



Global Fund for Widows

Widowhood in Displacement
Analyzing Widows' Rights Violations
in the Context of Forced Migration

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August 2021

Widowhood is often not identified as such in the context of forced migrations such as refugees or IDP populations. Most reports focus on *women* and do not recognize those single women as *widows*. However, the percentages of widows and female head of households is high among those populations. This lack of recognition and data leads to the marginalization of widows and the invisibility of their struggles in the context of forced migrations. Yet, it is crucial to recognize those women as *widows* to effectively protect their rights. The purpose of this research is to better understand the challenges widows face in terms of human rights, security, and economic opportunity within displacement contexts such as conflict zones, IDP camps, refugee camps, and urban refugee settlements.

The impacts of war continue in refugee camps; widows, who are already among the most vulnerable populations in the world, find themselves in an even dire situation as refugees and IDPs. For these women, life as a refugee means becoming the sole or primary wage earner and caretaker of their family, as many of the widows depended on their husbands for economic support and protection prior to his death and their displacement. Most of them become widows after their husband's death during the conflict, or because he went missing; hence, they are often war widows or half-widows, and often have to take care of young children as well. As is the case with all displaced populations, they have likely been forced to leave their home without their personal belongings, including legal documents, which can also be stolen or destroyed in flight or during the conflict. Altogether, these challenges result in an accumulation of human rights violations that displaced widows suffer from in the context of forced displacement. In this paper, the Global Fund for Widows (GFW) examines these specific human rights violations and looks at how to better protect the rights of displaced widows.

The Prevalence of Widowhood in Forcibly Displaced Populations

The UNHCR describes “forced displacement” as a “displacement of population resulting from persecution, conflict, generalized violence, human rights violations or events seriously disturbing public order¹”. In the case of displaced widows, most of the research and data available focuses on war widows, particularly in the Syrian, Iraqi, and Rohingya contexts, who fled violence and instability happening in their region in order to protect themselves and their children.

Nearly all displaced widows live in refugee camps, IDP camps or in urban refugee settlements in some of the poorest and most conflict-affected regions of the world². In some large camps, widows and orphans have their own section or block. For instance, the Syrian refugee camp of Ersal in Lebanon has a “Camp of the Widows and Orphans;³” and in 2017, female-headed households made

¹ UNHCR Global Trends Forced Displacement 2019 <https://www.unhcr.org/flagship-reports/globaltrends/globaltrends2019/>

² VOA, “Syrian Female-Headed Refugee Families Struggle to Survive” <https://www.voanews.com/middle-east/syrian-female-headed-refugee-families-struggle-survive>

³ France 24, “Lebanese camp holds 'no future' for widows and orphans of Syria's war” <https://www.france24.com/en/middle-east/20210315-lebanese-camp-holds-no-future-for-widows-and-orphans-of-syria-s-war>

up 1,250 out of 4,463 families inside the UNHCR Iraqi camp of Hammam al-Alil sheltering displaced residents from Mosul⁴. In the Rohingya refugee camp of Hakimpara in Bangladesh, a cluster of homes is known as the “Camp of the widow.”⁵

Displaced widows in several countries have expressed that they feel safer living inside those widows-only camps where they find a sense of community and sisterhood, and look after each other.⁶ This has shown to be accentuated in societies where widows have been historically subjected to stigma, violence, and discrimination. In other instances, widows might be assigned to these camps because they do not have a male guardian in their family to look after them, which is not socially accepted in some patriarchal societies. For example, in the Refugee Camp of Idlib, a gated and guarded compound which is home to 100 women and their children, is known as “the Widows Village.”⁷ The Islamist militant group Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham controls the city and requires that they live in the widows-only camp. While only a handful of examples of widows-only camps, their existence and numbers allow for a better understanding of the prevalence of widowhood in displaced populations.

In 2020, the UN High Commissioner to Refugees explained that the global community is witnessing a changed reality where forced displacement is not only vastly more widespread, but is simply no longer a short-term and temporary phenomenon.⁸ Even though the life in a refugee camp or in urban refugee settlements is supposed to be temporary and transitory, displaced people, but notably widows and their children, stay in those camps for years. This long-term displacement questions the *temporary* aspect of this precarious situation and makes it difficult for widows to visualize their future and the future of their children. For many displaced widows there is no clear vision of what the future will bring, knowing that they will face challenges in accessing livelihood opportunities, familial property, and other basic needs services. This protracted displacement makes it even more urgent to address the violation of widow’s rights in this setting and to look to improve their security and economic development.

