

# Shedding Their Refugee Skin: Constructions of Women Refugees and International Aid Regimes

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## Abstract

*This paper explores the development establishment as an institutional network, a main actor in producing social constructions of women refugees. These knowledge products are particularly rooted in Western culture. The central questions asked here are first, how does knowledge produced within the development establishment affect women refugees and second, are the voices of women refugees incorporated into the knowledge production process?*

## Précis

*Cet article examine l'élite du développement en tant que réseau institutionnel, et en tant qu'acteur majeur dans la production de la construction sociale des femmes réfugiées. Les questions centrales posées ici sont: d'abord, comment la connaissance produite au sein de l'élite du développement affecte-t-elle les femmes réfugiées, et ensuite, la voix des femmes réfugiées est elle entendue et intégrée dans ce processus de production de la connaissance?*

## Introduction

Refugees, by the nature of their official status under the nation-state system, expose the cracks in the structure of that system, which has recently recognized, from an official standpoint, that not all refugees are the same. Refugees are women. Refugees are children. Refugees are men. Refugees are Asian, Chechen, African, Haitian, babies, adults, elderly, healthy, dying, soldiers, civilians. The system of international humanitarian aid, whose obligation it

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is to respond to groups who have been turned into refugees, has recognized difference and diversity among refugees in a particular way, which, in turn, fits into the global and local political economies where humanitarian aid organizations operate.

"Refugees" come to the Western world in a particular package, shaped by the forces explored in this paper. I will look particularly at how forces within the development and humanitarian assistance establishment, from the mid 1980s to the mid 1990s, shape what we know of refugee women in the West.

The packaging of refugee women into a palpable, aid-driven icon is a complex process with threads of its creation reaching from refugee camps across the globe and into media coverage, academic debates, international decrees and declarations, and even peacekeeping operations.

## Constructions of Refugee Women

In this paper, the development and humanitarian assistance establishment is considered a construction site and is analyzed as an institutional network which produces a distinct discourse as it works in concert with other institutional producers of images of refugee women. This paper focuses on the development construction site as the main source of discourse production. Other sites of discourse production which act to reinforce and legitimize the development establishment include the human rights construction site, the academic construction site and the international media construction site. The general thrust of knowledge production in these Western institutions creates an image of the woman refugee that may be intended to benefit not only the refugee herself, but also the regimes and individuals that make up the international system of emergency relief and assistance.

By *construction site* I am referring to the physical and conceptual space in which institutional networks carry out processes of knowledge production. This includes the technologies—social, political or technical—available at this particular historical moment.

The development site includes activity by large multinational organizations such as United Nations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), governmental organizations and the forums convened, alliances agreed upon, conventions signed, calls to action produced, policies written, projects conceived of and carried out, and also the gritty, sometimes chaotic reality that plays itself out in many relief field projects. The human rights site includes aspects of international law and international policy considered outside the bounds of development policy, as well as human rights advocacy groups.

The scholarly site refers to social science disciplines including sociology, psychology, geography, political science, international relations and anthropology which engage in the study of refugees. The international news media construction site is the most visible producer of the archetypal woman refugee. The image projected by the news media, that of the helpless, victimized woman wholly dependent on aid for survival, is at least partially consistent with the image produced by the other three construction sites.

Even though each of the products of the construction sites has threads of truth or reality to them, it is my intention to provide evidence demonstrating that the general trend is for Western institutions to funnel resources into various forms of knowledge production, as well as policy production, in terms of self-interest—individual or institutional. Even the most respected products of this system show some degree of those in the

West "imagining" or filling in the gaps to the identity of the refugee women, and basing policy decisions on these images. Who constructs these images and how? Are they accurate? Can we even detect the accuracy? Or is it that our insights, conventions, protocols and policy statements are so thoroughly embedded within our own culturally and socially constructed narratives that they are not universally salient?

The process of turning entire populations into "refugees" is itself profoundly gendered. It is clear that this process affects all refugees, men, women and children, but it happens in specific ways for women. Because a majority of refugee situations are caused by war, we can easily see gender differences in these groups of people. Many men are at war, if they have not already been killed in combat, while many women and children flee to refugee camps or other "safe" havens. The statistic that most analysts and fund-raisers rely on is that between 70 and 80 percent of the world's refugees are women and children.

