

Civil War and Forced Displacement: A Case Study of Syrian Women

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Abstract:

Women, traditionally, are confined to stereotyped gender roles. Gender biases are deeply rooted in almost all the societies in the world. Lot of efforts are carried to bring equality among the genders but without much success. All the human activity in political, economic and socio-cultural sectors are prone to gender biases. Conflict or war is such activity that throughout the history has left humanity vulnerable to all sorts of miseries, deprivations and privation like economic, health, educational difficulties and above all fear of tragic death. Asides, forced displacement is a much severe implication; women and children are immediate sufferers of which. Women, as a vulnerable section of society, are often misused and maltreated during crisis and often used as shields and sorely exploited. Violence against women during civil wars has fetched gendered understanding of security as women are prone to some of the specific vulnerabilities. Syrian civil war have resulted in unforeseen consequences on women like forced displacement, physical assault (any act of gender-based violence), abduction, political debarment and psychological torture. This paper looks into the grievous implications of civil wars on women, substantiating ongoing Syrian conflict as a case study. Asides, this paper would also highlight the opportunities conflict has brought for women. This paper would conclude with pointing out the need to empower women for the post war arrangement.

Key words: civil war, refugee crisis, forced displacement, women

Introduction

People's displacement, a usual occurrence, has transformed into an issue of global concern in recent decades. People move from place to place in search of suitable living space and livelihood. Displacement of people has been an age-old phenomenon

and is collective human behaviour. Besides the voluntary movement, forced displacement has also been an ancient phenomenon. Yet, the traditional forced displacement was mostly due to the changed climatic conditions such as natural calamities, need to search for work and desire to live in modern living conditions. But the forced migration or displacement in recent times is primarily due to the unstable political conditions of the country, civil wars, conflicts between the nations and the state-sponsored threats. The threat to life has become a foremost determinant of the forced displacement in the contemporary era. Forced displacement or migration in the modern sense has become a developmental challenge and humanitarian problem to the world, especially after the Second World War. The occurrence of forced displacement is gradually increasing. As reported by the UN, more than 70 million people are forcefully displaced worldwide by the end of 2018 (UN, 2019).

Forced displacement has grabbed the attention of scholars from all over the world, which made the study of forced migration a multidisciplinary and international issue of research. Forced migration has also received the attention of various regional and international organisations. IOM has described forced displacement as “The movement of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalised violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters” (*Glossary on Migration*, 2019). International Association for Forced Migration (IASFM) describes forced displacement as ‘the movements of refugees and internally displaced people as well as people displaced by natural or environmental disasters, chemical or nuclear disasters, famine, or development projects.’ FMO views forced migration as a complex phenomenon and categorised factors for forced displacement as conflict, development policies and projects and disasters.

Forcibly displaced populations include refugees, internally displaced persons (IDPs) and asylum-seekers (Hans, 2019); Where refugee is the term used to describe a person who was already granted protection. Asylum seekers can become refugees if the local immigration or refugee authority deems them as fitting the international definition of a refugee (*Migration and inclusive societies*, 2019). Internally displaced persons (IDPs) are “persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in

order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalised violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognised border”(OHCHR | *Questions and answers about IDPs*). Whereas, Asylum seekers are people who move across borders in search of protection, but who may not fulfil the strict criteria laid down by the 1951 Convention. Asylum seeker describes a person seeking protection as a refugee(*Migration and inclusive societies*, 2019) and is awaiting the determination of his or her status.

Conflict situations across nations are experienced by both men and women differently. Even when women are not active participants in hostilities; they suffer significant harm as they deal with various forms of gender-based violence. They face the loss of livelihoods and critical documentation needed for daily life. They tend to have less access to assistance and struggle to access adequate education, healthcare, training and livelihoods. They are more susceptible to sexual and gender-based violence, are likely to face difficulties in exercising rights to housing, land and property, and exclusion in decision-making processes. The conflict compounded human rights violations, exacerbates pre-crisis patterns of discrimination.