Widows’ Rights Violations Specific to the Context of Forced Displacement

Displaced widows are victims of frequent gender-based violence and abuse, and their rights are frequently disregarded.⁹ In addition to the psychological trauma and grief widows go through, their status of refugee or IDP makes them even more vulnerable to numerous human rights violations that can amount. In the context of forced displacement, widows find themselves without the legal documentation that could prove their marital status or citizenship. The Global Fund for Widows believes those unique human rights violations and abuses need to be better understood and recognized at the national, regional, and international levels in order to better protect the widows.

⁴ UNHCR USA, “Mosul’s war widows face new challenges in displacement”

<https://www.unhcr.org/news/latest/2017/7/595b86554/mosuls-war-widows-face-new-challenges-displacement.html>

⁵ UNHCR USA, “Rohingya widows worry about their families’ futures”

<https://www.unhcr.org/news/stories/2018/4/5ad494934/rohingya-widows-worry-families-futures.html>

⁶ British Red Cross, “The widows who’ve formed a sisterhood in a refugee camp”

<https://www.redcross.org.uk/stories/disasters-and-emergencies/world/the-sisterhood-of-widows>

⁷ 4 News, “The women struggling to survive in Syria’s widows village” <https://www.channel4.com/news/the-women-struggling-to-survive-in-syrias-widows-village>

⁸ Filippo Grandi, UN High Commissioner for Refugees <https://www.unhcr.org/flagship-reports/globaltrends/globaltrends2019/>

⁹ UNHCR, *Women Alone: The fight for survival by Syria’s refugee women* <https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/53be84aa4.pdf>

Sexual and gender-based violence

The Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women (EVAW) affirms that violence against women constitutes a violation of the rights and fundamental freedoms of women and impairs their enjoyment of those rights and freedoms, such as the right to life, the right to be free from all forms of discrimination, or the right to liberty and security of person.¹⁰ For displaced widows, gender-based violence can be physical, sexual, and psychological, and includes acts of rape, sexual abuse, sexual harassment, and intimidation. This sexual and gender-based violence against displaced women and widows has been observed repeatedly by UN agencies and humanitarian nonprofits working with these populations, yet aside from designated camp spaces and communities, little has been done to address their protection needs as single women. The UNHCR report *Woman Alone: The fight for survival by Syria's refugee women*, based on the interviews of 135 female heads of household in Syrian refugee camps in Egypt, Jordan, and Lebanon, found that a number of those women attributed their feelings of insecurity, or their experiences of harassment or exploitation, to the fact that they were living without an adult male, who would ordinarily provide social and physical protection.¹¹

At home, most of the widows were housewife and had always lived under the protection of a man. Hence, this new role of wage-earner of their family can be extremely challenging for the widows, especially in patriarchal societies where it is difficult for women to get a job outside of their home. In the refugee camp of Kutupalong in Bangladesh, Rohingya widows explained that living in the widow's block helps them and their daughters avoid sexual violence elsewhere in the camp.¹² For refugee widows, marriage in the foreign country can be encouraged¹³ and is often seen as a form of protection from gender-based violence occurring in the community and in the camps. However, marriage cannot be considered a panacea, as widows that remarry still remain at risk of gender-based violence, such as domestic violence and sexual abuse. The same testimonials from Kutupalong noted that men tend to suggest marriage arrangements that women do not believe to be genuine,¹⁴ and similarly, in the Iraqi province of Sulaymaniyah, a 27-year-old Syrian refugee widow testified that she was assaulted in her tent by a fellow refugee who threatened to kill her if she refuses to marry him.¹⁵

Statelessness and inability to access aid

The widows' right to a nationality, as it is recognized by Article 15 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), can be severely threatened in the context of displacement. In fact, many widows fled their homes without bringing legal documentation or lack legal documentation because their marriage was only recognized under customary law. For instance, the vast majority of Syrian widows who lost their husbands in the war or whose husbands are among the scores of missing and

