



Refugee Digest 34

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Refugees, Migrants and Displaced Persons

This month we look at some of the issues facing refugee and migrant women. In South Africa August is observed as Women's Month, in commemoration of the 1956 march by more than 20 000 women to the Union Buildings in Pretoria, protesting against plans to impose the infamous 'dompas' on black women. The famous cry of the women, 'When you strike a woman you strike a rock!' has become one of the classic slogans of the liberation movement. The march drew attention to the fact that black women were triply oppressed in terms of gender, race and class.

<https://www.bing.com/search?q=history+of+women%27s+day+south+africa+august+&qsn&form=QBRE&sp=-1&pq=history+of+women%27s+day+south+africa+au&sc=0-38&sk=&cvid=99CE104D93CA4D20B1F8FCBF984029F4>

Displaced women across the world today share in the vulnerability and oppression that is part of the contemporary experience of displacement. A 2018 UN report said that women and girl children presently face unconscionable trauma. The same report said that 75% of all victims of war and conflict are women.

<https://womenwatch.unwomen.org/migration>

The position of women and girl children in South Africa, especially that of displaced women, remains dire.

'Women and girls represent a significant proportion of people on the move world wide' – IOM world migration report 2018. The risks and vulnerabilities of women and girls on the move are shaped to a great extent by their gender. Violence does not have nationality attached to it. All women face violence in South Africa and across the world.

<https://www.cormsa.org.za/2018/11/>

Statistics released earlier this year stated that migrant female workers are estimated to be about 68.1 million out of a migrant workforce of 164 million, equating to 48.1%. In the USA, however, the trend is different, as the face of migrant labour there is largely female. And the experience of undocumented, as opposed to documented, female migrants is vastly different.

<https://www.oecd.org/migration/mig/G20-migration-and-displacement-trends-and-policies-report-2019.pdf>

<https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/immigration/news/2013/03/08/55794/10-facts-you-need-to-know-about-immigrant-women-2013-update/>

A US government report observes that migrant women face many of the same challenges as abused women in any other situation (such as physical, sexual and emotional abuse) but in their case with the additional challenges of being vulnerable to trafficking, deportation or losing custody of their children.

<https://www.womenshealth.gov/relationships-and-safety/other-types/immigrant-and-refugee-women>

<https://www.unfpa.org/news/running-her-life-journey-violence-displacement-and-healing>

Even in a country such as Canada, with a reputation for a more welcoming attitude to refugees and migrants, the government's own statistics show that migrant women face significant employment barriers, are subject to hidden racism, and have low employment take up rates.

<https://www.thestar.com/news/canada/2018/04/12/immigrant-women-in-canada-earn-less-face-more-employment-challenges-government-report.html>

In 2017, 48.4% of women refugees in Europe had left their home countries to flee violence. The report goes on to make a critical point: "The multiple forms of prejudices which women endure, due to the juxtaposition of their gender and their status of migrants and refugees, place them in a specific situation of vulnerability. The migration process exacerbates the gender-based violence and gender discrimination before, during and after their migratory journey. The very restrictive migration policies present throughout Europe increase the likeliness for women and girls to endure gender-based violence perpetrated by, among others, migrants, smugglers, and law enforcement officers."

<https://rm.coe.int/report-migrant-women-scpo-jan-2019/168092d8cd>

It seems to be a trend that jobs that require physical strength and which are low paid are also ones where there is anti-pregnancy bias. It has been found that "inflexibility of schedules and working environments in lower paying service jobs often require physically demanding tasks and play a large role in some employers' refusal to make accommodations for pregnant workers, and such refusals weigh most heavily on immigrant women and women of colour."

https://www.huffpost.com/entry/pregnancy-discrimination-immigrant-women-and-low-wage-work_b_7032834

A 2018 report on migrant women in Durban, South Africa concluded that "women refugees are affected more by violence than any other female group in the world, before, during and after their forced migration experience, because of patriarchy." Amongst the fears expressed by women in this situation was a fear of the police and the perception that the police fail to protect vulnerable women. The study also found that "female refugees were also afraid of using public spaces because they were subject to physical attacks, verbal abuse and sexual harassment from refugees, local people and taxi drivers and conductors. This has been aggravated by the high levels of xenophobic violence in South Africa, tensions between local people and foreigners, and the knowledge that police protection is limited."

<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s12132-018-9356-1>

Another vulnerable group of migrants which includes, but is not limited to, women, is the LGBTI community. Many report that the freer environment for this community is not as uncomplicated as may be imagined by some beyond South Africa's borders. A combination of xenophobic and homophobic attitudes has made for serious tensions for many from this community.

<https://za.boell.org/2018/10/11/double-challenge-lgbti-refugees-and-asylum-seekers-south-africa>

In 2018, to mark the 10th anniversary of the 2008 xenophobic attacks in South Africa during which 60 migrants were killed, Shenilla Mohamed, the Director of Amnesty International in South Africa, summed up the insecurity felt by many migrants in this country. "Ongoing xenophobia in South Africa is compounded by the failed criminal justice system, with many cases remaining unresolved, which allows perpetrators to attack refugees and migrants with impunity. There has been a marked failure to bring those responsible for the 2008 attacks to justice, emboldening future attackers and leaving refugees and migrants in a constant state of fear."

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2018/05/south-africa-ten-years-after-xenophobic-killings-refugees-and-migrants-still-living-in-fear/>

It seems pretty obvious that if we want to honour the courage and determination of those thousands of women who marched to the Union Buildings in 1956, and if we want to emulate their resistance to any form of discrimination against women, then ours is the task of ensuring that no person – but especially no women or girl child, migrant, refugee or citizen, documented or undocumented – is ever vulnerable to the shameful violence that stalks our streets. It is not only an outrage against women, it dehumanises all of us. No country can afford that.

President Cyril Ramaphosa spoke to this on 9th August in Vryburg: "There is a South Africa we want. A South Africa that Mme Ruth Mompati and the women of her generation fought for. A South Africa where women are free from discrimination and subjugation, from violence and oppression; and are given the means to uplift themselves and their families."

<https://www.thesouthafrican.com/news/womens-day-2019-highlights-president-ramaphosas-speech/>

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