



Sacrificing the Few to Save the Many: The Moral Economy of Resettlement to Norway

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HISTORY Received 2025-04-24; Published 2026-05-13

ABSTRACT

This article explores how Norwegian resettlement officers navigate moral dilemmas when selecting refugees who are deemed both deserving of protection and too vulnerable, costly, or risky to resettle. It analyzes resettlement officers' moral distress, discretionary power, and coping strategies and develops a moral economy perspective on refugee resettlement in a universalist welfare state. The analysis reveals that these dilemmas reflect fundamental contradictions within the resettlement system, at the intersection of humanitarian commitment, national legal and social norms, and municipal capacity. These moral tensions create a space where human suffering is neither ignored nor easily resolved but continuously present.

KEYWORDS

Norway; resettlement; moral economy; moral dilemma; human suffering

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article explore la manière dont les agents chargés de la réinstallation en Norvège se chargent de dilemmes moraux lors de la sélection de réfugié.e.s qui sont jugés à la fois dignes de protection et trop vulnérables, trop coûteux ou trop risqués à réinstaller. L'article analyse la détresse morale, le pouvoir discrétionnaire et les stratégies d'adaptation des agents chargés de la réinstallation, et développe une perspective d'économie morale sur la réinstallation des réfugiés dans un État-providence universaliste. L'analyse montre que ces dilemmes reflètent les contradictions fondamentales au sein du système de réinstallation, et ce à la jonction entre l'engagement humanitaire, les normes juridiques et sociales nationales et les capacités municipales. Ces tensions morales créent un espace où la souffrance humaine n'est ni ignorée ni facilement résolue, mais reste constamment présente.

The resettlement of refugees is considered a durable solution to the ongoing refugee crisis (UNHCR, 2024). As resettlement is not codified in international law and admission, states are relatively free in deciding whether, whom, and from where to resettle (De Boer & Zieck, 2020). Although resettlement is scarce—less than 1% of the approximately 37 million refugees worldwide are resettled from the first country of asylum to a host country (mostly in the Global North)—there is still a public (and political) understanding that resettlement is driven by the humanitar-

ian ethos of helping the most vulnerable refugees, those who do not have the ability or means to seek asylum in the Global North on their own. Indeed, the vulnerability criteria outlined in the **UNHCR Resettlement Handbook (2023)** form the basis for allowing refugees access to the resettlement scheme. However, the resettlement of quota refugees is not only a humanitarian response to improve the lives of suffering others (Fassin, 2012). Resettlement is also a means of controlling the movement of people and their access to a nation-state (Welfens & Bonjour, 2021).

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This article takes the Norwegian resettlement system as its case. Norway's engagement in international burden-sharing is to a certain extent influenced by a political ambition to be a humanitarian great power (Wohlforth et al., 2018). By "emphasizing human rights and the development of the Global South and other generally positive collective goods issues," Norway has aimed to establish and maintain moral authority internationally (Afroz, 2023, p. 77). In fact, Norway has, until 2023, been the one of the largest resettling countries in the world, after the United States, Canada, Australia, and Sweden (UNHCR, n.d.). Norway also combines a strong universalist welfare state with extensive post-resettlement services with a decentralized model in which municipalities participate voluntarily and have significant autonomy in settlement decisions. This creates unique tensions between national and international humanitarian commitments and local capacity constraints. The Norwegian resettlement system is a space where values, norms, and sentiments are constantly negotiated. Decision-making processes in the resettlement context are, argue Böhm et al. (2021), "imbued with norms and values, which are often reflected in state level discourses on immigration and integration" (p. 6). Resettlement as a tool of international protection can therefore "not be seen independently of these state discourses since the practices of selection, reception, placement, and integration are inherently national and policies are heavily influenced by norms and values" (p. 6). The selection and exclusion of refugees within the Norwegian resettlement system are thus based not solely on objective criteria but also on more dynamic assessments of their perceived "fit" with Norwegian society, their potential burden on public resources, the potential consequences on UNHCR–Norwegian

relations, and the overall impact on the willingness of municipalities to participate in the resettlement program.

Scholarship on resettlement has highlighted how vulnerability is not a fixed category but is actively constructed through processes of assessment and selection (Bjørkhaug & Brækkevold, 2025; Leboeuf et al., 2025; Welfens & Bonjour, 2021). Resettlement officers in various contexts navigate between claims of deserving protection and assessments of refugees' integration prospect and economic contribution. Missing from existing resettlement research, however, is sustained attention to the moral distress resettlement officers experience when making these decisions, and to how their coping strategies stabilize (or obscure) systemic inequities. This article extends this literature by examining how such negotiations unfold within a universalist welfare state, where extensive post-resettlement services create both expanded possibilities and novel constraints. It explores how Norwegian resettlement officers deal with moral dilemmas when selecting refugees deemed both deserving of protection and too vulnerable or too risky to resettle, and what these negotiations reveal about the resettlement system more broadly.

