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REFUGEE GIRLS CHILDREN IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA: VULNERABILITIES AND NECESSITY OF SOCIAL PROTECTION

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Abstract

The qualitative and quantitative challenges in child protection in the Middle East and North Africa countries making the children vulnerable to the risks and all kinds of neglect and exploitation. In addition to the great violation of the rights of children, especially girls as a result of ongoing wars and conflicts in the region. The children's rights violations and the problems faced by children in war environment were forced them to migrate to other countries unaccompanied or with family. Also, the problems faced by children in the asylum period have very negative implications on the physical, psychological, social and moral development of children along with the violation of many rights. It can be seen that girls are more vulnerable to problems and violations of the rights among the refugee children. This study will discuss neglect and exploitation problems and risks faced by refugee girls during the asylum period and will present the social policy suggestions that can contribute to solving these problems and protecting the refugee girls.

Keywords: Refugee Girls, Child Protection, Vulnerabilities, Social Policy, Child Exploitation.

1. Introduction

Children are among the most vulnerable groups that are affected by the ongoing war and conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. It can be seen that the problems experienced by children in the conflict area and the risks they face in the process of being displaced and asylum to another country can affect their development in a very negative way. "Separation from family members, difficulty accessing basic services and increased poverty make it more likely that children will marry early, work before the legal age or in dangerous and exploitative conditions, drop out of school or face violence in their homes, communities or schools. They also face risks of detention, trafficking, and other forms of exploitation during their displacement." (UNHCR, 2014: 4). In general, the lack of legal protection and the inability of the family to provide protection and support in such crises are the most important risk factors faced by children at this stage, which makes them vulnerable to human trafficking organizations (Wilson, 2011). In the period of displacement and asylum, risk factors are also increased in unaccompanied children who are more susceptible to mental illness, PTSD and depression (Fazel & Stein, 2002: 366-370., Huemer et al, 2009: 1-10., Fazel et al., 2012: 266-282). The detention of children, torture and living in the poor conditions of the detainee are factors that directly increase trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder to refugee children (International Detention Coalition, 2012. Save The Children, 2015). In general, it can be said that the period of displacement exposed the children to the highest risk of psychopathology and associated serious symptoms that appear on the child and affect his growth (Hodes, 1998: 793-795). All these traumatic experiences have a significant impact on children in the future and may be an important obstacle to the child's ability to learn (McBrien, 2005: 329-364). Due to problems that can be experienced in the asylum process, asylum can be considered as the greatest risk on security, integrity and stability of the family. In every case, especially in the case of war, conflict and asylum, the family is the first mechanism in child protection and its role is quite large. But refugee family is inadequate to look after and protect their children because of economic difficulties, uncertainty, stress and various psycho-social problems. In the process, in order for family to protect their children especially girls, it can resort to negative mechanisms that can risk the development and safety of children, such as marriage. Therefore, it can be seen that girls are the most vulnerable to risk and all kinds of neglect and exploitation in this process. In addition, malnutrition, separation from families and sheltering in risky places in the asylum process can cause girls sick, be at risk of exploitation.

The security problems faced by refugees can emerge in various forms. The fact that socio-cultural structures and norms remain untreated, the separation of family members or the loss of the support of family members, and the failure to adequately punish those who commit crimes or commit violence against

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refugees and asylum seekers, in particular women and children, are becoming more vulnerable. Women and young girls in refugee status; may be subjected to exploitation in a variety of forms, such as rape, abduction, and human trafficking from refugee friends, host community members, local authorities, or humanitarian workers as a result of requesting protection, documentation, or assistance from them. Refugee children, especially girls, are at greater risk of sexual exploitation, violence and abuse (Eker, 2008: 181). These levels of risk and severity in sheltered countries can be assessed depending on whether or not the girls are accompanied or unaccompanied by their families and whether they live within or outside the refugee camps. Girls living outside refugee camps may be deprived of various rights, psychosocial support programs and services. While providing services by national and international organizations for families and girls living in refugee camps, and the possibility of reporting the risks, negligence and abuse incidents can be seen as advantage it can be disadvantage for refugees who are living outside the camps. Refugee girls living in metropolitan areas have problems accessing such programs and services due to various reasons.

