

The article is about displaced women, particularly African women who are still facing situations of armed conflict and subjected to sexual violence. Those who have attempted to escape mostly end up being displaced. This puts them in a more vulnerable spot and subjected to more violence during the flight out of the country where the women are attacked by smugglers and are trafficked. Displaced women are excluded from mainstream society without access to basic services and excluded from the Justice System.

United Nations Resolution 1325, a major policy milestone in the lives of women in conflict situation, urges women to participate in peace negotiations. This was followed by resolution 1820 in 2009 which has contributed to the incorporation of women's rights and eliminating gender-based violence against women and girls during and after armed conflict. Women, particularly displaced women need to be engaged in decision making and be provided with social support, training and empowerment support and access to legal systems.

Meeting the Challenges of Displaced African Women

by Marie Anne Zammit



Amina's Plight and Displacement

On her beautiful face, one can hardly read any expression, as if she is making sure that no emotion is betrayed. Her eyes are held downcast, hiding her pain and an attempt to bury all her experiences. The comfortable room at the second floor of the Refugee Commission seems quite safe. Amina (a fictitious name), a young woman from Somalia takes note of this as she answers questions regarding her application for a refugee status. Suddenly, Amina's face turns ghastly pale and tears surface from the edge of her eyes. Amina is asked to describe what she had to go through before finding herself in Malta. Long silence dominates the room as Amina recalls the war, the stray bullets' bomb shells landing on her house. But worse was her experience of rape by men, losing all her family members and having to flee from her own country searching for a new life.

Like many other women from Africa, Amina had to flee from her country in order to escape the violence and the harsh brutalities caused by war. All these women hope for a better life devoid of war and conflict. This is the harsh reality experienced by African women immigrants who risk their lives while crossing the Mediterranean region illegally. With some luck, they might manage to reach one or two Mediterranean shores for refuge.

The African continent is considered to be a continent affected by many disasters. Some are natural like drought and dryness, and others are caused by humans such as war and conflict. Women in these regions are responsible for 70 percent of agricultural work, and all the cooking and domestic responsibilities. Women are excluded from mainstream society and gender equality is almost non-existent. The effects of climate change are a direct menace to these women but the worst threat that women face is the exposure to sexual and other forms of violence during armed conflicts. Conflicts in most African regions have escalated and the negative impact of these wars has resulted to the abuse of women and children.

Violence against women comes in many forms - physical abuse, sexual abuse, domestic violence, genital mutilation and other forms. In conflict zones, the violence directed towards women is even

more profound, creating adverse impact with short and long term consequences.

As an aftermath of war, resorting to violence in armed conflicts is still a common reality and is often used as a weapon of war against the opponent. Women in armed conflicts are often subjected to rape and sexual abuse, forced pregnancies, slavery, forced marriages and many forms of torture and mutilation. These include being burned alive, shot and subjected to other brutal attacks with the aim of humiliating the women. To add to the pain and suffering, these harsh atrocities are performed in the presence of their children and family members. These circumstances are enough to get the women imbalanced. In situations of conflicts in Rwanda, Sudan and Sierra Leone, acts of sexual violence were committed to destroy women's lives, and thus, the opponent.

A report undertaken by the UN Special Rapporteur in 1996 found that acts of rape were quite prevalent during the Genocide in Rwanda in 1994. It led to the rape of 500,000 women and girls.


For women who survive, going through the experience of abuse and violence leaves a lingering effect on them, whether it is psychological, social and physical. Victims suffer from stress, anxiety, depression, panic attacks and may lose general interest in life. Moreover, many of them suffer from medical complications such as traumatic fistula which is described as tissue tears in the vagina, bladder and rectum. There is also the medical condition referred to as uterine prolapse which is the case of the uterus descending into the vagina. Other medical and physical conditions include miscarriage and long term complications such as infertility. There is also the high risk of contracting STDs and HIV/AIDS by women who have been raped.

Even if women are the victims and have been forced into the situation of sexual violence, women who have been raped, sexually violated, humiliated, persecuted and isolated by their own



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communities. Some are rejected by their families and even abandoned by their husbands because they are regarded as dishonour to the family and community, and out of fear of contracting STDs and HIV/AIDS. These harsh conditions put women in even more vulnerable and helpless situations where many are forced to engage in sex trade and be prostituted.

