WOMEN IN CONFLICT ZONES: THE CASE OF SYRIA CIVIL WAR

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Abstract

The article is aimed at assessing the role of women in Syria conflict. In many societies, women are assumed and workout very little power. However, the role, position and power of women in society often change in through conflict. Thus, Conflict can transform roles, responsibilities and opportunities for women. Despite women have been exposed to arbitrary detention, enforced disappearances, torture, sexual violence, being taken as hostages and summary executions, however, Syrian women should not be noticed merely as passive victims of the conflict. Many Syrian women have participated in protests and organized gatherings in support of the victims of the conflict. Female lawyers, students, journalists, and political and human rights activists played a distinctive role in this period and continue to be active throughout civil society networks. A number of women are also involved in delivering humanitarian aid to victims of the armed conflict, Internal Displaced People, and refugees. They also undertake key roles in ensuring the survival of their families in the midst of chaos and destruction and in the grassroots Peace building movements in their post-conflict communities. Thus, even if women were subject to gender based violence's they had different roles in Syria conflicts like as a combatant, as a victim and peace builders.

1. Introduction

Syria is a country in southwestern Asia which borders the Mediterranean to its west, Turkey all along it northern regions, Lebanon and Israel to its south -west and south-central regions, Jordan to its south-central and south-eastern regions, and Iraq all along its eastern regions. Ethnically, the Syrian population comprises Arabs; a largest group which account 90% of the country's population. Syrian Kurds represent the second largest, making up some 9% of the population, while the remaining one percent comprises small communities of Assyrians, Armenians, Circassians, and Turkmen (Pastoor, 2013).

Syria's religious tapestry is more complex which includes Sunni Islam; the largest and most prevalent creed professed by roughly three-quarters of the population. This majority, however, is far from monolithic: it includes Arabs as well as Kurds and other ethnic minorities. The second largest religious group is Alawites (12%); an offshoot variation of Shia Islam. Christians are (10%), which includes Greek Orthodox, Greek Catholic, and Syrian Orthodox denominations, among others(ibid).

The Syrian civil war, like the other uprisings that occurred throughout the Middle East and North Africa region since January 2011 was sparked by countrywide protests against repressive Bashar al-Assad's government policies towards political and human rights (ibid).Since the conflict began with the violent repression of peaceful protests in 2011, the Assad regime has targeted majority Sunni Muslim communities with exceptions being made for the few who displayed continued loyalty to the regime and many civilians including women and children were killed (Jasser, 2014).

The conflict gradually morphed from prominent protests to an armed rebellion after months of military sieges. The armed conflict/opposition consists of various internal and external groups/actors that were formed during the course of the conflict. Some of the Syrian government

and affiliated parties like Syrian Army, National Defense Force, Shabiha, Hezbollah and Iran are pro-government actors. On the contrary anti-government opposition forces include Syrian National Coalition, Free Syrian Army, Syrian National Council (SNC), Islamic Front, Salafist factions, Al-Nusra Front, Syrian Kurds and Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) (Jenkins, 2014).

Furthermore, during the civil war both the Syrian government and the opposition have received support, militarily and diplomatically, from foreign countries leading the conflict to often be described as a proxy war. The major parties supporting the Syrian Government are Iran and Hezbollah and also received arms from Russia. In opposition to the government the main Syrian opposition body; the Syrian coalition receives political, logistic and military support from the United States, Britain, Turkey and France. Some Syrian rebels get training from the CIA bases in Sunni states like Qatar, Jordan and Saudi Arabia(Malantowicz, 2013).A United Nations report in late 2012 described the conflict as being "overtly sectarian in nature", between mostly Alawite government forces, militias and other Shia groups fighting largely against Sunni-dominated rebel groups, although both opposition and government forces have denied it (C. Hof and Simon, 2014).

The armed conflict in Syria has been marked by Violations of international humanitarian law that have been committed by government forces and non-state actors include: the use of prohibited weapons; indiscriminate attacks; direct attacks against civilians and civilian objects; summary killings; and taking civilian captives. Here, women are more vulnerable to in this civil war. For instance, a rebel group like ISIS that has carried out summary killings of hundreds if not thousands of people, both captured combatants and civilians, and has subjected individuals including children and women to torture and other ill-treatment (ibid).

