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ARTICLE



Reframing the refugee crisis: from rescue to interconnection

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ABSTRACT

In this paper I argue that we should not frame the debate over whether or not we have duties to help refugees in terms of duties of rescue. This way of framing the issue, where Western states are depicted as rescuing refugees from harms unconnected to them, does not adequately represent the reality experienced by refugees in the 21st century. I suggest that we need a framework that includes the secondary harms experienced by refugees as they try to seek refuge in camps, urban spaces and via asylum. These secondary harms constitute serious violations of human rights and prevent refugees from accessing the minimum conditions of human dignity. As a result, the rescue metaphor is inappropriate and, perhaps more importantly, prevents us from having a proper debate about the obligations of states in general, and Western states in particular, to refugees.

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For the past several years, the global refugee crisis has caused many relatively wealthy Western states to see a dramatic uptick in the number of people arriving on their territory to claim asylum.¹ Countries like Italy, Greece, the US, and Germany have had to grapple intensely with the question of what they owe to these asylum seekers, as well as to the millions of refugees around the world who would like to be resettled in a country like theirs. While there is a general agreement that these states have *some* obligation to refugees and asylum seekers, what precisely states are obligated to do is far from settled. It is not uncommon to hear this obligation framed as a duty to *rescue* refugees from the harms created by their home countries. The important questions, in this way of framing the problem, are what the duty to rescue refugees requires relatively wealthy Western democracies to do and when a particular state can say that it has done its fair share.

I argue in this paper that this is the wrong way to frame the question. This way of framing the issue, where Western states are depicted as rescuing refugees from harms unconnected to them, does not adequately represent the reality experienced by refugees in the 21st century. Even though many countries around the world take in asylum seekers and resettle refugees, refugees are nonetheless exposed to a range of secondary harms as they seek refuge – in refugee camps, informal urban settlements and as they

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seek asylum – that have been created and supported by a range of different states, including Western liberal democracies, in collaboration with the international refugee regime. These secondary harms are often ignored when considering the harms refugees need to be rescued from and evaluating whether or not a state has sufficiently helped refugees or contributed to the global effort to do so. Far from trivial, these secondary harms constitute serious violations of human rights and prevent refugees from accessing the minimum conditions of human dignity. As a result, the rescue metaphor is inappropriate and, perhaps more importantly, prevents us from having a proper debate about the obligations of states in general, and Western states in particular, to refugees. It also prevents states from taking seriously the question of what remedial responsibilities states may have to fix or ameliorate these secondary harms (Miller 2007).

The reality is that the vast majority of refugees will, in fact, not receive refuge or be rescued in any meaningful sense. In the 21st century, only about 1% of refugees will be resettled in a given year, 2% will be able to return home, and the vast majority will spend on average 17 years as a refugee either in a camp or informally in a city with little access to international aid (FitzGerland 2019; Betts and Collier 2017; Parekh 2017; UNHCR 2004). The 10% of refugees who seek asylum directly in the West must risk their lives, overcome brutal deterrence policies and spend their life savings to do so (Betts and Collier 2017; Gibney 2006). Thinking about moral obligations purely in terms of duties of rescue obscures the role that rescuing states have played in creating and sustaining this outcome and many of the harms that refugees experience as they seek refuge.

One of the reasons for these secondary harms has to do with the ways in which two key norms around refugees protection have been interpreted by Western states. The first is the norm of non-refoulement, the principle which holds that states cannot send refugees back to their home countries if they have a well-founded fear of persecution. This norm implies that states have strong obligations to refugees who make it to their territory: they must at minimum allow them to stay and assess whether or not they have a well-founded fear of persecution. Since many states are eager to minimize their obligations to asylum seekers, this principle has in practice given states an incentive to keep refugees away from their territory to prevent them from claiming asylum. By contrast, norms around resettlement – in particular, that resettlement is an act of discretion and states have no legal obligation to resettle refugees – mean that Western states have an incentive to support refugee camps as the main way of helping refugees, a practice which ensures that refugees remain largely in the Global South. If states choose to resettle refugees, they can do so in their own time and in an orderly manner. If they choose not to, they have not violated any legal obligation, even if this means that countries in the Global South must host large numbers of refugees indefinitely. In these ways, Western states are interconnected to the secondary harms refugees experience in refugee camps, informal urban spaces or as they seek asylum. As such, when Western states consider their moral obligations to refugees, as they have increasingly done in recent years, they ought to employ a framework that includes these aspects of the West's relationship to refugees. Such a framework, one that stresses their interconnection to the harms experienced by refugees, would no doubt lead to a different way of thinking about what morality demands in terms of our treatment of refugees.

