HOW CAN MUSLIM CHARITIES IMPROVE PROTECTION FROM VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN DISPLACEMENT?



Dr. Sandra Pertek

Alarmingly, the number of forcibly displaced people continues to increase, with 19 million more affected people at the end of 2022 than in the previous year[1]. Forced migration trends are increasingly feminised, as seen through the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh, where most displaced are women and children. Displaced women and girls are disproportionately subjected to cumulative risks of violence and exploitation across the continuum – from conflict and transit to refuge.[2]

However, the number of forced migrants who experience gendered violence remains unknown and varies by context, but it can be as high as 69.3% for women and 28.6% for men.[3] The continuum of violence against women (VAW) along forced migrant routes includes physical, sexual and psychological violence perpetrated by persons in authority, smugglers, traffickers, border control officials, militia, their partners and other migrants. The needs of displaced survivors are largely unmet as the protection and provision of mobile services remain severely underfunded.

The growing scale of forced displacement necessitates innovative responses. While it is estimated that over half of the world's forcibly displaced people are hosted in Muslim-majority countries, most of which lack migration laws, religious resources offer opportunities for strengthening protection in forced displacement contexts. For centuries, significant contributions to humanitarian crises have come from instruments of Islamic philanthropy, such as Zakat (a form of obligatory charity), Sadaqah (voluntary charity), Waqf (endowment) and other Islamic social finance tools such as zero interest loans. However, little is known about the role of Muslim religious resources in addressing the challenges displaced women face.

Muslim humanitarian charities – often driven by faith principles of social justice – administer principles of Islamic philanthropy and run relief programmes globally. These charities significantly support displaced women through various initiatives and programmes. While specific activities and services offered may vary among different charities based on organisational mandates, resources and the contextual needs of displaced women, many Muslim charities support displaced women with immediate assistance (e.g. food, water, shelter, healthcare), economic empowerment (e.g. vocational training, income generating activities), mental health and psychosocial support, advocacy, policy influence and multi-stakeholder coordination initiatives. Arguably, Muslim charities may be better positioned to understand the needs of Muslim displaced women accounting for their faith-related needs than mainstream agencies due to the shared cultural and religious proximity. They are also responsible for the equitable distribution of life-saving religious resources, such as Zakat. Therefore, Muslim-led charity responses to humanitarian emergencies must ensure gender-sensitive design to strengthen the protection of displaced women from exploitation, discrimination, and exclusion.

In this piece, I consider how Muslim humanitarian charities could take the next steps to strengthen protection pathways for displaced populations. I draw on my professional experience as a gender and protection specialist, along with research findings from my five-year academic research on women in forced displacement. Given the resources and humanitarian motivations of Muslim charities, I argue that they have a strong potential to develop gender sensitivity in response to displacement, to protect the most vulnerable groups from harm along forced migrant routes.

RISK FACTORS IN DISPLACEMENT

Displaced women face a range of vulnerabilities to violence: loss of resources to pay for travel passes and ransom if detained, family loss,

social isolation, precarious legal status and ineligibility to access aid and public funds due to aid conditionality, and language barriers, to name a few. Many African forced migrant women I spoke to in Tunisia were abused across pan-African routes and sexually exploited in Libya (see Ayesha's story[4])[5]. Similarly, the displaced women I interviewed in Turkey faced a heightened risk of exploitation and sexual harassment by local and migrant men. Many lived in inadequate housing conditions (e.g. ruined houses and basements) and with food insecurity. All Syrian and Iraqi women I spoke to disclosed that strangers approached them in their homes with transactional aid offers. For example, Mona, a woman from Syria in her 30s, disclosed:

"They [informal helpers] would help you a few times, and then they would say, let's keep in contact by phone, and if you refuse, the help stops. They would say either we get married, but secretly, with no rights, or they cut help..." (Ankara 2019)

As revealed above, informal aid provision lacking safeguarding measures enables unscrupulous informal aid workers to harass women to exchange intimate relationships for aid. This is just one case of abuse, among many types of violence, that Muslim charities are suggested to address in areas of their operations.

