

“The Brains Are Frozen”: Precarious Subjectivities in the Humanitarian Aid Sector in Jordan

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Abstract

Under the influence of neoliberal policies and marketisation dynamics, the humanitarian sector’s labour conditions become increasingly insecure. Based on one year of fieldwork in Amman, Jordan, and interviews with 39 aid professionals, this article explores the experiences of these insecure and precarious labour conditions of national and international aid workers in Jordan. Precarity in the humanitarian field is often discussed concerning aid recipients, such as refugees. It is, however, understudied in connection to aid professionals and those providing aid and care, and there is a wider lack of research on university-educated professionals’ experiences of precarity. In line with feminist and decolonial scholars, I understand labour as closely interconnected with other spheres of life and look at precarity through an emotional lens. I explore aid professionals’ emotions around their work conditions to come to a deeper understanding of precarious work and the difficulties of living in precarity. By taking emotions seriously, I show that they are an important yet understudied site of analysis to unravel what generates precarity for aid workers and precarity’s effects on aid workers’ lives and work. I argue that the structural conditions of their work produce precarious subjectivities, which are expressed in feelings such as frozenness, fatigue, and unsafety.

Keywords

aid professionals; emotions; humanitarian aid; Jordan; labour conditions; precarity; subjectivity

1. Introduction

As I rush into the café where we agreed to meet, I see Nadia sitting behind her laptop. Amman is experiencing a heatwave and I am sweating from my walk. When she notices me, Nadia gets up to give me a hug, while

I apologise for being sweaty and running a little late. She smiles, brushes aside my apology, and tells me it was beneficial because it allowed her to catch up on work. In a mix of broken Arabic and English, we start talking about the weather that even for Jordan is extreme. After a few minutes, she receives a message from her boss and lets out a deep sigh. She shakes her head after replying to the message, and I ask about her job at the national NGO she works for. She explains how stressful things are and how there is a constant worry about money. She sighs again and says: “Just money. When you sleep—money. When you get up—money. When you work—money. When you walk—money. It’s very noisy, it’s too much.” Then she laughs and states: “*āsh’ur ān āl-‘aqūl tajamadat*. I feel like the brains are frozen.” Nadia grins as she tells me this, but the comment is telling for Jordan’s aid sector.

In this article, I explore the affective state Nadia expresses and the ways humanitarian aid professionals in Jordan experience precarity. Precarity is mostly studied in relation to marginalised communities: In the fields of aid and social work, scholars predominantly focus on how recipients or service-users such as refugees experience precarity (see, e.g., Ilcan et al., 2018; Smit & Rugunanan, 2014). Less well-examined are university-educated professionals’ experiences of precarity, such as social workers or aid professionals (Pascucci, 2019; Pentaraki & Dionysopoulou, 2019). Although recent important works (Farah, 2020; Fassin, 2010; Ong & Combinido, 2018; Pascucci, 2019, 2023; Ward, 2021) have begun to research labour and precarity in humanitarian aid, these issues remain underexplored. Based on one year of fieldwork in Amman, this article seeks to address this gap, shedding light on the lived experiences of those who perform the labour of caring for vulnerable communities in Jordan.

Precarity is felt by both international and national aid professionals, and there is a shared sense of precarity. However, this precarity is formed and influenced by colonial structures of inequality and neoliberalism that shape the humanitarian sector in Jordan, which results in “differentiated precarities” for national and international aid workers (Campbell & Tobin, 2016; Farah, 2020; Pascucci, 2019). In this article, I look at precarity through the lens of emotions and ask what aid professionals’ emotions reveal about precarity in aid work. By looking at the emotions and feelings that aid workers express about precarity, I come to a better understanding of the effects and embodied experiences of precarious work conditions and argue that the way the humanitarian sector is structured produces precarious subjectivities. Looking at emotions will show that aid professionals grapple with a catch-22 situation, navigating challenging dilemmas arising from structural constraints and labour conditions in the aid sector. This research emphasises the need to engage with emotions when researching precarity and labour, and thereby highlights aspects and dynamics of precarity that usually remain more hidden.

In the following sections, I review existing literature on precarity and humanitarian aid, as well as subjectivity and emotions. After this, I discuss the background and methods used in this research. Next, I explore the ways aid professionals experience precarity in their work, how this affects them, and what their feelings and emotions around it are. In the discussion, I reflect upon these experiences and discuss implications. Finally, I offer some concluding remarks.

