
24. Gender and humanitarian issues in transitional shelter processes: the cases of Syrian refugees and displaced communities by the earthquake in Haiti

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1. INTRODUCTION: SHELTER CONDITIONS IN EMERGENCY CONTEXTS

Today, emergency shelter for populations who have been displaced by armed conflicts, climate change, and disaster management is among the most important priorities for Humanitarian Aid policies. However, it is also one of the most complex humanitarian actions to carry out properly. And establishing shelter is necessary not only during the first few days of an emergency, but also and even more so during the reconstruction process. Since establishing a long-lasting solution may stretch out over years, this moment is crucial so that families can settle down in a safe place and return to a situation of relative normality in their own lives. In such an intervention, as we will see in this chapter, our central argument is based on how important is the provision of adequate housing in the case of refugee women and girls, due to their particular situation of vulnerability.

One has to bear in mind that the reconstruction process following a natural disaster is estimated to take between two and five years. Nevertheless, the length of an armed conflict can never be foreseen, and some conflicts have been active for over sixty years. Meanwhile the useful life of a tent is approximately one year. Besides, the use of transitional shelters, which will allow displaced persons to have a habitable space between the emergency and the procurement of a stable dwelling (Figure 24.1), is not recommended by many experts (Davis 1984, 30). However, when transitional shelters are used, the urgency of these situations results in the use of standard solutions that are often unsuited to their occupants. The lack of an adequate dwelling creates not only the deprivation of a space to keep belongings, but also the lack of a safe and healthy environment, which impinges on the physical and psychological integrity of individuals.

The development of a transitional housing process in what is called an “emergency continuum”, which means a series of different phases, becomes particularly importance when gender issues enter the equation. Understanding housing as a process that will be the basis for the recovery of the individuals and communities, and not as a product, must answer the needs of all groups, especially those who live with a specific vulnerability. As we will display next, our experience and research demonstrate that dwellings used after a displacement have often brought about discrimination of female refugees as they omit considerations such as being exposed to sexual and gender violence, a lack of personal autonomy, adaptation to their customs, and privacy. The vulnerability faced by refugee women and girls, who make up



Source: Patricia Muñiz.

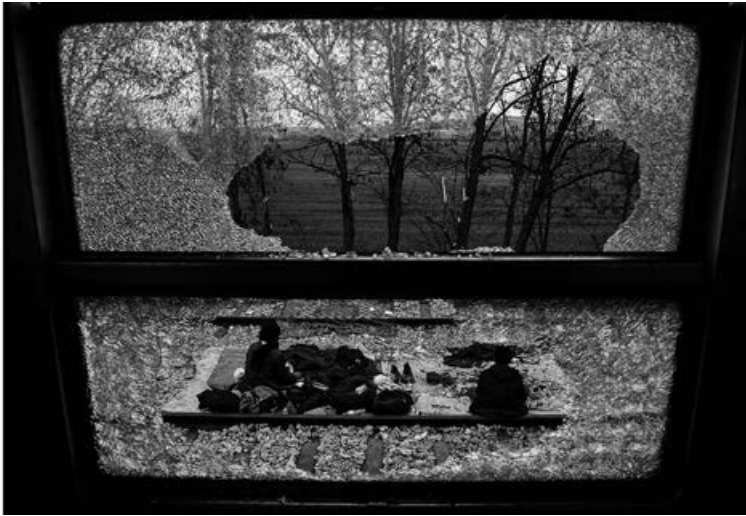
Figure 24.1 *Traditional housing diagram*

almost 50% of the individuals who have had to abandon their homes by force (UNHCR 2021, 3), is increased by the combination of gender and displacement factors.

Every refugee has to face major obstacles, but in the case of women these difficulties are exponentially multiplied. This is a result of a lack of access to rights, cultural factors, and socio-economic and legal situations. As stated in the UNHCR's Guidelines on international protection based on gender, "[p]ersons raising gender-related refugee claims, and survivors of torture or trauma in particular, require a supportive environment where they can be reassured of the confidentiality of their claim." In the case of one-parent households that in different conflicts accounted for 25% of all households (United Nations 2014), they face an additional hardship in having to support their children on their own, which poses a higher possibility of exclusion and precariousness.

