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Policing Bodies: An Analysis of Gender-Based Violence in Migrant Detention

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From the influx of Central American migrants to the United States (US) to the Syrian “refugee crisis,” the topic of forced migration has been widespread in the policy sphere. Whilst situations of forced migration are commonly framed as economic [1] or security issues [2], modern narratives have long overlooked the gendered nature of forced migration that underpin the lived experiences of women who make up half of all internally displaced, refugee or stateless populations [3]. This includes the occurrence of gender-based violence (GBV) in situations of forced migration, which will be the focus of this paper. Gendered-based violence is a phenomenon that describes all forms of violence that is rooted in patriarchal power dynamics, which render the minority gender subordinate. In the forced migration context, GBV is well-documented; those who identify as women are victims of a “continuum of violence” where gendered power imbalances leave them at a disproportionate risk of violence at every stage of the forced migration journey – both at the individual and structural level [4, 5]. Gender-based violence may therefore play out as direct physical violence against women at the individual level. The vulnerability of women to violence may also be determined at the population level as well, as a direct consequence of discriminatory social structures such as gendered norms or sexist laws in their host destinations. This “continuum of violence” defines the distinctive experience of female forced migrants and has been used to even explain poorer health outcomes amongst female forced migrants compared with their male counterparts [6].

In order to better understand the prevalence of GBV in situations of forced migration, this paper will explore the context-

specific drivers of this phenomenon. The drivers of GBV will be subdivided by mechanism: factors that increase women’s exposure to GBV; and factors that render women less protected from GBV. We will then discuss interventions that have been used to address GBV among forced migrants moving forward. For the purpose of this essay, our focus shall be on GBV against women and girls, which includes experiences of physical, psychological and sexual violence, economic violence, child or early marriage, as well as violence in more specific contexts like intimate-partner violence (IPV).

The Continuum of Violence

Female forced migrants are exposed to a “continuum of violence” from the start of their migrant journey to its theoretical end. For some, GBV begins as a driver of migration itself. For example, a University of Washington Study concluded that female migrants fleeing from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras due to GBV doubled in direct response to increasing violence against women between 2011 to 2016 [7]-the extent to which justified the creation of a state taskforce to investigate femicides in Honduras in 2017 [8]. Once female migrants decide to migrate, they are at risk of violence due to the unsafe passage to their destinations. Along their migration journey, female forced migrants are exposed to individual harm from: their intimate partners; fellow migrants; smugglers; police and border patrol; and even humanitarian workers [9]. In addition, many are at risk of human trafficking for sexual exploitation [10], as well as child trafficking-cases of which have been well-documented amongst forced migrant populations across 6 of 7 continents [11]. Once arriving at their destination, migrants

are often housed in over-crowded housing with a paucity of secure and/or single-sex facilities, which can also increase females' exposure to violence [4]. This is equally relevant to those in migrant detention centers [5]. Once "refuge" has been sought, female forced migrants still experience violence through a variety of mechanisms. This includes factors like economic insecurity, which increases their exposure to violence, as well factors that fail to protect female migrants from violence, such as a breakdown of their community secondary to displacement and structural discrimination through law and public policy in their host destinations.

Increased Exposure to Violence: Economic Insecurity

Economic insecurity has been a widely cited driver of GBV in situations of forced migration; it can promote mechanisms that increase the exposure of female forced migrants to violence, such as intimate violence (IPV), and a need to engage in transactional sex for survival [10]. Forced migrants commonly experience high levels of poverty; they are disproportionately from low or low-middle income countries and are more likely to migrate to areas, regions and countries that are close to their host location with similar levels of economic development [12]. Thus, destination regions often share similar economic problems such as poor employment opportunities; local services may also be further pressurized if incoming migrants arrive on a large scale [13]. On resettlement, forced migrants are also victim to unequal work opportunities due to factors like implicit and explicit biases and precarious immigration status [12]. The economic insecurity that many forced migrants experience have been shown to obscure gendered norms in heterosexual relationships and promote IPV against women. Studies have shown that men who conform to traditional gender roles, where men are the primary breadwinner, may feel relatively powerless as a direct consequence of being unable to live up to the social expectation of providing for their families. Thus, some men may turn to violence as a method to exercise their relative power in heterosexual relationships [9, 14]. This type of IPV can be further compounded by situations of conflict that many forced migrants have fled from, as the use of violence at the individual and population level may be normalized [15].