¹⁰Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women, General Assembly resolution 48/104 of 20 December 1993 <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/violenceagainstwomen.aspx>

¹¹ UNHCR, *Woman Alone: The fight for survival by Syria's refugee women*

¹² British Red Cross, "The widows who've formed a sisterhood in a refugee camp" <https://www.redcross.org.uk/stories/disasters-and-emergencies/world/the-sisterhood-of-widows>

¹³Dina Taha, "Seeking a Widow with Orphaned Children": *Understanding Sutra Marriage Amongst Syrian Refugee Women in Egypt* <https://brill.com/view/book/edcoll/9789004417342/BP000005.xml>

¹⁴ British Red Cross, "The widows who've formed a sisterhood in a refugee camp"

¹⁵ UNFPA, "Reporting on Gender-Based Violence in the Syria Crisis" https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/best_practice_book_47_english.pdf

forcibly disappeared do not have identification paper.¹⁶ Without these papers, particularly their spouse's death certificates, widows face intense legal challenges in terms of resettlement, travel permissions for themselves and their children, and accessing inheritance.¹⁷ Lacking legal documentation and unable to prove their citizenship, displaced widows can become stateless, denying their right to a nationality and severely compromises their access to employment, government services, political processes, or travel documents. Statelessness would further deepen the widows' precarious situations and puts them at risk of additional human rights violations.

Moreover, in the case where the widow is in possession of some legal documents, other challenges might arise such as the hosting country not recognizing the documents because they were delivered by a foreign government, or because they need to be translated. As part of the UN Women report, *Unpacking Gendered Realities in Displacement: The status of Syrian refugee women in Jordan*, several widows and female heads of households expressed frustration with Jordanian authorities because they did not accept their Syrian legal documents showing marriage, divorce, or death, meaning legal changes that took place in Syria were not recognized in Jordan. Typically, women sought these documents to show that they were widowed and at the head of their household, in order to demonstrate the absence of a male provider and the need for additional aid.¹⁸ The invalidation or rejection of those legal documents prevents widows from accessing government or humanitarian aid which infringes on their rights to health, food, and shelter—and increases once again their vulnerability.

Poor access to education and child marriage

Widows living in the context of forced displacement, whether in camps or in an urban setting, are in a constant state of struggle because of their reliance on humanitarian assistance for food and other basic needs, the lack access to education for their children and the lack of professional opportunities that would allow them to become financially independent. In this context of extreme precariousness, children of refugee widows are usually unable to continue their education due to financial constraints and limited infrastructures in the camps. In *Woman Alone*, the UNHCR found that without regular income, Syrian refugee female headed families were at risk of relying on child labor, which prevents children, especially boys, from attending school. This violates children's right to education and leaves them more vulnerable to forced labor and human trafficking.¹⁹

Moreover, testimonies of refugee widows demonstrate that child marriage and widowhood in the context of forced displacement are closely related. A widow interviewed in the "Widows Village" of Idlib, Syria, said that she "married her daughters off because she had no money;"²⁰ far from being an isolated case, in Za'atari Syrian refugee camp in Jordan, the UNHCR found several reports of young girls being forced to marry as their families could not afford to keep them.²¹ The practice of forced early child marriage has been shown to have a detrimental impact on the girls' physical and mental

¹⁶ UN Women, *Unpacking Gendered Realities in Displacement: The status of Syrian refugee women in Jordan* <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/68233.pdf>

¹⁷ UNHCR, USA "Mosul's war widows face new challenges in displacement"

¹⁸ UN Women, *Unpacking Gendered Realities in Displacement: The status of Syrian refugee women in Jordan*

¹⁹ UNODC An Introduction to Human Trafficking: Vulnerability, Impact and Action

https://www.unodc.org/documents/human-trafficking/An_Introduction_to_Human_Trafficking_-_Background_Paper.pdf

²⁰ 4 News, "The women struggling to survive in Syria's widows village"

²¹ France 24, "Lebanese camp holds 'no future' for widows and orphans of Syria's war"

well-being, and violates several of their rights including the right to consensual marriage and the right to freedom from violence.²² Despite the risks for their daughters, life in protracted displacement pushes widows to increasingly adopt harmful coping mechanisms, including the early marriage of girls as a way for the mothers to provide her with social protection as well as financially provide for fewer dependents.

