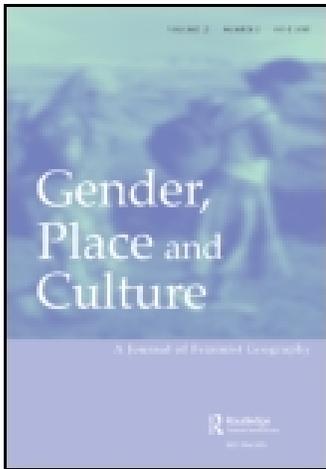


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### Introduction: the feminist politics of refugee migration

Jennifer Hyndman <sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Department of Social Sciences , Centre for Refugee Studies, York University , 4700 Keele St., Toronto, ON, M3J 1P3, Canada

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## Introduction: the feminist politics of refugee migration

Jennifer Hyndman\*

*Department of Social Sciences, Centre for Refugee Studies, York University, 4700 Keele St., Toronto, ON M3J 1P3, Canada*

The interdisciplinary field of refugee studies includes gender analyses, but feminism is not its forte. Scholarship in the field has neglected the development of feminist frameworks to trace the power relations that shape the gender and other politics of forced migration. Specifically, the underplayed concept of ‘refugee transnationalism’ is elaborated as a form of globalization where the social and political intersect in particular ways.

**Keywords:** migration; refugees; gender; feminist; refugee studies; transnationalism

In 2008, a session on gender relations in refugee studies was convened at the International Association of Studies in Forced Migration in Cairo. Feminist scholars who were present from across the social sciences and from a range of countries lamented declining interest in gender studies related to refugees and feminist analysis of mobility and displacement. While the papers in that session were not thematically organized, they did share several conceptual continuities: all addressed feminist theory and/or power relations, and several examined the gender politics inherent in the transnational lives of refugees.

Based on this shared sentiment about the paucity of sustained feminist scholarship in refugee studies at the turn of the twenty-first century in general and the relatively underdeveloped concept of ‘refugee transnationalism’ (Nolin 2006) in particular, we called for additional papers from interested scholars, especially those in the early part of their academic careers. This themed section showcases some of this innovative scholarship, rendering visible the often hidden geographies of cultural politics and social negotiations, the links between family sponsorship of refugees and related expectations of care-giving that refugee women both voice and face. The collection also explores the ways in which the work of the refugee settlement sector in the global North itself is gendered and gendering. Drawing on Butler’s theory of performativity and Foucault’s edict to study the conduct of conduct, several of the authors illustrate how refugee status pressures them to enact particular scripts. The persistence of a stable category, ‘refugee’, enables refugee-serving agencies to meet their mandates, but can also serve to infantilize and/or feminize refugees in relation to the new host society in which they find themselves.

### Engendering refugee studies

We could have submitted these articles to a special issue of a journal dedicated specifically to refugee studies, but decided against this as we felt that ‘gender’ had played itself out

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\*Email: [jhyndman@yorku.ca](mailto:jhyndman@yorku.ca)

in this interdisciplinary subfield. From a policy perspective, calls to ‘mainstream’ gender into all programmes and practice have been made for more than a decade among United Nations agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and refugee settlement agencies. Has ‘gender’ been ‘mainstreamed’ into the academic interdisciplinary field of refugee research? Or is it simply out of vogue?

Interestingly, since the inception of the *Journal of Refugee Studies* in 1988 until March 2009, 497 articles were published in the journal.<sup>1</sup> Of these, 45 – or just under 10% – contained references to either feminism, feminist, gender or women in the abstract or title. Three of the 45 were explicitly about masculinity and had a strong gender analysis, but this is still a very poor showing for analyses of men’s gender identities in the context of forced migration (see Szczepanikova this volume).

This collection of articles, then, attempts to challenge the marginalization of feminist analysis and gender politics in refugee studies. It not only fills a gap, but provides original insights into refugee families’ risk management and survival strategies. Refugees are not simply a population to be managed; rather the spaces in which refugees move is a medium to be constantly negotiated by transnational families and social networks.

B.S. Chimni (1998, 2009) recently reiterated his critique of Refugee Studies as an imperialist research project by the global North of the global South. He notes that scholars from the South have often been involved in refugee-related research, but usually as methods experts or empiricists. Theory and the conceptual framing of this interdisciplinary field is the exclusive domain of scholars in wealthy countries. The absence of a sustained postcolonial or feminist critique of Refugee Studies is conspicuous.