STRENGTHENING PROTECTION FROM VIOLENCE AGAINST DISPLACED WOMEN

Faith-inspired action against VAW

First, as inspired by their faith, Muslim charities would benefit from standing by the Islamic ethics of honouring and protecting women, especially those most vulnerable women in displacement conditions. Therefore, religious donations, such as Zakat, might be increasingly directed to support women on the move to prevent their exploitation due to destitution and irregular legal status. The Qur'an commands believers to support a 'wayfarer' with charity, which also refers to people on the move and crises-displaced populations:

"The alms are meant only for the poor and the needy and those who are in charge thereof, those whose hearts are to be reconciled, and to free those in bondage, and to help those burdened with debt, and for expenditure in the Way of Allah and for the wayfarer." (Quran 9:60)[6]

Women on the move, often travelling alone, require help to reach refuge safely. Supporting safe transportation and connecting them with local faith communities along their migratory pathways can protect them from exploitation in transit. Likewise, the best protection for forced migrants is their inclusion in local communities. Actions promoting refugee integration and access to health, work, education, and safe accommodation are essential to enable them to rebuild their lives. For example, enabling livelihood opportunities can reduce displaced women's economic vulnerability to abuse.

AN INTEGRATED INTERSECTIONAL AND ECOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

Second, the management of Zakat and Sadaqah funds can be strengthened by applying the best quality mechanisms to identify and effectively respond to protection concerns specific to women during conflict, transit and in places of refuge. An integrated intersectional and ecological analysis of vulnerability and resilience is a powerful approach that helps identify groups at higher risk[7]. This tool helps to capture risk and protective factors related to identity markers of displaced populations at individual, interpersonal, family, community, and societal and structural levels. Such an approach also means engaging diverse stakeholders from the social ecology of forced migrants, including faith actors - women's faith groups and religious leaders. Intersectional and ecological analysis can be used to design responses to identity-based violence and discrimination and to develop resilience-building interventions.

> *Arguably, Muslim charities may be better positioned to understand the needs of Muslim displaced women accounting for their faith-related needs than mainstream agencies due to the shared cultural and religious proximity..*



> *...Muslim-led charity responses to humanitarian emergencies must ensure gender-sensitive design to strengthen the protection of displaced women from exploitation, discrimination, and exclusion.*

RECOMMENDATIONS

As custodians of religious resources for destitute people, Muslim charities have a moral obligation to strengthen protection of displaced women from violence. Key recommendations for Muslim humanitarian actors include:

Programme design and delivery

Programme specialists might consider to develop forced migrant-sensitive programmes with appropriate actions to prevent and respond to violence against women along forced migrant routes, recognising that violence extends beyond conflict into flight and refuge. It is also important to ensure that Zakat and Sadaqah programmes mainstream protection and gender sensitivity in responses to displacement to protect the most vulnerable groups from harm.

In countries of transit

Humanitarian teams can strengthen their work by prioritising the protection principles of dignity, access, participation, and safety of crises-affected people in responses to conflict and humanitarian and immigration settings. They might consider providing mobile services to people on the move along forced migrant routes, reception centres, and migrant hotspots, including through healthcare, safe spaces, and shelters. Key considerations include to prioritise women's safety and confidentiality and their access to necessary support services, such as counselling and legal advice. Finally, Muslim charities might ensure faith-sensitivity to displaced women's needs, for example providing adequate clothing, and spiritual care, and connecting them with local faith communities, including women's groups.

In places of refuge

Promoting and supporting the integration of displaced women into local communities and access to health, work, education, and accommodation is vital. In addition, investing in developing faith-sensitive and trauma-informed mental health and psycho-social support for displaced survivors is crucial to support their mental health. Furthermore, Muslim charities might consider innovative ways to empower displaced women economically to strengthen their resilience and reduce dependence on the kindness of strangers and informal helpers, along with informing forced migrant victims about legal support, and their rights and entitlements in appropriate languages.

Lastly, Muslim charities can monitor and address risks associated with informal helpers supporting displaced women and girls.

OPERATIONS

On an operational level, Muslim charities can strengthen their work by ensuring remote/mobile response teams and services are trained and sensitised to the needs of survivors of violence and offer appropriate first aid, including psychological first aid. Furthermore, humanitarian teams would benefit from gender balance and trained female staff available to respond to displaced women's needs. It is also essential that protection practitioners develop safe referral pathways to local services for displaced people to access necessary help, as well as internal safeguarding measures to ensure humanitarian personnel do not pose any risks. In addition, Muslim charities can strengthen inter-agency collaboration, coordination and resource and expertise sharing to effectively address violence against women in displacement.

ADVOCACY

Finally, campaigners might consider innovative ways to raise awareness about violence against women in displacement and push for policy changes that prioritise the protection and rights of the survivors. Advocacy to governments can include calls for safe and legal asylum routes for people subjected to persecution and effective legislation, policies, and services for displaced populations.◆

