

**NO WOMAN'S LAND:
REDEFINING FORCED MIGRATION THROUGH A GENDER PERSPECTIVE
IN AFGHANISTAN**

Author name: Jéssica Pereira

Affiliation: NOVA University of Lisbon – School of Social Sciences and Humanities

E-mail address: a2023113626@campus.fcsh.unl.pt ; jessicacostapereira20@gmail.com

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Abstract

Forced migration is a phenomenon strongly present in the dynamics of globalisation, as is the absence of women in the theoretical formulation of the processes that shape the lives of citizens. At the intersection of these two realities, this paper aims to analyse the absence of gender in the definition of forced migrant delineated by the United Nations. By rethinking the concept of forced migration, addressing the women's experiences, two complementary goals are outlined. First, the analysis of the gendered barriers faced by Afghan forced migrant women, the research population, in the migration process. Second, how security is defined by the Afghan women who coercively migrate, as security encompasses a myriad of issues that evokes a specific aspect that is linked to our daily life.

From a methodological standpoint, this research draws upon Feminist Security Studies, as it conceptualises the intrinsic relationship between gender and security. These are key terms for guiding the semi-structured interviews with Afghan forced migrant women, methodological instrument used to include the realities of women, in their own words. Thirty Afghan forced migrant women were interviewed and several aspects were considered in order to build a representative research. Among them, considering their ethnicity, eight were Pashtun, eight Hazara, eight Tajik, one Uzbek, two Sadat. Regarding the participants with double ethnicity, two were Pashtun/Tajik, and one Tajik/Uzbek. The participants currently reside in nine different countries: Belgium (1), Canada (3), France (1), Germany (5), Ireland (3), Malaysia (2), Portugal (8), Spain (3), USA (4). Regarding the age range, it spans from 19 to 57 years old.

Drawing on a genealogical analysis, we argue that normative categories, such as ‘forced migrant’, are produced by actors who hold a productive power through which label individuals and configure their lived realities. By conceptualising gender as a social and cultural construct, and acknowledging that it shapes the experiences of forced migrant women, we contextualised the background from which they depart: Afghanistan. More than four decades of war, compounded by the Taliban’s second takeover, have profoundly eroded women’s rights, prompting the forced migration of Afghan women.

The main findings of this study highlight that for the majority of the interviewed women, as forced migrants, security is linked to protection from gender-based violence, freedom from fear and human rights protection, disconnecting from traditional associations of security with military. Additionally, it was posed that gender-specific barriers remain overlooked in every phase of the migration journey – pre-migration, transition across state borders and temporary locations, and country of residence. Most of the challenges presented were related to threats and acts of sexual violence and psychological and emotional insecurity.

We argue that the realities of women are not represented in the definition of forced migrant. The absence of gender leads to a gap in gender-disaggregated data on migrants flows and a lack of acknowledgment of the gendered challenges along the migration journey. Including gender in the definition not only recognises women as individuals but serves as a foundation for the production of policies that materially impact women’s lives and security. The primordial analysis of women in forced migration aims to centre the importance of this issue, paving the way for the development of innovative perspectives. This paper embodies an intellectual commitment to expanding the boundaries of existing knowledge on the intersection between women and forced migration, aiming to foster a categorical shift in the inclusion of gender.