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Click to Donate: visual images, constructing victims and imagining the female refugee

HEATHER L JOHNSON

ABSTRACT This article investigates the role of visual representation through images in the international refugee regime, with a particular focus on the female refugee. I argue that visual representation illustrated by the photo archives of the UNHCR in particular, but also in other institutional sources, plays a crucial role in shaping our imaginations and knowledges, and that its dynamics are important in understanding the politics of asylum. As the international refugee regime institutionalised by the UNHCR has developed, the imagination of the refugee has undergone three concurrent shifts: racialisation, victimisation and feminisation. Each of these shifts has contributed to changing policies and practices in the regime, particularly the change in ‘preferred solution’ from integration to repatriation or, where possible, prevention. More importantly, these shifts have all operated within a discourse of depoliticisation of the refugee, denying the figure of the refugee the capacity for political agency. This depoliticisation works through the construction of the ‘female’ refugee, indicating important lessons for our understandings of the political agency of both women and non-citizens.

A defiant Soviet general. A graceful Russian dancer. A proud Polish family. As the 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees was being written, these were the images that dominated the (Western) public imagination of ‘refugees’: individuals with complete histories, fleeing political persecution and a repressive Soviet regime to live in ‘freedom’ and ‘democracy’.

Starving, barefoot children on the backs of exhausted mothers. Huddled bodies crammed into a boat in dangerous waters. Women mourning the loss of husbands, sons and fathers. Today, these are images that constitute imagined refugees: masses of humanity, nameless women and children fleeing violent conflict and living in destitution, the victims of tragedy searching for a place where they can rebuild shattered lives.

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Over the past 60 years, the image of the refugee has been reframed: from the heroic, political individual to a nameless flood of poverty-stricken women and children. This has occurred in the context of three overlapping patterns of transformation: the racialisation of the refugee, with a shift of the global refugee regime from a eurocentric focus to one on the global South and an associated shift in the preferred solution from integration and resettlement to repatriation and ‘preventative protection’;¹ the victimisation of the refugee, with a shift from an imagination of the refugee as a powerful, political figure to an undifferentiated victim, voiceless and without political agency; and the feminisation of the refugee, with a shift in the imagined figure from a man to a woman. These shifts become apparent in a genealogical study of the refugee regime institutionalised by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). An accounting of the history of refugee law, policy and practice reveals these dynamics and, arguably, so does a more empirical study of refugee ‘situations’ throughout the world. They are also apparent, however, in an analysis of the visual representation of the refugee. Tracing the history of the contemporary refugee regime through an analysis of the pictures and images of refugees that shape the public imagination reveals important lessons about how we understand migration, the politics of the ‘other’ and the security of society in relation to these dynamics. It is also revelatory of certain politics of humanitarianism, and how they are mobilised. An analysis of refugee images reveals important understandings that underpin our conceptualisations of political agency and who can or should enact it, and of women. It is significant that, as the refugee has been racialised and victimised, she has also been feminised.

The following analysis tracks each of these developments, and investigates their overlap. I argue that this change in representation has been strategic, operating to mobilise public support and concern for the plight of refugees within a humanitarian discourse and at the same time to manage the threat of instability and difference presented by the refugees’ condition of statelessness. Each requires the depoliticisation of the refugee, a construction within which the feminisation of the refugee does considerable work. Although there is a good deal of comment on political agency and its denial within the refugee regime,² and on the need for a gendered analysis for more effective policy,³ there has been little written on the gendered nature of refugee representation and how it intersects with constructions of political (non)agency. It is towards an understanding of this intersection that I move, asking how we have departed from the refugee as a heroic figure stepping off a plane to

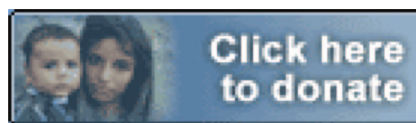


FIGURE 1. Afghan refugees in Pakistan, as featured on the UNHCR donate button.
Source: UNHCR/L Boscardi.

arrive at the image of a woman and child beneath the caption ‘Click to donate’ on the UNHCR homepage (see Figure 1).⁴

Images, imagination and the common senses of politics

Bleiker argues that meanings are made public through representations.⁵ It is through the dynamics of representation—of rendering certain constructions visible and legible in the public sphere—that the categories that shape our social world are made meaningful. Categorisations of people and events, social relationships and institutions form the content of the social and political structures that shape our lives. They form the foundational understandings that are the basis upon which we engage with the world—even if that engagement is to contest these categories. They have meaning, and it is through the collective process of meaning making that knowledges and understandings are developed. This process must have a foundation, however, and it is in the public representation of categories that this begins.

To construct a representation is an act of power; representations are fundamentally political. They tell us how to interpret our world, and shape our imaginations. They also form the context for policy making and implementation. In this way the representation of the refugee is a key component of how we write refugee policy, and how that policy is interpreted, supported and contested. This understanding of representation calls attention to the ways in which the social world of symbols and signs constructs particular knowledges that enable or disable processes of dominance and resistance. How we imagine particular categories of people determines how we engage with them, who we accept as legitimate political actors, and who is able to participate in our world.

Representation, in its influence on our imagination and common senses, is not only expressed within rationalist discourses that are spoken or written in clearly laid out, well argued and sustained terms. It is also found in visual representation through images. An image operates at the level of the aesthetic, which is at least partly on the level of perception and emotion rather than thought; images go beyond language and so can be profound in their shaping and support of the dominant narrative. They provoke an immediate and complex reaction that engages with and builds upon all our assumptions and understandings of the world, reinforcing (or challenging) them. In accessing emotional responses, they can shape our fears and feelings of security or motivate empathy and compassion, upon which our actions are often based. The clearest manifestation of this is in film and photography.

