

2015

Syrian women refugees: out of the shadows

Lisa Davis

CUNY School of Law

[How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!](#)

Follow this and additional works at: http://academicworks.cuny.edu/cl_pubs

 Part of the [Law Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Davis, Lisa, "Syrian women refugees: out of the shadows" (2015). *CUNY Academic Works*.
http://academicworks.cuny.edu/cl_pubs/54

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the CUNY School of Law at CUNY Academic Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Publications and Research by an authorized administrator of CUNY Academic Works. For more information, please contact AcademicWorks@cuny.edu.

[openDemocracy](#)[OurKingdom](#)[oDR](#)[oD 50.50](#)[Transformation](#)[OurBeeb](#)[More](#)[Gender Politics Religion](#)[Our Africa](#)[People on the Move](#)[Peacework & Human Security](#)[Structures of Sexism](#)

Syrian women refugees: out of the shadows

LISA DAVIS 16 June 2014

Syrian women refugees cite rape, or the fear of rape, as one of the main reasons they fled. A coalition of grassroots women and international advocates has formed to integrate services and advocacy, enabling women refugees to participate in formulating the political future they want to see



A line of Syrian refugee women leaving Syria. Photo: UNHCR/W

Picture the millions of Syrian women and girls who are in crisis at this moment. There is the woman who fled her home and became a refugee, escaping not just the bombings but also [the threat of rape](#). There is the young girl whose dreams of an education ended when her parents [sold her into marriage](#). Now imagine that part of the solution to their crises lies thousands of miles away, in a United Nations hall in Switzerland.

Making these connections between local threats and international advocacy solutions is rarely evident or simple. But each seemingly unlikely link weaves a

thread of hope: to end the conflict, to protect against gender-based violence, to support survivors, and to promote an end to impunity.

For more than three years, shocking patterns of sexual violence perpetrated by both the Syrian regime and opposition forces have emerged. In accounts from refugees who fled conflict-affected cities, women and girls cite rape, or the fear of rape, as one of the main reasons they fled.

Such fear of sexual violence committed by armed actors in Syria has unfortunately proven well founded. Cases of gender-based violence committed with complete impunity by armed actors are stacking up as the conflict progresses. The UN has warned that the conflict in Syria is increasingly marked by torture, and sexual violence used “[as a weapon of war to intimidate parties to the conflict destroying identity, dignity and the social fabrics of families and communities.](#)”

A Treaty for all women

Nearly 35 years ago, the [Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women](#) (CEDAW) was adopted by the UN General Assembly. This treaty set out a standard of human rights protection for women and obligations for the countries that ratified it - including Syria.

As a party to CEDAW, Syria must regularly present its record on women’s human rights for review before the CEDAW Committee. In July, [Syria will face that scrutiny.](#) Moreover, Syrian women’s human rights advocates and their international allies will have the opportunity to shape discourse at the global level, influencing the questioning to which the regime will be compelled to respond.



Syrian refugees queue for food in the Lebanese border town, Wadi Khaled

This process has already begun. The Committee has asked the Syrian government to provide information in advance of the July hearing on its measures to address gender-based violence - for both displaced and refugee women - as well as the obstacles women face in accessing healthcare.

This request for advance information was not by chance. It was due in significant part to the advocacy work of international and local organizations and the [credible documentation they submitted to the CEDAW Committee last fall.](#) A [follow-up report](#), written by Syrian and international activists, was submitted in early June 2014.

These documents highlight a sweeping epidemic of gender-based violence exacerbated by the war. In addition to providing critical information, they enhance the advocacy efforts of Syrian women’s organizations that have come together in an unprecedented coalition of groups to create an advocacy platform under a unified voice.

This reporting to CEDAW serves as that platform. A process driven by local

activists both reflects inputs from communities experiencing rights violations and creates a historical record of abuse. Through community-based documentation, the voices of people previously excluded are amplified at the international level.

Syrian refugee women, like many women worldwide, rarely report gender-based violence. This is due not only to the lack of appropriate mental and physical health services, but also to the threat of severe social stigma and exclusion by family members and society at large. One Syrian women's rights activist stated that, "If it is made known that a woman has been raped, no one will want to marry her." Instead, those who may report gender-based violence are more likely to share it with another family member or religious figure who could handle the situation quietly, rather than report an incident to a service provider or the police.

Without strong community-based programs designed to identify sexual violence survivors and enable them to come forward safely for assistance, many will remain invisible. This is the vital role that grassroots women activists play, connecting women to services and gathering their testimonies as evidence to hold their government accountable.

The impact of both of these interventions is immediate. Not only do women navigate around stigma to access crucial care, they can tell their stories and be heard. For women refugees who are often isolated and lost in the chaos of displacement, to be heard is empowering.

However, that impact can dissipate quickly. If women and girls who share their testimonies are left without recourse, they soon lose faith in an international advocacy process that did little to change the material conditions of their lives. But there is a solution to this danger.

Combining direct services and advocacy

Integrating services and advocacy means that women are sustained as they engage in the long process of pursuing justice at the international level. This combination enables women refugees to participate in formulating the political future they want to see. Such a methodology further builds local resilience and sustainability, leaving skills, resources and knowledge in Syrian women's hands for the long term.

A coalition of grassroots women and international advocates has come together to implement this combination of services and advocacy for Syrian refugees. The Syrian Women's League, Free Syrian Women, MADRE, the City University of New York School of Law and others are merging humanitarian aid and healthcare with human rights trainings for local women's groups.

On the first point, this coalition delivers supplies to Syrian women's organizations and service providers, local allies who are best positioned to distribute aid to the most vulnerable. This aid ensures that survivors of rights violations receive the care they need in the short term. Meanwhile, human rights training equip local activists with skills and expertise to document violations and prepare evidence to present at the global level. This increases the participation of Syrian women leaders in international venues charged with upholding human rights and building peace.

The wheels of international justice may often turn slowly, but they do turn. Our obligation is to leave no one behind as together we put our shoulders to that wheel.

Read more articles on 50.50's migration, gender and social justice dialogue,

People on the Move, edited by Jennifer Allsopp.

Related Articles

Seeking safety in Algeria: Syrian refugee women's resilience

LATEFA GUEMAR

Hopes and fears: Summit to End Sexual Violence in Conflict

SANAM NARAGHI ANDERLINI

Syrian women demand to take part in the peace talks in Geneva

MADELEINE REES



This article is published under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 3.0 licence](#). If you have any queries about republishing please [contact us](#). Please check individual images for licensing details.

We encourage anyone to comment, please consult the [oD commenting guidelines](#) if you have any questions.