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# **Saving brown women from brown men?**

## **Navigating the politics of protection in the interests of all**

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# Saving Brown Women from Brown Men? “Refugee Women”, Gender and the Racialised Politics of Protection

Heaven Crawley  \*

## ABSTRACT

White feminist scholarship in the Global North has drawn attention to the challenges facing women seeking protection under international refugee law (IRL). Whilst these efforts have improved outcomes for *some* women, they have largely failed to reconfigure the ways in which gendered experiences of persecution are conceptualised and represented. Drawing on postcolonial feminist scholarship, this article suggests that white feminist scholars have been largely complicit in a script that essentialises the experiences of women originating from the Global South. Where gender is taken into account, women from the Global South are typically understood and represented through a neo-imperial frame as disempowered, helpless “victims”, or as “Exotic Others” who need to be rescued from their “backward” cultures. The framing of “Refugee Women” as a homogenous and undifferentiated category ignores the complex intersections of race and gender shaping both women’s experiences and the racialised politics of protection. Moreover, because white feminist approaches have a colonial “blind spot”, they ignore the ways in which the international refugee regime is deeply entangled with the history of colonialism. In so doing, they replicate and re-inforce racialised representations of Black and Muslim men as perpetrators of violence against women.

## The politics of refugee protection

- The process of refugee status determination is often presented as if it is a straightforward and objective legal process. In reality it is - and always has been - deeply political, providing protection in line with political interests and allegiances
- Those whose experiences do not conform to an increasingly narrowly defined and often stereotype idea of a 'genuine refugee' have increasingly struggled to secure access to international protection e.g. women engaging in gendered forms of resistance, persecution on the basis of sexual identity or relationships
- Focus of feminist lobbying and advocacy since the late 1980s has been on highlighting the ways in which gender-specific and gender-related forms of perspective fall within the meaning of the 1951 Refugee Convention, often reflected in detailed legal challenges over the construction of Convention grounds etc (PSG)
- Reflected in the work of the Refugee Women's Legal Group (RWLG) which drafted gender guidelines, campaigned for childcare during asylum interviews etc

## A shrinking protection space

### **AT THE SAME TIME...**

- Migration in general - and asylum in particular - has been increasingly positioned as central to political debates about issues of security, national (or regional) identity, the role of the state/ trust in government, a distraction from other domestic concerns
- Negative migration and asylum narratives - and the concrete policy changes with which they have been associated have had significant implications for those seeking asylum in the UK (as elsewhere) most notably in terms of access to protection through increased securitization of borders, increased use of detention, new rules determining eligibility to claim asylum depending on route/timing of claims etc
- Whilst there has been extensive advocacy and campaigning against these changes, there remains remarkably little discussion of colonialism, postcolonialism or decolonization in studies of gender and international refugee law (IRL). This is despite the fact that the politics of migration are deeply racialised as well as gendered

## The legacy of colonialism

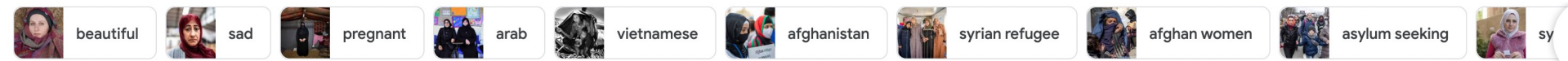
- Reflects a lack of interest in the legacies and continuities of colonialism for migration governance more generally (Mayblin and Turner, 2021)
- Colonial interests shaped the drafting of the 1951 Refugee Convention including the exclusion of millions displaced in the Global South (e.g. India, Palestine)
- Construction of a 'myth of difference' (Chimni, 1998) in which both the nature and character of refugee flows from Global South were represented as fundamentally different from those in the North and specifically Europe: "an image of a "normal" refugee was constructed - white, male and anti- communist - which clashed sharply with individuals fleeing the Third World"
- The definition of a refugee was thus racialised, by design and effect
- Ongoing consequences of colonialism, structural inequalities and racism for contemporary forms of migration including refugee flows



## 'Refugee women' in the imaginary

- White feminist scholarship in the Global North has drawn attention to the challenges facing women seeking protection under international refugee law. Whilst these efforts have improved outcomes for *some* women, they have largely failed to reconfigure the ways in which gendered experiences of persecution are conceptualised and represented
- My argument is that white feminist approaches to international refugee law (IRL) have a colonial 'blind spot' and ignore the ways in which is deeply entangled with the history of colonialism. ***In so doing these approaches have perpetuated the myth of difference***
- Where gender is taken into account, women from the Global South are typically understood and represented through a neo-imperial frame as disempowered, helpless "victims", or as "Exotic Others" who need to be rescued from their "backward" cultures.





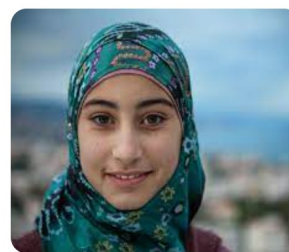
UNHCR  
Women | UNHCR



EURACTIV.com  
Violence against refugee women i...



Wikipedia  
Refugee women - Wikipedia



JRS APR - Jesuit Refugee Service  
refugee women ...



The Council of Europe  
Migrant and refugee w...



Al Jazeera  
Life as a female refugee: 'You don't ...



RAND Corporation  
The Precarious State of Syrian Refugee ...



The Council of Europe  
Human rights of refugee and migrant ...



UN Women  
World Refugee Day | UN Women - He...



UNHCR  
Syrian refugee women - UNHCR ...



UNICEF  
Rohingya refugee women and girls ...



www.caritas.org



Oxfam



Alliance magazine



Every Woman



Habitat for Humanity GB



## So what/where next?

1. Need to understand - and represent/advocate for - the idea that the challenges facing women seeking international protection as being **embedded in systems and structures, inequalities and oppressions**, rather than focusing exclusively, or even primarily, on their identities as women
2. Need to recognise the **centrality of race** in the workings of IRL, both in terms of history and contemporary policy and practice. Race and gender do not just 'intersect', they are mutually bound together (Achiume, 2020)
3. Need to place colonialism and history at the centre of thinking about international refugee law and protection. There are real dangers in fighting sexism/patriarchy with racism, even if this is not our intention. **The fight for social justice for one group must not be at the expense of another.**