

**Book Review****Women and Migration in Asia (Vol 3):  
Gender, Conflict and Migration**

edited by Navnita Chadha Behera

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*Gender, Conflict and Migration* is the third volume in a collection of essays titled *Women and Migration in Asia*. This volume is a remarkable piece of work that intertwines a number of perspectives to demonstrate the types of problems women face in relation to migration. Focusing entirely on forced, rather than voluntary, migration, the book directly challenges issues relevant to women in contemporary society, as it is women who represent more than 80 per cent of those who are forcibly displaced. This volume pushes the boundaries of migration to include an analysis of gender, crimes against women, inaccurate historical accounts, and human rights and international law implications, among other things.

Many of the essays in this volume challenge a number of misconceptions which are fashioned by states to suppress the truth about the brutal treatment women migrants have been exposed to within their borders. Furrukh Khan, in his essay,<sup>1</sup> argues that, as a result of the nation-states setting down their own selective history, the voices which are often ignored are those of the citizenry doubly marginalised — that is, women from lower economic strata (p 99). However, Khan also suggests that 'dominance can only contain, not successfully destroy a woman's voice' (p 98). By acknowledging the lack of accounts given by women and recognising the importance of empowering them to tell their narrative, this collection of essays directly confronts the discourse of migration promoted by disgraced states.

All of the essays address the notion that gender should be considered on a more frequent basis in an analysis of migration. Several authors in the volume argue that violence and conflict obscure the split between the private sphere of women and the public sphere of men. During conflict, it is suggested, women are forced to discard their traditional roles for various reasons and take on new responsibilities.<sup>2</sup>

1 Chapter 3: 'Speaking violence: Pakistani women's narratives of partition'.

2 See the Introduction by Navnita Chadha Behera at p 35.

However, in a number of the essays, this process is explored and argued to be somewhat artificial in terms of empowerment for women, as, quite incorrectly, it is often assumed that a return to peace means a return to the pre-war status quo. Rajasingham-Senanayake questions this reasoning in her essay<sup>3</sup> and advocates that humanitarian and development interventions should support and facilitate affirmative changes in the status of women living in conflict situations (p 197).

The heinous crimes that women migrants are subjected to are explored throughout the volume, including rape, forced prostitution, trafficking, domestic violence, torture, abduction and the deprivation of basic necessities unless demands for sex are met. This raises a number of issues on an international level which are also explored, including the role of the state in producing and maintaining instances where such acts occurred. Oishik Sircar addresses these matters in his essay<sup>4</sup> by acknowledging that there are a number of international conventions that have not been implemented in parts of South Asia, as well as there being a general lack of a regional refugee policy. However, he also acknowledges that certain conventions, including the Refugee Convention, are inadequate due to the male assumptions that lie behind the apparently gender-neutral wording of the articles (p 258). The male assumptions Sircar discusses make it difficult for women to meet the eligibility of refugee status. Suggestions by a number of authors in the volume focus on the need for the definition of 'refugee' to be more versatile, and for gender to be included as a separate ground for persecution<sup>5</sup> (the five existing grounds under the Refugee Convention being race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group and political opinion).

In her essay,<sup>6</sup> while proposing a perspective on why women flee, Rita Mancganda contests the construction of women migrants as non-subjects by viewing them as victims. She argues that forcing women to return home after abduction reveals the states' outright unfairness in relation to their construction of women as citizens without rights (p 213). Similarly, Rajasingham-Senanayake also incorporates this notion into her essay,<sup>7</sup> by arguing that humanitarian international and human rights relief create a discourse by defining women as victims who need to be return to their original homeland (p 194).

3 Chapter 7: 'Between Tamil and Muslim: women mediating multiple identities in a new war'.

4 Chapter 10: 'Can the women flee? Gender-based persecution, forced migration and asylum law in South Asia'.

5 See Chapter 10, above note 4 at p 260, and also Chapter 11: 'Gender-based persecution: the case of South Asian asylum applicants in the UK' at p 278.

6 Chapter 8: 'Contesting "infantalisation" of forced migrant women'.

7 Chapter 7, above note 3.

The essay written by Urvashi Butalia<sup>8</sup> introduces the idea of legal implications in relation to the forced return of abducted women to their original homeland. Butalia does this by presenting the reader with the confronting reality that women migrants must face when they have the freedom of choice removed by policies that require them to return to their homelands. She recounts the story of Sardaran, who was abducted and imprisoned after being 'rescued', while her forced return to Pakistan was challenged. The courts held eventually that her imprisonment was contrary to fundamental human rights and citizenship, among other things; however, she was not the first or the last woman to find herself such a situation (p 144).

The standards of refugee camps are a concern that is continuously raised in this volume. It is suggested by a number of authors, including Mookherjee<sup>9</sup> and Raychaudhury,<sup>10</sup> that the living standards of some of the refugee camps where women have fled are disgraceful, with some people within them living no better than animals. Further to this, the volume makes it adamant that social inequalities and discriminations are not astray in the camps, with women in some parts of Asia not being able to register their children as refugees if they are not born of a refugee father — thus denying the children access to food rations, clothes, education and health (p 217).

Many migrants have no assets and no support in terms of family or friends, often having to leave most things behind and becoming separated from loved ones in the struggle to escape. This volume, being dedicated in one sense to setting straight the historical discourses created by the states, allows a number of women to recount their experiences in their own words for the first time. The women's stories range from being victims of rape and abduction, to seeing relatives killed, even to having to throw infant children in rivers to save themselves. However, the common theme that continuously emerges in each recount a woman migrant gives is the gender insensitivity to which they were, and are, constantly subjected. Mancganda, in her essay,<sup>11</sup> discusses how, in her request for asylum, one girl named Mary was refused status on a number of occasions by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees because of her inability to precisely recount her traumatic rape experience (pp 214–15). Instances like these are not singular and the authors of the essays in the volume advocate for the acknowledgment that women repeatedly endure the material, psychological and emotional effects of conflict, and there is a pressing need

8 Chapter 5: 'Migration/dislocation: a gendered perspective'.

9 Chapter 2: '*Muktir Gaan*, the raped woman and migrant identities of the Bangladesh War' at p 85.

10 Chapter 6: 'Women after partition: remembering the lost world in a life without future' at pp 157–58.

11 Chapter 8, above note 6.

for gender-sensitive relief and rehabilitation work.

The collection of essays, as a whole, confronts many of the hidden aspects of migration through challenging the discourse created by nation-states in their 'modified' historical accounts. Many states have proceeded to immense lengths to conceal their treatment of women migrants in the past, and through this book these misconceptions are exposed. The book fulfils the need for a more abstract analysis of migration in Asia by including in its discussion elements of gender, criminality against women, international and humanitarian implications, and suggestions of reform.

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