In this analysis, the specific questions I am aiming to answer include: How do the knowledges that we in the West create about refugee women actually, first, affect the process by which a woman becomes a refugee? And later, how does this knowledge affect the process and likelihood that the refugee will shed that skin? By shedding the label "refugee," a displaced person is coming to terms with a new life, a new identity, imprinted with the scars of flight and asylum. How do women refugees become "normal" again and how do the groups intending to aid refugees mitigate this process?

By framing this paper in terms of constructions of the "refugee woman", which occurs in the mid 1980s to the late 1990s in all of these sites together, I will look at how these constructions shape the process by which any individual woman becomes a "refugee" in a way that makes the subsequent process of becoming normal again difficult or improbable for many. How do women who have gone through the process of becoming refugees to the Western imagination rebuild a life in a situation where

they are no longer subjected to the gaze of the West as a spectacle or a victim in ways that undoubtedly affect their own self-conceptions in profound ways? Is this even possible in the global systems we have created that both produce and assist refugees?

It is my hope that, through interrogating our own constructions of the "refugee woman," we will be better able to engage in constituting constructive relationships where the voice of the refugee herself is heard clearly instead of filtered through institutions and individuals who are producing knowledge *about* refugees.

#### Theories

In the pursuit of some form of authentic representation of women refugees, which adequately reflects the voices of women refugees, it will become apparent that I am searching for theories and methodologies that rely on engagement, dialogue, recognition of difference and seek to create the conditions for the woman's voice to be heard and incorporated into the knowledge products. Feminist theories and methodologies critique dominant canons of knowledge production, especially in academia, but which can also be applied to development institutions, human rights advocacy organizations and mass media. I will also draw on what has been loosely labelled as "post-modern" critiques of development theory and practice.

Both bodies of thought, feminist theorizing and post-modern development critiques, question analytical observers' claims to objectivity and view the knowledge that they produce from these observations as necessarily coloured by their own ideologies, experiences, histories and world views. These theoretical stances also expose the power hierarchies inherent in knowledge production and attempt to "de-colonize" thought. As Donna Haraway (1991, 211) writes, "feminist objectivity means quite simply situated knowledges."

Postmodern theory and feminist theory have far-reaching implications for development theory, which is imbued with liberal economics, modernization theory as well as other forms of

what is considered to be modern, structural, positivistic, rationalized thought.

#### Theories of Difference

Feminist theory deals with difference in a way that breaks down universal notions of concepts like equality, truth, justice and categories of analysis like the universal woman. These theories of difference are grounded in two specific arguments:

- that women's lives are best theorized from the perspective of their lives which yields multiple realities, and
- that theorizing from this standpoint needs to be from the perspective of women's lived experiences.

These theories of difference do not just take into account the issue of sex or gender difference, they also recognize difference in terms of race, class, nationality or ethnicity and acknowledge that the axes of difference (e.g. race, class, gender) are present in shifting ways within a single women's complex constellation of identities.

What can be extrapolated from theories of difference for the purposes of this paper, is that analyzing identity is relevant to both those observing and those being observed, or in the case of refugee relief, those receiving aid and those administering aid. When the identities of the observer (not to mention interests

at stake) are constituted differently from that of the observed, both need to be made topics of examination in order for the observer's analysis to be weighed and used appropriately. When the identities of the women or woman being observed are themselves disparate, this also needs to be made explicit. We need to ask, what are the political implications of knowledge that is produced from a standpoint of the observer, in this case the regimes in the West which produce knowledge on women refugees?

#### Standpoint Theories

Standpoint theory deals with the question of hegemonic discourses and practices by stating that since knowledges are situated, so too could theorizing be situated. In other words, those being theorized about or for should be the

starting place for producing knowledge or theories about that subject. Postmodern critiques of development characterize development discourse and practices as hegemonic, even neo-colonial.

