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Infantilisation and De-maturation of Refugee Women: A Gendered Crisis of Rights and Recognition

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Abstract

The refugee experience is inherently debilitating. Although women constitute a significant proportion of forcibly displaced populations, humanitarian and legal discourses continue to construct them through assumptions of passivity and dependence. Even within UNHCR-administered camps, protection frameworks often remain inattentive to gender, particularly in South Asia, where state laws and institutional practices reproduce gender bias. The persistent rightlessness of refugee women reflects the concealment of gender-specific violence, in which women are targeted not as individuals but as members of a homogenized category labelled "women." Sociologically, infantilisation operates through institutional norms and power relations that deny women agency and autonomy. Women and girls are routinely classified as a "vulnerable group," yet vulnerability is not inherent but produced through political, legal, and social conditions. An exclusive focus on vulnerability risks generating narratives of helplessness that silence women's voices and obscure their capacities for participation and leadership. Adopting a gender-sensitive framework, this paper examines how refugee women are constructed as non-persons and analyses the sociological implications of infantilisation. Patriarchy is conceptualized as a culturally sanctioned, masculinized hierarchy embedded within state power. Methodologically, the study is based on a systematic thematic review of academic literature sourced through digital databases, with analysis concluding at academic saturation.

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1. Introduction

Contemporary armed conflicts are marked by what has been described as an *"inexorable intensification of violence,"* resulting in large-scale civilian displacement and the transformation of millions of individuals into refugees. The current refugee crisis constitutes a global humanitarian and political challenge, as forced migration transcends national borders and compels affected populations to seek protection beyond their countries of origin (UNHCR, 1951). Refugees are not merely abstract figures within crisis narratives but ordinary people confronting extraordinary circumstances and compelled, through no fault of their own, to abandon their homes in pursuit of safety and survival.

Although war, violence, and forced migration profoundly disrupt the lives of all those affected, empirical research consistently demonstrates that women and children experience displacement in distinct and

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disproportionate ways (Turner, 2000). In many conflict settings, women's bodies are constructed as political sites, rendering sexual violence a strategic instrument of warfare rather than a collateral outcome. This gendered targeting frequently extends beyond conflict zones into displacement routes and refugee contexts, exposing women to sustained forms of violence, exploitation, and insecurity (Freedman, 2015). Moreover, socially assigned reproductive and caregiving roles produce a differentiated experience of displacement for women and men, intensifying women's vulnerability while simultaneously rendering their labour and suffering invisible. The brutalisation of women thus emerges as a persistent and structural feature of contemporary conflict.

The marginalisation of refugee women is further reproduced through dominant humanitarian, legal, and policy discourses. As Manchanda (2004) argues, the figure of the refugee woman is frequently constructed as the epitome of disenfranchisement, with her identity collapsed into a homogeneous category of "victimhood." Within this framing, refugee women are portrayed as passive, dependent, and incapable of self-representation, effectively stripping them of agency and political subjectivity. Such representations do not merely reflect reality but actively shape institutional practices, policy responses, and modes of governance (Fassin, 2012).

This paper examines the culturally sanctioned and hierarchical power relations through which refugee women are rendered administratively invisible and politically secondary, particularly within state and humanitarian regimes. Women's condition of rightlessness as refugee subjects exposes the systematic failure to adequately recognise gender-specific forms of violence. Manchanda (2004) conceptualises this process as one of *infantilisation* and *dematuration*, wherein refugee women are produced as non-persons within legal and bureaucratic frameworks. Notably, even reports issued by prominent international organisations often employ ostensibly neutral terms such as "people" in ways that obscure women's experiences rather than include them meaningfully. Charlotte Bunch (2004) critiques this linguistic neutrality, arguing that such formulations conceal women's political significance while reproducing gender-blind approaches to human rights.

Furthermore, the tendency to subsume women under composite categories such as "women and children" collapses women's individual identities into reproductive and caregiving roles, further denying their autonomy as social actors (Ticktin, 2011). As a result, women are routinely sidelined in refugee scholarship and policy, rarely positioned at the centre of analytical inquiry. This marginalisation is particularly consequential given that many women flee gender-based persecution—forms of violence their home states are unwilling or unable to prevent. Yet, because gender is not explicitly recognised within the international legal definition of a refugee, such persecution remains inadequately acknowledged (UNHCR, 1951). This structural omission continues to limit the legal recognition, political visibility, and protection of refugee women within international refugee regimes.

