

Gender, Camps and International Norms

By

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I had heard about refugee camps from my parents who had fled the newly constituted State of Pakistan to India. A wearisome but relatively safe train journey had brought them to Delhi and then to Anupshaher in UP with a final destination to Bulandshaher where they found refuge in Chhatari House the home of the former Nawab of Chhatari. The camps they had visited in Delhi where close relatives lived were small tents with families snuggling in the winter cold, limited sanitation facilities and a generation traumatized beyond recognition. While food concerns were met there was no knowledge of psychological trauma faced by millions of people who had seen terror at first hand. The deaths, killings, abductions and loss of honour were to be stamped in their living consciousness and the camps become the depositories of those silent reminiscences.

Introduction

It is universally acknowledged that refugee movements comprise at least fifty percent women. This is true only to some extent, as in some movements there are many more women than men. The ratio shifts when women and children are sent first as a protection measure, when men join forces fighting the State or when many of the men are killed or imprisoned. It has to be recognized that this is not only a numbers game, but more women mean more women headed households and hence different and complex gendered issues (Hans, 2003).

A Refugee Camp: Why is an Analysis Important from a Gendered Context?

In the view of refugees, camps are transitory safe spaces, where people seek protection till they return home. Unfortunately refugee concerns for security in camps are rarely met as history and theoretical and conceptual understandings have revealed (Indra Doreen, 1999, Bhabha, 1996, de Lauretis, 1990). This is for the reason that camps are political islands which have the potential of generating conflict and straining local economic and other resources. They are the 'other' even though in the case of refugees

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they are part of the international refugee regime which might be recognized by the State. In the case of the internally displaced, the situation is further complicated as they are citizens with same rights and cannot be de-recognized. Their status therefore depends on how the local population views their rights and ultimately the acceptance or closure of the camp depends to a large extent on these communities. Large populations descending on small local communities with limited resources can be perceived as a threat and the existence of the camp may be long term or short as they might be closed and opened as per the demands of the situation. The oldest camps for refugees, as is well known, are in Palestine. They have existed for more than fifty years. It is not that refugees continue to stay in one camp continuously. Palestinian refugees, for instance, in Lebanon in camp Shateela have faced serial displacement. A woman reported that she had moved nine times since childhood (Sayigh, 2004: 8). The camps may sometimes be allowed to exist, but may turn out ultimately to be dangerous and unhealthy places which affect men and women differently. Women in camps have differential needs and are confronted with different protection issues. The need for analyzing camp situation arose as the subaltern female is located in the risk zones of camps where her experience is gendered, involving her sexuality and her female body processes. As social actors women are vulnerable but forced to shoulder the burdens of refuge. In this feminine space three major constructions related to home, location and violence emerge.

Spaces, Camps and the Home: Gendered and Political

The term space is being increasingly used from a non-territorial perspective as camps are floating spaces. They exist and are replaced by another or the space becomes a void from a refugee perspective with no-one who sought refuge living there any longer. Even when they exist long term it may not always be possible to meet Henri Lefebvre's notion that when we evoke 'space' we must immediately indicate what occupies that space and how it does so (1991: 12). These spaces are like shifting sands where people move in and out with the increase or decline of violence or peace. At the same time there is no doubt that spaces are social, and that each space defines the people who live in it, which also indicates that there is a gendered trajectory within it (Malkki, 1992, 1995; Massey, 1994).

Despite the shifting spaces they still retain their technicalities and social criterion and when refugees or Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) move to them, they carry memories of their home which has to fit into this new rendering of space. They become a 'home' and a signifier of a homeland.

For a Sri Lankan refugee the camp is the 'Tamil Homeland' as it is for the Palestinian in Lebanon. For the IDP, camps are political spaces from which to unite and carry the struggle forward for a homeland. The home and homeland from a woman's perspective merge as both are political

spaces. The home has always been linked to women's bodies where the boundaries are set by the patriarch. The homeland then is the expanded 'home' where boundaries again are set by the State as the patriarch. They are dominated and controlled by the patriarch at home and the dominant majority in the State. For women life is a political battle within the home and society and in the camps to this binary is added the State. In these political spaces the location of the camp and its layout can play an important role.