2. Labour and Precarity in Humanitarian Aid

Precarity is not a new phenomenon, especially in the Global South, and it is the norm rather than the exception (Millar, 2014; Munck, 2013; Neilson & Rossiter, 2008). Until recently, labour and precarity in humanitarian aid

had been undertheorized (Pascucci, 2019, p. 747), but in her critical work, Pascucci (2019, 2023) introduces labour and precarity into humanitarian aid studies. Building on postcolonial and feminist studies on social reproduction and care, she discusses how precarity is unevenly distributed in the humanitarian sector because of “spatialized hierarchies” and the division between national and international aid workers.

A small number of other studies look at aid work in relation to labour and/or precarity. Sliwinski (2012) and Ward (2020, 2021) explore humanitarian labour in relation to knowledge and hope. Ong and Combinido (2018) look at Filipino digital aid workers’ precarious work and critique how these insecure labour arrangements intersect with existing power inequalities, while simultaneously discussing aid workers’ aspirations and understandings of meaningful work. Farah (2020) also explores humanitarian labour in relation to power inequalities and shows how national aid professionals, compared to international professionals, have less access to geographic mobility and therefore less access to social and professional mobility, perpetuating a global division of labour. In a related field of care work, Pentaraki and Dionysopoulou (2019) in Greece and Muñoz-Arce and Duboy-Luengo (2023) in Chile explore precarity amongst social workers and its consequences in their personal and professional lives.

The concept of precarity helps to understand lived experiences and “embodied struggles” of those performing labour. With Pascucci (2019, p. 744), I define precarity as “a socially and politically distributed condition associated with material and affective labour performed in conditions of (relative) uncertainty and subalternity, a condition that is deeply ingrained in the sociality and identity of the working subjects.” Although this article focuses on labour-related aspects of precarity rather than on precariousness as a universal ontological condition, following scholars such as Khosravi (2017), Reininger et al. (2022), and Muñoz-Arce and Duboy-Luengo (2023), I understand the sphere of labour as closely interconnected with and influencing all spheres of life. This includes matters traditionally seen as private and personal such as emotion and affect (Khosravi, 2017; Millar, 2014, 2017; Pascucci, 2019, 2023). Additionally, Molé (2012, p. 5) argues that the way labour is configured “creates and shapes particular kinds of...subjectivities, somatic effects, and affective registers.” Pascucci (2019) calls for more studies on such subjectivities, specifically in humanitarian aid in the Global South. Building upon these works, in this article, I focus on the precarious subjectivities produced among aid professionals in Jordan. Next, I briefly discuss subjectivity and emotions before moving on to the study’s background and methodology.

3. Subjectivity and Emotions

The concept of subjectivity helps to understand what precarity does. Subjectivity sheds light on how power structures are internalised and how these structures shape one’s interior life (Das & Kleinman, 2000; Fiorito, 2019). With Ortner (2005, p. 31), it refers to “the inner states of acting subject” while embedded in the social world. The concept helps to understand how individual’s inner lives, emotional states, and “ensemble of modes of perception, affect, thought, desire, fear, and so forth that animate acting subjects” (Ortner, 2005, p. 31) are contingent and constructed by political, economic, social, and cultural structures. Subjectivities are therefore always situational and embodied as “the body is the place where social structures settle” (Fiorito, 2019, p. 347). Subjectivities are thus shaped by power structures but simultaneously form the basis for agency and resistance (Ortner, 2005). Similarly, precarity constrains individuals but is also “the engine of resistance” that allows for new forms of resistance to arise (Butler, 2009; Khosravi, 2017; Muñoz-Arce & Duboy-Luengo, 2023, p. 635; Reininger et al., 2022). Reininger et al.

(2022) explain how precarity, precariousness, and resistance are interconnected and argue that these should be understood as a continuum. I complicate and add nuance to this argument by discussing aid workers' emotions around precarious work conditions.

Emotions provide a fruitful lens to examine precarity in the aid sector. Opposing cartesian dualistic thought, scholars such as Lutz (1988), Ahmed (2004, 2014/2004), and Hochschild (2009) understand emotions not as individual or precultural, but as cultural and social (Wright, 2012). Thus, like subjectivity, emotions have social and political dimensions. Ahmed (2004, 2014/2004) illuminates the interconnected nature of emotions and prevailing power structures. She uses the concept “affective economies” to explain that emotions are not personal feelings arising from within a subject. Rather, they circulate among people, places, and within social and economic systems. As such, emotions, and the way they are expressed and valued are deeply intertwined with, produced, and regulated by broader social, political, economic, and cultural structures. From this relational perspective, emotions can serve to maintain and reproduce power structures but can also be mobilised to challenge and resist these structures, and thereby contribute to the construction and negotiation of subjectivities (Ahmed, 2004, 2014/2004; Wright, 2012). Viewed in this way, emotions, as non-individual and deeply social phenomena, provide a valuable analytic lens to better understand broader structures and power dynamics and the interrelation between personal experiences and social structures. Specifically, focusing on “the sensory nature of precarity” deepens existing understandings of precarious labour (Allison, 2013). Exploring precarity through an emotional lens allows us to move beyond a purely economic analysis of precarity and its effects, and instead shed light on less tangible dynamics that often remain hidden such as the lived experiences of precarity, and the ambivalences and difficulties accompanying precarious labour.

