

The relevance of gender to our understanding of war refugees

Written by Sweta Kannan

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SWETA KANNAN, MAY 12 2011

'Gender matters. To incorporate gender in migration research is not to "privilege" it but to accord to it the explanatory power it merits'^[1]

Gender is an issue that has been noticeably on the agenda of refugee support organisations like the United Nations High Commission for Refugees since the 1970s. With feminists pushing for change within the structures of these organisations and the modification of their focuses to include issues of gender, governmental and non-governmental organisations soon found the issue of 'gender' and 'gender equality' one that required much attention – as well as one that would often be overshadowed by issues that were deemed more 'important' or 'pressing'. Due to the nature of the topic – large numbers of refugees fleeing from war zones or zones of ongoing conflict – it is not surprising that much of the work within the academic field of Refugee and Migration Studies has thus been preoccupied with notions of immediate survival among refugees – much attention has therefore been given to issues such as food, water, shelter and increasingly, human security. These examinations, however, tend to either neglect the issue of gender completely, or render a misguided understanding of 'gender' as synonymous to 'women'; indeed, it is thus often used as a term to refer to women and so-called 'women's issues'. Yet *gender*, referring to the constructed social and cultural notions of femininity and masculinity could be seen as fundamental to the experience of being a refugee. Indeed, it is posited here that issues of gender are influential in determining which individuals are capable and are 'socially accepted' to leave their home and flee the country, as well as dictating which individuals survive refugee camps and are then able to seek asylum. Gender, for instance, often dictates the levels of education that girls and women in certain countries may attain – higher levels of education, for instance, thus tend to encourage women to continue their quest for safety even if they are not accompanied by male relatives or partners. It is therefore not surprising that women who end up claiming asylum also tend to demonstrate higher levels of education generally.^[2]

In certain cultures, however, it is seen as unseemly for women to travel alone, often due to assumed psychological and physical vulnerability that are closely tied to notions of a woman's 'honour' and 'dignity' that are seen as paramount to uphold. Such circumstances thus already represent some of the highly gendered constraints that female refugees face – and against which some fight tirelessly. The decision to leave one's home – and potentially even one's family – to seek safety from violence and destruction is thus one that implies the individual's engagement with cultural and societal assumptions and expectations – refugee women who have had to leave their children behind are thus often portrayed either as resigned to their fate and thus often suicidal due to the broken natal bond between themselves and their children, or indeed as working tirelessly towards the possibility of being reunited with them.^[3] These perceptions even influence the way that these women are thus treated by potential host countries: Freedman, for instance, notes that women with children are more likely to be granted asylum in France as they are seen as fulfilling their motherly duties, whereas women who are understood to have left their children behind tend to be rejected, often without a justification. Similarly, men are granted asylum more easily as, according to her, they are viewed as the 'principal agents of political resistance and therefore legitimate beneficiaries of protection from

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resulting persecution'.^[4]

Such deeply entrenched notions of men as naturally part of the public sphere and women as naturally part of the domestic sphere that is linked to their societal roles frequently determine the ways, in which male and female refugees are perceived and treated by the people they encounter – from rebels, soldiers and locals to camp administrators, (non-) governmental employees and immigration officials. Notions, perceptions and ideas of gender are deeply implicated in the ways that refugees are viewed – and often even impact the ways, in which they perceive themselves.

It is therefore posited here that male and female experiences of being a refugee and the encounters that are associated with these experiences tend to be distinctly different. This, however, has implications for the study of refugees of war as more specifically gender sensitive analysis is necessary within the field of Refugee and Migration Studies; in addition, it implies that existing work needs to be reviewed critically in the light of these gender-based differences. This essay thus seeks to highlight some of the ways in which gender provokes differing experiences of being a refugee among men and women, as well as differing treatment of men and women that is not necessarily based on the implementation of gender-sensitive guidelines. Here, three sections are looked at in some detail to emphasise the large extent to which gender matters: three sections in particular are examined here – *Conceptual frameworks* thus examines the definitions that are used to identify refugees in particular, while *Leaving home/ On the move* focuses on experiences of leaving one's home and known surroundings and issues that arise when on the move; 'In the camp' examines issues that arise specifically out of the situation of refugee camps. Due to space constraints, there is no discussion of the issues that male and female refugees encounter when seeking asylum in new countries, even though this, too, represents a crucial stage of being a refugee.