Standpoint theorists claim that all knowledge attempts are socially situated and that some of these objective social locations are better than others as starting points for knowledge projects, challenging some of the most fundamental assumptions of the positivistic, scientific world view and Western thought that takes science as a model of how to produce social knowledge. Modernization theory—which provides a theoretical foundation for contemporary models of development—is one of these positivistic models for producing social knowledge. Standpoint theory sets out a rigorous “logic of discovery” intended to maximize the objectivity of the results of research, and thereby produce knowledge that can be for marginalized people (and those who would know what the marginalized people would know) rather than for the use only of dominant groups in their projects of administering and managing the lives of marginalized people (Harding 1993). Using standpoint theory, in the case of women refugees, knowledge production would start from women refugees themselves.

### ***Development Critiques***

The notion of development coalesced into a certain kind of political practice following World War II by the U.S. government and the formation of the United Nations (Esteva 1993). Women in Development grew out of this development era—the decades following World War II—in conjunction with 1970s second wave feminism in the United States and Europe. In the past three decades, feminists have begun to raise and legitimize certain issues in many fields including politics, journalism, academics, development and law. The opening up of discourse on “women’s issues” has developed simultaneously and in a parallel fashion in many fields, while certain issues have cut across several fields such as violence against women. These

forces have also come together in official forums, most recently culminating in the 1995 United Nations Conference on Women in Beijing. These conditions have come together to create a time when it is possible for women’s issues to appear on political agendas worldwide. Refugee policy is also one area in which reform has begun for women’s issues, at least in the form of interstate conventions and decrees.

Postmodern critiques of development discourse and practice contend that development institutions follow established lines of power even when the discourse from within the institutions claims to be liberatory. Arturo Escobar (1995) has analyzed the concept of participation in development and the rise of Women in Development in this light.

Adele Mueller (1986) contends that development discourse is a strategy for producing and maintaining first world dominance in a capitalist world order through reproducing existing rules of relation. In this sense, the rules of relation are reproduced through research methods, the control of the theoretical direction for understanding key issues, and through the carrying out of projects, and in the form of declarations and policies coming out of the international women’s movement in the past three decades.

These categories, designed and written into policy by the development construction site and other institutional networks, frame what will be named as development problems for women and, in turn, decide which projects will be funded and how they will be designed. The legitimization of women’s issues through this type of documentation helps shed light on specific issues, and puts women’s issues on political agendas globally, but it may also frame the issues in a way that does not necessarily reflect the view or voices of the marginalized.

### ***The Development Construction Site***

Because millions of people are turned into refugees each passing year—through war, famine, mass expulsion,

genocide, ecological degradation—the machinery of feeding, clothing, protecting and sustaining these people remains intact. The international system of humanitarian aid is the benefactor for more than 48 million people worldwide whose status in the nation-state system is “refugee” or “internally displaced person.”

Some analysts proclaim that the system created in the post World War II era for dealing with these immense crises is now in crisis itself. They cite lack of funding, poor planning, inadequate nutrition in food rations, politicized distribution of aid and decreased security for delivery of aid as evidences. Internationally accepted core critiques levelled against the contemporary system of international relief include the potential for severe dependency and idleness that can be created in refugee camp life.

Perhaps the most blatant indicator that resources provided by agencies are inadequate and that the new goals of empowerment remain unfulfilled is the high incidence and conditions of violence. Wherever refugees reside, violence is a problem for all, but is especially salient for women. Aristide Zolberg (1989) suggests in his research that refugee flows are an inherent part of the mechanisms of economic and political globalization and that violence is endemic to this process. Women experience this violence differently because of their vulnerability to sexual violence—which is often politicized. Many who scrutinize refugees have begun to realize the gendered aspects of refugee life, and have paid attention to the violence women endure and the vulnerability they withstand in their journeys. With these realizations have come adjustments to policy, discourse and knowledge produced about refugees.

### ***Who Is a Refugee?***

The international system of emergency aid is built on inaccurate notions that portray refugees as waves, floods and tides of humanity whose masses will undoubtedly scramble for limited precious resources—notions which separate us from them, the fortunate from the

unfortunate, defining refugees as the distant and unfortunate "other." Official definitions rest on UNHCR's 1951 Convention and 1967 Protocol, but their usefulness in the post-Cold War era has been called into question.

