

Term Paper for Module D 2004

Does the presence of large number of women in refugee population in South Asia indicate their lack of control over resources? Comment.

By Deeptima Massey

(I take this question to mean what is women's position in the refugee camps and how they lack control over resources at the resettlement sites. I sent an email asking to reframe the title, but did not get a response on the same, therefore the essay is written according to my viewpoint)

Women form a large part of the refugee movement in South Asia. Some are internally displaced while many more cross borders and move to the neighbouring countries. For examples, almost 150 Bangladeshi women face forced displacement every day, nearly 150,000 women are trafficked into Japan each year. Sri Lanka recorded 45,597 (72 per cent) refugee women in 2002. More than 250,000 Burmese Rohingya refugee women fled to Bangladesh in late 1991 and early 1992 (Ruiz, 1992).

Apart from their huge numbers, the movement of refugee women in South Asia have many causal factors. Political upheavals, war, repression, social violence and persecution have been the common ones. Partition became the main force for refugee movement in 1947. The announcement of the new borders caused the greatest migration in human history as millions of Muslims left India for Pakistan while millions of Hindus left Pakistan for India (CBC News. 2004). Women continue to flee from Tibet to India because of forced birth control policies, state encouragement of prostitution and harassment of nuns (Hans, 2003,367).

In recent years, new causes for movement of women as refugees have been added. Education has been a powerful factor for Sri Lankans seeking refugee in India. The controversial Tehri dam project is internally displacing more than 125 villages with a population of 80,000 including large number of women and children in India. Apart from the tehri dam, till January 2004 over 30 million people have been displaced in India owing to mines, industry or wildlife sanctuaries. Large-scale development induced displacement is also taking place in Pakistan. With the initiation of projects on construction of dams at Terbel, Mngla and Kaptai large volume of families including women and children have to be resettled. The displaced were given very little compensation for the loss of their homes and agricultural land (Refugee Watch). Women seeking protection from rising family violence and divorce have been also been forced to leave their homeland and move to an alien neighbour. For example, large number of refugee women leave from Bangladesh into neighbouring India, Thailand and Japan against the torture and sexual assault they overcome from their husbands. Many of them are divorced and widowed.

It can be argued that due to large-scale movement of refugee women, the government finds it difficult to allocate resources. But at the same time it can be agreed upon that these women also face gender discrimination with limited access to basic resources. The paper seeks to review examples from various parts of South Asia to show that numbers do not matter in allocation of resources. Rather it is their gender specific needs which women have right to but are deprived of at the resettlement sites. In waves of migration and refugee movements, women have grossly lacked access to adequate food and basic health services. Within the ambit of limited resources, women also become vulnerable to violence and physical insecurities.

Gender specific needs

Shelter, basic sanitation, water and other support services are essential for survival of all human beings including refugee women. But no justice has been done in making these resources available for them in the camps. It is true that most refugee camps are huge with teeming number of refugees. But at the same time the inadequacy of access to resources is not because of their numbers. This is largely on grounds of their specific needs for survival, which the camp fails to provide. As an example, Chakma refugee women are forced to leave the camps due to lack of toilets and fuel wood. They confessed that due to inadequate sanitation, they consumed less water, which later led to health problems (Chaudhury, 2003). For the Afghan refugee women, it is all the more vulnerable. They have to practice *purdah* (screen or veil). It secludes them from public observation by wearing concealing clothing from head to toe and by the use of high walls, curtains, and screens erected within the home. This is a cultural constraint which increases their potential to increased risk in refugee camps. They are not able to go to the toilet during the day time. During night, women in veils leave their camps to go to the toilet. They face attack and risk renal problems at that time. In winter it is very cold in Kabul, women have to make their way out living in chill within the temporary shelters (BBC News, 2001).