From 2011 to 2018 we conducted research on the housing conditions of refugees in the world, paying special attention to the particularities of vulnerable groups. In this chapter, we will present detailed information on variously implemented strategies just after the 2010 earthquake in Haiti and after the Syrian war (which started in 2011). This double examination has allowed us the comparison of two contemporary displacement situations, due to different reasons, such as natural catastrophes or war conflicts. For study purposes, locations in countries with different development indexes and development situations were chosen on purpose, so as to understand how that also influenced the governments' and humanitarian agents' responses. The selection of these two case studies has enabled us to engage in different field visits, and also to be able to compare them with other trips in Jordan, Lebanon, or Greece, as well as interviewing the affected population and the agents involved.

The chapter comprises two fundamental parts, with different sections presenting different "genderized housing" arguments. The first addresses the characteristics of minimum adequate housing in the case of forced displacement, as established in the *Minimum Regulations and Emergency* manuals used in international humanitarian contexts. To these standards, we have added criteria that we believe to be crucial when understanding the particular case of displaced women. The second part of the chapter, which consists of several points of discussion regarding the introduction of a gender perspective concerning migration, brings to light the relevance of introducing gender issues throughout the complete housing process, starting with participation in the housing design, camp planning, or the allocation of female-only collective housing.



Source : Gabriel Tizón.

Figure 24.2 Refugees in Idomeni, Greece

2. FIRST ARGUMENT: ON THE CONCEPT OF TRANSITIONAL HOUSING

International legal instruments reflect the right of every individual to suitable housing that is considered safe and dignified. Among these instruments, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in Article 11 and General Observation no. 4, states, “an adequate housing must be habitable, in terms of providing the inhabitants with adequate space and protecting them from cold, damp, heat, rain, wind or other threats to health, structural hazards, and disease vectors. The physical safety of occupants must be guaranteed as well.” The housing must be affordable, accessible, and culturally appropriate. It must also have sustainable access to natural and shared resources, to an energy source for cooking, and for keeping the house warm and lit. Furthermore, there must be proper basic access to sanitation services and hygiene facilities, to emergency services, to health services, and to social facilities (El Proyecto Esfera 2011, 277).

The transient nature of the housing that is carried out in emergency situations means that it is impossible in most cases to achieve all the criteria asserted in these international legal instruments. Nevertheless, the minimum standards and regulations regarding shelters and settlements in cases of involuntary displacement of a population have been based on these criteria in order to establish the essential conditions of temporary and transitional housing. We can sum up the characteristics that these types of housing must meet as follows:

- They must provide a covered space for living and keeping belongings.
- They must guarantee personal safety and protection against climate conditions, as well as fostering resistance in the face of health problems and sickness.
- They must guarantee human dignity, so as to uphold family and community life, and enable the population that has been affected to recover from the consequences of the disaster.

- The housing type preferably must be one with which occupants are acquainted culturally and socially.
- They must provide access to essential services.
- They must collaborate in strategies to overcome adversity and encourage self-sufficiency and self-management among the population affected.

In principle, compliance with these minimum standards could resolve the specific needs of women. However, reality is far from it. The truth is that very rarely the solutions as implemented meet these criteria. As a matter of fact, the lack of economic resources, the lack of anticipation in the long term, or the unwillingness to invest in certain types of housing, beyond emergency ones, are all limiting elements in the access of refugee women to a safe and dignified environment. Along with these general characteristics, we also emphasize the following factors as very significant for the well-being of women:

