

LARAIB NIAZ and SYEDA NAIMAL FAITMA, Voluntary Repatriation Policy for Afghan Refugees: Increasing Vulnerability for Women

Migration uniquely affects women. This paper considers the gendered aspect of forced migration and highlights issues specific to women, focusing on the case study of female Afghan refugees in Pakistan and Iran. Victims of forced migration have been ill-served by voluntary repatriation policies for Afghan refugees living in Pakistan and Iran. This article calls for a gender-sensitive approach to solutions which empower female returnees.

Introduction

This paper considers the gendered aspect of forced migration and highlights issues specific to women, focusing on the case study of female Afghan refugees in Pakistan. We begin with an overview of the Afghan refugee crisis, examine the voluntary repatriation policy adopted by UNHCR and the governments of Pakistan and Afghanistan; and consider the impact of this policy on female refugees.

The gendered aspect of migration, in recent years, has become an area receiving considerable scholarly attention (Morokvasic 1984; Gabaccia 1992; Piper 2008; Donato et al. 2006; Connell 2002; Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994; Qasmiyeh 2010). However, there has been little consideration of gender in policymaking. This is concerning as migration affects women and men differently, is impacted by gendered socio-economic power structures, and because of the diverging roles ascribed to male and female migrants in both sending and host countries.

Women are often assumed to play a reproductive and domestic role whilst men are expected to occupy a productive and management role in developing countries. This is in stark contrast to the context of forced migration where women increasingly migrate independently, are often the sole breadwinners for their families and increasingly participate in labour markets (Fluery 2016). Therefore, forced migration, and subsequent repatriation policies, can prove to be particularly disconcerting for women.

International human rights agencies have started addressing difficulties faced particularly by refugee women, but policies for streamlining gendered issues are still scant. The policies which do exist focus on lack of infrastructure, basic education and health services directed towards women (Faizal and Rajagopalan 2005). Policies adopted to address the Afghan refugee crisis highlight that the plight of female refugees is often ignored.

The Refugee Crisis of Afghanistan

Over the past three decades, there has been ongoing warfare and civil strife in Afghanistan, beginning from the soviet invasion of 1979 to the post 9 /11 conquest of the Taliban, civil war and U.S. invasion in the country. This has led to one of the largest global refugee crises. Recent UNHCR estimates place the number of Afghan refugees as high as 2.7 million (UNHCR 2015), the majority obtaining refuge in neighbouring countries of Pakistan and Iran (Ruiz 2004). The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979 resulted in around 1.5 million refugees taking sanctuary in Pakistan (Safri 2011); with continuing unrest in Afghanistan, the numbers continue increasing.

As the international community did little to share the responsibilities for these refugees, Pakistani and Iranian policies prevailed. The Pakistani and Iranian governments repeatedly expressed their frustration at different forums, summits and discussions in the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), but received no support (Galustov 2013). The Pakistani and Iranian repatriation policies are a result of financial and economic instability, a steep devaluation of the host countries' currencies, rising inflation and unemployment; further making it difficult for both governments to deal with the refugee crises. As a result of growing public animosity against refugees, the Iranian government in 2001 announced that it had sealed its border with Afghanistan and that it was practically impossible for them to accept new refugees (Galustov 2013). Similarly, the Pakistani government, owing to greater threats from militant organisations including the Taliban, got stricter with refugees and urged them to repatriate (Weinbaum and Harder 2008).

In May 2012, the governments of Pakistan, Iran, Afghanistan and UNHCR adopted the *Solutions Strategy for Afghan Refugees (SSAR)*. The SSAR outlined the need for increased voluntary repatriation, but also for enhanced resettlement as a means of international burden sharing and assistance to affected refugees (UNHCR 2012). A quadripartite agreement between Pakistan, Iran, Afghanistan and UNHCR was designed to govern the repatriation process.

Ideally, repatriation occurs when the situation improves in one's sending country or when the refugee opts for return. Under UNHCR's guidelines, repatriation must be voluntary in nature; despite this, governments of Pakistan and Iran have increasingly pressured refugees to move back (Ahmadi and Lakhani 2016). According to IOM's 2015 report about 0.66 million Afghans have been deported. For Afghan refugees, however, accelerated returns stem from socio-economic and political issues in host countries rather than improvements in the security situation in Afghanistan. An Amnesty International Report highlighted Afghanistan's failure to implement a 2014 national policy to provide basic living standards for IDPs who were living 'on the brink of survival' (Amnesty International 2015). This is especially concerning for women and children who form more than 50 per-cent of the total refugee population (Basu 2000).

Impact of Voluntary Repatriation on Women

Afghan women and girls in Iran enjoy a number of freedoms denied to them at home (Strand et. Al 2004). In particular, they have greater freedom of movement, access to quality education, and the ability to seek divorce in contrast to women and girls in Afghanistan (Galustov 2013).