Every day provides challenges to the refugee women in terms of finding cooking fuel, carrying water many time for several miles. In Sri Lankan refugee camps kerosene is not always available. Therefore women find it difficult to cook and make their basic needs met. Widowed women have the added burden of children. They do not enjoy any special benefits from the government (Hans, 2003:370).

According to Dilip Kumar Ray, a well-known worker in Arunachal Pradesh camps, the situation was inhuman. Health, hygiene and sanitation in the camp were so poor that mortality rates, especially for women and children were very high (Hans, 2003, 365). In another case, Shekhar Singh presented findings from World Commission on Dams focussing on social impact of dams on women. He concluded that irrigation projects released water only at night making it difficult for women to access the benefits of irrigation schemes. So even if women get land from the project they eventually end up selling it off to male members of society (2002, 4).

Malnutrition is common to women refugees in general. Lack of food adds to their problems who live in temporary makeshift sheds. Chakma refugees cook worst quality of rice available and feed their children. Women find it difficult to cook during monsoons, as there is no kitchen. Refugees at Kathalchhari camps in Tripura have virtually been denied of food. Ration supplies to the refugees became infrequent since mid-1992 (Chaudhury, 2003,273). Here the role of state becomes crucial as they are deliberately deprived of access to basic resource.

Cutting off food supplies and other minimum necessities for refugee women has been leading to health problems. There was an outbreak of malignant malaria in Arunachal Pradesh, India in 1994 and 1995 causing death of 200 Chakmas. Social tension arises from the insecurity of food and lack of work opportunities for a large number of coastal people in southwestern Bangladesh (Guhathakurta, 2003, 6).

Inadequate medical care for women has also been hampering the survival of refugee women. The local government at many refugee camps in Bangladesh, Tibet and India have failed to launch any immunization programme for women and children. Further hampering health, the Taliban destroyed public education posters and other health information. This left many women, in a society already plagued by massive illiteracy, without basic health care information (Taliban's War against Women, 2001).

Physical Insecurities

Caught in the labyrinth of limited resources and support services, along with social and economic boycott from resources, women refugees become exposed to physical insecurities. According to Samaddar (1999,40) women are the most abused of refugees and the most unwanted migrants. They are victims of gender specific violence.

Since they are forced to leave their homes, many of them carry the burden of moving into an alien land with unfamiliar language and customs. Within this shock, they have to adjust themselves with further role changes. This increases their vulnerability all the more. The Pakistan based Lawyers for Human Rights and Legal Aid estimates that as many as 150 Bangladeshi women are forced into international trafficking each day. Women in shrimp areas of Bangladesh are caught by police and smuggled across the border to be sold as housemaids and prostitutes in India, Pakistan and the Middle East. Among the most common types of insecurity, which faced women in these areas, were rape, threat, false cases, cattle lifting, physical torture (Guhathakurta, 2003, 6).

Without enough food, fuel wood and shelter, refugee women are compelled to leave the resettlement site. Chakma refugees have been continuously facing sexual violence. Women between the age of 13 and 60, while on the move to India were raped by Bangladesh Army troops and Bengali muslims (Hans, 2003, 366). Even the local population of Arunachal Pradesh molested these refugees. Women in Bhutan have been hit badly by government repression. There are 156 rape victims in Bhutanese refugee camps as per the records of CVICT Nepal (Sharma, 2003, 224). Apart from rape, most women at the resettlement sites also have to tolerate their alcoholic husbands. Gazdar (2003) laments that cultural norms that ostracise women make them vulnerable to extreme forms of trafficking. He illustrates on sex work, forced marriage and sale of women from India and Burma to Pakistan. Casual prostitution has become a way of survival for the Afghan refugee women.

Conclusion

Women as refugee are on the move in South Asia. Most of them move in large groups. But whether they move individually or in groups, access to resources is their essential right. They are not only deprived of control over resources, but they also do not have limited access to them. Moreover they are discriminated on grounds of gender and many a times consider to be a burden on the economy. A large percentage of them spend time in camps that are crowded and frequently unsanitary. Women's issues such as basic needs of food and shelter and sanitation are not looked upon at the grass root level. These are sensitive issues and require more attention. It needs to be ensured that women have special needs and they should not be forgotten. Adequate funds also need to be generated to provide services and resources to women.