Conceptual Matters: Definitions

Before delving into the discussion of the issues at hand, it seems valuable to examine the definition of a 'refugee' to lay out the framework, within which these discussions will take place. Generally, the term 'refugee' is used loosely to describe people who fled or were forced to flee their homes due to the outbreak of violence and conflict – or, increasingly, due to environmental degradation. The principal legal definition that is drawn on to distinguish refugees from other displaced people is laid out in the United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees of 1951.^[5] According to Hamilton, the definition that this document offers is too narrow – indeed, by focusing on the recognition of people who flee their native country because they have either lost their nationality and are now without nationality, or because of the persecution of specific political, social, cultural or religious affiliations, the definition does not even allow for the recognition of people who are displaced by war and conflict.^[6] Even the Protocol, which was added in 1967, failed to recognise refugees of war and conflict as 'refugees' – instead, Hamilton identifies a document that was put forward by the African Union, called the 'Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa', as the main document that actually included these specific individuals. This demonstrates, that even universal definitions like these have to be seen as produced by a certain set of individuals (often men in positions of power) with certain interests, who operate under certain structural constraints.^[7] This is further underlined by Hildegard Dumper, who argues that the original definition of the UN was written in mind with the stereotype of the 'male political activist seeking refuge from Soviet-backed regimes that emerged during the Cold War' in mind.^[8] Thus starting from this premise, one could argue that the definition that is used to identify the individuals, who under the UN Convention would legitimately be registered as 'refugee' is one that in itself is highly political. As Dumper points out, the definition itself thus already makes an assumption about the gender of the person seeking refuge, and their motivation for doing so.

Interestingly, these assumptions have had a massive impact on people who do not seem to 'fit' the notions underlying the definition of a refugee: lesbian women, who have thus attempted to claim asylum on the basis of belonging to a special, persecuted social group (i.e. they portrayed their sexual identity as one that belonged to a larger form of 'homosexual' or 'gay' identities) as they were mistreated in their home countries in the context of ongoing social upheaval and civil war for their sexual identity. In cases like these the starkly differential treatment of men and women is stunning; the US National Center for Lesbian Rights notes that homosexual men who have fought for asylum on the exact same grounds have been significantly more successful than their female counterparts.^[9] This

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demonstrates how even definitions of a refugee cater to existing systems of male dominance, thereby placing women in disadvantaged positions through no fault of their own – gender thus is highly relevant when thinking about issues regarding refugees of war.

Leaving home / On the move

Thus while it is crucial to understand that gender is inherent to the conceptual structures within which refugees of war are recognised and acknowledged as such, one could argue that the ‘genderedness’ of the refugee experience itself begins with the individual’s decision to leave their home in the first place. This decision might not necessarily be a voluntary one – indeed, in the case of war refugees, it seldom is. Instead, people are often driven out of their homes by the closing in of hostilities.^[10] In cases like these, however, men are often coerced into taking part in the violence by joining the forces and thus are not given a chance to flee. Furthermore, when regarding accounts of conflicts like the 1994 genocide in Rwanda or the conflict in Bosnia, it is noticeable that violence was directed specifically at men in an attempt to eradicate the biological capability of a people to reproduce.^[11] Men were – and are – thus being targeted for being *men* in war.^[12] From this, it emerges that only certain men can survive conflict and flee; at the same time, the possibility of a woman being able to flee conflict is often seen in line with her ‘motherly duties’ to protect her children and take them to safety.^[13] As one can see, gender plays an immense role in legitimising the directing of violence against one gender (men and their masculinities) and emphasising the gender role of another (being a mother) as a legitimate reason to survive. While of course women encounter numerous difficulties, particularly when travelling unaccompanied, they are still often viewed as ‘legitimately’ being able to flee situations of violence and conflict, whereas male gender roles often bid them to stay, and to fight. Arguably then, men and women do not have an equal chance of being able to leave their homes and flee from highly dangerous situations. Gender is thus implicit in the decision, of whether or not an individual *can* leave his or her home in the first place.