Human Trafficking and Extremism

Instances of human trafficking have been observed in several refugee populations, and widows are at greater risk of being targeted by human traffickers.²³ For example, the Myanmar military's brutal crackdowns on Rohingya Muslims fueled a market for the trafficking of brides outside the country. The International Organization for Migration has documented cases of Rohingya refugee women being lured away from the camps with promises of marriage or jobs that end instead in forced labor or sex work.²⁴ Rohingya refugee widows in Myanmar are also at higher risk of cross-border trafficking to the Kashmir region of India, where they are sold and forcibly married.²⁵ In Jordan, the UNHCR found reports of widowed Syrian refugees being forced into prostitution to support their families.²⁶ Those practices violate the prohibition of slavery, forced labor, and trafficking of persons as recognized in numerous Human Rights documents including Article 6 of Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) on the suppression all forms of traffic in women and exploitation of prostitution of women.²⁷

Moreover, our latest report on [Widowhood and Extremism](#) has demonstrated that widowhood and violent extremism are closely intertwined. As conflict creates new widows, dehumanizing discrimination, neglect, and poverty, and the linked human rights violations resulting from these situations, make them and their children among society's most vulnerable to radicalization. The UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) found that one of the push factors in child recruitment process is poverty, marginalization, discrimination and a weakened social structure. The Agency also recognized that special risk groups, such as refugee children and internally displaced children may be particularly vulnerable to forced recruitment in armed conflict.²⁸ Consequently, the poverty, poor access to education, social exclusion, and discrimination widows and their children face, with the additional challenges as refugees or IDPs, are increasingly pushing children into radicalization and violent extremism.

²² A/C.3/73/L.22/REV.1 <https://undocs.org/A/C.3/73/L.22/Rev.1>

²³ France 24, "Rohingya women find peace in 'widows' camp' barred to men" <https://www.france24.com/en/20180206-rohingya-women-find-peace-widows-camp-barred-men>

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ VICE "Rohingya Brides Thought They Were Fleeing Violence. Then They Met Their Grooms" <https://www.vice.com/en/article/jgqa3d/rohingya-brides-thought-they-were-fleeing-violence-then-they-met-their-grooms>

²⁶ UN Women, *Unpacking Gendered Realities in Displacement: The status of Syrian refugee women in Jordan*

²⁷ Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women New York, 18 December 1979 <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/cedaw.aspx>

²⁸ UNODC, *Handbook on Children Recruited and Exploited by Terrorist and Violent Extremist Groups: The Role of the Justice System* https://www.unodc.org/documents/justice-and-prison-reform/Child-Victims/Handbook_on_Children_Recruited_and_Exploited_by_Terrorist_and_Violent_Extremist_Groups_the_Role_of_the_Justice_System.E.pdf

Moving Forward

Every day, displaced widows around the world are facing sexual violence, discrimination, and obstacles to the enjoyment of their fundamental rights. The constant state of survival they live in with their families, not knowing when or *if* they will ever go back home, makes it critical to acknowledge their plight in forced displacement contexts.

Recommendations

- The international community should recognize widows and female head of household as a vulnerable group within forcibly displaced populations in order to ensure their physical and psychological safety, as well as their children's. It should acknowledge the particular forms of harm, discriminations, and human rights violations widows are suffering from as refugee and IDPs because of their marital status.
- It is imperative that displaced widows and their unique needs be adequately accounted for in humanitarian aid and assistance, and ensure that all displaced widows and their children have a fair and equal access to those resources.
- Displaced widows should be given a path to employment in their host country or region as the sole provider of their family. A fair access to employment and financial resources will help displaced widows break the cycle of poverty and violence.

At the Global Fund for Widows we are committed to making sure widows are listened to and included in policy and post-conflict dialogues. Moreover, we believe that better addressing the needs of displaced widows would benefit our societies as a whole, as more inclusive humanitarian aid and development responses would address many of the root causes of poverty, education and nutrition access, child marriage, human trafficking, and violent extremism.