The images in film and photography convey messages about our world, made more powerful by their representation of what is considered ‘real’.⁶ Within the humanitarian arena pictures convey messages of conflict, of poverty and of suffering; they are the images of the starving, fly-ridden child accompanied by a request for ‘a dollar a day to save this child’s life’ that, for many who live in the industrialised world, constitute how they imagine and understand Africa. Within the refugee regime these images are of a woman and child fleeing war and persecution, placed next to an appeal

for financial support but not, it must be recognised, next to an appeal to the public to pressure their governments to increase the number of refugees they accept for resettlement.

An examination of the visual representations of refugees in publications of the UNHCR, combined with their accompanying text, is instructive in the dynamics of representation within the international refugee regime the UNHCR manages. Of these, *Images of Exile* is particularly interesting. Published in 1991 to commemorate the 40th anniversary of the UNHCR, this is a book of photographs compiled as ‘a visual record of victims of injustice and persecution and a tribute to their remarkable dignity and fortitude’.⁷ The images are arranged chronologically, producing a fascinating historical account of the changing figure of the refugee. Although the UNHCR can, and should, be considered a leader in the global public representation of the refugee, it is not the only presenter of representations in the public sphere. However, the image of the refugee in other media—NGO accounts, support and fundraising organisations, and news outlets—are demonstrative of the same pattern of imaginative shifts in understanding and representation.

Institutionalising refugees: from Europe to the global South

The UNHCR is the institutional embodiment of the international refugee regime. It was founded in 1950 as the international system of (Western) states’ response to the forced international migration and displacement of millions of people by the upheavals of the Second World War and the beginning of the Cold War. The UNHCR’s mandate is to provide a structure and framework for international refugee protection, and to seek permanent solutions to the refugee problem. For the industrialised world the UNHCR monitors the compliance of states with the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (hereafter referred to as the Convention). It is also the body vested with the responsibility for the distribution and management of humanitarian funding relating to forced migration. As an organisation that relies upon voluntary donations for the vast majority of its budget, this includes an intense focus on fundraising.

In the global South, or the ‘developing’ world or ‘Third World’, the UNHCR leads emergency responses to forced migration crises. As solutions are difficult, conflicts ongoing, and as refugee situations become protracted, the UNHCR has a role in the global South that is far more active in policy design and implementation. Its primary role has become the co-ordination and administration of refugee camps. Camps are ‘holding areas’ for refugees as they await the successful implementation of one of the three ‘durable solutions’: resettlement in a safe third country; local integration; and voluntary repatriation. Resettlement in the industrialised world has become increasingly rare in recent years as perceived connections between security and migration have closed borders and decreased openness to all kinds of cross-border migration.⁸ Similarly, local integration has also become less tenable as already overstretched national economies in regions of origin are

perceived as lacking the capacity to absorb refugee populations. Voluntary repatriation has emerged as not only the preferred, but in many ways the only, 'durable solution'. Complementing this has been a focus on the establishment of 'safe zones' within the country of origin as part of strategies that strive to stop refugees from crossing borders in the first instance. For those who do cross, and as conflict continues, however, repatriation is often not possible. The majority of refugees wait in camps that were designed to be temporary solutions but that, much like the UNHCR itself, have become permanent fixtures of the landscape.

The founding assumptions of the UNHCR are eurocentric in nature; indeed, the initial populations and territories of concern for the regime were European. The concern about refugees, and recognition of asylum migration as a unique issue that had to be addressed, arose in response to events on European territory. The International Office for Refugees (IOR) was the first institutional predecessor of the UNHCR. In 1921 Fridtjof Nansen was named as the League's High Commissioner for Refugee Work, and under his leadership the IOR worked with the International Labour Organisation (ILO) to facilitate refugee migration. Using what were dubbed 'Nansen passports', a regime was designed to enable individuals to cross state boundaries in search of political asylum.⁹ The refugees of concern for Nansen were of European origin. Those granted Nansen passports were fleeing the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution or were Armenians and Greeks entering Europe to escape Turkish atrocities. Ultimately the League of Nations proved to be a failure in facilitating international co-operation, but in 1938 the flight of Jews and other persecuted groups from Hitler's Germany, Mussolini's Italy and Franco's Spain motivated the creation of a permanent international committee to address refugee movement outside the offices of the League.¹⁰ Again the population of concern was European. It is important to recognise also that the refugees were fleeing from dictatorial and oppressive regimes identified as hostile to Western Europe.

After the Second World War the United Nations became a primary mechanism for addressing international issues and inherited the legacies of the pre-war years. Regarding migration particularly, these were clear: that the persons of concern were of European origin; and that such persons were fleeing states hostile to the West. As the Cold War took shape, this second legacy took on ever greater significance. Eight million people had been displaced by the war, and the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) was established to directly address their resettlement. After the UNRRA, the International Refugee Organization was created and, finally in 1950, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees was established.¹¹ Initially only given a mandate for three years, the UNHCR, like its predecessors, was seen as a solution to a temporary problem.¹² Statelessness was understood as an undesirable aberration from the norm, and the initial definition of the refugee reflected the limited role of the UNHCR. The Convention defined a refugee as an individual who:

As a result of events occurring before 1 January 1951 and owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.¹³

The definition also included a statement that these events could be limited to those occurring in Europe, indicating that states who wished to be party to the Convention with a broader scope should indicate this at the time of signing.¹⁴

The Convention definition reflected important limits on who 'qualified' as a refugee. First, geographical limits narrowed the official focus to Europe. The temporal limits had a similar effect, emphasising those displaced by the Second World War and its aftershocks in Eastern Europe. Finally, the individualist emphasis in the definition clearly focused attention on particularised events and persecution, and discounted generalised violence and mass displacement as a legitimate concern for the UNHCR. All these limitations were put in place not only to limit and narrow the scope of the UNHCR, but also to emphasise its temporary nature.