Media images of refugees of war, however, also tend to play on this gender dimension in that they often focus solely on women with frail infants, carrying a bundle of cloth with their belongings as the sole survivors of conflict. Indeed, they are often portrayed as ‘women and children’ – as a singular unit that cannot be divided into ‘women’ and ‘children’.^[14] This in itself is a controversial and much debated depiction of women – thus while ‘gender’ is often used interchangeably with the notion of ‘women’, the notion of ‘women’ are also often used interchangeably with images of ‘women and children’. Such depictions are difficult as they are born out of distinctly Western notions of children as helpless, agency-less, a-political and dependent and therefore necessarily closely tied to their parent. Similarly, women are portrayed as the ultimate victims of any conflict and are generally seen as caught between the crossfires of rape-lusty rebels and equally rape-lusty state soldiers. Both of these depictions, however, do not allow for an understanding of women or children beyond these notions of victimhood.^[15] As Utas writes, however, both women and children have actively subverted these roles – most notably so in the Liberian and the Sierra Leonean conflicts. More than simply subverting these roles, though, Utas states that the notion of ‘victimism’ – i.e. the creation of a framework within which women cannot be understood as persons, but solely as victims, as people to ‘whom violence is done’ – that is often applied by (non-) governmental support organisations to deal with women is regularly consciously used as a tactic by women to ‘self-stage as a victim of war’.^[16] He describes an incidence where he interviews women in a refugee camp in Liberia and every single one of them initiates the conversation by stating that they had been raped in the civil war in Sierra Leone.^[17] Used as a tactic, for instance to gain material benefits within the camp, some women thus play on these deeply ingrained, but naive and highly gendered notions of women as victims.

In the camp

Indeed, much of the literature within Refugee and Migration Studies tends to focus on issues of vulnerability and survival that surrounds refugees. Arguably, this explains the specific focus on issues such as food, water, shelter and immediate safety of the individual. Particularly in the context of examining refugees who have been accepted into refugee camps, concepts of survival seem to attract much attention. Allowing for conceptualisations on the basis of Agambian notions of the marginalisation of refugees’ lives to such an extent that they become representative of notions of life stripped bare – ‘bare life’ – within such camp settings.^[18] While these processes of complete

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marginalisation of individuals within these camps do certainly take place, it is also within these camps that distinct male / female experiences of being a refugee are noticeable. Academics focusing specifically on women in refugee camps thus tend to mention the incapability of camp administrators to deal issues like the complete non-existence of possibilities for women to find places to rest away from where they could be molested or interfered with by men for instance^[19]; particularly, when considering that a certain percentage of refugee women arriving at these camps will have experienced rape and sexual harassment on their journey and thus should be viewed as particularly vulnerable. Similarly, accounts exist of young, pregnant women who stated they felt highly uncomfortable with the idea of having to share the same spaces as young men, particularly since they were brought up to avoid such contact under any circumstance during pregnancy. Yet it seems that little can be done when it comes to such issues of 'sharing space' – indeed, due to the often chaotic circumstances and the makeshift structures within these camps there seems to be a tendency of little oversight, and thus little ability by the camp administration to create clearly delineated spaces for vulnerable women, for instance.^[20]

