Sex Work and Humanitarianism

Understanding Predominant Framings of Sex Work in Humanitarian Response

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## List of Abbreviations

<table>
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<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>EHA</td>
<td>Emergency Humanitarian Action</td>
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<tr>
<td>GAATW</td>
<td>Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women</td>
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<td>GBV</td>
<td>Gender-Based Violence</td>
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<td>IASC</td>
<td>Inter-Agency Standing Committee</td>
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<td>MSF</td>
<td>Médecins Sans Frontières/Doctors Without Boarders</td>
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<td>NGO</td>
<td>Non-Governmental Organisation</td>
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<td>OGERA</td>
<td>Organisation for Gender Empowerment and Rights Advocacy</td>
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<td>RHU</td>
<td>Reproductive Health Uganda</td>
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<td>RI</td>
<td>Refugees International</td>
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<td>STI</td>
<td>Sexually Transmitted Infection</td>
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<td>UN</td>
<td>United Nations</td>
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<td>UNGA</td>
<td>United Nations General Assembly</td>
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<td>UNHCR</td>
<td>United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees</td>
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<td>UNSG</td>
<td>UN Secretary General</td>
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<td>WHO</td>
<td>World Health Organization</td>
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<td>WRC</td>
<td>Women’s Refugee Commission</td>
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Abstract

The aim of this thesis is to study how the issue of sex work occurring within humanitarian contexts is addressed by the humanitarian sector, and what this in turn can say about how the problem itself is framed. The analysis focuses on three types of approaches which were identified. These are: to address humanitarian staff and their behaviour in the field in relation to using transactional sex; understanding sex work as a ‘negative coping strategy’ and addressing underlying vulnerabilities; and using a rights-based and community empowerment approach to sex work.

By analysing codes of conduct, policies, guidelines, and literature suggesting ways for humanitarian workers and peacekeepers to deal with, position themselves against, and understand sex work in the field, I found that, besides the fact that this issue has not been given enough attention in the humanitarian sector, it has mostly been understood as a form of exploitation, and as a coping strategy either used or forced onto mostly women in contexts of crises. The recurrent themes in many of these approaches, have been the focus on gendered vulnerabilities and power structures between people working within or together with the humanitarian sector and the local population in contexts of crisis. Within these frameworks, the issue of to what extent women engaged in sex work are perceived to have agency is somewhat ambivalent, and some critics have argued that their agency has been denied and that not enough focus has been given to the actual needs and risks of those who engage in sex work. This critique has in turn inspired new guidelines and programmes to be developed.

By linking the analysis to further debates on sex work and critique of the humanitarian sector, I conclude that the simplistic and victimising portrayal of people engaging in sex work and of people living in contexts of humanitarian crises, as well as the sometimes-lacking reflection of ideologies and frameworks motivating humanitarian operations, can blind us to the more nuanced and diverse needs that people in these situations might have. It can also negatively impact the approaches that we use to address stigmatised issues such as sex work. Therefore, I stress that it remains important to study the processes through which knowledge about these issues is produced, and whose voices are included in the process.
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1. Introduction

1.1. Background

In the same way that sex work occurs in places all over the world, this also happens in times of humanitarian crises. In fact, research points out that people often are more inclined to turn to sex work in these contexts as there are scarce or no other options available that offer a source of income for them and their families (Formson & Hilhorst 2016: 11), or they engage in relationships of transactional sex or ‘girlfriendning’ with powerful men such as military officers or peacekeepers to secure resources and protection (Utas 2005: 415, Oldenburg 2015: 320). Further, according to Beber et al. (2017: 3), the presence of peacekeepers in post war contexts has been seen to increase the probability of local women entering sex work in the first place. Cases also exist of humanitarian workers exploiting their power to force themselves to sexual favours in return for food and other relief items (Ferris 2007: 585) or availing themselves of the sexual services offered within local sex trade markets. The Oxfam sex scandal in Haiti 2011 and in Chad 2006 are more famous examples which drew attention to this matter in 20181 (BBC 2018).

Because of these tendencies, it is of utter importance for humanitarian workers to be sensitive to these issues, as well as to develop ways to deal with them that are safe and sustainable for the people involved, mainly women and girls, whom are sometimes the same people that the humanitarian workers are there to assist (Ferris 2007: 585). Unfortunately, there is a gap within the humanitarian sector regarding ways to respond to sex work taking place in the humanitarian field (Rosenberg & Bakomeza 2017: 96). As stated by a refugee service provider in Delhi:

“Everybody knows it is happening, we just don’t know what to do about it…. What can we be mindful of? How can we approach it? How should we talk about it? This we don’t really know” (WRC 2016a: 3).

Besides addressing this gap, it is crucial to examine how this problem is understood as these understandings are what generates different ways of addressing it, when it is addressed. A critical examination of the construction of knowledge in this field is therefore important to

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1 In 2018, staff of the charity organisation Oxfam were accused of sexual misconduct after it became known that they had used the services of local sex workers when working in the aftermath of the 2010 earthquake in Haiti and during their mission in Chad in 2006 (BBC 2018).
enable humanitarians and researchers to evaluate sustainable approaches, especially if we wish to adhere to the humanitarian principle of “do no harm”\textsuperscript{2}.

Besides the scientific importance of this study, I have a personal interest in this field both due to my interest of working in the humanitarian sector, and because of my interest in how to safely deal with the matter of sex work. Having previously done research on sex workers’ rights activism in Ireland, I found that some ways to address sex work can be directly harmful for the sex working population, and that the voices of sex workers themselves are often ignored, neglected, or consciously suppressed in conversations about sex work (Alm Engvall 2016: 4-5). Considering that this appears to be a structural problem in Ireland and elsewhere, it is highly imaginable that similar issues also exist in contexts with structures of vast power differences such as within the humanitarian field. Bearing in mind that these structures remain present in the production of knowledge on which this sector is operating, I see an immense need to remain critical to what humanitarians think that they know, what they do, and how they do it.

1.1. Goals and Research Questions

In my thesis, I plan to study how sex work is perceived and understood within the humanitarian sector. Previous research has criticised the paternalistic and postcolonial white saviour attitudes that have sometimes coloured humanitarianism and shaped its interventions (Barnett 2011: 12; I’Anson & Pfeifer 2013: 53). I wish to extend this critique and analyse how humanitarian agents have treated those engaging in sex work. To understand this, my main research question is: What sort of framed understandings of sex work are prevailing within the humanitarian field?

To answer this question, I will look at different approaches that have been adopted by organisations working in humanitarian contexts to address the issue of sex work and analyse what types of framed knowledge they are based on.

The goal of this research is not to evaluate the interventions per se, nor to recommend a certain approach, but to critically examine the different understandings that are active in generating the different approaches that are identified. By doing so, I hope to extend the critique of humanitarianism as a ‘neutral’ sector.

\textsuperscript{2} I will explain this principle further in the following work.
1.2. Previous Research

Previous research relevant to this analysis includes research related to humanitarianism and understandings of sex work. Barnett (2011) and I’Anson and Pfeifer (2013) have criticised the paternalistic structures within the humanitarian sector, and the ‘dialectical deafness’ NGO workers can have for the actual needs of beneficiaries. Bjarnesen (2016) criticises notions about victimhood and agency in the common dualistic view of refugees and labour migrants which simplifies the complex realities of these people. A similar polarised view of victimhood and agency has been criticised in literature studying debates about sex work, where images of prostitution as a form of oppression against women has been put against a focus on female agency (Hulusjö 2013:30).

