Chapter 6
Threatened, the Refugee as the Referent Object

6.1 Introduction – The Refugee as Referent Object

Since its inception, humanitarian communication has consistently represented beneficiaries as referent objects of a threat, as threatened. Images of victims, whether in the traditional representation of a sea of humanity' (Malkki 1996) or in the more recent aesthetic style of the individual portrait, have consistently constituted the large bulk of humanitarian NGOs' visual production. This chapter focuses on the representation of Syrian refugees as 'threatened' to show how this depiction of refugees is just another form of securitization, whereby Syrians are depicted as infantilized and passive victims in need of external intervention. In order to do so, it is worthwhile digressing to understand how remarkable have been the structural changes that humanitarianism has undergone over the last quarter century and how new relief assistance' modalities, while seeking to putting individuals and their rights center stage have also primarily represented them in terms of victimhood.

Since the 1990s, humanitarian actors have devoted increasing attention to the protection of human rights. From the purely needs-based approach of early humanitarianism, where life-saving assistance was delivered to people in danger according to their practical needs, there has been a shift toward a rights-based approach. The overarching objective of humanitarian assistance is today not merely focused on people's lives, but it is now equally interested in protecting people's rights. This laudable aspiration has been realised by a new focus on protection.[1] Despite the intense and heated debate on the necessity for and effectiveness of the rights-based approach (Chandler 2001; Žižek 2005; Brems 1997; Coomaraswamy 1994; Duffield 2014; Fox 2001; Rieff 2003; Slim 2003; DuBois 2007), its diffusion in present day humanitarian action is indisputable.

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[1] In the humanitarian context, the term protection refers to "humanitarian work [that] extends beyond physical assistance to the protection of a human being in their fullness. This means a concern for a person's safety, dignity and integrity as a human being" (Slim and Bonwick 2006, 30).

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Since genocide in Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s, the international community has elaborated another concept, one which includes both human rights protection and the right to be protected: that of human security. The term was officially embraced in 2001 by the Commission on Human Security (CHS), a body established in response to the UN Secretary-General's call at the 2000 Millennium Summit for a world "free from want" and "free from fear": "Human security means protecting fundamental freedoms – freedoms that are the essence of life. It means protecting people from critical (severe) and pervasive (widespread) threats and situations. It means using processes that build on people's strengths and aspirations. It means creating political, social, environmental, economic, military and cultural systems that together give people the building blocks of survival, livelihood and dignity" (Ogata and Sen 2003, 4).

The elaboration of the notion of human security has had several important implications. The concept paved the way for development of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) principle.[2] This provided the moral justification for a series of military interventions – including that in Libya in 2011 which was judged to be a model R2P operation (Kuperman 2013) – and put protection activities at the core of humanitarian action (Slim and Bonwick 2006). Most importantly, the concept of human security generated a theoretical shift in the way international security had hitherto been perceived. Rather than only having States as the focus of international security, people have been included in the picture, at the very center of the international security system (Duffield and Waddell 2006). In this new framework, the international community is impelled to act not only in the case of State aggression against another State, but also when serious violations of human rights are perpetrated against people by another non-state actor and/or the State itself. In the language of securitization theory, the human being becomes in this context the *referent object* of security and the violation of human rights constitute the *threats* from which people need to be protected. In this context, when people are threatened, humanitarian action is a legitimate response strategy to address human security (Watson 2011). Paying attention to the securitizing role of humanitarian NGOs in the human security framework, allows us to unpack the mechanism through which relief agencies "hold a privileged position in the enunciation of human insecurity, in which a reified and monolithic form of humanity is declared, and that supports existing international norms pertaining to the provision of security for humans" (Watson 2011, 5).

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[2] The R2P principle, promoted by the UN Office on Genocide Prevention and the Responsibility to Protect (https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/about-responsibility-to-protect.shtml), has been advanced as a solution to square the circle between the principles of sovereignty and human rights. In his 2000 Millennium Report, the UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan specifically asked: "If humanitarian intervention is, indeed, an unacceptable assault on sovereignty, how should we respond to a Rwanda, to a Srebrenica, to gross and systematic violation of human rights that offend every precept of our common humanity?" The International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS) was created in 2001 in order to answer that question. In its report, the Commission affirmed that States have the responsibility to protect their citizens, but in case of States' failure to protect its own people, the responsibility is transferred to the international community.

This chapter focuses on NGOs' humanitarian representation of Syrians on the move as *threatened*. The shift of attention from their needs (caused by famine, poverty, or conflict) to threats to their rights is also noticeable at the visual level. NGOs' humanitarian communication. Their attention has been increasingly focused on the human being as referent object of the threat: whether it be violence, war, exploitation or denial of access to basic services. The point is not the threat, but the fact that the represented participants of the images – the actual or potential beneficiaries of humanitarian action – are threatened as their rights are at risk. The typical image of present-day humanitarian crisis is no longer that of a starving baby, but that of a displaced child whose right to education has been taken away by war. Beneficiaries of humanitarian intervention are no longer represented (only) as people in need, but as rights-holders in need of protection. Contrary to what one could expect, this kind of depiction is not particularly linked to negative images more than it is to positive ones. It is, rather, its focus on the incumbent threat faced by the represented participants that links them with the concepts of protection and human security. In the language of securitization theory, the beneficiaries of the humanitarian intervention are visually depicted as referent object of a threat, as *threatened*.

Within the logic of human security and protection, the humanitarian actor's intention is to direct attention toward the persons of concern, and the need to act to prevent the (further) violation of human rights. In an "economy of attention" (Citton 2014) this is one of the way relief agencies in general, and NGOs in particular, compete with media and populist political accounts to offer an alternative account of emergency. Instead of focusing on the *threat* represented by people on the move, humanitarian organizations put the emphasis on the people and the situation of emergency that are *threatening* them.

Inspired by the theoretical framework offered by securitization theory and looking at the depiction of refugees as *referent object of a threat*, this chapter aims to explore how visual representation of the humanitarian subject as threatened contributes to the securitization of people on the move. Through a visual analysis of NGOs photographic material, I argue that several aesthetic patterns, which also happen to be the most recurrent ones in present day humanitarian communication, contribute to an account of displaced Syrians as threatened. Although this depiction is quite evidently intended to challenge dominant discourses of refugees as a security threat, it not only fails to keep the emancipatory promise implied by the rights-based approach to human security, but it also contributes to the reinforcement and the reproduction of a securitized account in which people on the move, as rights-holders yet passive victims, are in need of external protection. Against this background, humanitarian intervention is, therefore, presented as among suitable strategies to address human insecurity.

This chapter outlines the different visual themes that contribute to the depiction of Syrians on the move as threatened. Given the importance that the protection of the humanitarian subject whose rights are (or have been) threatened has in contemporary humanitarianism and its relevance within the human security/right based framework, the following section addresses this relatively new concept of humanitarian protection and the connection that it has with securitization. The chapter proceeds with the presentation of the analysis of the most recurrent visual patterns that emerge from the literature connected with representation of the victims and people in need. It starts by presenting the iconography of pity, putting it into connection with the religious concept of *pietas*[3] and compassion. It then outlines the different aesthetic patterns that are conducive to a victimized depiction of people on the move by taking into account more negative but also more positive types of photographic representation. The chapter continues with the exploration of the over-representation of children in NGOs' communication regarding the 'Syrian refugee crisis' and the ideological meanings connected with the infantilization of the humanitarian subject. In the fourth section, I deal with the photographic representation of physical pain and death to investigate the limits and/or the emancipatory potential of the visual theme of suffering in the framework on relief agencies' visual production. The topic of innocence is the subject of the subsequent section aiming to show how humanitarian depiction of the threatened victim is often complemented by an emphasis on innocence as a necessary characteristic of displaced people in order for them to be considered as deserving beneficiaries of relief aid. The penultimate last section analyzes the visual theme of the humanitarian worker as visual metaphor of the savior hero valiantly intervening to protect the threatened victim. To conclude, I show how these very different kinds of visual representations of the humanitarian subject as threatened contribute to a securitized representation of Syrians on the move.

6.2 Protection and Securitization

Protection is the operationalization of the concern of humanitarians to assist the threatened individual. As, such, it is an overarching concept that encompasses all the visual themes that depict people on the move as referent objects of a threat, as people, that need, exactly, to be protected. Although commonly perceived as a dimension antithetical to the securitarian one, protection and securitization appear not only often intimately connected, but to a certain extent, two sides of the same coin.

Over the last two decades, NGOs have paid increasingly attention to protection activities. This growing sector of intervention has been added to the traditional emergency operations around health, food assistance, education, water and sanitation, non-food items, and shelter. In the ALNAP Protection Guidelines,[4] Slim and Bonwick define it as "humanitarian work [that] extends beyond physical assistance to the protection of a human being in their fullness. This means a concern for a person's safety, dignity and integrity as a human being" (Slim and Bonwick 2006, 30). Humanitarian protection is, basically, the operationalization of the rights-based approach, the way through which relief agencies (whether governmental or non-governmental) translate into practice the aspiration to address human (in-)security.

