these factors contributed to their openness with me — which I often felt was more direct than their discussions with other iACT's staff.

I struggled to navigate the use of the men's insights for an academic project and the on-going lived realities and struggles for Darfuri refugees in Chad. Saddam, a now late-twenties university student in Sweden and former Darfur United player who lived in refugee camp Mile, helped me articulate this ethical queasiness:

> Sometimes you don't get asked everything you want. I wish people asked, "how is the situation in the refugee camps?" And "shall we do something?" That I want. I should get asked [that] but I never get asked. They just listen, you know, like you're watching some movie and you get inspired and excited, then when the movie finishes you say, yeah 'I saw that movie. It is very fantastic', then nothing (Saddam Hissen June 2020).

I recognize that this research project is not "doing something" in the way that Saddam urges. However, I am also attentive to how *doing something* in the context of humanitarianism is intricately tied to histories of masculine, racist paternalism in which aid workers presume to *solve* problems that they often create (Kemedjio and Lynch, 2024). While I cannot resolve these contradictions, I do seek to disrupt, even if partially, the ways in which refugee men are not heard by humanitarian actors. As Freedman (2015), Adomako Ampofo and Beoku-Betts (2021), and Mindry (2024) show, it is necessary to de-essentialize the experiences of Black African men while showing that concepts of gender and care require attunement to both men's and women's lives.

"There was nothing for men": Humanitarian Aids' Gendered Priorities

> There was nothing for men. There was only Darfur United. iACT came in and said, "We are going to build a refugee soccer team, and this team is going to

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> qualify for a World Cup. We don't have any information about the organization, iACT, just "Okay, let's try this" (Mohammad Annour June 2020).

"There was nothing for men" captures existing arguments on gender and humanitarian aid. As Paul and Masood (2024) demonstrate, formal and informal regimes of care rely on "feminized understandings of vulnerability" and in turn, care toward refugee men and attunement to masculinity is abandoned by humanitarian actors. Refugee men are thus either forgotten beneficiaries in aid responses or thought about only in relation to how they "help" or "hurt" refugee women (Turner 2019ab; Olivius 2016a, 2016b). This section contextualizes the humanitarian context in eastern Chad's refugee camps vis-á -vis the perspectives of refugee men before and during Darfur United's formation as an aid program. The players' narratives extend understandings of how refugee men are (not) cared for by humanitarian actors. I show that, contrary to racist tropes about the "backwardness" of refugee men, the Darfur United players spoke to the dynamics of aid's gendered hierarchies and its impact on their lives, particularly as they transitioned from childhood to young adulthood.

Yaya Ramadan, Saleh Abakar Yahya, and Mohamed Nin are now Swedish or Canadian citizens, and former Darfur United players who joined the team in their late-teens to early-twenties. I asked them about what humanitarian support there was for them as men when they lived in eastern Chad. They each shared perspectives that emphasized "humanitarian organizations were just there to help the old, women, and children" (Mohammad Annour 2020 June) and that there were not "any opportunities as a young man [in the refugee camps]" (Saleh Abakar Yahya June 2020). This narrative was contrasted with their memories of childhood in eastern Chad:

> It was good, in the beginning. It was quite good because you have support as a child. But later, years going, you realize it's not a good place to be because when you grow up your mind is growing and you need more things (Yaya Ramadan June 2020).

Yaya's insights affirm and challenge the operation of humanitarianism's gendered imaginaries. By recalling "support as a child," Yaya's narrative demonstrates the hierarchy of care in eastern Chad toward the "most vulnerable" refugees (read: women and children) (Baines 2004; Cornwall 2007, 7; El-Bushra 2000; Olivius 2016a, 2016b, 272; Rajaram 2002, 251). As he contrasts this with growing into adulthood, it urges a reckoning with how refugee children are left behind by aid actors as they become adults. Yaya's challenge to humanitarianism's temporal boundaries of vulnerability is not surprising given that the category of "children" is constructed with assumed values of moral legitimacy, especially in conflict settings (Hart 2023). These constructions are antithetical to constructions of racialized refugee men, who are blamed for causing conflict and displacement (Malkki 2015).