Further, Agustín (2007) uses a postcolonial framework to criticise what she calls the ‘rescue industry’, or the paternalistic and often western, middle-class ideas of ‘rescuing’ poorer non-European women, especially from sexually deviant behaviours or from situations as ‘trafficked victims’. The issues of gender, victimisation, agency and masculinity norms in relation to sex work, ‘girlfriending’, and sexual exploitation in post war contexts have also been studied by Utas (2015) and Higate (2007). Ferris (2007) and Mudgeway (2017) have analysed when humanitarian aid workers and peacekeepers engage in sexual exploitation of beneficiaries and local women and girls, and Simic (2009) has criticised how broadly the term sexual exploitation has been used when referring to some of these relations. McMillan et al. (2018) have also studied the meaning of different terminology used to describe sex work, such as ‘transactional sex’ and ‘survival sex’, and what these terms signify, and Rosenberg and Bakomeza have criticised the latter term when used to describe what they refer to as consensual sex between adults (Rosenberg & Bakomeza 2017: 96) whilst criticising how sex work in humanitarian settings has previously been addressed. Bradford and Sartwell (1997) have theorised about how some voices are heard over others and considered to be neutral and descriptive because of whom they belong to, allowing some people to speak on the behalf of others whilst essentially silencing them by calling them voiceless. Further, Cheng (2011) has studied how the international legal framework of human rights and women’s human rights are conceptualised and vernacularized locally to endorse certain legal approaches to sex work. Formson and Hilhorst (2016) have also studied the vast and complex realities and problems of people engaging in transactional sex in humanitarian contexts. However, as highlighted by them, there is only limited research conducted on this topic (Formson & Hilhorts 2016: 4).
1.3. Significance of this Research

As mentioned above, there is scarce academic research available on the topic of sex work in humanitarian settings, which is problematic considering that it is something that is commonly known to occur. It is therefore important to bring more attention to this subject, as well as to critically examine the way that it has hitherto been understood, which is what this thesis aims to do. This thesis can also be considered an addition to current discussions about humanitarianism and sex work.

Besides contributing to filling a gap within academic research, this research can also be beneficial for the people working in humanitarian settings since it provides an analysis of the framed understandings of what is going on that are at play in the different approaches used by humanitarians to address sex work. This knowledge can help humanitarians to be more reflective about their work in the field in relation to sex work.

Further, the knowledge produced in this thesis can also become beneficial for the women in humanitarian contexts who engage in sex work since it produces and encourages a critical examination of the understandings that are motivating existing approaches. Only by remaining critical to what we know and how we know it can we challenge or develop it and produce better and more all-encompassing ways for humanitarian workers to be sensitive and support those who engage in these behaviours, for whichever reason and in whichever way they are doing so.

1.4. Data and Methodology

This research is mostly based on secondary data and research conducted by other scholars and organisations. Besides relevant academic literature treating the issues of humanitarianism, sex work, frame theory, and the issues of social agency, which I will use to support my own analysis, this thesis will also be analysing material which directly addresses the issue of sex work taking place in the humanitarian field. The material which will be analysed can be categorised into four overarching categories:

1) policies and codes of conduct addressing the sexual behaviours of humanitarian workers in the field;
2) guidelines for humanitarian organisations that suggests ways to deal with or understand the matter of sex work and beneficiaries engaging sex work;
3) research and case reports by organisations working with people engaged in sex work in humanitarian settings; 
4) newspaper articles and statements made by journalists and humanitarian and human rights organisations; 

The material that will be used in each category includes:

1) The policies and codes of conducts that will be analysed include: the United Nation’s (UN) zero-tolerance principle and the United Nations Secretary-General’s (UNSG) Bulletin *Special measures for protection from sexual exploitation and sexual abuse*; the Ten Rules of Personal Conduct for Blue Helmets for UN peacekeepers; Oxfam Employee Code of Conduct and Oxfam Non-Staff Code of Conduct; and Médecins Sans Frontières’ (MSF) (2018) Behavioural Commitments. These policies have been selected as they belong to highly influential actors in the humanitarian field, and because especially the UN and Oxfam have taken specific measures to address the sexual behaviour of staff after allegations of sexual exploitation.

2) There are two types of guidelines I have identified, those dealing with how to prevent sex work or ‘survival sex’ from happening, and those who aim to address it as it is occurring.

The first group of guidelines include “The Sphere Handbook” (2018), the Inter-Agency Standing Committee’s (IASC) (2017) “The Gender Handbook for Humanitarian Action” and their (2015) “Guidelines for Integrating Gender-Based Violence Interventions in Humanitarian Action”. The Sphere Handbook was selected as it is based on the commonly accepted standards in humanitarian response, the Sphere standards, and used by governments, UN agencies, and national and international NGOs (Sphere n.d.). IASC is a “primary mechanism for inter-agency coordination of humanitarian assistance” (IASC n.d.), consisting of both UN and other humanitarian partners. Its Gender Handbook and guidelines are therefore highly referenced in humanitarian response.

interventions”. These guidelines have been selected as they specifically treat the issue on how to work with refugees engaged in sex work.

3) The case report that will be referred to is “Let’s talk about sex work in humanitarian settings: Piloting a rights-based approach to working with refugee women selling sex in Kampala” (2017) about a programme that was launched by WRC and Reproductive Health Uganda (RHU). This report is included as it evaluates a new approach taken to sex work among refugees in a camp setting.

4) The newspaper articles that will be used are from the Guardian, BBC, and Devex, since these are widely recognised news sources, and will be used to provide a background to certain events. Devex is also a platform with close relations to the humanitarian sector (Devex n.d.).

The statements that I refer to are statements made by Oxfam and Amnesty International. Both of these statements include positions taken by the organisations on the issues of sex work and sexual misconduct.

When studying my material, I will look at the way that the different texts discuss sex work; how it is portrayed and in relation to what; which terms are used to describe what is going on; how the people who are engaging in sex work are made sense of; what risks are mention and if the risks identified are mainly associated with entry into sex work or within sex work itself; and which suggestions are made about how to treat this. These questions will all be used to identify and analyse what sort of framed understanding of sex work is underlying in all of these texts.

1.6. Limitations

Though being aware that not only women engage in sex work in humanitarian settings, I have chosen to only focus my thesis on this. This decision was made to limit my research, due to constraints in time and space. Further, considering that the literature available on sex work in humanitarian contexts is already scarce, and women’s engagement in this is what has mostly been discussed in literature, it was possible to find more sources relating to this issue.

To my understanding, the realities of people who are using sex to access money, protection, food, or other material and non-material items in humanitarian settings can vary a lot, and since my aim of this research is to examine how this is understood, I will refer to forced prostitution
only when the framework that I am analysing does not differentiate it from other forms of sex work. I also do not treat the issue of child prostitution.

Many guidelines for humanitarian workers do not treat the issue of sex work, or only mentions it briefly in sometimes ambivalent or inconsistent terms without specifying what they mean by it. Hence, the material available for parts of my analysis has been somewhat scarce. However, I have been able to draw conclusions based on the work that is available using other academic sources, and I see this scarcity as another reason for why this research is important.