Part of our goal in this volume is to inflect a materialized sense of agency and potential change on the part of refugee migration strategies and outcomes. Yet we also aim to avoid assigning emancipatory meanings to refugee migration from camps or cities of initial asylum to subsequent locations, especially in the global North. Both Al-Sharmani’s (this volume) and Grabska’s (this volume) articles demonstrate this point: being sponsored by a family member to live in Cairo instead of a camp comes with gendered strings attached, just as being sponsored by a former refugee husband who has settled abroad in Canada, the USA or Australia is a riskier prospect given inflated dowries should something go wrong in that relationship.

In a similar vein but related to voluntary immigrants rather than refugees, Margaret Walton-Roberts and Geraldine Pratt (2005) published an insightful article in this journal based on extensive fieldwork with immigrants to British Columbia, Canada. They employed interviews with members of a single family to probe the motivations for migration and to unsettle the assumption that moving to Canada was a step towards ‘a better life’, to living a more cosmopolitan life in a place with a more developed modernity. Using testimony from several family members, the authors problematize the idea that a move to the global North is somehow ‘progress’ in terms of the cultural politics and economic opportunities migrants experience in quotidian ways. The family’s experience of Canada is much more mixed.

Walton-Roberts and Pratt’s (2005) argument is echoed in a research project I am completing with Wenona Giles that probes the situation of refugees in protracted situations, waiting in limbo for years at a time without any clear signal that they might get legal status in a host country (Hyndman and Giles forthcoming). One family member in a household of Somali refugees living in Nairobi interviewed for our project explained that the family did not want to live in the refugee camps, situated in an isolated semi-arid rural area far from the Kenyan capital, but neither did its members want to be resettled to one of the traditional receiving countries: the USA, Canada or Australia. With remittances

coming in from family living in those countries, life in Nairobi is manageable, and preferable to seeking asylum in the global North.<sup>2</sup> Like the family history recounted by Walton-Roberts and Pratt (2005), this story interrupts the all too common narrative and assumption that resettlement to wealthy countries is the preference, or option, of most refugees, despite the fact that fewer than 1% are ever actually resettled.

### **Feminist thought meets ‘refugee transnationalism’**

Transnational processes are most commonly defined as those ‘by which immigrants and refugees forge and maintain multi-stranded social relations that link together their places of origin and places of settlement’ (Basch et al. 1994, 7). Basch et al. (1994) emphasize the social, cultural and political fields that cross geographical borders. Transnationalism as an academic project substantiated by empirical fieldwork began two decades ago, largely with labour migrants who travelled seasonally or circuitously between different national sites. A great deal of scholarship has also addressed the impact of labour migration on gender identities (Mahler 1999; Hondagneu-Sotelo and Aviva 1997).

‘Refugee transnationalism’ (Nolin 2006; Sherrell and Hyndman 2006) refers to distinct expressions of such social fields across international borders among refugees: those who did not choose the conditions of their departure. As these authors and other refugee scholars have noted (Al-Ali, Black, and Koser 2001), the transnational ties between refugee and country of origin are precarious and politically charged in ways that are different from labour migrants.

As geographer Catherine Nolin (2006, 183) notes, ‘the agency and life choices of the world’s refugees are quite different from those of (im)migrants and the social processes that bind the two contexts when physical presence is impossible in the home country ... for refugees, physical mobility is often short-term, one-way, and violence-induced’. Nolin (2006) underscores two important components of refugee transnationalism: a conceptual shift from a focus on ‘connections’ to ‘ruptures and sutures’ of identity and belonging and a shift from ‘community identity’ to ‘transnational social fields’ and multi-scaled social relations.

### **The highlights**

Following the leads of Nolin (2006) and others (Al-Ali, Black, and Koser 2001; Sherrell and Hyndman 2006), the authors in this themed section elaborate transnational migration among refugee groups and the cultural politics they engender.