- Any intervention in housing programs must be conducted from a gender and risk approach, right from the beginning of the process, in order to prevent unintentional damage.
- In general, settlements must be avoided and building up strategies should be implemented.
- There is the need to encourage family housing rather than collective housing, where women are not exposed to abuse and exploitation; the necessary intimacy, emotional stability, and reinforcement to keep the family together must be available. If the dwelling is shared, there must only be women and children.
- There is also the need to encourage transitional housing rather than emergency housing. It must be considered that women encounter more problems finding a job, obtaining legal residence in the host country, and consequently being integrated. The likelihood of being forced to live in informal settlements for a long time without integration is higher for women than for men.
- There is a need to supply adequate housing for unaccompanied girls, keeping them safe from abuse, exploitation, and marriage for economic reasons.
- There is a need for enforcing measures that encourage settlements that secure refugees protection from assaults or blackmail, providing semi-private spaces that enable cultural, privacy, and intimacy conditions as basic standards.
- It is essential to provide basic services inside women's own dwelling, thereby keeping them away from the dangers of common services and the route going to and from them. If it is not possible to provide services inside the dwelling then there must be enough light and safety on the routes to and from the common services.
- There is a need to provide enough community services to avoid overcrowding.
- It is essential to encourage the participation of girls and women in the design processes of housing, allowing them to voice their particular needs and strengthening their position inside the organization and in decision making.
- When there has been participation, and projects implemented, elements to safekeep privacy and dignity in the households have been introduced. For example, there are internal dividers for sleeping areas, with opaque materials in the dividers or spaces for washing and toilet activities. All of these have been solutions relating to the design and construction of the households that have mitigated the risk of gender violence.
- As mentioned earlier, we have analysed research housing strategies following the 2010 earthquake in Haiti and the Syrian war, which started in 2011. In the former, only a few

seconds were required to destroy the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP), and a total of 2.3 million people had to be reallocated.

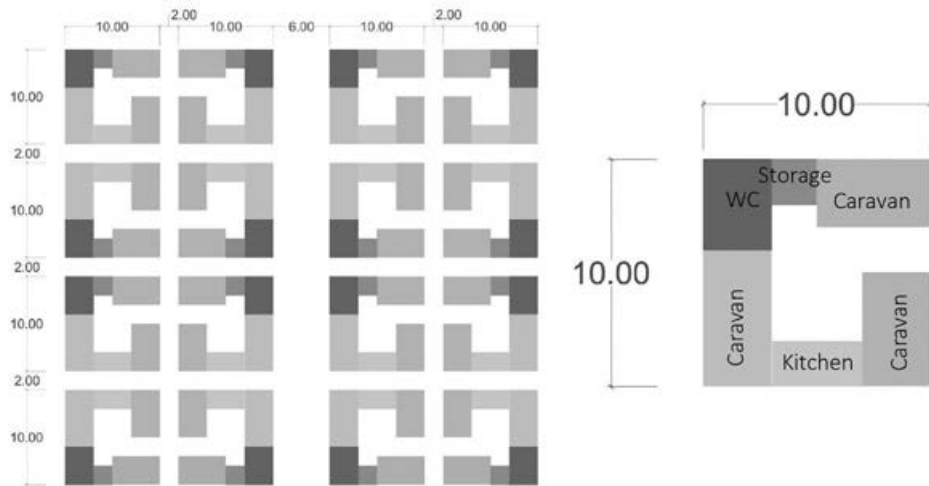
- On a separate issue, the war in Syria has brought about the largest displacement since World War II, forcing more than 11 million people to abandon their homes. As part of these study cases, we will explain four intervention strategies that, one way or another, have taken into consideration the needs identified in different host countries.

3. SECOND ARGUMENT: ON THE RELEVANCE OF SITE PLANNING

Planned camps are one of the last resources recommended by humanitarian agencies to shelter displaced communities. Among other things, this is due to the fact that refugees' rights and freedoms, such as choosing where to live or work, are limited in this location. It is due also to the increase of health risks as a result of high population density, or to the serious damage that can be caused within the campsite's surrounding environment. Nevertheless, in some cases, such as the war in Syria, dignified and appropriate housing strategies have been possible. Services such as education or sanitary attention have been provided to a large population in an efficient and centralized way. We turn to examples of this now.