1.7. Thesis Outline

After the introduction part of this thesis, which contains the background to this research and the relevant research and material that will be used, follows hereafter a part on the theoretical framework that will be used to support my analysis.

In this part, I will present the main theoretical framework that will be used, namely that of Goffman’s frame theory, as well as the concepts of agency and coping. I will also define what I mean by the humanitarian sector and discuss the language that is used in this thesis.

The analysis itself has been divided into three empirical chapters. Each chapter explores a separate way of dealing with, or not dealing with, the issue of sex work occurring in humanitarian contexts.

In the first chapter, I will look at policies and codes of conduct specifically addressing humanitarian workers and peacekeepers and their behaviours in the field in relation to engaging in (exploiting) relations with beneficiaries and other locals.

In the second chapter, I will look at guidelines used in the humanitarian sector that addresses the reasons to why sex work or ‘survival sex’ is happening in humanitarian settings.

In chapter three, I will look at new approaches that directly addresses people involved in sex work in humanitarian settings, and more specifically when refugees do so, and the risks that they face within these contexts.

In each chapter I will examine what these different types of approaches can tell us about how the problem is framed, and link this to wider discussions on humanitarianism and sex work.
Lastly, I will have a concluding discussion to summarise and analyse my findings further and tie them back to my research question before offering suggestions for further research.
2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Frame Theory

The main theoretical focus in this thesis will be that of Goffman’s (1974) frame theory. Coming from the field of Sociology, Goffman’s frame theory describes how people make sense out of the world by “framing” what is going on in certain ways to assert different meanings. This is something that all people do, often unconsciously, and it helps us to categorise our lived activities and make sense of our surroundings (Goffman 1974: 10-11). Goffman’s frame theory has different levels to it, but the most fundamental frames are those that he calls primary frameworks. These are the frameworks which give any event its most basic meaning and helps us understand “what is going on”. According to Goffman, mostly everything we do is ascribed some sort of primary framework (Goffman 1974: 21-22, 38). Misframing is something that can happen when we fail to understand exactly what is going on and ascribe an event the wrong type of meaning. Further, by applying different frames to an event, ambiguity and conflict can arise as people interpret something differently from each other. This can sometimes be resolved through the “clearing” of a frame, a correction in the understanding we have of an event, or when everyone reaches a shared perception of reality (Goffman 1974: 341-343). Frames can, nevertheless, be hard to clear. Often, we are good at defending the framework we perceive to be the correct one from outside critique (Goffman 1974: 28-29). New knowledge about an issue is usually either incorporated and interpreted by the dominant frame or dismissed as invalid. This has been seen, for example, within debates about sex work where the framing of sex work as a form of exploitation where the person selling sex is always understood to be exploited, and hence a victim, has worked to validate the exclusion of sex workers voices who claim otherwise (FitzGerald & McGarry 2016: 297). I found in my own previous research that claims that some sex workers are either ‘too damaged by structures to understand their own oppression’ or ‘not the right type of sex worker that should be at focus’ when speaking about sex work also worked to dismiss their voices (Alm Engvall 2016: 82). In this thesis, I will use Goffman’s frame theory to try to understand how sex work is understood within humanitarian contexts.

2.2. Agency

In social research, a person’s ability to make choices and control the courses of their lives and actions is commonly known as a person’s agency (Formson & Hilhorst 2016: 14). This ability has often been positioned in opposition to how surrounding social structures influences a
person’s possibility to make choices. These structures can consist of social class, gender, or cultural norms which influence a person’s behaviours and their access to certain resources (Sewell 1992: 2, 8-9). Most philosophers and social scientists seem to agree, though, that both social structures and agency as an ability to act within and upon these play a part in the trajectory of people’s lives, and they should not be treated simply as oppositions (ibid: 4). Two groups of people are often portrayed as having little or no agency at all, namely refugees and other beneficiaries of humanitarian aid and sex workers. This is of importance as this thesis sets out to study when these categories intersect, and people engage in sex work in times of humanitarian crises.

According to Bjarnesen (2016), refugees are often contrasted to labour migrants, as being understood as forced to migrate, and therefore are lacking agency, as opposed to labour migrants who choses to. Such a simplistic division, however, fails to encompass the complex realities of these people (Bjarnesen 2016: 53).

This simplistic view of human agency, as something that a person either has or has not, and the centralisation of the matter of choice, is also present and criticised within debates about sex work. Here, some feminists have argued prostitution as a form of male oppression and violence against women, stating that no one chooses to sell sex but are essentially forced into it by surrounding structures. Others have criticised this view precisely because it makes generalised assumptions about sex workers lives and ignores their agency (Hulusjö 2013: 30; Sanders et al. 2009: 168).

Combining the victimisation of both sex workers and people affected by war, some anthropologists have tried to understand the complex realities that women turning to sex work and other forms of transactional sex face in these settings (Oldenburg 2015). According to Utas (2005: 424), women are often depicted as victims in contexts of war, compared to men as active agents. In a critique of this, he shows a broader image of how women use what he calls ‘girlfriending’ as a form of tactic agency to better their position or reduce the risks they face within the war zones. Though not treating refugees and recipients of humanitarian aid who engage in sex work explicitly, this study depicts the lives of women in arguably similar contexts. The way the researchers are treating the concept of agency when portraying the lives and choices of these women is also similar to how the concept will be used in my analysis.
2.3. Coping Mechanisms and Strategies
The terms coping, coping mechanisms, and coping strategies are often used in literature and guidelines on how to work with people in crises. However, I found that these concepts are rarely defined in these texts.

According to the American Psychological Association’s (APA) Dictionary of Psychology, a coping mechanism is “any conscious or nonconscious adjustment or adaptation that decreases tension and anxiety in a stressful experience or situation” (APA n.d.a), and a coping strategy is “an action, a series of actions, or a thought process used in meeting a stressful or unpleasant situation or in modifying one’s reaction to such a situation” (APA n.d.b). Further, it states that “[c]oping strategies typically involve a conscious and direct approach to problems” (ibid).

According to these definitions, both coping mechanisms and strategies appears to be actions or processes to deal with a negative situation. What differs is that coping mechanisms can be conscious or unconscious, whereas coping strategies seem to involve a conscious and more direct action. What is interesting for my analysis is to what extent agency is understood to be present in these adaptations when these terms are used to describe the actions of people in crises who engage in sex work.

2.4. Defining and Positioning the Humanitarian Sector
The humanitarian sector can be hard to define as many disagree about exactly what humanitarian organisations should do in their work. Some argue that the humanitarian sector should only provide emergency relief whilst other argue that it should also focus on resilience building in the communities that it assists and try to bridge the gap to the development sector (Harmer & Macrae 2004: 2), or include a human rights perspective in their work (Mazurana & Maxwell 2016: 14). The commonly accepted definition, however, is that humanitarianism is “the impartial, neutral, and independent provision of relief to victims of conflict and natural disasters” (Barnett 2011: 10).