The current refugee regime, institutionalised through the Convention and the UNHCR, thus emerged at the beginning of the Cold War. It was shaped by the imperatives of ideological conflict as Western governments worked to give priority to individuals fleeing the USSR. In this flight the refugee was (ostensibly) motivated by pro-Western political values.¹⁵ The figure of the refugee here is inescapably political and has a particular ideological value: the refugee was said to be 'voting with *his* feet' by fleeing to the West. It was this context that shaped the image of who a refugee was and created in Western states a willingness to resettle asylum seekers and to accept them into society. The refugee was imagined as a white, male individual who may or may not have been accompanied by his nuclear family; the refugee had a past, a story and a voice, all of which were used to validate the West in its ideological war. This ideological imperative, combined with the European focus, defined the preferred solution at the beginning of the regime: local integration in the host state, supplemented by resettlement in a third (Western) country. Displaced persons were relocated to settler societies such as New Zealand or naturalised into European communities, and were not seen as threatening.

This imagined figure was reflected in the images of refugees that were produced at the time. Reflected in both *Images of Exile* and in the online photo galleries of the UNHCR, images from the organisation's early history reflect a European focus. They depict families and (male) individuals who are easily identifiable as being from the industrialised world, indicated by visible markers that reflect the self-perception of a Western identity. These



FIGURE 2. Refugees in Europe after the Second World War. *Source:* UNHCR, 1953.

include visual markers of race as well as material clues such as Western styles of dress, which also indicate class and cultural origin (see Figures 2 and 3). There is little evidence of a discourse at the time that constructed a depoliticised victim.

As the 1960s began, events in other areas of the world began to challenge the geographic limitations of the Convention. Decolonisation in Africa and Asia and events such as the Chinese Communist Revolution and the



FIGURE 3. Germany/European refugees. *Source:* UNCHR, 1953.

Algerian civil war generated major movements of people seeking protection.¹⁶ These migrations, combined with those spurred by conflicts in Latin America and the experience of the ‘boat people’ of Indochina, challenged conventional thinking on refugee status.¹⁷ In 1967 a protocol was negotiated that amended the 1951 Convention, removing the specific references to dates and places.

Cold war politics ascribed to the conflicts in the developing world a strategic importance as the superpowers strove to maintain their respective spheres of influence. The Cold War was not only a militarised conflict, but a competition between two distinct visions of the world. The refugee was useful in this discursive contest, not only to bolster the humanitarian image of the industrialised states who aided and supported refugees, but also in arguments that it was the misguided policies and politics of the ‘other side’ that were causing such displacement. These politics brought public attention to the refugees of Africa and Asia as suddenly the ‘Third World’ refugee acquired an ideological value.¹⁸ This marked a watershed in the construction of the refugee and asylum seeker. The popular image of the refugee was no longer only a white European individual giving voice to an affirmative and heroic political agency, but also a displaced person from the global South, poverty-stricken and fleeing violence and war.¹⁹

Myths of difference

BS Chimni argues that a ‘myth of difference’ emerged when refugees from the global South captured the attention of Northern policy makers, and both the nature and character of refugee flows from the South were represented as radically different from those in Europe.²⁰ He writes that ‘an image of a “normal” refugee [had been] constructed—white, male, anti-communist—which clashed sharply with individuals fleeing the Third World’.²¹ This ‘myth of difference’ is clearly demarcated within the text of the 50th anniversary edition of the UNHCR publication *The State of the World’s Refugees* as it chronicles the emergence of the ‘Third World’ refugee:

These refugees were different in many ways from those envisaged in the 1951 UN Refugee Convention. In most cases they were people who had fled their homes not because of a fear of persecution but because of war and violence related to the process of decolonization . . . Most of them did not seek to integrate in the country of asylum, but wanted to repatriate when their own countries became independent or when the environment became more secure. Rather than dealing with individual refugees on a case by case basis, UNHCR now found itself dealing with mass flows of refugees.²²

Moving forward from the emergence of the ‘Third World refugee’, refugee migration has become firmly entrenched in the global South and the popular image of the ‘normal’ refugee is now that of a poor African woman or child.

Migrants from the South are understood in terms of mass movements, economic opportunism and threats to security, all of which have generated increasing concern in the global North for the sanctity of borders. Refugee movements from (and in) the global South throughout the 1970s and 1980s evoked images of massive, often uncontrolled population movements. It is in the commentary on refugees in Africa and Asia that references begin to refer to ‘floods’, ‘flows’ and ‘hordes’ of refugees. Rather than individuals, refugees began to represent masses of people moving across borders—not fleeing persecution, as outlined in the Convention, but fleeing violence and war, intimidating in their numbers.

Influenced by an overarching structure of xenophobia, the causes of these displacements were understood as removed from a ‘developed’, Northern context and thus as producing a difference in the refugees themselves. This understanding that Southern refugees were somehow different has fundamentally affected which durable solution is preferred. Local integration and resettlement are no longer thought to be appropriate (as is stated in *The State of the World’s Refugees*, refugees are not even supposed to desire such an outcome!) and voluntary repatriation has become the preferred solution.

The change in preferred solution is presented by the UNHCR as reflective of the desires of the refugee population itself. However, an examination of the changing policies of Northern states reveals a decided trend towards tighter border controls that would seem to have a more direct impact on the shape of the regime and its preferred solution. As advances in transportation and communications technologies made the West more readily accessible to those

in flight, a moral panic concerning the stability of the domestic polis emerged in popular discourse and in the media. Refugee movements were seen as able to ‘threaten intercommunal harmony and undermine major societal values by altering the ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic composition of the host populations’.²³ A popular notion that the North did not have the capacity to absorb the mass movements from the global South developed, and increasingly restrictive legislation was put into place in many states.

