

Women, Peace and Security after Europe's 'Refugee Crisis'

Written by Audrey Reeves and Aiko Holvikivi

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AUDREY REEVES AND AIKO HOLVIKIVI, SEP 28 2020

On 28 October 2014, Suaad Allami, a women's rights activist and attorney from Iraq, addressed the United Nations (UN) Security Council at the UN Headquarters in New York City. Invited on the occasion of the Council's annual open debate on Women, Peace, and Security (WPS), Allami spoke of her experiences supporting women and girls affected by the armed conflict in Iraq. Since 2007, Allami has directed the Women for Progress Center in Baghdad, an all-female legal clinic that she founded in order to provide free services to women and girls displaced by war and violence. 'Imagine fleeing because your daughter is at risk of being kidnapped, forced to marry a militant fighter or trafficked into sexual slavery', said Allami to representatives of UN member states gathered in the Security Council's chamber. 'Recently', she continued, 'two young Yazidi women were rescued when they were bought from ISIS fighters. They had been passed from one group of fighters to another across the country and repeatedly raped.' Many women in such situations, the attorney explained, 'are traumatized from the violence' and stigmatized upon returning to their war-strained communities.

On behalf of the NGO Working Group for WPS – a global network of organizations dedicated to gender justice in peace and security initiatives – Allami reasserted the demands of existing international legal and policy frameworks. Member States should ensure the protection of women displaced by war, and work to prevent these wars from happening in the first place. Boldly, the women's rights activist also insisted that 'women must fully participate and be consulted systematically in decision-making, *across all displacement settings*' (emphasis ours). Unusually, Allami asserted displaced women's agency and democratic right to shape their own conditions of living. This demand pointedly challenged the tendency in legal, political, and media discourse to treat displaced women as voiceless victims.

The full implications of Allami's progressive request became increasingly apparent from 2015 onward, as wars in Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan led a rising number of women and girls to attempt a perilous journey to reach Europe through sea or land. Our 2020 article in the *European Journal of International Security* addresses the implications of Allami's claim in this aftermath of Europe's 'refugee crisis'. We argue that current discussions on 'conflict-affected women' on the part of European policymakers should be broadened to better attend to asylum seekers and the intense insecurity they experience at Europe's borders. By taking seriously the experiences of these 'conflict-affected women on the move,' we posit that conflict-affectedness is not only a property that attaches to geographic zones, but also to bodies and lives.

Like Allami, we draw on principles enshrined in UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on WPS (2000). For the first time in the history of the Council, Resolution 1325 recognized conflict-affected women as worthy of both participation *and* protection in all activities seeking the prevention, management, and resolution of armed conflict worldwide. From this recognition sprung a national and international legislation, funding streams, policies, and advocacy supported by thousands of activists as well as the likes of Hillary Clinton, Michelle Bachelet, and Angelina Jolie. These initiatives are dedicated to asserting women's right to shape security policy and benefit from it. They are collectively known as the WPS agenda.

Despite its progressive appeal, the WPS agenda has typically relied on a narrow representation of the conflict-

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affected woman as located in a conventionally defined conflict zone – the woman-*in*-conflict. This common representation leaves out women who flee conflict and seek refuge far away from conventionally understood conflict zones. This exclusion, we contend, makes little sense in sight of the intensification of the war on immigration in Europe. As Europe's borders look increasingly like warzones, conflict-affected women on the move are suffering gendered forms of violence and abuse in these borderlands that beg urgent consideration.

The hardening of Europe's borders since 2015 has rendered refugee women increasingly at risk of violence and exploitation. Legal routes for asylum seekers have radically closed down. Policies designed to hamper family reunification increasingly prevent mothers, wives, and daughters from joining the male relatives who preceded them in Europe, often leaving them in precarious situations. The closing down of legal options has made women and girls more reliant on smugglers, who often coerce women into sex as a form of payment. Women and girls who reach refugee camps across Europe's borders regularly experienced sexual violence, harassment, and exploitation – including at the hands of border guards and volunteers in reception centres. Those who find refugee status in Europe encounter gender-blind asylum laws that often do not recognize women's greater vulnerability to violence at the hands of close relatives and other forms of gender-based violence. In short, as a result of hardened borders and gender-blind asylum procedures, sexual and gender-based violence on transit routes have become 'normal', 'commonplace' and 'so widespread that it affected almost all migrant and refugee women'.

These gendered effects of Europe's war on immigration bring us to question conventional assumptions about who counts as the proper subject of the WPS agenda. We support Allami's claim that women and girls displaced by war ought to be better protected and included *across all displacement settings*. This should include Europe's insecure borderlands.