Norwegian resettlement officers prioritize and select refugees for resettlement to Norway. In doing so, they have to reject those refugees who, for several reasons, are deemed "a danger to public order, cultural identity, and domestic and labour market stability" (Huysmans, 2000, p. 752). At times, these rejected refugees are considered particularly deserving of protection (Welfens & Bonjour, 2021), and leaving them behind causes dilemmas of considerable moral character. I argue that such complex ethical dilemmas make visible the many moral tensions imbued in the resettlement system at large, and in the Norwegian selection process more

particularly. On the basis of three example cases, I will explore how Norwegian resettlement officers justify their decisions and what strategies they use to mitigate potentially negative effects for the refugees themselves and the larger resettlement system. In all three examples, the refugees are considered vulnerable and deserving, “cases that really need to come to Norway,” as one of the resettlement officers we talked to explained. However, their chances of coming to Norway are scant. Being aware of the acute suffering caused by rejecting these people, resettlement officers employ various strategies to alleviate not only the suffering of the refugees but maybe even more so their own moral distress. I will show that resettlement officers often end up prioritizing the maintenance and stability of the resettlement system itself, even if it means sacrificing the needs of the most vulnerable individuals.

As such, this article brings empirical evidence from Norway into conversation with three interconnected debates: first, on the scope and limits of professional discretion in welfare states; second, on how vulnerability and “promising victimhood” are constructed in refugee resettlement; and third, on how state–municipal relations shape refugee reception and integration. By examining the moral distress and coping strategies of Norwegian resettlement officers working at the margins of eligibility categories, the article shows how local negotiations over who gets resettled reflect broader tensions between humanitarian care, cost control, and national interests.

Before I delve into the ethnographic data material, however, I will present a combined reading of the anthropological literature on moral economies with street-level bureaucracy literature on coping strategies, and how the literature has approached moral sentiments, values, and norms within an or-

ganizational context. I then shortly describe how resettlement to Norway is organized, and which contradicting norms and values are at play, before I present my data material, and the methodological and ethical considerations that lie at its foundation.

MORAL ECONOMY, MORAL DISTRESS, AND COPING

Resettlement officers identify certain refugees as deserving of protection and in dire need, but when the refugees do not meet all selection criteria, or are considered too vulnerable or too costly for the municipalities, they are rejected. Such situations often cause moral distress. **Moral distress**, a concept initially coined by [Jameton \(1984\)](#), refers to “the emotional and psychological suffering that may be experienced when we act in ways that are inconsistent with deeply held ethical values, principles or moral commitments” ([McCarthy, 2013](#), p. 1). It occurs when frontline workers strongly believe that they know what would alleviate their client’s suffering but also know that this cause of action “conflicts with what is best for the organization, other providers, other patients, the family, or society as a whole” ([Thunman, 2016](#), p. 59). In the case of Norwegian resettlement officers, what is deemed best for the refugee might conflict with what other actors regard as the best for Norwegian society or the resettlement system itself.

Facing dilemmas (often unsolvable ones) and work-related stress is nothing particular to the Norwegian resettlement officers but something they share with other frontline workers and street-level bureaucrats, whose job it is to implement policies into practice in a direct interaction with clients. After all,

the reality of the work of street-level bureaucrats could hardly be farther from the bureaucratic ideal of impersonal detachment in decisions making. On the contrary, in street-level bureaucracies

the objects of critical decisions—**people**—actually change as a result of the decisions.

(Lipsky, 2010, p. 9)

As Lipsky and later Brodtkin (1997) argue, discretion in welfare states is shaped by institutional factors, resource constraints, and political expectations. The Norwegian resettlement officers studied here exemplify this: Their coping strategies and discretion emerge within, and are limited by, the specific configuration of universalist welfare commitments and municipal autonomy (Lillevik et al., 2025).

Not only do street-level workers often feel a mix of emotions, ranging from compassion to annoyance in their personal encounters with clients (Maynard-Moody & Portillo, 2010); they are confronted with conflicting demands, different institutional ethics, and, not least, scarce resources (Brodtkin, 2012; Lipsky, 2010). The literature on street-level bureaucracy theory, therefore, has long focused on coping strategies to better understand how street-level bureaucrats navigate their roles and manage discomfort while implementing policies (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003; Tummers et al., 2015).

However, understanding these coping strategies only at the individual or organizational level risks missing the deeper moral tensions at play. "Moral issues," argues Fassin, "are profoundly entangled within larger social, historical and political issues" (2011, p. 488). He therefore advocates an anthropology of moral economies, which emphasizes moral conflicts and their historical and political dimensions (Fassin, 2009). **Moral economy** refers to the socially shared norms, values, sentiments, and emotions that shape how societies approach collective issues. In the context of resettlement, it comprises competing values: humanitarian responsibility to protect the vulnerable, fiscal concerns about cost and municipal capac-

ity, concerns about national security and cultural integration, and commitment to international burden-sharing with UNHCR. These values are continuously negotiated by resettlement officers, who must decide which ones take precedence in each case.

