

Refugee camps as a site of violence: An exploration into violence against women in Kalindi Kunj camp.

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Abstract

For the past several decades, scholars working in the field of migration, gender-based violence and refugee studies have often shed light on the difficult conditions experienced by refugees living in the camps. Although camps are established to provide temporary shelter along with protective environments for refugees in host countries, refugees still can experience various risks in such encampments. The pilot study I did in late December of 2019 gave me a glimpse of the problems faced by the residents of the Kalindi Kunj refugee camp. The camp hosts Rohingya refugees, who fled the ethnic genocide that happened to them by the Burmese military. Insufficient funds, limited economic livelihood, restricted opportunities for political participation and confined living conditions are just some of the issues experienced by them. Another prevailing problem that they face is violence. Even though all residents of the camp have encountered violence, females of the camp are at a high risk of being exposed to gender-specific threats of violence, such as sexual abuse. This threat is central to this paper which is inspired by the work of Ulrike Krause on 'Violence Against Women in the Congolese refugee in a camp in Uganda'. Similarly, the paper here is also attempting to reveal the forms and scopes of gender-based violence- sexual violence, domestic violence and structural discrimination faced by the female residents of the camp and their relation to the camp's site and situation.

For understanding the gendered experience of the women, the paper is using the qualitative

methods of ethnography and case study. For conducting interviews the paper is using a method of semi-structured interview but is also relying on informal conversational interview with no predetermined question in order to remain open and adaptable to the needs and priorities of interviewees.

KEY WORDS: Migration, Refugee, Violence, Sexual abuse

Introduction

Gender and displacement may intersect in various ways. In many instances, armed conflicts and ethnic wars are seen as reasons to flee and often go along with maltreatment and torture in the home country. Women (/girls) are especially exposed to the specific risks and vulnerabilities due to their gender (Moghadam 1994, Yuval-Davis 1997, Enloe 1993), and become the primary target of systematic employment of rape and sexual violence (Cohen 2013, and Wood 2018). This made people migrate forcefully, whether temporary or permanent, as an important strategy adopted by people in dire situations of man-made or natural disasters.

Discriminatory policies of the Burmese government since the late 1970s have forced thousands of Muslim Rohingyas to flee their home and seek refuge in the lands nearby them such as Bangladesh, while others have taken sea to Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia. Some of them began arriving in India during the 1970s and are now scattered all over the country, with many living for decades in squalid camps (Albert and Maizland 2020).

Over the last many decades from the 1970s and due to the latest explosion of brutal attacks against the Rohingya community in 2017, more than half of their women and children have fled or displaced, making them stay in makeshift camps, which falls below international standards. Gender-based violence (GBV) has been a central component of the genocidal campaign waged by the Burmese military and security forces against the Rohingya ethnic community (MacGregor 2017, Sultana 2018). Rohingya Muslim women have suffered indescribable gendered violence at the hand of Buddhist men, including many military and police personnel also. Even men directly under state authority have been protected and sheltered by the state government (Siaci 2019). This shows that the intention of the military attacks against this community was to acquire land

and evict them permanently from their homeland. Ferris (2007) in 'Abuse of Power: Sexual Exploitation of Refugee Women and Girls' discussed that sexual violence is often used as a tool of war, which signifies that women and girls often flee their communities because of fear of gender based violence. She furthered that women are also often exposed to gendered acts of violence and exploitation from various actors during their flight. This pattern of gendered based violence (/sexual violence) often continues in refugee camps. Even though all residents of the camp have encountered violence, females of the camp are at a high risk of being exposed to gender-specific threats of violence, such as sexual abuse. Ferris also said the breakdown of social and cultural norms as prevalent in their homelands consequently makes women and girls more vulnerable or at risk of domestic and community violence (2007).

Keeping this as point of departure of the paper, the paper will attempt to explore and reveal the various forms of gender based violence - sexual, domestic and structural discrimination faced by the female residents of the Rohingya camp of Kalindi Kunj, New Delhi. Moreover, the camp residents are mostly cramped into unstable living structures mostly in low lying areas susceptible to natural disasters, and generally have poor access to hygienic basic necessities and basic healthcare (Amnesty International 2019, O'Chab 2017 and Miko 2019), making their lives more unstable and insecure. Inspired by this paper will also attempt to bring forth intersection of site and situation of the camp to the various forms of discrimination (/exploitation) experienced by women of the camp.

Women in the refugee camps

Rohingya Issue

The Rohingya are a Muslim minority group in Rakhine State, which occupies the western coast of Myanmar. An estimated one million Rohingya live in Rakhine State, primarily in the northern townships (Szep and Marshall 2013). Upon achieving independence from England in 1948, Myanmar struggled with armed ethnic conflict and political instability during a prolonged period of political reformation (Human Right Watch 2012). In 1962, a military coup produced a one-party, military state informed by socialist notions of governance—it would last for more than sixty years (Human Right Watch 2012).