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[3] *Pietas* is an "abstract divinity of the Romans, which expresses the set of duties that man has both towards men in general and towards parents in particular." In the modern sense, the term refers to the feeling of affectionate pain, of moving and intense participation towards those who suffer.

Despite the very noble scope of protection, its implementation has several problematic implications. Schubert (2007) has shown how protection, is fundamentally a political act, given its innate struggle to legitimize who has the authority to protect and within which limits. Although presented as an apolitical and ethical intervention, it is not only intrinsically political, but it also shares a very similar logic with security discourse in legitimizing an expert role acting on behalf of the 'other' lacking political agency. In some cases, the language of protection has been used to implement activities that have clearly contrasted with the intention of the people they meant to protect. Musarò (2013) has pointed out how Frontex's action in preventing irregular migration has been presented in terms of humanitarian intervention to save lives and protect the victims of smuggling, while, in reality, the agency's primary goal was and is to prevent migrants from reaching Europe and to forcibly return as many as possible to their countries of origin.

It is therefore not ironic that a UK flagged ship, which I saw during fieldwork in Lesvos anchored in Mitilene, just outside my hotel displayed both languages: signage saying 'Border Force' juxtaposed with that of 'Protector'. If those examples are about a security agent that claims a protection role, the interplay of these two seemingly conflicting yet interconnected domains occurs also the other way around. A child protection officer working for a local Greek NGO on Lesvos shared her concerns. Talking about their work with minors who are registered as adults,[5] she commented "that is what we do, we are the good police in there. Our work is not child protection, why do they call it protection? We are there basically protecting the system, not the children."[6] Similarly, a Save the Children child protection manager expressed her frustration following a meeting the child protection unit in Moria Camp: "the other day we met with other child protection actors in Moria to discuss measures to protect from violence and abuses the minors registered as adults in the camp and the only solution we could think of was to build other fences. To protect them we basically had to put them in a prison inside a prison."[7]

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[4] ALNAP is "a global network of NGOs, UN agencies, members of the Red Cross/Crescent Movement, donors, academics and consultants dedicated to learning how to improve response to humanitarian crises" (see: https://www.alnap.org/)

[5] The registration of minors as adults, due to contested age-assessment procedures, was at the time of research a key protection concern. For more information see: Achilli et al. 2017

[6] Interview with a Praxis child protection officer, Mitilene, Greece, 5th May 2017.

[7] Interview with a Save the Children child protection manager, Mitilene, Greece, 4th May 2017.

This complex interplay is not surprising. Protection and securitization alike require the disconnection of an issue from its political dimension for its framing in terms of emergency. In both cases the political context and the individual or collective political claims of the people involved are overlooked in the name of a greater priority. Moreover, as Carling and Hernández-Carretero (2011) have shown, the narrative of migrants' protection simultaneously works as a policy objective and powerful rhetoric to legitimize control measures. "Images of destitute and vulnerable migrants – which can seem at odds with the narrowly security-oriented narrative – underpin the policy narrative of protection. Because ostensibly protective intervention is often compatible with control measures, the narrative of protection achieves a sense of closure" (Carling and Hernández-Carretero 2011, 45). In this sense, protection and securitization appear as two sides of the same coin. The visual analysis of humanitarian NGOs' representation of people on the move starts from this assumption and looks at the different aesthetic patterns that depict displaced Syrians as threatened, underlying different aspects of this interconnection between protection and securitization.

There is another dynamic of protection and its securitizing role toward the threatened victim that has emerged from the visual analysis. NGOs' attempts to show individuals' traumatic experiences, clearly observable in the humanitarian photographic account of the refugee crisis, confirms the argument advanced by Pupavac (2001b) about psycho-social activities. She argues that such trendy interventions, increasingly at the core of emergency protection programmes in the field, have come to constitute a "new form of international governance based on social risk management" (Pupavac 2001b, 358). This governance, that she calls therapeutic, has permeated relief strategy. Humanitarian interventions are based on psychosocial risk management and have a double effect. On the one hand they conceal or hinder local coping strategies to displacement and violence. On the other they pathologize war-affected individuals, considering them as either being 'in recovery' or 'in remission', never recovered, "but ever after haunted by their trauma and at risk of being re-traumatised by their memories" (Pupavac 2001b, 264). We can see a gradual shift from traditional humanitarian pictures of masses of undistinguished individuals to the preference for portraits of individuals. In the representation of the humanitarian subject as threatened, the traumatic experience is assumed and depicted inside the individual, and the threat is internalized in the body of the victim. In this way, people on the move, intrinsically threatened, visually results in identification of the need for therapeutic governance. However, as Pupavac (2001b) has highlighted, several studies on the assumption of trauma in conflict-affected societies have challenged the idea that this assumption can be made. For appearances of clinical conditions are particular rather than universal and specific factors mediate how individual experience war.

6.3 Visually Threatened – Human Security and Securitization

6.3.1 *Pity (Fig. 6.1)*

A mother with a suffering child is probably one of the most powerful images of pity, intended as the feelings of painful and thoughtful participation in the unhappiness of others.[8] In this picture a little girl, clearly in distress, is lying on her mother's lap. We can feel the mother's presence through the warm and protective embrace of her hands, and her involvement through the gaze turned to her daughter, but we cannot see her face. Her head is cut off from the frame. The little girl, instead, at the center of the scene, is looking straight at us, thus establishing a direct contact with us. She is the focal point of the image as everything else is either cut out or left out of focus. The eye contact is a typical feature of 'demand images' where the gaze of the represented participant demands something from the viewer, to enter into some kind of abstract relationship (Kress and Van Leeuwen 1996). The kind of relationship expected in this picture is revealed by the little girl's expression. Her suffering look, combined with the close-up distance and frontality of the shot, demands empathy and compassion. The text accompanying the picture informs us that the little girl is

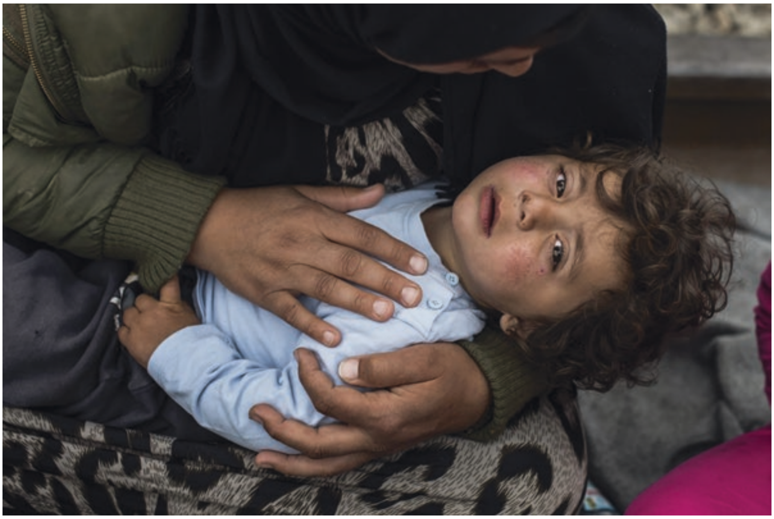

Fig. 6.1 ©Pedro Armestre/Save the children

sick and cannot stop crying. She and her family are stranded in Greece and waiting to go to Germany to access appropriate care (Save the Children 2016a). The image leaves little doubt about the kind of reaction which is expected. This request for emotional involvement, however, comes also with the suggestion of a specific power relation between the represented participant and the viewer. The high angle of the indicates the viewer's position of power toward the subject of the image (Van Leeuwen and Jewitt 2001), mitigating, in a certain way, the feeling of close social distance and involvement proposed by the other semiotic resources at play. Most importantly, views from above "tend to diminish the individual, to flatten him morally by reducing him to ground level, to render him as caught in an insurmountable determinism" (Martin 1985, 38).

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[8] The term *pity* is very similar to the term *compassion* although in religious terms pity is only an emotion and compassion is both an emotion and a virtue. However, the two notions are often used interchangeably and in relation to the religious term of pietas. The terms *pity* and *compassion* differ substantially from the more secular notion of *solidarity* that implies a relationship between an individual and a community while the former are more linked to a one-to-one relation.

This image powerfully recalls images of *pietas*, an iconographical theme widely present in pictorial art, represented par excellence in religious art of the Renaissance, but also present in secular illustrations. The visual pattern connecting humanitarian representations of pity to the iconography of religious *pietas* is no coincidence: the aesthetic theme of piety, or its more secular synonym of pity, arouses precisely feelings of compassion and empathy for the suffering other. This is probably one of the reasons why pity has been historically one of the most recurrent themes of humanitarian communication.

