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Abuse and Violence Against Migrant Women

Migration has been a natural human adaptation strategy since the beginning of time. Humans have always moved from one place to another, in search of safety and resources. Even though the reasons for migration have not changed significantly, the ability to move freely has become more restrictive and complicated. In recent years, war and political instability throughout the globe have created an international unprecedented refugee crisis. There are millions of displaced people globally, including many in refugee camps waiting for asylum applications to be processed by the host countries. The challenges encountered during migration often make the process unsafe, increasing the vulnerability that is already inherent in migration and settlement. They are usually displaced with very few of their belongings. They are often forced to flee without documents. They lose family and social networks, and their access to resources becomes very limited. As in most situations, migrant women and girls are the most vulnerable of migrants. During migration, women and girls are at most risk of experiencing gender-based violence.

Several studies cited by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) indicate increasing evidence of gender-based violence being a major issue for migrant women and girls. They are at risk of experiencing gender-based violence in the context of conflict (pre-migration), during the migration journey, and in the host country. A recent field assessment of risks for refugee and migrant women and girls identified instances of sexual and gender-based violence. They included early and forced marriage, transactional sex, domestic violence, rape, sexual harassment and physical assault in the country of origin and during the journey. The FRA reports that most European host countries lack systematic data collection and standard protocols for reporting and investigating gender-based violence experienced by migrant women and girls throughout the migration journey.

Conversations about migration and migrants are usually non-gendered. It has been well established that non-gendered dominant discourse refers to the male perspective and focus. Greater emphasis must be placed on the voices of females and their experiences during migration. It is crucial for service providers who work directly with migrant women to be aware of the issue of gender-based violence. Better awareness and understanding will give them the sensibility required to help migrant women effectively. Ideally, there should be counselling services and support groups available for migrant women where they can talk openly about their experiences and begin to discover a path for healing.



In a recent study conducted by the Peel Institute on Violence Prevention that deals with Strategies for Violence Prevention for Middle Eastern Immigrant and Refugee Women, focus group participants acknowledged that the entire migration process placed them in vulnerable positions for gender-based violence. Although the study was conducted with a very specific population, i.e. Middle Eastern women, it shed light on issues around migration that are applicable to other populations. Further details about the study are discussed in the following section of this issue.

The study focused on refugee women from the Middle East, who had experienced gender-based violence and inequality. Their stories began in their countries of origin and continued during their journey to Canada and after their arrival in Canada.

The findings from the study on **“Voices of Refugee Women from the Middle East: Strategies for Violence Prevention”** are described during three stages of migration. Pre-migration information seeks to understand the experiences of women before their decision to migrate. An Arab woman’s identity is shaped predominately by interpersonal relationships within the context of the family, the community, and the society in which she lives. Typically, men are considered as the head of the household, while women are relegated to subordinate roles, such as household responsibilities. A woman’s duty to her family and pressure to preserve family honor are cited often as reasons why women remain silent and remain in abusive relationships.



During migration, fleeing from war zones is associated with experiences of chronic fear, anxiety, uncertainty, stress, and living in unacceptable conditions. The effects of migration on the mental health of refugees vary depending on the severity of migration factors and how long they are exposed to these factors.

During resettlement, changes in the socio-cultural context of the new country may instill higher tension, amplifying the violence endured by women, continuing the vulnerability felt during the migration journey. Reasons why Immigrant and refugee women choose to stay in abusive relationships include traditional beliefs and attitudes, language barriers, social isolation, and financial dependence on their husbands.

Focus Group Highlights

This article is based on the migration experiences of women from the Middle East who participated in three focus groups for a study conducted by the Peel Institute on Violence Prevention. Many women spoke of marriage as protection for their daughters. It is believed that by attaching a daughter to a man, there will be someone who will take over the function of control from the father, someone who will protect the daughter’s honour and keep her from shame.

“...she had daughters who were maybe 14-15 years of age, and they married them off. Because they were scared for them... scared about them getting assaulted and kidnapped...”

During migration, sexual harassment in host countries is highly prevalent for women travelling without a male.

“It is believed that living without a male in the house leaves women vulnerable to exploitation by other males since the husband is expected to provide physical protection”.



However, this becomes problematic when considering the role of Middle Eastern women within the family, where experiences of family turmoil and emotional abuse are common.

“If he is angry and he verbally assaults her, they [in ref. to society/people] would tell her to be patient, and it is not right of her to blame him... maybe he came home angry from work pressures.”

Furthermore, a woman considering leaving a marriage due to abusive conditions is completely unacceptable.

“...they are afraid of what people would say... A divorced woman in our society is not an accepted social member...”

Refugee women who participated in the study attested the gender based violence during the migration journey.



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