The focus of this paper is the discourse in Western liberal democracies on their moral obligations to refugees and asylum seekers. The terms ‘Western’ and ‘the West’ refer to the group of relatively wealthy, liberal democratic states that have played a powerful role in the international community since the end of the Second World War and are countries that receive many requests from asylum seekers and refugees for admission. Though a term that can mean different things in different contexts, ‘Western’ is a commonly used short hand for this collection of states which include the UK, Canada, Germany, Sweden, the US, and Australia among others. I focus on this group of states for two reasons. First, in recent years, these countries have been grappling with their moral obligations to refugees and asylum seekers due to the rise in the numbers of people seeking asylum in these countries and nationalist push back against accepting refugees and asylum seekers. Most citizens of these states and their leaders see themselves as unconnected to the crises which cause refugee flows and as such, see themselves as being in a position to rescue refugees. It is the discourse in these countries, a discourse which frames obligations to refugees as duties of rescue, that is the focus of this paper and the view that I am challenging.

Second, there are good reasons to believe that these states have strong moral obligations to help refugees and to remediate the secondary harms they experience and, as such, it is important to understand how they are interconnected to the harms refugees experience as they seek refuge. Western states, because of their relatively large GDP and the power they are able to exercise in the international community, have the *capacity*, both organizational and financial, to help in ways that less powerful and wealthy countries do not.² Their shared commitment to liberal democratic values, such as equality, rule of law, fairness and to human rights more broadly, means that Western states can be held to these standards. Finally, because of their influential role in the international community, this collection of states has played a decisive role in shaping the contemporary refugee regime. This is not to suggest that other states have not contributed to the secondary harms and should not play a role in addressing them.³ However, because of the important role Western states play in determining the ways that refugees seek and receive protection around the world, it is worth focusing on their discourse around moral obligations to refugees.

The traditional frame: the west as rescuer

In the dominant way of framing the crisis in many Western countries, Western states and their members are by and large seen as *rescuers* who must step in to help refugees who have fled their home countries to escape torture, death, and insecurity. The states which produce refugees are the wrongdoers, since they have harmed their citizens, violated their human rights and forced them into a position where they must be helped by an outside country. Western states are being asked to come to the rescue of these refugees. Because this is a duty of rescue – Western states are being asked to provide help, not to rectify a past harm – they are morally permitted to balance their own

²On the roll of capacity as a ground for responsibility, see Miller (2007).

³To be sure, the effort to provide refugees with the minimum conditions for human dignity must be global. The limited scope of this paper should not be taken as suggesting that *only* Western states play a causal or remedial role in the refugee crisis.

interests (economic, security, social/cultural) with their obligations to help. As rescuers, Western states can't be asked to take on too big of a burden since they have not caused the problem in the first place.⁴

To put it in other terms, if Western states have a duty of rescue towards refugees, this duty should be understood as one of *beneficence* – it is a positive duty to help, rather than a negative duty to refrain from harming. As a duty of beneficence, states are permitted to balance their own interests with the duty to rescue. Because helping refugees is by and large an *undistributed* duty – it is not clear who has the responsibility to discharge the positive duty of rescue given that there are many different countries who could help refugees – we rarely blame countries which fail in their duty to rescue. We may praise states which help refugees and encourage our own states to do more, but states are rarely held at fault for not doing enough.

This is way of framing the issue can be seen in political discussions around asylum seekers in the EU as well as in the US. David Milliband, a former UK member of Parliament and current head of the International Rescue Committee, recently published a book on the obligations of Western states to refugees entitled, *Rescue* (2017). A number of philosophers make this assumption explicitly too. Writing about what Western states owe to refugees, David Miller, explains that there is, 'a parallel here with the duty of rescue born by individuals in emergencies. For this to come into effect, there must on one side be a potential victim or victims facing a threat of death or serious injury, but on the other side the rescuers must be able to intervene without incurring serious risk himself ... There is not, in other words, an unlimited and unconditional obligation to carry out rescues: the duty that it imposes aims to safeguard the urgent interests of the victim without placing an unacceptable burden on the rescuers' (Miller 2016, 78). As rescuers, we are morally permitted to balance our attempts at rescue with the needs and interests of our states. Ultimately Miller argues that we may end up with a 'tragic conflict' between the needs of refugees and the values of a political community that believes it cannot rescue all or perhaps even most refugees if it is to be able to sustain democracy and achieve social justice (93).