One of the intentions of this kind of representation is certainly that of showing the suffering of people and soliciting the viewer's emotional involvement. For NGOs such communication is desirable, helping to obtain financial support for the organization's humanitarian work. For relief agencies, one of the key communication objectives is also that of raising awareness on the situation about which the public could not be fully informed. As a Save the Children communications staffer told me: "Currently one of the key messages is around the EU-Turkey deal, on the impact that the deal has on the kids especially on the Greek islands. Their psychosocial status is increasingly worse with more and more kids attempting suicide and arming themselves. We are calling for the EU to improve the condition on the islands, taking family and children out of the detention centers, give them a fair right to asylum and that every European country does it fair share for resettlement".[9]

In the specific case of Save the Children picture above, the image is part of a photojournalistic reportage entitled *Children on the move in Europe*. It clearly sets out its key message: the EU – Turkey Deal that had come into force a few months previously is leaving children (and their families) stranded in Greece, at risk of inhumane conditions and detention (Save the Children 2016a). The message is quite clear and its resonates with discourses of social justice, humanity, and solidarity: there is a humanitarian situation going on in the Greek islands and the organization wants to inform, raise public awareness, and advocate with European Governments for safe and legal routes to Europe and increased resettlement options (see *Our Call for European Leaders* section in Save the Children 2016a).

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[9] Interview with a Save the Children Information, Communication and Media Manager, Athens, 24th March 2017.

What I find problematic is that the cover picture presenting the section dedicated to Syrian displacement is instead focusing on pity. The problem with this kind of framing – a framing present, to different degrees, across the four selected NGOs – is that, as Hannah Arendt (1990, 7) has argued, the politics of pity operate under the assumption of the existence of two groups: the unlucky ones who suffer and the lucky ones, who do not suffer but get to observe the suffering. In Arendt's perspective, pity could be considered a step forward compared to compassion. According to the philosopher, compassion operates outside the political space for it is a passion incapable of generalization, one that cannot be applied to an entire class of people, but only to a specific case that stirs the observer and creates co-suffering. Pity, instead, is able to make generalization, to address classes of people, but only in relation to their fortune and misfortune. Pity is different from solidarity, a principle to guide action which takes into account differences in strength and weakness, richness and poverty. Pity, however, only looks at luck and completely disregards justice. For this reason, the politics of pity is also different from the politics of justice. Although pity may have inspired action for the alleviation of suffering, it is based on a discourse of grand emotions, rather than socio-political justice (Chouliaraki 2010). Drawing on Arendt's reasoning, Boltanski (1999) has noticed that, in fact, "for a politics of pity, the urgency of the action needing to be taken to bring an end to the suffering invoked always prevails over considerations of justice" (Boltanski 1999, 5).

There is something else in the iconography of pity that I find interesting. The large majority of pictures of pity examined for this study represented women and children. This is particularly relevant if we consider that the preliminary content analysis did not identify an over representation of women versus men. While children were the subject of the majority of pictures, when it came to adults the two genders were almost equally represented in photos of single individuals (71 women versus 60 men) in photos of group of people (39 groups of women and 44 groups of men). However, in the images of pity women and children were clearly predominant. This is strikingly e at odds with the demographic data on Syrian displacement in Europe in 2015. According to UN data, in fact 62% were men, 16% women and 22% children (Time 2015). Although in the Middle East by the autumn of 2016 the percentage of minors was higher (47%), the entire population was broadly split between the two genders (UNHCR 2016).

Since the visual theme of children is particularly dominant in humanitarian representation and entails specific implications, it will be treated in detail in a dedicated section (see Sect. 6.3.3). Here, I would like to focus on the over-representation of women in images of pity.

In recent years there has been increased attention to gender in the humanitarian sector. Almost all relief organizations (both governmental and non-governmental) have progressively and inexorably integrated gender mainstreaming – the inclusion of a gender perspective into humanitarian policies, practices and project implementation – into their emergency programmes. Although in theory a gender perspective is not particularly focused on women more than on men, the visual presence of women compared to man is overwhelming. This has probably something to do with the fact the humanitarian discourse has often considered vulnerability as essentially situated in the female body, reinforcing a representation of women as victims and passive recipients of aid (Aoláin 2011). The problem with the images of pity predominantly embodied by women is that they reproduce an essentialist depiction of women as intrinsically vulnerable. The over-representation of women in images of pity also resonates with a growing body of scholarship that has critically addressed the narrative of rescuing women and children that has permeated discourses for the legitimization of military humanitarian intervention and humanitarian action (Heck and Schlag 2013; Rosenberg 2002). Most NGOs may have, albeit belatedly, acknowledged that an attention to gender means an attention to all genders and gender dynamics, and not to a specific gender (IASC 2006). However, such a recognition is completely absent at the visual level in images of pity.

6.3.2 Victimization (Figs. 6.2, 6.3)

A little girl, barefoot and wearing an over-large T-shirt, is rubbing her eyes, probably crying, miserable beside a tent. There are no other details in the picture except for the dirty and muddy soil. A close-up portrait where everything is in sharp focus and the girl (and her affliction) are the sole protagonist of the picture. This image – beside the unease potentially provoked in me every time I look at it that I have intruded in an intimate moment – tells us very little about the circumstances that led her to this situation. We do not know why she is crying, or if anyone, apart from us,

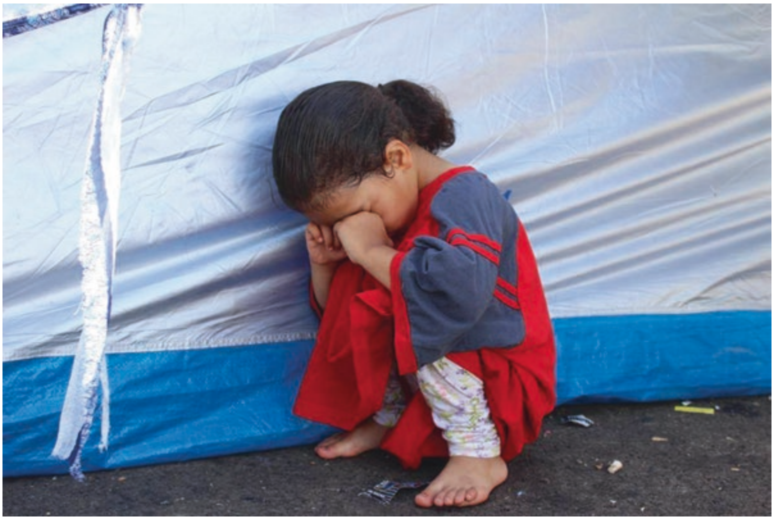

Fig. 6.2 ©CARE, Syria Response 20 September 2015

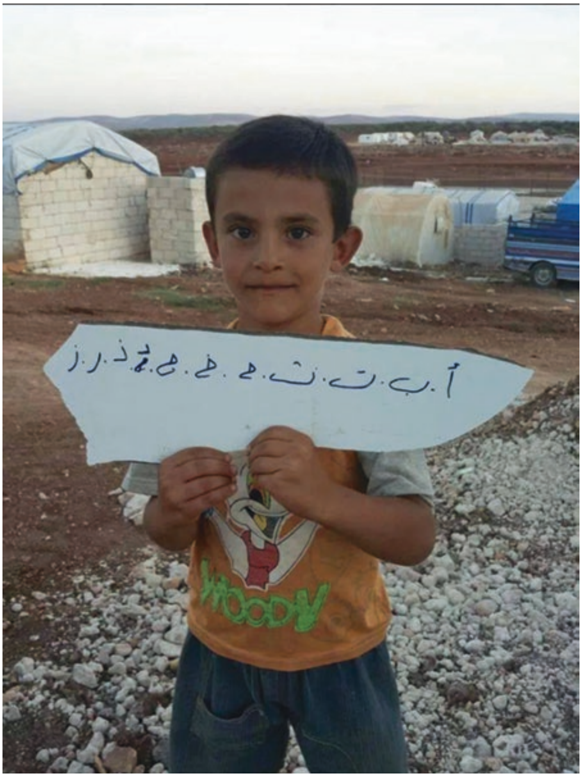
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Fig. 6.3 ©CARE, Syria Response 24 July 2015

is seeing her and will go to comfort her. The photographer has put him/herself (and the viewer thereof) at the same height as the child in an effort to mitigate the asymmetrical relation of power between the observer and the observed. However, in spite of this attempt, the oblique point of view unveils the detachment and moderates our involvement with her feelings: despite sympathy we can have for her, the diagonal angle depicts her as part of another world, not ours. As Krees and van Leeuven (1996) have pointed out, this does not mean that the viewer is forced to accept the specific view suggested by the semiotic resource of the diagonal angle (that of social distance). Yet, before rejecting its meaning, it is necessary to acknowledge the value of this particular semiotic resource.