The aspects of neutrality and impartiality are central to many humanitarian organisations. However, Ciro Martínez and Eng (2016: 155-156) argue that what they call the “frame [of neutrality] allows humanitarian practices to stand above and beyond the debates of ordinary politics”, whilst actually, aid itself can become politicised. Barnett has also discussed the fact that despite adhering to its ethical principles and imagining itself as operating solely on its apolitical ethics of care, the humanitarian sector itself can bring about new structures of power
and be highly paternalistic in its approaches (Barnett 2011: 34). According to I’Anson and Pfiefer (2013: 50), it also operates on its own set of ideologies, and NGO workers might thus have a ‘dialectical deafness’ to the agencies and needs of its beneficiaries. Further, when studying the work in refugee camps, Clarke (2016) criticises humanitarian workers for failing to recognise the political power that they hold over other people’s lives and to provide systems of accountability for this control (Clarke 2016: 100).

These structures of power also extends to the process of producing the knowledge that shapes these practices, especially in what Morris (2010:112) describes as the politics of representation which is when someone assumes the position of being able to ‘speak for’ others about their lived realities. Bradford and Sartwell (1997: 193) have also highlighted the problem that different voices are received differently, such as how the white male voice and the academic voice often are perceived as neutral narrators of what is going on. This is an important aspect in the process of framing different problems and constructing different responses.

For humanitarian organisations to assure that they do indeed hear the actual needs of people and refrain from projecting their own ideas of what is going on onto their beneficiaries, and to follow the principle of ‘do no harm’, it is important that they remain reflective of these mechanisms. This principle, which most organisations aim to uphold, instructs humanitarian actors to be aware of the unintended consequences that their assistance might have, and act to minimise the risks of these (UNICEF 2003: 2).

Considering the principles of neutrality and impartiality that humanitarian organisations are adhering to, most of them will only engage with the military if these principles are not compromised (UNOCHA 2014: 5). UN Peacekeeping operations, on the other hand, are military operations, and are thus not a part of the humanitarian sector per se. They can, however, be part of a humanitarian response, are often motivated by humanitarian reasons, and work closely with the humanitarian sector (UN Peacekeeping n.d.). A lot of focus regarding sex work and sexual exploitation in humanitarian contexts has also been on peacekeeping operations, and the UNSG Bulletin on ‘Special measures for protection from sexual exploitation and sexual abuse’ was based on findings from an investigation into allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse of refugees by both peacekeepers and humanitarian aid workers in West Africa (UNGA 2002: 1). It applies to all UN staff (UNSG 2003: 1) including peacekeepers and those working in its humanitarian branches. Because of this, peacekeepers are also addressed in my analysis.
Since the sector itself is wide and diverse in its operations, I am not claiming to identify frameworks that are consistent in the sector as a whole. Instead, I wish to highlight what I believe are dominant frameworks in the guidelines and discussions that I have identified, and which all apply to many or large humanitarian organisations.

2.5. Language

The language used when discussing sex work has been debated and politicised in especially feminist discourse. Therefore, it calls for some discussion about the terms that I am using in this thesis. The term prostitution, though often used as a legal term, has been abandoned by many liberal feminists and sex workers who stress that the term sex work should be used as it recognises the agency of sex workers and acknowledges sex work as being a form of labour (Hulusjö 2013: 136: 3; McMillan et al 2018: 1519).

Within literature relating to the humanitarian sector, the term ‘survival sex’ is often used to describe those who sell sex in times of crises, suggesting that this is a behaviour which is only motivated by extreme needs (McMillan et al 2018: 1523). This term has been criticised, however, by those who claim that it gives a simplified and polarised understanding of those who sell sex because of ‘needs’ or ‘wants’, a distinction that is rarely clear-cut (Formson and Hilhorst 2016: 9).

The term transactional sex is also found in literature treating the matter of paid sex in humanitarian and post war contexts (see e.g. Oldenburg 2015). Transactional sex is considered a broader term than sex work, as it includes multiple forms of behaviours and relationships where sex is “exchanged as part of a range of social transactions and obligations” besides strictly commercial sex work (McMillan et al 2018: 1522).

Following McMillan et al. (2018: 1517), I mostly use the term sex work as it recognises sex work as a form of labour without defining it according to morals. Recognising that the people themselves might not identify as sex workers, I describe them as women engaging in sex work. I also use the term transactional sex when a wider understanding is more applicable.
3. Analysis

3.1. Addressing Humanitarian Staff and Their Behaviour in the Field

As we have seen, sex work does exist in humanitarian settings, and some humanitarian workers and peacekeepers themselves have been known to use services of local sex workers when working in the field (Anders & Edwards 2018; Beber et al 2017: 3). Some have also been accused of trading food, medicine and other humanitarian aid supplies for sexual favours from beneficiaries (Ferris 2007: 585). This has been getting more attention from funders and the international community, as well as from organisations themselves. Some organisations have introduced policies dealing specifically with the behaviour amongst their staff in relation to these issues (Mudgeway 2017: 1453).

3.1.1. UN Zero Tolerance and Issues of Sexual Exploitation

Following allegations of sexual exploitations against UN peacekeepers, the UN has taken steps to address these issues and developed a ‘zero-tolerance’ policy against sexual exploitation and abuse (Mudgeway 2017: 1453). In 2003, a specific Secretary-General’s Bulletin named ‘Special measures for protection from sexual exploitation and sexual abuse’ was developed which applies to people working for all branches of the UN (UNSG 2003: 1). The bulletin was based on a report from the previous year, which investigated allegations of widespread sexual exploitation of female refugees made against UN and NGO staff working in West Africa (UNGA 2002). In the report it states that:

“Sexual exploitation and abuse by humanitarian staff cannot be tolerated. It violates everything the United Nations stands for. Men, women and children displaced by conflict or other disasters are among the most vulnerable people on earth. They look to the United Nations and its humanitarian partners for shelter and protection. Anyone employed by or affiliated with the United Nations who breaks that sacred trust must be held accountable and, when the circumstances so warrant, prosecuted” (UNGA 2002: 1).

This is a strong and clear statement which demonstrates how seriously the UN is treating this matter. It also brings up a lot of aspects that we will explore in this chapter, such as the term ‘sexual exploitation’, the issue of vulnerability, and the idea of the UN and the humanitarian sector as a sort of protector of these other more vulnerable people.

On the specific issue of transactional sex, the bulletin states that:

“Exchange of money, employment, goods or services for sex, including sexual favours or other forms of humiliating, degrading or exploitative behaviour, is prohibited” (UNGA 2003: 2).
Here we see the term ‘exploitative’ being used specifically relating to transactional sex; suggesting that this is something that should be understood as exploitative in its nature. The term exploitation indicates that there is some sort of power inequality present in this transaction. This becomes clear in the definition that is used for the term in this document:

“For the purposes of the present bulletin, the term “sexual exploitation” means any actual or attempted abuse of a position of vulnerability, differential power, or trust, for sexual purposes, including, but not limited to, profiting monetarily, socially or politically from the sexual exploitation of another” (UNSG 2003: 1).

Using frame theory, it is possible to see this understanding as a primary framework. The problem is understood, or framed, as being one of exploitation where one person is using their position of power to gain something, in this case for sexual purposes, from another’s more vulnerable position. This framework resonates with how sex work in general has been framed by radical feminists who describe all forms of sex work as inherently exploitative (Simic 2009: 289). Besides the term exploitation, the bulletin also includes the wording “or other forms of humiliating [and] degrading […] behaviour” when discussing transactions of trading goods for sexual favours. These are, thus, also unquestioned qualities that are ascribed to transactional sex (in this context) within this framework.