It is between the emergency phase and the reconstruction phase (or in some cases, settlement in a third country) that the official, registered refugee loses that label or sheds his or her refugee skin. At this point in development discourse, the refugee moves from "refugee" to "former refugee" or "repatriated refugee," as if to reiterate that refugee status is the most important dimension of the individual. The "refugee," as reinforced by aid workers, can be used politically by those creating the conflict and those administering aid. In this sense, the refugee becomes a political commodity. Hence, becoming a former refugee, or shedding the refugee label altogether, will depend on all of the regimes in power in the country of flight, the country of asylum, the aid community and the donor community, each of which has its own interests at stake and strategies in place.

#### Women Are Refugees Too

It is easy to talk about refugees without realizing that 80 percent of all the refugees in the world today are women and their children. At first look, it seems most refugee populations are gendered in a very specific way. Women are turned into refugees with their children while men are turned into soldiers, exiled politicians or intellectuals, killed or fighting in wars as guerrillas, bandits or hired militiamen. But a closer look reveals that a small number of women are recruited as soldiers while many others are expected and required to play peripheral roles in civil conflict such as carrying supplies and ammunition. It is likely that other women are playing a complicit and supportive role from their base in a refugee settlement.

It is only recently, in the last decade, that the development regime has recognized, in the form of official policies and other proclamations or special appointments, the gendered make-up of refugee groups. These policies for women as

refugees didn't develop in a historical or political vacuum, but were produced by people who are inevitably imbued with their own personal ideologies, culturally embedded narratives, and particular epistemology. The gendered characteristics of refugee groups didn't suddenly appear in the last decade as the policies were being developed, but existed long before the regimes were aware. Refugee women were turned into a distinct issue by academics, policy makers, activists and aid workers inside and outside of the development regime, with a general thrust of discourse and knowledge production originating in Europe and North America *about* refugees in developing countries.

#### Progressive Policy

The international women's movement, the women's human rights movement, and the formation of Women in Development (WID) programs within the development construction site have made women more visible in many arenas as political actors. All of these influences together have buoyed the advocates who initially turned the conditions of women refugees into an issue within the international aid community.

Aid organizations have long recognized the need for refugee protection against forcible repatriation, armed attacks, banditry or unjustified detention, but it was only in the mid 1980s that these advocates brought to the attention of the international community the gendered aspects of protection. The Third World Conference on Women in Nairobi in 1985 created Strategies for Advancement which UNHCR was obligated to implement. Following the conference, the International Working Group on Refugee Women was formed in Geneva, whose mandate was to encourage NGOs, UNHCR and governments to look at the specific needs of refugee women. The Working Group, as well as other NGOs and activists, was instrumental in pushing UNHCR to develop its first policy on refugee women in 1990.

The 1994 Cairo Platform for Action, and the Platform for Action from the

1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing recognized refugee women as a distinct issue. The *Convention for the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women* (CEDA W), passed by the UN General Assembly in 1979, was central in providing a base for creating policy for women across the board. Policy on women's human rights has developed alongside and reinforced policy for refugee women.

Since the mid 1980s, UNHCR has been the leading organization among international development and humanitarian organizations in the development of the policies on women refugees, although it was spurred by NGOs and activists to do so. The International Working Group on Refugee Women lobbied UNHCR to establish the post of Senior Coordinator for Refugee Women, which was created in 1989. In 1985, UNHCR began issuing official statements which acted as building blocks, and secured a base from which the 1990 UNHCR *Policy on Refugee Women* and subsequent documents could be built. The 1990 *Policy on Refugee Women* aims to improve participation of refugee women in all programs through mainstreaming.

The 1991 *Guidelines for the Protection of Refugee Women* elaborate on practical ways to implement the recommendations in the 1990 Policy. Their purpose is "to help the staff of UNHCR and its implementing partners to identify the specific protection issues, problems and risks facing refugee women" (UNHCR 1991, 11). In 1995, UNHCR came out with the document entitled *Sexual Violence against Refugees: Guidelines on Prevention and Response*, which elaborates on physical protection issues.

