

Article

Syrian Women and the Refugee Crisis: Surviving the Conflict, Building Peace, and Taking New Gender Roles

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Abstract: Women and men experience conflicts differently. Women, even as non-combatants, suffer a great harm. Wars are gendered, both in causes and consequences. Women are deliberately excluded from formal peace negotiations. Work done for the reconstruction of conflict ridden societies, fail to recognize with women's realities and needs. Despite that, women have remained influential at the grassroots level in peace-building and rehabilitation. The paper uses the example of Syria, to explore beyond the most prominent perception of women borne out of an armed conflict, i.e., of the 'victims of war' and assesses, in how many different ways women have survived the Syrian conflict and have made efforts for peace, informally and formally, challenging the narrative of women as just a group with special needs and requirements. For this purpose, the paper has content analysis of the previous research, data, reports, mainstream news articles, and other relevant information on the topics of housing, food, health, work and financial security, changed roles, isolation, and gender-based violence to understand how women's role in all these spheres are shaping new narratives for women, peace and security, distinct from the prevalent existing ones.

Keywords: women; armed-conflicts; peace-building

1. Introduction

Conflict situations across nations are experienced by both men and women differently. Though women do not participate in active hostilities in majority but they overwhelmingly suffer a great harm (Eriksson 2011). Feminist scholarship, throughout decades has shown that wars are gendered in their causes and consequences. From the kind of language used by the state leaders, to the policies employed by various armed groups in conflicts, a gendered ideology always remains at work (Duncanson 2016). As a consequence of this, women are targeted with various forms of gender-based violence. However, when it comes to peace negotiations, it is has been observed for a long time that women have been deliberately excluded from them (Baksh-Soodeen 2005). Subsequently, the reconstruction processes and peace agreements fail to identify with women's realities (UN Secretary-General 2002). However, women have played an influential role, through their work at the grassroots level in peace-building in various areas including healthcare, nutrition, education, democracy, and most importantly in post-war justice (Klot 2007).

The unremitting Syrian war has entered its sixth year. This civil war has prompted millions of people to flee their homes and a majority of them have found refuge in neighboring countries like Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt and Iraq, etc. Turkey has been more receptive than any other country. The UN bodies working in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey, soon started complaining about the shortage of money and resources to accommodate more Syrian refugees in their camps. The ultimate impact of this was the incapability of UN to provide Syrian refugees with financial

support in the Middle East (Jones 2014). As a result of this, so many refugees started opting for Europe and the world finally woke up to the flow of Syrian refugees in 2015 (Kingsley 2015).

The holocaust that has engulfed Syria has dominated the news, but there is a significant aspect of this civil war, one with profound implications that continues to go unreported (Freedman 2017). This paper attempts to highlight the plight of women and girls who are enduring the gravest burden, yet their voices and perspectives are often left unheard. These Syrian women refugees are facing sexual and gender-based violence, early marriages, overwhelming economic strife, and psychological scarring caused by the loss in a war that seemingly has no end. The paper also tries to challenge the most prominent image of women that comes out of an armed conflict, i.e., “victims of war”. It tries to interrogate as to in how many different ways women are braving one of the worst humanitarian crises of the contemporary times and living with the new gender roles thereby establishing themselves as potential peace builders, rather than just victims on the sidelines of war. The paper enquires as to what all can be achieved by actively involving women in the peace process in Syria, challenging the long run of deliberately excluding women from formal peace negotiations.

When we look at women just as victims of war, we fail to recognize their capabilities as peace builders. We have seen from conflicts across the world that when women are deliberately excluded from formal talks, there are profound negative implications of the same. Their absence contributes to a gender-insensitive approach towards the issues being addressed. Sometimes issues which women are more likely to raise, are often marginalized and sometimes fully excluded. These include issues such as sexual violence, abuses by government and rebel security forces, and also the provision of key social services. The parties to war are not the same as parties to peace. To exclude women from the security sector reforms and also relevant programs, is to derail the likelihood of success and sustainability of these peace programs altogether (Miklaucic and Civic 2011).

The paper proceeds in several parts. The first part of the paper explains the methodology used and the objectives of the research. The second part of the paper looks into the numbers that tell us the severity of the Syrian refugee crisis. The third part of the paper tracks the journey and challenges faced by Syrian women refugees. The fourth part of the paper explores how the Syrian refugee women are braving all the challenges and making endeavors to come out as survivors. The paper finally ends with a discussion that highlights the lessons wars have taught for not having gender inclusive peace plans and not recognizing the capabilities of women as peace builders. It also throws some light on the positive changes that can be seen lately in conflict ridden states with respect to women, peace and security.¹

Methodology and Purpose Statement

The paper is a secondary research, content analysis of the previous research, data, reports, mainstream news articles, and other relevant information on the topics of: housing, food, health, work, financial security, changed roles, isolation, and gender-based violence to discover how women’s role in all these spheres are shaping new narratives for women, peace and security, distinct from the prevalent existing ones. To comprehend the reasons and patterns of gendered victimization of women in armed conflicts and also to find out the possible solutions for it, we need gender mainstreaming of the peace and conflict-resolution methods. To challenge the deliberate absence of women from formal peace negotiations and post-conflict reconstruction, the paper tries to establish how women as peace builders, against all odds, can make significant contributions in the re-building of their conflict ridden states. By using the example of Syria, the paper tries to explore beyond the most prominent perception of women borne out of an armed conflict—‘victims of war’ and assess in how many different ways

¹ I would like to mention here that I do acknowledge that there are multiple genders and not just women. They all face different kinds of violence and struggles. The challenges faced by men are different from those seen by women or transgender. This paper only tries to highlight this very point that the experience of armed conflicts is different for different genders and hence a gender inclusive approach is what we need for policy framing and peace.

women have survived the Syrian conflict and have made efforts for peace, informally and formally, challenging the very perception of women as just a group with special needs and requirements.

