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The Debilitating Effect of Conflict on the Female Gender: The Syrian Conflict in Focus

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ABSTRACT: *In times of war, members of the same society face very different challenges. The impact of war on someone will vary according to factors such as age, social class, and gender. What appears to have taken centre stage in the discussion of the Syrian conflict is the impact of the conflict on children and the dangers threatening their everyday lives. Children however are not the only vulnerable members of society at war. Syrian women also face extremely adverse conditions. This paper sets out to analytically x-ray the plight of women in conflict situations with particular reference to the Syrian crisis. It finds amongst other things that women are indeed the most vulnerable in war times and it recommends amongst other things that strive for the protection of the vulnerable in war times and conflict prone zones is a quest that must be sought.*
Keywords: *Debilitating, Effect, Conflict, Female Gender, Syria, Focus*

I. Introduction

In times of war, members of the same society face very different challenges. The impact of war on someone will vary according to factors such as age, social class, and gender. What appears to have taken centre stage in the discussion of the Syrian conflict is the impact of the conflict on children and the dangers threatening their everyday lives. Children however are not the only vulnerable members of society at war. Syrian women also face extremely adverse conditions. On a broader scale, violence and displacement can alter social networks and roles, which may undermine the ability to cope and lead to family tension, identity crises and psychological distress which is mostly prevalent in women. Additionally, within a refugee context, family roles and gender roles may change dramatically. Many Syrian women have become providers for the household, as well caring for their families, as their husbands are absent, wounded or disabled, or have died, UN (2013). These additional responsibilities, combined with feelings of lack of security, often create great stress for women, Salmah (2014). Traditional views on gender roles or stereotypes about refugees from Syria can also put great pressure on refugees of both sexes. A study in Lebanon found that many refugee women felt uncomfortable that they had to undertake tasks not previously considered appropriate for women from their community, such as running errands and engaging in paid work, in addition to their roles as caregivers. However, other women reported that that this new situation gave them a sense of empowerment and had provided them with new opportunities that would otherwise not have been available to them, Masri and Harvi (2013). Men, who often ground their identity in their role as the families' main provider of material and financial needs, may experience psychological distress when their ability to provide food or money for their family is disrupted. Moreover, concerns for the safety and security of their families, unemployment, exploitation and working illegally may also lead to major worries among men. Urban refugee men in Jordan frequently mentioned feeling depressed and ashamed of their inability to continue their education, and being forced by circumstance to work in very low paying and/or harsh jobs to help support their families, Mufraq and Amman (2013). Moreover, men, women and children report that these additional stressors exacerbate family tensions and have led to increased domestic violence, IRC and Salmah (2014).

Impact of conflict on gender

A range of factors, including ethnicity, age, and occupational group, may affect how people experience conflict more than differences between men and women. Nevertheless, there is consistent evidence that women, men, girls and boys experience conflict differently, and that conflict has differential impacts on men and women.

Gender-based violence (GBV) and violence against women and girls (VAWG)

Gender-based violence (GBV) is violence targeted at individuals or groups on the basis of their gender. Violence against Women and Girls (VAWG) is directed specifically at females. While VAWG is considered to be a useful proxy indicator of rising tensions and incipient conflict; ensuing violence and armed conflict themselves can exacerbate gender-based violence. Isolated case studies have documented how women experience multiple types of violence as a result of war. Recorded cases of young women who returned from abduction into the Lord's Resistance Army in northern Uganda, many of whom were forcibly given as 'wives' to

commanders, indicate links between different forms of violence and discrimination. These women experienced physical and sexual violence in an armed group, verbal and physical abuse from extended family members, and from intimate partners (Annana & Brierb, 2010).

