

# Forced Migration and Security Threats to Syrian Refugee Women

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There are many reasons why people are forced to migrate, including conflict, natural disasters, famine or unemployment. In Syria's case the main reason for people's forced migration is the country's conflict which, since its beginning in 2011, has forced people to migrate to other countries or be internally displaced. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) 6.5 million were displaced within Syria and 4.8 million have fled to neighbouring countries such as Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs 2016). Despite the fact that the largest number of Syrian refugees moved to countries in the Middle East such as Iraq (245,022), Egypt (117,658), Lebanon (1,069,111), Jordan (637,859) and Turkey (2,620,553) (UNHCR 2016), thousands of Syrians are on the move to European countries seeking protection, asylum and safety. However, their journey to European countries, either by land or sea, is often not safe. The route through Turkey into Greece is highly risky for refugees. They mostly travel in unseaworthy boats and dinghies across the Mediterranean. These overcrowded boats could sink in a matter of minutes and coast guards for rescue may not arrive in time (International Rescue Committee 2015, 7; Dearden 2016). Similarly, the land routes pose danger (see, for example, Navai 2015).

Not only the migratory routes<sup>[1]</sup> but also transit camps can be unsafe for refugees. A survey carried out by the Refugee Rights Data Project (2016) in nine refugee camps in Greece focused predominately on individuals over the age of 18. Many respondents mentioned they had witnessed others being hurt or killed during their journey to Europe. Rather than finding safety and security in camps in Greece, many refugees continued to face risks to their lives on a daily basis. According to the report, 31.6% of respondents knew of at least one death having taken place inside their camp. Causes for the deaths ranged from violence between residents to chronic disease and lack of adequate medical treatment. Almost half of all respondents (45.3%) replied that they 'don't feel safe at all' or 'don't feel very safe' in camps. On the other hand, countries such as Hungary, Greece, Bulgaria and Macedonia built fences to prevent the refugee flow as refugees are perceived as a threat to national security (Baczynska and Ledwith 2016). Countries are mostly concerned that armed elements among civilian refugee populations may spread conflict into neighbouring countries (UN Report of the Commission on Human Security 2003). Balkan countries such as Serbia and Macedonia, due to the sudden closure of European borders, had to deal with an unprecedented situation as hundreds of people were blocked inside transit camps – either official or unofficial. Refugees were pushed back by authorities in Bulgaria, Croatia, Hungary, Romania and Spain. There were also allegations of access to asylum procedures being denied and violence (UNHCR 2017). At several borders between Balkan countries refugees were subjected to excessive force and harsh treatment by police (Amnesty International 2015). Some of the European States have taken steps to investigate allegations of human rights abuses at borders (UNHCR 2017).

Violence, however, is gendered during this process. Refugee women's perception and experience of violence, and their vulnerability are crucial for human security. A 'bottom-up' security approach addresses the gender specific insecurity for individuals during displacement (Rosenow-Williams and Behmer 2015). Many women experience numerous traumatic events and are exposed to sexual and gender-based violence<sup>[2]</sup> at every stage of their refugee

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journey (Pittaway and Bartolomei 2004; Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children 2006).

This chapter discusses the risks that Syrian refugee women have to deal with during forced migration, and examines what kind of insecurities they face in situations of displacement in the context of human security. International media coverage, NGO and UN reports referencing migrated Syrian refugee women were analysed by using feminist critical discourse analysis to reveal different kinds of threats. Feminist critical discourse analysis (FCDA) investigates how gender ideology is produced in social practices, in social relationships between individuals, and in individuals' social and private identities through written and oral sources (Sunderland 2004; Lazar 2007, 151).

This chapter aims to contribute to feminist studies and international security studies in three ways. Firstly, by investigating the vulnerability of Syrian refugee women during and after forced migration. Secondly, by showing the gendered nature of forced migration. Thirdly, by illustrating the security threats to Syrian refugee women in the context of human security.

## Forced Migration and Human Security

Not only traditional state-centric perspectives but also more recent critical approaches to security studies have been applied to address the side effects of forced migration (Betts 2009, 60), and forced migration of refugees and their displacement became an important research area of international security studies (Newman 2003, 4; Gasper and Truong 2010). According to a state-centric traditional security studies approach, national security is considered as the core of international security, and forced migration is seen as a source of insecurity to the state (Betts 2009, 62). Methodologically, traditional security studies literature on forced migration and security examines the empirical relationship between migration and military threats to the state (Betts 2009, 62; Vietti and Scribner 2013).