2. Deprivation of Fundamental Rights and Factors Block Access to Services in Society

Wars and conflicts in the MENA have affected women, especially girls, because of the obstacles created by these conditions that prevent access to basic services. Lack of access to health services to recover from the effects of sexual assault and emergency obstetric care has had serious negative consequences for the health of women and young girls (Lindsey, 2002., Sami et al, 2014: 1179-1181). In addition, lack of scarcity or resources may make women vulnerable to sexual exploitation in return for food or security. Refugee women or girls outside refugee camps are vulnerable to exploitation by the local residents, due to lack of access to services provided by humanitarian organizations or the government (Vlachova & Biason, 2005., Ward & Marsh, 2006). All kinds of neglect and abuse experienced by refugee girls in the process of asylum, such as forced abduction, forced marriage, exposure to violence, witnessing violence, lack of education and health care, and separation from family are both profoundly affecting girls in both physically and psycho-social health. Girl's children are stay under the influence of human rights violations and the effects of problems they faced in the asylum process, therefore, there is a very great possibility to confront the problems of adapting to the new environment. There are many factors that can prevent refugee girls from accessing essential services within the host country and they have a fundamental role in protection. The most prominent factors:

- The opportunities in the country of asylum and the importance it attaches to the rights of refugee children and their applications for it.
- The clarity and accessibility of services provided to refugee children, specifically girls
- The strict laws protecting girls, particularly with regard to sexual exploitation under the name of marriage.
- The knowledge and education of refugee girl's families and consciousness levels and the ways used in which they can protect their daughters.
- Be accompanied or alone.
- Cultural and religious values that allow the sexual exploitation of children under the name of marriage and thus the denial of the most fundamental rights such as education and rehabilitation services.

In general, need to develop various programs and services to solve these problems or to develop social policies and strategies that will facilitate the access of refugee children and their families to existing programs and services. Therefore, the provision of services for the protection, healing and adaptation of refugee girls is an obligation of all states that have adopted the UNCRRC:

"States Parties shall take appropriate measures to ensure that a child who is seeking refugee status or who is considered a refugee in accordance with applicable international or domestic law and procedures shall, whether unaccompanied or accompanied by his or her parents or by any other person, receive appropriate protection and humanitarian assistance in the enjoyment of applicable rights set forth in the present Convention and in other international human rights or humanitarian instruments to which the said States are Parties." (Article 22/1).

There are some obstacles that restrict refugee children benefit from the right to education, especially the opportunities that states have offered. The main factors that restrict the high benefit of children's education right and restrict children's access to education in the sheltered country are education in a foreign language, curriculum different from the curriculum they are accustomed to, length of distance between the girl's home and school, and school fees (Schlecht, 2016). In addition, the issues of receiving discrimination from other students and teachers, inadequate language and the resulting emotional problems and communication problems with other within the school environment (Vinokurov, Trickett, & Birman, 2002: 425-445., Birman et al, 2005). Therefore, problems encountered in the asylum process, limited services and opportunities in the host country, or problems in utilizing the services are depriving girls from basic rights and preventing them from meeting basic needs.

3. Child Marriages among Refugee Girls and Child Mothers Problems

Marriages under the age of eighteen are called early marriage and child brides and need to be discussed as a matter of child rights violations. This kind of marriage, which is caused by various reasons, is mostly influenced by economic, uneducated, traditional, cultural and religious beliefs. Child marriage phenomenon is a phenomenon found in both developed and developing societies. However, it can be seen that some events such as war, conflict and forced emigration connected with it increase the case of child marriage as a result of instability which created in society. The forced migration waves in the Middle East region have led to a change in the role of family structure, social and economic factors and have been a major cause for forced marriage of girls. Refugee girl's marriage by forced or involuntary means, violation of the rights of human, women and children. But in this special situation of forced migration it is necessary to produce and implement both national and international social policies in order to protect children from early marriage risk and helping them access to basic rights such as education, health, nutrition and safe housing environment.

The marriage of children, especially refugee children, constitutes the most serious obstacle to social support and social protection and deprives girls of basic rights, especially education (Schlecht, 2016). There are many problems and rights violations related to refugee girl marriages can be mentioned here. The greatest violation of rights is deprivation of education rights. In addition, early marriage has a very negative impact on the health and physical development of girls.

Early marriage and pregnancy have negative effects on girls' health and their chances of survival and their children's health. Girls are also inadequate to plan gaps between pregnancies. Therefore, child marriage violates the right to reproductive health. Girl marriage shows an increase in extraordinary situations such as war, conflict and asylum. There are two main reasons for this increase: increased poverty and the perception of protection girl's 'honor' from threats (Spencer, 2015: 2-18). In recent times, Syrian refugees in Middle Eastern countries where they seek refuge have been forced their daughters to marry for many reasons. In the rapport prepared by Save the Children (2014), about the growing problem of child marriage among Syrian girls; Declining resources and income, limited economic opportunities, and the belief that girls can suffer from sexual violence and abuse are at the forefront of factors leading to child marriage. Therefore, some refugee families are considering child marriage as the best way to protect their daughters and alleviate the pressure on family resources. Child marriage among refugees in the region of the Middle East are seen to increase in Syrian refugee camps in Jordan, Iraq and Lebanon. At the same time, child marriages and forced marriages between Syrian girls have also been reported in Egypt and Turkey.