Refugee women are at greater risk than other women for several harmful reproductive health outcomes as a result of their migration experience. Health and medical care is therefore an essential resource for women. At most resettlement sites women lack access to reproductive health services. Provision of hospitals and health campaigns is the basic requirement for them.

Security in camps should be increased so that women are not exposed to violence and persecution. It is also important to give leadership to them that will enable them to have control over resources. Enrolling them in decision-making process will reap greater benefits for them. The state must fulfil its obligations to share responsibility of making basic services available for the refugee women irrespective of their large numbers. Also, sensitivity to resources and their availability and access to refugee women needs essential attention. This can be initiated by giving equal status to women along with men and empowering them to have open access to resources.

Bibliography

- BBC News. 2001. Afghan Refugee Women at Risk. http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/south_asia/1630970.stm
- CBC news, 2004, India and Pakistan: Border on the Brink http://www.cbc.ca/news/background/india_pakistan/
- Chaudhury, Sabyasachi Basu Ray. 2003. 'Uprooted Twice: Refugees from the Chittagong Hill Tracts' in R. Samaddar (ed.) *Refugees and the State: Practices of Asylum and Care in India, 1947-2000*. New Delhi: Sage.
- Gazdar, H. 2003. 'A Review of Migration Issues in Pakistan'. DFID-RMMRU Conference on Migration, Development and Pro-poor Policy Choices in Asia, Dhaka, 22-24 June 2003.
- Guhathakurta, M. 2003. Globalization, Class and Gender Relations: The Shrimp Industry in South-western Bangladesh, in Poverty and Governance: RAWOO Lectures and 25th Anniversary Conference, Netherlands Development Assistance Research Council, November 2003.
- Hans, A. 2003 'Refugee Women and Children: Need for Protection and Care' in R. Samaddar (ed.) *Refugees and the State: Practices of Asylum and Care in India, 1947-2000*. New Delhi: Sage.
- Refugee Watch, Development Induced Displacement in Pakistan, http://www.safhr.org/refugee_watch15_3.htm
- Ruiz, H.A. 1992. Burmese Rohingya Refugee Women in Bangladesh, http://www.refugeesusa.org/store/individual1.cfm?item_id=835
- Samaddar, R. 1999 *The Marginal Nation: Transborder Migration from Bangladesh to West Bengal*. New Delhi: Sage.
- Sharma, U. 2003 *Women in South Asia: Employment, Empowerment and Human Development*. Delhi: Authorspress.
- Taliban's War Against Women. 2001. Report Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor. November 17, 2001.
-

Does the presence of large numbers of women in any given refugee population in South Asia indicate their lack of control over resources? Comment.

By Shahzada M. Akram

It is estimated that more than 21 million people have been forced to cross internationally recognised borders in order to escape human rights abuses. More than 80% of the world refugees are made up of women and their dependent children. An overwhelming majority of these women comes from the developing world. South Asia happens to be the fourth largest refugee-producing region in the world. In 1999 the estimated number of refugees in this region was 2,014,189.^[i] Moreover, a large number of people are rendered homeless within their respective countries in this region. A majority of these refugees as well as the internally displaced persons are made up of women.^[ii]

The presence of women in such a large number in a particular group of people indicates the gendered aspect of this issue. It has been shown that refugee women experience displacement and dislocation in a different way to male refugees. It has been argued that their gender often functions to their disadvantage.^[iii] The high proportion of women in a given refugee population indicates the magnitude of vulnerability and insecurity the refugee women face primarily in the refugee producing countries. However, this short paper is aimed to look into the matter to a different point of view. This paper will concentrate on the issue of resource politics, and discuss whether their lack of control over resources has any role in the creation of such a large number of women refugees especially in this region.

