



Research Report

UNHRC

Preventing gender-based violence
against refugee women and girls

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Introduction

There has been an ongoing intensification of violence in many areas around the world in active armed conflicts. There are currently 59.5 million refugees worldwide. These refugees are put in dangerous situations, they have to risk fleeing through areas of conflict, they have little access to food and water, most have lack of access to healthcare and plenty of other hazards and trials they have to endure, many refugees do not survive this journey. In the year of 2023 the IOM, International Organization for Migration, estimated around 8565 refugees died in migration routes. Tensions in refugee camps are high, they are poverty stricken and lack education. In addition to this it has been reported that when refugees are confined in these closed camps, the traditional behavioural norms and restraints break down, the focus is shifted on survival and not on the treatment of fellow refugees. This leads to women being vulnerable to human trafficking, getting sold into slavery and forced into marriage.

These are serious breaches of human rights. Gender based violence is a significant and common threat to the human rights of refugee women and girls globally. $\frac{1}{3}$ Women have experienced gender based violations, in the form of physical, sexual and psychological violence. Refugees and displaced individuals are at a higher risk of these due to several factors. These include limited access to help or aid, governments and authorities not holding those responsible for the violent actions accountable and them not being in safe environments to be able to report them. They are at risk at all stages of the refugee journey, from being in danger because of the contesting forces where they flee from, to being in danger from human traffickers and border security forces during their immigration, to being in danger in the refugee camps. Among violence stricken areas, the brutalization of women is a trend. Refugee women and girls may be in situations where their oppressor has power over them, and being that they are already in vulnerable situations their actions to prevent this themselves is limited if possible. This is why organisations such as the UN Refugee Agency work together with partner organisations, governments and communities to implement programs that help victims, educate the people on their rights, and respond to gender based violence.

Definitions of Key Terms

Gender Based violence:

Violence targeted to a specific gender. In this case, it is usually targeted towards women refugees who are considered to be most vulnerable to the risks of assault, human trafficking and other forms of gender based violence.

Refugee:

A displaced person seeking safety from persecution, conflict or natural disasters. In the case of gender based violence, they are stateless people and are often more at risk of gender based violence due to a lack of authority and high tensions in refugee camps.

General overview

This issue is about the failure to implement existing policies that protect women and girls from gender based violence, sexual assault and abuse, and mental and physical violence. These cases constitute a serious breach of human rights.

Refugees fleeing from conflict or dangerous living situations often end up in refugee camps. According to the UN, approximately 6.6 million people are living in refugee camps, which is $\frac{1}{3}$ of all refugees in the world. In these camps, people live in temporary settlements with issues such as food scarcity, health issues, absence of adequate healthcare facilities, lack of education, limited job opportunities and so forth. This leaves many refugees in tense, unhealthy, and often dangerous living situations. Reportedly restraints and social norms break down in these camps. Criminals are often not held accountable and with the tensions and lack of authority in these areas, violence often occurs between refugees. Women are usually most vulnerable to this violence. Sexual assault and rape may be committed by other refugees, individually or in groups, and those around them or in more power may prevent or stop the attempts to punish perpetrators. In response to this threat women and girls sometimes enter 'protection marriages', where they are able to use

this to avoid assault. There are also cases of violence and abuse from family members, reportedly as an outlet for people to have from this tension-filled life in the camps.

There have also been many cases of national migration and humanitarian staff/ security forces exploiting women and girls. These forces and staff are people in power, people entrusted with authority and this is in contrast with the vulnerable state of the refugee women. An example of this was shown in a report in 2002, detailing humanitarian agency staff and security officers sexually exploiting girls in Guinea, Liberia, and Sierra Leone. Allegations of hundreds of girls being raped, sexually abused and sold in Nigerian refugee camps were made. The government in response to this formed a committee and investigated these claims. This committee then stated that an error had been made in the allegations and that the children were being moved from one camp to another for their comfort. Given that refugees often have limited access to help legally and financially, and lack of education and could be in dangerous situations preventing them from voicing their struggles and concerns, cases can often easily be covered up.

These human rights violations affect an individual's freedom, cause trauma for victims, and can lead to unwanted pregnancies further leading to unsafe abortions and potential health issues for mother and child. These women in already unsafe situations are sometimes left with no choice but to give birth. This can be dangerous and can in some cases lead to the death of the girl or woman. This goes against most societal norms and values, and human rights.

Refugee women are often most vulnerable to these acts of gender based violence due to several factors.

