



Efficiency of the Policy and Practice of Integration and Empowerment of Refugee Women in Armenia

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Introduction

Different conflicts have led to the establishment of refugee communities in the Republic of Armenia, with two major ones being the Nagorno-Karabakh and Iraq war. Refugeeism in Armenia is thus a phenomenon that emerged in the beginning of 1988.

According to the Government of Armenia (GoA) and the United Nations (UN), some 360 000 ethnically Armenian refugees from Azerbaijan have been identified as having fled the country to seek asylum in Armenia between 1988 and 1992 in the years of the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute. They had come to constitute more or less 10% of the Armenian population at the time. With no resolution in sight, the Armenian government decided to take it as a moral duty to help the new-comers to integrate locally. However, at the same time, Armenia was already highly preoccupied with some major internal issues; including the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the Spitak earthquake of 1988 leaving a significant number of locals homeless, and the conflict with Azerbaijan itself.

Another important date for the history of refugeeism in the Republic of Armenia is 2003. It is when the country started welcoming refugees from Iraq seeking asylum in the country because of the war between their former country of residence and the United States of America.

Although one might think that in recent years no wars have led to a new major influx of refugees, focusing on a topic such as refugeeism is still up to date and should be considered relevant because of the urgency to combat an issue that has remained problematic despite all the efforts made by the GoA, the UN and various other non-governmental organisations. This is the fact that former and current refugees still face discrimination in a range of areas.

Also, focusing on women among refugees is essential in a group wherein they are overrepresented and

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more vulnerable. Women are indeed in need of more attention and protection because of the double burden of being a refugee and a woman living in a patriarchal society at the same time. The GoA considers its legislation to be non-discriminatory, but in reality discrimination is still common practice. Thus it becomes essential to use a gender-sensitive dimension to approach this issue.

Methodology

This research aims to assess the efficacy of the integration process, focusing on how the existing policies empower current and former refugee women.

For the purpose of this essentially qualitative research, I have decided to conduct face-to-face interviews, investigate the implementation of various relevant laws and programmes, and have a focus group discussion in order to have an in-depth understanding of different issues. The study focuses on refugees from Armenian ethnicity only and essentially on women.

A total of 15 face-to-face interviews with refugee women were conducted from August to September 2011. Of these respondents, 13 were from Azerbaijan and 2 were from Iraq, with a majority living in Yerevan. The interviews were conducted in the language the respondent preferred, which was always Armenian. For the purposes of confidentiality, I

have used the name 'Elena' to quote one of them.

The remaining interviews were conducted both in English and Armenian with the head of the state migration agency (SMA) within the ministry of territorial administration, the head of the Police of the Republic of Armenia (RA) and other employees at the administrative department of passport and visas, the chief adviser of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and the Representative for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

The focus group discussion took place in a diamond cutting factory of Nor Hagin with six women who came from Baku about 20 to 23 years ago and one who came as a child. The chosen language was Armenian. I have quoted some of their sayings but to guaranty their anonymity, I have changed their names to 'Anna', and 'Lusine'.

Findings

The integration process comprises two major dimensions: a legislative and a practical one. One only needs to review a few legal documents to realise that from a legal perspective, refugees and Armenian citizens enjoy almost the same rights. The main differences are that refugees only have the right to participate in local self-governance, and do not own an RA passport or land on the territory of Armenia. The Armenian legislation can be thus very appealing on paper. In practice, however, as mentioned by the different refugee women and the UN, it is a whole different story. The implementation of these laws necessitates some revising.

This section starts with a focus on the legal aspect of integration, which is achieved by naturalisation. It then focuses on the social aspects of integration including housing, living conditions, interaction with local communities and social networking, followed by the economic ones including employment opportunities, and finally, the gender specific ones, including gender equality, domestic violence and trafficking. It then finishes with a focus on political integration.

Integration by naturalisation:

Naturalisation became the GoA's chosen policy of integration after the Law on Citizenship was adopted in 1995, offering to Armenians by origin the possibility to apply for citizenship without being subject to any conditions. Also, the Article 23 of the

Law on Refugees offers straightforwardly the citizenship to all ethnic Armenian refugees who voluntarily request to change their status. Naturalisation is therefore made very accessible and easy to people with Armenian background.

