

Honoring the Legacy of Barbara Harrell-Bond

My interview with Angelina of Hope Restoration South Sudan was inspired by the work of Barbara Harrell-Bond, a pioneer in refugee rights and an original critic of the work of the United Nations. Barbara's work with refugees began with the arrival of Hungarian refugees in the United States in the 1950s, and continued with her anthropological studies at Oxford in the 1960s. After her studies, she was given the opportunity to travel along the West African coast, and later went to Algeria where she found refugees running their own camps without outside intervention. There, she saw how each refugee had a meaningful role in the operation of the camp, and how organized and efficient the camp was. That was when Barbara realized the need for the humanitarian system to recognize the role of refugees in managing their own lives, and not to view them only as victims. This experience inspired her to focus her academic and advocacy work on a refugee-centered critique of humanitarianism.

Barbara worked toward this mission until her death in 2018. During her long career, she became one of the first outspoken advocates for refugee rights, founding the first ever Refugee Studies Centre at Oxford, creating and contributing to the establishment of refugee studies programs and refugee legal aid programs around the world, and creating forums for advocates to come together to speak candidly about refugee issues. She founded the *Journal of Refugee Studies* and the *Forced Migration Review*, as well as the International Association for the Study of Forced Migration.



Photo credit: The Refugees Study Centre

Barbara never hesitated to critique the UNHCR's approach to working with displaced persons. She advocated for a "participatory" and refugee-centered approach to humanitarian aid. Her 1986 book *Imposing Aid: Emergency Assistance to Refugees*, lays out why it is so important for displaced persons to participate in decision-making regarding their own assistance: "[a]id which is imposed from outside not only... suppresses the creative energy of the refugee who could have been helped to help himself, but provokes responses which are hostile and unproductive for all concerned. Participation is about empowering the poor to take control of their own lives, about being able to involve themselves effectively in decision-making."¹ Barbara believed that displaced persons

¹ Harrell-Bond, Barbara E. *Imposing Aid: Emergency Assistance to Refugees*, 3–4. Oxford: University Press, 1989.

should be allowed to maintain their agency to fully engage in conversations and solutions regarding their own welfare.

In her later work, Barbara warned of the long-term consequences of failing to include displaced persons in decision-making processes. She stated that, over time, aid agencies begin to view displaced persons as passive “problems” as opposed to agents with the ability to help themselves. Barbara saw that when displaced people are seen as “problems” to be solved by an agency, institutions begin to try to get rid of them to resolve the perceived problem. Barbara describes how this often plays out, with agencies making:

increasing attempts to repatriate refugees prematurely, introducing efforts to prevent them from fleeing violence by establishing “safe havens,” and the practice of illegal forced repatriations—all undertaken “simply because proper care for them became difficult and they became a threatening budgetary problem for UNHCR.” As we have seen, other strategies include defining refugees as undeserving opportunists (“recyclers,” “irregular movers”), refusing them medical treatment, and cutting off support to refugees who were formerly defined as in need of protection.²

This dynamic that Barbara described in 2002 and that she advocated against for over 40 years of her professional and personal life

is playing out today in South Sudan with the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS). When I first met Angelina, we were in a Zoom meeting with David Shearer, the head of UNMISS. Shearer was briefing refugee advocates on the current situation in South Sudan, and UNMISS’ recent decision to turn over control of its protection of civilian sites (POCs) to the South Sudanese government. While Shearer described a positive situation, claiming that the country was moving toward peace and stability, Angelina interjected that the transition was decided upon without any input from those living in the sites, and that she and others on the ground had no idea the transition would happen until it had already begun.

Shearer was dismissive of Angelina’s concerns for the safety of displaced persons during the transition. In fact, he was recently quoted as saying that while people used to need the POCs for safety, “today, many stay just to access services.”³ Shearer has been attempting to push civilians to leave the POC sites by portraying them not as people in need of protection, but as greedy “problems” who simply want to keep leaching aid.⁴

Shearer’s rhetoric villainizes these civilians while ignoring the reality that by the UN Security Council’s own assessment, conditions in South Sudan remain violent and unstable.⁵ Shearer frames UNMISS’ work “in terms of charity rather than as a means of

² Harrell-Bond, Barbara, “Can Humanitarian Work with Refugees be Humane?,” In *Human Rights Quarterly*, no. 24 (2002): 73-74, accessed on February 9, 2021, <https://www.unhcr.org/en-in/4d94749c9.pdf>.

³ United Nations. “UN Protection of Civilians sites begin transitioning to conventional displacement camps.” United Nations Peacekeeping. United Nations, September 4, 2020. <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/un-protection-of-civilians-sites-begin-transitioning-to-conventional-displacement-camps>.

⁴ UNMISS has consistently downplayed the issues with closing the POC sites, and instead implied that POC residents are “welfare parasites” who stay only to access services. Craze, Joshua and Naomi Pendle. “South Sudan: A Fantasy of Finality- the UN Impasse at the Protection of Civilian Sites.” *All Africa*, September 23, 2020. <https://allafrica.com/stories/202009260025.html>.

⁵ United Nations Security Council. *Situation in South Sudan Report of the Secretary-General. S/2020/890*, September 8, 2020. https://unmiss.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/secretary-generals_report_on_south_sudan_8_september_2020_0.pdf.

enabling [displaced persons] to enjoy their rights.”⁶ Barbara Harrell-Bond warned that this framework sets up a dynamic wherein anything an aid agency does is benevolent, extra, and not to be questioned.⁷ In such a framework, Barbara wrote, “there is rarely an opportunity for indigenous professionals to question... agencies’ approach or contribute to the general theoretical debate concerning their role in refugee assistance. It would sometimes appear that [displaced persons] are expected to receive assistance without questioning either the suitability of the gift or the competence of the giver.”⁸ The inevitable inference under this framework is that displaced persons must gratefully and unquestioningly accept whatever assistance they receive, and they do not have a right to raise concerns, or even to receive the assistance in the first place.

By identifying and naming the harms of excluding displaced persons from the decisions that affect their safety and

wellbeing, Barbara Harrell-Bond opened a space for others to critically examine the work of the UN and agencies that were previously deemed irreproachable because of the work they do. She did this both through her field research starting in the 1970s, and through her academic and advocacy work throughout the rest of her career. Barbara created an international platform for people like Angelina to speak out about the injustices being done to her community by UNMISS.

Barbara’s lifetime of work acknowledging, honoring, advocating for, and amplifying the voices of displaced persons remains crucial in improving humanitarian response and improving the lives of refugees. I hope that my article *The UN Mission in South Sudan is Failing Sexual Assault Victims: An Interview with Angelina of Hope Restoration South Sudan* has done some justice to her legacy by continuing her mission to give displaced persons a platform to speak out.

⁶ Harrell-Bond, Barbara. “Can Humanitarian Work with Refugees be Humane?.” In *Human Rights Quarterly*, no. 24 (2002): 52-53, accessed on February 9, 2021, <https://www.unhcr.org/en-in/4d94749c9.pdf>.

⁷ Harrell-Bond, Barbara. “Can Humanitarian Work with Refugees be Humane?.” In *Human Rights Quarterly*, no. 24 (2002): 78, accessed on February 9, 2021, <https://www.unhcr.org/en-in/4d94749c9.pdf>.

⁸ Harrell-Bond, Barbara. “Can Humanitarian Work with Refugees be Humane?.” In *Human Rights Quarterly*, no. 24 (2002): 78, accessed on February 9, 2021, <https://www.unhcr.org/en-in/4d94749c9.pdf>.

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