Camp Locations and Structures

This section conceptualizes space from a broader dimension of camp layouts to a socio-cultural gendered analysis. We can initiate a discourse of women's role and an assumption that initially when camps are set up there may be no scope for decision making, as they occur without warning. No one can be asked, is this what you want? That is why Chan Kwok Bun has argued that the refugee camp is "a unique socio-political artefact of this century" (Chan Kwok Bun, 1991: 284).

An important emerging factor in the context of camp location is the role of the 'outsider' within the camp. The legal provisions and the implementing authority of the host State control the camps. Under these circumstances whom does the space belong to? Gendering takes place as per local socio-cultural environment and women's positioning within it. If women are better located in the host community, the refugee/IDP benefit; in communities where women have not been able to achieve significant rights, they will experience a disadvantageous position. Women in a camp located in a conflict zone experience much more brutality as violence surfaces from within as well as beyond its boundaries.

Poorly designed camps in themselves increase risk for women. Plastic sheeting or tin roofs provide no ventilation and become extremely hot especially when women cook. In some cases, latrines and showers are built along the edge of the camps (UNFPA, 2006: 61). Women when they have to walk long distances to fetch water and firewood, become targets of sexual abuse.

Besides the acknowledged problems mentioned above, are those that are invisible - for instance camp layouts which are taking on a technical characteristic. The geometrics of geographies are linked to space, place, and architecture. The camps run by different agencies and organizations produce diversity in layout. In unpredicted situations they are hastily put up with no planning. The Sri Lankan Tamil refugees who started arriving in India in the 1980s were provided different types of accommodation. Some lived in camps set up especially for them, others in school buildings, government offices, warehouses and any building available. They were usually set up as family units until the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi in 1991 by a Sri Lankan woman, when they came to be perceived as a threat and even families were separated (Hans, 1997). The Bengali refugees in India also faced the

problem of joint families divided into nuclear ones, and they were further split up into male headed groupings where work was for the male bread winner (Weber, 2003. p. 66-67).

Today planning of camps is technical in nature but challenges remain. Camp planners prescribe a planning approach that takes the individual shelter unit as the starting point, resulting in highly inappropriate collectives. Giving an example of the Ngara camp in Tanzania, Skotte says that everything from plot size to the dimension of walkways was standardized and the social strengths of the people was disregarded and the camp became more like a prisoner of war camp (Skotte, 2004: 3). UNHCR guidelines stipulate an area for camps in which each person must have 45m² (UNHCR: 2000). This may not always be possible to provide in highly populated regions of Asia. In most camps non-residential buildings are grouped together at one end excluding many persons who live at a distance. Many camps are linked to cultural lifestyles. For instance, in camps like Bourj al Barjaneh and Nahr al Bared the layout preserved inter-village layouts (Sayegh, 2004: 9). Camps which are structured so that cultural continuity is maintained have both positive and negative determinants. Women from the same community, if they live together, find support of earlier neighbours, extended families and same ethnic back up. On the other hand if former community structures prevail as per class, race, or caste, there are few chances for the women to emerge from stereotyped roles and patriarchal controls.

The Politics of Patriarchy and Violence

Women go into camps with existing vulnerabilities, experiencing specific risks. As marginalized persons, especially within marginalized communities, they are often forced to shoulder the ordeal of crisis situations far more intensely. The risks they encounter are physical, psychological and deal with self-esteem. Some of the following indicators quite explicitly describe the unique risk experiences of women:

Women have little access to resources, assets (monetary or fixed or capital, especially property)

Women's right to decision making and specifically right to use resources is limited.

Women have no control over their own incomes

Women possess **low health seeking behavior**

Women normally possess low literacy, fewer resources and limited power.

Despite the above, women have been known to access their rights when barriers put up by state and society have been removed. The most important barrier remains the existing patriarchal norms.

Patriarchy and its twin component of power and control follow women into camps. This was very visible in Afghan camps where women were forced into purdah which is reinforced on return to Afghanistan (Told

by Sakeena Yakoobi, a well known women's right activist from Kabul to the author in 2004). Family members have been known to force girls into early marriage as a means of securing their own safety (Zackariya, n.d.). That UN Peace keeping forces and NGO relief workers also exploit young women in camps in exchange for relief was exposed in West Africa which led to wide ranging discussions within the United Nations. (UNFPA, 2006: 61-62).