However, by the 1990s intra-state conflicts were no longer considered as only a threat to security of the state, but to humans (Betts 2009, 62–66). Thus, human security as a concept was included as a policy in the 1990s in The United Nations Human Development Report (UNHCR 1994). The report classifies security in seven categories: economic security; food security; health security; environmental security; personal security; security of the community; and political security. In addition, population growth, economic disparities, migration pressures, environmental degradation, drug trafficking and international terrorism were considered as threats (Booth 2007, 321). These classifications of security and variations of threats are crucial for people to realise what security means (MacFarlane and Khong 2006, 11).

According to the Report of the United Nations Commission on Human Security in 2003 (UN Report of the Commission on Human Security 2003), the fear and experience of threats changes from person to person. Consequently, human security is related to the protection of individuals' vital freedoms. This human-centred definition is related to security, protection and survival of forced migrants. They must be considered as a vulnerable group that needs protection from threats. Refugees suffer from being displaced and they suffer while being displaced. During their displacement, flight or movement, they experience specific vulnerabilities (Newman 2003, 16) such as rape, persecution, social exclusion or detention (Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children (WCRWC) 2006). According to Freedman (2016, 3), 'when listening to the stories of forced migrants and studying their experiences, it does seem clear that migration does entail considerable threats to human security [...]'. Poku and Graham (2000, 3–4) also emphasise the link between human security and forced migration in the context of threat. Forced migration is no longer the by-product of war, but a goal in its own right such as ethnic cleansing, genocide, human rights abuses or unemployment (Poku and Graham 2000).

However, in the case of Syria, conflict is the reason for forced migration. Currently, Syrian refugees are considered one of the biggest refugee challenges of European and bordering countries (UNHCR 2016). For some states, they are treated as a threat, for others they are considered people in need of protection. Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Egypt were the first countries to accept large numbers of Syrian refugees (UNHCR 2016). On the other hand, Greece, Italy, Sweden, Austria, Germany, France and Britain were the European countries that accepted a large number of Syrian refugees (UNHCR 2016). However, Hungary, Macedonia, Serbia, Slovenia and Croatia considered Syrian refugees or asylum-seekers a security threat to their nations (Šabić and Borić 2016). The Hungarian

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government, for example, declared a nationwide state of emergency in response to the ongoing refugee crisis in Europe, and announced the deployment of additional troops and police officers on its border with Serbia following Slovenia's border crossings closure, blocking the Balkan route that refugees used to reach Western Europe (Strickland 2016). Consequently, the Syrian refugee crisis has become a security issue for states.

Of all refugees, women are likely the most vulnerable group. Physical, environmental, socio-economic and political reasons are the roots of their vulnerability. *'Vulnerability can be seen as a state of high exposure to certain risks and uncertainties, in combination with a reduced ability to protect or defend oneself against those risks and uncertainties and cope with their negative consequences'* (UN 2001). Types of vulnerabilities may vary in the case of migration, journey, flight or displacement. Moreover, vulnerability of refugee women increases during this process.

## Security Threats to Syrian Refugee Women

Wars and conflicts pose major risks to people's survival, livelihoods and dignity and thus to human security (UN Report of the Commission on Human Security 2003). Therefore, it is not surprising that vulnerability of women increases during forced migration due to a lack of security. They are often targeted with sexual and gender based violence during flight, displacement and migration (WCRWC 2006). Perpetrators, who are mostly unpunished, could be gangs, civilians, bandits, border guards, humanitarian workers and even peacekeepers (Fowler, Dugan and Bolton 2000; Laville 2015). In this sense, it is crucial for international security studies to pay specific attention to the threats experienced by women during forced migration. Feminist intellectuals are concerned that the gendered dimensions of threats have not been analysed adequately (Bunch 2004; Basu 2013; Young and Chan 2015). In this sense, feminist studies emphasise the importance of bottom-up approaches and micro-level perspectives to analyse the threats that are experienced and witnessed by refugee women having different fears and threat perceptions. These approaches and perspectives necessitate giving importance to each refugee woman individually, as a human-centric approach will be more useful to understand their vulnerabilities and also protect them from threats.