It has been increasingly emphasised that sexual violence cannot be seen merely as an inevitable 'by-product' of war and insecurity, but deserves specific attention as a strategy of war and as a form of insecurity. In addition, Wood (2009, cited in Sudhakar & Kuehnast, 2011) finds that whether sexual violence occurs during conflict depends partly on the dynamics of armed groups (their policies and strength of command structure), which may either tolerate sexual violence or forbid and punish such acts. Evidence also suggests that while women and girls are more likely to be victims of sexual and gender based violence (SGBV), SGBV against men and boys is also widespread during conflict (Sivakumaran, 2010). Anderlini (2011) finds that the long-term impact of SGBV committed in conflict is rarely addressed. Such impacts include undermining reconciliation efforts and rehabilitation (particularly of victims), fuelling retributive violence, and higher rates of sexual disease, including HIV/AIDS, among rape victims. In Rwanda, for example, HIV prevalence in rural areas rose from 1 percent prior to the genocide in 1994 to 11 percent in 1997 (UNAIDS, WHO, cited in Anderlini, 2011). A study based on female and male combatants who experienced sexual violence in Liberia found that they had worse mental health outcomes than non-combatants and former combatants who had not suffered from SGBV (Johnson et al., 2008, cited in Buvinic, Das Gupta, Casabonne, & Verwimp, 2013). It is important to track these longer term impacts in order to assess the full consequences of violent conflict and to design appropriate interventions (Johnson et al., 2008, cited in Buvinic et al., 2013): more data and research are needed. Much of the literature emphasises that the end of armed conflict may not necessarily end SGBV. People's experiences of violence may lead them to view violence as normal (Harders, 2011). Rather than representing an isolated event, such violence can more appropriately be seen as a point along a continuum (Sudhakar & Kuehnast, 2011). Many post-conflict societies experience high levels of sexual and domestic violence (Schäfer, 2013). This is closely tied to the issue of masculinities and identity. Male ex-combatants, who return, traumatised, to few economic opportunities and to changed gender roles (stemming from the conflict) may see SGBV as a way to re-establish male domination (Schäfer, 2013; Sudhakar & Kuehnast, 2011). Reducing gender-based violence in post-conflict situations requires action to: increase educational and economic opportunities and the accountability of the criminal justice system, minimise substance abuse, and improve the coping mechanisms of families and individuals exposed to extreme violence (Annana & Brierb, 2010). Women and girls are not the sole targets of such violence; there are also reports of assaults on other men and armed robbery (Schäfer, 2013). These issues are exacerbated by the lack of outlets formen to openly express their social, emotional and psychological needs – and for them to be addressed (Myrttinen et al., 2014).

Effect of Sexual and Gender Based Violence

Sexual and gender based violence (SGBV) has increased substantially due to the conflict, MADRE (2014). Many women and girls, and to a lesser extent boys and men, are exposed to SGBV resulting from conflict-related violence, the breakdown of law and order inside Syria, increased poverty, lack of basic needs and safe services, family separation and disruption of traditional social networks and protection mechanisms, IRC and UNHRC (2014). Refugees who have fled to other countries may be safe from conflict-related SGBV, but continue to face other forms of SGBV, including: domestic violence, (UN and IRC; 2014, MEM; 2013, Masterson, Gupta and Ettinger; 2014) sexual violence, early marriage, harassment and isolation, exploitation and survival sex, (IRC; 2014, IRC; 2012, HRW; 2012 and Parker; 2015). Refugees have repeatedly identified rape, and the fear of rape, as a driving motivation to flee the country, UN and US State Department (2013). The psychological and social impacts of SGBV, in particular sexual violence including rape, can be devastating for the survivor, Ellsberg, Jeisen (2008), and may have a ripple effect throughout the family and wider community.[99] Fear of being subjected to abduction, rape and other sexual violence limits women and girls' freedom of movement. In addition to the actual ordeal of suffering sexual violence, women and girls often fear or actually face social ostracism and further repercussions, including: rejection, divorce, abuse and for a minority of cases "honour" crimes" at the hands of family members, UN (2012). Women subjected to arrest or kidnapping are reportedly, frequently stigmatised on release because of presumed sexual abuse. Boys and men who have experienced sexual violence also face negative social consequences. All of these factors increase the risk that sexual violence leads to psychological problems, such as depression and anxiety. Survivors of sexual abuse often experience a combination of feelings, including: injustice, a sense of guilt and self-condemnation.
Domestic violence is reported as among the most common form of SGBV. Forms of domestic violence against women and children are reported to have become more aggressive and common as a result of the conflict. Stress among men is reported to be a major cause of the increase of this form of violence, and as such, MHPSS practitioners should offer evidence based services to men (that have been shown in other contexts) to reduce domestic violence, including anger management and parenting programmes. In addition, as part of the psychosocial services provided to survivors, they should be helped to identify supportive members of their