Government and pro-government militias have sexually assaulted and raped women on many occasions in detention centers. On the other hand, the IS has committed widespread rape, sexual violence and forced pregnancy. In January 2013, the International Rescue Committee described "rape as a significant and disturbing feature of the Syrian civil war". Fear of rape has often been cited by women refugees as a major factor in their decision to flee Syria(Amnesty International, 2014).

Indeed, the civil war in Syria had different impacts on the role and status of women. During the civil war Syrian women experienced multiple as both participants and victims (Syrian Network for Human Rights, 2014).

Many women and girls displaced during the civil war and subject consistently to serious forms of gender-based violence. Women's and girls' efforts to escape the conflict in Syria have exposed them to serious risks, both during flight and as refugees in camps and cities in Iraq, Jordan, Turkey and Lebanon(IRC, 2014).Thus, the paper focused on assessing the role women of in the Syria civil war.

2. The Role of Women in Conflict from the Perspective of Feminist and Gender Perspective

Through gender lenses researchers has explored a variety of roles women play in relation to conflict, including peaceful mothers; passive victims; members of state militaries or rebels/ terrorists, and supporter of the military or rebellion finance or repapering food (Kwon, 2013). Professor Heidi Hudson explained in her article "Peace building through a Gender Lens and the Challenges of Implementation in Rwanda and Cˆote d'Ivoire".....discrimination against women increases the likelihood that a state will experience internal conflict. Hudson re-conceptualizes the peace agenda in more inclusive and responsible ways. Following from this, she argues that a culturally contextual gender analysis is a key tool, both for feminist theory of peace building and

the practice of implementing a gender perspective, in all peace work (Hudson, 2009).United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 asks that member-states ensure the consideration of gender in Peace building processes. Despite this normative tendency of inclusive peace women are excluded or undermined in many countries policy frame work.

Julie Arostegui (2013) argued the role of women in conflict develop and bring new dynamics, frameworks, and opportunity though many civil wars put eminent danger on them:

> ....recent conflict and post conflict periods have provided women with new platforms and opportunities to bring about change. The roles of women alter and expand during conflict as they participate in the struggles and take on more economic responsibilities and duties as heads of households. The trauma of the conflict experience also provides an opportunity for women to come together with a common agenda. In some contexts, these changes have led women to become activists, advocating for peace and long-term transformation in their societies--- including the establishment of an international framework on women, peace, and security that includes United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 and other international agreements and commitments to involving women in post-conflict peace-building (Arostegui, 2013).

Armed groups often divided along ideological or ethnic lines that increasingly target civilians with severe physical, psychological, social, political, and economic consequences. Women and girls are especially targeted for extreme sexual violence, abductions, forced marriage and impregnation, and slavery. So, these women's bodies have now become battle fields.

Those crises are characterized by widespread violations of international humanitarian law, including restricted access to basic services and supplies, recruitment and unlawful detentions. The capacity of neighboring countries to accommodate refugees is increasingly strained with hosting, displaced, and refugee communities competing for scarce commodities and basic services. Although humanitarian aid is scaling up, it would not keep pace with increasing needs (Help age international and Global Protection Cluster, 2014). For many years there was a strong stereotype towards women in conflict which is a tendency of limiting the role of women as a mere victim. But, recently there is a growing and diversifying role of women in conflict situation is demonstrated in different conflicts cases and emerged in a number of feminist literatures. In this paper researchers wanted to identify the role/s of Syrian women in the protracted conflict and examine what kinds of abuse/s they faces.

