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Globalisation and gendered displacement

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Abstract

It will be argued within this paper, that women’s experiences of displacement and exclusion need to be situated in the relationship between globalisation, neo conservatism and neo liberalism. Neo liberal globalisation diminishes all human pursuits into buying and selling. It is elites in the North who have implemented neo-liberal policies into both the North and South over the past twenty five years. These policies have resulted in the eradication of social safeguards which have led to massive gendered displacement. While globalisation may conjure up a vision of a borderless world, as a result of the free flow of goods, it is increasingly about borders which are both permeable and exclusionary. Under neo liberal globalisation borders are either enforced or ignored, according to the needs of neo liberalism. Within this paper I will argue that while women and children make up the majority of refugees and displaced people, women as refugees, are rendered invisible in many national policies which focus on asylum seekers as male. My paper will highlight the relationship between forced migrations and the concerns that nation-states have with their national security and border control.

Globalisation and gendered displacement

It will be argued within this paper, that women’s experiences of displacement and exclusion need to be situated within a global context. Globalisation contains elements which are both neo liberal and neo conservative. This paper will highlight the lack of neutrality in the way in which notions of legitimacy and illegality are constructed. For the last two and a half decades, neo liberal policies developed by elites in the North and implemented in the South have had a very negative impact on many of the people living within these countries, particularly women. The inequalities which have been created by the relationship between North and South have led to massive gendered displacements. Women and children, as refugees and displaced people, make up 80 per cent of the displaced population. Women as refugees, experience gendered forms of violence, are left out of decisions which impact on their lives and are rendered invisible in many national policies which focus on asylum seekers as male.

Gendered displacement needs to be situated within the global context in which it is occurring. In addition, the various elements which characterise this global context
need to be analysed in order to provide a more holistic understanding of the impact of
globalisation on women’s experiences of forced migration. Chimni (2000:258) claims
that there is an unquestioned belief that it is local and national issues within third
world countries which are responsible for both human rights violations and threats to
the spread of democracy. The part which the neo liberal agenda and the agencies
which support this agenda play in undermining the South in terms of both politics and
economics is largely ignored. Sivanandan (2001:90) has argued that while
multinationals take over the world economically, more and more women are being
displaced from their homes. As a result, countries are being economically devastated,
in others there is genocide, some countries have old style communal wars and in
others new racisms are emerging. Political and Economic categories have become one
and the same thing and culture is becoming increasingly homogenised, where the
values by which we live are the values of the market place.

These values associated with the market place encourage both inclusion and
exclusion. The role of the nation-state within many countries in both the North and the
South has not become less prominent but has instead become more regulatory in terms
of putting in place the conditions which are needed for capitalism to thrive.
Globalisation is about both neo liberalism and neo conservatism and these dynamics
have a particularly adverse impact on women who make up the majority of the poor.
Indeed, as both Bryan (2002) and Peck (2004) argue, neo liberalism does not involve
the simple application of free market philosophy but is based also on social
conservatism and increasing preoccupation with social control in areas of law and
order and border protection (Peck 2004). Globalisation is not about a borderless world
but rather about a capitalist world where borders are or are not present according to
the needs of neo liberalism (Mitropoulos 2001:54). Displacement needs to be situated
within the unequal relationship between capital and labour (De Genova 2002: 423)
where economic and political elites are able to cross borders as they wish, while the
poor are left to stay at home and suffer the consequences of the neo liberal policies of
which they have little control (Castles 2003:16).

Since women make up the majority of the world’s poor, neo liberal policies have been
particularly detrimental to women, with a reduction in social programs being the most
visibly gendered aspect of these policies. Reductions in health services have led to
higher maternal mortality and the introduction of school fees in many Southern
countries has made education even more inaccessible for the poor, particularly girls. These changes have both increased the impoverishment of women and made it difficult for them to find work. Neo liberal policies aimed at the eradication of national social safeguards in the South have led to increased inequalities and crises that have impacted on women even more adversely than men, leading to massive gendered displacements (Jagger 2002:123).

Eighty per cent of refugees and internationally displaced people are women and children (Rodriguez 2003:6). Women experience gendered forms of violence, such as rape, the fear of rape, body searches, enforced pregnancy, slavery, sexual trafficking, enforced sterilization, and infection with sexually transmitted diseases and AIDS, as well social stigmatisation once they have been sexually assaulted (Rajasingham-Senanayake 2004:149; Rodriguez, 2003:1). The infection of women with HIV/AIDS leads to local discrimination against these women and disqualifies them from resettlement in many countries, including Australia (Bartolomei, Pittaway and Pittaway 2003:88).

