Of Displacement and Gendered Spaces: A Note

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Abstract

Conflict is played out on a masculine terrain and so women are disadvantaged during the entire process. It has to be recognized that this is not only a number game, but that more women actually translate into more female headed households and hence different and complex gendered issues emerge out of all conflicts. At the epicenter of the trauma of displacement is the space where the displaced are incarcerated – ‘the Camp’. One needs to deconstruct the geography and the sociology of the camps to fully understand the gendered nature of displacement and the resultant trauma. The paper touches upon a whole gamut of issues women face as displacees and as residents of so called transitory camps.

Author Profile

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Often it is said that women constitute at least half in terms of size and sheer composition of all refugee movements. This statement is true only partially, as in some movements there are many more women than men. The ratio for example shifts during times when women and children are sent first as a protection measure, when men join forces fighting the State, when men go underground for reasons of protection and when many of the men are killed or imprisoned. Conflict is played out on a masculine terrain and so women are disadvantaged during the entire process. It has to be recognized that this is not only a number game, but that more women actually translate into more female headed households and hence different and complex gendered issues emerge out of all conflicts. There is one aspect where gender becomes a decisive factor and that is the process of forced migration generated due to conflict.

Displacement as a result of conflict is a gendered phenomenon and therefore it results in large scale insecurities, particularly feminine insecurities. According to Paula Banerjee, “displaced women are often doubly marginalized since state policies are weighted against them both because they are women and also because often they are members of minority ethnic, religious and linguistic groups. In situations where the state is not an actor, the majority group imitates state behavior thereby victimizing women.” At the epicenter of the trauma of displacement is the space where the displaced are incarcerated – ‘the Camp’. One needs to deconstruct the geography and the sociology of the camps to fully understand the gendered nature of displacement and the resultant trauma.

Refugee Camp: A Gendered Space

In the eyes of refugees, camps are a transitory safe space, where they seek protection till they can return home. Unfortunately, refugee concerns for security in camps are rarely met as history has revealed. This is because camps are political islands which have the potential of generating conflict and straining local economic and other resources. Although, they are part of the international refugee regime, they may or may not be recognized by the State. Also the camps are spaces of ‘not belonging’. Even when people live there, they hardly do so with the notion of fixity. They can be taken out of the camps at any time and they do not have the agency to stop the process.

In the case where the camps are established for the internally displaced, the situation is further complicated as they are citizens with the same rights as the local population and cannot be de-recognized. Their status therefore depends on how the local population perceives them and ultimately the acceptance or closure of the camp depends to a large extent on these communities’ acceptance by the local population. Such acceptance is difficult to achieve as large populations descending on small local communities with limited resources can be perceived as a threat. When faced with such situations, the camp might be closed and opened as per the demands of the

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local community, with the people who are displaced having no right to decide on the fate of the camp. In fact, this process has been understood as one of the ways of gendering and effemining the displaced people in the camps; rendering them voiceless.

The camps may sometimes be allowed to exist for a longer term if the security of the local population is not compromised. Nevertheless, longevity notwithstanding they turn out ultimately to be dangerous and unhealthy places that affect men and women in unique ways. The oldest camps for refugees, as is well known, are in Palestine. They have existed for more than fifty years. Although, refugees do not live in one camp continuously, but seldom do they manage to move out of the camp. Palestinian refugees, for instance, in Lebanon in camp Shateela have faced several displacements. A woman reported that she had moved nine times since childhood.\(^3\) Camps in Assam portray another dimension of insecurity. Since the displaced are concentrated in a fairly small space, attacks against them by rival ethnicities can become an effective way of ethnic cleansing and therefore bloody. In both conditions, where the camps have existed for a long time or when they have come up more recently, women occupants have differential needs and are confronted with a diversity of protection issues.

The question of analyzing camp situations arose with the subaltern female being located at the heart of these risk zones, where her experience was gendered; one that involved her sexuality and her female body processes. These situations revealed that even though as social actors women are vulnerable, during displacement they are forced to shoulder the burdens of refuge. In the process they reveal remarkable resilience and use the camps as spaces for challenging gender hierarchies. In this politics of camps, three major constructions related to home, location and violence have emerged as central.