In this article, I draw on the anthropology of moral economy to illuminate how resettlement officers weigh these competing values when making selection decisions. Resettlement officers' moral distress and coping strategies are not merely individual responses to challenging circumstances but reflect fundamental contradictions embedded in the resettlement system itself. Specifically, officers navigate conflicting moral imperatives—to protect the vulnerable, to manage municipal capacity, to uphold Norwegian values, and to maintain international relations—which no individual strategy can fully resolve. Ultimately, these tensions produce tangible effects. I argue that the simultaneous ethics of humanitarian care, migration control, commitments to international conventions, and prestige tied to being a humanitarian great power create a moral economy full of tensions and moral ambiguity, which permeate the entire resettlement system, from policy level to implementation.

In the next section, I provide an overview of the resettlement process to Norway, before I provide my empirical evidence, followed by concluding remarks.

THE RESETTLEMENT PROCESS IN NORWAY

Norway has a long history of resettling refugees. Since 1956 it has resettled refugees through the UN system (Brekke et al., 2021). In the following decades, many Hungarian, Vietnamese, and Chilean refugees arrived in Norway via formal refugee programs (Schultz, 2022). Norway also has been considered a pioneering state in accepting refu-

gees with disabilities and medical needs and “prioritizing so-called ‘hard-core’ or ‘minus-refugees’” (Tjelmeland & Brochmann, 2003, p. 45; translation by the author) throughout the 1950s and 1960s. While this history was not explicitly mentioned in our interviews with resettlement officers, it forms part of the institutional backdrop against which contemporary selection decisions are made.

Today, Norway operates a government-led resettlement program with annual quotas, most of which are filled with UNHCR referrals (Paasche et al., 2025). After refugees are identified in the country of first asylum, UNHCR interviews each individual refugee and assesses their resettlement needs. Norway sends instructions about which kind of refugees it wants to receive and how many. UNHCR then selects refugees according to an annual quota with specific sub-quotas divided by country of residence, ethnicity, and priority categories. UNHCR then matches the selected refugees to the profiles of the various resettling countries. All refugees resettled to Norway must be eligible for international protection and fulfill one or several of the UNHCR vulnerability criteria. These criteria are slightly adjusted to the Norwegian profile and imbued with their own norms and values. Women at risk, families with children, and LGBTIQ+ individuals are now the most prioritized vulnerability categories of refugees resettled to Norway (Lillevik et al., 2025). A smaller quota for medical cases is designated to meet those refugees whose medical condition can, with adequate treatment in Norway, be significantly improved (Bjørkhaug & Brækkevold, 2025). Finally, resettlement officers operate within the loose category of “high needs,” that is, people with extensive and long-term follow-up needs. Many of the most vulnerable refugees are found in this category. This category is not specified as a priority or

sub-quota but operates as a limiting factor across the sub-quotas and prioritized categories. When selecting refugees for resettlement, Norwegian resettlement officers assess whether they fit into one or more of the “prioritized groups” as well as the other selection criteria concerning national security, capacity in the resettlement country, and the refugees’ ability to integrate and comply to social and cultural standards in Norway.

Refugee settlement in Norway is a clear example of how strong municipal autonomy and voluntary participation produce a persistent gap between state requests and local decisions (Askim & Steen, 2020), making municipal capacity and willingness decisive for whether refugees are actually received. In Norway, it is the state that selects the refugees, but the municipalities settle and integrate them. Resettling refugees is a voluntary task for Norwegian municipalities. Once they accept, however, this decision comes with specific obligations to facilitate the refugees’ integration and inclusion. The municipalities must provide housing and childcare or schools for the children and enroll adults in a 1–4-year program of language training and other activities aimed at achieving social integration and economic self-sufficiency through employment. They are also required to offer welfare services that the refugees are eligible for based on individual needs. The extent of services municipalities must offer and finance is thus rather wide when perceived in international comparison. This is due to the Scandinavian tradition of **universalism**—the principle that all residents should have equal access to public services regardless of background or means (Bendixsen et al., 2017). This structure and the values of the welfare state system set Nordic countries apart from many

other refugee-receiving states (Brochmann & Hagelund, 2011).

The combination of expansive welfare promises and decentralized implementation shapes every stage of refugee selection: Resettlement officers must anticipate not only whether a refugee needs protection but whether a municipality will accept them and whether municipal budgets can absorb the integration costs. Capacity is a fluid factor, and individual municipalities' ability to receive refugees with certain profiles—for example, unaccompanied minors, medical cases, or single refugees—may vary and “will be affected by the refugees' needs and individual municipalities might sometimes have trouble offering adequate services for those being resettled” (UNHCR, 2021, p. 6). It is therefore the responsibility of the authorities selecting refugees for resettlement to ensure a healthy balance between “promising” refugees, who are expected to quickly integrate and become active members of society and the labour market, and those refugees who will not and who are expected to become a financial burden to the municipalities that house them.