One of the main causes of this is the lack of social support and protection systems, to systematic collapses in the areas of conflict and in the refugee camps. This allows perpetrators to not be held accountable, and reduces the awareness of the consequences of such actions. In addition to this, in refugee camps there is a lack of access to safe spaces

that women can escape to in such situations. For example, no locks on the doors, shared bathroom facilities, general enclosed living spaces.

There is also a conflict related to sexual violence which includes armed forces using rape or sexual violence as a form of weapon. This conflict related sexual violence may be forced prostitution, sexual slavery and human trafficking etc. The rule of law is usually absent in these conflicts, which allows armed forces to not be held accountable for such human rights violations. They often have power over the refugees and they exploit this to commit these acts of gender based violence.

With the increase in natural disasters, as a result of the intensification of the effects of climate change, the number of displaced people worldwide is expected to increase. This leaves more women and girls vulnerable to this violence.



UNUniversity. "Protecting Female Refugees against Sexual and Gender-Based Violence in Camps."

Our World,

ourworld.unu.edu/en/protecting-female-refugees-against-sexual-and-gender-based-violence-in-camps



Reports, Staff. "10 Largest Refugee Camps in the World." *BORGEN*, 20 Mar. 2018, www.borgenmagazine.com/ten-largest-refugee-camps-world/

Major parties involved

UN refugee agency, UNHCR:

United Nations Agency aims to provide aid, protect refugees and forcibly displaced people. They also help displaced people with integration into the country they flee to. In preventing gender based violence against women and girls, they play a significant role in helping protect women and their human rights.

International Organization for Migration:

This is a United Nations related organisation that offers assistance and aid programmes to migrant workers, displaced people and refugees.

Human Rights Watch:

This is a non governmental organisation that advocates for the implementation and ways of implementation of human rights and investigates human rights breaches.

Timeline of Key Events

1979 - The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women was adopted by the UN General Assembly

1985 - UN Secretary General issues a report with the protection of refugee women highlighted as a fundamental part of the work of UNHCR

1990 - UNHCR's policy on refugee women was adopted

1993 - Declaration of elimination of violence towards women by the UN

2000 - UNHCR released a guide for protection officers in the prevention and response to gender based violence

2008 - A handbook for the protection of women and girls is published, reinstating implementations of legislation for elimination of sexual assault and violence by humanitarian staff and authorities, additionally to this in 2008, there was a start in hosting workshops for the men and boys in refugee situations educating them on the issues and gender based violence, an approach that started in Cape Town in 2008 and has since been implemented

Previous attempts to solve the issue:

1. An approach has been put forward by the UN to deal with this issue of gender based violence targeted to refugee women. This comes under the name of the Global Compact on Migration. In this document, there are several objectives mentioned highlighting the urgency to deal with these breaches of human rights towards and among refugees. The approach plans to address gender based violence among other gender based inequalities through national law, employment policies and programs worldwide. They aim to use this approach to reduce the vulnerability of women and increase the support given to them.
2. The UN convention about the status of refugees recognizes the importance of access to courts of law in refugee camps. This is significant to this issue because these acts of violence are illegal and if handled properly, holding perpetrators accountable and following international law, could help reduce gender based violence. This is supported by the UNHCR's recommendation, a protection framework on accession to justice for sexual and gender based violence victims.
3. Community based organisations and programmes with links and support from NGOs in refugee camps, such as the Myanmar Ethnic Women Refugee Organisation, bring together victims. There they help each other and provide support and training to aid them in leaving their situation. A big issue with gender based violence is victims being afraid to seek help in their dangerous situation, and having no one to turn to to help them out of their situation. Victims can also be pressured to stay silent or be ashamed of their experiences. These organisations and aid provide help for them to be educated on their rights and how to help escape it. This may not be changing the roots of the issue, which is the oppressors and perpetrators committing the violence, but they are helping provide support and help for current victims who need it. This is a partial solution to the existing issue, however, it is also important to prevent this issue at the roots of the issue.

Possible solutions

1. Implementation of workshops and education programmes to educate refugees on gender based violence issues.
2. Training programmes for humanitarian staff and security officers, and holding perpetrators accountable and not allowing them to work in this area if they breach the law or commit an act of gender based violence.
3. Providing better access to legal aid, and further aid and support to the victims so that the perpetrators and oppressors are held accountable and are not able to repeat violations.

Further Readings

1. <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n18/244/47/pdf/n1824447.pdf#page=22>
2. <https://www.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/legacy-pdf/543b90796.pdf>
3. <https://ourworld.unu.edu/en/protecting-female-refugees-against-sexual-and-gender-based-violence-in-camps>
4. <https://americas.iom.int/en/blogs/what-makes-migrants-vulnerable-gender-based-violence>
5. https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/gender-equality/gender-based-violence/what-gender-based-violence_en

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