Although Syrian women themselves are making initiatives towards inclusive peace, to support my argument, I have mentioned in this paper, examples of women from other conflicts who have set an example as to how an inclusive peace talk can fetch results which cannot be achieved otherwise by keeping women on the sidelines.

I have struggled finding scholarly work on the specific area of Syrian women refugees and have relied for data completely on the international organizations and other agencies working with the refugees in different parts of the world. Also, there are a lot of groups which are providing relief and humanitarian assistance and also doing research and data collection, within Syria and also in the neighboring parts. I have chosen to quote the data collected by those groups only who have worked in coordination with an international organization in conducting their research.

2. Humanitarian Crisis of Syria

The intolerable conditions that the Syrian crisis has led to, the ever growing chaos and insecurity, and the accession of military operations forced millions of Syrians to seek asylum elsewhere—get internally displaced or become refugees in other nations. They are relying entirely on the internal or international humanitarian assistance and living in conditions where they suffer a loss of dignity and their right to a decent life (Chase 2016).

2.1. Facts and Figures

The Demographic Report on Forced Dispersion prepared by the Syrian Centre for Policy Research, estimates that the total population inside Syria was 20,776,000 people in mid-2014, of whom 25 per cent were displaced creating 3,136,000 refugees and migrants. The report also estimated the total population inside Syria at about 20,208,000 by the end of 2015, among whom 6,361,000 were IDPs (Internally Displaced Persons). The number of refugees and migrants reached 4,275,000 and this population drain continues till date (Syrian Centre for Policy Research 2016).

The UN Refugee Agency, United Nation High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), as of 5 July 2017, has estimated the total number of registered refugees to be 5,136,969² (Syria Regional Refugee Response 2017). This figure includes two million Syrians registered by United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, and Lebanon. There are 2.8 million Syrians registered by the Government of Turkey, as well as around 29,000 Syrian refugees registered in North Africa (Syria Regional Refugee Response 2017).

Amnesty International reports that the Gulf countries such as Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Bahrain have offered zero resettlement places to Syrian refugees. United Arab Emirates has taken 250,000 Syrian Refugees. Other high income countries including Russia, Japan, Singapore, and South Korea have also offered zero resettlement places. Germany in the entire European Union (EU) alone has pledged 43,431 places for Syrian refugees, which is about 46% of the combined EU total. The remaining 27 EU countries have pledged only 1% of the Syrian refugee population (in the main host countries) places via resettlement and other admission pathways (Amnesty International 2016b).

Besides Germany, other countries who have received Syrian refugees are—Sweden, Denmark, Hungary, United Kingdom, and France. In the region of North America, there have been only 12,000 official resettlements in United States (Park and Omri 2016) while Canada has accepted around 40,000 Syrian refugees.³

² These figures mentioned in this section of the paper are subject to change as the data gets updated every other day. My purpose of mentioning these numbers here is just to highlight the severity of this refugee crisis.

³ Countries like Hungary, which have although provided resettlement to Syrian refugees, are not really receptive towards them and have protested against their influx. They are capable of providing far more resettlements than they actually have.

2.2. International Refugee Law and the Obligation of State Parties

The 1951 Convention on the Status of Refugees defines 'refugee' as person who is:

being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it (UNHCR 2017a).

The Convention recognizes that while seeking asylum, the refugees may breach immigration rules and prohibits arbitrary detention of the refugees for the same. The Convention also provides certain safeguards against the expulsion of refugees through the principle of non-refoulement which is so fundamental that no reservations or derogations can be made to it. It also provides that no one shall expel or return ("refouler") a refugee against his or her will to a territory where the person fears threats to his or her life or freedom (UNHCR n.d.a). Finally, the Convention also lays down basic minimum standards for the treatment of refugees for State parties to grant favorable treatment to refugees without any prejudice. These rights, amongst other, include access to the courts, to primary education, to work and the provision for documentation, including a refugee travel document in passport form (UNHCR n.d.b).

The Convention and its additional protocol although do not recognize gender as a ground of persecution but still make it an obligation on States to take in refugees seeking asylum in other countries fleeing persecution on various grounds (Crawley 2000). State parties of the Convention including countries such as Hungary, which has gone to the extent of erecting wired fence to keep refugees out and leaving them in decrepit conditions as they wait for their transfer and safety; are criticized by migrants and activists for their attitude and indifference (Al Jazeera News 2016).

United States, another signatory of the Convention, has imposed a ban on the resettlement of Syrian Refugees as of now. The UN Refugee Agency has claimed that around 20,000 refugees in precarious circumstances might have found residence in the United States during these 120 days of suspension announced, based on average monthly figures of the last 15 years. Agencies working with refugees have expressed their displeasure at the move saying it is a clear violation of the international norms and refugee conventions. The US has taken in far less number of Syrian refugees than European nations like Germany and Sweden (Shaheen 2017). The responsibility of these nations, including the US, increases further as they have been using active force in the region of Syria as part of their debated humanitarian intervention that has also resulted in the destruction of infrastructure and loss of civilian lives (Mathew and Harley 2016).

