

Escaping Domestic Violence in Time of Conflict: The Ways Female Refugees Decide to Flee

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Abstract : I study the experiences of domestic violence survivors who flee their countries of origin in times of political conflict using insight and evidence from forty-five biographical interviews with female Chechen refugees and twelve refugee resettlement professionals in Poland. Both refugees and women are often described as having less agency—that is, they lack the power to decide to migrate - refugees less than economic migrants and women less than men. In this paper, I focus on how female refugees who have been victims of domestic violence make decisions about leaving their countries of origin during times of political conflict. I use several existing migration theories to trace how the migration experience of these women is shaped by dynamics at different levels of society: the macro level, the meso level and the micro level. At the macro level of analysis, I find that political conflict can be both a source of and an escape from domestic violence. Ongoing conflict can strengthen the patriarchal cultural norms, increase violence and constrain women's choices when it comes to marriage. However, political conflict can also destabilize families and make pathways for women to escape. At the meso level I demonstrate that other political migrants and institutions that emerge due to politically triggered migration can guide those fleeing domestic violence. Finally, at the micro level, I show that family dynamics often force domestic abuse survivors to make their decision to escape alone or with the support of only the most trusted female relatives. Taken together, my analyses show that we cannot look solely at one level of society when describing decision-making processes of women fleeing domestic violence. Conflict-related micro, meso and macro forces interact with and influence each other: on the one hand, strengthening an abusive trap, and on the other hand, opening a door to escape. This study builds upon several theoretical and empirical debates. First, it expands theories of migration by incorporating both refugee and gender perspectives. Few social scientists have used the migration theory framework to discuss the unique circumstances of refugee flows. Those who have mainly focus on "political" migrants, a designation that frequently fails to account for gender, does not incorporate individuals fleeing gender-based violence, including domestic-violence victims. The study also enriches migration scholarship, typically focused on the US and Western-European context, with research from Eastern Europe and Caucasus. Moreover, it contributes to the literature on the changing roles of gender in the context of migration. I argue that understanding how gender roles and hierarchies influence the pre-migration stage of female refugees is crucial, as it may have implications for policy-making efforts in host countries that recognize the asylum claims of those fleeing domestic violence. This study also engages in debates about asylum and refugee law. Domestic violence is normatively and often legally considered an individual-level problem whereas political persecution is recognized as a structural or societal level issue. My study challenges these notions by showing how the migration triggered by domestic violence is closely intertwined with politically motivated refuge.

Keywords : AGENCY, DOMESTIC VIOLENCE, FEMALE REFUGEES, POLITICAL REFUGE, SOCIAL NETWORKS

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