Images of mass movements from the global South are immediately evident in a genealogical assessment of pictures of refugees. Although in earlier eras the pictures are situated in Europe, the 1960s is dominated by images of masses from Africa and Asia. In the 1960s chapter of *Images of Exile* all pictures from Africa depict large groups of people who are clearly living in poverty (see Figure 4). One image stands as an exception to this rule. In this, a single woman covers her face next to the caption: ‘But it is always hard to be a refugee’ (see Figure 5).²⁴ The figure is female, pictured without a distinct identity as we cannot see her face, and so immediate associations with victimisation and hardship are made. The last image of the chapter returns to Europe, and refugees are again families. A single Czechoslovakian family approaches a border crossing into Austria, led by the father figure dressed in a suit.²⁵ The contrast with the images of poor, undifferentiated African refugees is stark.



FIGURE 4. African refugees in the 1960s. *Source:* UNHCR/S Wright, 1961.



FIGURE 5. A woman covering her face exemplifies the shift to depersonalisation, victimisation and feminisation of the refugee. *Source:* UNHCR/J Mohr, 1968.

Images from the 1970s that chronicle the ‘flight from Indochina’ and the ‘boat people’ are even clearer in their depiction of masses of people. Photographs of beaches overwhelmed by Vietnamese make distinguishing individuals difficult, and the immediate impression is one of sheer numbers.²⁶ Those pictures that allow individuals to be easily identified are images of abjection, of overcrowded boats full of desperate, ill and despondent refugees.²⁷ Again, there is a decided absence of unique identities for individuals, and the immediate associations are those of vulnerability and victimisation.

Images of individuals, families and productivity in Africa and Asia are not completely absent from those selected for the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. However, over the course of three decades only two of 16 European images in *Images of Exile* convey a message of sheer numbers, and of these only one is an image of undifferentiated masses. Over the same period 11 of 26 images

from Asia and eight of 18 images from Africa are clear in their depiction of mass movements of people. Furthermore, of those images that show individuals, only five from Europe depict women and/or children. Eight from Asia depict women and children, and 12 of the 18 images from Africa are of this nature.²⁸

There is a marked contrast between the nature of reporting about refugees from Africa and that about refugees from the Soviet bloc. There are no names or individual histories given in the African cases. In *Refugees: A World Report*, produced in 1979, the accounts given of Africa are overwhelmingly about the numbers represented by refugee migrations. The chapter begins with a comment on numbers:

It was estimated that there were more than 1 500 000 refugees in 12 African countries by the end of 1978, and an even greater number of displaced Africans were said to have fled their homes although they were still in their own countries.²⁹

The reports that follow are not about individuals, but instead focus on group activities. There is a good deal of coverage of the guerrilla activities of refugees and violent actions taken by them. In some cases refugee forces are portrayed as dangerous insurgents, as in the account of students near the Botswana border who were abducted into a 'refugee army in exile' from Zimbabwe.³⁰

Coverage of the Soviet Union, however, is overwhelmingly dominated by personal stories. The chapter begins with the statement that:

The refugees from the Soviet Union include famous dancers, musicians, artists, writers and ordinary people who have frequently braved persecution, prison terms and even death in their efforts to escape from the USSR.³¹

The following pages are full of individual stories of exile and defection, highlighting 'celebrity' personalities such as Svetlana Alliluyeva, Stalin's daughter, who defected in 1970 and Arkady Shevchenko, the highest ranking Soviet official in the UN who defected in 1979.³² In all, the only account of a group focuses on the migration of Jews from the Soviet bloc, and even here accounts of individuals, including human rights advocates and military officers, are provided.³³ The political nature of the Soviet refugees is implicit rather than highlighted in the reports, but it is also validated and valued. In contrast to dangerous African refugees who exist in overwhelming numbers, Soviet refugees are depicted as individuals with personal histories, stories and reasons for exile that both serve strategically in the ideological war between East and West and also continue to validate the European refugee as more legitimate, or at least more acceptable, than the refugee from the 'Third World'.

By the end of the 1970s the image of the refugee had begun to shift from the political individual fleeing the Soviet bloc to masses from the global South. In the case of Africa specifically the image was becoming one of masses of women and children. As early as 1983 official reports such as the *World Refugee Survey* produced by the United States Committee for

Refugees noted the reticence on the part of governments to open their borders to refugees, arguing that 'there are today too many asylum seekers/refugees, and that international institutions and current international legal instruments were not meant to deal with such large numbers'.³⁴

During the 1980s restrictive refugee policy was tempered somewhat by continued Cold War politics and strategic manoeuvring.³⁵ However, with the 1990s came the end of the Cold War, and the geopolitical strategic value of the refugee ended with it. In my estimation this marks the definitive break in the construction of the refugee in the Western public imagination. The image of masses of people became emblematic of the refugee condition, and the sentiment that the global North did not have the capacity to absorb the mass movements from the global South became dominant.

The victimisation of 'genuine refugees': removing political agency

The migration of people from the South to the North is regarded with a suspicion and unease rooted at least partially in economic concerns. The emergence of refugees as a mass phenomenon coincided in the 1970s and 1980s with a global economic crisis. As welfare states in the West underwent extended periods of retrenchment, reticence in accepting asylum claims grew rooted in suspicion of refugees from the developing world. The accusation that Southern refugees were different was about not only who they were, but also about their motivations for movement. 'Genuine' refugees are defined as fleeing from persecution. Refugees from the global South, however, were not seen as (only) fleeing persecution, but rather as making an informed and beneficial migration choice. A crisis of authenticity emerged for asylum seekers as their claims were presented as spurious and inauthentic. The suspicious figure of the economic migrant became a foil for the legitimate refugee.