During that time, the Burmese army committed numerous human rights abuses, such as killing, raping, and torturing the state's Rohingya Muslim population (discussed by Abdelkader 2013). Notably, the army subjected the group to mass expulsions in 1977 and 1992 creating what has been widely viewed as a chronic refugee crisis in neighbouring Bangladesh (Human Right Watch 2012). After the passage of the 1982 Citizenship Act, Rohingyas have been denied equal access to citizenship. The Act officially recognizes 135 "national races" that qualify for citizenship. The Rohingyas Muslims are not included on that list and as such are denied the full benefits of citizenship on account of what the Burmese government has described as their "nonindigenous ancestry." Widespread societal prejudice against the group informs the historical (and contemporary) lack of political will to repeal the law (Abdelkader 2013, Ibrahim 2018).

The persecution of the Rohingya Muslim minority community of the Rakhine state in Myanmar is an issue that garnered a great deal of international attention after the general election of 2015, which brought Nobel Peace Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi to power in the country (Albert and Maizland 2020). Again in the beginning of 2017, with reports of renewed violence, including mass rapes, murders and arson, triggered another phase of mass exodus of Rohingyas to rescue themselves from the 'genocidal repression' by Myanmar's security forces. Many Rohingyas walked for days and took dangerous sea journeys to reach places of safety, including Bangladesh. Now more than 900,000 people have been staying in the Cox Bazar region of Bangladesh (UNHRC, 13 July 2022). Rohingyas have also sought refuge in other neighbouring countries including India. India has a population of 21000 Rohingyas staying in various camps. Kalindi Kunj is one such camp. Kalindi Kunj camp is located 200 metres away from Kalindi Kunj metro station in New Delhi.

Kalindi Kunj Refugee Camp : Site and Situation

The term 'camp' comes from the Latin term campus meaning 'open field, level space' and was originally associated with open spaces for military exercise, defined spatially as a field that is set apart from other space. These were areas that were at once open and closed (Hailey 2009: 3), enclosed and transgressed (Diken 2004). A refugee camp, although the concept is 'temporary set up' by definition, is meant for sheltering and protecting refugees for a short period, in reality, the

lifespan of these refugee camps exceeds the expected time. In real life, for many displaced persons, the only home they have known is the camp; as many displaced persons spent more than a decade living as refugees in these temporary settlements (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in Kenya, cited by Harrouk 2021, Aburamadan et al. 2020).

‘These spaces, unlivable to a certain extent, due to the increasing refugee crisis at unprecedented levels in recent years, have been seen shifting from temporary to semi-permanent or quasi-permanent (Petee 2005) dwellings. Camps are often located far from cities and other centres, and are clearly demarcated—often fenced—defining a distinction between the inside and the outside. Even in cases where camps are unfenced and located in cities, the distinction between the inside and the outside persists.

Harrouk (2021) argued that even these spaces face a lot of challenges like infrequent water supply, harsh climate, poverty and others, due to the arrival of huge numbers of people some of them quickly became alienated slums. Agier (2008) and Hart et al (2018) concur that camps as places are becoming like an enduring organisation of everyday life exhibiting peculiar social life and processes, and systems of power. Such camps, as argued by Aburamadan et al. (2020) are transitioning into a hybrid ephemeral place that embeds both quality of temporary living space as well as qualities of evolving into a permanent dwelling place having its own social and cultural qualities, like an informal city.

Kalindi Kunj camp, also known by various names such as Darul Hijrat Camp and Burma Muhajreen Camp. The land that the camp was on is owned by the Zakat Foundation of India, an Islamic charitable foundation. The camps were first built by the Rohingyas themselves on the land provided in 2012, where most of the residents have been ever since. (Human Rights Law Network 2018). This camp held 46 families, with a total population of approximately 228 people, in extremely cramped conditions. There were narrow, dark lanes between the rows of shanty towns. Each family had a tent where the entire family would sleep in one to two rooms, with no gas, electricity, or running water. Many families were cooking on open fires within their tents. There was no clean running water in the camp. Residents built hand pumps, where they would pump water from the underground pipelines, despite this water being highly unsanitary and dangerous to drink. The hand pumped water is used for bathing, washing cooking utensils,

and washing clothes. In terms of personal bathing, there is a total lack of privacy (Human Rights Law Network 2018).

The condition of the camps is unsanitary, overcrowded with unsatisfactory housing quality and dangerous (/insecure). Life quality of people living in the refugee is hazardous and poor due to above- mentioned problems as well as due to its location alongside road, nearby sewage drainage and on the low land. Surviving in such conditions with limited access to sanitary systems, water and hygienic space pose a serious threat to the life and well-being of women, who stay all in their household.

Scholarship on refugee crisis and displacement have found that above mentioned conditioned causes psychological distress which can lead to sexual/gender based violence, domestic violence and intimate partner violence (discussed by Jensen 2019) . Jasinski (2001) mentioned that, fundamentally violence becomes a way to reduce /eradicate feelings of helpness.

Rohingya Women in Refugee Camp : Voices from Kalindi Kunj

Conclusion

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