Yaya's argument that eastern Chad's refugee camps were "not a good place to be" also speaks to how resource constraints reinforce gendered hierarchies of humanitarian care. As the Darfur United players aged and moved into the

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contested category of *men*, they were not seen as in need of help nor did they need to make use of their "minds" in the ways in which gender mainstreaming programs seek to build the "capacity" of refugee women. Humanitarian actors' operationalization of gender fails on all fronts in the players' account of humanitarian support in Darfuri refugee camps. Refugee women are essentialized through feminine tropes about need and agency. Refugee men are abandoned and placed outside of the affective economies of aid, in which vulnerability is the primary currency for care (Paul and Masood 2024).

While I am critical of gender mainstreaming's failures for men and women here (True, 2009), I am also cautious about dismissing the significance that Darfur United players placed on aid actors as important for any chance to build lives, despite inadequate support (Feldman 2018).

Al-fateh Tarbosh, who is currently iACT's Program Coordinator in eastern Chad and a former Darfur United player, understands the bare minimum of care for refugee men as different from support for refugee women and children:

> For humanitarian support for the men, they help like twenty-five percent only. This is not a degree of success. They do not have plans to give the men work or anything where they can get experience. They give them food and shelter only (Al-fateh Tarbosh June 2020).

Al-fateh was among the first Darfuri refugees to arrive in eastern Chad as violence in Sudan surged in the early 2000s. He had never seen a social or livelihood program in eastern Chad just for men. His and other players' recognition of this gender inequity is particularly poignant in comparison to the limited recognition of gendered power relations in iACT staff's reflections on working with refugee men:

> It's also revealing that interactions with men in particular don't stand out. I do think that a lot of times they were seen as an impediment...It's kind of an impossible bargain, right? You're either lazy and dependent or you're somebody causing trouble (James Thacher June 2020).

> Lately (2020), people are thinking of services for men because that will have an impact on gender dynamics if you address their specific needs. But I can't think of too many examples or any example of a program that was okay 'we're going to focus on males.' (Gabriel Stauring June 2020).

iACT staff show awareness of tropes about refugee men, while reinforcing the idea that men's services would be beneficial because they would "impact gender dynamics" for refugee women. iACT staff only reflected on refugee men in response to my probing. iACT "naively" (James Thacher June 2020) jumped into forming a men's soccer team with little to no consideration for how Darfur United disrupted gendered aid practices and vulnerability narratives, as iACT sought to do for its preschool and employment programs geared toward refugee women and children.

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"Go and play football, and then do everything": Humanitarian Chances for Men

> I became a Darfur United player because that's where I will get a chance to study. I didn't want to go play football. I wanted to study. So, I thought, 'get this chance', go and play football, and then do everything (Saddam Hissen Abdine June 2020).

This section considers why men chose to participate in the first-ever aid program specifically for men in eastern Chad. I argue that aid actors relied on gendered assumptions about refugee men that bypassed the kinds of support men wanted from aid actors and that ultimately led to the creation of an aid program that reproduced something some of the men enjoyed but *did not* actually lack (the capacity to play soccer). Despite the misalignment between aid actors' and refugee men's notions of care for men, Darfur United players understood the team as a rare chance to meet their self-identified needs and thrive on their own terms.

iACT often used the over-exaggerated and simplistic trope that everyone (read: men and boys) in eastern Chad's refugee camps "loved to play football" (Moubark Abdallah June 2020) as the justification for forming a men's soccer team. The Darfur United players' narratives reveal more dynamic reasoning. Bichara — currently a sports coach in Sweden — joked:

> Before iACT, we were still playing football, you know. We made footballs before the organization was giving us footballs and shoes...but to go around the world and compete...we couldn't imagine as a refugee that we would get that chance (Bichara Abderaman June 2020).

I find Bichara's light-heartedness telling. Despite all the ways in which refugee men spoke about a lack of support for them, Darfur United was "giving" something to men that they already had. This irony reflects literature on how western aid organizations adopt masculinized positions in which they assume to know what is best or most needed for refugees (Hyndman 2000; Pallister-Wilkins 2022). "Going around the world" was unimaginable for Bichara. However, participation in global sport and the men's love of soccer was secondary or coincided with their desires to support their families and improve their lives:

> I didn't want to go to play [in the tournament] in Sweden. I just wanted to travel to Sudan and continue my education. I didn't think football would give me a chance. At that time, I decided to not play football any longer because I couldn't see a future for me there (Bichara Abderaman June 2020).

