

RETHINKING THE PROTECTION OF FEMALE REFUGEES

Introduction:

For more than two years now, the Syrian refugee crisis has posed a myriad of dilemmas for polities across the globe. The crisis has continued to strain the economic, political, and social infrastructure of many countries. Western governments remain concerned over welcoming refugees from the Middle East, particularly given the inability of many European countries to provide adequate shelter and resources for overpopulated refugee camps. Often overlooked, however, are the conditions in refugee camps both in the Middle East and elsewhere, and the human rights violations perpetrated against vulnerable populations. One particular area of concern is the status of women in refugee camps, whose predicament is compounded by sexual violence.

This paper will discuss this issue in more detail. In doing so, it encourages measures to enforce the protection of female refugees in order to improve the livelihood of women everywhere. Through a survey of the current conditions of female refugees, as offered by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), this paper will first argue that because the appropriate management of female refugees will lead to greater security and cooperation among global partners, the UNHCR should make this its top priority. The paper will then offer suggestions for policies and practices the UNHCR should take to mitigate the violence faced by female refugees, specifically in refugee camps.

The Current Condition of Female Refugees:

According to the 2014 UNHCR Global Report, more than 55 million refugees are dependent on UNHCR assistance and support across the world.¹ Of this number, roughly half are women, many of whom are living alone with their children without adequate resources to ensure their health and survival.² These women face many of the same challenges that other refugees face in procuring resources and seeking out conditions for survival, but also face additional challenges including the risk of sexual violence and gender discrimination. In a recent study entitled, “*Women in African Refugee Camps: Gender Based Violence Against Female Refugees: The case of Mai Ayni Refugee Camp, Northern Ethiopia*,” Yonas Gebreyosus describes his experience with female refugees in Northern Ethiopia. He recalls how one woman explained the common practice of physical violence. She says, “...it’s better to talk about female refugees who are free from such violence because it is common practice in the camp.”³ He also discusses how many female refugees are subject to rape, kidnapping, and forced prostitution.⁴ And the challenges faced by female refugees are of course not limited to those of physical violence. Women are also subject to gender-based discrimination, especially when accessing basic services like schooling for their children and hospital services.⁵

¹ “UNHCR Global Report,” last modified 2014. <http://www.unhcr.org/5575a78416.html>.

² “Women,” UNHCR News. <http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49c3646c1d9.html>

³ Yonas Gebreyosus, *Women in African Refugee Camps: Gender Based Violence Against Female Refugees: the Case of Mai Ayni Refugee Camp, Northern Ethiopia*, (Hamburg: Anchor, 2014) EBSCOhost.

⁴ Jeanne Ward and Beth Vann, “Gender-based Violence in Refugee Settings,” *Medicine and Conflict* 360, no. 1 (2002): 13-14. Accessed November 18, 2015. <http://www.sciencedirect.com.proxyau.wrlc.org/science/article/pii/S0140673602118022>.

⁵ Gebreyosus, *Women in African Refugee Camps*, 42.

Studies have shown that the impacts of such abuse is evident in the long term with festering consequences after female refugees are resettled or return home. Victims of violence face lasting psychological and physiological effects, which can damage reproductive organs, augment mental health conditions, create community stigmas, and result in unwanted pregnancies.⁶

Causes of Violence:

Understanding the root causes of violence against female refugees is critical to understanding why this issue must become a top priority for the UNHCR.

While the causes of gender-based violence in refugee camps are often multifaceted, studies show that the breakdown of societal organization results in staggering violence throughout refugee camps. Atrocities borne from conflict and war often result in fractured family structures. When husbands, brothers, and other male counterparts leave for war, women are often left alone to care for their families, resulting in little protection and increased threat of violence. As one woman explained in an interview with Gebreyosus: “Some female refugees came to this camp at their fifteen or sixteen ... Later, no one guides the new adolescents about sex, sexual violence and other related sensitive issues i.e. no one close to them to teach the challenges ahead as a female refugee.”⁷

⁶ Ward and Vann, “Gender-based Violence in Refugee Settings,” 13.

⁷ Gebreyosus, *Women in African Refugee Camps*, 57.

Studies also reveal that young female refugees are often forced into caretaker roles, making them especially vulnerable to violence. Because these young women, like many refugee youth, are so dependent on non-familial males for access to resources and have no familial or communal protection, they are more easily coerced. According to researcher Stephanie Parker, who conducted a report on violence against female Syrian refugees, “Women are often forced to exchange sexual acts in return for items like food, clothing, and shelter. Women are treated like commodities during desperate times like conflict situations.”⁸

Another critical issue inciting violence against female refugees is the lack of registration and documentation in refugee camps. This is largely due to the fact that upon arrival to many refugee camps, families are expected to register through the head of household, who is more often than not, the head male of the family. When male family members are absent, as discussed earlier, women and their children are often unaccounted for and made more vulnerable to violence.

One refugee woman surveyed in Nepal recalls her experience:

‘Sometimes I was beaten so badly I bled. My husband took a second wife. I didn’t agree ... He said, “If you don’t allow me to take a second wife, then the registration card is in my name, and I’ll take everything.” I have asked my husband for the health card and ration card and they don’t give it to me ... I have not gotten approval to get a second registration card.’⁹

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ “UNHCR Handbook on the Protection of Women and Girls,” p 112, <http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/home/opendocPDFViewer.html?docid=4aa76bf09&query=chapter%204>.