Economic insecurity has also forced many women to pursue undesired relationships, such as remaining with violent partners [16] or early marriage [9, 17], as their proximity to male partners may promote financial stability and may be perceived as protection from violence from other men [10]. In situations of forced migration, it is arguable that early marriage practices have even intensified in certain groups. In a qualitative study among Syrian refugees in Lebanon, it was reported that processes of early marriage have been expedited by fears of economic security and a need for physical protection. For example, the bridal price or "dowry" was often lowered and engagement periods were shortened to quicken the process of marriage when individuals felt a need to migrate [18]. Moreover, economic insecurity has also led many female forced migrants to turn to transactional sex as a means of survival-with documented cases of women and children exchanging sex for food, money and safety [19].

Irregular work can also increase one's exposure to violence. This has been noted among lone Syrian female migrants who engage in transactional sex-many of whom either travelled from Syria before their male partners or had lost their partners due to conflict-as many male perpetrators of violence perceive lone women in unstable environments as easy targets for violence without legal or social repercussions [9]. Protracted displacement may also increase women's vulnerabilities to GBV by prolonging their exposure to said violence [17]. At the same time, protracted displacement may also promote poor health seeking behaviors among migrant men that encourage GBV, such as alcoholism-related violence; this has been demonstrated in case studies on Acholi communities in Northern Uganda who were displaced secondary to conflict [20]. It also important to highlight that the mental and physical effects of GBV may also have a debilitating effect on the lives of victims who may find it difficult to rebuild their life thereafter, hence potentially exacerbating economic inequalities and reinforcing a cycle of gendered violence with poverty at its root [4].

Decreased Protection from Violence: a Breakdown of Community

Gender-based violence is also rampant in situations of forced migrants due to a failure of systems to protect women. This could refer to the breakdown of protective community-level mechanisms secondary to displacement, as well as the failure of legal structures to attain justice for women, which may reinforce cycles of unaccounted violence. During situations of forced migration, the breakdown of community (or "social cohesion"), due to factors like displacement and bereavement, may also expose female forced migrants to GBV. "Social cohesion" describes the interconnectedness of a community based on mutual trust. Communities with high levels of social cohesion are likely to influence the social norms of their constituent members and demonstrate more collective resilience to stress during emergencies [21]. In situations of forced migration, we often observe community breakdown due to various mechanisms including family bereavement, border separation and the self-selection of particular demographics to migrate (for example: trends of younger members migrating first). A disintegration of social cohesion may leave constituent members more prone to stress, isolation and a sense of powerlessness (i.e., less resilient), which may lead to GBV due to the mechanisms relating to gendered power dynamics as previously discussed. These stressors can be further intensified by tension between migrant and resident populations, especially in regions where resources are already limited [22].

In addition, the absence of social cohesion in migrant communities may mean that perpetrators of violence are less likely to have their violent behavior regulated by other community members, as was shown in a study that analyzed Chechen refugees in a camp in Czech Republic [23]. This could also create a vicious cycle of violence that discourages women from speaking out against GBV, as many women may already experience stigma as victims, and violent partners therefore being more emboldened in their violence as a result. The associated stigma related to divorce may be also further intensified in situations of forced migration

where women find themselves more reliant on male partners to recreate a sense of social cohesion [10]. A comparative lack of community after migration may also encourage women to establish income streams that may have previously been socially sanctioned, such as transactional sex. Going beyond community-level social structures, female forced migrants may also experience structural violence, through structures like the legal system, that puts them at a disadvantage due to their sex and immigration status.