According to research conducted by Amnesty International (2016), the 40 refugee women who were interviewed described feeling threatened and unsafe during their journey from Turkey to Greece and then across the Balkans. Many reported that in almost all of the countries they passed through they experienced physical abuse and financial exploitation, they additionally mentioned being groped or pressured to have sex by smugglers, security staff or other refugees.

Furthermore, the UNHCR report (2014) 'Woman Alone: The fight for survival by Syria's refugee women' is the result of field work conducted with 135 female heads of household in order to provide a snapshot of what it means to be a refugee woman in Jordan, Lebanon and Egypt. All women who were interviewed – aged between 17 to 85, with most being between 26 and 59 – said that they have security problems in host countries. After being forced to migrate these women faced sexual and verbal harassment and exploitation due to the fact that they were living without an adult male or husband who would otherwise provide social and physical protection. Several Syrian refugee women also said they experienced harassment or received exploitative offers from persons at local charity associations or landlords that offer services, assistance and free accommodation to Syrian refugees. This insecurity situation, besides bringing feelings of isolation and desperation, often leads to mental health issues such as depression, anxiety and suicidal thoughts (United Nations Population Fund 2014).

A number of women attributed their experiences specifically to the fact that they were living without an adult male, and some said that men made inappropriate proposals for intimate relationships, or asked for their telephone number in an attempt to be 'friends'. Several women in Lebanon had even been approached for temporary marriages, also because marriage is seen as protection from sexual violence (The Freedom Fund 2016).

The vulnerability of Syrian refugee women continues after fleeing from conflict. Elizabeth Tan summarised the situation: 'Women affected by the conflict in Syria continue to be easy targets of sexual violence and harassment in the countries of asylum, in addition to the plight of leaving your own country and being dispossessed of everything' (UNHCR 2014, 50).

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Furthermore, refugee women are afraid to speak of their harrowing experiences during their journey as they face the risk of honour killings by their relatives; consequently, perpetrators usually go unpunished (Strickland 2016). At the same time, NGO workers who work with refugee women mentioned that some were even forced to work for smugglers or drug dealers (Strickland 2016).

For female refugees, and especially mothers, needs vary from male refugees. Many Syrian refugee women are forced to take on responsibilities of family members while coping with dwindling resources. For this, they have been forced to turn to prostitution to make money for food, rent or other needs. Some of them engage in 'survival sex' taking lovers in exchange for food, clothing and shelter (The Freedom Fund 2016). They are mostly afraid of sexual harassment from male guards, police or other male refugees (Van Der Zee 2016). For those with children specifically, their primary concern for the protection of their children places a double burden on their shoulders. To stress this situation, Van Der Zee (2016) mentions the experiences and fears of Syrian refugee women in a European transit camp. For example, a Syrian refugee mother of three and pregnant with her fourth child, who had travelled for two weeks crossing the Mediterranean in a rubber boat and walking for kilometres, explains:

There is also the threat of rape and sexual assault by smugglers, security guards, policemen and fellow refugees. Some smugglers try to coerce the women into having sex with them in exchange for a shorter waiting time or a lower price for the crossing.

According to the Women's Refugee Commission, transit camps fail to offer women adequate basic services or protection from violence or exploitation. This is mostly due to the lack of female-specific shelters. In such places, sexual and verbal harassment or assault occur. Therefore, women take their own precautions such as sleeping outside of the tent shared with other male refugees (Van Der Zee 2016).

Shower facilities in transit camps are also of concern. Refugee women reported having to use the same bathroom and shower facilities as men. For example, according to refugee women in a transit camp in Germany, some men would watch women as they went to the bathroom. Some women took measures such as not eating or drinking to avoid having to go to the toilet where they felt unsafe. Seven pregnant women described lack of food and basic healthcare. A dozen of the women interviewed told that they had been touched, stroked or leered at in European transit camps (Amnesty International 2016).

Moreover, the geographical location of a refugee camp increase the risk of sexual violence, especially when the camp is located in a high crime area. The design and social structure in camps are also a problem for refugees. Unrelated families share communal living and sleeping space due to overcrowding. This is a great security problem for women refugees. On the other hand, poor design of services such as poorly lit toilet facilities may also contribute to risk of insecurity. The lack of police protection in some camps is another security problem for refugee women. Police may accept sexual intercourse in exchange for food or services (UNHCR 1995).