The post accompanying this image on Facebook specifies the context: “This little girl and her family only wanted refuge. Instead, she got teargas. Help Syrian refugees, their lives & dignity matter.” Together with the hashtags #Refugees #EU #SyrianRefugees #RefugeeCrisis, it also indicates a link. I immediately clicked, looking for more information on what had happened: why teargas, who had done that and why? Nothing, for the link does not lead to any further information, only to a page urging donations to help the organization “fight poverty and provide emergency relief” (CARE 2016b). I followed the clue of the teargas easily learning that 3 days prior to publication of the photo the Hungarian police, guarding the border with Serbia, had fired upon people on the move with tear gas and water cannons (The Independent 2015). However, none of this is visible in the picture. There is no border, no police in riot gear, nothing that could give us the sense of what is going on and why the little girl is crying. Once again, we note how the absence of any kind of information on the context reproduces a victimized account of Syrian refugees that conceals the relevance of their socio-political situation.

The representation of people on the move as victims is one of the most discussed visual tropes in the literature. A large body of scholarship has investigated how certain ways of depicting refugees or aid recipients tends to victimize them by describing the represented participants as helpless and passive (Calain 2012; Fassin 2007; Kleinman and Kleinman 1996; Malkki 1996; Rajaram 2002). Overall, the analysis has revealed that all four NGOs publish and produce pictures of victimhood. However, it is important to note that CARE and Save the Children utilize this visual theme to a much greater extent than Oxfam and MSF. The iconography of victimization is different from pity as the former places the emphasis on passivity rather than compassion. In fact, this representation does not necessarily rely on negative images where the subject of the picture is clearly in distress. It can, on the contrary, depict people with a proud look or even smiling. Similarly, passivity and victimization are no longer necessarily associated with images of group of indistinguishable people as a "sea of humanity" (Malkki 1996, 377).

No matter the subject, or the positiveness/negativeness of the image, what all these pictures have in common is that they show the represented participants as passive victims of circumstances. All this is in striking contrast with reassurances given me by a regional communications officer for the Syria response when explaining what a good' picture should look like according to his organization: "We always try to create empowering images, we do not take pictures from certain angles that would make them vulnerable".[10]

However, images of this kind represent displaced people in terms of loss and helplessness. It is not about a specific semiotic resource at play, but, rather, how in each specific picture the combination of various semiotic resources contributes to the depiction of victimhood. It could be the lighting and the depth of field focusing on the situation of misery or the medium size of the frame, which combined with a high and oblique angle detaches the viewer from the represented participant who sits on her hands completely helpless. Despite, sometimes, the strong and proud look of the people, and that some images are taken from a frontal, inherently more equal, angle, it is loss and inactiveness which usually permeate such types of representation.

While the visual topic of the victim is quite widely used in present-day contemporary humanitarian representation, it is also crucial to acknowledge that NGOs, in contemporary depictions of the threatened individual, are also putting a great deal of effort into avoiding images of passive victims in favor of a depiction of people with agency and in need of empowerment. This is true across the four relief organizations. This important change of perspective it is not only stated in several policy documents and guidelines, such as the *NGOs Code of Conduct on Images and Messages* (Concord 2006) or the different internal guidelines that communication practitioners referred to during my field interviews, but it is also quite evident at the visual level. Figure 6.3 shows a boy holding a piece of cardboard with the first letters of the Arabic alphabet. His proud gaze is directed at us as he poses in front of the camera. Behind him, the background in focus situates the picture in the typical semi-arid landscape of the Informal Tented Settlements (ITSs) in which many displaced Syrians live in Syria, Lebanon and Jordan. This is not a detail, as they are considered particularly vulnerable. As a UNICEF/REACH Report explains, “for Syrian refugees who are unable or unwilling to reside in formally established refugee camps and are unable to afford regular housing solutions within host communities, Informal Tented Settlements (ITS) have become the default option, notably for the most vulnerable and impoverished displaced Syrian households” (UNICEF/REACH 2014, 6). The Facebook post accompanying the picture clarifies: “his boy has been displaced with his family members from their home. They are now living in an informal settlement in Syria. The boy is carrying a sign with the Arabic alphabet written on it, expressing that he has lost his education and that he needs to go back to school.” The structure of the picture is based on a symbolic attributive process whereby the cardboard – made salient through the central position in the frame, conspicuous color and its display position – stands to signify its symbolic value: the boy’s threatened right, the right to education that has been taken away by war and displacement.

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[10] Interview with a CARE Regional Communications Officer for the Syria Response, Amman, 23rd March 2017.

This picture, putting the threatened right at the centre of the attention, through its symbolic attributive structure, is paradigmatic of the relatively new rights-based approach of humanitarianism. The image still presents some elements of the old visual perspective. The pose seems quite artificial since it is hardly the spontaneous idea of a little child to create such a symbolic and powerful image. Moreover, the camera is still shooting from above, from a position of power, one of the humanitarian actors supposed to, and poised to, act to defend the boy’s rights.

However, the boy is holding some cardboard and is not looking at us with a suffering or demanding expression, but, rather, with a proud look. He has a message. I initially thought that the picture wanted to show how families were coping with the difficult condition of displacement. In Syria, the educational system has been severely disrupted by the ongoing level of violence, and, as I learned during my fieldwork, in Jordan and Lebanon access to education for displaced Syrian children in general, and for those living in ITSs in particular, was problematic for numerous reasons.[11] However, we do not know if this is the message of the child, if this is his priority or it is the only learning resource he has in the harsh conditions in which he is leaving. Since the boy is clearly posing, and the text says that the cardboard is a symbol of its lost right to education as any other displaced child, as any other 'universal victim' (Malkki 1996), his individuality, together with his agency and empowerment are diluted. In this case, empowerment and dignity would have been probably best represented by visually documenting the several attempts that Syrian refugees put into self-organizing education activities in the ITSs and the various obstacles to access their right of education.[12]

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[11] For more information on this topic, see: Human Rights Watch 2016a, b.

Undoubtedly, however, looking more generally at this new type of images, it is clearly evident this kind of representation is completely different from that of the passive victim. It is crucial, therefore, to recognize that images of this kind constitute a drastic change from the typical image of the victimized threatened victim of traditional humanitarian communication. In most of the photos of deprived rights-holder victims, the point of view is frontal, and the camera is put at the same eye level as the subject. Women and girls are no longer the predominant subject. On the contrary, the represented participants are mostly boys, in striking contrast with the photos of pity and passive victims. Faces are in full light and expressions are mostly jaunty and confident. They are not passive victims anymore, they are rights-holders. Yet, minors are the main subject of representation. It is as if for the represented participant to be visually *threatened,* s/he has to embody some kind of vulnerability. Although this representation entails a drastic change compared to the helplessness of more 'traditional' visual themes, it still depicts the people on the move as embodying the need for (humanitarian) protection. They are not completely passive victims anymore, but they remain (mostly) people in need of external intervention.

The new, rather more positive and undoubtedly improved, aesthetic pattern of rights-holder subjects is therefore not without some limitation. Although the passive victim has been replaced by the rights-holder, humanitarian intervention is depicted as natural and inevitable to address the wrong and as the only actor able to act to defend the person' rights. The rights-holder representation works with what I describe as a 'Trojan horse effect'. Deceptively, at first glance it seems to deconstruct traditional representation of people on the move as helpless victims but eventually reproduces a discourse in which the rights-holder is portrayed with limited agency: s/he is threatened as his/her rights are threatened and this needs external intervention for protection. Unlike the mythic wooden horse deployed as a stratagem by Odysseus, with this new genre of picture NGOs are making an effort to f challenge the imaginary of the passive victim with no intention to trick the viewer. Nonetheless, the polysemic feature of photography allows for both meanings to be present. While putting the individual and his/her rights at the center of attention, it simultaneously reproduces a representation of the rights-holder with very limited agency.

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[12] In 2015, while serving as Head of Mission in Jordan of a humanitarian NGO active in the emergency response to the Syrian crisis, I was a member of the Education working group where the topic of informal education was discussed and coordinated with UN agencies and Ministry of Education representatives. Among the Syrian refugees there were several teachers who, amidst the situation of displacement and ban on formal employment in Jordan, organized small schools in the informal settlements. The Government of Jordan asked the NGOs to harmonize and coordinate the emergency education response while at the same prohibiting Syrian teachers from providing educational services. Other obstacles to accessing education for Syrian refugees living in the ITSs have included transportation costs to and from school and lack of required documentation.

6.3.3 *Infantilization*

The over-representation of childhood in NGOs humanitarian communication constitutes a particular form of victimization. Among the more than a thousand images collected for this study, two thirds of all images of individuals portray children. Over 60% of group images include minors. Although only one of the four selected organizations has a specific mandated child focus (Save the Children), the significant recurrence of images of minors is noticeable across agencies and particularly evident in the case of SCF 74% of whose images are of children, CARE (38%), Oxfam (32%), and to a much lesser extent MSF (15%). In Chap. 4 I have shown how the use of conceptual structures has the effect of essentializing and de-individualizing individuals' diverse experience of displacement. Here, I would like to focus on the discussion of the predominant recurrence of childhood iconography and its implications in relation to the humanitarian representation of people on the move. Unlike other visual themes analyzed so far, the representation of children in present-day NGOs communication is quite variegated. Portrayals of children in situations of distress, need, suffering, and misery, coexist with equal numbers of images of them happy, playing, holding a favorite toy. Children are represented in groups or alone, in the arms of their parents or standing out in the middle of a mass of adults.