Decreased Protection from Violence: Structural Violence & The Law

The vulnerability of female forced migrants to individual and structural violence is framed by the systems of their host countries, such as legal systems. Laws that disadvantage migrant populations often disproportionately impact women and have the potential to encourage GBV [10]. For example, critics of Jordanian domestic violence laws claim that women who have affairs with other men will receive harsher punishments than males who murder their female partners [10]. Thus, many survivors refrain from speaking out against violence due to having no faith in accountability structures; others also feel that law enforcement may also blame them for the provoking GBV—a common gendered trope used against victims of violence internationally. In addition, national laws may also enable gendered violence in specific forms, for example: those between 15 and 17 years old may get married in Jordan with permission from a judge [10]. Child marriage is also legal in 44 states in the US and critics argue that child migrants entering the US are also prone to sexual exploitation through said unions [24].

Host laws can also disadvantage forced female migrants economically, hence increasing their risk of GBV. For example, Jordanian laws impose great difficulty on Syrian refugees from acquiring work visas or entering white collar professions; these structures disproportionately impact the livelihoods of women [10]. Many women who have lost contact with male family members, including intimate partners, are also unable to inherit property or navigate certain social systems without a male intermediary. These mechanisms have been shown to facilitate women's involvement in transactional sex as their access to resources hinge upon their proximity to male partners or fathers who are alive [15].

Interventions to Prevent Gender-Based Violence:

Due to the significant burden of GBV in situations of forced migration, many interventions have been proposed to promote gender equality, or directly decrease the incidence of GBV, in the forced migration context—although with varying levels of success [25]. Some programs have tackled GBV by aiming to re-distribute the gendered power imbalance between men and women within migrant populations to ensure women more possess more “power,” hence leading to more social protections. For example, some interventions have established income generating schemes for women in order to promote their economic security and independence [26]; whilst other schemes have provided women with leadership responsibilities within communities with the assumption that their newfound social standing will be protective

[27]. There are also programs that focused on signposting victims of GBV to specialized social and medical services [25].

Income generating schemes are a commonly used interventions to promote economic security among women. As previously discussed, financial insecurity is associated with exposure to GBV. Such programs tackle GBV by encouraging female economic empowerment and independence, so that women no longer accept their previously subordinate social status [27]. Programs like this have been established by United Nations (UN) agencies and other non-profit organizations, such as the “Cash for Work” program for Syrian women and girls in Za’atari camp by UN Women [26]. These interventions have been met with both success and failure and reflect the complex and unique contexts that forced migrants exist within. For example, while some studies in South Africa and Uganda have shown that economic and physical security intersect significantly for some female forced migrant populations, there have been examples of economic empowerment programs that promote GBV—as some men may react violently to the obscuration of gender norms created by their female partners gaining financial independence. This underlines the importance of not treating forced migrant populations monolithically. As Hamber et al explains: the relationship between GBV and economic empowerment is “unpredictable, complex and often individually context-specific [27]” and this should be reflected in context-specific interventions for GBV.

Similarly, other interventions sought to advance the security of female forced migrants by promoting them to decision-making roles in their communities – with the assumption that their newfound social capital would equate to increased protection from GBV. For example, in Kakuma camp, Kenya, which houses many South Sudanese refugees, UN agencies offered food ration cards to women and girls, so that they could collect food from the UN agency themselves rather than rely on male members of the household, which was more typical [28]. Although this shifted the decision-making powers in many household units, interventions like this saw an increase in IPV against women, as men felt disadvantaged by their relatively lower levels of control over female members of the house. Some women also felt further disenfranchised by the program, as they felt that their inclusion in community leadership spaces were tokenized. For example, UN agencies reportedly preferred to interact with community members who spoke proficient English—these were almost exclusively young men—and women, the majority of whom were illiterate, felt that they were simply “added onto” programs to market a sense of diversity without being fully incorporated into the leadership structures [28]. Despite such programs being well-intentioned, it is clear that the impact of the program was distorted by a power imbalance between the humanitarian agencies and the community – the former of which did not consider the contexts of the forced migrant women when implementing the program. This was a similar problem faced by a GBV intervention established by the International Rescue Committee in Lebanon.