In times of war, women who are married lose their husbands and end up as widows with increased responsibilities. Most African women work in the agriculture sector. In times of war, there is a bigger chance that they could lose their land and properties.

Illegal grabbing of land and property owned by the women results in diminished food and crops which are necessary for family and community survival. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNCHR) estimated that in 2004, the number of people displaced by armed conflict was about 34 million. Of these people, 9.3 million became refugees in neighbouring states while another 25 million were internally displaced. Women who end up displaced are forced to leave their homes and countries to seek protection elsewhere. Because of this, they are further exposed to risks of sexual violence. The incidence of violence and abuse could be repeated over and over again while the women are temporarily living in halfway camps provided. After losing their land, properties and belongings, not even the halfway camps can provide some sense of guaranteed protection and security. While staying in camps, women have to collect firewood in order to cook for their families and in so doing, they also expose themselves to risks of assault, rape, theft and even murder.

Crossing Deserts, Tales of Sexual Slavery

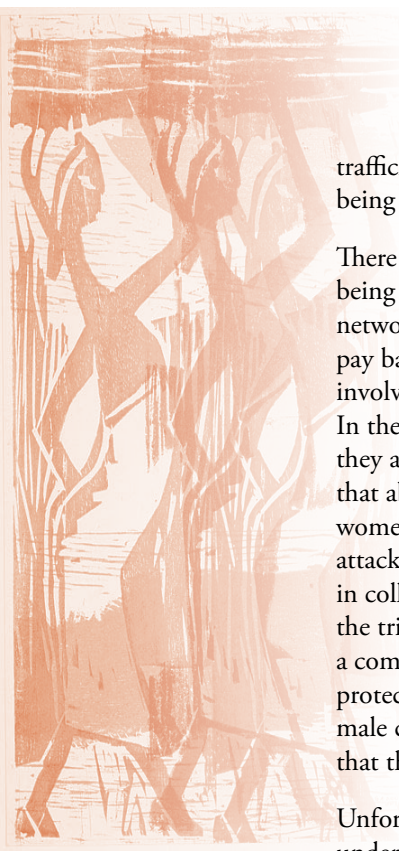
In 2006, the Women's Commission for Refugee Women identified a group of women who are of particular concern. These are displaced girls, older women and physically-disabled women and girls

who lack the capacity to resist physical or sexual violence. According to the UNCHR, there are many factors which make women vulnerable to sexual violence. These are: the collapse of family support, lack of available food, fuel which forces women to seek outside of their locality, lack of police or security protection and hostility coming from their own community.

After spending some long periods inside the camps, women may decide to move away. Most of the time, women move away from these camps only to enter a more difficult situation. More often, they end up being transported illegally out of Africa. Taking this journey is without doubt more perilous for women who have to cross through deserts for long days till they reach the ports of Libya.

During their flight, women are again put at risk of being sexually abused, this time by bandits, military men and border guards. Those who manage to get through like Amina, may end up in Southern European countries like Malta, Sicily and Southern Italy where States are obliged by the European Union to assist refugees and provide them necessary documentation. In other circumstances, women crossing over Libya may end up in the Gulf region where they work as domestic workers with no work contracts, working as slaves and even subjected to abuse.

One could say that the toughest part of the journey is the immigrant's stop in countries of transit in the Maghreb area. These countries are Morocco and Egypt, geographical locations considered attractive for migrant flow passing through the Maghreb on their way to Europe. The widespread incidence of violence inflicted on immigrant women is often not recorded, but the Medicins Sans Frontieres has issued reports of violence against undocumented sub Saharan migrants in Morocco. These reports were compiled with detailed information on the effects of violence on women's health and at the same time, highlights the failure of the Moroccan, Spanish and European Authorities to meet their obligations in protecting migrants from all forms of violence. Morocco has become a transit destination for trafficked women coming from the sub Saharan region, from North Africa and even Asia. So many



trafficked women brought to Morocco end up being sexually exploited.