4. Humanitarianism and Neoliberalism in Jordan

Since the outbreak of the war in Syria, Jordan saw an increase in humanitarian organisations, although many were already present before due to Palestinian and Iraqi displacement. Little is known about the organisations' influence on Jordan's economy, but the presence of aid organisations creates various opportunities and jobs. In line with a wider global phenomenon, the humanitarian sector is becoming more important as a source of employment (Pascucci, 2019, pp. 744, 748). These organisations are part of Jordan's aid regime that is characterised by neoliberal arrangements: The government has little involvement in humanitarian assistance, except concerning, e.g., security matters via the Ministry of Interior (Wizārat Al-Dākhliyya) and involvement of the Ministry of Social Development (Wizārat Al-Tanmiyya Al-Ājtimā'iyya) predominantly concerning the approval for NGO projects (Al-Adem et al., 2018; Pasha, 2021). Instead, the government outsources the responsibility for aid provision to NGOs and private sector actors (Campbell & Tobin, 2016). However, the Jordanian regime is involved in the aid sector through Royal NGOs. These, created by royal decree and headed by members of the Hashemite Royal family, are some of Jordan's larger national NGOs and play a key role in aid provision (Maqableh, 2023, pp. 112–115; Sato, 2020).

Neoliberal restructuring started in Jordan in the late 1980s (Sukarieh, 2016, p. 1209). During a time of economic challenges, the Jordanian government turned to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank (WB) for financial support, both of which had been pressuring for reforms in Jordan for several years (Harrigan et al., 2006). After entering into agreements with the IMF and the WB, Jordan introduced several structural adjustment policies, and its political economy became characterised by a focus on free markets,

minimal government intervention, labour market flexibility and deregulation, emphasis on the private sector, reduced public sector employments, privatisations, and cuts in government spending (Baylouny, 2008, pp. 292–294; Lenner & Turner, 2019, pp. 71–73). These neoliberal policies were integrated into but also unsettled by existing societal dynamics, e.g., stark inequalities, rural-urban divisions, family and tribe relations, oligarchic networks rooted in British and Ottoman colonial rule, and Jordanian state-building processes (Baylouny, 2008; Lenner & Turner, 2019, pp. 71, 74; Pascucci, 2019, pp. 747–748; Sukarieh, 2016, pp. 1209–1210). Precarity and precarious labour are therefore not exceptions, but rather enduring structural features of Jordan’s modern era that neoliberal policies exacerbated (Munck, 2013; Neilson & Rossiter, 2008; Pascucci, 2019, p. 747).

Jordan has high unemployment rates, reaching 23,1% in 2022 (“Jordan unemployment rate,” 2023). With reduced public sector employment, the humanitarian industry became attractive to work in. However, the humanitarian industry is also subject to neoliberalisation and marketisation. This is visible, e.g., in various aid programmes focusing on responsabilisation, entrepreneurialism, and resilience (Anholt & Sinatti, 2020; Campbell & Tobin, 2016; Easton-Calabria & Omata, 2018; Lenner & Turner, 2019). It also affects aid professionals, both in their work practices and labour conditions. Humanitarian organisations operate “in a market of donors,” and therefore predominantly work to create “good projects” through which they will receive funding from donors (Krause, 2014). The focus is on satisfying donors, rather than recipients, thereby ensuring the organisation’s survival. Increasingly, there is a results-based management style with a focus on outcomes that can be measured, rather than actual change (Krause, 2014; Viterna & Robertson, 2015; Ward, 2021). Because of the marketisation of aid, most projects are short-term and there is little funding for long-term sustainable projects. This in turn leads to short-term contracts for employees, as job security depends on funding. These neoliberal structures are accompanied by structures of ongoing coloniality which means that precarious labour conditions are differentially distributed between national and international professionals, which is discussed below (Farah, 2020; Ong & Combinido, 2018; Pascucci, 2019).