The IRC established their mobile service delivery program for GBV for Syrian refugees in Lebanon [25]; they focused on building social cohesion by creating female exclusive safe spaces that would

build community and where victims of GBV could be signposted to essential services. The implementation of the program was initially difficult, as some male members of the community felt undermined and suspicious by the female exclusivity of the program; this even led to some men limiting their female partner's access to the program. To overcome this obstacle, program leads aimed to create a buy-in from male members of the community, by building relationships via one-to-one and community-level engagement, which helped establish the GBV program by gaining their trust [25]. A point of contention for female migrants thereafter was that the program did not consider their social contexts and norms before its implementation; this highlighted the need for local actors to be involved during the design phase [28].

More generally, critics of some GBV intervention programs have claimed that program designers from multinational non-profit organizations often approach gender-related programs through a Eurocentric lens. For example, a study of Chechen refugees in a camp in Czech Republic showed that plans to encourage the sharing of resources between men and women in the community, such as a communal television, did not consider whether women wanted to share a space with access to all sexes. As Szczepanikova explains, interventions did not consider the complexities of gendered norms, culture nor the conflict on the lives of refugee women prior to their existence in the camp, which led to interventions that were inimical to social cohesion. Lastly, educational materials that were meant to engage men in the refugee camps seemed to propagate images of women as victims. Not only could this contribute to psychological stress caused by internalized sexism, which is well documented [29], but Grabska concludes that the male migrant "security risk" and female migrant "victim" dichotomy compounds gendered disparities by further disadvantaging and otherizing those who identify with genders that do not fit this binary [4].

Despite deficiencies in previous efforts to tackle GBV in situations of forced migration, there is growing acknowledgement and political momentum to prioritize the fight against GBV in the global migration space. Building upon previous interventions, The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees has published an amended policy on the prevention of, risk mitigation and response to GBV in 2020 [5]. The policy not only acknowledges the failures of the past, but it commits to a well-defined approach to tackle GBV in situations of forced migration through 9 core actions. Importantly, the policy also aligns with international agendas, like the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development; this is imperative when looking to obtain more funding for GBV-related programs, which critics argue has long been overdue. The recommendations also highlight the importance of their programs developers to partner with local actors, implement targeted services and promoting a survivor-centered approach, which have been cited as major flaws on previously established programs for GBV as discussed [5]. Despite encouraging political advances against GBV in situations of forced migration, a broader discussion about our commitment to dismantling the patriarchy is paramount, as it is an ideology that determines the way our societies are organized and hence how gendered violence manifests. Whether its femicide driving

Honduran women to leave their country or an increase in early marriage among Syrian minors, patriarchal structures are at the root of GBV in situations of forced migration and will only persist if we do not dismantle them from the top-down. Although this is a well-established view in left-wing, political spaces, the normalization of this viewpoint is critical in progressing forward with challenging gendered power dynamics that dictate the way women are able to navigate worldwide at the individual and population level. This will, in turn, tackle aspects of GBV in the context of forced migration as well.

In summary, female forced migrants are exposed to a "continuum of violence" at every stage of their migration journey; this is further exacerbated by several sociopolitical determinants from economic insecurity to discriminatory systems in their host destination. Given the unique and significant experiences of GBV by female forced migrants, gender-blind discourses of migration will not only act as a grave injustice to the experiences of these women but will further compound their experiences of violence. Given the complex and context-specific nature of GBV, survivor-centered interventions that involve local actors in their design are prerequisites for any true and sustainable successful initiatives in the field. Further research is needed to develop the support of GBV programs for gendered minorities beyond cis women, which is beyond the scope of this paper.

Acknowledgement

None.

Conflict of Interest

No Conflict of interest.

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