There is a high incidence of migrating women being forced into prostitution by these trafficking networks. During flight, women are expected to pay back with sexual favors, in return to the efforts involved in smuggling them out of their countries. In the case of single women, the risks are higher as they are most vulnerable to sexual abuse. It seems that abusers more often prey on single or widowed women, as do organised gangs who choose to attack them. These attacks may even be organised in collaboration with the smugglers organising the trip. So if they could, single women choose a companion to travel with them in order to be protected from this violence although women with male companions can never be completely assured that they will not be targeted.

Unfortunately, this violence during flight remains under reported because women who endured violence are mainly afraid to report the incidence of what they have gone through and even if they do, they get little or no help.

Egypt is another country of transit and destination for migrant workers and refugees. Most of the refugee populations are from Sudan, Somalia, Ethiopia and Eritrea. To address the deplorable condition of women during times of conflict, the United Nations Security Council passed Resolution 1325 in 2000 to provide the key framework for the implementation of a gender perspective. The resolution on Women, Peace and Security assessed the impact of war on women and enhanced women's contribution to conflict resolution and peace building.

This was followed by the UN Security Council Resolution 1820 in 2009 calling for a coordinated response to the crime of sexual violence in conflicts. Without doubt, this is an important landmark but still, women continue to be sexually violated in war torn areas, lose their status and exposed to higher risks. The situation is even worse in the case of displaced women who are rarely included in governmental structures. Displaced women have no access to schools, to health services and to legal participation in the labour market.

Need for Gender-Responsive Approach

The problem of displaced women may be addressed by reinforcing the implementation of community-based programmes that offer multi-sectoral support services. These services would include reproductive and health services, medical, psychological, legal and economic programmes with the provision of immediate help to reintegrate them back within the fold of community. The health sector will assess the needs of women and girls who have been exposed to violence while other sectors shall see to it that women get free psychological services and free or low cost legal counselling, representation and other legal support.

Significantly, women are encouraged to participate in community-based activities and institutions despite facing numerous obstacles devastating their lives. In countries where gender equality is unheard of, it is fairly common that women are left out of the peace building processes and excluded in decision making aspects in their communities as the committees and councils are male-dominated. Women are excluded from the public sphere and may not be informed about their rights, or they may be unwilling to report to the police due to lack of information sources and lack of access to support services. Women are unaware of their human rights and the support services available to them.

Introducing more community-based initiatives and applying gender-equal systems would help alleviate the enormous problems that displaced women encounter on a daily basis. On top of that, more measures should incorporate the adoption of a binding code of conduct regulating the behaviour of soldiers. Law enforcement strategies must be geared towards punishing those who engage in smuggling and trafficking of women and children.

The physical environment where women live is another important concern. Most of the time, this generates serious problems for women who have to go out of the house to use toilets or latrines, even after dark. Such a situation can be life-threatening, endangers women's lives and heightens the risk of sexual violence. These communities need to be made safer and should be constructed with

the utmost consideration to protect women from sexual violence and reduce opportunities for perpetrators to attack.

Putting into practice more gender sensitive approach in assessing conflict situations can contribute to the prevention of women's violence. Empowering women is the key to easing up their woes. Their participation and inclusion in all decision making processes are crucial. The more women meet and discuss issues together, the more they will be encouraged to build networks and coalitions between them.

The key components in the prevention of violence against women and curb displacement of women involve: the delivery of educational services and

information, providing adequate social services and encouraging participation in the labour market. For the UN Resolution to work and be considered an effective instrument for peace, it is vital that women and men take part in the whole process of peace building and ensuring security in the community. Emancipating women means supporting them in their struggles and putting a stop to more sexual violence from happening. The more women participate in community decision making, the more they will be able to stand up for their rights, prevail over victimisation and take the lead. The possibility of this happening is not an impossible dream. Hopefully, international initiatives remain committed to the pursuit of its peace building goals and do so effectively and with strong conviction. ■