During the 1990s, and particularly since the terrorist attacks of 9/11, the economic foundations of the refugee crisis of authenticity have been complemented by increased concern over security. The image of the foreign Islamic terrorist has become dominant in Western public anxiety, and this figure overlaps in perceived origin and ethnicity with many refugees. Border control legislation is increasingly restrictive and claims for asylum are even more closely scrutinised as refugees are suspected of both trying to improve their circumstances and of attempting to damage those of the citizens of the host state. Chimni argues that 'a central feature of the post-Cold War era is that refugees are no longer welcome in the North'.³⁶ The onus has fallen to the refugee to prove her authenticity.

As the complexity of the perceived threat posed by refugees has increased, and as restrictive asylum policies have arisen in response, the imagined figure of the refugee has also become that of a victim. This move has two crucial implications. The first is the control that a victimisation discourse exerts over the potential agency of the refugee, while also decreasing the perceived threat she poses. The second is the achievement of sustained support for a politics of humanitarianism which firmly locates the refugee 'problem' in the developing world.

Victimisation removes political agency from the figure of the refugee by establishing a condition of political voicelessness. Political agency represents the capacity to act, and to be heard; it is the ability to have an impact both upon one's own life and upon the lives of others. Such capacity is traditionally located within the auspices of citizenship. As Peter Nyers and others argue, citizenship of a state is understood to be the political identity that embodies all modern claims to liberty, equality, rights, autonomy, self-determination, individualism and human agency.³⁷ Refugees are non-citizens. Should they be permitted to access any kind of political agency, therefore, the correspondence of citizenship and political agency would be disrupted, which in turn disturbs the founding premise and structure of the nation-state and popular sovereignty upon which the international system rests. For Soguk the object of humanitarian intervention is not 'human beings as *victims* of a state gone *aberrant*. Rather, the object of intervention ... is *citizens* gone *aberrant* to become *refugees*'.³⁸ The citizen is the norm, and any deviation from this is understood as dangerous, problematic and in need of correction.

This discourse is dominant in UNHCR policies and programmes. 'Preventative protection' aims to prevent any departure from citizenship, resulting in burgeoning Internally Displaced Person (IDP) populations. Meanwhile, voluntary repatriation as the only durable solution not only represents a return to the normality of citizenship, but also a return to the normality of one's *original* citizenship, recreating and sustaining a system wherein each nation-state is responsible for its 'own' citizens—and only its own citizens. Refugees disrupt this responsibility. By constructing the refugee as a voiceless victim, the agency of the citizen is preserved within the same discourse that diminishes the perceived political threat (and, subsequently, the economic threat) of the refugee.

The victimisation of the refugee occurs through representational discourse present in both how refugees are spoken of and how they are visually depicted. As the refugee problem became rooted in the developing world during the 1980s, the representation of refugees as victims also took hold. In the 1983 *World Refugee Survey*, US Committee for Refugees (USCR) President Roger P Winter begins the 'Year in review' with commentary on the worsening conditions of international standards for the treatment of refugees.³⁹ Here, there is concern for the plight of refugees, and an appeal for a more active relief effort. Yet the focus remains on the legal and institutional structure that is in place internationally. The debate is not constructed around the identity of the refugee. By 1988 there is a clear shift in the discourse. The 'Year in review' begins with the words: 'Refugees need a permanent home. But, as victims of persecution and war, they have minimal control over their destinies ... refugees are the flotsam of power struggles.'⁴⁰ The section concludes with another statement clearly defining the identity of the refugee: '*Refugees and displaced people are victims*. A few are controversial. But the bulk are regular people caught up in persecution and violence.'⁴¹ The notion of 'regular people' here is important. It is passive, conjuring a notion of quiescent individuals making their own way, and not causing trouble or calling

attention to themselves. It is implicit that they are non-political. In the space of five years the discourse had shifted to focus on the figure of the refugee as an innocent victim of circumstances beyond her control.

It is my contention that the end of the Cold War marked the complete entry into the new paradigm of the refugee, moving away from the politicised, European figure. The refugee is now imagined as a depoliticised victim, emblemised by a 'Third World' woman and child. As a victim of political persecution, the condition imagined for the European refugee, a refugee is fundamentally political; as a victim of violence, however, the refugee is objectified and loses this political agency. Refugee agency is further diminished in the emphasis on numbers. Individual victims have the capacity to act, but masses are portrayed as elemental. Agency is constructed in the Western imagination as an individual capacity; the 'masses' of refugees constructed as characteristic of those from the global South cannot express or access agency within this discourse. The difference between European refugees and 'Third World' refugees was (and is) constructed precisely on this basis.

By 1993 this victimisation (and depoliticisation) of the refugee was explicit in UNHCR literature, which described the refugee's life as:

desperately simple, and empty. No home, no work, no decisions to take today. And none to take tomorrow. Or the next day. Refugees are the victims of persecution and violence. Most hope that, one day, they may be able to rebuild their lives in a sympathetic environment. To exist again in more than name.⁴²

As Soguk notes, in a climate that favours repatriation as the preferred solution, this goal is accomplished by returning 'home'.⁴³ Only by reclaiming citizenship can the refugee regain a voice and reclaim agency.