Many of the professionals within the development regime agree that the strength of the policies will only be tested as they move from the paper to "the field." UNHCR and some NGOs have begun to implement the guidelines in the field, and many field workers have been trained in gender awareness. In addition to the Senior Coordinator for Refugee Women, there is now a Regional Coordinator in each of the five

UN regions, i.e. Africa, Asia, Europe, Middle East, and the Americas. Each field office and administrative office now has a Focal Point who is responsible for raising awareness about issues for refugee women and distributing policies.

Even with these constraints, there have been many successful projects initiated since the commitment of UNHCR to women refugees began in the late 1980s, including programs to increase physical security, counselling and mental health services, micro-credit and income-generating projects, maternal and reproductive health, and education and literacy training.

Aid agencies have also begun to pay attention to the gendered aspects of distributing food in camps. In some cases, camps staff are not aware of women as single heads of households, and assume the food should be distributed to the men.

### Conclusion

To interrogate the knowledge production process is to query whether the discourses produced are liberating for refugee women or, on the other hand, if they subject women to increasing degrees of control over, and appropriation of, their lives by development workers and administrators, human rights advocates, journalists and scholars.

On the side of viewing the creation of the category of women refugees leading to refugees having less control over their own lives, are analysts such as Arturo Escobar (1995, 9), who asserts that development discourse in general "has created an extremely efficient apparatus for producing knowledge about, and the exercise of power over, the Third World." In this same vein, again on the category of women in WID programs, Mueller (1996) points out that researchers and development experts use standardized procedures and statistics which inevitably have the effect of the erasure of women's experience. Typical descriptions reflect "a way of knowing and a way of not knowing, a way of talking about women and a way of silencing women from speaking about the experi-

ence of their own lives as they are organized by unseen and uncontrollable outside forces" (Mueller quoted in Escobar 1995, 179). Mueller's description of WID knowledge production echoes many of the critiques brought forth in this paper which shows how women refugees are silenced, organized and controlled by the various regimes examined even when intentions of individuals and institutions are working within the development regime to empower women refugees. This distortion of the humanitarian effort is a function of how the super structures of the aid system can act to transform intentions of advocacy into the larger workings of power.

The other side of the debate, which views the creation of the category of "women refugees" as a liberating force, may be best illustrated by discourse from within the development regime. Concepts of empowerment and participation that have generally taken root in development policy are also in wide circulation when it comes to women refugees. Training programs for dealing with the gendered aspects of emergency relief are now becoming common in the international aid community. And, as we have seen, policy is well-developed now for the protection of women refugees.

The debate outlined above locates the situation in which the central question of this thesis must be asked. That question is: Does the construction of "refugee woman," which occurs in the mid 1980s to the late 1990s in all of the construction sites together, shape the process by which any individual woman also becomes a "refugee" in a way that makes the subsequent process of becoming normal again difficult or improbable? The evidence in this study suggests that the process of becoming normal again is hampered by the previous process of becoming a refugee because the constructions of the refugee woman, in many cases, act to reinforce and maintain the systems of management, administration and regulation by the regimes, especially the development regime. This does not mean that there is no liberating effect at all of the new dis-

course on women refugees. The discourse, policies, and projects created for women refugees need to be recognized as important contributions to the struggle for women's rights internationally, but only with the recognition that the institutionalization of bureaucratic procedures specifically for women also have the potential to open women up to state or quasi-state forms of regulation. Women who have been turned into refugees are particularly vulnerable to these forms of control because of their fragile status in the system of nation states. For these women to be able to shed their refugee skin, a delicate balance must be struck between the power inherent in the international aid community and the liberatory effects of the new found category of refugee women.

The forces that have come together in the international women's movement allow us to begin to talk about violence against women (whether they are considered refugees or not) during war in a way that makes us conscious of the victim's welfare, instead of merely reinforcing and institutionalizing women as victims. An international network of feminists, some who work in the construction sites, have begun to explain how war makers rely on specific ideas about masculinity. These feminists are documenting rape so that internationally recognized human rights can be redefined in women's favour. This trend will certainly buoy efforts by women refugees to access legal redress in crimes of sexual violence and gain protection in situations of armed conflict. ■

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