The representation of children and its iconographic value in humanitarian communication has been extensively explored by the literature. Scholars have shown how not only children (and women as we have seen the previous section) embody a particular kind of powerlessness, but also that they rarely look threatening (Malkki 1995, 1996), symbolizing the humanitarian subject by excellence (Bleiker et al. 2014; Burman 1994; Byrne and Baden 1995). By focusing particularly on NGOs' communication, Manzo has argued that "the iconography of childhood is a signifier of an NGO corporate identity" (Manzo 2008, 635). The way organizations represent children works similarly to a brand logic in which agencies encode their humanitarian principles, vision and ideals. Through their use of a dominant iconography of childhood, NGOs shape, interpret and undermine these principles and values producing a representation of children in which multiple and opposite meanings can easily coexist. Manzo has also shown how the humanitarian depiction of minors resonates with colonial ideology, particularly when analysing analogies between the iconography of childhood and that of savagery, both based on the assumption of innocence, dependence and protection. From a psychological perspective, scholars have explained how images of children evoke in adults a sense of power and confidence in their own abilities (Holland 1992) and are utilized to symbolize grownups' concerns about protection and security (Myers quoted in Burman 1994). The iconography of childhood therefore reinforces a colonial and paternalistic account where the (lonely) child, symbol of all victims, needs protection and transnational western NGOs work in loco parentis (Burman 1994). Pupavac has shown how the current humanitarian emphasis on children's rights "has become key to human rights-based international security strategies" (Pupavac 2001a, 95). Present-day child-targeted psycho-social rehabilitation programs, she acutely argued, are the way through which children rights have been operationalized in the humanitarian sector. Children have become crucial to the creation and creation of a "new international ethical order" and key actors to promote social change (*ibid.,* 95).

Unlike the visual themes hitherto analyzed in the case of the iconography of childhood it is not a matter of the way children are depicted, but, rather, the recurrence of the subject, and what this reveals about NGOs' understanding of the population they work to assist. Both the over-representation of children and the focus on child protection activities confirm the paternalistic account of humanitarian action and power relations between transnational Global North-based aid agencies and beneficiaries in the Global South as pointed out in the literature (see, inter alia, Manzo 2008; Pupavac 2001a, 2005). Moreover, childhood, which is "characterized by protection and freedom from responsibilities" (Burman 1994, 3), reproduces and reinforces a discourse of passivation of the victim.

As already noted in relation to the iconography of victimization there has been an evident change in the way children are represented. Although images of starving babies are no longer a recurrent visual theme, the new images of children as rights-holders fails to escape a representation of the recipients of aid as passive, powerless and vulnerable threatened subjects in need of external protection. Likewise, the variety of aesthetic patterns portraying children (such as single children, those attending protection programmes or groups playing) follows the same logic. For all the evident effort by NGOs to communicate more positive images which present children with dignity, and sense of empowerment, the reality remains that over-representation of childhood continue to conceal more than reveal by providing an infantilized representation of people on the move.

Regardless of whether or not children are represented as passive victims or rights holders, the point is that the figure of the child is used as a metonymy[13] of all displaced Syrians in the visual production of NGOs. Since children are in the Western narrative in need of protection and parental care, the predominant recurrence of this visual pattern justifies and reinforces a paternalistic perspective. In this sense, the over-representation of children in humanitarian communication contributes to a depiction of people on the move as infantilized, because mainly illustrated through the visual theme of the minor. This infantilization is problematic because it transfers to the wider population (all refugees) the features normally associated with childhood: vulnerability, need of external (adult) protection, and limited agency.

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[13] Metonimy is a figure of speech. It "has the effect of creating concrete and vivid images in place of generalities, as in the substitution of a specific 'grave' for the abstraction 'death'" (Encyclopaedia Britannica 2018).

The visual analysis has not only confirmed what Pupavac (2001a) has noticed, that the child as rights-holder is denied the moral agency to act in his/her interest, but has also underlined the not too implicit statement that NGOs are basically the only actor able to intervene to address the wrong and protect child rights. This is particularly evident if we compare the pictures of NGOs' activities with children and the images of parents with their children. While the latter often do not show the traits of the parents (either photographed from the back or simply cut out of the picture), when they 'are in the frame' – as it is indeed the case in many of the images of the selected four NGOs – they are mostly represented carrying or embracing their children. As much as this is a clear visual signifier of the love parents nurture for their own kids, there are almost no images in which parents are engaged in some of their 'natural' parental activities: teaching, playing, feeding, trying to relieve the kids from the traumatic experiences they went through. Whereas all this is completely visually absent from the images of fathers and mother with their children, on the contrary images of NGOs' projects clearly show the organizations to be very active in these activities. In this securitized representation of people on the move, where Syrian refugees are represented trough the metonymy of children, NGOs contribute to a securitized depiction in which an infantilized subject with limited agency is in need of (adult, or in other words top-down) protection.

6.3.4 Suffering, Physical Pain and Death (Fig. 6.4)

The suffering body, especially of children, has been for a long time a dominant visual theme of humanitarian communication (Fehrenbach and Rodogno 2015). The level of violence, physical abuse and death of the Syrian war, and the displacement it has caused, have produced a series of dramatically vivid images of physical pain and death that are difficult to forget. While there are few very strong and powerful pictures representing death – and particularly the death occurring along the Mediterranean migration journey through open symbols such as coffins, lifejackets, and abandoned children' shoes on the shore – in this section I would like to focus on images of physical pain and dead bodies.

Pictures of this kind, published by the four selected NGOs – over 70% of those analyzes for this study were produced by MSF – are mostly close-up or medium distance shots of children in serious pain due to the wounds caused by bombs or chemical weapons or the effects of famine in besieged areas of Syria. In some other cases the bodies are abandoned on a bed or in the arms of someone rescuing them from destroyed buildings. We do not get to know what happened to the people portrayed. Moreover, there is at least one picture showing explicitly a dead person, probably a child. It portrays a mourning child weeping over a dead body and it is part of a photo collage including the following text: "Fewer people died in the first month of Syria's ceasefire than at almost any other time since the war began. US+RUSSIA: SAVE HOPE.SAVE LIVES.SAVE THE CEASEFIRE. Over the past

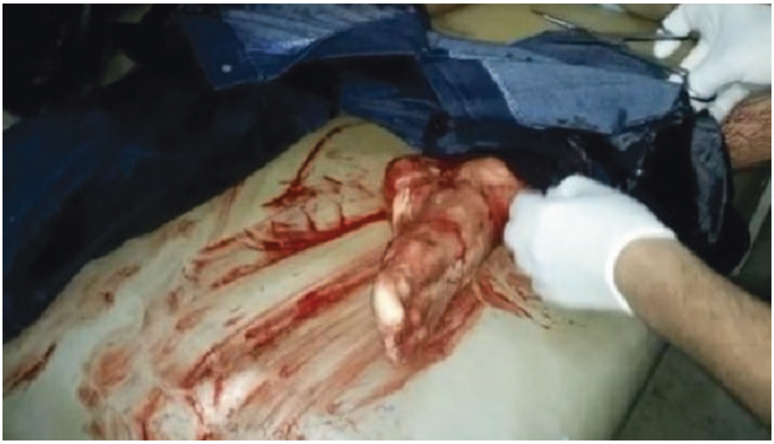

Fig. 6.4 ©MSF, 2013

48 h one Syrian has been killed every 25 min and injured every 13. This is one of them" (CARE 2016a).

In order not to involuntarily fall into the trap of a "pornography of violence" (Bourgois 2001), I have decided to reproduce only one image of suffering that I personally find less shocking than most of its kind within the corpus of photos gathered for this study. Although this image is far from being paradigmatic of the most upsetting ones, it still allows me to make my point without reproducing pictures of extreme suffering and death.

MSF picture shows a foot covered in blood. White plastic gloves are covering the hands that are cutting off the victim's trousers to enable medical intervention. The bloody streaks on the white operating table give a sense of the fast-moving emergency environment of urgent medical assistance. The gloved hands (actor of the image) with the scalpel (vector) are an open symbol of the medical profession. We know – without the need for more details – that there is an aid worker, either a doctor or a nurse, working on the wounded body (the goal of the action). Through its "psychological salience" (Kress and Van Leeuwen 1996, 63) blood dominates the scene. This close-up shot puts the viewer (us) in the middle of the medical emergency. All we can do is to observe and acknowledge the physical pain of the body.