Further, the bulletin also discourages all forms of sexual relationships between workers and beneficiaries as it is seen as they are:

“based on inherently unequal power dynamics [and] undermine the credibility and integrity of the work of the United Nations” (UNSG 2003: 2).

This suggests that within this specific framework, transactional sex in humanitarian settings is not only unequal due to the financial or other transaction that is being made, but the actual relationship behind that transaction is also understood to be one of inequality due to the power structures that characterises relationships between workers and locals/beneficiaries.

Simic (2009) argues, however, that the term ‘sexual exploitation’ is used too broadly in this bulletin and conflates sexual relationships which might not be of exploitative character, according to her, such as consensual sexual relations between peacekeepers and locals, with those that are, such as rape, and forced prostitution (Simic 2009: 288).
3.1.2. Peacekeepers’ Code of Conduct and Issues of Morality

Though the UN first started actively addressing these matters in 2002, allegations of sexual exploitation by UN peacekeeping staff had been heard since the early 1990’s (Simic 2009: 288), and a lot of critique has thus been centralised around peacekeepers. Besides the UN Bulletin and zero-tolerance policy, UN peacekeepers also have their own code of conduct. One of the points in this states:

“Do not indulge in immoral acts of sexual, physical or psychological abuse or exploitation of the local population or United Nations staff, especially women and children” (UN 1999: 2).

What is interesting in this sentence is that it does not only raise the issue of exploitation, but also that of morality. The question of morality is one that has been reoccurring within the topic of sex work, where what has been described as a moral panic about trafficking and forced prostitution has influenced different policies to address it (Hope Ditmore 2011: 32).

The humanitarian sector itself has sometimes been portrayed as operating solely on the basis of ethics, as opposed to politics. Though this has been problematised with time, it is still commonly understood that humanitarianism is driven by an ‘ethics of care’ (Barnett 2011: 6-8). Considering this, for humanitarian workers to engage in behaviour that is deemed ‘morally wrong’ would be contradictory of the humanitarian intention and could threaten the legitimacy of the sector as being one driven by human compassion.

Another aspect which is raised in this sentence, is that of gender. When specifically mentioning “women and children”, this indicates that these are the people who are most vulnerable to this problem, if not further, the most vulnerable full stop. The aspect of gender dynamics and gendered vulnerabilities is one that has been at the core of discussions about sexual relations in humanitarian contexts and is one that will be explored more in depth shortly.

3.1.3. Impunity, Masculinity Norms, and Male Agency

What these policies have in common is that they focus on the behaviour of the peacekeepers as the ‘perpetrator’ in these situations. Some researchers, such as Higate (2007), have also tried to understand what causes this behaviour in order to suggest ways to address it. Two themes that he identifies and criticises are those of impunity and masculinity norms.

The problem of impunity is one that has been heavily criticised, and it appears to be an issue both within humanitarian organisations, where few organisations seem to have enforced their
policies to dismiss or penalise staff for this sort of behaviour (Anders & Edwards 2018), and within peacekeeping operations where, according to Martin (2005: ii), policies and guidelines are not always followed.

In a report written for Refugees International (RI) by Sarah Martin (2005), she identifies the hyper-masculine culture that exists among peacekeeping personnel and which she argues “encourages sexual exploitation and abuse” (Martin 2005: ii). Higate (2007) has also studied these masculinity norms to understand how they, together with other aspects such as socioeconomic contexts and the issue of impunity, affects peacekeepers behaviours. In his study, he argues that despite prevailing masculinity norms, and despite what other’s would argue as men’s natural (and uncontrollable) sex drive, peacekeepers do have agency to make their own decisions about how to behave within the structures that they move (Higate 2007: 101-102, 111).

Some critics have stressed that a problematic aspect of these approaches is that they ignore the agency of the women who sell sexual services to humanitarian workers and peacekeepers (Simic 2009: 294). Others, such as Higate, have dismissed any such critique saying that:

“The limited control used by women involved in commercial sex was conflated with their (illusory) exercise of power” (Higate 2007: 113).

After drawing this conclusion, he continues:

“It is possible that these findings have policy relevance, since they can be fed into gender sensitivity training strategies. For example, permission and in-mission training directed toward peacekeeping and civilian UN personnel might seek to encourage newly deployed personnel to get beyond the image of working girls freely choosing to solicit them for commercial sex” (ibid).

It could be argued that Higate reproduces the image that Utas has criticised of men being understood as active agents, whilst women are understood as controlled by their surrounding structures, especially in times of war and crisis (Utas 2015: 497). It also resembles the idea of women engaging in sex work all being victims without agency. What is interesting in Higate’s writing, in relation to how knowledge is constructed and framed, is that his writing does not only reproduce the image of these women being pure victims without agency, but it also suggests ways to spread this framework through including this understanding in gender sensitivity training for peacekeepers.
3.1.4. Humanitarian Organisations, Female Agency, and Gendered Vulnerabilities

The humanitarian organisation that has been in the centre of attention regarding the issue of aid workers’ sexual behaviours in the field, and which sparked an international concern about this, is Oxfam. After it became known that Oxfam workers had been paying local women for sex in Haiti on their mission after the earthquake in 2010, other stories came out about humanitarian workers engaging in sexually exploitative behaviours with beneficiaries and local people (Anders & Edwards 2018). This has led to funders and spokespeople withdrawing their support for Oxfam (Gayle 2018), and the European Union threatened to tighten funding to NGOs that do not address this issue (Chadwick 2018). Since then, Oxfam and other organisations have updated their policies on the issue in similar ways to the ones we looked at above.

On their international website, Oxfam states that they are sorry for the mistakes that were made in Haiti regarding both prevention and investigation of sexual misconduct carried out by their staff. They also assure a commitment to change the culture within the organisation that allowed for this. One of the things that they have done has been to “[bring] in specialist insights, including from feminist activists, to help boost and share [their] knowledge”, and formed a specific group that is working to “[ground] feminist principles across [their] cultural change work”. Besides this, they have organised workshops for their staff on gender, culture, and power in countries such as Haiti, South Sudan, and Afghanistan (Oxfam International n.d.).

The introduction of these workshops and the use of feminist principles in their work suggests that Oxfam has based their understanding of the issue on a (radical) feminist framework, identifying power and gender inequalities as main problems.

Further, Oxfam have also updated their code of conduct to include the usage of services provided by sex workers, something which was previously not addressed specifically (Ratcliff & Quinn 2018). Today, two points in their codes of conduct for both staff and non-staff state:

“\[I will not have sexual relations with beneficiaries, recognising (…) the inherent unequal power dynamics and that such behaviours can undermine the integrity and credibility of Oxfam's work.\\]

I will not exchange money, offers of employment, employment, goods or services for sex or sexual favours, nor any forms of humiliating, degrading or exploitative behaviour.” (Oxfam 2018a: 1; Oxfam 2018b: 1).

Similar to the codes of conducts for peacekeepers, this wording signifies both that engaging in sexual relations with beneficiaries, as well as purchasing sexual services whilst working in the
field, are acts of exploitation or based on unequal structures of power. They also point to the issue raised earlier that such behaviour can delegitimise the work of Oxfam as an actor driven by an ethical motivation to help those who are vulnerable.