In the first article, Alice Szczepanikova uses a feminist analysis to probe the modes of governance employed by NGOs in the settlement of refugees. NGOs are effectively becoming ‘subcontractors’ of governments or of the United Nations and yet their status as private agencies tacitly points to the privatization of gender politics in the settlement process. Szczepanikova reveals the micropolitics of NGO assistance to refugees in the Czech Republic, but also highlights its gendered character (see also Szczepanikova 2005). As she contends, being a refugee has distinct impacts on women and men, yet little is known about the gendered character of being dependent on assistance. Critically, the piece also traces masculinity and cultural norms that make it an indignity for some refugee men to ask for assistance from strangers and to openly acknowledge their situation of dependency. The feminization, even infantilization, of refugee newcomers by well-meaning settlement agency staff offers important lessons about the links between power and performance.

Employing a perspective that draws on Judith Butler and Michel Foucault’s understandings of power, Szczepanikova argues that NGOs have a unique role in

constructing and maintaining refugee identities. Performative spaces of 'refugeeness' are nurtured and enacted in a regulatory context of scripts to be followed. Just as Martha Kuwee Kumsa (2006) has argued that once refugees have permanent residence and secure legal status they no longer care to be referred to as 'refugees', Szczepanikova shows that refugees with clear and legitimate legal status in the Czech context occupy a position that offers more space to negotiate the meaning of refugee than that offered to them by service providers at NGOs. Some newcomers can afford to disassociate themselves from the label, while others make strategic use of it and/or find themselves trapped in performing the script of 'refugee'.

In new groundbreaking work on the globalization of marriage among refugees, Katarzyna Grabska traces the forging of relations between former Sudanese refugee men (the so-called 'lost boys') who are now living abroad in the US, Canada and Australia, and Sudanese refugee women, many of whom remain in Kakuma Camp in Northern Kenya (see also Grabska 2008). The fusion of local Nuer and Dinka customs and foreign currency in these transnational transactions is remarkable: young men in the global North are expected to pay their brides' families in the order of US\$25,000–\$30,000 for the privilege of marrying, according to Grabska's research. Many brides' families see the payment of bride wealth as a 'way out' of protracted displacement, dispossession and poverty. Given the millions of Kenyan shillings that young single Sudanese women in Kakuma can command, they have been referred to as 'Walking Millions', as Grabska observes. The younger or more educated the woman, the higher her bride price.

Grabska contends, however, that transnational marriages contest, reconfigure and reinforce the culturally inscribed gender norms and practices in the camps and in Southern Sudan where some refugees have begun to return home after a peace accord in 2005. Many of these so-called 'lost boys' who have been resettled to North America and Australia have secured jobs, albeit often modest ones and want to marry Sudanese women from the camps. Grabska's extensive research for more than a year in Kakuma camp and Southern Sudan shows that such transnational marriages can result in potentially negative consequences for the women concerned, even as the envisaged opportunity to live abroad is a coveted one among families in the camp.

Mulki Al-Sharmani examines the family strategies employed by diasporic Somali refugees, arguing that these constitute a 'durable solution' that offsets the destructive effects of the civil war and helps the people to cope with the experience of displacement.<sup>3</sup> Her article probes the intimate spaces of family care-giving and the ways in which family sponsorship is offered in return for gendered, unpaid work, often by unmarried women (see also Al-Sharmani 2007). Yet women's roles in these transnational family arrangements are multifarious: they are at once earner and remitters, caregivers for children and ageing family members, as well as facilitators and brokers of these migrant networks. Familial notions of authority, respect, reciprocity and gratitude introduce a set of power relations heretofore under-analyzed within contexts of contested transnational support systems. More than one million Somalis live in the diaspora and Al-Sharmani's work offers an overdue geographical shift to this African context, building on much of the excellent scholarship that traces the fragility of these familial networks (Menjivar 2000) and the conflicts and tensions that can arise among migrant communities in the US.

Gail Hopkins' critical contribution to this volume explores the links between identity (re)formation and transnationalism, tracing changing notions of 'Somaliness' among Somali refugees to Toronto, Canada and London, England. Based on fieldwork in both cities, Hopkins probes how new cultural geographies of belonging among Somali women emerge in the largest polyglot global cities of Canada and Britain (see also Hopkins 2006). What it means to be a Somali woman is different in Somalia from what it is to be such

a woman in a refugee camp in Kenya. Likewise, gender identities for both men and women are changed in other ways as they move in different directions, to resettlement in both Toronto and London. Such identities, Hopkins argues, are dynamic and interact with geographic locations of origin and resettlement, and with other ethnonational groups and societal boundaries. ‘Somaliness’, in short, is geographically contingent.

