Gender and Conflict in Syria

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Armed conflicts play a major role in causing humanitarian crises across the world. A case in point is the Syrian conflict since the Syrian refugee crisis became one of the biggest refugee crises around the world where Syrian citizens fled away to neighboring countries such as Lebanon, Turkey and Jordan to escape the prevalent war. Countries like Syria, Palestine, Iraq and Yemen, witnessing armed conflicts, are endangering the lives of women who became like racialized minorities and other ethnic groups (Majed, 2021).

Women face various forms of violence during armed conflict, ranging from physical violence including murder, torture, sexual assault and forced marriage to psychological violence committed by governmental and non-governmental entities. For example, women who are family members of fighters are often targeted by the security authorities, and are subjected to kidnapping and torture, either to obtain information from them or to kill them which restricts their ability to move freely and support their families. Furthermore, the lack or the limited health services affect women drastically causing the rates of maternal mortality to increase by 2.5 times in regions of armed conflicts and even post-conflict (Bensouda, 2015). According to studies conducted by the United Nations Refugee Agency, women make up to 49 percent of the refugees worldwide. These numbers are high as a result of armed conflicts where women face greater hardships when compared to men (Bensouda, 2015). Despite the fact that significant progress has been made in

order to involve women in peace and decision making, the pace of change remains slow till now. For example, less than 4 percent of the signatories and less than 10 percent of the negotiators were women in the peace-making process from 1991 to 2011 (Bensouda, 2015).

In efforts to end gender-based violence towards women, international law has passed several laws to protect women and those who are vulnerable. As a result, "The law of armed conflict (LOAC)" has emerged as an attempt to regulate armed conflict (Gardam, 2018). LOAC has provided protection for refugee women and civilians in war-torn areas (Gardam, 2018). LOAC was based on four Conventions and has provided many statements that support women and protect them. LOAC demanded that women war-prisoners are entitled to sanitary products and allows them to have a female supervisor. In addition, LOAC has "provisions are designed to directly protect women from sexual assault" (Gardam, 2018). Initially, these laws targeted "pregnant women" and "mothers of young children" to benefit from the provisions, especially in matters that involve "early repatriation, priority in medical care, emergency relief, and the provision of food and medical supplies" (Gardam, 2018).

Despite the fact that there exists an international law that regulates armed conflict and how people should be treated, the violence against women who are caught up in the conflict remains questionable. Who punishes criminals who commit sexual violence against women in armed conflicts? Such questions led to developments in the interpretation of LOAC at an international level by international criminal courts in order to criminalize sexual violence against women (Gardam, 2018).

Women suffer from gender based inequalities and experience different forms of sexual

discrimination across different countries in armed conflicts. Usually in such contexts, women are considered to be the most vulnerable individuals in situations where their needs are not taken into consideration. Hence, this makes the LOAC problematic in terms of its provisions which represent women's experiences during armed conflicts (Gardam, 2018).

There are many issues directly associated with how women's lives are influenced to a great extent by armed conflicts, taking into consideration that these problems already exist in Syria. For example, early marriage is one of the most serious problems that Syrian refugee women face because of their refugee status resulting from the armed conflict in Syria that forced them to leave their countries (Majed, 2021).

Although war and its consequences negatively impact women's lives, many women feel empowered when put under such circumstances. However, this doesn't mean that women are free from the social expectations that the patriarchal system forces upon them (Majed, 2021). Therefore, transformations in gender roles should be addressed in countries such as Syria, as part of the MENA region that is characterized by oppression against women and unequal treatment. Peace and justice, in that context, are strongly related to the feminist struggle in the region, and for it to prevail; armed conflicts should be dealt with locally, regionally and internationally.

Women and girls are the most vulnerable and targeted groups during wartime. Although they face many challenges especially in terms of sexual violence, women are not being involved in the process of conflict prevention and conflict resolution (Muscati, 2012). Both the Security Council and high-level leadership, who have commitments with integrating women's rights, play a major role in leaving them out of the negotiations and peace talks (Muscati, 2012). This is a reflection of how women are being treated and being discriminated against during armed conflicts.