> When they asked me to accompany them to Sweden, at that time I was not employed. But I felt that one day, I will be an employee of iACT, and through that employment I will be able to help as many people as I can. That was my aim (Al-fateh Tarbosh June 2020).

Al-Fateh's perspective on joining Darfur United supports literature from African feminist scholars, who show how young African men's desires are tied

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to masculine ideals about being providers and household leaders (Adomako Ampofo and Beoku-Betts 2021). Al-Fateh had a stable and high-ranking job in Sudan before having to flee to Chad and was seeking a role to help his community. Education was most often how Darfur United players wanted to reach their goals and support their families. In fact, many Darfur United players considered *not* joining the team because of these obligations. Yaya Ramadan, who has several family members still living in eastern Chad, identified obligations to family as his biggest hesitation about joining the team:

> I always think about the team and my family too. Like my mom, she is what I was most worried about. I can't choose my own life and leave them there in the refugee camps (Yaya Ramadan June 2020).

Yaya's reasoning challenges tropes about refugee men as threats to their own communities. Providing care to their loved ones was central to men's hesitations about joining Darfur United. Yet, to be discussed further on, Darfur United became a mechanism through which the players formed relations of care among themselves and with their communities despite their recognition of the gendered dynamics at play.

I interpret the men's decisions to ultimately join the team as tied, in part, to their frustrations with *waithood* in the camps. Honwana's (2019) research on "waithood" argues that young Africans are constantly navigating the impossibility of achieving gendered and societal expectations of them in the conditions of colonialism and neoliberal capitalism. One can assume these conditions are even more heightened for refugees living in what the men regularly called "open prisons." Mubarak describes this sense of waithood as a young man:

> There was nothing to do in the camp. We don't have any jobs to do. Sometimes we could go to school. When we got home, we tried to help mom or dad or do any simple things. But you know in the refugee camps, we don't have farms, we don't have any animals that we can take care of. We just keep sitting (Moubark Abdalla June 2020).

In reiterating the lack of jobs and education, and unfulfilled familial obligations, Mubarak challenges tropes about refugee men being labeled as lazy and dependent to instead illuminate how the bare minimum care and opportunity provided by aid actors is weaponized against men as a sign of supposed inadequacies or failing and dangerous masculinity.

Given the chance to choose how they would be supported by aid actors, it seems the men involved in this research project would have taken a different path than what iACT presented to them. Competing in global soccer tournaments likely would not have made the list. Their participation in Darfur United instead is what Feldman (2018) understands as the political and generative consequences of "humanitarian living," via which these players made chances to overcome waithood and fulfill personal goals despite dire conditions.

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"Support for football is totally different than other organizations": Gender and Luxury Aid Programs

> "Darfur United is more than soccer. It is a movement for hope…The formation of the team and its participation in a global tournament gave Darfuri refugees a world stage on which to represent their people…Darfur United has successfully inspired the Darfur people and fostered unity and cohesion among Darfuri tribes dispersed between the camps. (iACT on Darfur United 2024).

Despite how iACT's formation of Darfur United was misaligned with the men's self-identified needs and desires, I argue that Darfur United simultaneously disrupted humanitarianism's rudimentary understanding of lifesaving services. Amid the endemic logics of crises that lead to underfunded and fleeting aid budgets, humanitarian response becomes limited to inadequate provisions of food, sanitation, education, and healthcare (Feldman 2018; Redfield 2013). This was true of eastern Chad in 2012. Aid funding was quickly shifting from the Darfuri displacement to crises "elsewhere" (Duffield 2007). This timeframe was also just before sport-for-development and sport-for-social-good was popularized in the mid-2010s. In such conditions, recreation (sport, art, music) is considered a luxury implemented in the short-term at best and mostly left out of humanitarian services altogether (Cheung-Gaffney 2018, 210; Darnell et al. 2019, 194). This section details how the Darfur United players interpreted a so-called luxury aid program. I argue that Darfur United as a "movement for hope" and a "world stage to represent [Darfur]" is understood by refugee men as an important challenge to humanitarianism's rudimentary lifesaving in which the men could thrive, support their communities, and build identities not typically afforded to refugees by the humanitarian sector.