In a 2015 study, I explored the various forms of sexual and gender-based violence which take place in refugee camps. Five major British daily newspapers (*Guardian*, *Independent*, *Daily Telegraph*, *Times* and *Sun*) were used for research purposes. According to newspaper coverage, the most common forms of sexual and gender-based violence in Syrian refugee camps are forced marriage, early marriage, dowry and polygamy. In many cases, these different forms of sexual violence are in fact interrelated. For example, parents are afraid of their young daughters being raped or sexually abused at the camps, which brings shame to the family. Therefore, parents force their daughters to marry in favour of dowry or protection. The most frequently mentioned words related to Syrian refugee women discourses at refugee camps are: *afraid*, *scare*, *victim/survivor*, *at risk*, *in danger*, *isolation*, *shame*, *weak*, *morality*, *honour*, *vulnerable*, *submission*, *femininity*, *passive*, *defenceless*, *dependent* and *alone* (Özdemir 2015).

As it is seen from the aforementioned reports, mostly qualitative data-gathering methods were practiced on sexual violence in the context of Syrian refugee women. The use of qualitative rather than quantitative research methods makes it difficult to evaluate the number of Syrian refugee women exposed to violence and risks. Additionally, survivors are usually reluctant to talk about their experiences during migration due to cultural and social pressures, as it is seen as shameful (MacTavish 2016). Syrian refugee women face the risk of honour killings by their relatives

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and hence prefer to remain silent, which leads to perpetrators going unpunished.

On the other side, refugee-receiving countries have been unprepared for the large number of refugee influx and are failing to protect the refugees during migration adequately. According to research conducted by the Women's Refugee Commission (2016), there is no consideration of gender-based violence along the migration route to ensure safe places. Refugee women are unable to access basic services in transit centres. The lack of clear information and inability to access interpreters to talk about their vulnerability hinders refugee women from accessing services and leaves them vulnerable to smugglers and other opportunists.

Human security includes not just protecting people but also empowering them. In his article called 'Security and Emancipation', Booth (1991, 319) states that:

Emancipation is the freeing of people (as individuals and groups) from those physical and human constraints which stop them from carrying out what they would freely choose to do. War and the threat of war is one of those constraints, together with poverty, poor education, political oppression and so on. Security and emancipation are two sides of the same coin. Emancipation, not power or order, produces true security. Emancipation, theoretically, is security. 'Security' means the absence of threats.

Syrian refugee women will be more emancipated if they are far from the threats when they migrate. Their security should be considered at all phases of a refugee cycle. Absence of the threat of pain, fear, hunger and poverty during their migration is an essential element in the struggle for emancipation (Jones 1999, 126). To prevent Syrian refugee women from sexual and gender-based violence, humanitarian actors should increase knowledge of sexual and gender-based violence programmes. It will also help to develop recommendations for future sexual and gender-based violence programmes (UNHCR 2001).

On the other side, most organisations' leadership dealing with refugees are male dominated. In this situation, female interests are rarely recognized. Organizations should support women as equal decision-makers. Inclusion of refugee women in leadership structures has increased the level of women's involvement in decision-making process. More precisely, in situations where there are refugee women representatives, their appreciation as leaders and their inclusion in leadership structures has led to increased presentation of sexual and gender-based violence issues. They will ensure that gender issues are not left aside (UNHCR 2001). For example, the Women's Learning Partnership (2017) is adapting programmes to realize the Empowering Syrian Refugee Women for a Better Future project with local partner organizations. They provide Syrian refugee women with leadership participation and support a number of young Syrian women to develop their advocacy skills in decision-making processes. Hence, refugee women will have the skills to make their voices heard.

Another project carried by Sawa Association for Development in Lebanon targeted 30 Syrian women aged between 25 and 45 years. The main goal of the project is to empower Syrian refugee women in Lebanese camps by raising their awareness to their civil and social rights, and provide awareness on rights to reduce the vulnerabilities of Syrian women refugees subjected to sexual and gender-based violence, stress and trauma resulting from war. At the economic level, the project aims to ensure women's ability to provide for themselves and their families, and at the legal level, education about the legal aspects of their rights will empower them to stand up against violence. The project will contain workshops that aim to raise women's awareness of their rights, and trainings on empowering women with professional skills to improve their economic situation (Sawa Association for Development 2016).