Women tend to make up a minimum of 50% of any refugee population (this percentage rises among IDPs); yet, studies also show that their numbers increase with the age of the displaced people(*Women*, n.d.). Women are often the first responders in a crisis, and whether during war or in camps, home countries or destination countries, they play a crucial role in caring for, sustaining and rebuilding their communities. Most notably, in most of the cases, women don't have a say in the decision to displace. Sexual and gender-based violence is an unfortunate reality for many women. Often without the protection of family and communities, they had before displacement, internally displaced women can be vulnerable to rape, domestic violence, forced prostitution, trafficking and any number of other violent situations. Women who have lost their husbands to conflict, also face additional challenges and responsibilities as heads of households, and often have to rely on necessary survival skills. Newly displaced women usually face different risks than those displaced for twenty years and women living in camps typically have different needs than those living with host families(*Improving the Protection of Internally Displaced Women: Assessment of Progress and Challenges*, 2014). Conflict and displacement can also

result in socio-economic ruptures within the family; the loss of work and income, as well as changes in social roles and status. Yet, refugee and migrant women's needs, priorities and voices are often missing from policies designed to protect and assist them.

Civil conflict in Syria has produced an enormous number of refugees, asylum seekers and internally displaced people. As per UNHRC, by the end of 2018, a whopping 13.0 million Syrians were displaced, including 6.7 million refugees, 6.2 million internally displaced people (IDPs) and 140,000 asylum-seekers. (*Global Trends - Forced Displacement in 2018 - UNHCR, 2018*)

While the world has witnessed the worst human rights situation of the displaced Syrians, women and children are the worst affected even when they had no direct involvement in the crisis. This paper attempts to highlight the plight of women who are enduring the gravest burden, yet their voices and perspectives are often left unheard.

Syrian Crisis

Once a stable middle-income country that hosted refugees from the region, Syria underwent rapid economic liberalisation characterised by nepotism and cutbacks in state subsidies. Syrian people raised concerns about growing unemployment and corruption and also about the curtailment of personal freedom. The displeasure about the Assad regime grew among the people, and it furthered when the state descended on the resistance with force. It was when the state allegedly arrested and tortured school children for making anti-government graffiti, the protests started, which were peaceful. But the government ostensibly attacked the peaceful demonstrations and opened fire where four protestors succumbed to death which caused a wide range of outrage and to add to it, the army on the following day opened fire at the funeral of the previous victims, leaving one dead. The extensive use of force by the government on the peaceful protestors induced aggression and hatred towards government into the protests.

The anti-government protestors, called as 'rebels', started demanding the resignation of Assad as president. The protestors initially demanded the restoration of democratic processes and greater freedom in the country. However, not all citizens were against the policies of the government. The government supporters started fighting the rebels.

In 2011 July, Free Syrian Army formed, and the conflict dwelled into an armed conflict leading to violence in most parts of the country; making the conflict turn into a civil war in 2012, post the failure of Annan six-point plan. The war in Syria was initially limited to two groups, rebels and government supporters. However, the Islamic State (IS), a new actor entered the war in 2014. Meanwhile, the involvement of the international actors, US, Russia, China, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Iran and Iraq further escalated and complicated the strife (Ford, 2019). Russia and China backed the Assad regime, while the Gulf countries and the USA supported rebels and also were accused of supporting arms to the rebels (Khan & Khan, 2017).

The significant events that took place throughout the war, such as, Russian airstrikes in 2015; acquiring of opposition seized Aleppo by regime armies in 2016; the downfall of ISIS; and the withdrawal of US forces in 2018, could not bring the war to an end (Ford, 2019). Instead, the increased number of stakeholders made the war seem a never-ending one. The regime forces, rebels, international alliances and the terrorist organisations in favour of forming Islamic state are the primary stakeholders. Remarkably, the rebels are not a single community but a group of various communities that looks forward to the formation of a new government with democratic reforms. Kurds, are the community who have joined hands with the rebels but with a distinctive goal of secession to form Kurdistan (*The Syrian Civil War: Regime of Bashar Al-Assad*, 2014).