In order to assess whether this has a role, it is better to first understand the socio-economic position of women in general in this region. The socio-economic position of women in the region is determined by a set of social relations. This defines their position in the family, and economic power in relation to distribution and control over productive assets and opportunities. Women's roles are generally extremely traditional and the emphasis is given to child rearing and household management. It is expected that women will look after the husband, their children, the husband's parents and other aged members, cook meals and feed the family members, clean clothes and dishes, and clean floor and yard of the house. In general, women are brought up in a protective environment, which leads to their subjugation under male domination. As a result, their potential

becomes limited to the conventional gender roles. In most cases, women are still not considered to hold control of economic resources and are often deprived of legitimate inheritance of their parents' or husbands' properties. Therefore, they rarely own properties such as land, homestead or business. They are not actually perceived as actively participating in income generation activities.[\[iv\]](#) As a result they are usually not engaged in the decision-making process of the family.

The issue of lack of control over resources by the women refugees can be observed at two stages – before displacement, and after displacement. Before displacement, as we have already come to know, that in general women do not have formal access to resources. These may include property, cash, education, skill, employment, sanitation and healthcare facilities and so on that are needed to subsistence. As a result when an emergency arises, it is mostly males who decide when to leave and where to flee. Such decisions are taken in a situation when all other avenues have been exhausted and no options are left other than to flee. As the traditional gender role suggests that women are to look after the children and other family members, women along with children and elderly are often sent to safe places, and/or males leave women behind to look after properties and protect assets and/or join belligerent forces back in the source country.[\[v\]](#)

Being women is also another cause for displacement and becoming refugees. Most often the oppressing agency takes the strategy to systematically make women leave a country through undertaking means of gender specific violence such as rape, abduction, physical abuse etc. Women refugees face such abuse before, during and after displacement, and after resettlement. In such cases, it has been observed that access to resources may not play any role in preventing the oppressing forces.[\[vi\]](#)

Access to information is another important issue in this regard. It has been seen that in case of development induced displacements, women are always denied information on specific projects and their components and therefore, they are unable to make informed choices.[\[vii\]](#) It has also been argued that since women are not owners of land, they are ignored during the land acquisition and resettlement process. In case of refugee women, this problem is extremely important.

In the post displacement situation women's access to resources becomes much reduced. There they are faced with multi-faceted problems. Upon becoming refugees, for all refugee women, regardless of location, some issues appear to be common. They remain responsible for most domestic activities, whether in Third World camps or in industrialised countries. Women often find themselves as heads of households, with no husbands or older children to help support the families. They are to secure the common needs like food, shelter, clothing and medical care for the families. Women become targets of sexual and physical abuse in the resettlement sites. They are often forced to give sexual favours to male refugees who have the authority to distribute rations in the refugee camps.[\[viii\]](#) Even without payment in sexual favour, food distribution is highly iniquitous. As a result, women heads of households often receive fewer food rations, and they and their children have higher rates of malnutrition than the families headed by males. Women are often in charge of caring for the most vulnerable refugees, the young, the sick, and the elderly, even though they may be vulnerable themselves.[\[ix\]](#)

Women refugees in South Asia have often been denied of employment. Their freedom of movement both within and outside the refugee camps has been curtailed. This has been due to the more closed social culture within the camps (as seen in case of the Muslim Rohingya and Sri Lankan refugee women).[\[x\]](#) Refugee women have often been used as sources of subsistence for the refugee family (Rohingya women bear more children to receive more ration).[\[xi\]](#) It has been shown that women as refugees seldom have any decision making power due to the absence of gender sensitive policy in terms of resettlement and rehabilitation, allocation of resources and management of rehabilitation process. All these have made refugee women dependent on their male counterparts.[\[xii\]](#)