In line with Allami's appeal, echoed by other activists and NGOs, Finland, France, and seven other European states have broadened their understanding of the WPS agenda to better consider the security needs of women and girls seeking asylum within their borders. In their National Action Plans for WPS, these states now recommend policies in this sense, designed to protect refugee women and girls from gender-based violence. Such provisions, we suggest, legitimately draw attention to the insecurity of asylum seekers at the borders of Europe.

Nonetheless, many of these states limit their attention to the need to *protect* displaced women, missing the ground-breaking insistence of the WPS agenda: that protection of women should be paired with their active *participation* in all matters relating to peace and security. Unfortunately, only a handful of European countries, such as Ireland and Germany mandate consultations with organizations of refugee women as part of their WPS policies.

WPS policies that focus only on protection problematically rehash a colonial trope that presents Europe as the heroic protector of brown women from brown men. These policies fail to recognize the agency of displaced women in their host country, treating them as passive victims. In addition, they tend to obfuscate the responsibility of European states in creating some of the insecurity experienced by women and girl refugees.

For instance, none of the national policies on WPS explicitly addresses the sexual assault and harassment of refugees by border guards. And yet, since the adoption of Resolution 1325, these same policies have often addressed the need for police and military forces that respect and support women's rights and bodily integrity. Initiatives such as codes of conduct for police and armed forces clearly forbidding sexual harassment and abuse, and the provision of gender training to promote gender sensitivity, are a common feature of WPS policies. It is now time for European policymakers and activists to develop initiatives to prevent the perpetration of sexual violence by border guards and other European professionals and volunteers that find themselves on the path of asylum seekers.

Most intriguingly, forcibly displaced women seeking asylum in Europe remain completely invisible in as many as thirteen (i.e. the majority) of National Action Plans on WPS in Europe. The United Kingdom, for instance, treats WPS as strictly a foreign policy area. This understanding of WPS as primarily or only foreign policy is characteristic of the Global North. In contrast, in the Global South, it is common for nation states to include questions of asylum and migration in their WPS policy, alongside other domestic commitments.

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Europe's greater tendency to understand WPS as strictly foreign policy reproduces the fantasy that Europe is already fully peaceful and gender-progressive. Turning a blind eye to refugee women's insecurity sustains and cultivates this fantasy. It provides credibility to the imperial idea of a civilized, orderly Europe that is distinct and separate from the chaos and barbarity of the rest of the world.

This, in itself, is a bordering practice that takes place at the level of language and imagination. Politicians and opinion leaders have already framed recent population movements as a 'crisis' to Europe through tropes of barbarity and civilization. The idea of Europe being in crisis couches the former as developed and civilised space, that is assaulted by people who, due to their places of origins, are perceived as still in need of development and civilisation. When European WPS policy summons the idea of a gender-just, peaceful Europe that does not need to further improve its internal record in matters of WPS, it engages in the same kind of othering practice. The idea that WPS is strictly foreign policy implies that European states are only there to be mentors in gender justice to less advanced states in a violent, patriarchal Global South. This type of thinking feeds into the imagination of refugees as belonging to societies threateningly different from European ones. To put it bluntly, the idea of WPS as foreign policy only cultivates imperial hierarchies. It buys into the assumptions that sustain the war on immigration and make refugee women more insecure day after day.

Rather than yielding to the reiteration of imperial hierarchies, we suggest that the way forward for WPS is to more fully integrate the perspectives of refugee women in Europe. On 15 May 2017, Mina Jaf became the first conflict-affected woman established in Europe to address the Security Council on WPS. As a refugee from Iraqi-Kurdistan now living in Denmark, Mina Jaf spoke as the founder and director of Women's Refugee Route. Jaf and her organization support women who navigate asylum laws and policies after surviving rape, domestic violence, or unwanted pregnancies. They live by the motto, 'from displacement to decision making' and provide living proof of refugee women's capacity to create a more peaceful and gender-equitable world.

In her article *Can the subaltern speak?*, the feminist scholar Gayatri Spivak warned that attention to minority and migrant women in the West should not distract us from the dispossession and exploitation of poor 'subaltern' women still living in the South. We agree that the radical insecurity experienced by women refugees should not eclipse the struggle of conflict-affected women in conventionally defined conflict zones. However, we do believe that their stories deepen our understanding of the radical interconnectedness of violence against conflict-affected women taking place in both the North and the South, particularly along racial divides. Such an understanding will render the WPS community better poised to support equitable peace on a global scale.

This article is adapted from a journal article in the European Journal of International Security.

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