



Experiencing the “worst period of her life”

A critical analysis of women´s portrayal in humanitarian aid
campaigns

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Abstract

Women and children are often the focus of humanitarian aid campaigns, generally considered to be the main victims of humanitarian emergencies. Previous research has explored the portrayal of victims within humanitarian action, focusing on humanitarian images, and how humanitarianism portrays the refugee. There is not, however, a lot of research that focuses on the humanitarian aid campaigns themselves, and not either on women's victimisation specifically. This thesis thus makes a contribution to research by conducting a critical analysis of women's portrayal in humanitarian aid campaigns, asking the research question of how women in the Democratic Republic of Congo are portrayed in humanitarian aid campaigns, with a broader aim of examining why humanitarian aid campaigns are gender based. I argue in this thesis through a single within case study that the empirical case "The worst period of her life" campaign created by ActionAid UK victimises women by associating women's dignity with menstrual health, appealing to donors through the common hardships of menstruation, and picturing women as passive victims. The woman is portrayed as someone who is not capable of action, requiring external intervention. Using Agamben's framework of "bare life" and *homo sacer*, this thesis concludes that women's portrayal in the "The worst period of her life" campaign reduces the female victim to the realm of "bare life". The already disadvantageous position that women have in the broader societal structure is reinforced by removing their agency in humanitarian aid campaigns. The results thus highlight problematic factors of women's portrayal in humanitarian aid campaigns, opening for further research on the implications of the victimisation of women within humanitarian action.

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Abbreviations

DRC	Democratic Republic of Congo
GHO	Global Humanitarian Overview
IVE	Identifiable Victim Effect
UCDP	Uppsala Conflict Data Program
UK	United Kingdom
UN OCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs

1. Introduction

The Global Humanitarian Overview (GHO) 2018, provided by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA), predicts that over 128 million people will need humanitarian aid during 2018. There will also be a larger need of funding than ever (GHO 2018a.). In 2018, the humanitarian needs will be most urgent in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Nigeria, Somalia, South Sudan, Syria and the surrounding countries, and Yemen (GHO 2018b., 21). The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is considered to have one of the most neglected humanitarian crises in the world. Just over the last year, the humanitarian needs have doubled in the country which is deeply affected by a protracted conflict, epidemics, malnutrition and high levels of sexual violence (Al Jazeera 2018).

Women in the DRC are perceived as the victims of a war perpetrated by men. The term “rape capital of the world”, commonly used to describe the DRC, illustrates the role of women in the conflict quite vividly. The protracted humanitarian emergency in the DRC has however caused donor fatigue, which can be seen through the declining amounts of humanitarian funding during the last few years (GHO 2018b., 21; ReliefWeb 2018). Funding for humanitarian purposes comes from different sources. The traditional beneficiary has been governments, but with a declining governmental humanitarian budget, aid agencies are forced to find new ways to collect funding. As a result of this, private funding has become all the more important. Appealing to the donor is essential as private funding “is more subject to sudden shifts in headlines in the economy. People tend to be more spontaneous in their giving” (IRIN News 2009). Humanitarian aid campaigns is an important method to engage donors to give more, often portraying victims of the emergency in need of aid as it is a way to connect different stakeholders, both governmental and civilian, to the humanitarian cause (Orgad 2013, 6).

Adult and adolescent males are rarely portrayed in humanitarian aid campaigns. In fact, men are rarely mentioned as victims at all in armed conflict (Haeri & Puechguirbal 2010, 106). Instead, women and children are often the focus because they appeal to the Western viewer as having “a special kind of powerlessness; perhaps they do not tend to look as if they could be ‘dangerous aliens’” (Malkki 1995, 11). This is despite the fact that women often bare essential care responsibilities in most communities, both in times of peace as well as in humanitarian emergencies (Ní Aoláin 2011, 2). This raises an interesting concern about victimhood and representation.

This thesis thus asks *How do humanitarian aid campaigns portray women in the Democratic Republic of Congo?* In the broader sense, what is really at stake in this thesis is to examine the gendered nature of humanitarian aid campaigns, thus asking the sub question *In what ways are humanitarian aid campaigns gender based?* Anthropologist Miriam Ticktin argues that specific groups of women are targeted within humanitarianism due to existing stereotypes that women are the most in need of rescue. It draws on power relations of inequality, and reproduces gendered, racial, economic and geopolitical inequalities (2011, 261). By applying Giorgio Agamben's theoretical framework, this thesis departs from this statement, putting forward arguments as to why humanitarian aid campaigns are gender based.

1.1. Purpose and justification of research

The purpose of this thesis is to enquire in which ways humanitarian aid campaigns are gender based in the Congolese context, and what consequences this may have on the aid recipient. This thesis only looks at women in humanitarian aid campaigns. There are other groups represented in humanitarian aid campaigns such as children and people with disabilities. In order to state the case, it is, however, useful to have a more focused analysis of a single case study, and hence only one group will be addressed. Notwithstanding this methodological step, it is important to note that as women are often portrayed together with children in humanitarian aid campaigns, girls may be present in the cases considered in this thesis. This thesis will not focus on the specific problematic factors of portraying children in humanitarian aid campaigns. Further, this thesis will focus on the portrayal of women in humanitarian aid campaigns, and not on the ethical implications of this type of campaigns. Humanitarian aid campaigns are most likely tailored to what appeals to potential donors to achieve the most effective outcome. Developing humanitarian aid campaigns that portray victims of humanitarian emergencies differently may generate a different monetary outcome. Analysing the campaign itself is however more important for the research question of women's portrayal, rather than the consequences. Lastly, this thesis does not focus on the colonial associations to humanitarian images of women. While it is a highly relevant topic, this thesis does not focus on larger underlying causes of women's representation in humanitarian aid campaigns, but rather on the direct portrayal of the campaign.