METHODOLOGY

Research for this article was part of an ongoing international research project titled *The Future of Resettlement: Vulnerability Revisited*, funded by the Norwegian Research Council. The project explores the street-level bureaucracy of resettlement as well as policy aspects of how quota refugees are selected for resettlement. During 2 years of fieldwork with Norwegian resettlement officers employed at the Norwegian Directorate of Immigration (UDI) and the Norwegian Directorate for Integration and Diversity (IMDi) between 2022 and 2024, the Norwegian research team concentrated on three selection missions.

During the pre-mission preparations, the team discussed the cases to be evaluated with the responsible resettlement officers, participated in pre-mission dialogues, and attended preparatory meetings. We participated in two of these selection missions, conducted participant observation, and shadowed the resettlement officers in their work. For ethical reasons, we did not participate in the interviews between the resettlement officers and the refugees. However, we had ample opportunity to observe the officers' interactions with the refugees during the morning briefs and their interactions between the interviews and on their way to the interview room. We observed the interactions between officers of UDI, IMDi, and the police, the three agencies involved and participated in the so-called check-out sessions. Resettlement officers discussed their respective cases daily within their team. The UDI and IMDi heads of mission met weekly to agree on the outcome for each case. We were also permitted to observe the interaction between the Norwegian delegation and UNHCR, which comprised both coordination and organization of practical issues related to the mission, as well as more substantial discussion concerning the cases. Upon return to Norway, we again interviewed the resettlement officers about their cases and invited them to reflect on the outcome of the respective missions and how they dealt with any dilemmas that may have occurred. In total, we conducted qualitative interviews with approximately 40 resettlement officers in the two directorates, some of which were interviewed several times.

We also had access to 100 anonymized files of refugee cases. These were randomly selected from all cases that had been evaluated by the Norwegian Directorate of Immigration and the Norwegian Directorate for Integration and Diversity during the

three missions we had observed. Files from UDI contained the resettlement officers' preparatory notes, notes taken during the interview, and the subsequent evaluation of the refugees' protection needs and the grounds for the final decision. IMDi data contained comments related to the refugees' resettlement needs. The files thus featured some resettlement officers' interpretations of the case as well as their arguments for rejecting or accepting refugees for resettlement.

As moral tensions and conflicts become most visible when routine procedures and objective criteria cannot resolve a decision, we challenged resettlement officers to identify "trouble cases" (Lillevik et al., 2025). These cases are not statistically representative, but they exemplify recurring dilemmas. This article draws primarily on fieldnotes from the selection missions and from interviews with the resettlement officers that relate to these trouble cases. The case files provide evidence of the officers' written reasoning during the selection and necessary background information on trouble cases.

In later stages of the project, and to confirm my reading of this more subtle data, I presented and discussed my findings with the resettlement officers of both UDI and IMDi, and later also shared a draft version of this article with them for respondent validation.¹ The project received formal approval from the Norwegian Data Protection Authority (SIKT) including a Data Protection Impact Assessment, and the data were handled in accordance with the Norwegian Data Protection Act. Research was furthermore conducted in compliance with the ethical guidelines from the National Committee for

Research Ethics in the Social Sciences and the Humanities. Ethical considerations were also reviewed internally at Fafo as part of its mandatory project evaluation process.

In the following, I will present three such case examples that illustrate how resettlement officers navigate the moral dilemmas inherent in refusing refugees who are deemed utterly vulnerable and deserving of protection. In doing so, they walk the extra mile, exteriorize the responsibility for the refugees, and, not least, evoke the notion that by sacrificing the few, they might contribute to saving the resettlement system as such. I will outline the conflicting demands and dilemmas the resettlement officers had to consider, how their feelings of moral distress found expression, and which strategies they employed to deal with refugees' suffering, their own moral distress, and their obligations toward national and international interests.

GOING THE EXTRA MILE

Among the prioritized category "family with children," some cases presented to the Norwegian mission included family members who had mental or physical disabilities and therefore were categorized as "high needs." Although Norway accepts a certain number of so-called high-needs cases each year, during our fieldwork, we documented a few such cases that had already been in pre-screening and were rejected, allegedly on the grounds of capacity. Resettlement officers explained the rationale behind such rejections:

The municipalities are not very keen on resettling such families. You could say that they receive a lump sum from the state initially, but after 3 years, the municipality has to continue funding these services from their own budgets. And you have to remember that in Norway, resettlement is voluntary. The state cannot mandate the municipalities to resettle! We are in a situation where we are

¹ In writing this article, I used the AI tool Perplexity to develop a structure for the presentation of findings and empirical material. I prompted the AI tool to suggest a structure based on my own notes and followed a version of this structure while writing up the article in my own words.

dependent on IMDi, who in turn are dependent on the municipalities. (UDI resettlement officer, November 2022)