Darfur United players were quick to recognize the unique opportunity iACT presented them. Al-fateh Tarbosh — who works closely with many aid organizations in eastern Chad as iACT's current Program Coordinator — assessed the significance of the program:

> NGOs were just working on health, education, food, and shelter. Support for football is totally different than other organizations. This is why I decided to support the Darfur United Soccer Academy and iACT" (Al-fateh Tarbosh June 2020).

Al-fateh's assessment affirms aid's literal understanding of "life-saving relief activities" as those which prevent people from dying. There are legitimate ethical reasons for prioritizing such needs amid limited resources. iACT struggled with the realities of day-to-day survival in the camps and its plan to invest tens of thousands of dollars into a men's soccer team. iACT founder Gabriel Stauring, who had been traveling to Chad's refugee camps since the early 2000s, shared:

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> When we came to the community with the idea of Darfur United in refugee camps that had just experienced extreme violence, [for refugees] who didn't have enough food, who didn't have housing...we said, "Does this make sense? Soccer is a game" (Gabriel Stauring June 2020).

Amid this ethical wrestling, iACT decided to pursue Darfur United precisely because as a "game" the program challenged anything that aid organizations thought should be done for Darfuri refugees in Chad. A repeated narrative at iACT is that a Darfuri leader shared with Gabriel that "Darfur could now be part of the world." While the masculine and heteronormative relations that position a men's athletic team as "part of the world" are not lost on me, I instead focus here on how the Darfur United players complicate the easy division between luxury aid programs and lifesaving ones:

> It's an amazing feeling you know. You are seen as a football player...As a team, we talked before every game, before every training, after training. We are together because we all met from twelve different refugee camps to become a football team. That's really unique. We met some good friends, you know. Life friends that we still have (Mohammad Nin June 2020).

Former Darfur United player Mohammad Nin's narrative points to two central effects of a luxury aid program. The first is how refugee men feel that they are *seen* as soccer players. To be recognized as an athlete resists humanitarianism's feminized constructions of men for what they lack (proper masculinity, jobs, citizenship, education, etc.). The second is how a luxury aid program facilitates being "together" with "life friends." The importance Mohammad places on such relationships pushes back against aid's tropes about single, dangerous refugee men to instead illuminate how men seek out and operate within their own networks of care and community that humanitarian institutions overlook or abandon (Paul 2025).

These relationships began to form when iACT and Darfuri community leaders intentionally selected participants from each of the then twelve refugee camps on the Chad-Sudan border. This has been the only time refugees from each camp have come together for an aid program. This absence speaks less to humanitarianism's racialized narratives about "tribalism" among Darfuris in eastern Chad and more to the securitized aid practices that prevent refugees from exercising freedom of movement between and within eastern Chad's refugee camps. Connecting across camps disrupts the highly isolated experience of refugeehood and the division created between refugees and "the world." As one Darfur United player argued: "Aid organizations don't care about anyone to be known outside of these camps" (Moubark Abdallah June 2020). By using their power and privilege as aid actors to facilitate intercamp and global mobility for refugee men, iACT re-visions what can be meant by life-saving activities as those which push back against the securitized and isolated existence of humanitarian living.

McGee and Pelham (2018) argue — while cautioning against apolitical narratives about the magical and transformative power of sport — that grassroots initiatives such as sport, theater, and art projects can contest humanitarianism's

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facilitation of only the "temporary preservation of survival" (24). The significance of so-called luxury aid programs is perhaps best narrated by Saddam:

> You were in a refugee camp, and you got the chance to play football around the world. It was a very nice moment. I never danced, but at that moment, I became a dancer. The Darfur United players put on some songs. I made some moves. I never danced. They asked me "For how long have you danced?" And I said, "No, you don't understand, this is my first time dancing" (Saddam Hissien June 2020).

Saddam's embodiment as a dancer is a real and significant effect of iACT's decision to move forward with an aid program that was not confined by assumed categories of life-saving support. Refugee men chose to participate in this program fully, and in doing so, created space to live within and simultaneously beyond aid's predetermined life and identities for refugee men.

"We wanted to tell the world there are a lot of Darfur refugees in Chad": Gendered Success and Failure in Aid

> We wanted to tell the world there are a lot of Darfur refugees in Chad. We are all Darfurian people, even if not everyone could play. It was a dream come true (Yaya Ramada July 2020).