2. Refugees as "Minority Groups"

The most widely accepted legal definition of a refugee is articulated in the 1951 Refugee Convention, which states (1951) that:

> *"Any person who owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his/her nationality and is unable, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself/herself of the protection of that country."*

This definition continues to serve as the cornerstone of international refugee law and humanitarian protection regimes. However, while legally authoritative, it remains largely gender-neutral and does not sufficiently capture the differentiated experiences of displacement shaped by social hierarchies, power relations, and structural inequalities.

Wherever they go, refugees remain a minority. When a group is referred to as a "minority group," it implies not merely numerical inferiority but a structural positioning defined by exclusion from social power, systematic discrimination, limited access to resources, and persistent misrecognition by dominant groups (Khan & Laurie, 2017). Refugees are often subjected to institutional marginalisation within host societies, where their legal precarity and social invisibility combine to restrict their ability to participate fully in economic, political, and cultural life. Since all refugees are, by definition, situated as minorities in the global arena, the lived realities of refugee women are shaped by layered vulnerabilities arising from both displacement and gendered social arrangements. Research further suggests that sustained exposure to discrimination and subjugation may result in individuals internalising a "minority" identity, reinforcing feelings of powerlessness and social alienation.

The term "refugee" itself frequently conjures images of faceless and voiceless masses characterised primarily by suffering and dependency. Such representations strip displaced populations of historical specificity and political

agency, detaching their experiences from the broader contexts of conflict, governance failure, and structural violence that produce forced migration. In humanitarian and policy discourses, refugees are often framed through a singular trauma lens, implying uniformity of experience and obscuring internal differences related to gender, class, age, and social location. The provision of aid and protection, therefore, becomes entangled with crude political calculations, where visibility is conditional and voices are selectively amplified or silenced. When refugees and internally displaced persons are viewed solely as passive recipients of care, their distinct narratives, strategies of survival, and claims to agency are systematically marginalised, reinforcing their symbolic and material exclusion.

3.One-dimensional Portrayal of Refugees

In dominant humanitarian and policy discourses, refugees are frequently represented through a one-dimensional framework that constructs them as passive, helpless, and entirely dependent on external assistance. Such portrayals, while often mobilised to generate sympathy and justify intervention, rely heavily on narratives of suffering that strip displaced populations of agency and complexity. For refugees and those experiencing humanitarian crises to access aid, their depiction as powerless victims becomes almost imperative. Speechlessness and powerlessness are thus mutually reinforcing conditions, enabling the state, the media, and humanitarian organisations to assume the role of legitimate spokespersons on their behalf. This dynamic raises critical questions about who is authorised to speak for refugees and whose knowledge is recognised as valid within humanitarian governance.

Central to this problem is the assumption of a unified and homogenous "refugee voice." This presumption obscures the fact that there is no singular refugee experience, identity, or perspective. Refugees' lived realities are shaped by intersecting factors such as gender, age, class, region, race, and ethnicity, which produce differentiated forms of vulnerability as well as resilience. Ignoring these variations not only flattens refugee experiences but also reinforces reductive stereotypes that treat displacement as a uniform condition. As Sigona and Nando (2014) argue, forced migration entails dislocation across time and space, generating multiple and contested refugee figures whose identities and meanings are constantly negotiated. Consequently, refugeehood cannot be understood as a fixed or monolithic category but rather as a dynamic social position shaped by political, cultural, and institutional forces.

This homogenising tendency contributes significantly to the infantilisation of refugees. By framing them as incapable of articulating their own needs or making informed decisions, humanitarian systems justify paternalistic interventions that exclude refugees from meaningful participation. Humanitarian professionals often prioritise refugees' needs based on institutional assessments rather than direct consultation with displaced communities themselves (Domanski, 1997). Refugees' experiential knowledge is frequently dismissed as partial, biased, or unreliable, rendering them marginal actors in the design and implementation of policies that directly affect their lives. Such exclusions reinforce asymmetrical power relations, positioning refugees as objects of care rather than subjects with political and social agency. Ultimately, one-dimensional portrayals do more than misrepresent refugees; they actively shape governance practices by legitimising top-down decision-making and silencing alternative narratives. By denying refugees the authority to speak for themselves, humanitarian discourse perpetuates dependency and undermines the possibility of refugee-led responses, thereby reproducing the very vulnerabilities it claims to address.