Sammadar (1999:40) claims that women are the most abused refugees and the most unwanted migrants. The sexual victimization faced by women is the most gender specific human rights violation of forced migration. These abuses violate both women’s rights to their own bodies and to their physical and psychological well-being. Women do the most low skilled, least paid, most abused and dishonourable jobs. Economic crises which often impede a girls ability to get an education makes the trap of sexual violence, such as sexual slavery, trafficking and prostitution much harder to escape (Britain 2003:44). Children’s survival often depends on a women’s ability to adapt to impoverishment (Sammadar, 999:41). Within refugee and displacement camps, women are the ‘invisible’ refugees who are not consulted in the planning and designing of programs which impact on them. Women also represent 80 per cent of health care workers in refugee camps, yet they have little say in the construction of national and international policies. Women often do not get a fair share of food, water and shelter allocations, with resources often being given to male heads of households (Sammadar, 1999:40; Rodriguez, 2003:2).

While neo liberal policies have had a particularly adverse impact on women, the neo conservative policies put forward by nation states have further compounded this adversity. For example, as Piper (2004:76-77) states, migrant women workers in
South East and East Asia work in jobs which are unskilled as domestic helpers, entertainers or sex workers. Stricter immigration policies have meant that most of these women work on short-term visas or as ‘illegals’. The illegal status of these women puts them at even greater risk as they fall outside any of the mechanisms set up in the host countries to protect workers. For undocumented workers, the limited work opportunities and risks already experienced by migrant women workers increase as a result of their illegality.

The construction of displaced and refugee women as either legitimate or illegal migrants is dependant on the needs of capital. As De Genova (2002:424) states the law circumscribes it own parameters and operations and thus particular notions of ‘illegality’ are the result of both particular migrations and the immigration philosophies of particular nation states. Laws are instituted at particular historical moments in response to social upheavals and political struggles largely focused around the neo liberal oppression of labour (De De Genova 2002: 424). Thus migrant illegality is not only maintained by particular laws but constituted by them as well (De Genova 2002: 431). It is not only the increasingly neo conservative response of many nation states to migration which has had an adverse impact on women but also the gender blind way in which laws are constituted. Despite the huge number of women who make up the displaced and refugees, the gendered nature of immigration laws and asylum policies means that women are often not acknowledged as an identifiable category in relation to these regulations and policies but are viewed rather as dependants of men (Binder and Tosic 2005; Piper 2004). The double exclusion faced by women with regard to neo liberalism and neo conservatism can be witnessed with regard to changes to immigration laws within Australia.

In line with the establishment of border control policies in the North, Australia has developed policies which are increasingly exclusionary. Australia’s anxiety over asylum seekers is, according to Devetak (2004:103), consistent with Australia’s past fear of otherness. The first act of Australia’s new Federal government in 1901 was the ‘Immigration Restriction Act’. The White Australia policy allowed governments to create a powerful and lasting discourse in Australia which has been exclusionary of foreigners and established a myth of Australia as being encircled by threatening races (Devetak 2004:103).
According to Pickering (2001:170-171), in comparison to international standards Australia’s intake of refugees is small. However, over the past decade Australia has implemented increasingly regulatory and punitive laws and policies. While there has been some challenges made to these policies through the courts, massive changes to immigration law have curtailed the ability of those representing asylum seekers to use judicial or administrative review to challenge adverse determination decisions.

Australian Prime minister John Howard has developed a very firm connection between sovereignty and exclusion in present asylum policies by making statements, such as, “We have the right to determine who comes here” (Humphrey 2002:119). Howard’s approach to immigration is shaped by his anti Asian position on immigration and the increasing support which has been given to minor right-wing anti-immigration parties (Pickering 2001:71).

Pickering (2001:171) claims that both asylum seekers and refugees have been portrayed as deviants. Dichotomies, such as, “bogus/genuine, law abiding/criminal, legal/illegal”, have been established to create an “us and them mentality”. These dichotomies create notions of illegality and legality through positioning refugees as illegal and thus legitimising punitive state responses.

