Sexual and Gender-Based Violence on Refugee Women's Journeys

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Abstract

In the wake of the refugee 'crisis', an abundance of anti-refugee sentiments can be found in the mass media. Curiously, the focus is centred on men, and refugee women are largely ignored in the media, yet this is not the case in the academic literature. Through a literature review, I uncover that the agency of these women is often forgotten by scholars. Focusing on the refugee 'crisis', I explore the obstacles that refugee women face on their journeys regarding sexual and gender-based violence. I pose the question: *How does sexual and gender-based violence affect refugee women's journeys?* To avoid representing refugee women as passive victims, I employ a gendered lens on the autonomy of migration approach. Overall, I argue that refugee women should be decoupled with notions of vulnerability and should instead be reframed as resilient women who constantly navigate difficult and dangerous pathways to fight for a better future.

Keywords: Intersectionality; Autonomy of Migration; Refugee Women; Sexual and Gender-Based Violence

Introduction

"Did you know that since the beginning of the immigration crisis the harassment of women has risen sharply in Europe?"

> Government sponsored billboard in Budapest, Hungary (Bayer, 2016).

"This repulsive criminal must not only be convicted, but also deported straight back to Afghanistan after his imprisonment"

> Government official Joachim Stamp, in response to an alleged rape of a German girl (Stickings, 2020).

Sentiments like the above seem to abound in European mass media. In the wake of the refugee 'crisis', the male refugee is painted as a foreign invader posing a threat to the European woman. Lutz (1997) and De Genova et al. (2018) indicate that "Fortress Europe" manifests these fears to protect notions such as national sovereignty (pp. 105-106), yet few mass media articles seem to consider refugee women, unless they are portrayed as affiliated with incorrigible men (see for example Dudman, 2018; Zeuthen & Sahgal, 2019).

Unlike the mass media, scholarly attention to migration and gender is far from lacking. I will now present a brief literature review of these combined fields with a focus on agency. Nawyn (2010) shows that after the seventies the experiences of migrating gendered beings started to be explored (p. 750), rather than just looking at the differences between men and women (Herrera, 2013, p. 476). Nawyn (2010) explores the feminisation of labour migration and points to migrant women as being "more exploitable" in the international labour market (p. 754). Herrera (2013) explores economic factors when discussing women and migration in relation to migrant care work (pp. 477-479). Importantly, Herrera (2013) criticises the tendency to view "family and the household as homogenous units" (p. 481), and although there may be "negotiations between husband and wife" (p. 480), it is usually "men [who] control remittances" leaving their wives in a less powerful position in relation to "gendered household dynamics" (p. 474).

Unlike Nawyn (2010) and Herrera (2013), Byrskog et al. (2014) and Freedman (2016) have a specific focus on refugees when exploring migrating women. Byrskog et al. (2014) explore refugee women from Somalia and the challenges these women face in relation to sexual

health and violence. Byrskog et al. (2014) portray refugee women as controlled gendered beings: controlled by their violent husbands (p. 3), by the fear of state violence (p. 4), and by fear of stigmatisation (p. 6). Similarly, Freedman (2016) explores a case study of a refugee woman who is scared of the men at her accommodation in France, so she wanders the streets to pass the time, yet little attention is paid to the woman's previous imprisonment "for opposing the government" (pp. 22-23) – in this way the woman is presented as fearful and powerless although she could have been reframed as a woman who defies laws to protect herself.

Overall, the literature on gender and migration seems to be saturated with terms and ideas connoting victimhood or docility regarding female migrants. Literature within the "field of gender and international migration has expanded dramatically" (Herrera, 2013, p. 472), yet it seems that the women portrayed are discussed as victims in a one-dimensional manner, where their agency is largely ignored. This does not mean that women do not face extreme hardship on their migratory journeys, and particularly refugee women seem to face a multitude of obstacles during flight, as indicated by Byrskog et al. (2014) and Freedman (2016).

Considering Byrskog et al. (2014) and Freedman's (2016) work, it seems that many of these obstacles have a gendered nature. Both exemplify that sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) is a serious, almost omnipresent concern for fleeing women, therefore, I see this as a factor which must be thoroughly addressed. With these considerations in mind, I pose the research question: *How does sexual and gender-based violence affect refugee women's journeys?* I aim to explore this question in a manner that pays attention to the agency of women, particularly through a gendered lens on the autonomy of migration (AoM) approach, as will be discussed below.