The area of interest of women's representation in humanitarian aid campaigns is relevant in several ways. In previous research on representation in humanitarian aid campaigns, focus has generally not been on women. There is a field of research that discusses the representation of "victims" as more of a general term. In other research, women are either not discussed or are discussed in relation to other groups such as children. There is currently a focus on girl's roles as both victims and actors for change. Adult women have not however received the same attention in academic research. There is therefore a need to focus on women's representation in humanitarian aid campaigns. Women are one of the main groups represented in humanitarian aid campaigns but have not been the main group focused on in previous research. While this thesis will not specifically address societal gender roles in the specific contexts of the DRC or donor societies, this type of research may provide general insights on underlying gender roles and perceptions of women.

There are currently multiple protracted, high intensity conflicts active in the world. Analysing humanitarian aid campaigns therefore becomes important due to the increased need of funding, warranting the need for humanitarian aid campaigns. The way in which humanitarian aid campaigns are carried out has varied and is constantly developing to try to prevent donor fatigue. While receiving funding is critically important for humanitarian aid organisations to conduct their work, it is important to understand on what premises this is carried out. Humanitarian aid campaigns often have a large audience as they are displayed in public spaces and through media channels. Research of women's portrayal in humanitarian aid campaigns is therefore important for the humanitarian field to increase the consciousness of how aid is provided to the large target population. It is important to critically process this information, asking who is the provider of the information? What interests may this party have by framing the information in a certain way? What broader implications does the representation of the subject in the campaign have? One can argue that an image can never be neutral, there is always a person or group behind it that have a certain set of interests or goals with the image itself. Understanding underlying motivations for humanitarian aid campaigns may not only provide an understanding of the provider of the campaign, but also of the subject of the image.

This type of research can highlight the impacts that humanitarian aid campaigns may have on actors involved, both those who donate, those who provide aid, and the aid recipient. Analysing humanitarian aid campaigns and how women are portrayed in these campaigns may also aid in developing an understanding of how women are perceived in conflict in general. By merely

focusing on women and children in humanitarian campaigns, they become the primary victims. It is highly likely that the perception of a certain conflict will change depending on how it is represented.

1.2. Research design

This section lays out the methodology used in the thesis to operationalise the dependent and independent variables. Further, the case selection process and data collection and criticism are presented. Developing and discussing research design provides an opportunity for transparency, explaining how the process has been carried out from choosing independent and dependent variables to case selection and data collection. The dependent variable is women's portrayal in the DRC, and the independent variable is humanitarian aid campaigns. The operationalisation of the independent and dependent variables, which are humanitarian aid campaigns and women's portrayal, are conducted in the analysis chapter of this thesis. The variables are analysed in a theory driven analysis, applying the theoretical framework developed in the theory chapter to a selected case. Agamben's theory of "bare life", and the feminist scholars that have critiqued and contributed to his theory, are interpreted in relation to the selected humanitarian aid campaign to analyse women's portrayal in these campaigns.

This thesis is a small-n, within-case study, which aim is to provide an in-depth understanding of a single case being studied. A single case study provides an opportunity to individually study one case and identify its case specific qualities and patterns that can later be out into a larger perspective (Paterson, 2010). While there are limitations with a within-case study as a single study may not be representative of the entire population of cases, single case analyses still provide theoretical and conceptual contributions to the research area. Most cases provide a specific context, but insights about one case can be applied to other similar cases. Humanitarian aid campaigns are widely used within humanitarian action, and even a single case study will build theoretical and conceptual knowledge within the field.

With the dependent variable (women's portrayal) and independent variable (humanitarian aid campaigns) established, the next step is to select a case to analyse the variables. Selecting a case to analyse is an important part of the research process. One needs to be aware of possible risks that may affect the case selection process, such as selection bias. Selecting cases at random can in certain cases help prevent selection bias, but if the population of cases is small, the selection

may still not be unbiased through random selection. The cases risk not being representative of the case population at all. It is then more beneficial to actively select a case (Seawright & Gerring 2008, 295). The conflict context chosen to focus on in this thesis is the conflict in the DRC. It is a relevant case to study for several reasons. The conflict has been ongoing for decades, and donor fatigue has affected the humanitarian operation during the last few years. The humanitarian context in the DRC is interesting to study due to the longevity and intensity of its humanitarian crisis, making it an interesting and relevant case when analysing humanitarian aid campaigns. The case chosen within the Congolese context to analyse in this thesis is a campaign from ActionAid United Kingdom (UK), called “The worst period of her life”. While the campaign focuses on the DRC as well as Syria and Afghanistan, this thesis will focus on the context of the DRC as the images used in the campaign focused on Congolese women.

The analysis of the chosen case is primarily based on a secondary dataset, however also including primary data for the humanitarian aid campaign study case. The data used in this thesis consists of qualitative information, as quantitative data is not as relevant for the research question. The qualitative dataset partly consists of scholarly research articles. These types of articles are reliable sources as they are peer reviewed, published in scholarly journals and often closely connected to academic institutions. The majority of the scholarly articles have been collected through the Uppsala library database which provides an extensive data set and access to numerous academic databases. For conflict background about the DRC, the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) is the main source due to its academic reliability and up to date conflict information. News media articles are also used in the thesis, mainly for conflict background and the current humanitarian context. Media sources can be collected from a very large variety of sources, which is why this thesis uses well known and established newspapers to gain a higher rate of validity.

There are certain limitations to conducting a secondary source analysis. It is important to always be critical when collecting sources and analyse their validity and relevance. This process is especially important when writing an academic thesis, as reliability is an important factor. Methods to carry out source criticism include using peer reviewed sources as they have already been analysed by scholars, and carrying out source triangulation. Further, examining where and when the source is published and which organisation the source is connected to increases the prospect of using reliable sources. Using these methods when analysing sources does not

guarantee that they are completely reliable, one must always read with a critical mindset (Booth, Colomb & Williams 2004, 83). It does however provide a guideline for choosing more reliable sources. When researching tabooed or controversial subjects such as female sexuality or menstruation, one needs to be aware about possible bias in sources.