In a document on behavioural commitments from MSF we find a similar stance:

“MSF staff members and operational partners shall not accept, under any circumstances, behaviour that exploits the vulnerability of others, in the broadest possible sense (sexual, economic, social, etc.). This includes exchange of goods, benefits or services for acts of a sexual nature, including the use of sex workers’ services while on assignment” (MSF 2018).

It thus seems like the commonly accepted framework, both when addressing peacekeepers and humanitarian workers, is that which understands the problem as being one of exploitation of power. These types of policies, however, have been getting some critique from people such as Simic (2009), who argues that:

“(…) the ‘zero tolerance policy’ treats women as passive and helpless objects who do not have the agency to decide whether or not to be involved in any form of sexual relationship” (Simic 2009: 294).

As mentioned in the introduction, the question of agency has been central when discussing both recipients of humanitarian aid and people engage in sex work. An interesting note here to make is that on Oxfam GB’s website where their codes of conduct are accessible to download, it reads that:

“Oxfam GB is working towards a world in which people can live with dignity, have their basic needs met and their basic rights respected, and have the ability to control their own lives” (Oxfam UK n.d.).

This raises the question of whether, within the framed understanding that Oxfam, among other organisations, are basing their stances on; women in areas of crises who sell sex to humanitarian workers are perceived to be unable control of their own lives. This question of passivity is one that we will come back to more in the following chapter.
3.2. Addressing Sex Work as a ‘Negative Coping Strategy’

The prevailing way that sex work among refugees and other recipients of humanitarian aid appears to be categorised and addressed in most humanitarian guidelines, if addressed at all, is through understanding it as a ‘negative coping strategy’ or ‘coping mechanism’ and/or ‘survival sex’. Below follows a section from the Sphere Handbook that describes the strategies that people might use to cope with the problems of food security and nutrition:

“Some coping strategies used by, or forced on, women, girls and boys may impact their health, psychological well-being and social integration. These coping strategies include transactional or “survival” sex (…)” (Sphere Association 2018: 168).

What exactly is meant with coping strategies and coping mechanisms in this and other guidelines used in the humanitarian sector is not often explicitly defined. The terms appear to also be used rather interchangeably. As we have seen previously in the definition by APA, both of these terms describe the psychological and physical behaviours used by people to consciously or unconsciously mitigate and adapt to negative situations. In these guidelines, however, it is not often clear whether ‘survival sex’ as a coping mechanism or strategy is used as a conscious strategy by people in which they have agency, or whether this is rather something that happens upon them.

3.2.1. Vulnerabilities and (Negative) Coping

As seen in the segment above, some coping strategies can have negative consequences for people, such as impacting a person’s psychological well-being. Some coping strategies are also understood as being negative all together. On the specific topic of transactional sex as a coping strategy, the Gender Handbook for Humanitarian Action states that:

“risky coping strategies such as (…) undertaking transactional sex [(…) can lead to] associated risks of GBV, exploitation, social stigma, unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections such as HIV/AIDS” (IASC 2017: 277).

Though the negative and long-term effects are not mentioned in all handbooks, there seem to be a common understanding that these behaviours are a last resort for people and should be avoided. The different strategies that are mentioned to address these issues seem therefore to focus on prevention and underlying causes. For example, in a guidance note in the Sphere Handbook, a question that is suggested for humanitarian workers to ask when assessing a situation is:
“Are people engaged in negative coping mechanisms such as transactional sex, early marriage, child labour or risky migration? What can be done to mitigate the underlying vulnerabilities?” (Sphere Association 2018: 38-39).

To address these vulnerabilities, some suggestive measurements that I have identified in the handbooks include building safer communities, improve food and nutrition, and to introduce cash-based interventions that are accessible to women (IASC 2017: 95, 199). What these preventative measures share is that they are based on the understanding that if these basic needs are met amongst women, who are the prime target group, and their families, they will not engage in transactional sex seeing that this is understood as a consequence of their vulnerable position. For women to engage in transactional sex in times of crises seems to thus be framed, in these guidelines, primarily as a problem caused by (gendered) vulnerabilities, where the matter of agency becomes rather uncertain.

3.2.2. Gendered Vulnerabilities and Agency

The gender aspect in this framework is interesting, and we can draw parallels to Utas’ (2015) understanding of how female vulnerability often is portrayed. Though there seems to be room for nuance and recognition of female agency in some of the guidelines, such as when the gender handbook states that “[w]omen and girls are neither exclusively nor solely the passive victims of crisis” (IASC 2017: 22), there is still a high level of victimisation present when it comes to women using their bodies for sexual labour. An example from the Gender Handbook discusses the problem that many women who find themselves having become the head of the household in times of crisis may find it hard to safely access food and other resources needed for them and their children. This in turn:

“(…) creates a context in which women are more susceptible to abuse and exploitation and are more likely to be forced to engage in sexual transactions for money and access to services” (IASC 2017: 22).

This focus on force and understanding of choice when it comes to people engaging in sex work is one that has been central in debates about sex work globally. The question of whether a person can choose to engage in sex work has been raised and radical feminists have argued that everyone selling sex can be considered to be forced as they view sex work per se as something coercive (Hope Ditmore 2011:34).
We see this way of thinking also in research on sex work in humanitarian settings. For example, Higate (2007) discusses whether women who trades sex for assistance, protection, or food can actually be said to have agency and argues that:

“It is not so much a question of whether choices can be seen as real but rather that the opportunities open to women living in these precarious settings are severely limited” (Higate 2007: 108).

Besides understanding the engagement in sex work as an activity that is forced upon women, or chosen due to limited options available, sex work is also often described in terms of exploitation in these guidelines. For example, in IASC’s Guidelines for Integrating Gender-Based Violence Interventions in Humanitarian Action one can read that “[a] 2012 inter-agency assessment in Mali showed that displaced girls often engage in transactional/exploitative sex to provide for their families” (IASC 2015: 328).

Whether transactional sex should be understood as exploitative in itself, or whether there are aspects of it which are, or if it can lead to forms of exploitation, is a bit blurry. The question from wider feminist debates of whether sex work should be framed as a form of men’s violence against women also echoes in the seemingly ambivalence in the guidelines on whether to understand sex work as a form of gender-based violence (GBV). For example, in the paragraph above from the Gender Handbook, it states that transactional sex can lead to risks of GBV and exploitation (IASC 2017: 277). However, in another part of the same book survival sex is mentioned as actual form of GBV, stating that:

“(…) lack of suitable shelter, overcrowded displacement sites and food insecurity can place women, girls and boys at heightened risk to all forms of GBV, including survival sex, sexual exploitation and abuse” (IASC 2017: 24-25).

This could imply that they do make a difference between transactional sex and what they call survival sex. The definitions themselves are not stated in the handbook. This brings us to a discussion about what is implied when the term survival sex is being used.

3.2.3. ‘Survival Sex’

As we saw in the introduction, the term survival sex stresses the vulnerable situation of a person that drives them into taking part in different forms of transactional sex. What is interesting when looking at the manuals used in humanitarian action to address this is that they focus on exactly this, and it seems to be understood that if these people were less vulnerable or had their basic needs met there would not be any reasons for people to engage in it. The term ‘survival sex’ in
this sense, carries a lot of resemblance to how the term ‘trafficked victim’ has been used in wider debates about sex work and in what is sometimes referred to as the trafficking discourse. Some organisations, for example, have pushed for prostitution to be seen as synonymous to trafficking, stressing their understanding that no woman can consent to selling sex but are always coerced by their surrounding structures (Agustín 2007: 49). A similar understanding of what is going on seem to be at play in the victimising framework describing people who are seen to be at risk for ‘survival sex’ in these guidelines.