4. Women in Times of Humanitarian Crisis

Wars and humanitarian emergencies affect both men and women; however, the fact that eighty percent of refugees and internally displaced people worldwide are women and their dependent children indicates that women endure conflict and warfare in distinctly gendered ways. Displacement does not merely remove women from their homes; it exposes them to layered forms of violence that are deeply embedded in social, political, and institutional structures. Women are often targeted not as individuals but as members of a collective category labelled "women," making gender itself a site of persecution. In such contexts, violence becomes a means of enforcing gender hierarchies and social control rather than an incidental outcome of war.

Gender-based violence is frequently trivialised or rendered invisible as a legitimate cause of flight, particularly within asylum and protection regimes that prioritise political or ethnic persecution over gendered harm. Domestic violence within refugee settlements is often normalised or dismissed as a private matter, despite its prevalence and severity. Both legal aid processes and camp-level decision-making institutions tend to be gender insensitive, reinforcing patriarchal norms that marginalise women's voices and autonomy. As Manchanda (2004) observes,

these institutional practices actively contribute to the infantilisation of refugee women by treating them as dependents rather than rights-bearing subjects. The UN (1995) Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women defines violence against women as:

> *"Any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life".*

This definition underscores the structural nature of violence against women and highlights the continuity between conflict-related violence and everyday forms of gendered oppression. Gender-based violence (GBV) remains the most pervasive yet least visible human rights violation globally (UNICEF), a reality that is magnified during armed conflict and forced displacement.

Throughout periods of war, violence against women manifests in multiple and intersecting forms, including forced displacement, sexual slavery, physical brutality, public executions, forced repatriation, and discriminatory state policies that restrict access to healthcare, education, employment, and legal recourse. Rape and other forms of sexual violence are increasingly deployed as deliberate strategies of war to humiliate, intimidate, and destabilise individuals, families, and entire communities (Pittaway & Bartolomei, 2001). Such practices not only violate bodily integrity but also fracture social bonds and reinforce women's marginalisation within humanitarian responses.

Despite these realities, refugee women are frequently positioned within humanitarian discourse primarily as victims in need of protection, rather than as agents capable of resistance, survival, and political participation. This narrow framing obscures women's resilience and social contributions while simultaneously limiting their involvement in decision-making processes that shape their lives (Freedman, 2015). Addressing gendered displacement therefore requires moving beyond protectionist narratives toward frameworks that recognise refugee women as active social and political actors

5. Discourse On Refugee Women and Girls

Within humanitarian and policy discourses, refugee women and girls are frequently constructed as more "genuine" refugees, a representation that paradoxically undermines their humanity. By equating women with vulnerability and dependency, such portrayals effectively infantilise them, placing them on par with infants presumed to lack agency, responsibility, or decision-making capacity (Turner, 2000). This framing does not merely describe women's suffering; it actively shapes how refugee women are perceived, governed, and assisted within humanitarian regimes.

As a result, women's identities and lived experiences are collapsed into the homogenised and ubiquitous category of the "victim," erasing individuality and silencing diverse forms of resistance and resilience. Their existence and personality are subsumed under narratives of helplessness, rendering them insignificant and incapable of speaking for themselves (Manchanda, 2004). This discursive reduction reinforces paternalistic interventions, where decisions are made for refugee women rather than with them. With an excessive focus on individual vulnerability, women and girls are further categorised as a uniformly "vulnerable group," obscuring the structural and political conditions that actively produce vulnerability. Women are not inherently vulnerable; rather, they are pushed into circumstances that intensify exposure to violence, exploitation, and human rights violations.

It is therefore crucial to recognise that refugee women and girls do not constitute a "special needs" category despite their diversity. While they share fundamental human needs—such as food, water, shelter, sanitation, and security—with men and boys, they often face additional barriers in accessing these necessities due to gendered power relations, caregiving responsibilities, and restricted mobility (Freedman, 2015). Treating women solely through a vulnerability lens risks reinforcing dependency rather than addressing the structural inequalities embedded in displacement contexts.

The marginalisation of refugee women and girls has direct and severe human rights implications. Limited legal protection, inadequate reporting mechanisms, and weak accountability structures allow perpetrators of violence to function with near impunity (Pittaway & Pittaway, 2010). Without confronting this uncomfortable reality, efforts to improve the conditions of refugee women and girls remain superficial and ineffective. At the same time, an exclusive focus on vulnerability risks producing a discourse of perpetual victimhood that denies women their political and social agency.