In general, such families are often difficult to resettle—particularly if the present disabilities imply extraordinary and long-term care and resources. They simply are (too) costly for the resettling municipalities, whose budgets are often already rather stretched (Askim & Steen, 2020). According to the resettlement officers, capacity and economic burden are therefore factors they have to consider in such cases. The aim of the Norwegian resettlement scheme is to quickly resettle refugees in a municipality and to facilitate a speedy integration process. If, however, a municipality willing to accept refugees that have already been brought to Norway cannot be found, these families would be resettled in asylum centres alongside other asylum seekers:

If we cannot resettle them [in a Norwegian municipality] then we cannot accept them. Then they would be in the same situation again—waiting for resettlement. Their lives would still be on hold. It is bad enough that people are sitting in asylum centres [here in Norway] who cannot be settled. We can't bring people to Norway and let them sit in asylum centres and wait. These are the most vulnerable people we have to say no to. (IMDi resettlement officer, May 2023)

The resettlement officers knew from experience that Norwegian municipalities were reluctant to resettle costly and complex cases. Statistics confirm that asylum seekers with complex and chronic health needs wait the longest for resettlement (Weiss et al., 2017).

However, different from many of the other selection criteria, capacity is far less clear-cut. Whether or not the families are given access to resettlement mostly depends on the ration between resourceful and demanding refugees so far resettled that year and not least on individual municipalities' willingness to resettle more refugees with special needs.

This leaves bureaucrats with considerable bureaucratic leeway and thus also moral responsibility to facilitate or reject refugees with high needs. In several interviews, the resettlement officers reflected on their moral responsibility not only to the refugees but to UNHCR:

It can be tough when you see a very vulnerable family. You can imagine how they must feel. ... The goal is to help them get the opportunity for a better life—and not least, to support UNHCR. This is an incredibly challenging case for them. There are few countries willing to resettle people with high needs! (UDI resettlement officer, November 2022)

In the following field notes, the officers' motivation to alleviate refugees' suffering and to lift some burden from UNHCR was palpable.

The case was a single mother with several children, one of which was a child with severe mental and physical disabilities. Beyond the statement that one of the children had a congenial birth defect, the Resettlement Registration Form² contained little information about the nature and degree of the disability. IMDi had already cleared all cases during their initial pre-screening. The UDI resettlement officer, who pre-screened this case, however, felt it incumbent to hear their opinion on this specific case. When presented with the case a second time, the IMDi officers now recommended rejecting the case. The resettlement officer disagreed, and perceiving some indecisiveness with their IMDi colleagues, the resettlement officer started to negotiate. "When I lifted the case with IMDi, I did not mean for them to reject the case outright. I rather wanted them to engage with potential municipalities and explore if they could find one willing to resettle that family," they later explained to us. After a few rounds of back and forth, IMDi agreed to try. The integration officers discovered that the applicant already had relatives living in Norway, who would be willing to assist their relative—a fact, they believed, could further the applicant's case and provide additional

²The Resettlement Registration Form is drafted by the UNHCR and provides the basis for states to assess the eligibility and admissibility of each resettlement case member (UNHCR, 2023).

leeway to act. Equipped with that assurance, the integration officer reached out to municipalities in the vicinity of those resettled relatives. They stressed that the woman already had a network that could help and take some of the caring load. The municipality agreed to this, and the family could be invited to an interview. "I think I cried with joy in the office, when IMDi called back and told us!" the resettlement officer told us.

During the selection mission, both UDI and IMDi resettlement officers observed the extent and nature of the disability through observation outside the interview and within the interview setting. At the end of the interview day, the resettlement officers acknowledged the family's dire situation. They were starving in the camp. The child's disability and need for constant attention and care made it nearly impossible for the mother to work and thus earn enough money for their basic needs. The child's disability thus posed an existential threat to the entire family in the camp. However, the fact that the child was able to interact with other children and could sit on their own was noticed with enthusiasm. Although it was acknowledged that "the family will need a high degree of local support: customized housing and possibly placement/respite care in an institution" (IMDi resettlement notes), resettling the family might not be as costly as feared. With adequate care provided for the child, the mother could work or get an education, and the family could live a relatively good life. The family was accepted for resettlement and soon after moved to Norway.

Throughout the selection process, the resettlement officers responsible for the case seemed highly invested (Maynard-Moody & Portillo, 2010). Both were willing to go the extra mile, to push boundaries, and to explore the extent of their respective action space: the UDI resettlement officer by not immediately accepting IMDi's suggestion to

decline the case, and the IMDi officers by intensifying their efforts to find a municipality. The integration officers followed their usual procedure but not their usual timing. Generally, refugees have been interviewed, their case approved, and necessary information about the refugees' integration needs obtained before the integration officers engage with potential municipalities. In this case, however, a positive answer from a municipality, and thus insurance that there would be no capacity problems linked to the case, enabled the resettlement officers to invite the applicant and her family for an interview. In doing so they were able to alleviate the refugees' suffering and accommodate Norway's contribution to the international burden-sharing. In doing so, they also seemed to alleviate their own moral distress. "I cried with joy," the responsible immigration officer summed up their feeling of relief that the family could be invited to an interview—the most important step for securing resettlement. At the same time, their negotiations with the municipalities before the selection interview ensured that the family's arrival would not be perceived as exceeding the capacity of the Norwegian reception system.