Similarly, Betts and Collier argue that providing refuge 'is about fulfilling our duty of rescue' (Betts and Collier 2017, 6). In their view, the duty of rescuing refugees is born out of a common humanity that we share with other human beings. This common humanity gives rise to an obligation to assist strangers who are in desperate need when we can do so at no significant cost to ourselves. In other words, our duty to rescue refugees is grounded on the principle of the Good Samaritan, a principle that many other philosophers will also draw on to ground obligations to refugees (for example: Carens 2013; Walzer 1983; Gibney 2004). An important aspect of the parable of the Good Samaritan is that there is no connection between the rescuer, the Samaritan, and the person in need of help; the Good Samaritan simply helps out of human decency, not because they were responsible for harming the person lying by the side of the road. Western states are like the Good Samaritan in the parable: rescuing people who were harmed by their home states.

⁴Some make an exception if the state is directly implicated in the conflict which caused displacement. For example, Carens points out that after the US's war in Vietnam caused the creation of millions of refugees, many considered the US to have a strong duty to accept refugees (Carens 2013).

Duties of rescue and durable solutions

If most agree that Western states have a duty to rescue at least some refugees, what precisely are they supposed to provide them in terms of rescue? After World War II, when this question was first posed, the international community answered this question by drafting the UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees in 1951. According to Refugee Convention, refugees were supposed to be given one of three possible solutions: voluntary return home, resettlement in a third country or integration in the country that was hosting them. These were known as the three ‘durable solutions’ and, taken together, seemed like the best way to assure that refugees would have access to their full set of human rights in as short a time as possible.

Yet for reasons that I’ll make clear below, the three durable solutions – resettlement, voluntary repatriation and local integration – have not been realized for the vast majority. In the 21st century, only 1% of refugees are resettled in a given year, 2% are able to voluntarily return home, and local integration is virtually non-existent (Betts and Collier 2017; Parekh 2017). In other words, refugees have not been *rescued* in the ways Western states claimed they would be when they wrote and signed the Refugee Convention in 1951.

Given that the three durable solutions envisioned for refugees after the Second World War helps only a fraction of the current global refugee population, what other solutions do refugees have access to? In other words, how have refugees in fact been rescued? The answer is that refugees have been given three more or less terrible options: squalid refugee camps, urban destitution or dangerous journeys to seek asylum (Betts and Collier 2017). As I’ll suggest in the next section, all three options fail to provide the minimum conditions of human dignity. Most refugees, we may say, have not really been rescued.

Options for refugees in the 21st century

When people use the term refugee camp, they usually mean the temporary settlements that are set up by the UNHCR to receive those who have left their countries, fleeing from persecution, war, or other forms of conflict. Their goal is to attend to the immediate needs of refugees who are seeking help by providing security, food, water, and medical care.

The problem with refugee camps occurs when ‘temporary’ camps intended to help with immediate needs become long-term settlements. Refugees are given rations and a place to live but are usually not permitted to work or move around within the country. Refugee camps are often places of insecurity and abuse, enforced idleness and diminished autonomy, and hold very little hope that something better might be on the horizon (Parekh 2017; Agier 2011). For refugees, ‘resigning yourself to a refugee camp meant putting your life on pause, receiving just enough food and water to get through to the next day, but robbed of any chance to provide for a family or plan for a future’ (McDonald-Gibson 2016, 80).

This might not be so bad if people could reasonably expect to leave refugee camps within a few years. Yet because of a lack of durable solutions, people have ended up spending years, sometimes decades, in refugee camps. Further, refugee camps are expensive to run. ‘Condemning millions of people to wasting their lives, this

approach has contrived the rare folly of being both inhumane and expensive' (Betts and Collier 2017, 1). Nonetheless, this is how about half the refugees in the world live and refugee camps remain the standard mechanism for aiding refugees in the aftermath of a crisis.

Given what I've described above about refugee camps, it's not surprising that many refugees reject them. Since about 2003, refugees began increasingly 'voting with their feet' to reject refugee camps (Crisp 2017, 92). They have chosen instead to go to cities, where they live informally (that is, without being formally registered with the UNHCR or the local government) with relatives, friends or in share apartments with other co-nationals. This has some clear advantages over life in camps: refugees maintain their freedom of movement, can live where they want and can come and go freely. Most will work in the informal economy which, though uncertain in the extreme, offers the possibility of earning an income and potentially even saving money.