The Syrian war, after the Syrian Arab Spring, started in 2011 (for the context of these mobilities, see Ribas-Mateos 2016) and brought about one of the largest displacements of recent years. More than 5,680,000 refugees have been recorded (UNHCR, 2021a), in addition to the six million people internally displaced inside the country. Jordan is one of the countries that hosted the majority; here the Syrian refugee population makes up 10% of the country's official population. A total of 20% of this population are today housed in planned camps. The biggest and most emblematic of these camps has been the Zaatari refugee camp, which was opened by UNHCR on 29 July 2012. By mid-2021 it hosted around 80,000 people, but it had housed more than 200,000 in April of 2013, making it at the time the fourth most populated city in the country, and the second-largest refugee camp in the world. Located in the desert, 10 kilometres from the city of Mafraq and very close to the Syrian border, it started as an improvised and chaotic camp in which conflicts ensued due to its size. Today, despite its size, it is a settlement organized in 12 districts with all necessary services. This organization, carried out since 2013, brought about a substantial improvement in matters related to women's safety.

Nevertheless, there is still much to be done in a camp with a high number of child marriages (25% in 2014, according to Save the Children), gender violence, and even prostitution. As a consequence of such social conditions, new approaches have become necessary in order to preserve intimacy, privacy, and cultural aspects for women, as the programmed site planning did not favour them. With that in mind, in 2015, after a participatory and collaborative process with the Norwegian Refugee Council, a new project was launched that started the restructuring of some empty parcels in which family units with all services included were set out. Through the new project, 10 × 10 m parcels were created, in which the arrangement of the rooms allowed for an internal patio within the unit, recreating the multifamily life model of families in Syria and improving social cohesion. It also reduced the vulnerability of women, offered more privacy, avoided the risks of using communal spaces for cooking and sanitation, and thereby boosted their autonomy. Another factor that has been decisive to mitigate the risks for women has been the improvement of lighting in the camp. Since the end of 2017, Zaatari



Source: UNHCR.

Figure 24.3 New prefab housing layout in Zaatari Camp, 2015

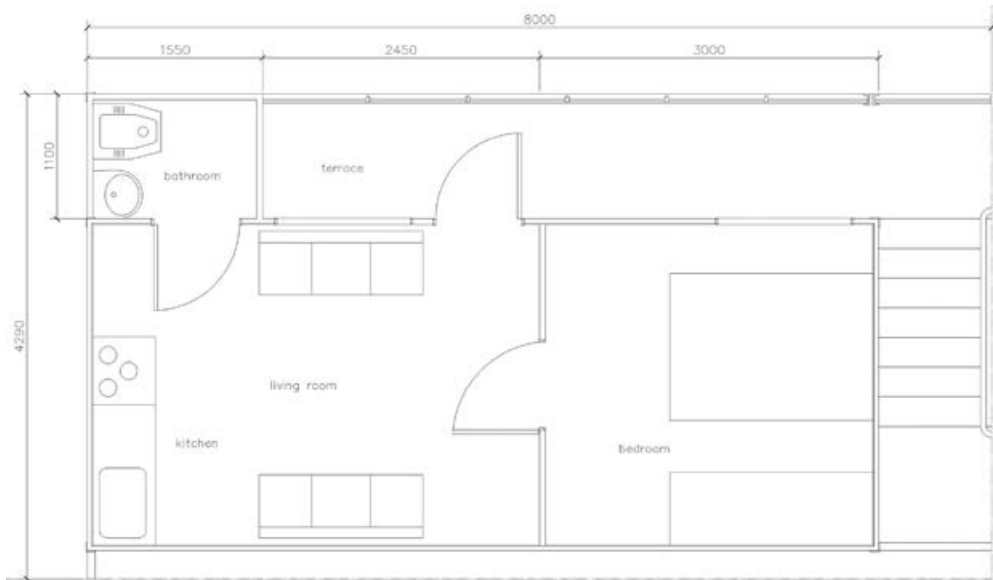
has had a photovoltaic plant that provides energy and supplies the lighting systems, thereby improving safety within the camp (Figure 24.3).