The character of the Syria civil war has transformed since its origin and has turned complex. The conflict initially started as a protest against the government, which was rapidly becoming corrupt and authoritarian and overlooking the developmental concerns of the citizens. But it soon fell prey to the sectarian politics of the nation, which without any delay attracted the international actors that had vested interests in the region. The existing cleavage between the Alawite minority, who enjoyed prominent positions in the society and the Sunni majority, especially the urban population, who considered themselves discriminated, abetted the development issues based conflict to turn into a sectarian power struggle (Wimmen, 2016). The failure of the initial protests to gain the support of larger society but of the Sunni majority, especially the urban Sunni population, paved the way to the transformation of conflict on sectarian lines. The support of the Shia majority countries to Assad, an Alawite minority, against rebels (comprising Sunni majority majorly) made the conflict

blossom into a larger Shia- Sunni sectarian conflict. Besides, the involvement of international actors in the strife added issues like energy politics, regional supremacy to the existing conflict. In the interim, extensive use of weapons, especially the chemical weapons, made Syrian War one of the lethal civil wars.

A large number of Syrians forcefully displaced from their residences due to the irreversible territorial destruction. A vast number of Syrians displaced within Syria apart from the externally displaced population, according to statistics published in 2018 (*The Syrian Civil War: Regime of Bashar Al-Assad*, 2014). Syrian refugees and asylum seekers are in Turkey (3.5 million), Lebanon (1.5 million), Jordan (655,000), Iraq (245,162), Egypt (129,642), Germany, Sweden, Sudan, Austria and Netherlands, creating one of the acute refugee crisis in history.

However, reaching host countries is not effortless. Mostly preferred routes like the routes to the European countries and the route from Turkey to Greece (Ozdemir, 2018) are highly unsafe. The sea routes have turned highly lethal for refugees due to the overcrowded boats that aren't seaworthy. The land routes, on the other hand, also pose deadly threats like the lack of food and medical facility throughout the journey. Yet, a considerable number of refugees reach the asylum providing nations but to face various new vulnerabilities. Poor living conditions and the ill integration of the refugees in the host country are the major problems (Verme et al., 2016). Refugees in the host countries don't have proper access to the housing facilities; not every host country provides the refugees with the opportunity to reside anywhere in the country. Most of the asylum countries, in case of Syrian refugees, have confined them to the refugee camps; Turkey is one of the host countries that have granted freedom of movement and settlement in any part of the country. Refugees living out of the refugee camps face discrimination and hatred from the local people due to the stigma attached to the refugees of being economic burdens and cultural threats (Saleh et al., 2018). Apart from this, access to housing, health benefits, education and employment are also significant challenges to refugees (Verme et al., 2016). The refugees residing in the camps also face problems of health, education and employment but to a larger extent. Host countries are found not to be providing adequate facilities to the refugees, and the condition becomes worse as refugees are confined to refugee camps and do not have freedom of movement which makes them vulnerable to harmful health conditions and malnutrition.

Most of the refugees and asylum seekers are physically hurt and psychologically traumatised due to the armed conflict in the home country and the long journey to host countries. Poor housing, lack of sanitary conditions and deprived health care worsens refugee's situation. For, asylum seekers, the situation is much worse as they are the people who haven't acquired refugee status in the host country. Besides, the internally displaced people face various health and livelihood risks due to the continuous armed conflict which compel to move place to place frequently. The repetitive movement makes the IDP's vulnerable to multiple transmissible diseases and health issues along with the lack of education, housing and employment.

Further, IDP's, refugees and the asylum seekers from Syria have grabbed international attention. The international organisations, especially the UN, has introduced various programs to benefit displaced people. But the major challenge is that the aid is not accessible to the displaced people comfortably and the plans are not effective due to the obstacles posed by the host governments and corruption(Verme et al., 2016). Though all the displaced people equally face the challenging conditions, women and children are more vulnerable to the displacement.

