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Who Counts? Refugees and the Politics of Indifference

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Who Counts? Refugees and the Politics of Indifference

Abstract

The contemporary plight of refugees, asylum seekers, and other marginalized groups reveals the limits of international human rights norms. Numerous internationally recognized standards and laws exist for the humane treatment of people. Yet despite enormous progress, the reality is that some people are simply deemed to be less fully human than others. Nationalism and racism underlie popular indifference to today's unwanted refugees. This is the unspoken truth that lies at the heart of the global refugee problem.

Keywords

Human rights, Refugees, Responsibility, Displaced people

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Who Counts? Refugees and the Politics of Indifference

by Sonia Cardenas

The contemporary plight of refugees, asylum seekers, and other marginalized groups reveals the limits of international human rights norms. Numerous internationally recognized [standards and laws](#) exist for the humane treatment of people. Yet despite enormous progress, the reality is that some people are simply deemed to be less fully human than others. Nationalism and racism underlie popular indifference to today's unwanted refugees. This is the unspoken truth that lies at the heart of the global refugee problem.

Overcoming entrenched indifference towards refugees consequently requires looking beyond state sovereignty. Effective refugee policies must turn to global governance for solutions, challenging narratives of fear and animosity as well as tackling the root problems (political and economic) that displace people from their homes. Compassion toward refugees cannot be assumed or coerced—note recent [EU restrictions](#) for asylum-seekers—though it can be constructed politically.

National governments cannot sustain liberal refugee policies indefinitely; they are too captive to short-term political calculations. In democracies, electoral pressures can push leaders to restrict migrant flows, especially during periods of economic downturn or perceived terrorist threats. In non-democracies, governments are often implicated in the conflicts from which people are fleeing; even if they offer safe passage or haven, [refugees' rights](#) still may be compromised.

By definition, the protection of refugees poses an international problem requiring a [global solution](#). Once people cross state borders (or once a government permits internal displacement), other states cannot be trusted to protect refugees. People who have lost the protection of their home countries should not have to depend on the goodwill of strangers. The international community must have reliable and effective mechanisms for protecting them. If this admonition sounds naïve, it is only because state sovereignty trumps human rights.

Challenging the politics of indifference towards refugees further requires exposing narratives of fear and animosity, or hidden assumptions about who counts as a full and equal human being. Here, the [media](#) can play a productive role, revealing stories of dispossession and abuse while giving a human face to distant victims. Activists should ask uncomfortable questions about why only certain refugees are worth protecting: for example, would we really close our doors to those most closely resembling us? Advocates must also confront [myths](#) about the prohibitive costs of hosting refugees, including purported rises in crime or unemployment. Where public opinion is largely indifferent or hostile to refugees, liberal political discourse should strive to be more substantive than polemical.

Fundamentally, the most effective refugee policy is comprehensive, addressing the root causes of displacement and conflict. This requires proactive inter-agency coordination, incorporating refugee issues alongside diplomatic and economic negotiations. The goal—however elusive—is

ultimately to make the political category of refugees obsolete. States must become convinced that refugee problems undermine international security, making it in their interests to stem foreign conflicts. A robust international refugee policy is therefore necessarily attentive to peace building and conflict resolution.

The reluctance of wealthy countries to accept [growing numbers of refugees](#) confirms the importance of political will. Who counts as a human being worthy of protection is subject to bigotry, often manipulated by political elites. In contrast, more equitable refugee policies call for global regulatory approaches, explicit challenges to fear-inducing rhetoric, and comprehensive policies targeting the root sources of conflict. Debates over refugee policy understandably focus on sovereign states, but the key to protecting refugees lies with transforming public opinion: replacing the politics of indifference and fear with an informed politics of compassion.

Sonia Cardenas is Associate Professor of Political Science and Director of the Human Rights Program at Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut. She is the author of numerous publications, including Conflict and Compliance: State Responses to International Human Rights Pressure (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007). She is currently completing two book projects, both for the University of Pennsylvania Press— Chains of Justice: The Global Rise of State Institutions for Human Rights and a textbook, Terror and Hope: The Politics of Human Rights in Latin America.