social network, further, risks of social stigmatisation and further abuse need to be carefully assessed and addressed. Prevalence and associated risks of early marriage have both increased as a result of poverty, insecurity and uncertainty caused by displacement. Both inside Syria, and among refugees from Syria to neighbouring countries, early marriage of girls has become a coping mechanism and is perceived as a means to protect girls and better secure their future when faced with general insecurity, poverty, absence of male family members and uncertainty. However, early marriage may be a significant source of distress for girls, and is often associated with interruption of education, health risks and increased risk of domestic violence, Ouyang (2013). Feelings of abandonment, loss of support from parents and lack of access to resources to meet the demands of being a spouse and a mother may create additional stress in married girls.

Situating the Syrian Conflict within a Geo-Political Context

After the death of (the older Assad) Hafez in 2000, he was succeeded by his son, Bashar al-Assad, who structured his regime along similar power lines to his father. His regime continued to exploit ethnic and sectarian divisions in the country to retain strong political power. He also maintained his party's power through potentially manipulated elections. In both the 2000 and 2007 Syrian presidential elections, other candidates were not permitted to run against him and Bashar received votes in the upper 90th percentile in uncontested elections, BBC (2009) Civil unrest in Syria began in the early spring of 2011 within the context of the Arab Spring protests, a wave of both violent and nonviolent demonstrations, protests, and riots across the wider Arab World. Nationwide protests rallied against Bashar's government, whose forces responded with violent crackdowns, New York Times (2011). The conflict gradually morphed from mass protests to an armed rebellion after months of military sieges. Fighting reached the country's capital Damascus and second major city Aleppo in 2012, and by July 2013, the UN estimated that 90,000 combatants and non-combatants had been killed in the conflict, UNHR (2013). What began as another Arab Spring uprising against an autocratic ruler has since spiralled into a brutal proxy war that has drawn in regional and world powers. From the early stages, Bashar's Shi'a Alawite sect government received technical, financial, military, and political support from Russia, Iran, Iraq, and Shi'a Hezbollah groups, Hafezi and Saul (2013). Support from Russia has been most prominent, and is not surprising considering the two countries' longstanding historical relationship from when Hafez held power. Russia has provided weapons to the Syrian government, launched air strikes against Bashar's opponents and, as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, has repeatedly vetoed draft resolutions that would have left open the possibility of UN sanctions or military intervention against Bashar's government, Gutterman (2012) Meanwhile, the Sunni-dominated opposition has attracted support from international backers such as the United States, Turkey, and Jordan. This coalition is primarily U.S.-led, with funding for arms provision and military training to rebel groups coming from the U.S. and being carried out on the Turkish-Syrian border, as well as in Jordan, New York Post (2013).

While the number of international actors involved and each one's level of involvement in the Syrian civil war is difficult to parse, majority of the international involvement has been organized by Russia and the U.S. Leaders from the two countries have blamed the other in allowing the conflict to persist. U.S. President Barack Obama has accused Russia as the outlier in a, "global coalition organized against the Assad Regime," and that Russia's failure to cooperate in this coalition has hindered a resolution for the civil war in Syria, White House Press Secretary (2015). The resulting proxy-war between the U.S. and Russia has led commentators to characterize the situation in Syria as a "proto-world war with nearly a dozen countries embroiled in overlapping conflicts", Panchan, Al-Mukhar and Lai (2015). With such undisputed permission for Syria to serve as geographic battleground of intense discord between two major international power players, the resulting effects of the original 2011 uprisings have spiralled into chaos, displacement, and insecurity for the people of Syria.