I acknowledge that this is a rather broad question, so I must impose a few limits to allow for a more specific exploration. Firstly, I choose to focus on the refugee 'crisis', which, through European eyes, began in 2015 when over one million people attempted to reach Europe by sea (Clayton & Holland, 2015, para. 3). When I employ the term refugee 'crisis' I use inverted commas to highlight that refugees should not be seen as constituting this condition, but rather that the socio-political response to the situation constitutes this perceived crisis. This approach is in line with Freedman (2016; 2019) and is informed by De Genova et al.'s

(2018) considerations that the "unrelenting proliferation of official discourse of 'crisis'" is designed to justify nationalist projects (p. 2).

The second limit that I construct is a focus primarily on refugees from the Middle East coming to Europe, although I acknowledge that such migratory flows are rarely simple or one-directional, especially because EU countries "bounce [refugees] around" (De Genova et al., 2018, p. 246). With this geographic limitation in mind, it is important to remember that refugees coming from the Middle East represent a heterogenous group, with diverse experiences based on country of origin, class, race, religion, sexuality, gender, ethnicity, age, etc. To engage with some of these differences, I take an intersectional approach, as will be outlined below.

An implicit limit in the research question is the focus on SGBV, although a multitude of other factors also affect refugee women's journeys. I choose to focus on SGBV to provide as thorough an insight into this aspect as possible. Overall, I avoid presenting female migration as one homogenous experience for all migrating women, but rather focus on one aspect of a large and complex process.

Framework

Sex vs. Gender & Intersectionality

My research question implicates certain concepts which must be unpacked before I can embark on the analysis. Firstly, my focus on how *women* experience migratory journeys necessitates a conceptualisation of gender. As Nawyn (2010) states, gender can be understood "as a practice or ideology rather than a fixed biological category[sex]" (p. 751). But sex and gender may be linked, as is made clear from Carling's (2005) statement that "gender produces and institutionalises asymmetries on the basis of sex" (p. 2) Further, Carling (2005) states that "the most common weakness in gender research is the focus on *women* rather than on *gender*" (p. 3). To avoid this, I aim to unpack 'women' as a social category in a manner that sees women as gendered beings situated in complex power dynamics and navigating a multitude of dynamic gender relations.

Carling (2005) notes that "gender relations are always mediated by other socially constructed categories such as class, age, 'race', and ethnicity" (p. 3). Carling here begins a discussion of

intersectionality. Collins (2015) presents a commonly accepted definition of this term when explaining that intersectionality "references the critical insight that race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, ability, and age operate not as unitary exclusive entities, but as reciprocally constructing phenomena that in turn shape complex social inequalities" (p. 2). In this case, it can therefore be understood that the inextricable categories 'refugee' and 'woman' co-construct and maintain each other, shaping a complex web of inequality.

Taking an intersectional approach when discussing migration and women seems necessary considering Silvey's (2006) statement that "there is a variable porosity of borders, and the unequal geographies of spatial control reflected and created through these borders are intertwined with social hierarchies of gender, race, nation, and class" (p. 72). Here, the social identity markers a person holds are shown to have a crucial importance to migration.

Migrant vs. Refugee & AoM

The category 'refugee' is another underpinning concept implicated in the research question. One way to understand the term 'refugee' is as "a rarefied and exclusionary legal category", allowing states to produce asylum as a scarce resource (De Genova et al., 2018, pp. 244-245). In line with this, Crawley & Skleparis (2017) note that "choosing to label […] someone a 'refugee' is a powerful, and deeply political, process, one by which policy agendas are established and which position people as objects of policy in a particular way" (p. 52). This is a top-down approach where states determine who is a 'genuine' refugee compared to those seen as 'economic migrants' (Zagor, 2015, p. 380).

I take the approach of De Genova et al. (2018) as they "irrespective of migrants' status […] mobilize the term refugees […] as a strategic essentialism" (p. 245). This is a bottom-up approach, as strategic essentialism takes departure from the experiences and assessments of the people actually affected by real and concrete impacts of being a refugee. I use this conceptualisation of the term refugee when discussing refugee women to include those who would otherwise be excluded by the political elite.