Therefore, the major objective of this paper is to understand better how women played roles in Syrian civil war and impacted by the conflict. Based on this objective the paper tried to answer the following research questions:

1. What is/are the role of Syrian women in this devastating conflict?
2. How are women affected by the Syrian civil war?

3. Methodology

This paper is conducted by reviewing key documents which are publicly available secondary data that generated through the humanitarian response reports, news, background documents, assessments the Syrian conflict situation reports, appeal documents, monitoring reports. Gender and feminist theories are also used to see the theoretical role of women in conflict situation, and to analyze the links between pre-existing situation of women and conflict-caused vulnerabilities. Then, the data will be analyzed through content analysis, categorizing emerging issues into thematic areas.

Accordingly, the paper will have three major sections: Introduction, Analysis and Conclusion. The Introduction section will give a general background of the Syrian conflict with a special emphasis on women's role. The analysis section will offer deeper analysis focusing on selected emerged themes. Sub-sections of the analysis section will be drawn in a way that responds the two research-questions. Lastly, the conclusion section will highlight major points derived from the introduction and analysis section. This research briefly summarizes the findings of the paper in the conclusion part.

4. Analysis of the Role of Women in Syria Conflict

In many societies, women are given and exercise very little power. However, the role, position and power of women in society often change in and through conflict. Conflict can, therefore, transform roles, responsibilities and opportunities for women. Such transformation can also lead to increased and expanded confidence, aspirations and demands for a more active visible role at home, in society and beyond (Kapur, 2014). For instance; women played a central role in the success of the Libyan Revolution of 2011. Women mobilized mass protests on the streets. They distributed humanitarian and medical assistance. They smuggled weapons and intelligence to fighters.

Regarding Syrian conflict, despite women have been exposed to arbitrary detention, enforced disappearances, torture, sexual violence, being taken as hostages and summary executions, however, Syrian women should not be viewed merely as passive victims of the conflict. Many Syrian women have participated in protests and organized gatherings in support of the victims of the conflict. Female lawyers, students, journalists, and political and human rights activists played a distinctive role in this period and continue to be active throughout civil society networks. A number of women are also involved in delivering humanitarian aid to victims of the armed conflict, IDPs, and refugees. They also assume key roles in ensuring the survival of their families in the midst of chaos and destruction and in the grassroots Peace building movements in their post-conflict communities (The Syrian Women Human Rights Network, 2012).Thus, even if women were subject to gender based violence's they had different roles in Syria conflicts like as a combatant, as a victim and peace builders.

4.1. Women as Victims

According to Syrian Women Human Rights Network (2012)**,** in the context of the current internal armed conflict in Syria, violence against women has dramatically increased. Syrian women have been exposed to arbitrary detention, enforced disappearances, torture, sexual violence, being taken as hostages and summary executions. These crimes have been perpetrated first and foremost by the Syrian security apparatus and their auxiliary militias, "Shabiha", and by opposition armed groups. These violations are committed in a climate of impunity, which is reinforced by the silence of the Syrian authorities and the international community. Since March 2011 abuses against women, including sexual harassment and rape, began in the context of governmental campaigns against the protest movement to intimidate the population from joining (Christian Dietrich and ClodaghQuain, 2014). In addition, over the past years, more than 2.8 million people have had to displaced and flee the civil war in Syria – nearly four in five of them are women and children.Despite it has a new dimension of conducting household heading of their family, women faced a number of challenges and violence (UNHCR, 2014).Therefore, women become the major victims of the conflict that was exacerbated when they actively involved in the revolution.

4.2. Significant Dimensions of Violence against Women in Syria Conflict

According to UNHCR, 2014 since the beginning of Syria's conflict in 2011, reports have revealed persistent patterns of gender-based violence perpetrated by both regime and opposition forces. The Syrian government continues to perpetuate gender-based violence through discriminatory laws, and treats women as inferior to men in the areas of marriage, divorce, inheritance, citizenship, and property. While the military dimension of the conflict in Syria intensified over years and a half, Syrian women have become increasingly exposed to a range of violations from the different parties in the conflict. According to EMHRN, 2013they are victims of the destruction of utilities and the disruption of food supplies, alongside killings and arrests and taking them as hostages to pressure their husbands or brothers, and been used as human shields at times. Thousands of women were killed during indiscriminate or deliberate shelling against civilians using explosives thrown from aircrafts, or Scud missiles, or heavy artillery, or snipers (Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network, 2013).