A male dominated culture in Afghanistan further exacerbates the situation. For instance, rape is at times used as a weapon and victims of such atrocities are not afforded sufficient rights (Nijhowne and Oates 2008). According to Basu (2000), in the context of IDP camps in Afghanistan, there is evidence that women were often forced to give sexual favours to male heads that possessed the authority to influence ration distributions. Further, Global Rights research reported that nine out of ten Afghan women faced threats of violence including physical, sexual or psychological, or were/are forced into marriage. Women currently being repatriated fear that they will be denied basic rights and freedoms they enjoy in host countries (Nijhowne and Oates 2008).

The Guidelines on the Protection of Women issued by UNHCR, proposes the elimination of all forms of discrimination in the area of refugee protection. They also identify specific issues, such as gender based violence, faced by women that would require customised assistance and provide strategies to tackle such issues (UNHCR 2002). The guidelines have not been fully utilised by Afghanistan.

Amnesty International interviewed a 50 year old Afghan woman living in Iran who claimed: 'I would prefer to live in prison rather than in Afghanistan, at least in prison I would not have to worry about food, shelter and my honour'. This is not the voice of just one woman but represents a widespread issue of concern to Afghan refugees. However, no law to address the concern of females who stand to be repatriated has been passed in the host countries of Iran and Pakistan. In contrast, considerable attention has been given to young male returnees; specifically dealing with risks of recruitment into violent extremist groups and criminal networks (Safri 2011). Not taking into account vulnerabilities of female refugees can lead to a loss of dignity, a return to violence and atrocious conditions and can also lead these women to be recruited by extremist groups (Dias 2003).

According to Dumper (2007), the cases of Guatemala, Bosnia, and Afghanistan present parallels to the plight of Afghan refugee women. Namely, those case studies represent a desire on the part of many refugees to return to their places of origin, the close proximity of host and origin countries, the low status of women in the sending countries, the role of external lead agencies and finally, a similarity in the demographic profile of migrants (i.e. predominantly peasant and rural-based). An examination of the gender elements in repatriation and resettlement programs in those case studies can be utilised in drawing up a similar program for Afghan refugees. After the Dayton Peace Accords were signed, officials from UNHCR visited Bosnia in order to evaluate the success of the guidelines for protection of women, and found that only a handful of women had been involved in programme implementation and design. This led to the successful institution of the Bosnian Women's Initiative (BWI), which engendered self-sufficiency by providing small loans and grants of \$5 million to women's organisations (Wareham and Quick 2000).

For female Afghan refugees, achieving self-reliance can be difficult due to limited education facilities and skill training opportunities, especially for those residing in Pakistan. For those refugees that have returned, it was found that women returnees faced tighter greater obstacles due to reinstated restrictions on mobility and loss of a sense of community. According to research conducted by Ahmadi and Lakhani (2016), displaced women in Afghanistan were reported to face psychosocial trauma, increased gender based violence among returnee families and a relatively larger increase in the burden of absorbing economic shocks.

Humanitarian policies can be customized to help empower these women. UNHCR has, in the past, worked with individual governments and women's organisations towards this cause. An illustrative UNHCR initiative was the creation of Mama Maquin in Guatemala, aimed to provide training and skills to refugee women in order to increase their livelihood prospects; proving to be very successful as it increased their entrepreneurial opportunities (Billings 1994). Once conditions in Guatemala improved, female Guatemalan refugees living in Mexico gained enough

confidence to negotiate agreements with the government themselves and actively participate in repatriation programmes.

Other examples include the Rwanda Women's Initiative amidst civil warfare, which aimed at generating income for vulnerable women, promoting education and empowering them in their social life (UNHCR 2002). This initiative helped in monitoring the status of women who repatriated, by providing support to local women's organisations linked to grassroots networks focusing on aspects such as sexual and gender-based violence. Forced migration, with all of its adverse consequences, provides a unique opportunity for the status of women to ascent. This opportunity should not be overlooked. Through on-going programming, UNHCR is in a position to encourage empowerment of female led organisations, particularly the ones based in rural areas and beyond Kabul, where it is not unusual for women to be bartered, enslaved, and sold (Diaz 2003). Working with the government of Afghanistan, donors should ensure the availability of income-generating projects for repatriating women, without which repatriation policies could further exacerbate existing vulnerabilities for female refugees.

Conclusion

It is difficult to imagine that displaced Afghans women could repatriate and build their lives in sending states with any measure of ease, especially after having experienced relative independence and labour force participation. International efforts lead by donors and the UNHCR, as well as domestic policies, should take into account women's specific realities and vulnerabilities while formulating policies; and consider the hostile, often patriarchal, social conditions in Afghanistan. At present, there is a need to go further and increase the opportunities for disadvantaged female Afghan repatriates in terms of education, employment opportunities and health benefits. UNHCR, and other humanitarian organisations, should increase the monitoring of cross-border population movements between Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan and should set up an information and assistance systems for Afghan women returnees.

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