Specifically, Hopkins focuses on Somali women because many feared and/or were subject to violence and sexual abuse during the war in and flight from Somalia. She points out that rape and sexual abuse of women and girls were common as a weapon of war in Somalia and in refugee camps. Accordingly, just as many Sudanese families sent their ‘lost boys’ away during civil war in that country, to avoid conscription by either side – rebels or government forces – so too Somali families sent female family members out of the region to safety. Women and children were sent either to calmer areas in Kenya or Ethiopia, or to destinations such as Britain and Canada if resources allowed. Needless to say, the stories of these ‘sent away girls and women’ remain largely unwritten, so their journeys and testimony of what dress, language and faith mean in their new homes is an important contribution to scholarship on transnationalism.

Some scholars might contend that studies of transnationalism have run their course after 20 years of rich insights and interdisciplinary scholarship. I disagree. Now more than ever, nationalism, identity and livelihoods traverse international borders. The task ahead is one of deepening our understanding of the ways in which migrants, and especially refugees, are enabled, excluded, recruited and hidden from view through power relations that are gendered and racialized at multiple scales. The conceptual dissonance of ‘refugee transnationalism’, as an amalgam of state-centric discourse and its very critique, sheds light on the luminal, contradictory and largely invisible negotiations of sponsorship, im/mobility and obligation that refugees face.

### Acknowledgements

Many thanks to the authors in this volume for their patience and persistence in seeing this project through. I would like to thank Kasia Grabska and Alice Szczepanikova for their insights and suggestions for this introduction.

### Notes

1. Thanks to Lisa Brunner for her assistance in compiling these statistics. Articles include field reports, research notes, debates and refugee voice, but exclude book reviews, obituaries and reports on meetings.
2. Cindy Horst (2006) has demonstrated the extent of these transnational remittance networks between refugee camps and locations of Somali resettlement in the US, Canada and Europe.
3. Durable solution is a technical term employed by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to describe sustainable answers to the plight of refugee displacement and temporary lack of access to citizenship in their country of origin. The three conventional durable solutions are, according to UNHCR, 1) voluntary repatriation of refugees to their home countries when it is safe to return; 2) the local integration on a long-term basis of refugees into a neighbouring country that has hosted them on a short-term basis (usually referred to as a first safe country); and 3) resettlement to a third country that is willing to offer permanent residence, stable legal status and normally a pathway to new citizenship in countries such as the US, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, but also including new host states such as Brazil.

### Notes on contributor

Jennifer Hyndman is Professor of Geography at York University in Toronto, Canada. Her research traces the geopolitics of displacement at multiple scales from a feminist perspective. Specifically, she

focuses on humanitarian aid, its impact, and gaps in and adjacent to conflict zones. Her first book is *Managing Displacement: Refugees and the Politics of Humanitarianism* (University of Minnesota Press, 2000). She is co-editor of *Sites of Violence: Gender and Conflict Zones* (University of California Press, 2004). She is currently working on a manuscript related to the 2004 tsunami.

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## ABSTRACT TRANSLATION

### Introducción: las políticas feministas de migración de refugiados

El campo interdisciplinario de estudios de refugiados incluye el análisis de género, pero el feminismo no es su fuerte. La investigación en este campo ha desatendido el desarrollo de los

marcos feministas para seguir las relaciones de poder que dan forma a las políticas de género y otras sobre migración forzada. Específicamente, el concepto minimizado de ‘transnacionalismo de refugiados’ (Nolin 2006) es elaborado como una forma de globalización donde lo social y lo político se entrecruzan de maneras particulares.

**Palabras clave:** migración; refugiados; género; feminista; estudios de refugiados; transnacionalismo

#### **难民迁徙的女性政治导论**

难民的跨领域研究包含性别分析，但女性主义并非其著重之处。该领域的学者经常忽略建构女性主义框架，用以探求形塑强迫移民者的性别及其他政治的权力关系。特别是遭受贬抑的概念——难民跨国主义 (refugee transnationalism) (Nolin, 2006) 被阐释为特定社会及政治脉络交会下的一种全球化形式。

**关键字:** 移民, 难民, 性别, 女性主义, 难民研究, 跨国主义