Generally women have been faced various violence's such as killings of women in the context of military fighting, use of women as human shields, use of women as hostages, arbitrary detention, enforced disappearances and abduction, sexual violence, displacement and others. In the following pages we are going to discuss these violations in detail.

4.2.1. Killings of women in the context of military fighting

EMHRN, 2013 stated that women are killed by the fighting between the different competing military forces in Syria. A recurrent pattern in the conflict lies in the indiscriminate shelling of civilian areas. According to the SNHR, the percentage of women deaths has dramatically increased from time to time. For example the total number of victims on April 30, 2013 at least 7543 women including 2454 girls and 257 female infants under the age of 3 have been killed, including 155 women who remain unidentified at this date.

4.2.2. Use of women as human shields

EMHRN, 2013 also stated Syrian human rights groups have reported the use of civilians, including women and children as human shields in several locations in Syria during incursions into neighborhoods where government forces encountered fierce resistance, or for the purpose of escaping fire and clashes. *For instance, as stated in the report in December 2012, Samia and her friend Lubna were stopped by governmental forces at Al-Arbaeen checkpoint on the road connecting Al- Moadamieh and Daria (Damascus Suburb). While the security personnel were searching the women, an exchange of fire between armed groups and government troops broke out. As the clash intensified, the commander of the intelligence unit used the two women to shield himself, pushing them into the line of fire until the troops managed to reach a safe area and leave the scene. The two women were then taken to the Air Force Intelligence Branch at Al-Mazzeh military airport were they remained detained several weeks.* As a result, women had been used as an instrument rather than as an intrinsic value.

4.2.3. Use of women as hostages

The use of women as hostages to pressure their male relatives to surrender or to force them to release prisoners during exchanges has tremendously escalated during the civil war. As stated in the EMHRN report (2013), in the city of Homs; fake offices of real estate were set up in order to serve as locations for the exchange of kidnapped women. A female human rights activist based in the city explains the functioning of these offices operated by members in pro and anti-governmental armed groups and how abducted women are used as hostages to conduct prisoners'

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exchange. On the EMHRN report (2013), Rama said; "*The offices solely serve to secure the exchange of money and people. Each kidnapped woman has an exchange value of 5 male prisoners, and each prisoner has an exchange value of 70,000 Syrian pounds. Before these offices existed, the majority of abduction cases would end with the victim being killed during the exchange*".

4.2.4. Arbitrary detention, enforced disappearances and abduction

Furthermore, EMHRN in its report (2013) stipulated that Women opposition activists and human rights defenders have been particularly targeted during arrest campaigns in regions known to be opposition strongholds. Syrian human rights organizations estimate that at least 60,000 people have been forcibly disappeared in Syria since March 2011, including an unknown number of women. The Syrian Center for Statistics and Research has documented the detention of more than 340 women and estimates that most of them have been referred to the Anti-Terrorism Court. So according to reports women faced various challenges and problems while they arrested such as; denial of fair trial and incommunicado detention; torture of detainees; health conditions and lack of access to medical care; violations of the right to visit for detained women in prisons.

Therefore, those above illegal activities were in contradiction to universal declaration of women rights and 1325 resolution.

4.3. Sexual Violence in Syria's Conflict

.Although no reliable statistics are available, Syrian human rights groups have expressed deep concerns as for alleged sexual abuses at an early stage of the crackdown on peaceful protests in 2011. Cases of rape have been documented in Homs, Damascus, Hama, Latakia, Daraa, Idlib and Tartous. Information received and reports indicate that there are three major situations in which incidents of rape have occurred: during governmental raids, at checkpoints and within detention facilities (MADRE and International Women's Human Rights (IWHR), 2013)).

Most allegations of rape have been perpetrated by Government forces and *shabbiha*, during house searches, when they were stopped at checkpoints and while they had been detained. In some cases, women were assaulted in public or in front of family members (International Federation for Human Rights, 2012). Thus, over the last four years, shocking patterns of sexual violence perpetrated by both regime and opposition forces have emerged.