Darfur United's disruptive presence as a luxury aid program is further complicated by the gendered and heteronormative practices through which iACT selected the Darfur United team and the team's performance as the only refugee-team in a global soccer competition. For example, I show how players understood the team's selection process and their role on the team as something *earned* through demonstrations of masculinity as able-bodied *athletes.* They also illuminated class, ethnic, and (dis)ability requirements needed to demonstrate their athletic worthiness to iACT staff. The mediation of Darfur United by iACT worked to both masculinize and feminize refugees as (non)objects of humanitarian care. iACT's and Darfur United players' responses to the team's routine losses were deeply gendered. By tuning in to the players' interpretations of the team's performance, I argue that the Darfur United players' understanding of success as an athletic team shifted from *winning* games on a global stage to the team's platform as a voice for Darfuris. The constant and contradictory repositioning of the Darfur United players and its aims under iACT's paternal gaze begs the question as to whether refugee men can exist beyond the binary of masculine agent-threat or feminized passive victim under the confines of humanitarian imaginaries.

> I wanted to play for Darfur because it means a lot to me to represent my country. When I came to the camp, I couldn't play football. But I saw them one day and said I should play with them. I worked day and night to be able to play with them (Yusef Mohammad June 2020).

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The Darfur United players overwhelmingly expressed that Darfur United was "a global symbol" (Ismail Wadalfeiel June 2020) through which "refugees in a corner of the world" could have "people to hear [their] stories and circumstances (Souliman Adam Burma June 2020). Yusef's desire to "represent his country" is tied to the idea that he and his teammates had to *work* for the only humanitarian program specifically for men — a sharp contrast to the need-based narratives around programs for refugee women and children. Hopeful Darfur United players often traveled several days, paying their own way, to attend tryouts held by iACT for the Darfur United team. Players shared that they trained regularly to improve their soccer skills (which required time in which one could not work or be looking for work). Each refugee camp then determined how to select the players that would travel to iACT's tryout. iACT did not dictate this process and each camp approached the selection differently. Darfur United players with whom I spoke shared a spectrum of satisfaction and dissatisfaction with their camps' selection process, some feeling that it was motivated by unfair allegiances based on ethnicity. Once players from each camp were selected, many of those chosen borrowed money from friends or family to make the journey to iACT tryouts in camp Djabal. Overwhelmingly, the Darfur United players with whom I spoke discussed the final team selection by iACT as a matter of finding the best soccer talent from each camp.

iACT staff had a different outlook. They were not looking for the *best* soccer players, per se. They informed Darfuri leaders that players would be selected from each camp. While this happened during initial conversations with Darfuri leaders about whether to start the team, I wonder about the power hierarchies that would have made protests to this policy permissible. iACT spoke regularly about finding the best *team* rather than the best individuals. This meant that players were also selected based on who would be a *good fit* for the program based on one's personality, background stories, English language skills (read: education access), and so on. None of the men with whom I spoke directly addressed this topic, but several players have commented about skilled soccer players not being selected for the team. In my experience with the team, there were regularly moments of frustration over some players' athletic ability and "better" soccer players being available to play. The team was ultimately composed of experienced soccer players and those who had little to no soccer experience prior to Darfur United tryouts. The disproportionate amount of opaque power that iACT exercised in these decisions is of course the norm in relationships between aid organizations and their constructed beneficiaries. The life-chances available through Darfur United were well beyond the men's control. It required making it through iACT's arbitrary and unclear conditions tied to (dis)ability, education access, class, and personalities amenable to iACT workers' implicit and western-centric biases. Mubarak Abdallah illuminates the mental strain this incurred:

> Tryouts were difficult. We couldn't all speak the same language. They only used Arabic, and it was so hard. They told us that they needed only twenty people from sixty-five people or more. It was so difficult. Everybody was focused on playing well and we tried not to make any mistakes. At every

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> single moment, you needed to focus on what they said. And with sixty people and only one translator, it was so difficult to get all the information.

For those who were ultimately selected, Darfur United became an important part of their lives and identity:

> You are so proud to play for Darfur United. I remember one day, the Janjaweed came around and I thought, "I'm dead." So, when you see from a dead man, to becoming a football player, a Darfur United football player, that is something. It is 200 degrees opposite. That is a really good achievement because we come with responsibility. We came here by the people's name: Darfur United. (Mohammad Annour June 2020).