5. Methodology

This article is based on one year of fieldwork in Amman, Jordan, between 2021 and 2022, and interviews with 39 aid professionals working or having worked in Jordan. This encompasses 28 national aid workers and 11 international aid workers who have experience working for a variety of NGOs, ranging from small neighbourhood-level national NGOs to larger national Royal NGOs, to large international NGOs (INGOs) with main offices in the US or Europe. These NGOs provide aid for refugees from different countries in urban areas and refugee camps, as well as to vulnerable Jordans, and work on issues such as water, sanitation and hygiene, livelihood, protection, gender-based violence, and education. Interlocutors were between their late 20s and early 40s and had different levels of experience, varying from entry-level to mid-career to senior level. Interlocutors were initially recruited via purposive sampling, through LinkedIn, and consequently, snowball sampling. Interviews were recorded, for which consent was given. With some aid professionals, follow-up interviews were conducted which were sometimes recorded. During less formal follow-ups, notes were taken. The interviews took place in coffee places in Amman, and occasionally in interlocutors’ houses or offices. Due to Covid-19 precautions or physical distance, some interviews took place online. They lasted between one to four hours, averaging two hours. Interviews were semi-structured: I used a list of questions as a general guide that we could easily move away from and focused on letting my interlocutors speak freely, as I wanted to talk about topics that mattered most to them. In addition, I attended three workshops for nationals working in

humanitarian aid. During these workshops, I took notes that I wrote out in my fieldnotes afterwards. Recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim, all data was anonymised, and names used in this article are pseudonyms. Data was analysed through an inductive thematic analysis, and themes and patterns were identified from the data through several coding cycles.

6. Subjective Stories

Many aid professionals I spoke with mentioned feelings of insecurity related to their work. In this section, I focus on aid workers' emotions around precarity to explore their experiences of precarity and its effects.

6.1. Frozenness

Nadia's words in this article's introduction point to a state of frozenness and paralysis of the mind due to constant worries about money. This sentiment of feeling frozen, considered a trauma response in psychology in addition to traditional fight or flight responses (Seltzer, 2015), was expressed in different ways by other aid workers who mentioned continuous money-related concerns and an inability to think critically. Yasmin, a national with much experience in the aid sector who now works for a large INGO, told me she felt like "you are running after the bread you need." I asked if she could elaborate:

People keep you at this limit where you are constantly fighting for your basic needs....You don't really reach your potential, *'anta* [translation: you] you're only busy to provide for your family. You don't have the luxury of time even to think or challenge anyone. *Khalaş* [translation: enough/finished/stop] they keep you busy with basic things.

Like Nadia, Yasmin experiences an inability to think due to an ongoing struggle for basic needs and survival, leaving little room or energy to question or contest someone or to develop one's capabilities and aspirations as fully as one would like. Both illustrate the impact of financial precarity, despite having an income, on one's job as an aid worker and one's personal life. Working for an INGO, Yasmin's income is higher than if she worked in most other sectors in Jordan. Nationals' salaries in INGOs range between approximately 1000–1200 Jordanian dinar (JD) per month. This is significantly more than the average 400–600 JD per month that people earn in other sectors. However, financial stress persists, predominantly due to the high cost of living in Amman. In 2018, the city was ranked the most expensive city in the Arab world and 28th worldwide, and the high cost of living remained a concern for many since then ("Asian and European cities," 2018; Ghaith, 2022). Furthermore, many national professionals are aware of internationals' much higher salaries, varying between 4000–6000 JD per month (and can increase in senior positions), and their additional work benefits such as coverage of accommodation, traveling and shipping expenses, and occasionally children's education costs. Nationals' understanding of their financial insecurity is shaped by their awareness of this disparity. Yasmin and Nadia's words highlight how these worries hinder critical thinking, limit mental space and energy to engage in meaningful reflection and potentially criticise the structures in which one is working, and impede self-development and the possibility to thrive. These feelings are not isolated individual experiences but rather point to precarity's paralysing and demobilising effects.

6.2. Worries, Unsafety, and Vulnerability

During our conversation, Majid and Sara, a husband and wife working in aid, share their feelings about job insecurity, especially since Sara struggles to find a job. The following shows a part of our conversation:

Sara: For me I think I am counting on him....If he had no job where, how can we live. How can we do the basic, the basic I mean *y'anī* [translation: like/meaning].

Majid: We are all depending on my work, my current work, if I lose my work for donation problems or [something] like that, she saw many families that had problems, family got problems, divorce for example, just because there is no one working.

Sara: Or [they got] depression. Yea. It's scary.