3. The Women Refugees of Syria

For us to understand how women are surviving the conflict, we should be aware of what exactly the challenges of being a woman refugee are. We should also know the gender specific challenges of surviving a conflict in order to understand how and why is it inevitable to have women on the table when negotiating for peace. For us to find solutions to the gender gap in post-conflict resolutions, the roots of gendered armed conflicts must be explored. In order to work towards the possible solutions of the systematic victimization of women during armed conflicts through a gender inclusive path, we need to look into these patterns of violence and understand how they work. Post-war justice provided by international law through hybrid or ad hoc tribunals is critical but is not the only solution.

As for any conflict in the world, women and children, in the civil war of Syria also, are the worst-hit. Women and children constitute the majority of refugees and also the internally displaced (Miller 2016). For every one in four Syrian families, women are the sole providers (UNHCR 2014, p. 15). They are struggling to keep the families together and to provide food and shelter to their children. The problem for them is not only this unforeseen alteration in the conventional gender roles of the Syrian society but

also gender-based violence in the form of harassment and humiliation. They have lost family members, ran out of money, do not have enough to eat, braving daily threats to their safety and are being forced into isolation for losing all of this (Atassi 2014b).

People who have gained the official refugee status, they are the registered refugees living in refugee camps (not always, as some have found refuge in urban and peri-urban settings as well) with shelter, food, water, sanitation facilities, and medical care, although not always sufficient to their needs. A lot of these are registered with the UN Refugee Agency where they receive help ranging from employment to healthcare from different agencies of UN including UNICEF, UNESCO, and UNDP. There exists another category of refugees, those who remain unregistered for some reason or the other, living in deplorable conditions, always with a fear of getting deported back to Syria. These unregistered Syrian refugees, especially women, find it difficult to get jobs, access to healthcare, face increased exploitation in the absence of legal protection including sexual exploitation and bonded labor (Al Jazeera News 2015).

Organizations providing humanitarian assistance which are working with the assumption that all refugees live in refugee camps do not have viable policies anymore. It is significant to acknowledge that a lot of these refugees have found settlements in urban settings. It is indeed difficult for them access all the public services of that State even after clearing all the procedural barriers, which in itself is a tedious process. Hence refugees living in different settings have different needs and requirements (Amnesty International 2016c).

3.1. Challenges of the Journey

We all have seen pictures of refugees loaded on to boats. Some are reaching shores safely while others are drowning. The pictures of Aylan Kurdi washed off shore like a sea shell, created temporary waves of shock and sympathy for the young child. Those who survive crossing the Mediterranean are indeed fortunate. The journeys, either via land or sea, of these refugees, who are making a desperate attempts to escape war back home, are indeed as difficult as the life they try and leave behind (Townsend 2015). Testimonies of these women who fled their homes to find a safer refuge are questioning the very humanity of this world. Most of these women have found themselves in unnerving new environments. They have complete inaccessibility to good healthcare facilities. Finding a place to live is a mammoth of a task for these women (Freedman 2017, p. 125). Most of them have reported being sexually harassed by police and local security guards on their way to a new country. Some of them confessed that they were offered help in return of sexual favors (Human Rights Watch Report 2017). In the absence of formal arrangements to accommodate these unwanted refugees, women are forced to live with their children and belongings out in the open sky, braving the harshest of weather, rain, or freezing cold. These women are increasingly falling prey to sexual harassment, exploitation, and sex trade in return for basic aid. From local police to charity organizations, the miserable condition of these women is exploited by these fraudulent local people (Amnesty International 2016a).

This problem has become all the more critical because the percentage of women amongst refugees who travel through Europe has risen dramatically. UNHCR estimates that of the total number of refugees created, women comprise 48.5% of them; with around 30% of them in the age group of 18 to 59 (UNHCR 2017b).

Amnesty International interviewed some of these refugee women about their journey to Europe. The organization interviewed 40 refugee women and girls in northern Europe who travelled from Turkey to Greece. Almost all of them said that they felt unsafe and threatened at every stage of their journey. Women are also at a great risk of becoming victims of violence, robbery, and extortion with threats of rape and sexual assault by smugglers, security guards, policemen, and fellow refugees. Some smugglers even coerce these women into having sex with them in exchange for a lower price for the crossing. There are transit centers where men and women sleep together in the same tents with no separate toilets or shower facilities. In the Amnesty report, women also described how they

would minimize the risk of any assault by not eating or drinking so that they would not have to use the toilet. Some would even sleep in the open as they found it safer than being inside the transit with men (Amnesty International 2016a). All these women interviewed by Amnesty described feeling threatened and unsafe during their journey, as all of the countries they had crossed, they experienced physical abuse and exploitation, being groped or pressured to have sex by smugglers, security staff or other refugees.

In the words of Amnesty International's Crisis Response director, Tirana Hassan:

"After living through the horrors of the war in Iraq and Syria these women have risked everything to find safety for themselves and their children. But from the moment they begin this journey they are again exposed to violence and exploitation, with little support or protection" (Noack 2016).