This thesis is divided into six parts, the main text consisting of five chapters. The first chapter introduces the broader context of humanitarian aid campaigns and need of humanitarian action, as well as the research questions. Further, the purpose of the thesis and justification of research is presented in this chapter. The chapter concludes by presenting the research design and methodology of the analysis. Following the introduction, the second chapter in this thesis examines previous research on women's representation in humanitarian aid campaigns and develops the theoretical framework that will be used to conduct the analysis of the Congolese context. The study case is presented in the third chapter. It starts by introducing the Congolese conflict context and sanitary situation for women in the DRC. What follows after this is the presentation of the case, which is ActionAid UK's humanitarian aid campaign "The worst period of her life". The analysis is conducted in chapter four, where the theoretical framework of Giorgio Agamben's concept of "bare life" will be applied to the case. The fifth chapter draws conclusions based on the analysis and suggests further research on the representation of women in humanitarian aid campaigns. The thesis concludes with a comprehensive bibliography of sources used throughout.

2. Humanitarianism and the concept of “bare life”

This chapter of the thesis examines previous research on women’s representation in humanitarian aid campaigns. It identifies a few research articles that have addressed the subject of victimisation and portrayal within humanitarian action, both about victims in general and the specific victim group of women. While there is a consensus that women are widely considered as victims in humanitarian emergencies and are often portrayed as such in humanitarian aid campaigns, there is not a lot of critical research of the humanitarian aid campaigns themselves. Examining previous research therefore identifies a research gap which this thesis aims to address. This chapter then proceeds to develop the theoretical framework that is used to analyse the empirical material. Identifying the main theoretical concepts provides clarity when conducting the analysis.

2.1. Previous research on women’s representation in humanitarian aid campaigns

To ensure conceptual clarity when analysing women’s representation in humanitarian aid campaigns, a discussion of the concept of representation first needs to be conducted. Representation as a concept may be interpreted quite broadly. What can be said about representation is, however, that it is constructed. Within research, the concept of representation has been used in different ways. Social representation theory argues that interactions surrounding a specific phenomenon creates social knowledge about this phenomenon. Representations are not indicative of all of society, but rather created by social groups within society (Rateau, Moliner, Guimelli & Abric 2012, 481). Representations themselves are created over time through processes of objectification. A phenomenon becomes objectified through communication within the social group, simplifying the phenomenon and taking it out of its context. Anchoring concludes the process, intertwining the objectified phenomenon into the pre-existing system of the social group (ibid., 482-483).

Within the realm of research on humanitarian action, Prem Kumar Rajaram (2002) uses Liisa H. Malkki’s association of humanitarianism with an “objectification of refugee experience” to explore the representation of refugees. Refugees are removed from their historical context and individuality and are portrayed as one large group (p.251). Rajaram continues by emphasising the creation of an “other”, which loses its “power to signify, to negate, to initiate its historic desire, to establish its own institutional and oppositional discourse”. The speechlessness of

refugees leaves them with the need of having someone speak for them (2002, 251). Representation is thus often created to fulfil some sort of interest, portraying the “other” in a certain way. In this thesis, representation is interpreted as one group assigning certain traits to another group, creating a power asymmetry between the group which is portrayed, and the group that forms the representation. By looking at how women in humanitarian aid campaigns are represented, one can identify how the power asymmetry between the aid provider and recipient is formed.

Women and children are the most represented in humanitarian aid campaigns, but the focus within research tends to be on the representation of the child. This thesis contributes to the academic discussion by solely focusing on women’s representation in humanitarian aid campaigns. The portrayal of women as victims in conflict contexts is not a new phenomenon. Medina Haeri and Nadine Puechguirbal (2010) describe the postcards distributed by Red Cross National Societies to boost morale during the first world war. They argue that the cards illustrate the female nurses as passive actors, tending to the male soldiers. Further, they argue that the conventional way to think about conflict implies that “the power of men, as the protector of women and children, should not be tarnished by pointing out that they too can be victims of war” (2010, 107).

Nancy Rose Hunt (2008) also focuses her research on images in humanitarian emergencies. She analyses atrocity photographs in the Congolese context. She argues that the focus on physical violence takes away from hidden violence, which is the sexual violence. Images of severed hands engaged popular attention as well as humanitarian and scholarly attention. By using these types of images, one reproduces and repeats historical patterns going back to colonial Leopoldian Congo. Hunt argues for the importance to rewrite the historical narrative in relation to the contemporary conflict in the DRC. The narrative needs to be moved from relying on shocking images to focusing on the Congolese voices and experiences, and identifying historical repetitions rather than seeing on cohesive historical link from colonial to post-colonial conflict. Through identifying historical repetitions, one can identify social roles and positions that repeat over time. The central image repeated throughout Congolese history is that of the overly sexual woman as well as the female victim (Hunt 2008).

In contrast to Hunt, Haeri and Puechguirbal, and other scholars who criticise the portrayal of victims, Aubrey Graham (2014) argues that the subject of visual representation is often aware of, and participate in, the construction of their own portrayal. When being photographed up close, Graham argues that there is an interaction between the parties, and that even in victimising images, the political agency of the victim is respected. She argues that the photographer merely reflects the already existing identity of the subject. Thus, the photographer does not create a personality for the subject.

The portrayal of the individual victim's personality is argued to appeal more broadly to individuals and motivate them to help. Seyoung Lee & Thomas Hugh Feeley (2016) analyse the "Identifiable victim effect" (IVE) which refers to "individuals' tendency to offer greater aid to specific, identifiable victims than to anonymous, statistical victims" (2016, 199). They argue that IVE triggers an emotional response and a sense of perceived responsibility when the victim is identifiable rather than statistical. If the perceived impact is high, motivations to help also rise (Lee & Feeley 2016). This does however become problematic as the perceived impact is higher when one perceives that they can help victims that are part of a smaller group. It is difficult to perceive a high impact of one's help when the number of victims in need is very high. In an emergency situation, there will be many "statistical victims", victims that are anonymous to the donor. Lee and Feeley do however argue that identifying a small group of victims may still make the donor perceive that their help will have a larger impact than if no victim is identified (Lee & Feeley 2016, 201).