Majid: I love my work, but of course I don't feel safe. I don't feel that this work must be my main source of income, because maybe in September, they tell me we have no fund to extend your contract. So I have to look for another job, maybe this takes one month, one year, I don't know.

The possibility of Majid losing his job scares them, particularly since they rely on his income. Majid feels unsafe in his work due to his job's unpredictability, which is tied to the organisation's dependency on funding and donors. Moreover, if Majid lost his job, it would be difficult to find a new job due to Jordan's high unemployment rates, as Sara struggles with. These feelings of fear and unsafety are intricately linked to the aid sector's precarious labour conditions that are marked by instability and unpredictability. They are rooted in the constant threat of losing one's livelihood and (the anticipation of) navigating these circumstances. These precarious conditions cause Majid and Sara to worry about their personal lives and relationship, as they see how it has affected other families negatively. Short contracts are a central theme in my conversations with aid professionals. When I tell Samar, a national who worked for various INGOs, about my research, she replies:

I think it's so important. Because, really, many people here who are working in the humanitarian sector, many people I'm telling you, they are struggling actually. Especially because it's like limited contract. It's all projects, so it's limited, limited contract.

Samar explains that because humanitarian aid is project-based, as discussed by Krause (2014), employees get short and "limited contracts." Later in our interview, she returns to this:

As I said before, because it's limited contract, sometimes you don't feel that you are stable. You are always thinking: "Okay, what if? What will happen if the project ends?" That makes you always alert, and that you are looking for another job. *Y'anī*, I don't want to sit at home. I don't, you know, because there's many people in the [labour] market who want to work. I think it's [the same] for everyone working in the humanitarian sector. If you talk to many people, they will tell you the same: "It's a limited contract. It's a limited contract." This is the struggle of these people, *y'anī* of this sector.

The limited contracts and her job's temporariness affect Samar, as she always feels alert and expresses a sense of caution and preparedness for the possibility of losing her job. Like Majid and Sara, Samar's

vigilance and worries stem from the precarious nature of her funding-dependent work. As Samar indicates, these struggles are widely-shared, especially given Jordan's current labour market and the aid sector's broader context where, as mentioned by many interlocutors, funds are increasingly directed away from Jordan, because the Syrian crisis has been ongoing for many years (despite being unresolved and many people still living in dire circumstances) and redirected to Ukraine. Leen, who worked for multiple national and international aid organisations, questioned if NGOs aim to mitigate possible negative effects on Jordan's economy:

I don't know how much NGOs collectively work to not cause any kind of economic disruption for Jordan....But like humanitarians, I think their time is wasted and they don't live a quality life. Maybe being always fatigue[d], especially field people. Which really eliminates [the ability]...to think of other skills around them so they can survive at the end of the day, after the end of this [NGO] exit, or downsizing.

Connecting her concerns to humanitarians, Leen sees their time as wasted and underutilised, as their work hinders the development of skills needed in case of layoffs or INGOs' departure from Jordan. Like others, Leen discusses a sense of preparedness and the need to survive that prevents people from thinking long-term and living a good life. These elements of precarious labour hit nationals harder and this "differential distribution of precarity" (Pascucci, 2019) makes nationals feel more exposed to insecurity and not on an equal footing with internationals. Yasmin stated that: "You feel vulnerable sometimes, as a local you are vulnerable because you know you don't have that power of an expat." She expressed that, as a Jordanian, she feels disadvantaged in accessing job opportunities compared to internationals, and that despite nationals having equal or more experience at times, internationals tend to be promoted to managerial positions with higher salaries. All national interlocutors discussed these differential aspects and the majority of internationals recognised this. Yet international professionals also experience precarity in their work, such as Yara and Chloé, two colleagues from the same European country who worked for the same INGO. We sit outside a cafe at night, talking about their sector's insecurity. After enduring prolonged uncertainty about her job contract renewal, ultimately causing what she described as a mental breakdown, Yara took matters into her own hands and looked for a different job. Although she enjoyed working at the organisation and wanted to stay, the prolonged insecurity shaped her decision. The following is an excerpt from our conversation:

Yara: I think one of the most challenging aspects of this work is not having any stability. So you have to compromise yourself and accept the fact that you will never have stability in this job. So that's why I get this mental breakdown, because I was sure about something [contract renewal and stability] that I couldn't expect from this job, from this sector, from this field. This is really frustrating....I was speaking with my dad, and he would say: "Well maybe not now but in some years, you will buy a house." And I say: "No, why should I buy a house in [home country]?" And I would not even buy a house here [Jordan], because I don't know where, what will happen with me....Also the personal life, your relationship, family sphere, it's really compromised, because you really have to compromise a lot, and it's not easy, and there is no solution....You don't have a house at the end of the day because you always have to move. So maybe I think twice if I want to buy, like, just—

Chloé: Tables.