There is something about the representation of suffering and death produced by NGOs that is connected with relief organizations' role to inform the general public what is happening in the field, raise awareness and mobilize support. The underlying idea is that often the victims of violence need their plights to be known to the world and their pain to be visible in order to raise awareness around forgotten crises. As a large swathe of scholarship working on images of atrocities has pointed out, invisibility is not helpful to victims of violence (Sontag 2003; Kleinman and Kleinman 1996; Butler 2004). For many transnational NGOs and certainly the four studied here 'making people' voices heard' is a core priority of their strategies (Save the Children 2016b, 3; Oxfam 2013, 5; Care International 2017, 7). MSF has, as noted earlier, put *témoignage* (bearing witness) at the heart of its humanitarian action. For MSF the principles of impartiality and denunciation, Calain (2012) has observed how humanitarian representation of suffering bodies does not meet the ethical standards usually used in medical practice. In fact, in order to draw attention to a neglected crisis or amidst particularly dramatic events, NGOs sometimes decide to put aside aspirations to use more positive images disseminate images that show extreme suffering and physical pain. When I asked an MSF communication officer when asked what made a ‘good’ and a ‘bad’ picture replied: “a good picture would be a picture of a patient or of people receiving MSF care, our activities. The focus is the patient. Since their voices cannot be heard, we try. I do not use communication to promote MSF and generally avoid using pictures with too much blood because I also do not want to hurt the eye of the viewer”.[14]

On the role of dramatic pictures of pain, an MSF communication manager expressed her opinion that: “the role of images was much more powerful at the time MSF was founded. Back then, it was extremely important in Ethiopia to photograph what humanitarian workers were seeing in order to inform people who did not know about what was going on. Now that we are bombarded by images sometimes I wonder if they still make a difference. For example, showing the body of Aylan has helped to raise awareness?[15] Surely, but for how long? Its effect has been quick.”[16]

However, despite the organizations’ internal debate, and at odds with their visual communication guidelines (Concord 2006; Manzo 2008) images of suffering and physical pain are undeniably part of humanitarian NGOs’ communication, to such an extent that Denis Kennedy has argued that relief organizations are involved in a “veritable commodification of suffering”(Kennedy 2009, 1).

Several considerations arise. The first has to do with the recurrence of such images. Without denying the importance of making visible the level of atrocities, the quantity of such powerful images contributes to produce what Moeller (1999) calls “compassion fatigue”, a resistance to shocking images that eventually dilutes the reason they were taken and distributed in the first place. Since expert actors – the transnational humanitarian NGOs in our case – as Aradau (2004) has rightly pointed out, play a key role in shaping the observers’ sensibility, imagination and emotional response, the way suffering is visually represented also defines our understanding of it. In this sense, relief organizations bear a great responsibility for the shaping of the socially constructed aspect of pain. However, because of the impossibility for the viewer to feel what the photographed subject is experiencing, what these images do eventually is to “fetishize pain in their drive to make visible what is essentially unimaginable (…) The body in pain is thus reproduced as an aesthetic visual image, a symbolic icon that stands in for itself as the referent object of political violence” (Dauphinée 2007, 140). The problem is that this representation of the unimaginable does not move us closer to the subject, as we cannot physically experience that pain. Sontag concisely pointed out that “to suffer is one thing; another thing is living with the photographed images of suffering” (Sontag 1973, 15). Since we are can only observe the visual manifestation of the pain, visual representation of suffering contributes to underlining the asymmetry between the observer and the body in pain (Chouliaraki 2013; Boltanski 1999).

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[14] Interview with MSF Communication Officer, Amman, 18th May 2017.

[15] She was referring to 3-year-old Alan Kurdi, whose body was found lifeless on the shores of Turkey after boat on which he was travelling with his family capsized.

[16] Interview with MSF Communication Manager, Athens, 24th April 2017.

Even the effort to give suffering a face, demonstrated by the predominant representation of people in pain through close-ups, is severely hindered by the fact that, as Dauphinée (2007) has noticed, the people depicted stand there as iconic representations of the cause of that pain and their individual suffering is completely erased. The representation of physical suffering underlines the impossibility of empathy and accentuates the divide between the observer and the body in pain. Thus, the power of the image for the purpose of humanitarian communication is in the subject as referent object of the threat (such as bombing, shelling, famine or gas attacks) or rather as symbol of future similar threats to those already experienced that pain from which it could not be protected.

The problem is that, as in the case of representations of pity, “it is only in a world from which suffering has bene banished that justice could enforce its rights” (Boltanski 1999, 5). In fact, even images that have been published to arouse conscience and denounce what is shown at the visual level remains trapped in a visual short-circuit in which the body in pain is extremely visible, but the threat is not. Therefore the possibility of interventions is difficult to imagine outside of the protection of that body. None of the pictures collected for this study shows bombings, weapons, belligerent groups, sieges, deportations, or refoulement (forcible deportation of those seeking refuge).[17] The suffering body incorporates the threat. The need for intervention is imaginable therefore only limited to the protection of that body.

6.3.5 Innocence

A man is posing for the camera with a white dove in his hands is the subject of an OXFAM picture. The image portrays them in full light through a medium-close shot whose interactive meaning corresponds to a far personal relationship (Kress and Van Leeuwen 1996, 125). We are not so close as to understand his feelings, as in close-ups, but close enough to be able to relate at a personal, rather than at a social level. The middle-aged man is well-groomed and well-dressed in clean clothes. The bird he is proudly holding aloft has its wings spread open, as if poised for flight. The photographer has captured the exact moment the bird opens its wings while still remaining firmly held. It is no coincidence: the dove, its wings spread for flight, is clearly an instantly recognizable symbol of peace. The background, although in sharp focus does not tell too much to a Western audience except that there is a roughly plastered wall and corrugated iron panels behind the man. To those who are more familiar with the urban landscape of some Middle Eastern cities, the setting may recall the typical visual landscape of rooftops where many people, generally men, practice a popular hobby in Syria, Lebanon and Jordan: homing pigeons.

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[17] A core principle of international human rights and refugee law, the principle of *non-refoulement* guarantees that no one should be returned to a country where they would face torture, cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment and other irreparable harm.

The photo is emblematic of the new kind of humanitarian pictures that are meant to go beyond the traditional (pathetic) communication to show people not only with dignity but empowered, visual representation that tries to use positive images and tell 'success stories'. As an Oxfam advisor told me: "because the Syria crisis has evolved over time we are also trying to change images of refugees from the classical representation of refugees in tents (of course this element is still there), we are trying also to show empowerment and success stories with a particular focus on women and families. This is also because of the social situation that is showing more and more social tension and we try to produce a positive account."[18]

Indeed, this picture provides an alternative narrative of Syrian refugees. Not only does it portray a man, instead of the more typical focus on children, women and other representations of vulnerability, but it also depicts the person doing something other than just standing around. The caption unusually[19] indicates his name and surname: Jamal Ashamed. Dignity. Empowerment is suggested through the visual clue of the hobby. Pigeon fancying is something ordinary, part of Jamal's every day, and not confined to his displacement situation. This does change the narrative and certainly is a step forward from the more typical depiction of refugees as passive victims. The intention of representing the success story of a man empowered and with dignity is also confirmed by the text accompanying the image: "Jamal and his seven children fled Syria 3 years ago. He left everything behind but has managed to reclaim part of his identity, his passion for training pigeons. Jamal spent some time volunteering with Oxfam, before he was offered the opportunity to work with us as a water distributor." (OXFAM 2016).

While appreciating the effort behind this picture to provide a different account of Syrian displacement, its alternative and positive perspective, I would like to focus on the ideological significance of one of the image's metaphors. For the dove, a visual theme widely recurrent in pictorial art[20] besides being the ultimate symbol of peace and used in religious paintings to symbolize the holy spirit, also has another symbolic meaning, that of innocence.

From the biblical verse "I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves. Therefore be wise as serpents and harmless as doves" (Matthew 10:16) to the poetic fantasies of William Blake's *Auguries of Innocence* "A Dove house filld with Doves & Pigeons Shudders Hell thr' all its regions" (Auden et al. 1950), the image of the dove – with its characteristic features of purity and immaculacy – is often used as signifier of innocence. Despite the presence of the white bird the picture of Jamal Ashamed featuring on Oxfam website in 2016, makes it particularly emblematic, this is not the only image depicting refugees as innocents. On the contrary, this kind of representation is very common among NGOs pictures. I have already touched on the subject, discussing how the general over-representation of children and women, older people and those with disabilities in relief organizations' communications underlines the humanitarian subjects' vulnerability as it presents them as threatened victims.

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[18] Interview with an OXFAM Policy Advisor, Beirut, Lebanon, 8th March 2017

[19] As often stated in the text accompanying pictures, the names of the people portrayed in the pictures are usually changed to protect their identities.