2.2. Theoretical framework

The analysis of humanitarian aid campaigns and the representations of female victims requires a theoretical framework with a critical approach. Previous research within humanitarianism and humanitarian imagery and the portrayal of victims of humanitarian emergencies has used Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben's theoretical framework for different purposes. Agamben has made a large impact within philosophy and radical political theory. His book *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1998) has been widely quoted and discussed in academic literature regarding victimisation and political exclusion. Tanja R. Müller (2013) utilises Agamben in the analysis of the humanitarian aid campaign Band Aid, looking at celebrity humanitarianism and how this reduces the victims of humanitarian emergencies to "bare life". Jennifer Fluri (2012) utilises the concept of "bare life" on the study case of (post)Taliban

Afghanistan to argue that the creation of a *homo sacer* within humanitarian action “territorialises gendered bodies as a site for capital accumulation and exchange value through aid/development allocation” (p. 31).

Agamben’s work is important in the context of women’s representation when developing a critical approach to the context in the DRC. Within humanitarian action, Agamben’s work is helpful in the analysis of underlying reasons to why women are portrayed as victims in humanitarian aid campaigns. This thesis aims to contribute to research on women’s portrayal in humanitarian aid campaigns by applying Agamben’s framework to this context and broadening the analytical understanding of his concepts. Agamben presents the concept of “bare life”. He does this by criticising Aristotle’s two definitions of life. The first is *zoë*, which is the natural and biological life that all living creatures have in common. The second definition is *bios*, which is the political life that separates humans from other creatures (Owens 2009, 569). There are certain individuals that are excluded from the political sphere, and Agamben argues that the relationship between *zoë* and *bios* does not itself motivate why one would give privilege to a certain life, and sacredness to another (Agamben 1998, 42). He therefore looks for an alternate explanation to why this division exists.

Within Western politics, there has not been a link connecting the biological and political life. The bare life “remains included in politics in the form of the exception, that is, as something that is included solely through an exclusion” (ibid., 13). Agamben takes the concept of “bare life”, in which an individual that is only included in the political sphere by actively being excluded lives, and defines a sacred person, *homo sacer*. The *homo sacer* stands outside the political and juridical sphere (Fluri 2012, 37). Agamben states that “once brought back to his proper place beyond both penal law and sacrifice, *homo sacer* presents the originary figure of life taken into the sovereign ban and preserves the memory of the originary exclusion through which the political dimension was first constituted” (Agamben 1998, 53).

Agamben’s definition of bare life is also applied within humanitarian research. Fluri argues that “Bare life (as defined in conflict or emergency aid/development zones) is life on the precipice of potentiality—as a living corpse “in need” of rebirth to *bios* through outside intervention” (2012, 40). The reduction of victims to bare life creates cases of humanitarian biopolitics. Agamben refers to biopolitics as the power of the sovereign to decide over its subjects, the sovereign itself standing above the law. It is the relationship between the sovereign and life,

combining politics with the biological life. The sovereign is thus in control over the physical bodies of its subjects, deciding over life, and subsequently also over death (Agamben 1998, 75-76). Humanitarian biopolitics indicates that the “sovereign”, the humanitarian aid organisation, has control over the lives of the victims of humanitarian emergencies.

The reduction of the victim to *homo sacer* by humanitarian aid organisations forms a power asymmetry between the provider of aid and the recipient (Fluri 2012, 40). In humanitarian emergencies, an immediate response is most likely required. Emergency relief in humanitarian action generally focuses on relieving immediate suffering, focusing on the physical needs of victims. The humanitarian aid operations often call for what Agamben refers to as a “state of exception”. The “state of exception” is a sovereign decision that creates a situation in which regular laws do not apply. Within humanitarian action, the decisive power is the aid provider, who will most likely focus on the physical suffering of the aid recipient, “replacing the full political citizen with a bundle of basic needs and physical states” (Barnett & Weiss 2008, 201, as cited in Müller 2013, 64). In contemporary humanitarian action, one can argue that “today’s *Homo sacer* is the privileged object of humanitarian biopolitics: the one who is deprived of his or her full humanity being taken care of in a very patronizing way” (Žižek 2002, 91). The aid provider “makes its beneficiaries objects of charity rather than subjects under the law” (Müller 2013, 64).

Agamben’s theory of “bare life” has been criticised by feminist scholars for not taking gender into consideration. They argue that the *homo sacer* who lives in a situation of “bare life” is presented by Agamben as a general figure but is actually in modern day life racialised and gendered. Further, they argue that perhaps the modern *homo sacer* is already a woman. Marlene Streeruwitz argues that the notion of “bare life” is “associated with the feminine position within patriarchal culture” (Dudnik 2014, 474-475). Hannah Arendt argues that women have traditionally been tied to the biological life, mostly centred around the private sphere and “sustaining life processes”, while “free” men developed and ran the political sphere (Owens 2009, 569-570).

The concept of “bare life” is important in the analysis of women’s portrayal in humanitarian aid campaigns. As Agamben does not himself consider gender in his theory, including the contribution made to the theory by feminist scholars is important to present a gender sensitive theory. Based on the theoretical framework established so far, one can start to make

assumptions about how the portrayal of women in humanitarian aid campaigns can be seen through Agamben and the gender sensitive contributions made to the theory. Not taking gender into consideration in the discussion on the division of “bare life” puts women in an ambiguous position. Based on existing and established gender roles, there is an asymmetry of power between men and women. It is therefore not possible to merely make the assumption that women also fit into both realms of political life and exclusion. The gender aspect is quite obviously essential for the topic of women’s portrayal. Women are reduced to “bare life”, a subject of physical suffering and biological needs. There is also a passivity associated with the victim as the external intervention comes in with actions that will help “save” the victim.

Previous research on the portrayal of victims in humanitarian action have rarely focused on women’s portrayal as its own group. The aim is therefore to focus on women as an independent group and conduct a critical analysis of a case study relevant for this topic. With the theoretical framework of Agamben established in this chapter, the next chapter proceeds to present the conflict context in the DRC to provide an understanding of why this particular context is relevant for the topic. The selected humanitarian aid campaign which will be focused on in the analysis is also presented in the next chapter.