To prevent early marriage among refugee girls can be created by developing five basic strategies. These strategies (Malhotra et al, 2011: 17):

1. *“Empowering girls with information, skills, and support networks*
2. *Educating and mobilizing parents and community members*
3. *Enhancing the accessibility and quality of formal schooling for girls*
4. *Offering economic support and incentives for girls and their families*
5. *Fostering an enabling legal and policy framework”.*

In general, the marriage of refugee children can be regarded as the greatest risk, neglect, abuse and violation of rights that girls face in the process of immigration and asylum. Child marriage has left refugee girls deprived of their right to education, and it has very negative effects on the health and physical development of the girl.

4. Social Policy Suggestions for the Protection of Refugee Girls

In the course of the migration and asylum waves of war and conflict in the MENA region, millions of children's rights have been violated and it was left defenseless. When looking at the problem and the risks faced by refugee children in this process, we can see that girls can be considered as the most vulnerable part. Therefore, various mechanisms and social policies need to be developed to protect refugee girls from the risks, problems and violations they face.

This responsibility lies with host countries and humanitarian organizations and must be a priority for humanitarian action in times of crisis. Here, also, should be emphasized on the importance of joint action and cooperation between the State and humanitarian organizations and coordination between ministries such as the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Justice and the Ministry of Social Affairs. Policies introduced in this area should include the individual, group and community. For example, addressing educational problems and problems related to child marriage by engaging directly with the child and family. As well as intervention at the group level by configure therapeutic and support groups using appropriate techniques and treatment methods and integrate refugee girls' children into activities that help them overcome the problems and traumatic experiences. On the macro level requires work on the development of

research and applied projects in collaboration with various agencies to provide multi-dimensional protection.

Some of the general proposals for social policy that may have a major precaution for the protection of refugee girls are as follows:

- Development of various programs and services to solve the problems or the restructuring of existing programs and services,
- Development of social policies and strategies that will facilitate the accessibility and visibility of services for refugee children,
- Taking necessary legal measures in every country for the protection of refugee girls from child marriage and related child mothers' problems
- Family has a major role in protecting refugee girls, thus supporting and raising awareness of the family must take place between responsibilities of state.
- Make part of humanitarian aid in cash to protect children girls and women from falling into sexual exploitation in order to obtain special needs.
- To establish a follow-up system for children and to monitor cases of child marriage and other forms of exploitation and to report it to the competent authorities to take appropriate measures and develop preventive, therapeutic and rehabilitation plans.
- Increase the quality and quantity of workers in the field of protection of refugee girls
- Implement the results of research studies relating to the protection of refugee children and international multidimensional cooperation
- Using media to protect refugee children from discrimination and exploitation issues and how to report it to the competent authorities

5. Conclusions

The development of social protection policies in the Middle East and North Africa has become an urgent international humanitarian responsibility. Wars and conflicts in the region have left many complex problems, which require years, considerable efforts, international cooperation and coordination to mitigate them. There is no doubt that the young Middle East society is face to face with the loss of a full generation if social protection policies are not formulated and implemented as soon as possible. This article aims to contribute on the solutions and policies which aimed to protecting vulnerable groups during asylum and in host countries. The focus has been on the most important problems faced by the most vulnerable groups and the development of appropriate solutions and proposals for problems experienced. The main findings and suggestions of the study can be summarized as follows:

As exploitation in all its forms, especially sexual exploitation under the name of marriage, is one of the most serious and serious problems faced by children refugee girls under the cover of culture, religious values and poverty.

The emergence of the cultural component and misperception of religion in dealing with refugee children, especially girls, making them vulnerable to exploitation and violence within the family and society and ineffective interventions to address these perceptions that make girls victims.

Childhood pregnancy and related health and psychological problems that threaten mental and physical health and thus violate the right to life

The lack of access to education and the difficulty of obtaining psychological and rehabilitation services that can be provided by school social work by developing programs to support and promote refugee children and their integration into schools.

Exploitation of refugee girls to work in the streets and begging, which makes them vulnerable to all kinds of risks and exploitation.

The lack of clarity of the services provided by some countries to protect refugee children or not configured in a way that facilitates access to children and benefit from it.

Challenges faced children or their families to access services in the host countries, such as the language factor and confronting issues of discrimination and persecution.

The lack of clarity on the laws protecting refugees, especially children, in many of the host countries.

The most important step in the social protection of refugee children, especially girls, is international, governmental and institutional cooperation, joint coordination, the implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and other conventions aimed at protecting refugee children. This is in addition to adopting the social policies that were proposed above.

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