3.2. Gender-Based Violence

History is witness to the use of gender based violence in conflict situations as a weapon of war (De Brouwer 2005). A lot has been talked about the gender aspect of conflicts in Bosnia, Rwanda, or the Democratic Republic of Congo. But an aspect of the on-going Syrian conflict remains that remains under-reported and much less talked about, is the gender-based violence against Syrian women and girls (Freedman 2016). Rape and sexual violence has been identified as the most extensive form of violence faced by women and girls while in Syria. Women became victims of sexual violence that was frequently perpetrated within their homes or in detention. This was coupled with other forms of physical assault, torture, kidnapping, and sometimes murder that are often perpetrated in the presence of a male family member (Human Rights Watch Report 2014).

A point that needs to be mentioned here, as we talk about sexual violence in conflict settings, is that men also experience sexual violence as a tactic of war (Sivakumaran 2007). This aspect of gender-based violence has gone un-noticed for a long time making men suffer in silence (Sivakumaran 2007, p. 255). A lot of cases of men being sexually assaulted by the regime members in detention in Syria have been reported (Meger 2016, p. 59). This has happened in the conflict of Yugoslavia as well and is certainly something not new (Teresa and Vivar 2016, p. 105). Finally, the international community has begun recognizing sexual violence against men also as an act of violence. The statute of the International Criminal Court has a gender neutral definition of sexual violence, acknowledging that men and boys can also be victims of sexual violence (Gartner and McCarthy 2014).

Domestic violence, early marriage, and sex for survival, were identified by women and girls as forms of violence currently experienced by them as they arrive in different countries (Djamba and Kimuna 2015). Survival sex, a consequence of women's and girls' desperate need to get some income to cover the increased cost of living, is also identified as a type of violence frequently experienced by Syrian women and girls (O'Sullivan and Stevens 2017). Survivors of various forms of gender based violence are reluctant to report due to the obvious stigma around these issues of the conservative society they have been a part of. Hence it is believed that many of the survivors would be very unlikely to seek support due to shame and fear of humiliation of their families (Freedman 2016). Women risk further violence, including death threats, to their own families, a factor considered to further compromise the safety of women and girls and expose them to ongoing violence (ABAAD Resource Center for Gender Equality 2012).

To add to this, a lot of these women and girls also have restricted or no access to services or support (legal or psychological counseling and guidance), particularly those meant for the survivors of gender-based violence (UN Women 2013).

3.3. Inefficient and Insufficient Healthcare

Healthcare is a major concern for Syrian refugees with a large number of them being unable to afford medicines, treatment, or even transport to a medical centre. UNHCR ProGres (refugee registration program) data for Syrian refugees in Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq, and Egypt, shows

16,000 people living in female-headed refugee households within all three host countries have serious medical conditions, and 1800 are disabled (UNHCR 2014, p. 26). The health of the people living in women headed households is not the only concern. Women themselves are in need of special care and attention with respect to their health. According to the United Nations Population Fund, of the 3.9 million registered Syrian refugees in countries neighboring Syria, there are around one million women and girls in the reproductive age group (15–49) along with 70,000 pregnant refugee women. Besides these, there are other barriers to accessing healthcare that include cost, distance, and transportation issues along with the fear of mistreatment, shame, unavailability of female doctors and insufficient provision of services (UNFPA 2015).

Syrian women's sexual and reproductive health has disproportionately suffered. Although, it is difficult to get information from refugee women regarding this very issue (because of the conservative nature of the society they belong to and the stigmatization of such issues), but the assessments made at small scale by different organizations highlight problems such as sexual and gender-based violence including rape, assault, harassment and intimate partner violence, early marriage, early age at pregnancy, frequent UTIs, complications during pregnancy, irregular menstrual cycle, and no access to antenatal care after delivery (Samari 2014).

The psychological toll of the Syrian refugee crisis is also massive. Recently a heartbreaking headline hit the news stating that Syrian children are turning to self-harm and suicides to escape the horrors of war (Taylor 2017). There are children and adults, men and women, who have been subjected to violence or have witnessed the harm done to their family members. A study done in Germany for refugees arriving there has shown half of these refugees have mental health problems, most common being the post-traumatic stress disorder and depression, which is sometimes so severe that patients have turned suicidal (Gregoire 2015).

The Psycho-Social Training Institute in Cairo (PSTIC), in Egypt, reports that female heads of household face an increased risk of depression and psychological distress as they face the pressures of displacement, anxiety of their new gender roles and feeling of isolation by living in a new country, in their exile. There are women who have been victims of sexual violence back in their country. Absence of proper counseling or any kind of medical help has made things worse for them as they continue to live with the physical and psychological scars of the trauma (UNHCR 2013).

3.4. Early Marriage

There are thousands of Syrian women who have lost the male members of their families in either fighting in Syria or they are simply missing. These women, with no male family members left with them, are marrying their daughters as young as 13 or 15 years of age, with a hope of giving them protection and a roof over their heads. This has left these young girls vulnerable to domestic abuse, poverty, and health problems. According to a report, 48% of these girls have been married off to men at least 10 years older. These child brides have no opportunity of going to school. They are stuck in a vicious cycle of poverty and living in abusive home environments (Sweis 2014).