Within countries such as Australia, which are characterised by elements that are both neo liberal and neo conservative, punitive measures result in the victims of an increasingly unequal system becoming portrayed as those who are at fault. An example of this in Australia, is the ‘Work for the dole scheme’, where the unemployed are blamed for a system which does not provide enough employment. Devetak (2004:107) argues that asylum seekers have been turned into security problems, justifying draconian border protection laws and keeping alive in the psyche of the Australian population, a paranoia and fear of invasion. These exclusionary tactics are presented to the Australian population in terms of a government who is regaining control over their borders and protecting Australia. Within this discourse asylum seekers have been demonised being constructed as queue jumpers, deviants and criminals (Devetak 2000:105-106). Changes to legislation in Australia have had a particularly negative impact on women seeking asylum.
McKay (2003) provides evidence of how changes to legislation in Australia such as the introduction of the *Migration Legislation Amendment Act [no 6] (Cth)*, have had a particularly adverse impact on women. Since the introduction of the temporary protection scheme (TPV), the government has increasingly taken steps to restrict the rights of onshore asylum seekers. This has resulted in very few asylum seekers being awarded permanent protection visas (PPVs) once their TPVs have run out. Under the TPV act, asylum seekers need to wait at least three years before they are able to apply for permanent protection with most being refused this protection or being refused a further TPV. Recently, it is women and children who have increasingly applied for asylum. However despite this increase in women and children, there has been no recognition of women as a group with specific needs. Legislation has not included measures which recognise the specifically gendered experiences of women in terms of sexual violence (McKay 2003:439,440) and other gendered forms of persecution and discrimination, discussed earlier in this paper.

According to McKay (2003:444) changes to the ‘*Migration Legislation Amendment Act [no 6] (Cth)*, (MLAA) have meant that individuals who are denied status as refugees are unable to make further claims individually or as a group. This means that women and their dependent children may be prevented from making claims. Any family who arrives in Australia must put in an application for a PPV. Each family member is then recorded as a dependent on the form of the person, who is usually the male head of the household. Each member can then make his/her claim separately by filling in a section further on in the application under the family unit section. While gender guidelines given to officers at the Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs (DIMIA) highlight the social and cultural barriers which may prevent women from putting in their own applications or having their experiences put down on applications, these are often ignored. McKay (2003:445) claims that often male heads of the household and even women themselves pay scant attention to the way in which women’s experiences of persecution can amount to a successful claim.

The way in which women are treated with regard to the MLAA diverges significantly from international regulations which have been put in place to protect refugees. As a result of the MLAA, if a woman asylum seeker is not interviewed before the principal
applicant’s claim is denied, then there is a large possibility that her claim will not be listened to at all. In contrast, in both Canada and New Zealand all family members have to complete individual application forms explaining why they cannot return to the countries from which they have originated. In New Zealand, all family members are interviewed with women being interviewed individually by a female and with a female interpreter, if they wish. By taking this approach all family members are given the opportunity to speak about their experiences (McKay 2003:447).

Section 91V of the Migration Act states that an asylum seeker may be required to make an oath or affirmation that information which they have provided in their application for a protection visa is true (McKay 2003:448). McKay (2003:448-449) claims that the Minister might view an applicant’s refusal to make such an affirmation as a sign of their dishonesty. In addition, in section 91W of the migration act, the minister may in the absence of documentary evidence draw adverse assumptions as to the authenticity of the applicant's claimed identity and/or nationality. The above requirements give rise to concerning issues with regard to women asylum seekers. The appropriateness of a particular manner and deportment with which a person is supposed to give an oath is culturally specific. Thus, not looking at someone in the eye when giving an affirmation can be interpreted in many ways according to different cultural readings and thus a sign of respect or nervousness may be misinterpreted as a sign of dishonesty. Secondly, for many women asylum seekers, their husbands or male relatives for cultural or other reasons may have had possession of their travel documents, so these women have never played a role in either the obtaining of or loss of their travel documents and yet may be penalised for not being aware of the importance of possessing their own documents in terms of entry into Australia.

McKay (2003:451) claims that the gendered nature of Australia’s refugee determination process means that women are at greater risk of not having their claims heard and there are no safeguards to stop this from occurring. In addition, due to their lack of documentation and access to an opportunity to have their cases heard, it is extremely difficult for women who arrive as dependants to counteract many of the myths which envelop asylum seekers arriving in Australia ‘illegally’.

Conclusion
The increasingly punitive and exclusionary laws which have been implemented in countries, such as Australia, have been justified by portraying these laws as a response to illegal deviants who threaten national security. Globalisation, at present, is both neo liberal and neo conservative. On the one hand it is increasingly about removing any barriers which may prevent the free flow of goods. On the other hand it is about erecting more and more barriers to prevent the movement of the very women that these neo liberal policies have displaced. Both the gendered dimensions of forced migration and the neo liberal causes of displacement and migration need to be recognised.

References


