

# IR, Gender Studies, and Volunteering in Refugee Camps

Written by Caroline Cottet

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2016/05/31/ir-gender-studies-and-volunteering-in-refugee-camps/>

CAROLINE COTTET, MAY 31 2016

Do not fret. This is not another blog post feeding into the endless debate of whether or not academics should be activists too. I believe the discussion is alive and well, especially in the context of the recent refugee crisis.

Instead, I would like to simply put forth some of the thoughts I have had, when volunteering in refugee camps, in tandem with my academic research. I situate myself as a junior scholar in IR and gender studies, with a particular interest in the gender binary, its construction and effects.

While there is a wealth of literature on the philosophical and theoretical approaches to the gender binary, I am most interested in concrete encounters with the production of a dichotomous understanding of what it means to be masculine or feminine, and what it means to be outside of the binary. There were plenty of such encounters during my recent volunteering experiences, in Calais and Grande Synthe (close to Dunkirk) near the Channel crossing on the French side, and Idomeni in Greece, at the Macedonian border.

“Do not lift this crate of pasta boxes.”

“Why not?”

“Because I am a man and you are a woman.”

On the first day in Idomeni already, gendered roles were made quite clear by a local volunteer. Never have I been so fiercely motivated to carry boxes.

In other aspects of camp-life too, it was expected that the strict categories of “men”, “women”, and “children” would be perpetuated. Yet this was actually harder than anticipated – as became clear when sorting out clothes for donation. The clothes needed to be placed in distinct boxes, to then be distributed in separate places, at different moments of the day. Yet most items were t-shirts, pullovers, hoodies, jackets, tracksuits, or even scarves and socks. In short, pieces of clothing with no obvious predetermined clientele.

One might be tempted to ask: But surely some items of clothing are clearly gendered? This might still hold true for most, although fashion has become increasingly gender-fluid. Yet the most obviously gendered items in Europe (like dresses, skirts, and high-heels) or those that are cut differently (like jeans and shorts) are simply not adapted to the conditions in refugee camps. During donations, most ask for comfortable clothes. “Tracksuits” is a popular request, by all, regardless of age or gender.

This division into categories similarly caused problems when giving out the clothes. In Grande-Synthe for example, I volunteered in the tent that stored clothing for women and children. A sort of “free shop”, if you like. Women and children could come in and take whatever they needed and liked, within reasonable quantities.

Men were not allowed in (aside from male volunteers, interestingly). In addition to clothing, the tent had hygiene items, cosmetics, and baby products. Fathers, then, couldn’t go into the tent to gather the needed items for their children. They could give a list of requirements to volunteers, who would then act as personal shoppers; but most preferred to ask a female family member to go into the tent for them, entrenching the division of gendered roles in child rearing.

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This isn't to say that women living the Grande Synthe refugee camp would not want a secluded space. Most came in groups and seemed to enjoy having some time with female friends exclusively. Though there are other additional spaces dedicated to this purpose. And positioning women as the default parent, within camps that are often the first place in Europe that people live in, does not contribute to the seeming effort of helping newcomers adapt to 'basic European values', regarding gender roles.

The same pattern occurred in Idomeni, as there are always two queues during food distribution: one for men, another for women and children. The "womenandchildren" one (Enloe's term) would systematically be much shorter – again deterring fathers from queuing for food with their children. But it also signals something odd: that this seclusion along gendered lines is necessary. Why not instead have a line for those who require priority (e.g. parents with young children, those with medical conditions, and the elderly) on the one side, and everyone else on the other?

The reason for this gendered division in queuing is unclear to volunteers. Some suspected that the trend had been initiated by UNHCR in the first few days and had become generalised since, others said that refugees spontaneously lined up in two separate queues, though most admitted having no idea as to what the reason might be.

I am not suggesting to blindly impose an alternative mode of organising a community. Rather, this experience made me realise the importance of daily encounters. There is a rampant stereotyping of societies that are predominantly Muslim as sexist. News articles on the topic and welcoming documentation demand of recent refugees to hold more progressive ideas about the roles of men and women in society. Aside from stereotypes being dangerously incomplete, how can gender roles be shifted in Europe, if old-fashioned ideas are ingrained in societal models presented to newcomers?

Myself and another volunteer agreed that we had experienced more sexism from Greeks than from people living in the Idomeni camp. Following yet another sexist comment by a volunteer, I was told "Don't mind him". The person preparing the food that was to be given out on that day amusingly explained, "He is racist, but against women."

This experience had me rethink my research on gender and IR, in giving more attention to the small things: the daily encounters that forge gendered identities, and thus inequalities. Aside from making me all the more interested in issues around displaced populations and war, this experience had me rethink the very purpose of my research on gender and violence.

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## About the author:

**Caroline Cottet** is a senior commissioning editor at E-IR in gender and sexuality studies, as well as an assistant editor for Encounters, in the academic journal *Critical Military Studies*. She is the 2016 recipient of the Feminist Theory and Gender Studies award for Best Graduate Student Paper. Caroline is also working full-time at the Refugee Women's Centre in Dunkirk.