4.3.1. Sexual violence as a weapon of war

According to MADRE (2013) Numerous UN bodies and representatives, as well as NGOs, have documented widespread and systemic violence, as 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. Reports have repeatedly confirmed a pattern of the use of sexual violence as a weapon of war during house searches and at sometimes killing the victims afterwards.

The threat of abduction was used as "an instrument of terror" by both pro-regime and opposition armed forces in the ongoing conflict in Syria (FIDH, 2012) .As a result, throughout the conflict years, as the UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic has consistently found the pattern and practice of sexual violence carried out in the conflict meeting the standard of crimes against humanity and war crimes. *The men raped [my two daughters] and my wife, forcing them onto the ground to do so. They raped them at the same time. When they began to rape my daughters, they forced me to raise my head and watch. They raped each of them three times. Then they forced me out of the chair and ordered me onto the ground.*

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They raped me as well and ordered my wife and children to watch. The men were jeering and said, "Look at your father." They destroyed me(U.N Report, 2012).

4.3.2. Rapes during incursions and kidnapping

As stated in EMHRN (2013) governmental forces and pro-government militias (shabeeha) and opposition fighters have been storming areas populated with civilians, conducting wide range campaigns of arrests and committing violent acts against the civilian population including rape, slaughter and arbitrary executions. There is a case stated in the report:

> *"Lina stayed for about a month in the house of her abductors in a Homs neighborhood, where she was tortured with burning cigarette butts, severely beaten and raped by her abductors and their friends. Lina underwent abortion and still receives intensive psychological treatment, as she suffers from severe post-traumatic stress."*

Therefore, grave violations have been repeatedly committed during incursions conducted on regions where anti governmental protests have taken place, as well as where pro-governmental fighters are located.

4.4. Displaced and refugees of Syria women

Violent conflict benefits few and tends to exacerbate the negative consequences of inequalities and marginalization (Dietrich and Quain, 2014). Since the beginning of the Syrian conflict in 2011, the number of refugees has grown from approximately 600,000 to four million to neighboring Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey, Egypt and Iraq.Here the majority were women and children. In accounts from refugees who fled conflict-affected cities, women and girls cite rape, or the fear of rape, and kidnapping as the main reasons they fled (MADRE, 2013).

An assessment conducted by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) adds that Syrian women have experienced sexual abuse or exploitation from community based organizations when seeking services. In short, based on UNHCR, 2014report women faced a number of challenges in refugee areas especially in Lebanon such as *early marriage;the statelessness of refugee children*; *sexual violence-prostitution;* lack/Limited resources and infrastructure,;harassment against women that creates anxiety for Syrians;they often face a dramatic drop in living conditions; The report stated that they offered free accommodation and money in exchange for sexual favors.

NGO'S Report to CEDAW, 2014 stated refugees in Jordan also suffer from stereotypes that make every woman vulnerable to harassment, which led to the reluctance of many women to send their daughters to schools. Thus, even though UDHR declares that everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution as well as protection in the host country but women face serious problems in refugee countries.

5. Women´s participation and leadership in the Syrian Conflict

The widespread patriarchal attitudes and deep-rooted stereotypes regarding the roles and responsibilities of women and men in the family and society that the CEDAW Committee noted in 2007 still persist in Syria. They are the root cause of the disadvantaged position of women in all areas, including in the labor market and in political and public life (CEDAW, 2014).

In conflict zones like Bosnia, Kosovo, Sierra Leone, Iraq, Afghanistan, Aceh and Nepal women suffered from deadly conflict but, brief windows of opportunity open up. Women became leaders of households and risked their lives negotiating for survival with armed combatants, both Government security forces and [rebels]. Women and girls who joined the [rebels] systematically

subverted traditional subordination of women and struggle for Peace and Democracy (Shevolution, 2010). The Syrian Women Human Rights Network (2012) described from the beginning, Syrian women played an active role in protests, grassroots mobilization and organized gatherings.They filled both leadership roles and the general ranks of the local committees, and organized demonstrations, such as a sit-in on March 16, 2011 in front of the Interior Ministry in Damascus, calling for the release of prisoners in regions such as the outskirts of Damascus, Homs, and Aleppo. Female lawyers, students, journalists, and political and human rights activists played a distinctive role in this period and continue to be active throughout civil society networks.