Mohammad's pride begs one to ask *who and how* one is positioned to *become something* through aid efforts. *Becoming something* in this case is tied to iACT's demonstrations of paternalism that shaped who made the team. Exercising mobility "by the people's name" is also deeply gendered. Feminist literature shows how men are most often seen and heard as public representatives who speak or fight "abroad" for women and children "at home" (Enloe 2014). African feminists have written widely on how soccer in African nation-states (re)produces such heteronormative, patriarchal platforms (Saavedra 2003; Adjepong 2022; Ogunniyi 2014). This is also evident in that the tournaments in which Darfur United participated were only for men.

I am cautious about drawing reductive conclusions here. Instead, I try and pull apart the numerous gendered logics at play. It is true that the men were participating in a mobile and global platform only for men, and that no one had facilitated an opportunity for women to "represent Darfur" despite the attention that women are given in aid settings. It is also the case that refugee men typically face more legal barriers when crossing borders than refugee women and children because of assumptions about men as threats and perpetrators of violence (Helms 2015; Hyndman and Giles 2011). In this case, the mobility of refugee men was facilitated through several gendered constructions. Gabriel Stauring and the iACT team gained permission from UNHCR for the program by "promising" to "keep the men safe" with the oversight of a UNHCR official at the tournament. This shifted the men from being masculine, racialized subjects of suspicion in camps to feminized refugees under the watchful care of western aid actors. Moreover, the first tournament was in Iraq — quelling fears about refugee men penetrating the so-called global North. The Darfur United team was also feminized within the tournament structure. They were invited not based on previous success — as the other nonrefugee teams had been — but based on their humanitarian status. Their inclusion was used as a marketing tool for the tournament. News articles and media frequently discussed the players in terms of what they lacked: citizenship, access to food and water, training facilities, soccer shoes; compared to the other fit, professionalized, and healthy opponents, Darfur United was not considered a serious competitor or championship contender. This was not the initial perception of Darfur United players:

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> I was feeling so bad. When we got back, friends were asking by how many goals we had lost. What are you going to tell them? What am I going to tell my family? Because we were representing all the refugees. We got back to the refugee camps, and I had to say I got beat by this many goals. It was no good (Mubarak Abdallah June 2020).

> The main part is going to win. We know it is hard because you don't come from a refugee camp and win a tournament. We lost our games, but it is not about winning. It is about the unity of refugees. We got to show the world we can play football, and we can stay united. That was our message. (Mohammad Annour June 2020).

I interpret the men's struggle with Darfur United's losses as a challenge to cultural masculine and heteronormative ideals about their roles and expectations as men. Their first reactions were to associate their (un)successful role as representatives of Darfur through the team's score sheet. This meant the tournament, in part, felt like a failure. The Darfur United players, supported by the messaging provided by iACT staff, came to justify the losses in two ways. The first means was through recognizing the inequities that they faced as refugees. As Mohammad Annour reflected, "you don't come from a refugee camp and win a [soccer] tournament." This narrative fit-in with the tournament's overall feminization of the team as inherently lesser and nonthreatening than its competitors. Darfur United, unlike its competitors, had not qualified for the tournament by winning games. They were invited as presumed soccer-loving "representatives" of refugees globally, not as serious competitors like the non-refugee teams who qualified.

The second means was through focusing on iACT's initial aim for the team: to bring awareness to the refugee situation in Darfur. The team's losses did not detract from the intense attention that Darfur United received from global media outlets, fans, and other teams in the competition. The men were regularly featured and interviewed on TV after their games and thousands of fans would surround their team bus to take pictures. This attention served as a conduit for Darfur United to re-claim successful demonstrations of masculinity. After speaking about their disappointment in the team's losses, almost every Darfur United player who I interviewed expressed a version of the following:

> With Darfur United, we are going to help children and women with education and football. And even if we get more financial support, we can help them with food and other things (Ismail Wadalfeiel June 2020).