Conversely, romanticising resilience and strength without acknowledging ongoing oppression carries its own dangers. Refugee women and girls possess significant social capital, coping strategies, and survival skills; however, emphasising empowerment alone can obscure persistent experiences of discrimination, violence, and exclusion. Refugee women and girls are simultaneously resilient, powerful, and marginalised—a contradiction that humanitarian discourse must confront rather than simplify. Failing to account for the conditions that render them vulnerable minorities ultimately reinforces the very inequalities such discourses claim to challenge.

6. Underrepresentation & Exclusion of Refugee Women

Humanistic agencies, academia, and media narratives frequently portray refugees in a flat, infantilised, and feminine way that emphasises their "pure" suffering and fragility (Sigona & Nando, 2014).
Women continue to be largely non-violent, are recipient of violence, and are tasked with helping the community get back on its feet. Women's responsibility is to painstakingly rebuild a future from the ashes of every fire that is sparked. They often serve as the sole breadwinners and household heads in refugee camps. However, the narratives about war and emergency responses have largely ignored their efforts as first responders and leaders in humanitarian action.

Women are excluded from leadership positions and decision-making on humanitarian projects, and their abilities are devalued as a result of the focus on women's vulnerability throughout conflicts and refugee crises. Despite the numerous socio-cultural obstacles that prevent women from taking on leadership positions in humanitarian circumstances, they have played significant roles in crisis response and in refugee settlements. Refugee women and girls experience multiple forms of prejudice, yet they are not merely helpless victims. Women fill all roles in the family and community when men are not available. Women who possess a vast ability and an array of talents, both formal and informal, engage in these activities. Additionally, they have a great understanding of the issues that arise in cities and camps, as well as potential remedies.

However, they are underrepresented in humanitarian organisations and UN organisations, which may indicate that the humanitarian sector has become more masculinized. The perception of women as innocent victims in times of war affects how policies are formulated, as well as who has access to important leadership positions and who makes decisions in camp situations. The reality of displaced and refugee women, who are frequently the head of household and the only providers for their family, is not reflected in this portrayal. Women are substantially underrepresented in positions of leadership within humanitarian groups during crisis. Only nine out of the 29 UN Humanitarian Coordinators as of January 2016 were female (Humanitarian Advisory Group, 2016). Women and suffering are frequently "feminised" and depoliticized in the marketization of humanitarian activity in an effort to garner greater public sympathy and financial assistance.

Liisa H. Malkki (1996), an anthropology professor who specialises in refugee studies in order to highlight significant feminizing victimhood in humanitarianism writes, "The visual prominence of women and children as embodiments of refugee-ness has to do with more than just the fact that most refugees are women and children; it also has to do with the systemic, international anticipation of a particular kind of dejection as a refugee characteristic."

Part of the explanation for the persistence of patriarchal power relations in camps is the assumption that women are the only victims in crisis situations and the perception of victimisation as a feminine occurrence, which can lead to fallible analysis and response efforts portraying refugee women as weak and immutable victims (Women's Refugee Commission, 2014). According to studies, women living as refugees face extraordinary difficulties. They do, however, show resiliency, fortitude, and a determination to live for themselves as well as for the benefit of their family and children. Refugee women and girls have enormous social capital and capacities, but they are frequently suppressed and undervalued. While this persists, women and girls are still at risk, and the refugee populations lose out on 50% of their potential contributions to solutions and problem-solving.

7. Gender-Blind & Inaccessible Refugee Programs

Gendered perceptions of vulnerabilities are extremely flawed and influence how a humanitarian crisis is assessed. This strategy prevented some women from participating directly in the information gathering process. They were excluded for a variety of reasons, one of which being that they had no official community roles. There were also numerous accounts of humanitarian actors providing resources and assistance to men only, as opposed to both men and women. It furthermore denies women in the community any influence over decision-making. For instance, stratified data was gathered through surveys with men in the camp since personnel assumed they were the head of family in preliminary phase of registration in refugee camps in Jordan. As a result, information from UN agencies and humanitarian organisations was immediately shared with male family members in the anticipation that they would then share it with the women. Humanitarian initiatives that go through men perpetuate and strengthen patriarchy while excluding women from decision-making and sustaining an infantilised state. In reality, women frequently encounter structural and cultural barriers that make it challenging for them to take on leadership roles and engage in humanitarian action (Ayla, Henty & Sutton, 2017). When allowed to attend meetings in patriarchal cultures, women report that they are harassed and criticised for appearing to question conventional gender roles and are not respected as competent leaders.