In terms of sexual and gender-based violence, girls are exposed to gender-based dangers such as child marriage, domestic violence, intimate partner violence and sexual exploitation. In armed conflicts, forms of sexual and gender-based violence become more common and more practiced compared to other situations (Roupetz, et al., 2020). In the context of conflicts, women

are coerced into sex, are beaten, raped, many are forced into "commercial sex work" and are

continuously being subjected to sexual exploitation and torture. This in turn leads, in post-conflict settings, to cultural and social isolation of women which makes their situation even worse and exposes them to more sexual abuse and harassment (Roupetz, et al., 2020). Whatever is committed against women in armed conflicts is a violation of human and women's rights and should be prohibited. These heinous crimes are used as a tactic in wars in order to conduct ethnic cleansing, spread terror among people and destroy communities (Roupetz, et al., 2020). Many Syrian refuge women in Lebanon are involved in forced prostitution and "survival sex" in which women go through as their only means to afford the basic needs of survival. Poverty, loss of jobs and economic vulnerability are the main reasons that put women and girls at risk of sex trafficking and being subjected to physical and verbal abuse, robbery and the fear of being kidnapped (Roupetz, et al., 2020).

Although many cases from different countries such as Iraq, Palestine and Bosnia demonstrate the impact of armed conflicts on women, less is documented and known in terms of the effect of the Syrian civil war on women and children who got displaced because of the conflict. Syrian women and children refugees in Lebanon account for 75 percent and more than half of the registered Syrian refugees are under the age of 18 (Woldetsadik, 2016). In addition, when women live under harsh conditions that require humanitarian intervention and places characterized by conflict, they suffer from poor reproductive medical health because of their financial situation (Woldetsadik, 2016).

It is worth noting that considering a unified feminist action based on the premise of reducing the differences between women which would be led by women calling for reforms would reflect the women's needs who experience armed conflict (Gardam, 2018). Moreover, the focus

should not only be on picturing women as weak and helpless victims but rather treating them

equally to men in highly contended contexts such as armed conflicts. This means that LOAC, being a "protective" regime for everyone should always represent women's needs and work towards a gender-neutral regime (Gardam, 2018). Besides this law, the Women Peace and Security Agenda (WPS) has its main aim to protect human rights, prevent conflicts and promote security (Davies & True, 2018). However, there is dissociation between what WPS fights for and what institutions practice preserved by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 1325. It addresses specifically the international policy framework which focuses on the gender-based influences of conflict on women and girls (Davies & True, 2018).

Understanding the multiple challenges that women refugees face is central to finding solutions to the gender-based discrimination in post-conflict resolutions as women constitute a very low percentage in the peace negotiation process. There has to be a comprehensive approach to understanding and analyzing the patterns of sexual exploitation and violence in order to find solutions to post-war justice (Asaf, 2017). Syrian women are providers for their families, they continuously struggle to provide food and shelter to their children and are the most exposed to gender-based violence which comes in various forms (Asaf, 2017). One of the most forms of gender-based violence faced by women and girls in Syria is rape and sexual violence. This even extends to further violence when women are being threatened by death which is used to expose women and girls to more forms of violence. This is a result of the stigma surrounding issues of sexual violence in conservative societies where women are reluctant to speak up about what they experience and therefore suffer from shame and social exclusion (Asaf, 2017).

Last but not least, women and girls have very limited or no access at all to legal or psychological services that would help them survive such harsh situations (Asaf, 2017). This

makes them suffer twice, as if they are being betrayed by their societies, closest family members

and the whole world. In the Syrian conflict, women have played an active role in protesting and documenting what has been committed; however, they have been excluded when it comes to participating in negotiations and peace talks (Asaf, 2017). Finally, it is the responsibility of the patriarchal societies to deprive women and girls from resources and services that can help them become independent and this case is further extended when armed conflicts take place.

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