This case illustrates the scope of professional discretion in Norwegian resettlement under resource constraints and voluntary municipal resettlement. Anticipating the many reasons to reject a child with high needs, resettlement officers walked the extra mile—negotiating with IMDi rather than accepting rejection, leveraging relatives in Norway, and contacting municipalities before formal approval. In doing so, they navigated the moral economy of resettlement: trading expanded municipal capacity against vulnerability (the child's severe disability), thereby maintaining system equilibrium.

EXTERNALIZING THE PROBLEM

Experiences of violence are important aspects in the assessment of protection needs, vulnerability, and access to or exclusion from resettlement to Norway. For instance, experiences of gender-based violence, including domestic violence, constitute a risk factor in UNHCR's "Women at Risk" vulnerability criteria. On the other hand, being a perpetrator of violence may pose a security risk, be an indication of a refugee's inability to comply with Norwegian norms and values, and often gives cause for further inquiries. Depending on the form and severity of the violence perpetrated, the refugee may be excluded from access to resettlement.

During interviews with potential quota refugees, resettlement officers therefore assess each refugee's history of violence, from their experiences in their country of origin, to the flight, to their living conditions in the country of first asylum. This is done to determine protection needs and to ascertain that the refugees fit the selection categories. When it comes to domestic violence, resettlement officers know that violence against spouses and children is more common and socially accepted in most countries from which refugees resettle. They also assume that scarce resources and opportunities in some countries Norway resettles from lead to increased violence.

Understanding the occurrence of domestic violence as situationally conditioned, resettlement officers therefore are more interested in refugees' stance on domestic violence and their willingness to abide by Norwegian laws upon arrival to Norway. It is the intention and willingness to raise their children without the use of violence that is then evaluated as part of the assessment of their compatibility to Norwegian norms and rules. As UDI resettlement officers talk only to the head of household, and nearly

always with the man in the family (unless the principal applicant is a single woman), such questions are often more a formality rather than a real assessment. However, at times, resettlement officers have discovered cases of severe abuse and violence within the refugee families they interviewed:

This was a gruesome example from [country]. We had to reject that case; we had absolutely no other choice. It was a family with father, mother, and a couple of children. I cannot go into detail how we discovered it—but the man in the family was the worst kind of perpetrator. We were helpless. We were in [city], where we had no authority. We had to reject the case. (UDI resettlement officer, March 2023)

In cases of severe domestic violence, resettlement officers explore various possibilities for how some family members can be accepted in Norway:

We take this up with IMDi—whether it is possible to split the family and remove the perpetrator, or take the whole family and then follow up in Norway. Usually, we don't do that. We don't want to bring people to Norway who are abusive.

(UDI resettlement officer, February 2023).

In one case, a family member had been guilty of perpetrating domestic violence. Furthermore, there were no indications that the father would change his behaviour upon resettlement to Norway. As such, the man had acted contrary to Norwegian law, his behaviour was contrary to Norwegian norms, and there was a possibility that he could pose a security risk upon arrival to Norway. This made it impossible for the resettlement officers to accept the case. Our interlocutors from IMDi furthermore raised the issue of capacity and economic burden. Families with severe domestic violence often become the responsibility of child welfare services. As these are municipal-level services, accepting such a family would in addition incur substantial economic costs for the municipality.

If we know that they will need assistance from child welfare services, then we are at the point of not bringing them to Norway. ... They should not be a financial burden on the state. They should not be a strain on the economic aspect of the municipality. (IMDi resettlement officer, March 2023)

The IMDi officer was clear that assistance from child welfare services was not an exclusionary criterion for all resettlement officers. However, in cases of known domestic violence, this could become a decisive factor against accepting the family. It was clear that the father in the above-mentioned case, as a perpetrator of violence, was not welcome in Norway. Dividing the family, as mentioned in the quotation by a UDI officer above, was also not an immediate option. According to the [UNHCR Resettlement Handbook](#), family unity is considered a fundamental principle of refugee protection that derives directly from the universally recognized right to family life (2023, p. 176). As the unity of the family was untouchable, it was impossible to reject only one person in the case and accept the rest of the family.

As all options for immediate resettlement to Norway had been exhausted, the resettlement officers turned to UNHCR, hoping it had protective measures in place for victims' immediate relief (e.g., shelters for victims of domestic violence or legal prosecution for perpetrators of violence) and for exploring the possibility for future resettlement to Norway. Following a new procedure for such cases, the resettlement officers immediately contacted UNHCR and reported what they had discovered—that Norway could not accept the family—and that UNHCR protection officers needed to follow up.