Women find it difficult to partake in relief efforts and development because of the way these endeavours are structured and administered. Women in Ethiopia claimed that they frequently were unable to attend local government sessions because they ran late into the night and did not take family or safety issues into account (Barclay, Higelin, & Bungcaras, 2016). Secondly, since there is no day-care available and they are not allowed to bring children to meetings, women who have children are unable to attend. They also encounter numerous extra obstacles when trying to acquire services like legal defence, reproductive, and other health treatments. Simple things like the absence of sanitary products for girls and women who are menstruating can keep them from taking part in events that addressed risks. Unreachable refugee programs and gender-blind needs assessments are two other obstacles (UNHCR, 2011, UNSC, 2017).

The presence of women at these meetings does not ensure that they will have any say in the decisions made. In the incidents detailed in Action Aid's 2016 report, women hardly felt empowered to take a stand on matters that affected them even though they were present since the males attending frequently ridiculed and rejected their concerns.

8. Infantilised Depictions Silencing Refugee Women

This section details and problematises the representation of women in times of conflict as infantilised subjects devoid of agency. The gendered practice of infantilising women is deeply embedded in patriarchal structures that position men as default holders of authority and rationality. Within such systems, women are persistently framed as dependent, emotionally driven, and incapable of autonomous decision-making. A sociological understanding of infantilisation requires attention to the power relations, sociocultural hierarchies, and normative assumptions that govern the contexts in which infantilising practices occur. By equating women with children, these frameworks falsely reaffirm the belief that women are inherently incapable of performing the same social, political, and economic functions as men, mirroring the presumed incapacity of children to perform adult roles.

Women are not voiceless; rather, they are systematically silenced (Roy, 2004). This silencing operates across multiple domains, including restricted access to political representation, unequal educational opportunities, cultural marginalisation, tokenistic inclusion, rigid gender norms, and limited funding for specialised training and leadership development. The absence of women's voices in decision-making spaces reinforces their exclusion from policy processes that directly affect their lives. In recognition of these intersecting inequalities, the Fourth World Conference on Women held by the United Nations in 1995 acknowledged that women and girls experience oppression shaped not only by gender but also by social class, race, and other structural factors.

The discourse surrounding refugee women and girls is often rooted in the patriarchal, religious, and political frameworks of both the country of origin and the host nation. These discourses frequently portray women as passive victims or as beneficiaries of protection rather than as active participants in social and political life. Women and girls are labelled as "damsels in distress," mothers, or reproductive machines, reducing their identities to caregiving and biological functions. The Human Security Now Report acknowledged women's presence in humanitarian crises but frequently grouped them with children, reinforcing an infantilising logic that emphasised special care while overlooking women's specific experiences of insecurity and gender-based violence. As Chenoy (2009) argues, historical references to "particular protection" have often functioned to disempower women rather than to enhance their autonomy.

Women are rendered voiceless by patriarchal ideologies that deny them access to authority and decision-making, restrict their control over their own bodies and reproductive health, and limit educational and economic opportunities. Cultural norms that privilege men further reinforce perceptions of women as dependent, obedient, and incapable of self-governance. Such perceptions often justify patronising protectionist initiatives that prioritise moral surveillance over genuine empowerment (Ticktin, 2011). Until the full extent of gendered violence and exclusion is publicly acknowledged, women will continue to be denied the assistance they require. The persistence of silence around these issues ultimately sustains the very structures that normalise women's marginalisation in conflict and displacement contexts.

9. Intersectionality in Refugee Situations

The notion "intersectionality" intends to describe how diversified facets of discrimination interact and it's structural and dynamic consequences. The concept of "intersectionality" explores how diverse socially and culturally established categorization, including gender, race, class, and other identity tags, interact on several and frequently concomitant levels and contribute to structural social inequality. It holds the classical conceptualisation of oppression within society, such as racism, patriarchy, economic disadvantages and other discriminatory systems. And how it adds up to build layers of inequality that organise the status of men and women, different ethnicities, and other categories relative to one another. Furthermore, it discusses how some practices and

legislation place a burden along such crossing axes, directly facilitating the creation of a dynamic of disempowerment.