**Camps and the Home**

In the context of refuge, the term ‘space’ is being increasingly used from a non-territorial perspective since 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 initially, living there any longer. Even when they exist long term as refugees they may not always be inhabited by the same people. Lefebvre's view that when we evoke ‘space’ we must immediately indicate what occupies that space and how it does so\(^4\), does not apply to places of refuge. For refuges as 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 these spaces are social, and that each space defines the people who live in it, indicating that there is a gendered trajectory within it.\(^5\)

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Despite the fact that camps are shifting spaces, they still retain their technicalities and social criteria. 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. The camp becomes a ‘home’ and a signifier of a homeland. For a Sri Lankan refugee, the camp is the ‘Tamil Homeland’ as it is ‘Palestine’ for the Palestinian refugee in Lebanon. For the IDPs, camps are political spaces from which they can unite and carry the struggle forward.

From a woman’s perspective, the home and homeland converge 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 patriarch – the state. They are dominated and controlled by the patriarch at home and the dominant majority within 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 therefore location and layout can play an important role.

Gendering takes place as per local socio-cultural environment and women’s positioning within it. If women are better located in the host community, benefits are accrued by the refugee women and IDPs. Conversely, in communities where women have not been able to achieve significant rights, they experience a disadvantageous position. Women in a camp located within the conflict zone, experience much more brutality as violence surfaces from within as well as beyond its boundaries.

Camps are sources of insecurity for women and poorly designed camps increase the risk for them manifold. 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. Women when they have to walk long distances to fetch water and firewood, become targets of sexual abuse. Also, in times of financial hardships the electric lights in the camps are often reduced leading to increased risk for women. This is particularly true in areas where the bathrooms are located and when young adult women try to access them in darkness they are often physically harassed.

Besides the acknowledged problems mentioned above, are those that are invisible. For instance, in unpredicted situations camps are hastily put up with no planning. The Sri Lankan Tamil refugees who started arriving in India in the 1980s for instance were provided various kinds of accommodation. Some lived in camps set up especially for them, others in school buildings, government offices, warehouses and any other building available. In the initial phase of displacement, they were usually set up as family units. The assassination of Rajiv Gandhi in 1991 by a Sri Lankan woman changed this and they came to be perceived as a threat and even families were separated. Similarly, the Bengali refugees in India faced the problem of joint

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families being divided into nuclear ones. They were further split up into male headed groupings where work was provided for the male bread winner.⁸

Today, planning of camps is technical in nature but challenges still remain. The geometrics of geographies are linked to space, place, and architecture. The camps run by different agencies and organizations produce diversity in layout. Camp planners prescribe a planning approach that takes the individual shelter unit as the starting point, resulting in highly inappropriate collectives. Giving one such 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 were disregarded and the camp became more like a prisoner of war camp.⁹

Although, UNHCR guidelines stipulate an area for camps in which each person must have 45sq2m,¹⁰ this may not always be possible, especially in highly populated regions of Asia. In most camps, non-residential buildings are grouped together at one end. This causes exclusion of many persons who live on the margins of the camp.

In contrast, many camps are linked to cultural lifestyles. For instance, in camps like Bourj al Barjaneh and Nahr al Bared the layout sought to preserve inter-village layouts.¹¹ Camps which are structured so that cultural continuity is maintained can have both positive and negative fallouts. While women from the same community, if they live together, find support of earlier neighbors, extended families and some ethnic back up, 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 control.

Besides the layout, it is important to conceptualize space from a broader socio-cultural gendered analysis. In the following section, a discussion is initiated on women’s role and the assumption that initially when camps are set up there may be no scope for participation in decision making, as they occur without warning. No one is asked if they want to be part of a camp? That is the reason Chan Kwok Bun has argued that the refugee camp is "a unique socio-political artifact of this century".¹² The population that is forced to inhabit the camps has no voice in the matter, just as is the case of jails. The entire process de-recognizes the agency of the displaced.