Cases that involved domestic violence posed considerable moral distress for the resettlement officers. "These are the toughest cases" was a comment we heard repeatedly. "They are probably the ones who really need

to come to Norway" was another equally common comment. In rejecting a case, they condemned the wife and children to live in violent and even dangerous conditions. Resettlement officers were also aware of the extra burden such a rejection would mean for UNHCR. In at least one case we documented, resettlement officers also sent an email to UNHCR and "deeply apologized for not being able to bring the family to Norway" (UDI resettlement officer, March 2023). The steps resettlement officers could take to alleviate immediate suffering were limited.

It is UNHCR's responsibility to take care of the situation. The problem is that reporting a family member without legal residency to the police can have consequences for the entire family. The most important thing is that UNHCR informs the protection officers and those responsible for gender-based violence. (UDI resettlement officer, October 2023)

As part of their communication with UNHCR, resettlement officers sometimes made informal promises that if the women left their husbands—for example, by moving to women's shelters—their cases could be resubmitted for resettlement to Norway, either as a smaller family unit or under the category of "Woman at Risk." Of course, chances that such a promise would become reality were slim. This depended on the women's means and ability to leave their husbands and find refuge in a woman's shelter. Often, resettlement officers were not even sure that such shelters actually existed. Finally, the promise of future resettlement in Norway also depended on the political situation in the country of first asylum and Norway's continued willingness to conduct selection missions there. Since we started our project, Norway had ceased to conduct selection missions from Uganda, several selection missions to Lebanon had been cancelled for

security reasons, and the yearly quota had been reduced from 2,000 to 200.

The question therefore remains whether the resettlement officers' attempts to alleviate refugees' suffering in fact only alleviated their own moral distress—that having done at least something opened, if ever so slightly, another space of opportunity for that family; that it might, if nothing else, have calmed their own feelings of helplessness.

This second case makes visible the impossibility of simultaneously protecting the interests of refugees, the nation-state, and UNHCR, and it exposes a fundamental tension between two normative commitments that both claim to protect refugees. UNHCR's principle of family unity is a core protection goal, rooted in the universally recognized right to family life. Norwegian legal and moral norms prioritize protecting victims of gender-based and domestic violence, especially women and children, even if this requires family separation. In such cases, the value of family unity collides with the value of protecting vulnerable refugees, and resettlement officers have no way of honouring both. This contradiction is not a technical problem that better procedures can solve; it reflects a deeper conflict between international protection principles and national legal systems.

BUREAUCRATIC IMPOTENCE

My final example relates to the vulnerability category of medical cases. To be categorized as a medical case within the UNHCR resettlement system, specific criteria have to be fulfilled (UNHCR, 2023):

1. The refugee's medical condition is serious or life-threatening, and adequate treatment is not available in the country of asylum.
2. There exists a positive prognosis and refugees have good prospects of recovery after receiving medical treatment in Norway.
3. Norway has the necessary specialist treatment available.

Bjørkhaug and Brækkevold (2025) provide an example of such a successful medical case: that of "Nathan," a Congolese refugee in Uganda who suffered from atherosclerosis. Although his medical condition was serious and could, if untreated, lead to serious health complications, treatment was relatively easy. Upon arrival in Norway, Nathan underwent a successful surgery that "could greatly enhance his quality of life, potentially opening new opportunities, including the possibility of joining the workforce" (Bjørkhaug & Brækkevold, 2025, p. 107).

However, if Norway does not have the necessary competencies or refugees have medical conditions in advanced stages, with bad prognosis even after resettlement, their cases will be rejected (UNHCR, 2023).

During pre-screening, resettlement officers co-operate closely with the Oslo University Hospital. A medical adviser at the hospital evaluates available medical documentation and the refugee's prospects after treatment. The hospital also provides advice about the Norwegian health service's capacity to treat a given medical problem (UNHCR, 2023). Although the guidelines are relatively clear, and Norway follows the definitions as outlined in the UNHCR **Resettlement Handbook**, resettlement officers were at times confronted with cases that did not meet these criteria.

In general, our impression was that resettlement officers were able to alleviate their moral distress using a form of (rational) cost-benefit consideration: "Bringing a case to Norway where the person is very likely to die, since we cannot offer the necessary treat-

ment, is not expedient" (UDI resettlement officer, 2022). Instead of bringing a dying person to Norway who cannot be treated, not even in Norway, the officers' rationale was that it would be better to bring someone who might benefit from their resettlement for a long time (and maybe from whom Norway could also benefit in the future). However, it was more difficult to allay any moral qualms when the patient was a child. During our fieldwork, resettlement officers mentioned one such case:

We had to reject a medical case. It was a typical case—the hospital had told us that Norway could not offer any curative medical treatment. It was too late. Of course, the medical patient was a child. This was tough.