Yara: Tables or, like, a lamp because I don't actually know where I will be. Maybe I will be on the other side of the world, how can I get that? Family, if you want to grow your family, okay, then you're going to marry, and then if you want children, which, like, language, the culture, which, where do I want to?...So you're always like one foot in one country and the other foot in another. It's super lost and exhausting....You never know what will happen to you, who should you trust.

Yara navigates the difficulties of working abroad, which are heightened by the sector's labour conditions that leave her uncertain about her (near) future. Her frustration and exhaustion illustrate the precarious nature of the sector, fostering insecurity. Unable to see a solution, Yara feels compelled to compromise a lot, especially in her personal life. This affective state stems from feeling divided between two countries and grappling with labour conditions that create precarity and fail to provide stability and security, leaving her depleted and disheartened. Although her experiences differ from nationals working and living in their own country, Yara's emotions resemble those of nationals like Samar, Sara, and Majid and are rooted in the same insecure labour conditions. These conditions mean that aid professionals must navigate "a labour regime that fundamentally undermines fixed temporality" (Molé, 2012, p. 52). The reported insecurity and feelings of perpetual worry characterising everyday life lead to an inability to build one's life, and the future becomes frightening rather than filled with potential (Allison, 2013; Pentaraki & Dionysopoulou, 2019).

6.3. Tiredness and Agitation

While talking with Dana who currently works for a big INGO, she discusses her work pressure:

When it comes to work, they put too much on one employee. They expect a lot from them, and the way they have way too many projects but not enough staff, and still now we are cutting staff so yeah. It is stressful actually. Like, sometimes I go home and I just want to sit with my kid, and I don't have [the] energy to do it because I've been working all day, like, really working and I keep thinking: "I should finish this, and I have deadline for this and that." And I continue thinking about it.

Dana's emotional experience provides a window into precarity's effects. Like Sara and Majid she talks about work impacting her relationship with her family. However, Dana's stress and tiredness do not come from short-term contracts, but from her heavy workload and the organisation being understaffed. She lacks the energy to spend quality time with her child, while after work she continues thinking about her job. She mentions she feels burned out and I ask her if she can elaborate:

Like, really, I feel like I am in survival mode all the time. Like I'm just trying to survive this week and I say next week will be better and next week comes and it's the same. And [it's] this loop of always just getting to survive the week. And I feel like I reached the point where I have no energy to do more work. Even if I have something major, a task, for example, a donor report is coming, and you have to prepare for him and write, like, our section of it...I feel like I have no energy. But still, I go and do [it], I don't have a choice.

Again Dana mentions her lack of energy, but now in relation to her ability to do her work. Despite her tiredness and high workload, she does not feel like she can refuse tasks. Furthermore, she is in a constant "survival mode," only focusing on making it through the week, hoping that next week her situation will improve but it never

does. Dana feels stuck in this loop that impacts her well-being to a point where her main concern is surviving and enduring her work, potentially leading to the inability to think beyond her immediate day-to-day tasks and needs. After talking more about her stress, she suddenly states:

But in general, I don't want to sound negative, because I'm still grateful for my work, for my job. I enjoy most of the time, like, working, doing that type of work, but I am stressed out, and I feel that I reached that. I wish it's, like, better, I hope it will change, I don't know.

It seemed like after discussing some negative aspects of her work, Dana felt the need to emphasise her gratitude for her work. This could be connected to Jordan's high unemployment rates, making Dana appreciate simply having a job. She later added that the humanitarian sector is still "much better than other fields," despite her own stress and desire for improvement, which could relate to the sector's relatively high salaries. Internationals also struggle with high workloads and burnout. While talking with Sophie, who is from a Western country, worked in the sector in various countries and positions, and now works for a small Jordanian NGO, she explains:

And I see that with a lot of people, you burn out. You do this work for a short period, and you run very fast for a short period of time, and then it's done. And so you continuously have a new person who runs this kind of relay race, you know, that you keep passing the baton to someone else, who then burns himself out again, and then the next, and the next, and the next.