3. Empirical case

This chapter describes the chosen empirical case, ActionAid UK's "The worst period of her life" campaign, to provide foundation for the analysis conducted in the next chapter. The campaign advertised its appeal both through campaign posters and a blog post on the ActionAid UK website, which are both considered in this thesis. Analysing both forums may give an insight on whether the portrayal of women in the campaign differ depending on which format the campaign is presented in. Two campaign posters and a blog post will be presented, all including both images or illustrations and text. The images featured and the use of language in the case study are examined in the analysis. Before the study case is presented, the conflict context and sanitary situation for women in the DRC is presented to provide a more in-depth presentation of the relevance of this context.

3.1. Conflict background and sanitary situation for women in the DRC

The conflict context in the DRC and the protracted humanitarian emergency in the country makes it an interesting case to research within the humanitarian field. Periods of violence occurred when the DRC was a Belgian colony, and re-escalated when the DRC became independent in 1960. The weak state and unstable parliament were incentives for rebel groups to mobilise and try to gain territorial control in the country. Multiple rebel groups fought each other as well as the government, and there were several attempts by rebel groups to overthrow the government in the 1960's and 1970's (UCDP 2017). The conflict has escalated and de-escalated multiple times since Congolese independence, with many rebel groups being involved during different periods of the conflict. The natural resources in the DRC and the nonproportional division of the wealth associated with the natural resources have been driving forces for the longevity of the conflict (ibid.).

The humanitarian situation in the DRC due to the conflict is highly problematic. Of the country's roughly 79 million large population, at least 13 million are in need of protection and humanitarian assistance. Despite the deteriorating conflict situation and increased need of funding, funding levels have decreased during the last few years, with 2017 showing the lowest numbers in the last decade. Only just over half of the required funding was received, and under half of the people in need received humanitarian aid (UN OCHA n.d.). Around 4,5 million people are currently considered internally displaced people in the DRC, and the deteriorating

conflict situation in 2017 forced more people than ever to flee their homes (UN OCHA n.d.). The majority of refugees fleeing their homes in the DRC are women and children (CARE n.d.). Women face specific difficulties in humanitarian emergencies. The current sanitary situation regarding menstrual health for women in the DRC is highly problematic due to deeply rooted taboos regarding menstruation, lack of education and the lack of access to sanitation supplies (ReliefWeb 2017). The apparent issue of menstrual health for women in the DRC has caught the attention of humanitarian aid organisations aiming to improve the situation. One of these organisations is ActionAid UK which in 2014 launched the campaign “The worst period of her life”, aiming to raise money to distribute sanitation kits to women and girls that have fled their homes due to conflict in the DRC.

3.2. ActionAid UK’s “The worst period of her life” campaign

The humanitarian emergency that the DRC has been facing for several years has prompted many humanitarian aid organisations to raise funds to aid the Congolese population. ActionAid UK is one of the humanitarian aid organisations that has specifically addressed the difficulties that women and girls face during the conflict in the DRC. ActionAid UK is a member of the ActionAid International Federation. They carry out work for the organisation in the UK by raising funds, influencing policy and conducting research. The main aim of the organisation is to help women and girls in the poorest parts of the world to end the “inequality that keeps women and girls locked in poverty, and to restore the rights denied them from birth” (ActionAid UK 2018). “The worst period of her life” was an appeal between March and June 2014, where donations were allocated to the general fund for providing sanitary kits to women and girls in emergencies, including the DRC, Syria and Afghanistan. During this period, all donations were doubled by the British government (ActionAid Supporter Team 2018). The campaign aimed to help women and girls who have fled their homes due to conflict in the DRC (Lowery 2014). The campaign was connected to the larger campaign “She Can”, which focused on violence against women in urban areas. This section presents the empirical material which will be analysed in the next chapter. The humanitarian aid campaign “The worst period of her life” was presented on campaign posters, which this section presents. During the campaign, a blog post was also posted on ActionAid’s website by a member of the communications team, discussing the campaign. This blog post is also presented in this section. The case study is later analysed in the next chapter.

This thesis focuses on two main posters connected to “The worst period of her life campaign”. They are analysed in the next chapter in relation to Agamben’s theory of “bare life”. The first poster is the main image for “The worst period of her life” campaign and was advertised in women’s bathrooms and the train network in the UK between March and June in 2014 (Holmes 2014).

The worst period of her life. Imagine you’ve fled your home. You’ve lost everything. And then it gets worse: you get your period and you can’t afford sanitary towels. Women fleeing conflict in war-torn countries like the Democratic Republic of Congo and Syria suffer this terrible humiliation, month after month after month. Will you donate £3 to help give one more woman a little bit of dignity? (see Appendix A, photo 1).

Paired with a close-up photograph of a young, dark skinned woman looking tiredly into the camera, this campaign pleads donors to give money towards feminine hygiene kits. The poster also provides a number to which the potential donor can text, sending a message with the word “kit” in capital letters. The potential donor donates £3 if they choose to do so. The donation is contextualised through the message that donating £3 will buy a feminine hygiene kit.

The second campaign poster was part of the “She Can” campaign during 2014, but also addressed “The worst period of her life”. The campaign states that “She can... get through the worst period of her life. With your help.”. The campaign poster refers to a survey where 1100 British women answered three questions about menstruation. The first question asked was “What are the worst things about getting your period?”. Nearly half of the women answered that stomach cramps and heavy bleeding were the worst things about getting their periods. The next question is “What would you do if you got your period but had no tampons or sanitary towels?”. Nearly half of the women asked would call in sick, and only one in three would definitely make it into work. Many women stated that they fear visible stains, and many feel unclean without sanitary towels or tampons. The final question asked in the campaign is “What’s the worst time to get your period?”, to which one in four answered when travelling long distances. The campaign poster concludes by stating:

Imagine the reality for women and girls in refugee camps. They've fled their homes in horrific circumstances, and travelled long distances to reach safety. Now they have limited access to basics, like clean water or soap. And no tampons or sanitary towel. ActionAid delivers sanitary kits to women and girls who have lost everything in places like Syria, Afghanistan and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Donate now to provide sanitary kits and help a girl through the worst period of her life (See Appendix A, photo 2).