[20] For example, Pablo Picasso's *Child with a Dove* (1901), Rene Magritte's *The Man with a Bowler Hat* (1964), or Marc Chagall's *Child with a Dove* (1937)

Here, I would like to focus on the aspect of innocence. For this section, I decided to select images of men exactly because masculinity is a category usually not associated with innocence, especially when other groups of subjects are available for the camera. Obviously, the representation of innocence is easily visible and noticeable in the overwhelming presence of children and vulnerable groups in humanitarian images. By showing that it is also found in images of men, I hope I will be able to make my point even clearer.

As noted above, among all the images considered for this study neither in the case of images with a single represented participant, nor in those portraying groups, were men significantly less frequently photographed than women. Although dominant subjects of pictures of masses of people on the move, the large majority of the rest of the photos – across all four NGOs – depicted adult males with their families, their children, in caring and protective poses or in situations of vulnerability. The advantage of these kind of images is that they challenge stereotyped representation of refugees (particularly adult men) as threatening. They do so by focusing on their affections, education, or parental/protective role. All these images, added to the others that depict subjects as inherently innocent, clearly constitute a dominant visual narrative in NGOs' humanitarian communication. Again acknowledging the important effort of these different aesthetic patterns in depicting people on the move as threatened instead of threatening, there is something that I find problematic in the humanitarian representation that emphasize their innocence. In a "moral economy" in which discourses and practices around people on the move oscillate between compassion and repression (Fassin 2005, 365), there is little doubt that NGOs favor the former.

Generally, as Slim has pointed out, NGOs lean toward an "innocence-based solidarity" (Slim 1997, 350): a conceptualization of solidarity in which the principle is only claimed toward the 'innocents', often women and children, typically considered the most vulnerable, but also, as the pictures above show, innocent men. The problem is that this emphasis on innocence contributes also to the reification of dichotomous categories of innocents vs. non- innocents, deserving vs. undeserving refugees or recipients of humanitarian aid and non-beneficiaries

The importance of labeling a particular group of displaced people struck me forcibly when during my fieldwork in Lesbos. I visited Moria, Kara Tepe, and Pikpa refugee camps. The first was at the time the largest reception site on Greek islands and was set up by the government to process new arrivals and host refugees waiting for registration. Kara Tepe is a municipally-managed camp intended to accommodate families and vulnerable groups. Pikpa is a small reception site managed by a voluntary organization and hosting only vulnerable groups and especially unaccompanied and separated children. In Kara Tepe, I was initially puzzled by a remark from a camp manager that “we do not call them refugees, they are villagers.”. I kept asking myself what could possibly be so bad about the term ‘refugee’ that it needed to be substituted by the artificial and inappropriate appellation/euphemism of ‘villager.’ Evidently, villagers needed to be protected from the stigma of being refugees as if this category intrinsically embodied something negative.

The difference between the concept of ‘villagers’ and ‘refugees’ lies in the action of moving, the decision to leave one place to go to another. It was as if refugees had lost innocence in this choice of moving, as if rights need to be threatened outside of any individual agency to be worthy of protection. In fact, as Friese has argued, despite agency and autonomy defining the modern subject, agency is threatening: “a helpless, needy and dependent person can be pardoned for that which in reverse marks the other as threat: namely autonomy, choice, and decision”’ (Friese 2017, 6). My reflection was reinforced by the different demographics in each camp. While Moria at the time mostly housed single men – n – referred to as refugees – Kara Tepe was for families (including men) and vulnerable populations (Jauhiainen 2017), the innocents par excellence – referred to as ‘villagers’. The denomination by the Kara Tepe camp management implicitly implied the perceived level risks associated with the two different populations.

In discussing seemingly antithetical security and humanitarian articulations concerning human trafficking, Aradau (2004) analysed how humanitarian organizations work with trafficked women. In order to move on from security approaches based on the politics of risk they prefer a form of representation capable of eliciting a response based on the politics of pity. Pity is, indeed, activated by the identification of the trafficked women as worthy of compassion as non-dangerous subjects. It must be noted that Aradau does not mean to suggest that these organizations aim to equate compassion with the supposed innocence of the victims. On the contrary, the notion of compassion is used by humanitarian organizations to go beyond the dialectic of victim-criminal according to which women in Aradau’s case study are either women who have embarked consciously on an irregular journey or are innocent victims of criminal organizations. In this way the strategy of pity manages to erase any consideration on innocence and guiltiness.

The images of pity are functional in avoiding dichotomous representation of refugees as innocent vs. guilty – since they are all worthy of compassion. On the contrary, images of innocence, not based on the aesthetic pattern of pity, contribute to reproduce and reinforce a binary understanding of people on the move, one divided between those who are innocent and vulnerable *versus* the not innocent, those who do not deserve assistance. Along those lines, the diffusion of the visual pattern of innocence in the representation of people on the move has a similar tendency to challenge media representation that have consistently depicted people on the move as irregular migrants constituting a threat to state sovereignty. However, even acknowledging NGOs’ efforts to question securitized accounts, the conceptual implication of diffusion of the visual pattern of innocence in the representation of people on the move implies that protection is for non-dangerous victims, the innocents. In this way, NGOs are leaning toward a defensive narrative in which in order to be considered worthy of protection refugees need to be shown to be innocent. Instead of being innocent until proven guilty, refugees fall into a perverse (and securitized) dynamic in which the burden of proving their innocence falls back on them.

6.3.6 The Savior Hero (Fig. 6.5)

Humanitarian narrative is often based on a quite predictable plot, what Chandler has called a "fairy story" in which: the (helpless) victim, the villain, the non-Western actor(s) responsible for violence, famine, and suffering and finally the savior, an external agent, typically humanitarian organizations, "whose interests were seen to be inseparable from those of the deserving victim" (Chandler 2002, 36). The visual narrative follows a very similar pattern but with a substantial difference: the villain is typically invisible.[21] While the previous sections have extensively explored the visual representation of the victim, I would like to focus now on the character of the savior. The image portrays a young Western woman holding a baby in her arms. Prominent in mid frame, the logo of the organizations she is working is emblazoned on her T-shirt. On the left of the frame, her back turned to us, there is an observer, a woman with veil or hijab, most probably the mother of the child. She is an external spectator and, more or less, like us. She is watching the protagonists of the image

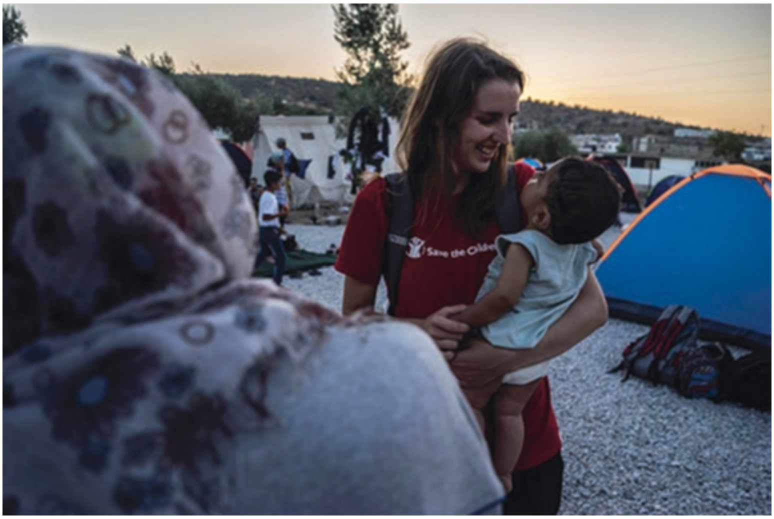

Fig. 6.5 ©Anna Pantelia/Save the children

while they are looking at each other. Whereas the humanitarian worker is smiling, the baby is looking bewildered, as children often are with strangers. We can deduce from the tents that the scene is set in an informal camp. For its semiotic characteristic (no direct eye contact between the represented participants and the viewer, medium/far shot, and frontal angle) this is clearly an 'offer' image, one meant to offer us some kind of information about the situation. What this image is telling us is that the organization is willing and able to assist the victims in their condition of displacement. The hug symbolically stands for the protection activities that constitute one of the core programs of many relief organizations.

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[21] See also Sect. 7.2.3 of the following chapter

Save the Children image is not unique in his genre. Several other pictures provide the exact same narrative (and pictures of this kind have been found to more present in MSF and Save the Children visual representation). In a thoughtful analysis of humanitarian visuality, the description that Kurasawa gives this visual theme could be easily applied to many other pictures of this kind: "for her or his part, the aid worker is demarcated from other actors in the image through situational and compositional symbols designating him or her as a benevolent, selfless and often courageous actor who intervenes in a humanitarian crisis to save the lives of victims, provide them with care, and/or ensure their recovery; hence, in addition to their corporeal poses and gestures (the examining or feeding of a subject, the carrying of supplies, etc.,) aid workers' relations to the crisis and its victims are visually signified through their clothing (e.g., a humanitarian NGO's t-shirt, a nurse's or doctor's uniform) and equipment (medical supplies, foodstuffs, aid tents, etc.)" (Kurasawa 2015, 17).