3.5. Refugee Camps and Humanitarian Relief through a Gender Perspective

The specific needs and vulnerabilities of women and girls are rarely at the forefront of humanitarian response, planning, and implementation (Clarke 2006). The dangerous situations that refugee women face on the journey do not always end on the destination. A report by Women's Refugee Commission reveals that the needs of women and girls often go unaddressed in accommodation centers in Germany and Sweden, where asylum seekers have to stay till their claims are processed. There are no separate living spaces for women and families and also no sex-separated latrines or shower facilities. Women and girls, thus remain vulnerable to rape, assault, and other violence in these facilities. While the two countries do recognize gender-based persecution as grounds for asylum (Crawley and Lester 2004), women and girls are supposed to go through increasingly complicated legal

and bureaucratic processes without sufficient support, making the procedure quite gender insensitive ([Women's Refugee Commission 2016](#)).

Unfortunately, the refugee camps are also not the expected safe havens for women. Far away from the security of extended family and community, unaccompanied women and girls may face harassment or assault from camp guards and fellow male refugees. Those who are lucky enough to flee with their family often find that the tremendous strains of refugee life increase the incidence of domestic violence ([Friedman 1992](#), p. 65). These camps, mostly the informal tent settlements are poorly planned, that do not take into account the needs of women and girls. Women get more exposed to abuse and attacks when they are forced to travel unprotected to remote areas in search of food, water, and firewood ([Domínguez-Mujica 2016](#), p. 58). When food and other necessities are in short supply, women do not get a fair share of what is available. The United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) has also warned that women in refugee camps get less of everything. From things such as plastic sheeting to soaps, women do compromise on their share. When men are the sole distributors of food and supplies, the likelihood of discrimination and also harassment is higher ([True 2012](#)). Sadly, there have been cases where humanitarian workers and peacekeepers, the very people responsible for the well-being and protection of refugees, have abused their power ([UNHCR 2012](#)).

More specifically in context of Syria, a study done by the Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security in camps set up by the Turkish government (known as the best camps of its kind for Syrian refugees), reveals that the absence of psycho-social support to survivors of sexual and gender-based and poorly structured approach to the provision of reproductive healthcare are the two biggest contributing factors to female disempowerment in the camps. Also neo-natal care is virtually absent because there is no systematic way of tracking pregnant women. Many women have reported that family planning mechanisms are not available and the extent to which camp management officials are able or willing to address this issue is not known. Women are not able to access birth control and are having babies despite constraints that make it extremely difficult to provide for an expanding family ([Jessen 2013](#)).

4. Fight for Survival by Refugee Women

For the women of Syria, experiencing the bitter realities of life as a refugee has awarded them an unexpected side effect—freedom or empowerment. The new economic and legal circumstances have forced these women to take on responsibilities that were once a man's domain ([Shalaby and Marnicio 2015](#)). Because of the absence of social constraints, exposure to programs talking about women's rights and increased association with aid groups, some of these women have obtained a sense of independence and personal autonomy ([UN Women 2015a](#)). For these women, life as a refugee is about becoming the main breadwinner and caretaker, providing for themselves and their families away from their communities and traditional sources of support. It eventually means facing challenges head on and being smart with the available resources ([Chick 2016](#)).

4.1. Finding a Home

Arriving in countries of exile, the first challenge awaiting these refugee families, specifically those who are unregistered and are not going to live in formal refugee camps, is to find a home to live ([Ezrow 2017](#)). The priority for them is to put a roof over their children's head and find a safe refuge in a new or unfamiliar environment. The limited resources these refugees arrive with result in a drop in their living conditions. A lot of refugees therefore end up in informal tent settlements, a damp garage or just a room with no electricity or other basic services ([Rabil 2016](#)). An average number of family members a Syrian female head of a house hold has under her care are around 5.6, including children, parents, siblings, or other relatives ([UNHCR 2014](#), p. 15). Despite this overcrowding and lack of space, women have been found extremely generous in welcoming other people in their homes. Women have also found support from mosques, local organizations, neighbors, landlords, and people in the local community, especially women of these communities ([World Bank 2016](#)).

4.2. New Gender Roles

Widowed, divorced or abandoned by their husbands, Syrian women have now taken up the responsibility to serve as the families' sole breadwinners, a role traditionally held in Syrian society by men (Batha 2016). Culturally, the majority of the Syrian women are raised or conditioned to take care of the stereotypical gender roles that includes duties not beyond the caretakers of the home; have dinner ready, the house cleaned, and raise children (Olimat 2014). But now heading a family means doing something they have not done before that primarily includes acquiring a job (Simmons 2016).

In refugee camps, there are programs such as 'Cash for Work' (by UN Women) which provide waged roles for camp residents through NGOs. Refugees, through these programs, are primarily provided with self-reliance opportunities. They are hired as administrators, hairdressers, guards, tailors, teachers, and day-care professionals. They are also provided with life skills classes including literacy (Arabic, English, computer), art classes (drawing, mosaic, psychodrama, dance), as well as awareness-raising sessions on issues related to rights, hygiene, camp services, legal information, reproductive health, sexual and gender-based violence, and other protection-related concerns (UNHCR 2016b, pp. 1–3). These women, who are volunteering in the camps, running community activities for a small hourly wage, speak highly of the way accessing work has changed their lives. The work which these women have been engaged in has given them a sense of purpose and structure and has also provided an income for their families (Huff Post Blog 2015).