The United Nations, Governments, NGOs and humanitarian authorities in general should define the kinds of threats Syrian refugee women face during migration. Gender-based analysis, interviews and research programmes should be made to understand the gender-based human security perspective of refugee women. A gender-based human security perspective, during and after forced migration, will empower refugee women. Putting refugee women at the centre of a human security approach will help to decrease their vulnerabilities and number of threats to their individual security (UNHCR 1995 and 2001). Besides, creating awareness via mass media will help to disseminate information on available services, rights of refugees and host country laws. This advocacy work emphasizes how to prevent sexual and gender-based violence incidents at individual, family and community levels, and how to support

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would-be survivors (UNHCR 2001).

## Conclusion

This chapter tried to illustrate the vulnerability of Syrian refugee women and the need of gendering human security during migration. Because of their gender roles, needs and status, refugee women are differently affected and particularly vulnerable. In that, forced migration creates specific threats and insecurities for Syrian refugee women throughout their journeys to their final destinations and while in transit areas. Therefore, gender sensitivity and gender awareness are important issues for the human security of refugee women, enhancing not only the protection of refugees from violence but also their health and livelihoods. A 'gendered human security' concept will not see the refugee women as victims or marginalized groups. Instead, they will be considered as people with different experiences and facing diverse insecurities during migration.

Host governments' collaborations with the UN and NGOs should reveal the kinds of threats that refugee women come across. First of all, priority should be given to the voices of refugee women. Wherever possible female experts from the host community should be engaged to provide sexual and gender-based violence training and service delivery. Funding should be given to experts to institutionalize plans and protocols to address the violence. Females should be actively recruited to international security or security forces to enable women refugees to freely talk about their witnesses.

When refugee women are empowered economically, socially and politically, they will have the ability to play a key role in preventing the spread of violence. On the other side, security forces should improve their monitoring of personnel who may directly or inadvertently contribute to coerced or forced prostitution, sexual exploitation, trafficking and other forms of sexual and gender-based violence (Ward 2002).

Host governments and NGOs, and humanitarian agencies should establish sexual and gender-based violence cases databases. A strong methodology for addressing the needs of women refugees will be available for adoption in future crises (Ward 2002). Of course, it is not easy for authorities and researchers to collect or gather the data on these different types of vulnerabilities and threats that Syrian refugee women face during migration, as they are mostly reluctant to talk about their experiences due to cultural and social pressures such as honour killing or exclusion, which creates an important limitation for research on women and migration. This is a critical difficulty, because qualitative rather than quantitative data-gathering methods are mostly employed.

As emergent and short-term policies, easy access to health services, gender specific security precautions, paying attention to cleaning facilities and hygiene, accommodations for unaccompanied women, and trusted service providers will help to decrease the number of threats. More important than this, international organizations such as the United Nations, NGOs and official authorities should develop a gender-based perspective paying more attention to the specific needs of refugee women. Therefore, besides the official emergent efforts on the ground to elevate the status of refugee women, careful analysis of the practices, experiences and needs of female refugees should be undertaken to determine long-term policies to maintain safer environments for refugee women during and after their journeys.

## Notes

[1] There are six main migratory routes that Syrian refugees are using to enter the European countries. These are the Eastern border routes (crossing the border between Belarus, Moldova, Ukraine, the Russian Federation and its eastern Member States such as Estonia, Finland, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, Poland, Romania and Slovakia), the Eastern Mediterranean route (from Turkey, Greece, southern Bulgaria or Cyprus), the Western Balkan route, the Apulia and Calabria route (from Turkey, Greece and Egypt), the Central Mediterranean route (from Northern Africa towards Italy and Malta through the Mediterranean Sea) and the Western Mediterranean route (from North Africa to the Iberian Peninsula, as well as the land route through Ceuta and Melilla), according to the Frontex Migratory Routes Map (<https://frontex.europa.eu/along-eu-borders/migratory-map/>)

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[2] 'Sexual violence, gender-based violence and violence against women are terms that are commonly used interchangeably. They refer to physical, sexual and psychological harm that reinforces female subordination and perpetuates male power and control' (UNHCR 2003, 10).

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