The campaign poster also informs the viewer that any donations during the campaign will be doubled by the British government. The poster does not feature any real images, just several illustrations related to the survey, such as women, blood, and means of transportation. The design of the campaign poster is similar to that of a comic book.

The campaign posters related to the "The worst period of her life" appeal in 2014 were posted in public locations to be easily accessible to the public. ActionAid UK do, however, also have a blog on their website which regularly posts about the work that they carry out around the world. On the 29th of May 2014, a blog post was published regarding the campaign by a member in the ActionAid communications team. The title of the blog post was "The worst period of her life: putting myself in her shoes". It features a picture of a woman in the Mugunga refugee camp in the DRC, to which ActionAid have provided sanitary kits. She is standing between huts in the camp, looking at the camera with quite a serious expression on her face (see Appendix, photo 3). The blog post features similar parts to both campaign posters discussed in the previous section. The blog post starts by stating:

Warning: we're going to blog about periods. A subject that most people don't want to talk about, let alone blog about. At ActionAid we don't agree. Our appeal "The worst period of her life" aims to help women retain their dignity during the hardest times in their lives and beyond (Lowery 2014).

The campaign aims to break taboos surrounding menstruation, both in communities that receive aid and in communities in which donors live, such as the UK. The blog post also refers to the same survey as the "She Can" campaign, asking the reader to imagine what it is like to be a female refugee on their period, facing the difficulties of menstruation on top of the difficulties

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of being a refugee. The blog post concludes by stating that “We [ActionAid UK] work to ensure women and girls retain their dignity”, followed by making a plea to the reader. “Now you have put yourself in their shoes, we’re asking you to donate to help women and girls access clean and safe sanitary towels in a humanitarian disaster” (ibid.).

It is apparent that the humanitarian situation for women in the DRC needs urgent and large-scale actions. The vast scale of the humanitarian crisis and simultaneously increasing donor fatigue puts the DRC as one of the countries in most need of humanitarian assistance. This does however require a lot of resources, making humanitarian aid campaigns highly necessary to raise funds. The focus on women in humanitarian aid campaigns is interesting as it opens for a discussion on the gendered nature of these campaigns. “The worst period of her life” campaign by ActionAid UK has been presented in this chapter as the case study for this thesis. In the next chapter, the study case is analysed using Agamben’s theoretical framework, aiming to identify reasons to why this type of campaign is gender based, and which problematic factors can be identified departing from Agamben’s theoretical point of view.

4. Analysis

This chapter consists of an analysis of women's portrayal in the humanitarian aid campaign "The worst period of her life", created by ActionAid UK. Using Agamben's theoretical framework of "bare life", and the initial theoretical discussion in the theory chapter, I identify three factors that impact women's portrayal in humanitarian aid campaigns. These factors also influence the larger perspective of the research question, of how humanitarian aid campaigns are gender based. The first factor that is put forward and discussed in this chapter is the use of the concept dignity and what the study case associates with the concept. The second is the appeal to creating "intimacy at a distance", a unilateral connection from the potential donor to the victim and recipient of aid. By creating a connection with the victim, "feeling" their pain, potential donors may feel more motivated to donate. The third and final factor that is discussed in this chapter is connected to the images in the study case. The passivity in which the women are portrayed is analysed through Agamben's concept of *homo sacer*, the sacred person, and the use of *homo sacer* within humanitarian action. The chapter concludes with a discussion on Agamben's view on humanitarian aid campaigns.

4.1. Aiming to provide a life with dignity

"Will you donate £3 to help give one more woman a little bit of dignity?"

"'The worst period of her life' aims to help women retain their dignity during the hardest times in their lives and beyond".

The concept of dignity is interesting within humanitarian action. The focus in humanitarian action is often on the physical needs of the victim, which is also often the most urgent matter at hand. Saving lives and alleviating suffering are the main principles for humanitarian work, thus warranting the focus on the immediacy on a victim's physical needs. Exactly what a life of dignity within the humanitarian realm entails may be difficult to identify. German philosopher Immanuel Kant perhaps provides the most classic definition of dignity as a concept, stating that dignity is "human beings [...] treated as ends rather than means" (Dean 2015, 243). This would mean that a person would retain or receive their dignity by having agency, the freedom to make

decisions. By being the subject of a humanitarian aid campaign, the female refugee in need of sanitary kits portrayed in the “The worst period of her life” campaign perhaps finds herself in between being a means and an end. She is the target of the donations that the campaign will raise, but she is also the subject of the campaign which objective is to motivate the potential donor to take action. Agamben’s interpretation of dignity ties into Kant’s discussion of agency. The dignified life is closely related to the political life, in which the sovereign lives. Living within the political life includes the freedom to make decisions and be an independent individual. The *homo sacer* is excluded from the political life, and stands beneath the political individual, or the sovereign power.

The concept of dignity is reoccurring in the texts featured in the “The worst period of her life” campaign. The use of term in the campaign posters as well as the blog post insinuate that women in the DRC will either keep their dignity, or gain dignity, through the gift of sanitary kits. Dignity is thus connected to the refugee’s biological needs of menstrual health. In reality, one can assume that dignity entails more than the “bareness” of basic human needs. Transforming the female refugee from being a subject of “bare life” to becoming political citizen would affect larger societal structures of gender relations, as the woman can be considered to be permanently excluded from politics. According to Agamben, the Congolese female refugee would live within the political realm if she was to attain dignity. However, the focus put on the connection between biological needs and dignity in the campaign does not bring her into this realm. One could argue that dignity should not be a part of the discussion in humanitarian aid campaigns at all. It perhaps appeals to the potential donor, increasing the feeling of impact when they make a donation. If, however, dignity refers to a person’s agency, the convenience of sanitary kits will not in itself provide this.

