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Post-election violence in Kenya 2007: Mapping Multiple Experiences of Internally Displaced Women

(Abstract)

The extreme violence following the controversial results of the December 2007 presidential elections in Kenya in which the incumbent President Mwai Kibaki was re-elected for another five-year term alarmed not only the entire African continent but also the whole world. Though the immediate trigger was the flawed elections, the reasons for this eruption lie in the simmering discontent based on a combination of overlapping historical, ethnic, political and economic factors. About thousand people lost their lives in the post-poll bloodshed. Besides large-scale killings, thousands of people were wounded and property worth millions of dollars destroyed.

The post poll violence also forced thousands of people to leave their native places. The dislodgement of people occurred in a staggered manner. Many who relocated to safer parts of Kenya became internally displaced and several others who fled to Uganda became refugees. The first phase of uprooting took place from the North Rift and parts of western Kenya and Nyanza, where mainly the Kikuyus were victimized. The local militias, comprising mainly the Luos, Luhyias and the Kalenjins, forced the Kikuyus to flee. The second phase of displacement started when the Kikuyu militias retaliated by chasing the Luos, Luyahs and Kalenjins from the areas, where they were in a majority.

The forced migration as elsewhere in conflict situations brought tremendous sufferings for many Kenyans. Like in any other case of displacement, the women uprooted by the violence became the worst affected. They had to suffer the forced migration doubly- as part of the whole groups as well as due to their gender. Kenyan women were sexually assaulted while fleeing and in the poorly managed camps that had to be shared with men who were not their spouses or family members. There were reports of young girls in the camps being forced to exchange sexual favours for food or clothing. The displaced women suffered from severe economic and socio-cultural violence due to lack of security and proper arrangements in the camps.

Despite official closure of the camps and government claims that the displaced have returned home or been resettled, civil society and media sources report to the contrary. As per reports, a substantial number of people continue to remain displaced. The larger issue is of preventing the recurrence of displacement has not been addressed since violence can resurface in future. The displaced Kenyan women thus would continue to live an insecure life until the issue is resolved on a sustainable basis. These silent sufferers need a voice to articulate their sufferings powerfully so that the concerned authorities take steps to redress their genuine grievances that range from proper facilities in the camps to long term stability in the country and security to lead a good life.

Based on above discussion the paper would make a gendered analysis of the displacement in Kenya to widen the discourse on migration. While analyzing the case of Kenya, the paper would argue the African countries need to move beyond the piece meal approaches in both political and societal terms towards a long-term commitment to inclusive peace and reconciliation. All the stakeholders including the displaced women should be given a voice to

make Kenya a true democracy wherein people no longer have to leave their homes and hearths due to fear and violence.