Such strategic essentialism can be seen as a "necessary methodological reorientation" within the AoM approach (De Genova et al., 2018, p. 258). AoM avoids "the objectivism of economic models in migration studies that treat migrants as effectively inert objects at the mercy of 'push' and 'pull' factors of structural forces" (De Genova et al., 2018, p. 241). In

addition, AoM scholars criticise the "humanitarian reason that has long dominated refugee studies by which refugees or 'asylum seekers' are treated as pure victims" (De Genova et al., 2018, p. 241). Rather than feeding into either of these narratives, AoM "insists on the analysis of migratory movements as exercising a significant measure of autonomy" (De Genova et al., 2018, p. 241).

A cornerstone of AoM is the decoupling of the image of the refugee with non-choice and as subjects who cannot but accept the conditions they face (De Genova et al., 2018, p. 248). Zagor (2015) suggests that this is "another way of characterising the refugee" as a person who has "without authorisation or documentation" fought for their safety, thereby constituting "the quintessentially autonomous human being" (p. 378). Therefore, it can be said that refugees are seen as "the protagonists of migration", that is, their experiences and agency are placed at the centre (Scheel, 2019, p. 43).

Although AoM scholars ask how "migrants challenge, defy, and subvert border controls" (Scheel, 2019, p. 46), the approach is not "a romanticization of the migrant exercise of freedom of movement as a purely subversive or emancipatory act" (De Genova et al., 2018, p. 241) – therefore, I acknowledge the "coercive emplacement and immobilisation" imposed on refugees in precarious situations (De Genova et al., 2018, p. 248).

Merging Frameworks

In the literature review, I outlined how gendered approaches to migration studies tend to view women as victims without agency. AoM, while putting a focus on the agency practiced by migrants, initially seems to pay little attention to the impact of gender in this process. I suggest that these approaches might be merged in a way that combines 'the best of both worlds' – that is, a focus on how gender impacts the way a person is able to practice autonomous migration. In this way, I aim to address refugees as the protagonists of their own migratory journeys (to use the terminology of Scheel, 2019), while also having an intersectional focus that acknowledges the interconnected web of social categories that shape complex social inequalities. Therefore, I aim to view women as gendered beings situated in complex power dynamics and navigating a multitude of dynamic gender relations, who exercise a significant measure of autonomy in their migratory movements.

In this paper, I do not collect and analyse empirical data, rather, I aim to present theoretical reflections based on works published in scientific journals and academic books, as well as using findings and discussions from case studies. This paper will discuss somewhat broad themes identified in the literature concerning refugee women's journeys in relation to SGBV, rather than aiming to make narrow or specific reflections, as would be possible with empirical data.

Analysis

Throughout the analysis, it is important to bear in mind that while the United Nation High Commissioner for Refugees estimates that around 21% of the one million refugees arriving in Europe during the refugee 'crisis' were women (EP, 2016, p. 8), this statistic is highly approximate "due to the lack of gender-disaggregated data" (Freedman, 2016, p. 18). Also, many instances of such violence are likely to be undocumented (see: Byrskog et al., 2014; Pittaway & Pittaway, 2004; Baklacıoğlu, 2017). Therefore, the magnitude of the problem is likely larger than found in the literature and statistics.

With this in mind, I first explore how SGBV affects women differently based on whether they travel alone or with a man, then I will look into SGBV in relation to authorities, and finally I will reflect on how the EU may be exacerbating the risk of SGBV.

SGBV When Travelling Alone vs. With a Man

Women fleeing on their own are likely to have a vastly different experience of the journey than women travelling with a man, such as a husband or a male relative. Freedman (2016) suggests that "a greater proportion of women are now travelling alone, or with just their children" (pp. 18-19).

Freedman (2016) shows that women flee as a last resort compared to men who often leave earlier (p. 20), indicating that conflicts in the Middle East are reaching a critical point (Freedman, 2016, p. 20; Tastsoglou & Nourpanah, 2019, p. 39). One reason that women leave later than men is explained by Byrskog et al. (2014). They underscore that refugee women are aware of the risks of SGBV during flight, hence they may be more apprehensive of fleeing. Although Byrskog et al.'s study is based on Somali women, the awareness of the

risks can be assumed to be held by Middle Eastern women too, an assumption I make based on scholarship produced by for example Asaf (2017), or Baklacıoğlu (2017), who both discuss Middle Eastern women who knew of the risks of SGBV before fleeing (p. 8; p. 88 respectively). In this way, women, aware of the risks they are taking, make a calculated risk, weighing their bodily autonomy against their future safety.