4.2. Developing empathy for the distant female refugee

The victim that one is asked to aid in humanitarian aid campaigns will most likely be a stranger. The potential donor may not be willing to help a complete stranger that they know nothing about. The aid recipient most likely lives far away and in a situation that is very different from the donor. Helping women that one can relate to may motivate the donor to give aid, and humanitarian organisations need to handle the issue of distance between the potential donor and recipient when fundraising. One way to do this is to create a bond between the parties so that

the donor can relate to the recipient. Organisations may focus on a woman's role as a mother, or perhaps perceiving the aid recipient as a friend or neighbour. The donor is asked to create "intimacy at a distance" (Orgad & Seu 2014, 917). The impact of creating a bond with the aid recipient has been widely used in humanitarian action, e.g. 'We shall have to accept the fact that the fate of the women in Bosnia depends on whether TV journalists manage to do for them what Harriet Beecher Stowe did for black slaves, whether these journalists can make us, the audience back in the safe countries, feel that these women are more like us . . . than we had realized.'" (Rorty 2002, 78).

"The worst period of her life" appeals to a specific group to create intimacy at a distance. One can argue that the main target donor group for the campaign is women in the UK. The "Worst period of her life" poster was posted in women's bathrooms, quite obviously appealing to women, who most likely share the experience of menstruation with the recipient group. Women's bathrooms are also the location where women can take care of their sanitary needs, putting into perspective how difficult it may be not having access to sanitary facilities. Relatability is, as previously stated, essential when creating a feeling of intimacy at a distance. Menstruation is a biological phenomenon that most fertile women either have, or have previously had, in their life. Women are also an essential donor group. 73% of donors to humanitarian causes in 2017 were women, but only 7% of the total donations raised were for women and girls (The Public Interest Registry & Nonprofit Tech for Good 2017, 4). One could therefore argue that appealing to women is important and aiming to create connections between the donor and recipient may motivate more women to donate to causes concerning women and girls.

The plea to put oneself in "her" shoes put forward in the blog post posted on the ActionAid UK website, "her" being the female refugee on her period, asks the donor to create a connection with the victim. The connection is not however aimed to be formed based on abilities that the potential donor may have in common with the female refugee, but one of the biological traits that most women have in common, namely menstruation. While connections may be formed between the potential donor and the female refugee, one can argue that this relationship will never be symmetric. The donor wants to put a face to the aid recipient, knowing who they help. The aid recipient, however, is not included in this exchange other than being the target of the aid that the donor provides. Humanitarianism reduces recipients of aid to charitable objects, indirectly stripping them of their political and juridical agency. In a "state of exception" of a

humanitarian emergency, there is a clear power asymmetry between the aid provider and recipient, even in humanitarian aid campaigns. The woman in need of sanitary kits is portrayed as a victim whose situation can be saved by external intervention. In the “state of exception” of the conflict situation in the DRC, the woman is not considered a political citizen, but is reduced to a “bundle of basic needs and physical states” (Müller 2013, 64). The aid provider assigns these traits to the aid recipient featured in the humanitarian aid campaign, assigning her the traits being in dire need to improve her menstrual health situation. The problem with the “state of exception” is however that the woman is already argued to be the *homo sacer*. The “The worst period of her life” campaign is then reinforcing the political exclusion that the woman already faces. While women can be considered to already be the *homo sacer*, the women in the “The worst period of her life” campaign are assigned only one trait, which is being a refugee that struggles when on her period and is in need of sanitary kits. One can therefore argue that the campaign even further excludes the woman from the political realm, strongly establishing her role as *homo sacer*.

4.3. The “passive” female victim in humanitarian imagery

The relationship between the potential donor and the aid recipient is often strengthened through images. The act of creating “intimacy at a distance” may become more effective if the story to which the potential donor is supposed to connect with is also accompanied with a face. Emotions and facial expressions are difficult to describe in text, and we can most likely “feel” what the person in the image is feeling more effectively through images. The humanitarian emergency in the DRC has been ongoing for decades, perhaps decreasing the effect of humanitarian aid campaigns. Once the same type of images has been shown for a long time, their effectiveness decreases as they are not as shocking anymore. When examining the images used in the “The worst period of her life” campaign, a common theme appears. The photographs that are featured in the “The worst period of her life” poster and blog post both portray a young woman looking into the camera, albeit with one close-up picture and one picture showing a woman and the context that she is in. One could argue that by showing victimising images of women, the “The worst period of her life” campaign illustrates that women are still in need of aid in the DRC, showing that the emergency is not yet over. However, this instrumentalises the woman, reducing her to a passive victim in need of saving. Agamben argues that “In the face, I exist with all of my properties [...]; but this happens without any of these properties essentially

identifying me or belonging to me” (2000, 98). An image may thus portray certain traits, but they are not necessarily representative of reality. The women in the images in the “The worst period of her life” campaign portray traits of passivity, not having the power to act.

In the images featured in the campaign, the women can be considered passive victims, not portraying any agency. The passivity of the image of the female refugee in the “The worst period of her life” campaign is strengthened through the text used in the campaign posters and blog post. The woman never raises her own voice or tells her story, the aid organisation does it for her. The only female image in the campaign which “takes action” is the illustrated woman, appearing to work for ActionAid based on the text on her shirt. She tells the story of female refugees leaving their homes, having limited access to sanitary necessities. While the female refugee can already be considered to be the *homo sacer* in the broader societal structure, Agamben does not indicate that the *homo sacer* is an individual completely without action. The *homo sacer* is excluded from political life, and the contemporary *homo sacer* as a woman is confined to the private sphere, which still does not mean that the woman is passive. The images of the woman as a passive victim thus reinforce the division between the sovereign and the *homo sacer*. Stripping the female refugee of her agency and context reduces her to a subject of “bare life” with basic human needs rather than a complex individual with abilities and personal traits.

4.4. Closing the distance between humanitarianism and politics

Through Agamben’s framework of “bare life” and *homo sacer*, and the focus in the analysis on three factors of the portrayal of women in the “The worst period of her life” campaign, several problematic elements have been identified. So, one could then ask what Agamben would consider to be a good humanitarian aid campaign that avoids the reduction of female refugees to “bare life”? As this thesis does not consider the ethical implications of the effectiveness, or lack thereof, of humanitarian aid campaigns in practice, the efficacy of a humanitarian aid campaign according to Agamben’s theoretical framework will not be discussed. It is rather a theoretical discussion. While there is a division between “bare life” and the political life of the sovereign, it is the active exclusion of the *homo sacer* within the juridical system that determines their position. The power positions that the humanitarian aid provider and aid recipient have are thus not carved in stone. However, Agamben does not describe the *homo*

sacer themselves as having any agency to resist and change their position themselves. This powerlessness is reflected in the “The worst period of her life” campaign, and perhaps in the general structure of humanitarian aid campaigns. The type of campaign examined in this thesis is created by an external actor which expresses its “sovereign power” by controlling how the aid recipient is perceived, and what their needs are.