The connection of political agency to citizenship in a nation-state means that those without this status are rendered speechless and in need of someone else's agency to speak for them—a role taken on by the UNHCR and other humanitarian organisations within the politics of asylum. As Jenny Edkins argues, refugees are understood as life that can be saved but that cannot have a political voice.⁴⁴ The refugee is abstracted away from a political and historical context and operationalised instead as the depoliticised, de-historicised and universal figure of the mute victim.⁴⁵ Prem Kumar Rajaram argues that humanitarian agencies represent refugees in terms of helplessness and loss.⁴⁶ By stripping the refugee of the specificity of culture, place and history the refugee becomes human in the most elementary sense, dislocated from a territorial state. The resulting abstraction establishes the refugee as voiceless and without political identity or the corresponding possibilities of agency.⁴⁷

Imagining the female refugee

Present day asylum policies and humanitarian activities within the refugee regime rely upon discourses of victimisation that depoliticise the refugee. To be effective, however, this discourse must be embodied in an imagined figure

of the ‘the refugee’, for which certain representational constructions are necessary. While the European victims of persecution who initially embodied the figure of the refugee were political and angry, the current victims are instead vulnerable and destitute. The cause of flight is important; in Europe persecution was defined as political, but in the global South refugees are seen as fleeing instead from violence and war engendered by ethnicity, religion and race rather than ideology.⁴⁸ Class politics also has a role to play; present day refugees are not constructed as anything but desperately poor, a condition assumed to deter (or make difficult) political action as survival becomes the overwhelming goal of daily life. It also creates suspicion about the potential economic motivations for migration, which has seriously damaged the credibility of refugee claims, and thus the openness of the system. Reaction to ‘economic migration’ significantly undergirds the emphasis on prevention and repatriation. In this way poverty creates both vulnerability and sinister intent in the figure of the refugee. But it is gender that plays the crucial role in creating the vulnerable refugee. Katharina Samara argues that the UNHCR has capitalised on the images of refugee women and children.⁴⁹ As an examination of UNHCR images attests, the use of women and children to depict mass mobilisations began with the recognition of the refugee crisis of the global South. By the 1980s the image of a ‘Third World’ mother and child became emblematic of ‘the refugee’ (see Figure 6).



FIGURE 6. Following the September 11 attacks in the US, some 200 000 Afghans unofficially slipped into Pakistan. *Source:* UNHCR/A Banta, 2001.

The emphasis on women and children in collections of refugee images is consistent with empirical numbers. In 2009 49 per cent of the population under the UNHCR mandate were women aged 18 years and above, while a further 44 per cent were children under the age of 18.⁵⁰ This trend has been consistent for data collected dating to 1960 (although the first data set classified by sex was not released until 1998).⁵¹ It is now widely acknowledged that in conditions of exile women are not only exposed to further risk, including that of sexual violence, but also to discrimination in food distribution, and in access to health, welfare and education services.⁵² In light of both the statistics and the specialised concerns of women, the inclusion of women's issues and gender policies could be expected within refugee policy. However, it was not until 1990 that the UNHCR first considered a gender-specific policy.⁵³ Critics argue that gender equality policies remain narrowly articulated and limited by the goal of simply 'adding women' to existing policies and operations.⁵⁴

One of the key barriers to the effective inclusion of women within the refugee regime is, for many, the definition itself. Nyers argues that the liberal values of the Refugee Convention contribute to a gender-blindness that creates serious obstacles and difficulties for female asylum applicants.⁵⁵ Soguk also argues that the universalising nature of the Convention definition understands refugees as refugees and not as men and women.⁵⁶ In asserting an abstract subject, the regime understands the refugee experience as fundamentally the same across all places and contexts, thus the refugee's expectations, hopes, dreams and plans are similarly flattened into a monologue that (in the contemporary regime) expresses little but a desire to return 'home'. Recent scholarship, particularly that embedded in the field, has been at pains to demonstrate the diversity of refugee worlds and the need to contextualise policy and practices according to particularities, but the foundations of the regime remain universalising. The best evidence of this is the continued insistence upon one single, 'preferred' solution in repatriation.

The implications of this for gender policy and politics is that, even as 'women' (and not, I must emphasise, broader gender conceptions including sexual identity) are included within the refugee regime, they are included as a broad and undifferentiated category. Erin Baines traces the development of gender policy within the operations of the UNHCR, arguing that women became visible in the crisis initially through sheer numbers.⁵⁷ During the 'Decade for Women' from 1975 to 1985 participants at conferences and forums worked to develop a series of recommendations to integrate gender into national and international asylum and refugee law.⁵⁸ In the report produced for the final World Conference on Women in Nairobi in 1985 gender roles were largely identified in terms of reproductive and domestic tasks, and the protection and assistance needs of women were similarly defined by the woman's position in the family. UNHCR gender policy was subsequently designed to enhance women's capacity to carry out these roles, rather than to emphasise deeper gender equality.⁵⁹ Gender remained marginalised in UNHCR discourse, constrained by assumptions of reproductive and familial roles.⁶⁰

The lack of 'gender policy' in the regime, however, has not meant that women have been invisible in the public imagination of the refugee.

They have, instead, been front and centre in the representations and the images of the international refugee regime, and have done much of the 'work' that the discourses of victimisation and depoliticisation demand. Soguk writes:

Typically, refugee women's displacement is presented in alarmist terms, intimating a general paralysis, a loss of their agency. This treatment in turn normalizes a general disenfranchisement of refugee women, so much so that women are denied the simplest opportunities to participate in the shaping of their refugee lives. They are even denied opportunities to secure their minimum needs, ranging from food to clothing to basic means of sanitary protection.⁶¹

It is this vulnerability that defines the female refugee. Socioeconomic conditions of more serious poverty for women than men, coupled with far greater familial and care obligations, make migration a far more difficult prospect for women than for men. They are non-threatening in this aspect, unlikely to migrate only because of 'economic pull factors'. They also move far shorter distances, crossing only what borders are necessary for relative safety and rarely reaching the borders of the global North. Migrant populations who 'spontaneously' arrive at European borders, for example, are overwhelmingly male. Refugee camp populations, by contrast, are overwhelmingly female and/or children.