Closely linked are also issues of health: refugee camps thus tend not to be able to cater to the special needs of women. Research done into female-headed households in Mozambican refugee camps thus also noted deaths due to complications from child births as one of the 'leading causes of death' of women.^[21] Similarly, the lack of sanitary napkins and separate washing facilities for women that is often noticeable in such camps often leads to women not feeling comfortable with washing in public spaces and thus not washing at all or using dirty rags to clean themselves, thereby increasing their risk of infections, due to the social stigma attached to the notion of a woman having her menstruation.^{[22] [23]} Appropriate health care that takes such female-specific issues into account is therefore not always readily available and can lead to the increased death rates of female refugees in camps. Having said this, there seems to be much discrepancy between different refugee camps; in his description of refugee camps in Tanzania, for instance, Lukunka argues that there seems to be almost too much of a focus on female refugees as they are given what is perceived to be preferential treatment by non-governmental support organisations within the camp.^[24] He thus notes that men are subjected to processes of emasculation that involve the lack of meaningful occupation and complete financial dependence on organisations like the UNHCR. Indeed, he writes that the dependence on such organisations is so great that they are sometimes even referred to as the 'new big men' – that is, men who are superior to these refugee men in their 'masculinity' as they are capable of feeding and financing their families, something that refugee men are often not fully in control of in the camp. Similar sentiments of frustration arise in the context of these men being subjected to similar conditions when applying for asylum with their families. Research done by Fiddian-Qasmiyeh and Qasmiyeh on Middle Eastern asylum seekers and refugees in the UK thus confirms that some men believe the National Asylum Support Services to be a 'better husband' to their wives and a 'better father' to their daughters.^[25] It is not an uncommon phenomenon for refugee men to feel that their masculinity, that their socially accepted role as the 'father' of the family is profoundly challenged by the role of such organisations. Yet still in situations like these concepts of the 'patriarchal dividend' prevail: although Lukunka fails to mention the ways in which these men express their frustration at their situation of being made 'redundant' as the protector and provider, it is documented that this can manifest itself in the mistreatment of their wives and/or children; indeed balking under the weight of the pressure, the stress and frustration that these men feel it is not unusual for them to become violent.^[26]

Conclusion

How is gender relevant to our understanding of war refugees? Can it be viewed as relevant to our understanding? And is it important to regard the dimensions of gender when trying to engage with their experiences? It is argued here that gender is imperative to our understanding of issues surrounding refugees of war and that the use of a gender lens to scrutinise the ways, in which these people are treated often demonstrates the embeddedness of deeply held beliefs about men, women and the roles and responsibilities that they should be fulfilling, according to societal norms. Indeed, it is argued that it is particularly Western beliefs that are brought into play when it comes to the perception of war refugees that determines who is perceived and understood as a 'victim', and how these 'victims' are then treated by Western, non-governmental organisations – such as the UNHCR. It is thus posited here that gender plays an absolutely crucial role in understanding refugees of war, as the power structures within which they negotiate their

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existence (most obvious in the setting of the refugee camp) are highly gendered in themselves. This then leads to the formulation of distinctly different experiences of 'refugeehood' by men and women. Again, it is argued that these different experiences need to be acknowledged, as they offer a solution to more fair, equal and appropriate treatment of these people when dealing with them.

Arguably, the general focus of the field has led to an imbalance in the discussion of 'gender' as referring to women; indeed, this is echoed by organisations working on gender issues in the context of refugees and asylum seekers, as it is seen as one of the few 'winnable battles' that can be fought.^[27] Yet as is demonstrated here, concepts of the patriarchal dividend – i.e. the notion that men ultimately tend to be more advantaged by systems of power and dominance in comparison to women – hold true. Starting from the reasons, for which individuals leave their homes and the structural constraints which may prevent them or enable them to do so regarding the ways in which they are treated when in the camp, one could thus argue that everything is gendered. By examining these individuals lived experiences of being a refugee and by contrasting men's experiences against women's experiences, one can easily see how important it is to understand the inherent genderedness of the structures within which these people negotiate their everyday lives.

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