
Women and children in armed conflicts

by Indrani Iriyagolle*

The protection of Women and Children in situations of Armed Conflicts and the issue of human rights could never have been more timely and urgent for women themselves to discuss it, as we do it here today. United Nations documents show that there are over 20 million refugees in the world today and over 20 million "displaced persons" within the borders of their own countries. Refugees and asylum seekers in need of protection and assistance are 9,797,208 in Middle East and S. Asia 5,441,350 in Africa

736,600 in Europe and North America 592,100 in East Asia and the Pacific 118,950 in Latin America and Caribbean.

(Sri Lanka not included in these; shows lack of proper documentation).

Most of them are women and children, and many live in developing countries whose limited resources and infrastructure could barely sustain the needs of their own nationals. Violence, tension, total disregard of human rights, devastation, and poverty affect women and children more than men. Refugees from Iraq, Afghanistan, Palestine, Ethiopia, Vietnam, Central America (Nicaragua, Mexico, Guatemala), etc. are but a few to be named here.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights was welcomed by women because it was based on "equality of all persons" and was "opposed to all forms of discrimination".

Articles 1-5 set forth fundamental rights. Articles 6-12 are concerned with legal rights and protection. Article 13-16 with movement and domicile and rights of nationality, marriage and religion. Article 17 with property. Article 18-19 freedom of opinion and expression, 22-25 with social and economic rights, 26-27 with rights to education and cultural life, 28 with social and international order, 29 covers individual obligations to the community. Covenants and commissions have expressed positively the need

to eliminate all forms of discrimination against women. But the question posed is — How far have these been effective against the suffering women and children after the ravages of war and internal civil strife? The basic question is one of **SURVIVAL** — and what do we do to help them?

The **problems of women and children** are special ones, associated with the refugee situation, viz;

1) the after-effects of violence -trauma, loneliness

2) persecution - constant fear

3) insecurity and lack of protection

4) sexual exploitation (rape) and child abuse

5) total disregard of human rights — lack of opportunities for education, shelter, privacy, family relationships

6) women suffer emotionally as they have relinquished their roles as household manager, mother primary-care-giver

7) women and children suffer more deprivation and also result in unproductive lives

8) Refugee women and children in developing countries lack adequate food, safe drinking water,

9) child mortality is very high and relatively poor nutrition and health,

10) the demand for continuous change and respond to traumatic new circumstances is often very hard for most women and children. Women must often cope with new environments, new languages, new social and economic roles, new familial relationships. Women are thus both agents of change and sources of continuity and tradition.

11) Refugees leave because they are forced to leave. Fathers often die and leave the women headed-households.

External factors affecting women

The intensification of the situation (for women and child refugees) gives rise to

other external factors that affect the lives of women and children e.g.

1) frustration of the men leads to family tension and creates the **potential for violence**.

2) women continue to remain **responsible for domestic activities** wherever they be and this too creates an environment for tension, irritability wrath.

3) Mothers change cultural attitudes with their daughters to marry early and **just anyone**.

4) Parent-child relationship change and suffer. Children become ashamed of their parents if they do not know the language of communication.

5) The role of woman as "preservers of culture" gets reduced to an ineffective one and creates intergenerational conflict. Children have no childhood.

6) Lack of self-confidence and trust in all other human-beings.

7) Suicide rate high, depression and indignity of living. DEATH becomes cheap, life becomes hopeless.

How can we bring relief?

I. State and NGO's should participate in advocacy efforts at international and national levels to assure rights of Women and Children. Promote a "child first" ethos.

II. Recruitment of refugee of children/youths into Armed Forces should be denounced.

III. As undocumented and stateless children are increasing special initiatives must be taken to prevent a "stateless" state for them.

IV. Those born out of wedlock (rape and promiscuity) should also be given legal protection under new laws enacted to meet such abnormal situation. No child should be illegitimate.

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