Forced displacement of Syrian women: challenges and opportunities

Forced displacement brings along various challenges and vulnerabilities to the population. The consequences of forced displacement faced by women vary that of men. As claimed by feminist scholars, conflicts are not free of gender biases in their foundation and impacts. Throughout the strife, women face various kinds of gender-based violence, yet women are not included in the peace talks and the decision-making process(Yumna, 2017). Even after being the major stakeholders, deals and negotiations overlook the women's problems and needs.

Sexual violence, gender-stereotyped harassment, verbal abuse and domestic violence are identified as the significant problems faced by the women. Most of the displaced women are left with the families without male companionship making them more vulnerable to abuse. Most of the males are either participating in the war or dead. Many men have abandoned their families out of the fear of burden. Several other males are physically disabled after getting injured during the conflict and survive on family members. Women in the families where men are either absent or physically disabled act as head of the family and take new roles of looking after the family.

Before the conflict started in Syria, women are mostly confined to the domestic spaces, which made women worst equipped to face the war consequences, especially in the absence of males. The internally displaced women, refugees and the asylum seekers face similar kind of challenges. Displaced women are most prone to rapes and sexual abuses. In further violence, displaced women often get death threats to the families for not surrendering to the sexual offers. Internally displaced women face sexual violence mostly from fellow displaced people, landlords, officials, aid workers and others who see it as a revenge on the rebel groups. Women, who are not the active participants in the war were used as tools of war and revenge, which researches did not focus much on. Refugee and asylum-seeking women face sexual abuse from the locals of the host country as a form of hatred, officials, landlords, aid workers and the fellow refugees and the smugglers. In the case of refugees and asylum seekers, housing and livelihood are the significant challenges which leave women more vulnerable in the refugee camps. Women and men, often strangers, were put in the same tents, making them vulnerable to abuses. Several women have described how they would sleep outside the tents to elude being assaulted by other males in the tent. The kind of gender insensitivity from the host countries put refugee women to increased risk.

The journey to the host country is the most difficult task for women. They reported of facing lethal consequences of travelling the problematic routes with challenging conditions like the lack of toilets, mensural hygiene, sexual violence, groping, kidnapping; pregnant women face many difficulties en route the host country(Yumna, 2017). Lack of security increases the risk of physical violence against women, and the issue of security to women during the journey is not given much attention as it is needed. After reaching the host country, a series of new problems await the displaced women like home for their family and earning livelihood necessarily. Sexual abuse and offers for sex are mostly confronted by the women in their everyday trail to find housing and work. Women are offered accommodation for free or for less rent and work in favour of sex. Unfortunately, several women, desperately in need of shelter and work, fall for the obscene offers which leave them traumatised. Besides, it is calamitous that the aid workers and administrative officials, police officers and the security guards that are assigned to look after the needs of the displaced people

themselves exploit the women sexually in exchange of the resources that are supposed to be supplied without any cost.

In worst of the cases reported by the Women's Refugee Commission, women were asked for sexual favours in exchange for refugee status in the host country and their requirements are often ignored in the refugee camps. In further gender insensitivity, women have no relaxation in the lengthy bureaucratic and legal procedures for acquiring asylum in most of the host countries(Buscher, 2017). Several refugee women don't have access to legal services, making it hard for them to find jobs, healthcare and protection from sexual offences and bondage labour. Women are burden with the economic tasks to get housing and to take care of their families. Women also face gender-based violence and discrimination at workplaces due to the lack of legal facilities to work. Due to the increased economic burden, several women look towards marriage as a way out which also would save from rape, burglary, kidnapping and sexual abuses(Yumna, 2017). However, marriage itself turned out to be a way to abuse women sexually. Women, in desperate for a male companion for security, are surrendering to polygamy. Besides, women with female children are marrying off their girls at very early ages to save them from sexual violence. Young girls are forced into marriage. The desperation of marriage gave way to dowry issues among the Syrian refugees. Early marriages, forced marriages, and the polygamy has numerously increased among the displaced Syrians(Ozdemir, 2018). The desperate marriages are not peaceful ones. Women had to go through domestic violence and sexual abuse from the family members. Marital rape is one such issue that is ignored among the more significant problems faced by Syrian women. Perpetrators lure displaced women in the name of marriage as marriage would provide safe access to sexual abuse; these marriages are often temporary. Asides, women are also sold by the many marriage mafias operating in various host countries, for instance, a marriage mafia in Al-Za'ri camps sold women and girls for 100 to 200 dollars in the name of lasting marriage with the help of religious priests(Noor, 2016).