Sex work is often depicted in dualist ways, where motivations of needs versus greed are discussed in binary terms (McMillan et al 2018: 1522), or where those discussing it are either doing so in terms of oppression or empowerment (Hulusjö 2013: 31). It appears, to my understanding, as if there is an unquestioned ‘truth’ that no woman in a humanitarian crisis is in a position where she is driven by greed to engage in sex work, or has a motivation to become empowered, but she is solely driven by the need to fulfil her most basic human needs. Therefore, she is unquestionably a victim of her surrounding structures. This resonates with the critique that has sometimes been directed at the humanitarian sector for operating on a one-dimensional imaginary of the people that it is meant to assist, thus failing to comprehend the complexity of these people’s lives and their agency (I’Anson & Pfliefer 2013: 49).
3.3. A Rights-Based Approach to Sex Work in Humanitarian Settings

In the wider discussion on sex work, many organisations and researchers have begun to refer to a more nuanced understanding of sex work than the narrative of exploitation and victimisation offered for example within the trafficking discourse. A lot of focus has been given to recognising and understanding the agency of sex workers (Hulusjö 2013: 157). Coming from this point of view, a harm reductionist and rights-based approach has been argued for by researchers and activists, and organisations such as Amnesty International (Amnesty International 2016), WHO (WHO n.d.), and the Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women (GAATW) (GAATW 2013) have stated that the safest environment for sex workers is one that is decriminalised and where the rights of sex workers are recognised and protected.

However, this shift in focus seems to have been slow to follow within the humanitarian sector, and some of the knowledge produced outside the sector has not been utilised within it (WRC 2016: 3). Some critics, such as Rosenberg and Bakomeza (2017), have criticised the previously explored understanding of sex work within humanitarian contexts as a negative coping strategy, and argued that this narrow understanding has meant that the actual needs of this population have been neglected and that this should be addressed through a shift in practice and policy. According to them, this should be done by ensuring “rights-based, evidence-informed and non-discriminatory service provision” for refugees, and by working to support inclusion and community empowerment in approaches to sex work (Rosenberg & Bakomeza 2017:100).

3.3.1. Developing New Guidelines and Launching New Approaches

In 2016, WRC, together with the Organisation for Gender Empowerment and Rights Advocacy’s (OGERA), a grassroots organisation in Kampala for refugees engaged in sex work, published a guidance note called “Working with Refugees Engaged in Sex Work: A Guidance Note for Humanitarians”. This guidance note was based on knowledge and expertise that had been gathered from other interventions working with sex workers and was developed specially to address the different issues that refugees who sell sex face. The organisations also state that though their research focus has primarily been on refugees, their findings are relevant also when working with other people who are forcibly displaced and engaged in sex work, such as internally displaced persons (IDPs) (WRC 2016b: 1). WRC identified a need for this sort of guidance after carrying out consultations with refugees and service providers in 2015 and finding, among other things, that refugees engaged in sex work often are particularly vulnerable to violence due to their statuses as refugees, and have issues accessing information and services.
that are vital for their health and safety. They also found that there is a problem of silence and stigma surrounding the issue of sex work within humanitarian response which constitutes a barrier for this population to access services such as GBV services. According to them, this can also lead to an increased exposure to discrimination, violence, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and unplanned pregnancies (WRC 2016: 2).

The guidance note that they put together is summarised in 14 key points for humanitarians to follow when working with sex workers. These points are:

1. Know the international standards
2. Solicit input from refugees doing sex work
3. Center the individual during decisions
4. Respect individual choice
5. Build skills and capacities of staff
6. Reach out to sex worker-led orgs.
7. Reach out to rights-based service providers
8. Know local laws around sex work
9. Develop tailored referral pathways
10. Mainstream service needs across programs
11. Conduct targeted outreach
12. Ensure funding proposals are inclusive
13. Facilitate peer support
14. Gather information about their experiences

(WRC 2016c:1-2).

Besides developing this note, WRC also piloted a peer-education programme in Kampala together with RHU focusing on community empowerment. In the programme, they trained 50 persons who were engaged in sex work to become peer-educators and outreach coordinators to reach and support others engaging in sex work. The participants were trained on issues such as sexual and reproductive health, local laws, parenting when being a sex worker, and human rights (Rosenberg & Bakomeza 2017: 98).

To build peer-led systems with sex workers is also something that has been recommended in UNHCR’s guidelines on how to launch interventions to address HIV with refugees engaging in
sex work. Within their suggestion on how to do this, they have included a verbal contract to which the engaged sex workers should agree which states that they will:

“Respect each others’ decisions about continuing or leaving sex work, and [w]ork together to improve their conditions and make sex work safer” (UNHCR 2010: 27).

When looking at the points that are included in the WRC’s Guidance Note and the training offered in the programme in Kampala, the issue of refugees’ engagement in sex work seems to be understood as a matter of human rights, and as a complex problem of structures and agencies working simultaneously. Here, there are three key themes that I wish to discuss further, namely the focus on risks associated with sex work for refugees and the nuance of people’s experiences; the focus on individual choices and capacities; and the focus on human rights.

3.3.2. A Focus on Associated Risks

When looking at how the matter of refugees engaging in sex work seems to be understood in this approach, it is interesting to see that the focus is not solely on the fact that refugees engage in sex work but on the surrounding risks; signifying that the act of exchanging sex for money is not understood as the most problematic aspect, or necessarily as a type of violence or exploitation in itself, as seen in the previous two approaches, but instead it is the other issues that surrounds it or that people may face because of it that are understood as the most damaging.

By focusing on the risks associated with sex work, it allows for a broadened understanding of what is going to be produced as it looks at the different aspects of what is happening more than just the fact that it can sometimes be occurring. This also allows more realities to be heard than the dominant narrative that ends with the ‘victim of survival sex’. Further, by recognising that stigma within humanitarian response also can be a problem perpetuating the vulnerabilities that women engaging in sex work have to these risks, also frames the problem as not only being one of structures caused by local crises, but also one to which the humanitarian workers themselves can contribute. This understanding is particularly interesting as it reflects a broader critique of humanitarianism and the idea of it being an apolitical and completely neutral sector, only driven by its ethical principles which allows for the delusion that it is able to operate free from politics when in fact it brings in its own set of power structures and inequalities (Barnett 2011: 34), and is driven by its own set of ideologies which can cause the problem of what I’Anson and Pfeifer (2013: 50) described as ‘dialectical deafness’ in humanitarian response.
3.3.3. Recognising Agency and Nuanced Realities

What is interesting about the focus on the specific wants and needs of individuals in this type of approach, is the recognition and centralisation of peoples’ agency and ability to make choices. In the guidance note from WRC, it gives many reasons for why refugees engage in sex work, such as poverty and lack of other options of income. It argues, however, that:

“Such constrained situations do not, however, vitiate, a person’s’ autonomy or “necessarily undermine or negate” their ability to consent or to make decisions for their own lives” (WRC 2016: 3-4).