However, it should be noted that in the phase of naturalisation, there has been resistance among refugees to acquire the RA citizenship. By keeping their status, refugees are offered free legal protection, shelter assistance, material support and other forms of assistance. Moreover, they remain free to emigrate to other countries. This resistance has progressively diminished with an incentive for naturalisation after July 2000, the date when Soviet passports could no longer be used as travel documents outside of the country. Nevertheless, before acquiring the citizenship, some are still asking for the permission to privatise their dormitory rooms first, which is something not often realised. The national policy in this matter cannot therefore be considered as entirely successful because the Armenian passport often leads to a loss of protection of the right to shelter. Others are categorically refusing it from fear of losing their compensation for the property that they have left behind in Azerbaijan in the event of a peace agreement. Being a citizen should therefore not be confused with being integrated in society.

Social Integration

Housing:

As said by the head of the SMA, housing constitutes the biggest challenge for refugees and is the only one specific to their integration. Homelessness is about ten times higher than among the local population. An important number of refugees are left in dormitories, resorts, and makeshift shelters.

In line with the law, refugees should be able to request shelter assistance. However, due to so-called budgetary constraints, this has not been correctly implemented by the GoA. Their yearly budget for this matter so far has ranged from 3 to 5 million USD until 2010, which is when they decided to stop spending on this issue. The limited resources make permanent and even sometimes temporary shelters for refugees unavailable. However, some refugees still have hopes that the GoA will provide them with shelter, and therefore wait for this to happen before acquiring the citizenship. The Representative for the UNHCR provides an explanation to this phenomenon: 'It is a cultural thing. The most critical problem is that Armenians always want to leave something for their kids, so even when they are offered limited

alternatives, they choose to continue living in difficult conditions.' The SMA estimates the costs needed to provide adequate housing to the 1175 remaining unsheltered families to amount to up to 45 million USD.

In 2004, the GoA started providing housing certificates to refugees and former refugees. From the 1100 given certificates, 800 families have truly benefited from this programme. The interviewed women who received such certificates were complaining about how hard it was for them to find a place to buy with the little amount of money the certificate provided. Many remained without a permanent living accommodation because of the expensive real estate prices and soon had to return the certificate, which had a period of validity of 6 months only. To buy a living accommodation, the refugees needed to have saved money in advance and be willing to sell their birth certificates to locals who thought it would be easier for them to leave the country with a refugee status, and to sell whatever belongings they possessed in order to add some money to the cost of the certificate. Even so, the Government's Project Certificate programme remains a good initiative. However, the programme has now been put on hold.

Living Conditions:

It is often understood by the refugee women that the GoA did as much as they could when they first arrived in the country. However, it has been 23 years now since the first arrivals and very little has changed in the situation. It is mainly the lack of adequate housing that stops refugees and former refugees from developing a sentiment of belonging to the Armenian country and being a RA citizen. Because of the horrible living conditions in the communal centres and elsewhere, and because of not owning a place to call home, refugees still want to leave. During the focus group discussion, 'Lusine' complained about how sick and tired she was of waiting for non-existent opportunities to come. The years had not helped. Social integration had failed and she did not see any future lying ahead of her and her family. Her son could not even afford to get married because of not owning a room for himself and he was surely not the only one in this case amongst the youth. However she also said: 'I do not dream of Europe or America. I want to live in Armenia, if only I could own a house...'

It becomes reasonable therefore to say that in practice, the acquisition of citizenship does not go hand in hand with the improvement of the living standards, which remain substandard. Refugees are

still among the poorest of the poor and have to struggle to sustain themselves.

Interaction with Local Communities:

Refugees tend not to mix with local communities, and this strengthens the feeling of alienation and augments the stigmatisation against them. Even after naturalisation, the categorisation into 'refugee' and 'local' remains viable, which goes against the implementation of the Armenian notion of 'one state, one people', making the country become a not so idealised motherland to yearn for. 'Elena', a refugee naturalised 20 years ago, still felt she belonged to a sort of second rank.

As for the cultural differences, locals tend to remain hostile or indifferent towards them. In school, the children of refugees from Iraq often get called 'Iraqi-an'¹. However, integration is a two way process; both have to accommodate. In this case, refugees are also not doing enough, preferring to stay in their comfort zone.

Social Networking:

According to most of the women I interviewed and the head of the SMA, a major factor causing integration problems is regarded to be the lack of social networking, or in other words social capital. The lack of communication between communities creates a deficiency in the establishment of these networks which constitute the basis of awareness in society and a way to access the public services such as education, jobs, health care services and so on. Refugees are unaware of any type of programmes such as vocational trainings, language courses and so on, that could be useful to them and have to use the means of the news such as the radio, or the television to get informed on the existence of such programmes. In Armenia, in order to get somewhere, one has to have the necessary connections, make himself or herself known and then move forward.