Women often don't report or go public about the assaults they face as it is considered as a shameful thing. Due to the stigma attached to their violence, women silently take all the abuses, which leads them to depression, anxiety and suicide. Notably, women also had to face honour killings for being sexually assaulted in the name of family honour. The traumatic conditions of women have increased the rate of suicide among

the displaced Syrian women(Noor, 2016). Internally displaced women face higher health risks due to the injuries during the conflict and continuous movement, leaving them vulnerable to contagious diseases, apart from the psychological trauma. Refugee women in host countries are prone to health threats due to ill sanitation, commutable diseases and injuries besides mental ordeal. Women in the refugee camps are put together with the other men and had to use shared toilets and bathrooms(Yumna, 2017). To avoid sexual harassments, women tend to eat and drink less to evade using toilets, putting them at higher health risks.

Pregnant women are the worst affected among the displaced Syrian women. According to a report published by UN population fund, there are more than 70,000 pregnant women, several among them were under-aged girls, remarkably(*Perilous conditions for pregnant women displaced in northern Syria*, 2018). The pregnant women don't have access to timely health care, access to proper nutrition, unavailability of female doctors leaving them and the unborn child at higher health risks. Transportation problems, cost issues, availability of medicine and services add to the health risks of pregnant women(*UNFPA Annual Report 2015*).

Besides the threats and challenges, conflict and displacement brought significant opportunities to the Syrian women. Women have incorporated new roles of being head of the family and the bread winner. Traditionally, Syrian women were raised to the stereotyped gender roles which never let them into the economic spaces. Since the initiation of the conflict, displaced women have taken up role as sole breadwinners. Men often send women to work either due to physical incapability, fear of being taken as war soldiers or being hurt. Displaced women are given opportunities by the stakeholders, working to improve the situation of women, to learn various skills and earn their living. Women found work in various sectors like education, sewing and crafting, agriculture and child care. Displaced women, who are into start-ups are provided with the training, raw material and equipment. However, notably, highly skilled women like lawyers, pharmacists, engineers and managers lacked job opportunities(Ozdemir, 2018). Women, as they stepped out of the traditional roles are increasingly getting educated. Many displaced women preferred educating their girl child rather than the boy, as they believed that boys would somehow find a job but education only would provide girls with work opportunities(Yumna, 2017). Education and employment opportunities during the times of crisis has changed the condition of

several women. Reports have also suggested that the working and educated women are less prone to gender based violence and biases.

Conclusion

Despite of women being the major stake holders in the violent forced displacement of Syrians, they are often ignored as peace makers. Women participation in the peace deals are negligible, as a result of which women issues go ignored or unanswered. The initial peace talks on Syria had zero participation of women but gradually are entering into the talks. Displaced Syrian women need to have equal participation in any deal related to the Syrian conflict and the displaced people. Women issues needs to be raised in all the talks and the stake holders should come up with systematic solutions to provide security to women, restore their dignity and empower them, as women would be torch bearers of the Syrian society post conflict.

Despite of the Arrangements made by aid organisation, the host countries and the international communities, women linger behind in attaining necessary facilities. There have been reports about aid workers asking women for sexual favours for reception of adequate supplies of the essentials. To restrain such behaviours international organisations, aid agencies and refugee governace needs to come up with mechanisms and protocols monitering the aid employees and volunteirs.

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