4. THIRD ARGUMENT: ON A VIEW INSIDE THE HOUSEHOLD

I am a single mother with five children, and I feel unsafe walking alone in the camp[.] I always accompany my daughter to the bathrooms. I can't leave her alone for a second. (A Syrian woman refugee, Hikmat & Miquel 2016, 11)

In the aforementioned camp of Zaatari the sheltering system started with tents, but the short lifespan they had due to the extreme weather to which they were exposed gave rise to a progressive substitution of tents with prefabricated containers. The use of containers as dwellings inside refugee camps is not a common strategy as a housing solution, but in this case it was bolstered by the Syrian crisis and by the economic capacity of benefactor countries. The initial prefabs were donated by the Gulf countries without pre-consultation with the camp manager about the needs of the refugees. They turned out to be an expensive option: even when they improved the conditions of the population, enabling the refugees to have a safer place for their belongings, their cost was excessive and services were inadequate. They had a floor area of 15 square meters and lacked services inside the room itself, the latter being communal. But in January of 2015, the UNHCR, in coordination with the Government of Jordan, started installing prefabricated containers of 22.5 square meters with a bathroom and kitchen, connected to water and sanitation facilities. From the evaluations we carried out in the camp in 2013, we were able to verify that this had been a demand of the women of the camp for a long time.

We find a similar example in some planned camps in Turkey. This country holds the highest number of Syrian refugees (3,735,807 in November 2021; UNHCR 2021b), especially after



Source: Patricia Muñiz.

Figure 24.4 Shelter in Killis Camp

the EU–Turkey Deal of 18 March 2016, which established, among other acts, that all irregular migrants that transited through Turkey towards the Greek islands as of 20 March 2016, would be returned to Turkey. From the developed housing strategies, two planned camps implemented dwellings with special sensitivity for the needs of women, the ones located in Killis and Kahramanmaraş, with two-level modular structures. The first location where these prefabricated panel system dwellings were used was in the refugee camp of Öncüpınar, in the Killis region, close to the border with Syria. With a population of 90,400 inhabitants, the camp has housed over 110,000 Syrians. Providing a kitchen and a bathroom was essential for the adaptation of the dwelling to the cultural traditions of the refugee women, boosting their intimacy and autonomy. The separation of the day zone and the bedroom is also very important, as it provides additional privacy and security measures. Another element that implied a significant change was a balcony enclosed with blinds, an extra space for the dwelling that provided a private but semi-open space enabling users to have a relationship with the external space without being seen. For cultural and ethnic reasons, this is a spiritual issue for the women of this area (Figure 24.4).

5. FOURTH ARGUMENT: THE IMPACT OF COMMUNAL DWELLING

Lebanon is a country of barely four million people and has sheltered over a million and a half refugees, which implies a great impact and challenge for the community. This situation has prompted the refusal of the Lebanese government to have new planned camps, hampering any

kind of settlement that implies the slightest permanency. After the war in Syria, although initially over half of the families opted to rent, the rise in prices since June 2012 and the dilation of the displacement situation have led to thousands of them having to abandon these dwellings, seeking refuge in much more precarious conditions. A high percentage lives below the poverty threshold, a situation that brings vulnerability to women and girls, including physical assault, domestic and sexual violence, denial of resources, and forced and child marriage. Some Syrian refugee women report being forced to resort to sex work to cover the basic needs of their families. In light of this situation, several interesting projects of shared housing for single women or women with children have been implemented. Three of them were coordinated by ABAAD – Resource Centre for Gender Equality, with the collaboration of the UNHCR in two of them, after a collaborative process with these women. It is a project that offers safe housing for women and girls of all nationalities, ages, cultural backgrounds, sexual orientations, and economic status, whether they be asylum-seekers, refugees, or members of the host community (UNHCR 2017, 52). The users of these centers, more than 400 women, found safe housing, for up to two months, where they were able to escape abusive situations and start recovering. It was therefore very important to define the strategy from a gender perspective, with housing only for women and girls, keeping ties with the sheltering community and boosting the participation of refugee women throughout the whole process, which strengthened their self-esteem and autonomy. The fact that the dwelling was communal enabled the inclusion of psychological and medical support in a continuous and feasible way.

