

GENDER AND THE REFUGEE CRISIS: WHO FEELS THE BRUNT

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An October 2017 UN Women Brief on the Rohingya Refugee Crisis Response in Bangladesh, East Asia, painted, in detailed and grim exposés, the gender dynamics in this refugee crisis. The Rohingya, an ethnic group a small percentage of whom are Muslims, face one of the most terrible humanitarian crises today. The UN High Commissioner on Human Rights described the situation as a textbook example of ethnic cleansing.

“Almost every woman and girl in the Balukhali makeshift settlements (which make up approximately 65% of the refugees) in Cox’s Bazar is either a survivor of or a witness to multiple incidents of sexual assault, rape, gang rape, murder through mutilation or burning alive of a close family member or neighbour. Women and girls have experienced sexual and gender based violence, perpetrated by both the Myanmar army and by Rakhine locals,” UN Women reported.

In October 2016, violent conflict began in Rakhine State. Between August and October 2017, an estimated 537,000 Rohingya refugees had crossed the border into Cox’s Bazar, Bangladesh. The distressed and traumatised displaced population – approximately 51% of whom are women and girls – live in terrible conditions, lacking basic

necessities like adequate food, water and sanitation.

The crisis, which is yet to be resolved, disproportionately affects women, girls and the most vulnerable and marginalised Rohingya refugee population groups by reinforcing, perpetuating and exacerbating pre-existing, persistent gender inequalities, gender-based violence and discrimination.

The situation is not any better for the biggest refugee crisis facing Europe since the end of World War II, the Syrian refugee crisis. Now in its eighth year, the Syrian civil war has led to a mass influx of refugees into the European border countries of Turkey and Greece, as well as Germany. The refugees have also fled to the U.S. and Canada. Syria's Asian neighbours, Lebanon and Jordan, have not been spared the refugee influx either. Europe also receives refugees from Africa who brave the dangerous crossing on the Mediterranean Sea, mainly from the Libyan coast into Italy.

The infographic published by the Child Protection Hub for South East Europe looked at the demographics of the refugee population arriving in Europe with a special focus on women and girls. It summarised key problematic areas that make refugee women's and girls' experience tougher owing to the gender perceptions.

In June 2015, the percentage of people arriving in Europe who were women and children was 27%. Five months later, in November, it increased to 40%, and then shot up to 55% in January 2016. This means war or conflict displaced more women and children than men. Yet despite this sharp rise, Child Protection Hub for South East Europe noted: "The specific needs and risks of girls and women, who are more vulnerable to matters such as sexual

assault and exploitation, are not taken into consideration sufficiently."

For the Rohingya refugees, UN Women reported that many women whose sexual assault resulted in conception are reported to have sought out abortions after arriving in Bangladesh. "This is a frightening reminder that sexual and gender based violence are among the most horrific weapons of war, instruments of terror most often used against women," UN Women stated.

In Uganda, as at 31 December 2017, the country was hosting 1,336,898 refugees and asylum seekers. Of these, 689,049 (52%) were females and 647,849 (48%) were males. Gender-based violence is often rife in crisis and fragile settings and women and children suffer most. UNHCR coordinates all sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) interventions in refugee settlements in Uganda in coordination with the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM), UNFPA, UN WOMEN, UNICEF and partners.

In its 2017 report on SGBV, UNHCR stated that 5001 new incidents (4,487 females, at 90%) were identified, managed, documented and reported from 12 refugee settlements in Uganda. The most prevalent were physical assault (1,640, at 33%) followed by psychological/emotional abuse (1,210, at 24%), rape (1,035, at 21%), denial of resources (551, at 11%), sexual assault (308, at 6%) and forced/early marriage (257, at 5%). The reported incidents occurred in both the country of origin and the country of asylum.

In January 2018, UNHCR reported that reductions in food assistance in place since August 2016 for refugees who arrived prior to July 2015 have led many refugees, including children, to cope by eating one meal a day and by foregoing essential nutrients. This

is the same time when reports of economic and sexual exploitation of girls and women refugees have been massive, particularly the exchange of food for sex.

There have also been human trafficking and sexual slavery involving women and underage girls. In a media interview with the Daily Monitor newspaper, Bornwell Kantende, the UNHCR Country Representative in Uganda, lamented the existence of such incidents. "These are serious issues which touch on the dignity of refugees, and we do everything we can to address them, so the victims can keep reporting them," he said. He, however, stated that measures are being implemented to address the problem: "The allegations are taken seriously and we do have a very strict regime in dealing with them. We have a zero tolerance for sex abuse and exploitation."

Funding is a strong factor in humanitarian action. But while funding can be a game-changer, there are disparities in funding that specifically address gender issues in crisis settings. According to women's rights advocacy organisation, Women Deliver, in 2014, less than 1% of aid to fragile states targeted gender equality significantly. In 2017, Uganda held the Uganda Solidarity Summit for Refugees to try to raise money to respond to the growing refugee crisis. Though USD 358 million or USh.1.2 trillion was pledged, what percentage of this would specifically address gender factors, no one knows. It also remains to be seen how the world and Uganda will effectively address or respond to the growing refugee crises where gender disparities are apparent.