Can one challenge the already existing power relations between the *homo sacer* and sovereign power in the context of humanitarian aid campaigns? It is not very likely that the aid recipient could challenge their own position in the campaigns. Their story is told for them, and if an image does not suit the purpose of the humanitarian aid organisation, they do not have to use it. There are two quotes from Agamben that quite clearly state his position when it comes to humanitarian aid campaigns;

The separation between humanitarianism and politics that we are experiencing today is the extreme phase of the separation of the rights of man from the rights of the citizen (1998, 78).

The “imploring eyes” of the Rwandan child, whose photograph is shown to obtain money but who “is now becoming more and more difficult to find, alive,” may well be the most telling contemporary cipher of the bare life that humanitarian organizations, in perfect symmetry with state power, need. A humanitarianism separated from politics cannot fail to reproduce the isolation of sacred life at the basis of sovereignty (1998, 78).

The depoliticization of humanitarian aid campaigns is thus at the core of the issue of reducing victims to “bare life” according to Agamben. The image of the victim in need is the optimal tool for raising donations. Perhaps then, according to Agamben, removing the division of humanitarianism and politics would produce a humanitarian aid campaign which portrays the victims differently. If humanitarianism was politicised, perhaps the victim reduced to “bare life” would instead be an agent under the law, with another set of rights than the current victim portrayed has.

5. Conclusions

Giorgio Agamben's theory of "bare life" sheds a light on women's portrayal in humanitarian aid campaigns, highlighting the victimisation of women as reduced to passive objects of physical suffering. This thesis has analysed the research question of how humanitarian aid campaigns portray women in the DRC, also presenting factors that show why humanitarian aid campaigns are gender based. Developing a theoretical framework based on Giorgio Agamben which takes larger societal gender structures into consideration, this thesis illustrates that women in humanitarian aid campaigns are reduced to "bare life", a subject included in the juridical order only by exclusion. The main factors of the portrayal of women in humanitarian aid campaigns identified in the thesis are the reduction of the female victim of conflict to "bare life" by focusing on her biological needs, associating biological needs with dignity, and using the "bareness" of menstrual health to appeal to the donor. While the woman can already be considered to be the *homo sacer* in the broader societal structure, she is further stripped of her autonomy by being portrayed as a passive victim of a conflict out of her reach. The results are indicative of a general perception of women as the "weaker" gender, and the primary victim of conflict.

The case study of the "The worst period of her life" campaign promoted by ActionAid UK suggests that humanitarian aid organisations often choose to portray women as subjects of "bare life" as it appeals to the donor. The case both illustrates the imagery used in victimising women, as well as the use of language to speak for the victim, not allowing them to tell their own story. The women featured in the campaign are thus reduced to a passive victim, incapable of action and dependent on external aid, legitimising the organisation's actions. While the chosen subject of menstrual health for the campaign may itself be a feminist appeal to tackle taboos on the subject, the analysis of the portrayal of women in the campaign in this thesis presents results that contradict this aim. An appeal to increase women's agency is in this case carried out by taking the agency away when portraying the women in the campaign.

This thesis has explored the portrayal of women in humanitarian aid campaigns, and reasons to why humanitarian aid campaigns are gender based. However, there are certain limitations with the chosen methodology. A single case study does not in itself provide enough basis to make general assumptions on this subject. As humanitarian aid campaigns appear to be indicative of broader societal gender structures, using a more critical feminist approach may aid in the

analysis of these campaigns. Previous research has been done on this subject as well as on the broader subject of women in humanitarian aid campaigns, and there is room for further research on the subject. A comparative study between different types of humanitarian aid campaigns can be conducted to perhaps analyse how the organisation's principles and methods of carrying out humanitarian action may affect how women are portrayed. Further, one may also explore what differences and similarities can be drawn between organisations which main target group for humanitarian action is women and organisations which have a broader target group and conduct broader campaigns. Studies may also be conducted on what implications gender-based humanitarian aid campaigns may have on how humanitarian action is conducted on the ground in target communities. One could theorise that portraying women and children as the main victims will risk inspiring humanitarian policies that forget about male victims of conflict. Research on the implications of women's portrayal in humanitarian aid campaigns is important on all levels of to build further knowledge to improve how humanitarian action is carried out.

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7. Appendix



Photo 1. “The worst period of her life” campaign (ActionAid Supporter Team 2018).

She CAN... get through the worst period of her life. With your help.

We asked 1100 British women:

She CAN... act:onaid

Q What are the worst things about getting your period?

- 47% stomach cramps
- 45% heavy bleeding

Q What would you do if you got your period but had no tampons or sanitary towels?

- 48% call in sick
- and only **1 in 3** would definitely make it into work.
- 50% feared visible stains
- 48% felt unclean

Q What's the worst time to get your period?

- 1 in 4 said when travelling long distances

act:onaid

Imagine the reality for women and girls in refugee camps.

Now they have limited access to basics, like clean water or soap. And no tampons or sanitary towels.

They've fled their homes in horrific circumstances, and travelled long distances to reach safety.

ActionAid delivers sanitary kits to women and girls who have lost everything in places like Syria, Afghanistan, and Democratic Republic of Congo.

act:onaid

Donate now to provide sanitary kits and help a girl get through the worst period of her life.

Until 25 June, anything you donate from the UK will be **DOUBLED** – help us make double the difference to women and girls around the world.

www.actionaid.org.uk/SheCAN

Matching your donation with **UKaid**

She CAN... act:onaid

Photo 2. "She Can" campaign (Pinterest n.d.).



Photo 3. Photo used in “The worst period of her life: putting myself in her shoes” blog post on ActionAid UK’s website (Lowery, 2014).