A lack of safe infrastructure and access to amenities in refugee camps has further compounded violence against female refugees. Many basic necessities, such as firewood used to build fires for cooking, are not available or are difficult to attain. In many refugee camps, it is the expectation that women will walk several kilometers into the forest to collect firewood.¹⁰ In order to retrieve the wood, women are often on their own, thereby increasing their risk of physical and sexual violence.

Policy Solutions:

Enforceable State System of Procedures:

It is important that states be held accountable for the treatment of refugees within their borders. This paper suggests that the UN mandate a fair and just treatment of both male and female refugees within international borders. This will not only combat gender roles that incite violence against women, but also encourage nations to act in the interest of protecting female refugees who are at a greater risk of violence.

Additionally, refugee camps have the potential to impact the political, economic, and social reputations of host countries. Because the refugee crisis and specifically the crisis of female refugees presently involves a variety of global actors and is very complex, states that manage refugee influxes and protections sufficiently are more likely to have positive reputations

¹⁰ Mary Anne Fitzgerald and, Shep Lowman. "Protect Refugee Women as they Gather Firewood." *International Herald Tribune*, Aug 27, 1998, accessed December 1, 2015, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/316878655?accountid=8285>.

across the international community. Potentially, these states are also more likely to enjoy increased economic productivity and peaceful domestic politics because their constituents feel that they are respected and treated fairly.

In the UNHCR Handbook for the Protection of Women and Girls, the agency recognizes the increased need of gender-sensitive policy, in addition to the promotion of gender equality.¹¹ The UNHCR should therefore work alongside nations to ensure they are following basic trajectories to expand gender rights. For example, the UNHCR should ensure women have equal access to schooling and that laws regarding gender-based violence are truly enforced.

Mandatory Registration of All Refugees:

The UNHCR should also implement a mandatory registration and reporting system for all refugees. For proper registration to occur, a two-fold policy is necessary. First, the UNHCR should provide on-the-ground registration services at all refugee camps. Because individual nations are solely responsible for registration procedures, issues such as politics and culture can threaten registration procedures. The UNHCR, not individual states, should have the power to create and employ a registration framework.

To address the issue of only heads of household being asked to register, thereby reducing the likelihood of women to register themselves and their children, the UNHCR should require that the receipt of health and ration cards be contingent upon proper registration of all family members. Because females are often left out of registration processes, they become dependent

¹¹ Ibid.

on their male counterparts. The UNHCR has espoused the importance of registration, but there are no concrete efforts being made to ensure that proper registration is taking place. If their access to basic resources and rations is connected to the identification of women, men will be more willing to properly complete registration and include all members of the household. Adequate registration practices will also help ensure that women and children are given protection and access to vital resources in the camp.

Disbursal of Fuel-efficient Products:

To address the problem faced by female refugees in having to take long journeys to collect firewood, the UNHCR should distribute alternative types of cooking equipment. Some organizations, like the Safe Access to Fuel and Energy (SAFE), have begun to wage similar efforts such as the distribution of the Save80, a fuel-efficient stove that requires just a fraction of the amount of firewood needed to build traditional fires. However, only about 3,000 of these stoves have been distributed thus far.¹²

According to the creators of the Save80, some countries have attached heavy import duties on these stoves, making it difficult for them to be obtained in refugee camps. It is clear, however, that this product may help mitigate a critical problem facing female refugees. The UNHCR should therefore consider the use of these products and work with countries to remove trade barriers to increase their flow across borders.

¹² SafeFuelAndEnergy.org. "Safe Access to Fuel and Energy (SAFE)." SafeFuelAndEnergy.org. Accessed October 31, 2016.

Conclusion:

The current policies in place are insufficient to ensure the protection of female refugees living in refugee camps. While the UNHCR and many other organizations are working hard to identify the specific needs of female refugees across the world, these efforts have not proved sufficient. The most pressing risks women face during their time as refugees are related to their personal safety and the security of their families. Due to decreased safety and security measures, and the nature of the camps themselves, women face threats of physical violence almost routinely.

While there are complex cross-cutting issues, there are specific steps that may be taken to help alleviate some of these stressors. One of the best solutions might be a streamlined and mandatory registration protocol that would serve to quell gender-based violence and discrimination against female refugees. If female refugees were more clearly identified and recognized, they would certainly obtain more physical protection. Issues of exclusion regarding access to resources and basic services would also be remedied as their dispersion would be contingent upon registration.

A thorough and specific registration system would have numerous benefits. First, women and their children would be better protected because their presence would be known. Second, they would have access to rations and resources that are often held hostage by their male counterparts. Ultimately, at the family level, this system could help ensure greater prosperity and safety. On a larger scale, a registration system could help quell safety and security risks within the camps and help improve prospects for more peaceful relations with host countries. The issues

of refugees and refugee protections are not going to disappear anytime soon, and the international community as a whole should begin addressing these pressing concerns now to better assist stateless persons in the future.

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