The cyclical pattern described indicates a systemic issue of precarity where people feel overworked and burned out. These high workloads and intense periods of stress also come up during my conversation with Adelina. She has many years of experience and currently works at a large INGO in Jordan that works remotely for vulnerable Syrians inside Syria. I ask how her job impacts her:

I could see myself, I have like two or three months of continuous stress, I become very agitated. You become reckless, not reckless, impatient. You don't have patience with the taxi driver, like, "why did he take me there, he could not take me in five minutes there?" Like, it's not his fault, your patience and tolerance level decreased quite significantly. That's one. And then of course your relationships get impacted because you know, you're not at peace, you're not calm, you can't judge a situation properly. So it did impact [me]. My husband keeps saying every single time I write a report: "So I'll not see you for three or four months." Because you are going to be in that space, headspace. And I literally don't feel like cooking, I don't feel like—I love dancing in the house, just music and just as a nice moment, I don't do that....You become distant.

She explains the effects of work stress and describes how she does not feel "at peace" or "calm" which impairs her judgment. This also impacts her personal relations, like with her husband whom she becomes distant from during intense work periods. Her feelings of agitation and short temper reflect the pressure she is under. Although the source is different for Adelina and Dana, their affective experiences are similar to Sara and Majid who worry about how losing their job would impact their family life. Additionally, Adelina notes that during these times, she can no longer engage in activities that bring her joy, like dancing. Many interlocutors described similar emotions resulting from the sector's precarious labour conditions due to high workloads and organisations being understaffed. The social fragmentation and disconnectedness that Dana and Adelina's

stories reveal are in line with earlier studies (e.g., Allison, 2013; Molé, 2012) describing that precarity can lead to individualisation and desocialisation. During my conversation with Isa, who works at a small organisation founded by internationals, she also tells me about the high levels of turnover and burnout in the sector: “You do see organisations here that have very high turnover rates and there’s a reason. A lot of times people are so burned [out].” When I ask her if this is something she experienced herself she replies:

Yeah, yeah. Especially the high intensity and like, “oh you have to get this done or like this,” or often you are short-staffed and all this other stuff. I mean I had an anxiety dream about work the other night. We all have these things, like, every job has stress, but I think with these types of jobs, you do feel this unnatural level of [stress]. Kind of, like, I shouldn’t be up at night thinking about this.

She recognises that all jobs involve levels of stress, but according to Isa this type of work involves an “unnatural level” of stress. Towards the end of the interview, I ask her what her advice is for the sector:

Really making sure organisations are accountable for their staff and kind of like you don’t burn people into the ground. They will leave, they will go to the private sector and make twice as much money. And I know, personally, even for me, I hit a point where it’s not like I want to leave non-profit work. It’s just more like, okay what are other avenues that I can help others without feeling like [this]. Like the other day, I was really feeling burnt out and I was just like: “I don’t help anyone.”

Aid professionals’ commitment to alleviate suffering paradoxically might make them more vulnerable to exploitation. Their motivation potentially leads to prioritising the humanitarian cause, and thus their work, over personal well-being. For professionals like Isa, leaving the aid sector is therefore a viable option not because they want to. Rather, it is a response to the pervasive fatigue and burnout indicative of the current humanitarian labour regime.

7. Precarious Subjectivities

In the previous section, I discussed the subjective stories and emotions that aid professionals expressed in relation to their precarious labour conditions. By understanding emotions as conceptualised by scholars such as Lutz (1988), Hochschild (2009), and Ahmed (2004, 2014/2004) and considering them as deeply social and political, I utilized emotions as a lens to explore aid workers’ experiences of precarity. Rather than being isolated occurrences or individual reactions, these emotions must be understood as deeply embedded in the socio-economic and political structures that shape humanitarian labour in Jordan. These emotions provide valuable insights into the lived experiences and less visible dynamics of precarity and show what generates precarity for aid professionals as well as precarity’s effects. This precarity consists of exploitative labour conditions that are structural in the aid sector and therefore almost impossible to escape. Aid professionals are stuck in a catch-22 where (especially for nationals) leaving is not a realistic option as this will leave them unemployed and unable to survive, which preoccupies their minds and everyday lives. Looking at emotions allows us to see the difficulties and ambivalences of being caught in this situation and sheds light on the dilemmas produced by structurally precarious conditions. In Jordan’s humanitarian sector, the configuration of labour under the intersection of neoliberal conditions, dynamics of marketisation and casualisation, and structures of ongoing coloniality gives rise to what I call precarious subjectivities, where aid professionals have a heightened sense of vigilance and feel in a perpetual state of fighting to survive, devoid of the luxury

and time to contemplate or criticise, and feel that their “minds are frozen.” Underlying these feelings is a fundamental sense of unsafety, vulnerability, and instability that generates a permanent state of survival mode in aid workers’ professional and personal lives.