On the basis of their gender and race, refugee women experience outright discrimination. In times of armed conflict, women may become the target of "ethically driven gender-specific" types of violence. Because of the ideological underpinnings based on strong nationalism and fundamentalism that reify women's responsibilities as "keepers of the society's values and culture," sexual offences against women are often perpetrated as means of political unrest. The most prevalent type of brutal torture used against women is rape and sexual abuse, which can take many forms, from gang rapes carried out by battalions of soldiers to the cruel mutilation of female genitalia. Women are raped in an effort to obtain information, humiliate communities, embarrass their fathers and spouses, and rip apart the social order as well as for reasons related to cultural annihilation.

They are compelled to exchange sexual favours for food for their kids. The army, border patrols, and humanitarian personnel sent to keep them safe all commit acts of sexual assault against them. The forced conception of girls from one ethnic group by males from another is a sort of genocide and another intersection of race and gender. These behaviours specifically affect women. There is proof of military training to perpetrate these brutalities.

Evidently, notwithstanding much discourse about protecting refugee women, many prominent figures were incapable or unwilling to see rape and sexual torment as a serious issue during war. Refugee women who have experienced rape and other forms of sexual assault report hiding their suffering from immigration officials out of concern that they will be branded prostitutes and refused refugee status or visas on moral reasons. Amnesty International and numerous humanitarian organisations that work with refugee women have thoroughly investigated these fears (UN Docs).

Given that men make up the majority of those killed or declared "disappeared," racism's experience and effects during armed conflict are unmistakably gendered. This explains the refugee populations, the bulk of whom are women & their dependent children who have typically experienced extremely violent physical abuse. Because of their gender, refugee women continue to face discrimination during armed conflict, when determining whether they qualify as refugees, and throughout relocation. However, studies reveal that most legal protections for women around the world, including those for women who have fled violence, are mainly gender-blind and fail to take into account the realities of women's life.

10. De-Prioritizing Women's Needs

The persistent absence of gender equality and the manner that women and girls are categorised in law and policy are significant barriers to providing meaningful solutions to them. Women are specifically targeted by resettlement policies on the basis of both race and gender. Regarding refugees, the design of initiatives and interventions can either help or make things worse for women. It was discovered that the pertinent human rights laws did not sufficiently address the trauma and torture suffered by refugee women. These tools not only did not offer a remedy, but they also contributed to the issue. According to Charlesworth & Chinkin (2000), dealing with the structural disadvantages of sex and gender has proven challenging due to the very nature of international law. The literature review revealed the gender asymmetry present in human rights legislation (Pittaway & Bartolomei, 2001).

Despite the fact that women are frequently on the front lines of localized humanitarian action, women's issues are frequently given low priority during times of crisis. Humanitarian responses did not always place a high emphasis on the specific needs and difficulties faced by women. During a refugee crisis, women's needs are still seen as optional and a luxury rather than as a top concern. One donor representative was cited as saying, "Gender is something that comes later, in the recovery phase," in attempting to explain why there is no pressing need to incorporate gender analysis into humanitarian assistance.

During the World Conference Against Racism's preparatory committee meeting in Geneva in May 2000, a paper titled "Racism, Refugees, and Multi-Ethnic States" was delivered. The document outlines the strong linkages underlying refugee concerns and bigotry and was written by five invited specialists on refugee issues, at least four of them were men. None of the twenty-seven pages in the document address gender, despite the premise that women and their dependent children make up 80% of the world's refugees. The well-known disparity between the refugee experiences of men and women is never acknowledged or addressed (Pittaway & Bartolomei, 2001). Infantilised depictions of people who have been affected by violence and crises effectively silence those who assert their agency and who participate in the discussion of developing projects and programs that would benefit their community. Analysis of and interventions to the particular concerns of women were still not consistently prioritised, according to the Humanitarian Response Index (HRI, 2011), which focused on gender issues.

11. International Attention to Gender Sensitive Responses Towards Refugee Crisis

This section highlights the importance of using gender as a critical analytical tool to guide humanitarian response, policy formulation, and aid delivery during refugee crises. Since women and girls often experience conflict, displacement, and post-conflict realities differently from men and boys—just as they do in non-crisis contexts—a gender-sensitive perspective enables relief interventions that are more responsive, equitable, and effective. Gender-neutral approaches to humanitarian assistance frequently fail to account for unequal power relations,

caregiving burdens, and exposure to gender-based violence, thereby reinforcing existing inequalities rather than alleviating them.