Another important 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 and yet remain outside it. Under these circumstances to whom does the space belong?

Women: Doubly Jeopardized?

According to Mehta\(^{13}\) male and gender biases negatively impact on displaced women in two ways – on the 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. Women therefore face hardships both as citizens and as refugees. In fact, the inequality they face as citizens is often translated into insecurity while seeking refuge.

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 hardship. Their mobility in camps is cut down as they are relocated forcibly to an unknown place contributing to their sense of powerlessness.

Poverty increases as women’s responsibilities increase and opportunities shrink. This undermines reproductive health too, given the fact that an estimated twenty five percent of refugee women of reproductive age are pregnant at any one time.\(^{14}\) Since the health indicator is linked to poverty, which is another form of violence, one could argue that, despite multiple existing standards available, within the camps women continue to face violence in multiple forms.

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 most other Conventions and laws, is androcentric in nature and the words gender and women are not included in it. The Convention does not operate in South Asia nor are there any refugee specific national laws, so dependence has been on non-refugee International and 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. Three years later the first Consultation on Refugee Women was convened. Consequently, in 1991 the UNHCR issued Guidelines on the Protection of Refugee


\(^{14}\) UNFPA op. cit., 63.
Women to address their needs and enhance their decision making power. This was followed by the 2003 Guidelines on Sexual and Gender-based Violence to ensure protection – a primary mandate of the UNHCR.

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”.

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. An important landmark in this respect is the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC) which followed the atrocities in Rwanda and former Yugoslavia. It defined violence against women as a war crime.

In 2000 the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 came into being. 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.

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. A large population, about 9 million who crossed borders first sought refuge in camps. The Indian example of camps is placed alongside the European experience even though Malkki places the refugee camp as a “standardized, generalized technology of power...in the management of mass displacement” in post-World War II Europe.

The camps in India existed from 1947 but at the time were run by private organizations. These were ultimately institutionalized in 1948 when the government took control. Camps in the Western part 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, waves of refugees 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. The latter became the largest rehabilitation centre for ‘distressed’ women. In

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due course, these women were provided huts as a resettlement measure and there was an attempt to provide comprehensive needs. Grants were given for marriage of girls, remarriage of widows, and even for cremations. Milk for children and pregnant women and treatment for health problems such as tuberculosis was also arranged for the refugees. However, these spaces, though materially better than most camps of today, did not always provide protection from violence. From 1946 when the exodus started to 1948, four million people were killed, others faced forced conversion and abduction. About 50,000 women were abducted as per official sources in Pakistan and another 21,000 in India.

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. Programs 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.

Another example of resilience is that of the Tibetan refugee women who have formed the Tibetan Women’s Association in India which is part of the Tibetan Government in Exile. The Association has sought to address comprehensively the rights of Tibetan women.

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 program providing economic alternatives to women refugees who were trading sex for food. In Bangladesh, UNHCR renewed the camp layouts to improve their overview from different directions to diminish security risks. It also made several other changes in the camp like providing water during the day and moving the latrines from the outskirts. In Tamil Nadu, India, at the camps for Sri Lankan refugees, women have established committees to exercise pressure on authorities and consolidate their position within the community. 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 camps are known to carry out daily work and economic activities. They are better equipped to manage local officials and governance issues in the camp situations.

22 Rao, op. cit., 150-151.
23 Ibid., 27.
24 Ibid., 32.
26 Alex Butler, Feminism, Nationalism and Exiled Tibetan Women (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 2003).
28 Information provided to author by UNHCR in 2002.
29 Visit to camps in Chennai by author in 2004.
Camps provide a glimpse into the status of women seeking refuge across borders or within their own country, in the case of the internally displaced. They are representative of women’s political ideologies and the historical spaces provided to them. The discrimination women face is the result of thousands of years of patriarchal domination, and therefore there is a need to challenge it. Camps provide an opportunity to change the structures of domination and break stereotypes. They make this possible because camps keep patriarchy in abeyance. Whether the situation changes when the woman goes back is another story and perhaps, another opportunity.
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