Economic Integration

Employment Opportunities:

With very scarce job opportunities in the whole country, as much for refugees as for locals, the situation in Armenia is very difficult. It is even more so for women who, according to UNHCR, constitute

¹ Armenian surnames most often end in -ian or -yan. Calling the kids Iraqi-an is just another way of making them feel different, as in coming from a foreign country.

70% of the unemployed work force, living therefore below the poverty line. Some measures are clearly needed to be taken to ensure equal opportunities for both sexes. With no amelioration in sight, the scarcity of jobs could become an important factor leading to the practice of begging or prostitution. The problem not only resides in the female majority constituting the unemployed body, but also among those having a job: women are very often paid less to do the same work. So, why do refugee and former refugee women do not share the same opportunities as locals? As I will discuss further, there are some issues which render refugee women less competitive in the job market.

1. Background:

A sudden change in lifestyle constituted a major issue for refugees coming predominantly from urban areas in Azerbaijan and Iraq, leading more comfortable lives before the war. Having to adapt to village life, they most often lacked the necessary skills for it. Refugee women's main source of income in their former countries of residence used to come from national arts and craft, an underdeveloped field in rural areas. Instead, employment is concentrated in agriculture. Refugee and former refugee women's skills are not matching their new realities.

2. Language Barriers:

Refugees from Azerbaijan are mainly Russian speakers; refugees from Iraq speak the Western dialect. Both have a hard time finding a job and qualify only for low-paying ones.

The former refugee women who were already above 30 years old when they first arrived told me during the focus group discussion that they had never had language classes and did not know of any such opportunity. Their mother tongue was Russian and they had learned Armenian by watching television, listening to the news and simply living in the country. Their reading and writing is very poor and sometimes even non-existent. 'Anna', a librarian in Baku, mentioned how hard it was for her to find a job when coming to Armenia because of not being able to read. She remained unemployed for 15 years before finding work in a diamond cutting factory.

3. Education and Support Programmes:

Refugees came to Armenia with whatever education they had, often not meeting market demands. The vast majority did not have the opportunity to become more knowledgeable after their arrival. When it comes to higher education, refugees are considered to be foreigners in the RA and therefore do not enjoy

the free of charge services offered to nationals. Some micro-crediting programmes for women only and a few vocational training programmes have been implemented by different organisations. However, because of a lack of awareness, few refugees have taken advantage of these. Women wanting to work effectively in the present economic system clearly lack the skills to do so.

4. Transport:

Jobs and support programmes are fewer in cities and villages outside of Yerevan. Many women do not earn enough money to pay for a ride to the capital.

5. Women Heading Households:

As a result of male migration to countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) to find employment, a number of refugee women have been left alone providing for the whole family. The desertification of some men makes the gender aspect of the condition of refugees more complicated than locals and allows less flexibility in time management.

Gender Specific Integration

Gender is a cultural construction. It defines the roles of both sexes in society, describing the ways in which one is expected to act, and shapes our perceptions and experiences of the world. In a country with patriarchal traditions like Armenia, women are more vulnerable to abuse which can lead to a decreasing sense of self-worth.

Gender Equality:

The point of view of civil society, the GoA and the UN differs quite sharply on the matter of gender equality. Rooted in patriarchal mentality and traditions, it is still common practice to understand the role of women to be with the family and living in a domestic sphere. It is not expected of women to work, and raising children is considered to be a top priority among their duties. In such a context, the society and the GoA do not comprehend the problem of gender inequalities and consider such problems to be non-existent in the country, therefore adopting and abiding by gender-blinded policies. However, according to UNDP's chief adviser, the UN is straightforward on this matter, firmly claiming that there is absolutely no equality between men and women and finding the Armenian society to be too negligent.

Sexual and Gender based Violence (SGVB) amongst Female Refugees:

Refugee women are often subject to violence within their families. However, not many cases are reported and there is no law banning domestic violence against women, only a National Action Plan Against Gender-Based Violence for 2011-2014. This is certainly not due to a lack of violence but to the stereotyping mentality of the Armenian society, a lack of confidence in the agencies which are supposed to help, and a fear of increased violence. A systematic and reliable database on SGBV is lacking in the country. According to a survey conducted in 2008 for UNHCR, 17% of the female refugees, married or in a relationship, experienced a psychological, physical or sexual abuse by their husbands or boyfriends. Furthermore, reporting domestic violence is still stigmatised as destroying the family, which is why many women refrain from doing so. They do not leave their husbands in most cases, not having anywhere else to go. Currently, there is only one shelter for SGBV survivors in Armenia.