Only relatively recently has the global community begun to acknowledge the gender blindness embedded within the 1951 Refugee Convention, humanitarian treaties, and state policies that shape responses to refugee women (Pittaway & Bartolomei, 2001). The absence of explicit recognition of gender-based persecution and women's specific vulnerabilities has historically limited women's access to protection and justice. In response, the United Nations and humanitarian organisations have made concerted efforts over the past two decades to integrate gender sensitivity into disaster response frameworks. These efforts have included the adoption of gender mainstreaming strategies aimed at improving the effectiveness of humanitarian interventions and ensuring that aid does not unintentionally reproduce patriarchal power structures.

According to UN Women, "gender" refers to socially constructed roles, responsibilities, and opportunities associated with being male or female, as well as the relationships between women and men, girls and boys. These constructions vary across cultures and over time, shaping individuals' access to resources, authority, and security. By employing gender as a unit of analysis, researchers and practitioners can better distinguish the specific struggles, risks, and coping mechanisms of men and women within refugee contexts (Kaapanda & Fenn, 2000). This approach facilitates a more nuanced understanding of displacement, moving beyond assumptions of uniform vulnerability to recognise intersecting inequalities.

Gender mainstreaming, as defined by the United Nations, refers to the systematic evaluation of the implications for women and men of any planned action, including legislation, policies, and programmes, across all sectors and levels. It is a strategy designed to ensure that the experiences and concerns of both women and men are integrated into the design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of humanitarian and development initiatives. The ultimate objective is to promote equality, prevent discrimination, and ensure that women and men benefit equally from interventions. In refugee contexts, gender mainstreaming has been increasingly applied to areas such as camp management, access to healthcare, education, livelihoods, and participation in governance structures.

Despite these advances, the implementation of gender-sensitive frameworks remains uneven. Gender mainstreaming is often treated as a procedural requirement rather than a transformative practice, resulting in superficial inclusion without substantive change. Women's participation in decision-making is frequently symbolic, and gender-based violence continues to be addressed reactively rather than structurally. Scholars argue that without challenging the underlying power relations that sustain gender inequality, gender-sensitive responses risk becoming technocratic solutions that fail to empower refugee women meaningfully (Cornwall & Rivas, 2015). Nevertheless, the growing international attention to gender-sensitive responses represents a significant shift in humanitarian thinking. By foregrounding gender as a central analytical and operational category, humanitarian actors can move toward responses that recognise refugee women not merely as beneficiaries of aid but as active agents whose knowledge, resilience, and leadership are essential to more just and sustainable solutions.

12. Conclusion

This paper has argued that the marginalization of refugee women cannot be understood solely through frameworks of protection, vulnerability, or humanitarian care. Instead, it must be situated within the sociological processes through which women are rendered administratively invisible, politically secondary, and symbolically diminished. By tracing how refugee women are constructed as passive subjects within legal definitions, institutional practices, and policy discourses, the analysis demonstrates that infantilisation is not an incidental outcome of displacement but a structured mode of governance operating through gendered power relations.

The study shows that the persistent framing of women as dependents and moral subjects, particularly through associations with motherhood and reproduction, functions to regulate their autonomy while obscuring their political and social agency. Such constructions do not merely misrepresent refugee women; they actively shape the conditions under which protection is delivered, rights are negotiated, and lives are managed. In this sense, infantilisation emerges as both a symbolic and material practice, reinforcing patriarchal authority embedded within state and humanitarian regimes.

By foregrounding the non-neutrality of vulnerability discourse, this paper challenges the assumption that recognizing women as "at risk" is inherently emancipatory. Instead, it reveals how vulnerability, when detached from structural conditions, reproduces narratives of helplessness that silence women's voices and limit their participation in collective life. Reframing refugee women as social actors rather than humanitarian objects is therefore not an ethical gesture alone but a necessary analytical shift (Ticktin, 2011). This study calls for a reorientation of refugee scholarship and policy that moves beyond protectionist logics to confront the gendered hierarchies shaping displacement. Recognizing refugee women as political subjects is essential to dismantling the structures that sustain their marginalization and to imagining more just forms of refuge.

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