Understanding the Syrian Conflict within a Humanitarian Context

As the conflict unfolded and further transformed from a civil uprising to a full-fledged civil war with heavy international intervention, the conflict's effects on the Syrian population, as well as populations in surrounding countries, have become increasingly detrimental. A number of political leaders, international organizations, and media outlets have named the Syrian conflict as the most significant humanitarian crisis since World War II, Alfred (2015) Estimates of death, both combat deaths and civilian deaths; vary widely with figures ranging from 250,000 to 470,000. Further, the violence has caused millions to flee their homes, with an estimated 45% of the Syrian population displaced, Syrian Centre for Research (2014). For those inside of the country, the UN estimated there were 6.8 million Syrians in need of humanitarian assistance in 2013, with 4.25 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) in 2013 within the country, UN (2013). An emergency to this extent led the UN to estimate that 4 million Syrians were in need of food assistance that year. In the past three years, though, these estimates have skyrocketed. As of March 2016, the UN estimates that there are 13.5 million Syrians in need of humanitarian assistance, with 6.5 million IDPs, UN (2015). While there have been many efforts by the UN, international NGOs, and direct funding from other states to provide humanitarian assistance

internally, many obstacles to delivery have arisen due to restricted access, attacks on humanitarian workers, and lack of response coordination between agencies. While the conflict has had immense effects on civilians who have remained in the country, much attention has been paid to the Syrian population have been made refugees and have been forced to flee their homes for another country. In 2014, the UN estimated around 2.5 million Syrians had fled the country. As of March 2016, this figure has nearly doubled to 4.8 million. With such high numbers of individuals estimated to be in need of assistance, the UN has requested $3.18 billion of aid funding in order to provide sufficient humanitarian assistance and protection to the Syrian refugee population, UN (2015). Majority of Syrian refugees have fled to neighboring countries such as Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey, Iraq, and Egypt. There have been various documented reports on the experiences and adoption of aid programs that UN agencies and the International Rescue Committee (IRC), a global humanitarian aid and development NGO that provides immediate aid and development assistance to refugees and those displaced by war, persecution, or natural disaster. Although this paper largely commodified the impact and suffering caused by the Syrian conflict on women and children, its purpose is not only to demonstrate the immense repercussions that have arisen out of this conflict but also to demonstrate that despite the high level of visibility and attention received by this conflict and attempts to provide humanitarian aid by a variety of organizations, these numbers have continued to rise.