This understanding and focus on people’s autonomy resembles how many in wider discussions about sex work have argued for a recognition of the agency of sex workers. Formson and Hilhorst also argue that considering that:

“humanitarian crises are not the only drivers of transactional sex, and other factors may also operate in humanitarian settings. This means that other, more ‘strategic’ forms of transactional sex may also occur during humanitarian crises” (Formson & Hilhorst 2016: 18).

Besides recognising the nuance of experiences and people’s agency in their decisions to sell sex, these guidelines also highlight the importance of centralising individuals and respecting their choices when offering support (WRC 2016c: 1). It supports this argument by referring to fundamental principles within the humanitarian sector:

“the fundamental humanitarian principle of “do no harm” applies with equal force to refugees who sell sex, along with attendant standards around preserving confidentiality, prioritizing safety, and respecting individuals’ preferred forms of assistance” (WRC 2016b: 5).

Here we see not just a differing in a conceptual framework and basic understanding of what is going on from the previous ones discussed, but this statement also refers to a more formal framework in how the principle of ‘do no harm’ and other humanitarian standards are applied to this context. Similarly, the legal framework of human rights has been incorporated in the framing of this issue.

3.3.4. A Human Rights Framework

Besides advocating for access to workers’ rights through acknowledging sex work as work, many advocates in the wider discussion on sex work have pushed for a recognition of sex workers rights as human rights. For example, Amnesty International, as a human rights organisation, has taken this stance. Some of the rights that they refer to which should be
respected are the rights to health, access to justice, and the right to a livelihood (Amnesty International n.d.). The rights stressed by WRC in their Guidance Note are those of the “[right] to information, health, and freedom from violence” (WRC 2016b: 1), and they argue that “[h]umanitarian principles require humanitarian actors to proactively address these needs” (ibid).

A human rights framework is an interesting one, especially as human rights can be interpreted in different ways. For example, the claim to protect women’s human rights have been used in the anti-trafficking discourse, and as expressed by Cheng (2011: 479):

“While the state, national elites, and middle-class activists may all pledge their commitment to women’s human rights, they often disagree on what constitutes violation and the protection of these rights.”

Here, again, we see how understandings can differ about what is going on when looking at sex work, how it should be addressed, and even which foundational humanitarian principle and international legal frameworks applies and how. In this way, a human rights framework can change the angle in which we look at things and motivate why attention should be drawn to this issue by the humanitarian sector, and how they should understand it.
4. Concluding Discussion

The aim of this thesis was to study different ways that the issue of sex work within humanitarian contexts has been addressed by different actors working within the humanitarian field to see what sort of framed understandings of the problem have been prevailing. The aim was not to evaluate the different approaches, but to identify what the main problems are perceived to be in the different approaches to see what this could say about how the issue itself is understood.

In my analysis, I identified three different types of approaches to this issue; namely addressing humanitarian staff and peacekeepers and their behaviour in the field in relation to using transactional sex, understanding sex work as a ‘negative coping strategy’ and addressing underlying vulnerabilities, and using a rights-based approach to sex work.

In the first approach, the problem of humanitarian workers trading money, services or other goods for sexual favours when working in the field was understood as being one of ‘sexual exploitation’. This was often the case whether this was done with beneficiaries or when using the services of local sex workers. Furthermore, in some codes of conducts all sexual relations with people from the local population were discouraged because of the unequal power dynamics between staff and locals. This understanding resonates with the wider framing of sex work as a form of exploitation in itself, mainly against women, and it also highlights how the humanitarian sector often is perceived in relation to the people that they are trying to assist. Because humanitarian workers and peacekeepers are understood as being the active protectors of vulnerable people, it becomes problematic when they are seen as predators instead, as this can undermine and delegitimise their position as working from a politics of ethics and humanity. We can thus see power structures both between genders and between vulnerable populations in times of crises and humanitarian workers and peacekeepers as being understood as the main problem at hand in this approach.

The issue of gender and gendered vulnerabilities was also present in the second approach, where transactional sex often was mentioned as a negative coping strategy which should be addressed through seeing to the underlying vulnerabilities of the people engaging in it. Here, the understanding seems to be that sex work would not exist if people had their basic needs met. The commonly used term ‘survival sex’ perpetuates this understanding of sex work in humanitarian contexts as only ever being driven by extreme needs. It also resonates with the wider trafficking discourse in which all those engaged in sex work are understood to be
trafficked victims who have been coerced into the industry due to surrounding structures or other people.

According to my findings, it seems that the widespread framework of sex work as a form of exploitation and men’s violence against women, which victimises sex workers and denies their agency, has been even more unquestioningly accepted within the humanitarian sector than in the overall discussion of sex work. I suggest that the reason for this is based on the image of humanitarian beneficiaries and people in contexts of crises as already being vulnerable in the first place due to situation in which they live. Due to this one-dimensional imaginary of people in crises as being simply vulnerable people, their agency is not always recognised, or their more nuanced needs and wants are not always heard. Here I’Anson and Pfiefer’s concept of ‘dialectical deafness’ is relevant, as we can see how a framed understanding of an issue, or an approach based on an ideology of (radical) feminism which sees all sorts of sex work as a form of oppression against women, fails to see beyond that and suggest ways to identify the other needs that this population might have.

The critique of this simplistic view and lack of response to people’s needs when engaging in sex work is what generated the third approach that I identified, which is to use a rights-based and community empowerment approach when dealing with mainly e.g. refugees engaged in sex work. In the literature that motivated this approach, and in the guidelines that were written for humanitarian organisations to adopt it, there is a focus on the agency of the targeted population, and on other risks that can be associated with sex work.

I would suggest that this latter approach has allowed for a broadened framework where vulnerabilities are still recognised but where more nuanced realities are allowed to be heard than the homogeneous narrative of the ‘victim of survival sex’. This perspective has also contributed to a reframing of the problem as not only consisting of risks within the local context itself, but also one that is shaped by a humanitarian presence, its ideologies, and barriers such as stigma towards sex work. The issue has also been framed as a human rights issue, where researchers and organisations have stressed that e.g. sex workers’ rights to safety should be protected. This is interesting considering how women’s human rights have also been referred to within the trafficking discourse as a motivation to combat prostitution as understood as a form of human trafficking.
In the creation of the new guidelines, and in the piloting of new programmes, we can see also how the framed understanding of a problem both theoretically and in relation to international norms and legal frameworks, such as the human rights framework, has directly motivated new approaches to be formulated, which is why this sort of critical examination is highly relevant.

It would have been interesting to look more at how these guidelines and policies are understood and utilised in the field, and whether the frames that I have identified are also dominant in the interpretation of this literature when working with actual people. Unfortunately, this goes beyond the scope of this research. Furthermore, it would also be relevant to look further into how these different frames are generated and reproduced. Though we saw in the third approach how the critique of earlier approaches worked as a base to form new ones, which included new understandings of the problems at hand, it was not possible to study this process in depth nor was this as clear in the other approaches.

I would therefore suggest that not only should more research be done on the realities of those engaging in sex work in times of humanitarian crises, or how to best address this, but also on the actual processes of generating knowledge on these issues. The question of whose voices are included in these processes should also be critically examined if we want to enable sustainable and inclusive policies.
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