Baines argues that traditional gender assumptions about women's inherent vulnerabilities and innocence have been mobilised to inform refugee policy.⁶² By representing 'refugee women' as particularly vulnerable and in need, she argues, the female refugee has been depoliticised. Refugee women are generalised into a category that is both dependent and in need of protection. Further, the frequently used phrase 'refugee women and children' collapses the two groups into one undifferentiated whole. The cliché *womenandchildren* (to use Cynthia Enloe's phrase) serves to identify men as the norm, to reiterate the notion that women are family members, and, importantly in the humanitarian discourse, to allow the paternalistic role of saviour to be played out in that 'states exist . . . to protect women and children'.⁶³ Helene Moussa also argues that depicting women refugees exclusively as victims gives rise to their portrayal as passive subjects, dependent upon their male counterparts for survival and salvation.⁶⁴

The construction of the vulnerable refugee woman, therefore, is used as a tool for the mobilisation of support behind humanitarian intervention and refugee work. Rajaram notes that, when photojournalism and film focus on individual refugees, women and children continue to be prevalent.⁶⁵ This emphasis becomes clear in an examination of the pictures chosen for prominence in publications: the cover of the December 2005 *Refugees* magazine is a collage dominated by images of women and children (see Figure 7). Rajaram argues that these groups embody in the Western imagination a special kind of powerlessness; perhaps they do not tend to look like 'dangerous aliens', in Malkki's terms.⁶⁶ The humanitarian work that practices of repatriation, containment and 'preventative protection' requires is costly, and the UNHCR relies heavily upon voluntary contributions to fund



FIGURE 7. Cover of *Refugees* magazine #141 for December 2005.

Source: <http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/publ>.

its work. For Barbara Harrell-Bond, in order ‘to attract money, refugees must be visible’.⁶⁷ The image that is visible is that of the vulnerable, depoliticised and non-threatening victim. The image is of a ‘Third World’ refugee woman and child (see Figure 8).

The implications of the narrative of the female victim within the international refugee regime and the emerging emphasis on humanitarian intervention and prevention rather than asylum constructs broader images of political society that are worrying. Beneath the female, depoliticised and victimised figure of the refugee is a fundamental comment on the political agency of women in general. Her location in the global South and economic circumstances of poverty contain further assumptions within the narratives of ethnicity, race and class.

The right to asylum is becoming more tenuous in the global North. In an era of globalisation, where borders and boundaries are said to be coming down, the North is building solid walls against migration, mobilising particular representations of the refugee to justify aid ‘over there’ rather than asylum here. Frelick argues:

Refugees are now being told ... that they can only be ‘protected’ if they stay where they are. If they are patient (and lucky), outside bureaucracies might come to their assistance. If they attempt to take control of their destiny by escaping on their own, they will be punished—they will be sent back to the very situations that threaten their lives.⁶⁸



FIGURE 8. A Rohingya woman from Burma. *Source:* UNHCR/HJ Davies, 1992.

The society that is modelled beneath the surface of refugee politics today is one characterised by a fear of the unknown and by a jealous guarding of privilege against those often seeking only survival and a ‘secure’ life. As this occurs in the name of humanitarianism, however, we are always able to ‘Click to Donate’.

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Notes

- 1 ‘Preventative protection’ is a term coined by J Hyndman, *Managing Displacement: Refugees and the Politics of Humanitarianism*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2000, p 1.
- 2 D Bigo, ‘Detention of foreigners, states of exception, and the social practices of control of the Banopticon’, in PK Rajaram & C Grundy-Warr (eds), *Borderscapes: Hidden Geographies and Politics at Territory’s Edge*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2007, pp 3–34; BS Chimni, ‘The birth of a “discipline”: from refugee to forced migration studies’, *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 22(1), 2009, pp 11–29; J Edkins & V Pin-Fat, ‘Introduction: life, power, resistance’, in J Edkins, V Pin-Fat & MJ Shapiro (eds), *Sovereign Lives: Power in Global Politics*, New York: Routledge, 2004, pp 1–21; Hyndman, *Managing Displacement*; LH Malkki, *Purity and Exile: Violence, Memory, and National Cosmology Among Hutu Refugees in Tanzania*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1995; P Nyers, *Rethinking Refugees: Beyond States of Emergency*, New York: Routledge, 2006; N Soguk, ‘Border’s capture: insurrectional politics, border-crossing humans, and the new political’, in Rajaram & Grundy-Warr, *Borderscapes*, pp 283–308; and SD Watson, *The Securitization of Human Migration: Digging Moats and Sinking Boats*, New York: Routledge, 2009.
- 3 EK Baines, *Vulnerable Bodies: Gender, the UN and the Global Refugee Crisis*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004; Hyndman, *Managing Displacement*; and N Soguk, *States and Strangers: Refugees and Displacements of Statecraft*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999.
- 4 This button could be found on all pages on the UNHCR website in 2005, always with the same picture of an Islamic woman with a young child.