The players' desire to support their families and communities at large in Chad is sincere. Their messaging is also exceptionally similar to iACT's organizational discourse and messaging around the team. Before starting Darfur United in 2012, iACT had already began an early childhood education program — Little Ripples — an in-home preschool center run by refugee women who were employed by iACT. With the formation of Darfur United, iACT decided to begin a second

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program — the Refugees United Soccer Academy — boys and girls soccer academies to be managed by Darfur United players and additional refugee male and female staff. Even if losing matches was "failing" the Darfur United players, iACT's vision for the program perhaps spoke to the men's desire to serve their communities and support their families via bringing increased attention and support to iACT's growing programs.

Raising awareness and money for Darfur United to compete globally — for Darfur United to in turn raise awareness and money for refugee women and children — was difficult. iACT took on a significant financial burden to make the team possible and always struggled to cover the costs of the team. Meanwhile, the Darfur United players left their jobs, familial responsibilities, and educational opportunities to participate. And their wives, mothers, sisters, and aunts took on their everyday labor in the camps. The men did receive a monetary stipend from iACT for competing, but their efforts seem to have done little to improve their own named lack of support *for men* in eastern Chad. In fact, the players were immediately detained by Chad's refugee agency upon returning from the tournament due to unfounded security threats about their mobility abroad and their return to the camps. iACT's preschools and youth soccer academies were expanded thanks to the men's commitment to awareness-building. Some of the Darfur United players were hired as coaches. Recalling Thacher's reflections earlier, the Darfur United players are again in an "impossible bargain." On one hand, the men fail to meet their own gendered marker of success — winning games on a global stage under "the people's name" despite the conditions stacked against them. Yet, when the men shift their understanding of success, they become displaced as beneficiaries of humanitarian care to instead serve as conduits that return the humanitarian gaze to the less controversial refugee subjects: women and children.

Conclusion: Refugee Men's Impossible Bargain

This project set out to explore what happens in the rare moments when aid actors direct their resources to refugee men. The divergent aims and outcomes of iACT's programs for refugee men, women, and children demonstrate the aid sector's persistent and resilient orientation toward feminized constructions of refugeehood as those that are worthy of care. The Darfur United players had to perform arbitrary and often contradictory performances of femininity and masculinity to remain within the boundaries of an aid program for men. This included adopting aid workers' masculinized assumptions about men's desire to be athletes. It required men to *earn* rather than *receive* humanitarian resources. Refugee men were understood as passive, nonthreatening actors in comparison to nonrefugee athletes and had to further demonstrate their innocuous masculinity to the world by serving as conduits to help refugee women and children *despite* how their losses on a global stage hurt their gendered understandings of success as part of Darfur United. In an impossible bargain, the men used these varied demonstrations of gender for a chance at

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humanitarian care, while such participation simultaneously enabled men's re-moval from aid's humanitarian gaze.

These findings have several implications for future research and humanitarian practice. Scholarship ought to bring additional attention to the formal and informal demonstrations of masculinity and femininity that refugee men must perform to be legible to aid actors. Future research would benefit from an exploration of how refugee men, women, and children self-identify their needs and desires across varied experiences and forms of displacement. This research also highlights that care itself needs to continue to be reimagined and extended beyond binary gendered categories, particularly as part of on-going conversations on decolonizing humanitarian aid from its western and colonial foundations. This project and others would also benefit from an extended conversation on how humanitarian actors and practices enable/disable the (im)mobility of humanitarian subjects and how refugees and migrants navigate these shifting and gendered borders (see Pallister-Wilkins 2022; Johnson 2015).

And finally, we must ask — where are the women in this story of Darfur United? Mostly, in eastern Chad's refugee camps. The Darfur United players' mothers, sisters, aunts, and extended family not only encouraged players to pursue this rare opportunity but made doing so possible through caring for the players' familial and other responsibilities while they were away. While many of the Darfur United players gained asylum in Sweden, it took years for a handful of their wives, mothers, and children to be reunited with them. Many Darfur United players and the women and children in their life remain separated. This includes the women who make up the majority of iACT staff in eastern Chad and serve as preschool teachers and youth soccer coaches. Many of these women asked for the creation of the Darfur United Women's team as soon as men's team was being created in 2012. This became impossible after Darfur United players sought asylum in Sweden. UNHCR would not approve travel, and realistically, iACT would not be able to fund travel for women and their children outside of the camps. The absences of refugee women in iACT's story of Darfur United speaks as much to aid's gendered power hierarchies and assumptions as does the creation of a refugee men's soccer team.

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