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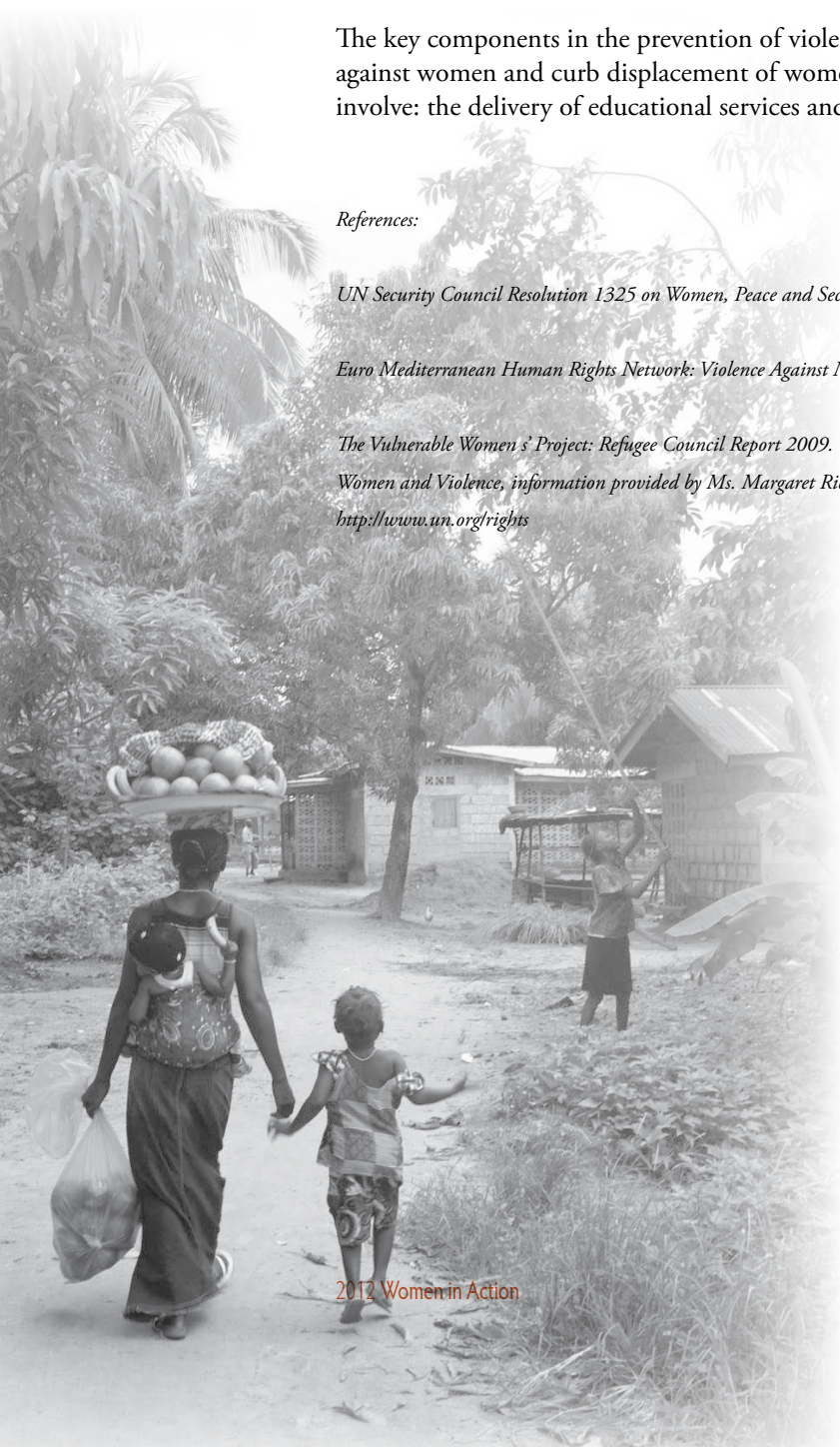
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About the Author

Marie Anne Zammit was born in Malta on the 22nd of October in 1967. She holds a degree in Social Work, in Probation Services and a Diploma in Diplomatic Studies from the University of Malta. She is employed as a probation officer in Malta and is currently a part of a distance learning course in Features and Freelance Writing at the London School of Journalism and concurrently taking a Masters in Probation course at the University of Malta. She is the author of three fiction books in Maltese and one in English and also contributes regularly to the newspaper Zminijietna Voice of the Left, Eco Sprinter and Federation of Young Greens. Her other articles appeared in various leading newspapers both in English and in Maltese.