In the other images of this genre not only are organizational logos invariably visible and in center, but also the humanitarian workers are standing as if there were no other adults present, as if the present and future of the children they are maternally caring for solely depended on them. No mothers, fathers, or families are included in the pictures. Those who have nurtured, loved and probably saved their children' lives escaping violence are not represented in many of these pictures. With a few notable exceptions, when parents are captured by the camera, they are relegated to a corner or background, as if their role were marginal.

The visual pattern of the white hero assumes even more relevance if we think about what it tells us about humanitarian organizations' self-representation. The iconography of the savior resonates with the colonialist and paternalist approaches to the 'other' that I discussed in the section on *infantilization*. It is no coincidence that at the iconographical level these kinds of representation once again privilege children (and to a lesser extent women), and very rarely men. The pose of the girl in another image in which she walks toward the horizon hand-in-hand with two children with her chin held high and a spring in her step, suggests enlightenment and confidence in the action she is carrying out. For she is leading the children toward an invisible destination (metaphorically towards a brighter future?). The rhetoric of this image, whose hyperbolic representation risks sliding into irony, is not very far from images that have been criticized precisely for their arrogant and culturally imperialist approach. Parodic social media projects like Barbie Savior[22] or Humanitarians of Tinder[23] have highlighted how the “victim/hero” narrative reinforces paternalistic and colonialist approaches to humanitarian action and how the self-representation of the “white savior” can help us understand how power dynamics are reproduced.

Other than relief agencies self-representation, the visual theme of the victim-hero also reveals something about ourselves (spectators), specifically if we pay attention with whom we identify with in the pictures. Given the marginality or absence of adult migrants, we are inclined to identify with the other adults in the picture: the humanitarian workers. In an article discussing the double narrative (military and humanitarian) used by the Italian Navy in representing its engagement in the Operation Mare Nostrum,[24] Musarò (2017) shows how most of the images inspire sympathy for the armed forces personnel and pity for the rescued migrants. In emphasizing discourses of assistance and protection, the Navy represented its operation as actions of national benevolence, creating an “imagined community” (Anderson 1991) between the military personnel and the viewers from the same country: a community in which ‘we’, the spectators, identify with the saviors rescuing the ‘others’. In the pictures discussed here a similar dynamic is at play except that the humanitarian goal is the NGOs’ primary aim (and not an accessory one as in the case of the Italian Navy). The hero visual trope reinforces a particular narrative that constructs two imagined communities: the Western actors who altruistically and bravely intervene to rescue the helpless migrant. This kind of representation, as Musarò points out, “construct borders at imaginary levels, through mediated representations that are often presented as binary opposites” (Musarò 2017, 18).

In so doing, the aesthetic pattern of the savior/hero produces an account of humanitarian action that resonates much more with the idea of the unilateral action of an external agent who is in charge and knows what he is doing and a victim who is passively at the mercy of the events. As Kurasawa has underlined: “images of rescue are symbolically structured to visually inscribe the hierarchically organized roles and vastly unequal capacities of actors in the face of humanitarian crises, through the juxtaposition of positions between a rescuer possessing the agency to intervene to transform dire circumstances and a victim portrayed as helpless, passive or acutely vulnerable” (Kurasawa 2015, 25).

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[22] Barbie Saviour is a social media project with a parody Instagram account (https://www.instagram.com/barbiesavior/?hl=es) created to express the founders’ frustrations at stereotyped and victimizing representation of the Global South and what they term “the Barbie Savior complex “of many humanitarian volunteers. See: https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-36132482

[23] Humanitarians of Tinder (www.humanitariansoftinder.com) is a collection of images of people using their “humanitarian’ encounter with the ‘other” to define themselves. What started as a joke, gained traction and sparked media and scholarly discussion on how both professional and volunteer humanitarians represent themselves (Bex and Craps 2016; Richey 2016; Mason 2016).

[24] A year-long naval and air operation launched by Italy in October 2013. Its suspension is credited with helping to subsequently increase the numbers of refugees drowning in the Mediterranean.

This dichotomous and asymmetric representation, typical of the different visual registries depicting the threatened victims that we have analyzed in this chapter, inspires an idea of humanitarianism that is far from the declared core values of partnership, empowerment, and solidarity set out in the NGOs mandates and mission statements. Indeed, while aid is conceptually based on the idea of donation, and the logic of gift implies a hierarchical relation (Mauss 1925), solidarity is based on the idea of equality. At the visual level, equality is nowhere to be found, neither in the images of hero/savior or in images depicting NGOs staff and beneficiaries involved in humanitarian activities. This representation does indeed contribute to a securitized account of Syrian refugees, re-relegated to a victim role, passively waiting for the intervention of the humanitarian hero.

6.4 Conclusion

This chapter has addressed the different visual patterns through which NGOs represent Syrian people on the move as referent object of a threat. Although the topic of the threatened individual is depicted in quite diverse aesthetic themes, they all describe displaced people at risk and in need of humanitarian protection. At the visual level, the combination of all the semiotic resources that contribute to the representation of the victims as threatened are part of the 'new' attention to human security and the concomitant shift from a needs-based to a rights-based approach to humanitarian intervention.

I have shown how images of pity, with their similarity with the religious iconography of piety, have the power to inspire an emotional response that uses the language of urgency instead of that of justice. In this way, the only imaginable action is that of immediate intervention to interrupt the suffering, while the wider political context and the causes of the distress are completely overlooked. Moreover, this kind of visual rhetoric has shown an over-representation of women that is at odds with the general trend for humanitarian communication images to depict men and women in equal measure. This reinforces the construction of the female body as intrinsically vulnerable.

The exploration of NGOs photographic material has also confirmed an account of people on the move as essentialized victims, a phenomenon extensively discussed in the literature on refugees and humanitarianism. The depiction in terms of helplessness and passiveness is underlined by the over-representation of children that I observed consistently in the picture studies for this research. The overwhelming presence of minors as photographic subjects contributes to the reproduction of an infantilized, colonial, and paternalistic account of people on the move.

The visual analysis of humanitarian organizations' photos has also shown how very vivid images of suffering and physical pain, produced with the evident intention to draw attention to critical situations, have also the opposite effect of distancing the viewer from the represented participant, underlying the asymmetry of position between them. Moreover, the body in pain comes to incorporate and represent the threat, while at the same time concealing it. What remains is the sense of urgency for a protective intervention that once again speaks in terms of emergency instead of justice.

Throughout the analysis of the symbolic value attributed to many images of Syrian people on the move, I have also shown how a special emphasis is placed on innocence. Although undoubtedly intended to challenge media and political accounts of refugees as threatening, this kind of depiction has also the effect of reifying dichotomous categories: innocents/non-innocents, deserving/undeserving or recipients/non recipients of humanitarian aid. The last visual trope that I have explored is the 'hero', a type of humanitarian self-representation through which NGOs present their essential selflessness. This dichotomous and asymmetric visual pattern does more than resonate with the colonial and paternalistic approach underlined in the case of infantilization. For it also contributes to the creation of binary 'imagined communities' of universal heroes and universal victims, an involuntary irony, satirical representations of present-day humanitarianism.

It is important to notice that the investigation of humanitarian organizations' visual production has also highlighted a new kind of representation that aims to go beyond a portrayal of beneficiaries in terms of victimhood. As I have shown in the previous sections, relief organization have put a great effort in changing their representation of the beneficiaries, including victims of displacement. Clearly, one of their core concerns has been to stop portraying them as victims, opting for a depiction of beneficiaries showing their dignity and empowerment. NGOs' intentions in this sense are confirmed by their communication guidelines (Manzo 2008; Lidchi 1999) and the interviews I conducted during fieldwork.

These 'new' type of images based on determined visages and confident faces, while putting the emphasis on people's rights – not only to survival but also integrity, dignity, and wellbeing – also contributes to the shaping of the protection authority over the person of concern. In this political act, the individual whose rights need to be protected is securitized by the humanitarian intervention that become the most legitimate security strategy to address the threat. Indeed, although the focus on the threatened rights seems to challenge securitized discourses on migration based on security and control, these two perspectives are not an alternative framing. On the contrary, "securitization and securing rights are, in fact, two sides of the same coin" (Sasse 2005, 689).

For these reasons, all these different depictions of Syrian people on the move as threatened have failed to fulfill the emancipatory promise of the rights-based human security framework. Indeed, the diverse visual themes, far from empowering or emancipating the humanitarian subjects, weaken any political claim they may have, and rather inscribe them into a dynamic of dependency requiring external protection. Against this background, humanitarian protection has increasingly gained momentum as the operationalization of a rights-based approach aimed at safeguarding the dignity, integrity, and wellbeing of the individual, and no just immediate life-saving assistance. However, its implementation is strictly interrelated with securitization discourses and practices as protection has become one of the most legitimate security strategies to address human insecurity.

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