In line with earlier studies (Muñoz-Arce & Duboy-Luengo, 2023; Pentaraki & Dionysopoulou, 2019; Reininger et al., 2022), this research showed that precarity affects not only aid-recipients as is often thought, but also university-educated professionals such as aid workers. Prior studies on aid work discussed the uneven distribution of labour precarity and the intersection between existing (colonial) power inequalities and labour conditions (Farah, 2020; Ong & Combinido, 2018; Pascucci, 2019). This study builds upon these works but adds a layer of complexity by looking at precarity through the lens of emotions and shows the comparability of the above-mentioned emotions and experiences of precarity between national and international aid professionals. Given that precarity is unequally distributed, the commonality of emotions and experiences is noteworthy. Furthermore, reflecting earlier findings (Muñoz-Arce & Duboy-Luengo, 2023; Pentaraki & Dionysopoulou, 2019), this study demonstrated that precarity has significant effects on aid workers’ personal and professional lives. Precarity impacts aid workers’ sense of self, interpersonal relations, relation to the world and work, and their ability to do their work. By focusing on emotions, this study shed light on how aid professionals’ coping mechanisms, developed in response to precarious labour conditions, impact social relations and their private lives. These findings resonate with earlier studies (Allison, 2013; Molé, 2012) that mention that precarity can engender social disconnectedness and desocialisation. However, in their professional lives and in contrast to Molé’s (2012) work where precarity leads to acts of mobbing and labour exclusion, most aid professionals mentioned turning to colleagues for support and care to deal with their struggles. This difference in sociality might be explained by the emotionally difficult nature of aid work, and its lack of comprehensibility to outsiders, which promotes bonding amongst aid workers, but simultaneously might make them more vulnerable to exploitation. The relation between (de)sociality and precarity is an important area for future research.

Reininger et al. (2022) argue that precarity, precariousness, and resistance must be understood as a continuum. This article does not sufficiently address resistance and alternatives to dominant power structures and precarious conditions and further research is needed. However, by looking at emotions around precarity, this article not only deepens our understanding of precarity and its effects but also offers tentative insights into why precarious work engenders resistance or not. As Ahmed (2004, 2014/2004) argues, emotions can help to maintain or resist power dynamics. The sense of frozenness, perpetual survival mode, and feelings of instability discussed in this article show how precarity debilitates and paralyzes people and is thereby demobilising and potentially hinders resistance. Furthermore, although these conditions are collectively experienced, they are not recognised as such but as individual concerns. This captures how neoliberalism and precarity operate: they individualise problems and responsibility, thereby undermining the potential for collective resistance. This does not imply subjugation or acceptance of precarious labour conditions, nor does it negate the agency or power of these aid professionals. However, the sense of being frozen and unable to move is an affective state that should be understood on the continuum of precarity and resistance, not as a state of acceptance or compliance, but as an outcome of precarity’s debilitating effects that prevent resistance from arising.

8. Conclusions

This article looked at the ways the labour regime of Jordan's humanitarian sector, influenced by neoliberal policies and marketisation dynamics, is lived and experienced. These experiences and the inner affective states of aid professionals cannot be understood outside of broader socio-political and economic contexts. By looking at emotions and feelings around precarious labour conditions, I argued that precarious subjectivities are produced by the way humanitarian aid is currently structured and organised. The experiences described in this article are not just individual anecdotes or struggles. Rather, they are reflections of the systemic way humanitarian labour is structured that produces these difficulties and precarious subjectivities. As the words of the people in this article have shown, precarity affects one's sense of self and one's sense of place in the world. For the aid workers I spoke with, the effects were multifaceted and complex. Not only did it lead to a sense of instability and feelings of unsafety, for some it also meant living in a constant state of alertness and survival mode with limited capacity to think and challenge. This has consequences beyond aid workers themselves as it can also affect the way they do their work. It can lead to a focus on tried-and-tested practices and programmes, repeating the same thing, and avoiding risk. As short-term results and easily measurable indicators are encouraged, there is less room for innovation and creativity that is needed to develop aid and care that is context-specific and more durable in the long run. The experiences of aid professionals such as Nadia, Adelina, Majid, and Sara are not unique to aid workers and many other workers around the world have similar experiences as labour is increasingly casualised. The findings of this study therefore hold significance for studying labour conditions and precarity beyond the aid sector. Adopting an emotional lens provides opportunities to elucidate precarity more broadly, including its causes and effects, and the way people respond to and/or resist precarity or not.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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