Also, information about SGVB is almost non-existent among refugee communities who sometimes come to accept violent acts as being part of the norm. The women interviewed who admitted cases where they were victims of sexual violence were readily accepting to be the ones to blame for the incidents rather than the offenders. There is a widespread belief that hitting women can be morally acceptable and justified by reasons such as disobeying the husband, not having properly completed household work, or even refusing to have sex.

Trafficking:

Poverty and limited employment opportunities often lead women to become more vulnerable to trafficking. Even though this is not an often-recurring issue in Armenia, the frequency of trafficking is augmenting and could become more serious if nobody reacts.

Political integration

The Armenian political sphere is probably the place where discrimination against women in general and against refugees is manifested at its best. Even though according to the Electoral Code, 15% of a party's list for the proportional-representation seats must consist of women, only 8,4% of the members of the Parliament (11 out of 131) and 11% of the ministers (2 out of 18) are nowadays women. There is no female mayor among the 48 mayors and only

one out of 51 is deputy mayor. Taking a look at the rural communities, only 23 community leaders out of 924 are female. Also, the biggest Republican Party's governing board, having 65 members, comprises only 2 women. And furthermore, none of them are refugees or former refugees. Currently, there is a draft Law on Equal Rights and Equal Opportunities which is undergoing internal procedures in Armenia. According to this Law, during elections, women would have to comprise 30% of a party's list for the proportional-representation seats. However, if the Electoral Code is hardly put into practice, it is hard to expect more from this Law.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Even though refugees and locals are granted almost the same rights, there are obstacles which the refugee women face in achieving a complete integration into the Armenian society. These constraints are mainly social, economic, gender-related and cultural, and political rather than legal in nature. For the integration process to be successful, on top of acquiring the Armenian citizenship, female refugees and former refugees should be able to, by putting efforts from their side as well, own a place to call home which would meet standard living conditions, integrate well in their local communities, get a job, be protected against various forms of abuse, and be active in the political sphere. The various findings put together show that it is time for the GoA, aided by other organisations, to address more thoroughly the various issues regarding the integration and empowerment of refugee women in Armenia. A good approach would be to:

1. Strengthen the social housing system and renovate the communal centres which are in bad shape, together with the privatised ones. Also, prioritise housing matters by resuming the Government's Project Certificate programme, or by letting the former and current refugees privatise their dormitory rooms or even by providing them with the material means to build their own houses.
2. Organise social events bringing together refugees and locals with integration among local communities as a goal, by promoting the understanding that unity is not about uniformity, and by encouraging the development of a positive view on diversity. Also, teach the children about the benefits of diversity in class.

3. Create higher levels of awareness in different communities by making the different influential faces in politics and the various projects that they designed known to the people on the ground.
 4. In order to avoid the installation of a dependency syndrome, and get the economy going by having citizens better adapted to market demands, help the women to adapt to rural life by teaching them once and for all owning income strategies to help themselves rather than simply allocate humanitarian aid. Also, encourage the establishment of small and medium sized enterprises for these women and assist them in setting up apprenticeship programmes, through which they can transfer their skills in crafts to younger generations.
 5. Because of the importance of Armenian literacy skills, organise accessible Armenian language training programmes and also pre-school training programmes in the different villages where the refugees live for more adequate opportunities.
 6. Review the legislation which considers refugees as foreigners in the higher education system by allowing them to be considered on equal footing with nationals to benefit from the same free opportunities.
 7. Implement a mechanism covering the expenses used on transportation for persons who find work in a village or city other than their place of residence. Also, start various social and economic development programmes in the main cities outside of Yerevan and inside the capital and provide a system of free transportation from the outskirts of those cities to the places where the events are held.
 8. Create a mechanism for systematic data collection on the frequency and forms of SGBV in Armenia, which would subsequently bring up to date the development of significant strategies to combat such abuse.
 9. Pass a domestic violence law and guarantee sufficient services and justice, including medical, psychological, legal and social support for the survivors of such abuse and the construction of more centres for survivors.
 10. Raise awareness among refugees about their right to physical and psychological integrity and also their right to report offences. Introducing a system of compensation of some sort for women who speak might be an option at the beginning.
 11. Understand the need of women in public and political life for less corruption and put the Electoral Code into practice.
- More generally, even though most problems are shared by locals as well, refugees remain more vulnerable. There is thus an urgent need to include refugees as a priority group in policies, integrate a gender perspective in policies, and last but not least, respect the different rights of refugees according to the current legislation.

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