Women found work in education, childcare, sewing, handicrafts, agriculture, and hairdressing. It must be noted here that there is restriction in Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan, the three major host countries, on the right to work (Chase 2016). This has limited the formal employment opportunities for Syrian refugees and the vast majority of women who did find work were engaged in the informal sector (Karakoç and Ersoy 2016). To help these women, there are organizations providing vocational training, raw materials, and grants to kick start businesses.⁴ These organizations claim that 50 percent of the participants are women. Highly skilled professionals, such as pharmacists, lawyers, architectural engineers, and office managers found it difficult to get a job (Catholic Relief Services 2017).

This flip in the stereotypical gender dynamic of a male bread winner is received with a lot of apprehension, both by men and women, who still believe that it the primary responsibility of a man to provide for his family. Thus, generally speaking, men in refugee camps are still getting more employment than women (Ayoub and Khallaf 2014). Households headed by women also have lesser working opportunities available for them. Some humanitarian organizations are trying hard to split the employment opportunities available equally between men and women for some Cash for Work roles, but they are also fighting stereotypes to do that (El-Masri et al. 2013).

Besides the above mentioned challenges, a significant thing that is related to the new found empowerment women have received in their refugee lives is that women who are going out for work also feel that the safe spaces for women have helped them in recovering the self-esteem and their independent sense of identity. In some cases, instances of displacement and trauma and the stress it accompanies, breeds abuse. Men may take the frustration of their powerlessness out on their wives and domestic violence rates often jump. But in these refugee camps, research suggests that women's work has actually resulted in decreasing gender-based violence. Engagement of women in these employment programmes has led to a marked decrease in domestic violence (a reported 20% decrease) amongst the beneficiary population. The primary reason for this reduction being the opportunity to leave home and the creation of safer spaces (UN Women 2015b). All of these positive outcomes have validated that increasing women's engagement in the economy not only results in economic empowerment, but also in social, cultural, and political empowerment. The gender dynamics of these refugee families are now evolving in different ways, more so positively (Djamba and Kimuna 2015).

⁴ The work of these organizations must be appreciated as otherwise these women would have had no idea about the availability of the resources and also they would have not recognized their own capabilities.

4.3. Resilience through Education

There are a number of Syrian refugee children going to school in the neighboring countries such as Jordan and Lebanon. On one occasion, U.S. Secretary of State Anthony J. Blinken points out that today there are more Syrian children in Lebanese public schools than there are Lebanese themselves. However, having access to education remains a great challenge for a large number of Syrian refugees (UNHCR 2016a). Five years after the start of the conflict, more than 250,000 children, approximately half of the nearly 500,000 school-aged Syrian children registered in Lebanon, are out of school. Some have never stepped inside a classroom (Culbertson and Constant 2015). The challenges of getting education for Syrian refugee children include lack of resources, under-funded educational projects, language barriers in foreign lands, and bullying in schools (Human Rights Watch Report 2016).

Despite all the hardships, there is an increased emphasis and realization of the fact that women and girls can play, within the refugee community, an extremely important role. Education is needed to encourage their participation in rehabilitation (Haynes et al. 2012). A lesson for life which the refugee women of Syria have learned for themselves by surviving in situations like these is the importance of education for women and girls. When they were to make a choice between sending either their sons or their daughters to school, they preferred educating their daughters. A woman interviewed by UNHCR said:

“A girl needs her education. If I had been educated, I’d be able to provide for my family in this situation. A boy can find work in places a girl can’t. To work, she needs to have her education.” (UNHCR 2014, p.25).

Bekaa Valley at the Syrian-Lebanon border presents an excellent example of the educational revolution that’s taking place amongst refugee women and girls (Human Rights Watch Report 2016). With the help of international organizations, local universities, and volunteers, there are organizations that are empowering a new generation of Syrian women, with tools and knowledge they will need to build their future. In the Valley, women have become the leaders of their community (Gatten 2015). They are the ones taking care of all the responsibilities of the public and domestic spheres of their lives; from sending their children to school for education to taking care of the residency papers. For one million plus registered Syrian refugees in the valley there are five schools. This also includes an all-girls high school, established by Noble Laureate Malala Yousafzai, where more than 200 Syrian girls are enrolled for a better future. Girls in the schools of this valley are learning not just the importance of education for women but also getting prepared for long-term development goals for themselves and their community. They now dream of going back to Syria and re-build it (Collins 2016).

4.4. Voice in Peace Talks

Before the Arab Spring and the 2011 revolution, women in Syria believed that it is not possible to disconnect fighting for women’s rights from fighting for human rights in general (Sadiki 2014). However, these women who worked day and night for the revolution, as the regime struck back with mass killings, arrests, and detentions, their role became more marginalized (Sadiki 2014). By 2012, women realized that they cannot have their rights without a struggle. They wanted a new democratic Syria and also understood that this democracy could not be achieved without equality between men and women. This understanding led 29 independent, non-governmental organizations and 200 individuals to form the Syrian Women’s Network. Their goals included a new Syrian constitution and a set of laws with full equality for women in terms of civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights. Since 2013, many of these women although living in exile, have worked to have women take a more central role in the peace talks for Syria (Noble Women’s Initiatives 2016).

The formal peace negotiations for Syria started with the Geneva I Conference in 2012. Women were neither present at the peace table, nor were they present anywhere in the margins of the peace talks. No wonder, the Conference failed to achieve what it was meant to (De Young 2012).