6. FIFTH ARGUMENT: ON A PARTICIPATORY GENDERED PROCESS IN DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION

On 12 January 2010, at 16:53 local time, it took only a few seconds to destroy 70% of Haiti's GDP. Although the number of casualties will never be known, the government estimated 222,750 people dead and over 300,000 injured. A total of 2.3 million persons were forced to abandon their homes. Due to the lack of security that the country had already been experiencing before the earthquake, through the damage caused to protection organizations, and the collapse of prisons, courtrooms, and police stations, vulnerability, especially of women and children, sexual abuse, and human trafficking increased alarmingly. A year after the earthquake, pregnancy rates were three times higher in improvised camps than those recorded in urban zones before the earthquake. In total, 66 per cent of them were unwanted or unplanned pregnancies (Human Rights Watch 2011). The lack of safety in improvised settlements and the lack of resources exposed many women to extreme vulnerability.

During the first five months, housing assistance was fundamentally based on the provision of tents, plastic sheets, or tool kits. As of June, a transitional shelter project started aimed at providing safer shelters for displaced persons, paying particular attention to the needs of women and girls. In different settlements, collaborative processes were carried out with women, both in the design part and once some of the implementation phases were finished, to improve the dwellings in order to reduce their vulnerability. In the different types of dwellings, there were changes made such as the addition of modules of toilets or showers, while some timber windows and doors were changed for more secure ones, inside partitions were added to enhance privacy, façade materials were changed in order to reduce robberies. Also, a backdoor was added; not only was it traditional to have two entrances, but it also served as a secondary

exit from the house if a family member needed to escape an act of violence. Separately, some women also felt safer in homes with outward opening doors, as they felt it would be harder for someone to pry the door open rather than to kick it in (Rees-Gildea & Moles 2013, 13).

Among these transitional dwellings, we can mention as an example the transitional dwelling of which the IFRC built 5,203 units. The design of this dwelling was of 12 square meters, but this proved too small, and it was proposed that the standard size would achieve 18 square meters. One of the settlements was the La Piste camp, where 354 units of 18 square meters were implemented, prioritizing the most vulnerable groups. Once the construction of the first 354 units was finalized, the IFRC modified the T-Shelter design, equipping it with two doors and an extension of the rooftop. Against the original design, there were changes in the doors and windows that were made of wood, substituting them with metal framed units.

7. CONCLUDING ARGUMENT ON GENDERIZED HOUSING: A NEED AND AN OPPORTUNITY IN A GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

[V]iolence has become normal ... they feel it is their right to hate us, insult us, beat us, rape us. (UNFPA 2016, 20)

The examples that we have been able to set out in this chapter reveal the relevance of housing for the survival and the recovery of refugee women and girls. Gender perspective cannot be an additional task to be incorporated into the job of those who decide and design settlements and shelters; rather, it must be understood as part of a global process that includes the following in its program: needs assessment, risk analysis, strategic planning, participation, inclusion, and empowerment. The transitional housing process should start as soon as possible, in an orderly and planned way, moving refugee women away from the most unhealthy and vulnerable situations, where gender violence could be used as a tactic to damage and humiliate them. The inclusion of their participation in the process will foster equal opportunities, social cohesion, and autonomy. Only by taking this perspective globally can we improve the precarious physical and psychological situations they face.

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