Women travelling with a man may travel with less insecurity concerning SGBV. As a case study by Freedman (2016) shows, the husband of one refugee woman had been killed so she fled alone with her two children – here, the woman experienced "another layer of insecurity as a woman alone without her husband" (p. 21). This indicates that travelling with a male companion provides a level of security in relation to the risks of SGBV. This can also be seen in Baklacıoğlu's (2017) work, where a Syrian mother expresses "I wish she [her daughter] do not undergo her menstruation soon, because we will have to marry her in order to protect her" (p. 95), thereby underscoring not only the protection a man may be able to offer, but also how the status of marriage can be protective.

Travelling with a man does not de facto reduce the risk of SGBV. This is especially the case when the person committing the violence is the husband of the woman in question. In line with Byrskog et al. (2014), I use the term Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) to refer to this. In this paper, I include IPV in the exploration of SGBV because IPV often manifests within unequal gender relations and as such ought to be considered a type of gendered violence (in line with Gray, 2019). Both Byrskog et al. (2014) and Tastsoglou & Nourpanah (2019) highlight that IPV is frequently regarded as a 'private issue' (p. 7; p. 41), and especially Byrskog et al. (2014) show that their interviewees considered this an issue to be "solved within the marriage and within the larger family" (p. 7), a solution that must be harder to implement during flight, where many families become separated. Freedman (2016) notes that during flight, women "find it impossible to leave their abusive husbands or partners" either because of the increased risks of SGBV by other men (p. 20), or because of the fear of being delayed on their onward journey (p. 22). Freedman (2016) argues that they consequently "find themselves stuck in a violent relationship with no hope of escaping" (p. 22). However, this phenomenon can also be seen as women weighing the violence they undergo by their husbands against the violence in their home countries, and as such are not passive victims but rather make an autonomous choice to endure IPV to be protected from other forms of SGBV,

and to be protected from the violence in the countries from which they are fleeing. Significantly, Yuval-Davis (2011) reminds us of "the differential situatedness of different social actors" that plays an important role in how such phenomena affect women (p. 4). In line with this, it should be considered that there are likely to be substantial differences within groups of refugee women, and while some may be practicing autonomous migration in this instance, others may, as Freedman suggests, be 'stuck' with little choice. The latter may be more likely in cases where categories like age or ability constrain the woman's relative power within the family.

SGBV by Authorities

Refugee women must also navigate the SGBV practiced by authorities. Attention to this problem is prominent in the literature, but the scope is likely to be larger than indicated, as there is no authority to report this to (Pittaway & Pittaway, 2004, "The Case Study").

Pittaway & Pittaway (2004) refer to reports of security forces and border-camp guards who take advantage of refugee women's dire situations by offering goods and services in exchange for sex ("Introduction"). This 'exchange' is so coerced in nature, that few scholars use the term prostitution to refer to it. Instead, Charles & Denman (2013) call it "survival sex" (p. 106) and note that this may be an 'option' considered on the "family level" (p. 106), yet Herrera's (2013) assertion that the family may not be a "homogenous unit" (p. 481) underscores that the measure of choice in this scenario must be seen as severely limited.

Freedman (2016) uses data from Human Rights Watch to discuss cases where "women were promised priority treatment of their cases and fast release [from border-camps] if they agreed to sexual relations with male guards" (p. 20). This data is backed up by Freedman's (2016) own interview data from Kos where women "had been victims of [SGB-]violence at the hands of Turkish police and coastguards" in exchange for 'privileges' (p. 22). Here, an intersectional perspective is particularly useful since the social category of class plays a significant role. Often, it is women in dire economic situations who face these issues (as indicated by Charles & Denman, 2013; Alsaba & Kapilashrami, 2016), while women with greater economic resources may be able to pay for safer travel in monetary rather than bodily terms. This underscores that the social categories to which a woman belongs have monumental effects on the obstacles she faces during flight.