The Undulate Effect of the Conflict on Women: Hierarchy of Vulnerability

A framing that classifies female Syrian refugees as the "most vulnerable" among the general refugee population is also justified and informed by politically legitimized human security and vulnerability discourse. UNSC Resolution 1325 iterated this distinctly heightened burden for women by expressing concern that women and children account for the vast majority of those adversely affected by armed conflict. Additionally, the adoption of this Resolution in general by the UN further solidifies women's categorization of vulnerability at the highest level. The sheer creation and adoption of a policy to recognize women in armed conflict zones as a distinctly vulnerable demographic group provides political legitimacy to the construction of an imagined hierarchy of vulnerability in which these women are placed at the top. Therefore, the discourse of vulnerability found in UNSC Resolution 1325 have informed a framework that allows UN agency and IRC reports to position refugees within a hierarchy that discusses refugee women as the most vulnerable. The UNHCR organizes its dispersal of resettlement aid based on who the report titles the "most vulnerable refugees." In Jordan, 40% of UNHCR financial assistance goes to households that are classified as the "most vulnerable", UN (2015). UN Women makes similar distinctions by recognizing that life is tough for refugees, but women and girls in particular are severely and adversely affected by the effects of conflict. The report states women and girls are more reticent to admit problems, leaving them to, "suffer silently in suffocating tents and experience the worst kinds of exploitation", UN (2015). The IRC paints a similar picture of female Syrian refugees as the distinct group who experiences the most burdens from fleeing conflict. As refugees, the report states, Syrian women have fled all they have known for a stark new reality where the burdens they face have significantly increased, IRC (2015) The implications of this gendered representation of a vulnerability hierarchy are evident in the UN agencies' and IRC's aid programming structure, and impose potentially debilitating implications on the livelihoods of Syrian women refugees, and the Syrian refugee population as a whole. This constructed hierarchy is then applied in practice as the organization utilizes their won hierarchy to distribute resources from their aid programs. The UNHCR report implements this hierarchy in terms of the economic assistance it provides Syrian refugees. The report states that the organization offers its direct economic assistance to "the most vulnerable" Syrian female refugee headed-households. In Jordan, for example, UNHCR cash assistance programs are directed to the ⅓ of female headed-households that were "the most vulnerable", UN (2015). In Lebanon, the report states the UNHCR financial assistance program, "focuses on cash for rent or other short-term needs, targeting those most vulnerable." (Ibid) However, the report provides no insight or explanation into how the organization procedurally and fairly defines a household in this bottom category. The UN Women report attributes the Syrian female refugee experience as the most vulnerable due to their lack of economic stability and employment prospects. Therefore, UN Women programs for Syrian women refugees are focused on providing increased work and employment prospects for women through education and job training programs, so that they may find diversified employment opportunities, UN (2015) However, a focus on providing increased employment prospects for refugees would be greatly beneficial if directed at all refugees, as economic insecurity is likely not solely a gendered experience. The IRC also has focused their aid programs for Syrian refugees based on a discursively constructed hierarchy of vulnerability with women at the top. For Syrian refugees in Turkey, the IRC provides cash assistance to "vulnerable female headed-households" with payments of up to $150 per month. The organization also provides these chosen females with an opportunity to participate in a group discussion curriculum on how to make financial decisions, IRC (2015).

Eventhough, it might be both morally and practically problematic to place certain vulnerabilities and experiences as "more vulnerable" over others, when these vulnerabilities would likely be better off constructed as *different* and constructing them as different would create the space needed to adequately and justly recognize

the complex and myriad of vulnerabilities experienced by the Syrian refugee population beyond the gendered hierarchy that is currently present, it goes without gainsaying or prejudice that women are most devastated by the war in Syria.

II. Conclusion

It has been argued here and rightly so that, during armed conflict, women and men both face violence, deprivation, and fear. However, the way in which they experience conflict and the types of violations they suffer can be quite different, particularly in highly patriarchal societies like Syria. Women are more likely to experience sexual violence, sexual slavery, domestic abuse, and widowhood that force them to struggle to keep their families' alive. Those women who have been raped are sometimes ostracized from their families and communities and could face retribution. The situation could worsen if a child is conceived from the rape. Men, however, are more often on the front lines or forced to be on the front lines and are therefore more susceptible to death, detention, and torture.

III. Recommendations

- Violence of all kind should be tamed in societies and like Dajs Hammarskjold have argued 'much as peace has its successes and setbacks, trials and errors, the search or quest for peace must not be stopped', because the reality is that the day we give up on the quest for peace then civilization will top to exist and what Thomas Hobbes envisaged – the state of nature, in which life is nasty and brutish and where lawlessness thrives – will be the order of the day.
- The United Nations and indeed independent sovereign states must put in place enforcement mechanisms to punish dissents who do not subscribe to the international laws that recognise the dignity of persons and sanctity of life even in times of war to serve as deterrent to others.
- Governments, international organizations and the civil society must do more to protect the vulnerable in all crisis situations – not just in Aleppo – but in all other parts of the world that is torn by conflicts and devastated by wars.

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