At the end of 2013, fifty women representing many civil society organizations, including eight members of the Syrian Women's Network, established the Syrian Women's Initiative for Peace and Democracy (Cassidy 2017). The aim was to promote the peace process, improve the humanitarian situation in Syria, and bring women directly into the negotiations. These women's groups demanded a 30% quota of female participants during the Geneva II sessions. Unfortunately, only a few women found a place on the negotiating teams and those were with limited roles. These talks also fell apart quickly (Atassi 2014a).

Staffan de Mistura, the UN Special Envoy to Syria, created "civil society rooms" at the negotiations for discussions and recommendations. A Women's Advisory Board is also created to bring a gender perspective to the peace talks. The establishment of the group created a lot of controversy as it was believed to be comprising of people with a pro-regime agenda. More questions were raised when the board did not speak for the rights of the prisoners or those illegally detained by the Syrian government (Mahmoud 2016).

However in May 2016, Syrian women rose above these differences and gave a message of unity. In an effort to build consensus to end the Syrian crisis, a diverse group of over 130 Syrian women, political and civil society activists met in Beirut, Lebanon from 22 May and forged a statement of unity, by overcoming significant political divides. The group met for a conference entitled "Syrian Women Peacemakers", to continue on the three years of UN Women's advocacy and coalition-building work with Syrian women peace activists, women leaders, and gender advocates from inside Syria (UN Women 2016a).

For five years, women in Syria have protested, fought, delivered aid, brokered peace, and documented atrocities on the ground in Syria (Sadiki 2014). Yet, when it came to negotiating for peace concretely, women were sidelined (Cassidy 2017). The things have changed and for the better. This increased female participation in peace talks is the result of years of tireless pressure by Syrian women (UN Women 2016b). The engagement of women in shaping the future of Syria is more critical now than ever before, especially after many previous failed attempts at peace (Rissi et al. 2015). The improvement in numbers became possible through advocacy, political will, consultation and capacity building. But these numbers aren't enough. These numbers must translate to women having more meaningful access and influence (Alfred and Mohamed 2016).

5. Discussion

Conflicts pose before societies, devastating consequences for everyone involved—but for women and girls, they do impact differently (Baksh-Soodeen 2005). Considering the patriarchal nature of the majority of these war-torn societies, women and girls in general, have access to comparably lesser resources to protect and survive on their own; they are also, more often than men, the deliberate target of gender-based violence and are also excluded from political processes critical for peace and security (Porter et al. 1999).

The number of conflicts, in particular the intra-state conflicts, have been on the rise worldwide, thereby contributing to a record number of forcibly displaced people since 2016 (the UN refugee agency UNHCR reported that more people are now displaced than after World War II) (McKirdy 2016). In many of these conflicts, violent extremism and acts of gender-based violence and abuse remains high, with all possible violations of the humanitarian norms. This poses a huge challenge, both to the communities and governments, of maintaining peace and security. An all-inclusive peace and recovery process remains the need of the hour (Reardon and Jenkins 2007).

Despite the fact that women have informally led and supported the peace and recovery processes in communities across the world, they have remained largely excluded from negotiations and decision-making processes critical for them. Of the 31 historic peace processes from the year 1992 to 2011, involving states from Africa, Europe to the Middle East, the representation of women in the form of either signatories, witnesses, mediators or women at the negotiating tables, have all remained highly disappointing with figures going as low as 0 percent in majority of the occasions

(Diaz and Tordjman 2012, pp. 4–5). These figures highlight that the poor representation of women at the peace tables is much more marked than their presence in other public decision-making roles, where, it can be said that women still are under-represented, but the gap is being steadily bridged. This includes the roles which are typically critical to peace talks—politician, lawyer, diplomat, or member of a party to an armed conflict (Diaz and Tordjman 2012).

Women in war, suffer in unique ways. Today, in Syria, women and children make up the majority of refugees and internally displaced people. Those who escape often face threats to their security along the road and those who are pregnant have no access to healthcare. We've learned from conflicts around the world, time and again, that higher the participation of women, the greater the chances for peace (Porter and Mundkur 2012). UN Security Council Resolution 1325, passed in the year 2000, mandated that there should be equal participation of women in peace and security initiatives, but women in formal peace talks, still remain a tiny fraction of peace agreement signatories and negotiators. In the early, failed peace processes for Syria, women were not at the table or even on the margins. For five long years, women in Syria, in the face of violence, have negotiated for local ceasefires, established safe areas, maintained basic services, distributed aid, disarmed youth and pushed for legal reforms. In the present desperate times, when more than half of the country's population has been massacred in insane acts of violence and forced to flee the country, inclusive peace talks seem to be Syria's only hope (Williams 2016).

5.1. Taking Notes from History

It is encouraging to know that it is in the post-conflict societies that the opportunity for changing roles and practices is present and indeed this fact is backed by the recent history as well. Guatemalan refugee women's organizations have remained instrumental in making significant influences on their member's lives. These organizations, from the very beginning took strong roots among refugee women. A significant example of this comes from Guatemala. In 1990, the Guatemalan refugee women formed the organization Mama Maquin. The organization was established in 1990 to organize spaces in which women could meet and discuss issues important to them. The organization promoted training in literacy, human rights, health and leadership skills. For women who were part of the group, their world became larger and their self-confidence grew leaps and bounds (Kumar 2001). The group helped UN High Commissioner for Refugees to conduct a survey of women's needs in some sixty refugee camps and aided the development of programs focused on job skills, education, health, and human rights (Kellogg 2005, p. 123).