(UDI resettlement officer, November 2022)

The resettlement officers seemed unable to do anything to alleviate the suffering of the child. They could not walk the extra mile within the Norwegian resettlement system and thus enable the refugee to come to Norway, nor could they (even attempt to) hold UNHCR accountable, to enable the protection of the refugees within the camps. Unlike in cases of domestic violence, where they could pretend that there was a security net in the form of UNHCR measures or shelters, and there was a future hope for women and children who might be resettled without their abuser, there was absolutely no hope for the child in the medical case—not even remotely. The child could not be treated in Norway as chances for success were too low, and no adequate medical treatment was available for their condition in the country of first asylum. The resettlement officers knew that the child they left behind would die, maybe even painfully.

Several of our interlocutors stressed the importance of institutionalized coping strategies in such situations, such as collective decision-making. "Such tough decisions are

never taken by one of us alone," one resettlement officer explained during an interview in 2023. In fact, each case is evaluated by a minimum of two officers, and after each interview day during the missions, both UDI and IMDi have various forms of debriefing sessions, where each case is shortly touched upon, dilemmas discussed, and the pros and cons of rejection versus acceptance weighted. One could argue that collectively making difficult decisions serves to deflect responsibility (i.e., the responsibility is that of the collective and not the individual). However, in our fieldwork, we saw the emotional work that is done during such debrief or check-out meetings. Moral distress was acknowledged—nearly taken for granted—and resettlement officers collectively tried to exhaust available options or to find reasons why their final choice was a good one, beyond the fact that they followed the rules. Particularly difficult cases were not decided on the spot but "lifted" further up in the system.

Such rejections are nearly always collective decisions, and a team of resettlement officers shares the moral burden. Such collective decision-making also contributes to creating a collective understanding of the norms and values within the system.

Unlike the previous cases, the medical case represents a threshold beyond which vulnerability becomes a liability within the moral economy of resettlement. When prognosis is poor and curative treatment impossible, the refugee cannot benefit from Norway's advanced medical system, and thus the officers cannot justify the expense. Such a case thus exemplifies the dictum "to sacrifice the few to save the system." Collective decision-making disperses individual moral responsibility, but it also creates space to acknowledge and validate the moral distress everyone feels. Yet this case

exemplifies the ultimate sacrifice: There is literally nothing officers can do to alleviate the child's suffering, no "extra mile" to walk, no network to leverage. The only comfort, then, might be that by rejecting that one dying child, the resettlement officers might have contributed to maintaining the system and thus contributing to saving many others in the future.

TO CONCLUDE: THE MORAL ECONOMY OF RESETTLEMENT

This article has explored how Norwegian resettlement officers navigate profound moral dilemmas when selecting refugees who are deemed both deserving of protection and too vulnerable, too costly, or too risky to resettle. The analysis reveals that these dilemmas reflect fundamental contradictions embedded in the resettlement system itself. Who gets resettled to Norway is not determined solely by need or vulnerability but by the unpredictable intersection of humanitarian commitment, national legal/social norms, and municipal capacity.

Empirically, this article has analyzed moral distress, discretionary power, and coping strategies among Norwegian resettlement officers. Across three cases, resettlement officers used discretionary flexibility for managing moral dilemmas. They walked the extra mile and mobilized networks, externalized the problem to UNHCR, and relied on collective decision-making to distribute the burden of rejection.

Theoretically, this article offers a moral economy perspective on refugee resettlement within universalist welfare states. It demonstrates that vulnerability is a relational category shaped by cost calculations, national norms, and institutional capacity. It also demonstrates how street-level discretion is fundamentally shaped by macro-level structures, such as universalist welfare com-

mitments, municipal autonomy, and international burden-sharing norms. This bridges street-level bureaucracy literature with anthropological and moral economy perspectives on resettlement.

The Norwegian cases also add to the resettlement literature by showing how vulnerability becomes a liability in relation not only to future employment or security risk but also to municipal budgets and service capacity. While specific features of the Norwegian case, such as the universalist welfare model, municipal autonomy, and the tradition of resettling refugees with disabilities, are distinctive, the underlying dilemma of how to reach the most vulnerable is shared by many resettling countries.

The title of this article, "Sacrificing the Few to Save the Many," intentionally echoes ethical dilemmas in philosophy and fiction. But what does this sacrifice mean in practice? The cases presented here suggest that coping strategies employed by resettlement officers have a paradoxical function. On one hand, they enable officers to maintain their sense of moral agency and to alleviate (at least partially) their own moral distress. On the other hand, they may serve to normalize and perpetuate systemic exclusions. By finding a municipal solution for a disabled child or by promising future resettlement to a woman fleeing domestic violence, officers may feel they have "done something." The underlying structural problems of insufficient capacity and contradictory norms, however, remain unchanged.

Whether this represents ethical compromise or pragmatic realism is not for this article to judge. But the analysis makes visible what is typically hidden: the moral labour and emotional toll involved in maintaining a system premised on scarcity and strategic selection. At the heart of resettlement work lies a continuous attention to human suffering.

This attention is not merely a background concern; it shapes decisions, generates moral distress, and underpins the collaborative structures of resettlement practice. At its core, resettlement work is shaped by the tension between care and control—a space where human suffering is neither ignored nor easily resolved but continuously present.

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