- 5 R Bleiker, 'The aesthetic turn in international political theory', *Millennium*, 30(3), 2001, p 515.
- 6 As images of what is traditionally considered 'real', film and photography may be seen as attempts at mimetic representation. However, this fails to recognise the processes of both framing and selection that determine their content, which disturbs this mimesis. In the realm of the visual, images convey their messages not through language, but through perspective. The actor who is communicating the message—the actual person who takes the picture—is not visible, and instead the audience 'looks through her eyes'.
- 7 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), *Images of Exile 1951–1991*, Geneva: UNHCR, 1991, p 3.
- 8 See F Adamson, 'Crossing borders: international migration and national security', *International Security*, 31(1), 2006, pp 165–199; J Crisp, 'Refugees and the global politics of asylum', in S Spencer (ed), *The Politics of Migration: Managing Opportunity, Conflict and Change*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2003, pp 75–87; E Dauvergne, 'Security and migration law in the less brave world', *Social and Legal Studies*, 16(4), 2007, pp 533–549; and J Hyndman & A Mountz, 'Another brick in the wall? Neo-refoulement and the externalization of asylum by Australia and Europe', *Government and Opposition*, 43(2), 2008, pp 249–269.
- 9 LA Sobel (ed), *Refugees: A World Report*, New York: Facts on File, 1979, p 2.
- 10 *Ibid.*
- 11 *Ibid.*, pp 2–3.
- 12 UNHCR, *Images of Exile*, p 6.
- 13 United Nations, 1951 Convention on the Status of Refugees, p 16, at www.unhcr.ch.
- 14 *Ibid.*, p 17.
- 15 Hyndman, *Managing Displacement*, p 9.
- 16 K Neuman, *Refuge Australia: Australia's Humanitarian Record*, Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2004, p 42.
- 17 Baines, *Vulnerable Bodies*, p 5.
- 18 The core of the Convention definition, however, remained the same. In 1969 the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) adopted a regional convention that expanded the UN definition of refugees to include not only those fleeing from persecution, but also those fleeing from war and communal violence. Organisation of African Unity, Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of the Refugee Problems in Africa, p 2.
- 19 Watson, *The Securitization of Human Migration*, p 37 argues that the refugee regime constructs two kinds of states: refugee-producing states that are endangering international security by creating disorder, and refugee-protecting states that work to ensure international security by restoring order. The roots of this dichotomy are found in the origins of the regime (the threatening USSR as refugee-producing, and the ordered West as refugee-protecting), but it comes into sharper distinction when the border between the two kinds of states also becomes the geographic border between global North and South.
- 20 BS Chimni, 'The geopolitics of refugee studies: a view from the South', *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 11(4), 1998, p 351.
- 21 *Ibid.*, p 351.
- 22 UNHCR, *The State of the World's Refugees 2000*, p 6, at www.unhcr.ch.
- 23 N Soguk, *States and Strangers: Refugees and Displacements of Statecraft*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999, p 201.
- 24 UNHCR, *Images of Exile*, p 25.
- 25 *Ibid.*, p 29.
- 26 *Ibid.*, p 41.
- 27 *Ibid.*, p 43.
- 28 *Ibid.*, ch 1, 2, 3.
- 29 Sobel, *Refugees*, p 31.
- 30 *Ibid.*, p 55.
- 31 *Ibid.*, p 117.
- 32 *Ibid.*, p 118.
- 33 *Ibid.*, p 119. It should also be noted that the Jewish community is also historically marginalised and depicted as unsettling within European nationalist discourses. Much of the same control of agency exerted in the depersonalisation of Third World refugees also operates here.
- 34 G Jaeger, 'The definition of "refugee": restrictive versus expanding trends', in US Committee for Refugees (USCR), *World Refugee Survey 1983*, Arlington, VA: USCR, 1983, p 8.
- 35 Baines, *Vulnerable Bodies*, p 5.
- 36 Chimni, 'The geopolitics of refugee studies', p 367.
- 37 P Nyers, 'Introduction: what's left of citizenship?', *Citizenship Studies*, 8(3), 2004, p 203.
- 38 Soguk, *States and Strangers*, p 177, emphasis in the original.

- 39 RP Winter, 'The year in review', in USCR, *World Refugee Survey 1983*, USCR, 1983, p 3.
- 40 RP Winter, 'The year in review', in USCR, *World Refugee Survey 1988*, Arlington, VA: USCR, 1988, p 2.
- 41 *Ibid*, p 4, emphasis added.
- 42 Quoted in Soguk, *States and Strangers*, p 9.
- 43 Soguk, *States and Strangers*, p 54.
- 44 J Edkins & V Pin Fat, 'Through the Wire: Relations of Power and Violence', *Millennium* 34(1), 2005, pp 1–24.
- 45 PK Rajaram, 'Humanitarianism and representations of the refugee', *Refugee Studies*, 15(3), 2002, pp 251, 248.
- 46 *Ibid*, p 247.
- 47 Malkki, *Purity and Exile*, pp 11–12.
- 48 It should be noted that each of these factors is, of course, political. In the context of the Cold War, however, when these definitions emerged, they were constructed as social or cultural as opposed to political.
- 49 Baines, *Vulnerable Bodies*, p vi.
- 50 UNHCR, *2008 Global Trends: Refugees, Asylum Seekers, Returnees, Internally Displaced and Stateless Persons*, June 2009, at www.unhcr.ch.
- 51 H Zlotnik, 'The global dimensions of female migration', at www.migrationinformation.org.
- 52 GS Goodwin-Gill, *The Refugee in International Law*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996, p 255.
- 53 *Ibid*, p 256.
- 54 Baines, *Vulnerable Bodies*, p viii.
- 55 P Nyers, *Rethinking Refugees*, p 48.
- 56 Soguk, *States and Strangers*, p 251.
- 57 Baines, *Vulnerable Bodies*, p 22.
- 58 *Ibid*, p 25.
- 59 *Ibid*, pp 26–27.
- 60 In 1991, for example, UN high commissioner Sadako Ogata defined women refugees in precisely these terms, arguing that 'the cycle of hopelessness created by an impoverished mother raising a family on her own must be addressed as an issue of highest priority'.
- 61 Soguk, *States and Strangers*, p 249.
- 62 Baines, *Vulnerable Bodies*, p viii.
- 63 *Ibid*, p 37.
- 64 Quoted in Soguk, *States and Strangers*, p 249.
- 65 Rajaram, 'Humanitarianism', p 252.
- 66 *Ibid*.
- 67 Quoted in Baines, *Vulnerable Bodies*, p 36.
- 68 B Frelick, 'Preventing refugee flows: protection or peril?', in USCR, *World Refugee Survey 1993*, ?, USCR, 1993, p 13.

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