Another example worth mentioning comes from Bosnia and the conflict that led to the disintegration of the Former Yugoslavia. Faced with a series of brutal wars and nationalist outbursts in the early 1990s, women of the Former Yugoslavia responded by strengthening the feminist movement and constituting a leading majority in regional anti-war activities (Lukić 2011). The voices of gendered nationalism silenced and depoliticized women. As a response to this, women's groups integrated across ethnic and national lines in an attempt to promote peace. What was most significant about the peace efforts in the states of former Yugoslavia was the organization of women's groups in the civilian population. These groups encompassing all types of associations often started in informal circumstances, probably not distinct from social group meetings in anyone's apartment. The fact that reconciliation efforts require the inclusion of all those concerned was rightly understood by women's groups in the former Yugoslavia. They reached out to over half the population and recreated the civil society that had been destroyed by the ongoing war (Hudson and Bowman 2011).

With these extraordinary stories of women's courage and resilience present right before us, there is no justification to the politics of keeping women out of peace negotiations and post conflict rehabilitation processes of their states.

5.2. *The Lessons of War on Gender*

Experts in the area of conflict resolution hold the opinion that non-state actors are key players in conflicts and the process of resolving it. This thought has produced different approaches in conflict analysis and prevention. The new concepts around conflict prevention emphasize the role of women and civil society as well as coordination between them and the governments, in order to generate multi-layered and comprehensive capacities (Sherwood 2016). It is also encouraging to see the post-war progress made by conflict-ridden states in the area of women, peace, and security as a testimony of the fact that the international community has learned its lessons and is significantly moving towards gender mainstreaming of peace processes critical for women. The following are some of the notable examples:

- The African Union Commission introduced its five year Gender, Peace, and Security Programme in June 2014 in order to promote women's participation and protection in conflict and post-conflict situations across the continent. The programme was designed to provide a framework for the development of strategies and mechanisms for facilitating women's participation for the promotion of peace and security (Abdulmelik 2016).
- Twenty years after the Rwandan genocide, in the year 2013, their parliament had the highest ratio of female parliamentarians in the world standing at astonishing 63.8 percent (UN Women 2017).
- In 2006, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf was elected Liberia's first female President. She was the winner of the Nobel Peace Prize as well. Her ten yearlong Presidency faced the challenge of re-building a country savaged by civil war, corruption, debts, and finally the deadly Ebola outbreak (Forbes Magazine 2016).
- In Afghanistan, the 2014 presidential and provincial elections saw an all-time high, 300 women stood as candidates for provincial councils. At present there are 69 female MPs in Afghanistan, i.e., 27.7 percent of a total of 249. Though the country is still in the grip of several forms of conflicts, it is seen a positive change that is anticipated of bringing peace to the region (Calfas 2015).
- The constitutional reforms that came after Kenya's post-election violence in 2008 gave women the opportunity to bring constitutional gender specific reforms and strengthen the constitutional provisions (Kanyinga and Long 2012).

There are countless other stories of women doing extraordinary things to bring normalcy back in their lives and communities. From Bosnia to Congo to the more recent accounts of the women of Myanmar or female Yazidi fighters; contemporary armed conflicts and post-conflict societies have shown just how any initiative for peace will not achieve the same until it invites women at the table as well.

5.3. *Policy Recommendation*

The starting point for gender mainstreaming is to acknowledge that a policy already exists and it only needs to be reorganized to enable the integration of a gender perspective into it. The gender mainstreaming and sensitizing of a policy can be done by including a gender perspective, first in initial appraisals, mission statements, and action plans, which may subsequently permeate to the guidelines and manuals prepared afterwards and also in the management responsibilities. Moreover, accountability of each actor involved in this dimension must be sought from all. When gender is integrated into all peace-building activities, the stakeholders and professionals will think differently (Olsson and Gizelis 2015).

In order to bring women, as active participants at the peace table, some mandatory preparations are required—raising awareness, mobilization, network building, and advocacy for the implementation of international instruments such as United Nations Security Council resolutions. Another significant thing here is to identify who do these women at the peace table actually represent—a political party, a State or an autonomous organization? Hence for an effective participation, their ideologies should be

known and clear. For example, women participating on behalf of a political party, may come with a nationalistic agenda instead of a feminist one (Cohn 2013).

If the presence of patriarchy or the male-dominated gender order, is the primary factor in making violent societies or normalizing conflicts, and is one among the other causes of war, then to achieve peace, a transformative change in gender relations needs to be worked for. This has to be done not just as an option, but as a fundamental part of the road to peace. So therefore, re-ordering gender roles is necessary for peace and the struggle against the patriarchal sex-gender order is itself an initiative for peace (Cockburn 2014). The narrative of war commonly put forward always fetches the image of 'women as victims' only. Eventually, that takes away their agency and leaves them unheard in the rebuilding of their country. Along with this, it must also be made clear that women's experiences as victims of a conflict facing specific patterns of a particular form of violence and their active participation in peace building are no two mutually exclusive aspects and need to be recognized together when negotiating peace (Kaufman and Williams 2010).

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