An important manifestation of patriarchy is the use of violence by men against women. Here patriarchy is representative of male domination whether it is the father, husband or the State ruled by men and is all pervasive in a camp environment. Many refugee and displaced women who leave home are sexually abused, their family members killed, their children separated and they are usually seen as a burden by host countries. Alcoholism, prostitution, and gambling resulting from displacement affect the lives and status of women in camps.

That rape is a common phenomenon during war is well-documented. The rape of women in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Tutsi women in Rwanda's shocked the world (Boric, and Desnica, 1996; Korac, 1999, Hans, 2004; Baines, 2003.). Trauma of rape follows women into camps where they may again face further sexual abuse. The rape of Bhutanese women in refugee camps in Nepal, like Sanischare Camp has been documented (Human Rights Watch, 2003). The Chakma women in Tripura were raped by camp officials and outsiders when they left camp to collect firewood. A report by Physicians for Human Rights, for instance, indicates that over fifty percent of Sierra Leonean women experienced sexual violence during the conflict there (Physicians for Human Rights, 2002). As this indicates, rapes are not individualized but takes the shape of mass abuse.

Most refugees/IDPs come into camps initially with nothing and the most troublesome is the lack of important documents. Sometimes preparations are made by UNHCR or donor agencies to receive them, but outpouring of large numbers is usually not predicted so resources fall short. High unemployment and stress among male refugees leads to increased domestic violence and erosion of existing value systems which provide support to women. In 2001, in six camps in Guinea, five times the number of domestic violence cases was reported as compared to rape cases (Vann, 2002: 61). Even in Jammu and Kashmir, after the 1999 war between India and Pakistan there was a high level of domestic violence in the camps (Author's visit to Kargil in May 2000).

Violence is ever present in women's lives. It increases in displacement. Gender specific violence has psychological, social, and legal connotations. This violence might be by family members, security forces guarding camps or members of the local community. Sometimes it extends to other communities sharing the space of the camps. Gender disparities rooted in social practice and tradition render women vulnerable to sexual and physical violence (Hans, 1997a). This abnormal condition results in higher divorce rates, desertions and destitution.

The Impact of the Economies of Refuge on Women

According to Mehta (Mehta, 2002) male and gender biases negatively impact on displaced women in two ways - on one hand, male biases in society help perpetuate gender inequality in terms of unequal resource allocation and distribution and also legitimize silencing of women's needs. On the other hand, biases within state institutions, structures and policies dealing with displacement exacerbate these inequalities. This understanding of IDPs can also apply to refugee women.

The whole process of dislocation is a gendered process. The fact that women are placed in subsidiary spaces and their marginalization continues, even though they are part of the refugee/displaced movement confirms their place on the margins. They are subsumed within the new authorities and identities of the camp. In most developing countries their independence is reduced as their existing skills are rarely of any use, especially if they are rural women. This severely restricts their economic independence. As women are largely engaged in the informal sector—gathering forest produce, working in the fields, or selling produce, dislocation can result in loss of livelihood, adding to women's economic hardships. Their mobility in camps is cut down as they are relocated forcibly to an unknown place contributing to women's sense of powerlessness.

Poverty increases as women's work load increases and displacement can undermine reproductive health rights, given the fact that an estimated twenty five percent of refugee women of reproductive age will be pregnant at any one time (UNFPA, 2006: 63). The health indicator is linked to poverty, which is another form of violence. One could argue thus that, despite multiple existing standards available within the camps, camps require monitoring at the ground level.

Protection in Refuge/Displacement: Women and International and National Standards

Women's status in camps is linked to the standards that nations apply. The Refugee Convention, like other Conventions and laws of the time, was andro-centric in nature and the word gender/ women was not included. The Convention does not operate in South Asia nor are there any refugee specific national laws, so dependence has to be on non-refugee International National Standards.

These include certain initiatives such as recognition by the Executive Committee of the UNHCR in 1985 which, for the first time, recognized the importance of inclusion of women and three years later the first Consultation on Refugee Women was called. Consequently in 1991 the UNHCR issued Guidelines on the Protection of Refugee Women to address their needs and enhance their decision making power (UNHCR, 1991). This

was followed by the 2003 Guidelines on sexual and gender-based violence to ensure protection a primary mandate of the UNHCR (UNHCR, 2003).

The Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement under Principle 11 stipulate the prevention of “Rape, mutilation, torture, cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, and other outrages upon personal dignity, such as acts of gender-specific violence, forced prostitution and any form of indecent assault” (United Nations, 1998).

In 1995, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action was the major initiative to recognize discrimination against women and the specific problems faced by them and added protection strategies. The role of the international community increased as violence against women became increasingly visible due to writings on gender issues and media portrayals. One of the most important documents produced is the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC) following the atrocities in Rwanda and former Yugoslavia. It defined violence as a war crime (United Nations, A/CONF.83). In 2000 the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 came into being (S/RES/1325 and UN. A/60/L.1.2005). This comprehensive document calls for protection of women living in conflict zones and mandates their involvement in peace processes. In 2005, Governments meeting at the United Nations (World Summit) reiterated the importance of the document (A/60/L.1.2005).

There are no specific national laws but legal and implementation processes provide an insight into women’s status as refugees or conflict related IDPs. Besides, initially after independence, India laid down executive policies for resettlement of people moving in after Partition. In this Indian regime, spaces for women were created. The largest population from the about 9 million who crossed borders first sought refuge in camps (Rao, 1967:3). The Indian example of camps is placed alongside the European experience even though Malikki places the refugee camp as a “standardized, generalizable technology of power...in the management of mass displacement” in post-World War II Europe (Malkki 1995: 498).

The camps in India existed from 1947, when run by private organizations, and later in 1948 by the government and so institutionalized. Camps in the West e.g. in Punjab, existed for a short time while in the Eastern part of India they remained for a longer time. In the east, different waves kept arriving and the camps kept springing up. Most, however, were for aged, disabled and widowed mothers. The widows were sent to Titagarh and Kartickpur camps in 24 Parganas and Ranaghat of Nadia in West Bengal and later more women in need were taken care of, for instance, by Ananda Ashram and Uday Villa (Gongopadhyay, 2000: 102). The latter became the largest rehabilitation centre for ‘distressed’ women. Later these women were provided huts as a resettlement measure. Grants were given for marriage of girls, remarriage of widows, for cremations and milk for children and pregnant women and health problems such as T.B. (Rao, 1967:150-151). There was an attempt to provide comprehensive needs but these spaces, though materially better than most camps of today, did not always provide

protection from violence. Four million people were killed, others faced forced conversion and abduction (Rao, 1967:27). About 50,000 women were abducted as per official sources in Pakistan and 21,000 in India (Rao, 1967:32)

Capacity and Resilience

Despite the excessive abuse and violence that women are exposed to, they are resilient and resourceful in camps. Sometimes they themselves manage adversities, while at other times the community rallies around them. Programmes by INGOS and UN agencies such as the Inter Agency Symposium on Reproductive Health in 1995 set an objective to integrate refugee RH services. The Women's Health Center at the Al-Bureij Refugee Camp in the West Bank and Gaza Strip can serve as a good example of a service run for women by women, with an aim to reduce maternal and infant mortality and to promote responsible sexual behavior and family planning (Jamal, 1997). Tibetan refugee women have formed the Tibetan Women's Association in India which is part of the Tibetan Government in Exile (Butler, 2003).

Sometimes the local women's organizations support women in camps in fighting gender-based violence. There have been unique initiatives as in Ghana's Buduburam camp, where Unite for Sight established a unique programme providing economic alternatives to women refugees who were trading food for sex (Williamson 2004). In Bangladesh, UNHCR renewed the camp layouts to improve their overview from different directions to diminish security risks, water is provided during the day and latrines on the outskirts have been moved (Personal information, UNHCR, 2002). In Sri Lankan camps in Tamil Nadu, women have established committees (Visit to camps in Chennai by author in 2004). These prove that camps can be islands of protection if different agencies and women's groups assist women to take up the challenges. Women in camp situations are known to carry out daily work and carry out economic activities. They are better equipped to manage local officials and governance issues.

Conclusion

Camps portray the status of women seeking refuge across borders or within a country. They are representative of their political ideology and the historical spaces provided to women. The problems women face are the result of thousands of years of patriarchal domination, and therefore there is a need to challenge these structures even in the camps. This is possible as camps provide the opportunity to change and keep patriarchy at bay. Whether the situation changes when the woman goes back is another story and another opportunity.

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