The gender bias particularly in South Asian societies makes the issues of refugee women unattended. In resettlement processes, women's interests are systematically ignored as transactions are undertaken with male members. As a result, women's needs with regard to water, fuel, and fodder are ignored in terms of subsistence allowances. Gender biases are reflected in services provided at resettlement sites. Most resettlement sites lack proper sanitation, privacy, and access to facilities that have a direct bearing on the welfare of women. It has been argued that this has been a reflection of the gender bias within the society. [\[xiii\]](#)

From the above discussion one may conclude that both before and after displacement women refugees in South Asia have to face gender biases in terms of control over resources. However, to this end, the following issues can be raised vis-à-vis this notion of 'control'.

- It has been observed that in reality women in South Asia have no access to resources in the situations of forced displacement. So the issue of control over resources actually comes much later.
- The issue of access and/or control over resources does not matter much when the oppressive agency(ies) choose to implement its policy of making certain group of people displaced.

- The South Asian states lack of proper gendered policy with regard to resettlement and rehabilitation of refugees and the displaced population. So the issue may be raised to what extent refugee women can influence the policy makers in another country to adopt gender-sensitive policies.
- Access to information is an important criterion for refugee women in terms of receiving asylum, proper care and services. However, such information is not readily available to this group both before and after displacement. Therefore, information can be considered a resource, access to which may bring positive changes to the condition of refugee women.

[i] UNHCR 1999, and Report of the US Committee on Refugees 1998.

[ii] Syed Sikander Mehdi, "Chronicles of Sufferings." *Refugee Watch*, Nos. 10 & 11 July, 2000, pp. 33-34. Refugee women and children form 76 percent of the total refugee population in Pakistan, 79 percent in India, 73 percent in Bangladesh and 87 per cent in Nepal.

[iii] Mekondjo Kaapanda and Sherene Fenn, 'Dislocated Subjects: The Story of Refugee Women'. http://www.safhr.org/refugee_watch10&11_8.htm

[iv] Meghna Guhathakurta, 'Globalization, Class and Gender Relations: The Shrimp Industry in South-western Bangladesh', undated.

[v] Kate de Rivero, 'War and its Impact on Women in Sri Lanka'. http://www.safhr.org/refugee_watch10&11_4.htm

[vi] Jagat Achariya, 'Agony Continues: Refugee Women of Bhutan', and Soma Ghosal, 'Rohingya Women: Stateless and Oppressed from Burma'. http://www.safhr.org/refugee_watch10&11_5.htm

[vii] The case of resettlement of the displaced during construction of the Jamuna Multipurpose Bridge in Bangladesh,

[viii] S Rozana Rashid, (unpublished), 'A Comparative Study of Vulnerabilities and Coping Mechanisms of Rohingya and Chakma Internally Displaced Women', Bangladesh Freedom Foundation, Dhaka.

[ix] Arpita Basu Roy, 'Afghan Women in Iran'. http://www.safhr.org/refugee_watch10&11_6.htm Paula Banerjee, 'Dislocating Women and Making the Nation'. http://www.safhr.org/refugee_watch17_1.htm

[x] Rashid, *op cit.* and Rivero, *op cit.*

[xi] *Ibid.*

[xii] Mohammed Asif, Lyla Mehta and Harsh Mander, 2002, Report of the workshop titled *Engendering Resettlement and Rehabilitation Policies and Programmes in India*.

[xiii] *Ibid.* As referred by Lyla Mehta, "male biases in society help perpetuate gender inequality in terms of unequal resource allocation and distribution and also legitimise silencing of women's interests. On the other hand, biases within state institutions, structures and policies dealing with displacement and resettlement and rehabilitation help perpetuate and exacerbate these inequalities". She maintained that gender bias in resettlement is often manifested through non-recognition of women's ownership of land. For example, in Sardar Sarovar project, women with land titles (*patta*) were not given land for land. Finally, she held that privatization and globalisation not just militate against people's sovereignty but also promote a development model that increases displacement.