However, these peaceful activities fall under law 22/2012, adopted 22 February 2012, which sets up a court specialized in "acts of terrorism". Women are therefore exposed not only to retaliation by government forces but also to prosecution by the state. Syrian women also play key roles in ensuring the survival of their families by leading households in the midst of chaos and destruction (ibid). As the uprising became militarized, however, women have been sidelined, and their voices marginalized in armed wings and in the political bodies forming outside Syria.5 Women have also been shut out of ongoing peace negotiations (MADRE, 2013).The pre -existing stereotypes which serve as a barrier to women's empowerment have also worked to exacerbate violence and discrimination against women in the context of the conflict (UNHCR, 2014).

6. The Role of Women in Peacemaking

Different international legal frameworks such as the UN Security Council Resolutions(UNSCR): 1325(since 2000) and 1820, 1888, 1889 and 1960 on women, peace and security addresses not only the disproportionate impact of war on women, but also the pivotal role women should and do play in conflict management, conflict resolution and peace building or negotiations. These resolutions aimed at improving the status of women in peace negotiations or peace building initiatives during post conflict recovery (Balleza, 2012).

Different NGO reports to CEDAW (2014) described In Syrian women were played multiple roles during the civil war. However, the role of Syrian women in peace making and negotiation was very limited. The voices of women fighting to end the war and build peace and a democratic state that guarantees equal human rights for all citizens have been absent from the negotiation process in Syria. Activists in women movement and civil society have been also absent as organizers of the peace talks in Syria did not allow a real space for active participation of women during the two rounds of negotiation held in Geneva in January and February 2014.

As a result the, Syrian Women for Peace and Democracy" initiative was launched on 13/1/2014 by women movement and civil society organizations that was sponsored by UN Women Commission. The initiative called for involving women at the negotiating table as an independent civil party, as well as in the entire process of peace building. They stated the need for commitment by the United Nations and all the conflict parties to implement Security Council resolutions 1325 and 2122 and other decisions relating to 'women in armed conflict derived by their firm belief that a peaceful solution is the only way to stop the bloodshed in Syria (ibid).

Therefore, the inclusion of a women's rights perspective in peace negotiations lays a critical foundation for addressing gender-based violence, promoting women's human rights, and countering gender-based discrimination. When peace agreements lack provisions or commitments towards gender equality, any subsequent measures proposed at the implementation stage can be rejected as outside the scope of the peace mandate. In this way, agreements that lack language promoting gender equality may become the very obstacles to overcoming nondiscrimination after peace is declared (Cynthia Cockburn, 2014). However; the absence of women in political forums for negotiating peace is undeniable, in contravention to UNSCR 1325.

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7. Violations against Women by ISIS Factions

 Initially, ISIS was one faction among hundreds of other armed groups in Syria. In April 2013, it began to develop into a well-organized, dominant armed force in control of large swathes of populated areas in Syria and Iraq, posing a significant threat to peace and stability in the region.(Meir Admit Intelligent and Terrorism Information Center, 2014).

In ISIS controlled areas of Syria, women and girls have largely been subject to violation of their human rights. Women are confined to their houses, excised from public life. ISIS's rules exacerbate the subordinate role of women in society, reinforcing patriarchal attitudes. Failure to abide by these rules is punishable by lashing. ISIS has perpetrated murder and other inhumane acts, enslavement, rape, sexual slavery and violence, forcible displacement, enforced disappearance and torture. Among the human right violations of ISIS the prominent are; Extra-judicial torture and killings (torture and stoning to death, forcibly disappearing), extra-judicial arresting, forcibly disappearing and torturing, tightening women rights(tightening clothes, work right, moving and transportation right, shotgun marriage, women selling),abduction, imposed unfair rules , break the rights of learning and privacy (Syrian Network for Human Rights, 2014).

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