SGBV Exacerbated by The EU

Pittaway & Bartolomei (2018) and Freedman (2016), indicate that the SGBV against refugee women is widely recognised, suggesting that the EU must have some awareness of this issue. Yet, as Freedman (2016) states "the EU's current policies may be acting to increase the vulnerability […] of these women" (p. 19). The ungendered nature of the UN's 1951 refugee convention (as explored by Tastsoglou & Nourpanah, 2019) or the Dublin Regulation (as explored by De Genova et al., 2018) serve as good illustrations of such policies, however, I here focus on how the EU is making the journeys of refugees more precarious and examine the gendered effects of this, to provide an example fit for the scope of this paper.

Freedman (2016) suggests that "as more and more EU member states […] attempt to close their borders to prevent passage or influx of refugees, the journey is becoming […] more dangerous" (p.18). This makes the journey of all refugees, regardless of gender, more strenuous. Baklacıoğlu (2017) provides one example of an EU attempt to prevent the passage of refugees, namely "the [2015] EU borderization policies at the Libya-Italy route", which caused this route to become "the most dangerous […] in the Mediterranean" (p. 91). In 2014, "Syrian women were the main passengers" of this route (Baklacıoğlu, 2017, p. 89), so in 2015 it is likely that these women had to find an alternative route. Baklacıoğlu (2017) suggests that this "constant shift" causes changes in smuggling channels, which increases transportation fees paid to smugglers, thereby "forcing thousands of women into debt bondage" (p. 97). Such debt may be paid using survival sex, a term discussed above in relation to authorities, but it should be noted that the literature does not confine the notion to just this setting (as seen e.g., by Charles & Denman, 2013). Here, the importance of an intersectional perspective becomes clear, as women with better economic resources are more likely to be able to avoid this debt bondage, thereby decreasing the SGBV risks they face.

Furthermore, subsequent to the 2015 securitisation of borders along the Italian, Greek, and Spanish shores, refugees had to find new points of entry into the EU (Baklacıoğlu, 2017, p. 88). The refugees who succeeded in leaving their camps had to walk "hundreds of kilometres through dangerous conflict zones" to reach new smuggling hubs (Baklacıoğlu, 2017, p. 87). Bearing in mind the increased risks of SGBV when leaving refugee camps (Özdemir, 2015, pp. 53-56), and when sleeping without proper shelter (Freedman, 2016, p. 23), it must be

considered that this forced “zigzag towards their aspired destination” (De Genova et al., 2018, p. 251) exacerbated the precarious situation of refugee women. However, Yuval-Davis (2011) asserts that “we cannot homogenize the ways any political project […] affect[s] people who are differentially located” within categories of belonging (p. 4), so we must remember that these refugee women represent a heterogenous group of people and that a multitude of other categories also impact the ways in which the journey may unfold. For example, ethnic belonging may further the precarious situation of refugee women partaking in this forced ‘zigzag’, as the mutually constitutive categories of ethnic belonging and gender can cause men from ‘enemy groupings’ to “rape and sexually torture women from other [ethnic] groups” (Pittaway & Pittaway, 2004, “Identity and Intersectional Oppressions”). This demonstrates that consequential distinctions in SGBV risks exist even within groups of refugee women.

Conclusion

From my analysis, it is clear that SGBV has an immense effect on refugee women’s journeys. I am inclined to agree with Pittaway & Pittaway (2004), who suggest that the label “refugee woman” is “a dangerous label” (“Refugee Woman”), precisely because of the two social categories evoked by this label. In this paper, I found that as a *refugee*, a refugee woman must navigate EU policies and design new pathways for flight. As a *woman*, a refugee woman must manoeuvre the SGBV risks posed by fellow refugees, by husbands, and by the authorities. However, these two categories are intricately connected, and a refugee woman must constantly manage both categories, thereby always calculating and weighing her bodily autonomy against her future safety.

In this paper, I have combined intersectionality and AoM, such a framework has proven to be useful to unpack the ways in which refugee women may practice autonomy on their journeys. Nonetheless, the differences within groups of refugee women must not be forgotten and may result in some refugee women being able to practice autonomy to a greater extent than others. Future studies could benefit from focusing on the factors which play a role in this regard.

In the literature review I point to the tendency to view refugee women as docile victims. Based on my findings in this paper, I rather propose that these women should be reframed as resilient women who are the strong protagonists of their own migratory journeys, and who

constantly navigate the difficult and dangerous pathways and precarious situations created and exacerbated for example by unequal gender relations, authorities practicing SGBV, or ungendered anti-immigration EU policies.

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