The biggest disadvantage is that refugees receive very little material assistance from the international community in terms of housing, food, health care or education when they are outside of refugee camps. Fewer than 1 in 10 Syrian refugees in Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan receive any material support from the UN or its partners (Betts and Collier 2017, 3). Though help with food, health care and education may not be adequate in camps, the virtual absence in urban centres can be devastating for refugees. Housing is difficult to find and often inadequate. Though many refugees are able to find work, it is often well below what is needed to survive, forcing people to go into debt and children to work. It is often difficult for children to get an education as the barriers to going to school are often insurmountable. Though the UNHCR recognizes the importance of educating refugee children, both inside and outside of the camp, 'the vast majority of Syrian refugee children in Turkey remain without access to primary education' (Amnesty International).

To put it in terms of human rights, it seems that refugees have to choose which set of rights they want more help with. In camps, some of their social and economic rights are more likely to be fulfilled – they are likely to be given some kind of housing and food rations for example. But they do not have the right to work or freedom of movement and, as a result, have much less self-determination and autonomy than urban refugees have. Yet urban refugees, though more autonomous, often face dire struggles for their social and economic rights such as accessing food, housing, health care and education. If they are able to find work, work is often difficult, exploitative and insufficient to sustain them. Though life in urban centres and the informal economy may be more preferable to many refugees than life in refugee camps, life is far from secure and many refugees fail to secure an adequately level of material existence.

We are far from the reality envisioned by the ethics of rescue. Instead of rescuing refugees and securing one of three durable solutions – resettlement, repatriation, local integration – most refugees understand that the real options provided by the international community are either impoverished camps with a slim hope of resettlement or urban slums without international support. Neither option offers much in the way of a future. This is in part why refugees are increasingly choosing a third option: having themselves smuggled into Europe, the US, or Australia to claim asylum.

For many refugees, asylum is effectively their only hope for rebuilding their lives. Yet refugees can only apply for asylum if they are able to come to to the country they hope

will provide it. This means travelling from Africa, Asia, South America and the Middle East to Europe, North America, or Australia. But because it is extremely difficult for refugees to get visas and the correct paperwork to travel legally to these countries, they have to enter their destinations without legal authorization. This requires them to hire smugglers to help them make the often dangerous and sometimes deadly journeys to apply for asylum. Hiring smugglers in order to apply for asylum is so common that virtually every person who came to Europe during the 2015 refugee crisis used a smuggler at some point in their journey (Tinti and Reitano 2016).

If a refugee is successfully smuggled into Europe, the ordeal does not end immediately. Reception centres in Europe often come with a new set of harms. Detention is routine in the US and in many countries that border the Mediterranean – Malta, Greece, Italy. Because of the influx in 2015, Greece opened the now infamous refugee camps that are notorious for their terrible conditions: damp, badly heated, overcrowded, unsanitary. In these European camps, respiratory and gastrointestinal illnesses and dermatological diseases are common. Jane Freedman has noted how conditions in reception countries in Europe make women more, not less, vulnerable to sexual assault (Freedman 2016).⁵

Interconnection: how are western states connected to the secondary harms?

Because *these* are the real options available to the vast majority of refugees, I want to suggest that Western states should not think of themselves exclusively as rescuers of refugees but as co-contributors to a system that structurally prevents the majority of refugees from finding refuge. As I'll explain in the section below, Western countries have contributed in important ways to the secondary harms that refugees experience as they seek a permanent solution. Though many other countries have, of course, been involved, Western states have been particularly influential in shaping the global refugee regime in ways that support their interests and have ignored the unintended outcomes it has resulted in, such as the 'warehousing' of refugees in camps for prolonged periods of time. In short, though not deliberately intended, the secondary harms experienced by refugees can be understood as the outcome of refugee policies that Western states were highly influential in creating and supporting, policies that, in the view of many, were intended to support Western interests in minimizing their obligations to refugees.

Western states were central in setting up the global system of refugee protection that has been in place since the second half of the 20th century. In the aftermath of the Second World War, the international refugee regime was established. Betts defines the refugee regime as 'the set of norms, rules, principles and decision-making procedures that regulate states' responses to refugees' (Betts 2011, 56). Central to this was the United Nation Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, which '*Western nations* drafted and signed' in 1951 (Gibney 2006, 140; emphasis added). Western states, the US and EU in particular, also played an important role in determining the structure of the main UN body tasked with finding durable solutions for refugees, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). When it was initially founded, these states

⁵For a more detailed analysis of the harms refugees experience as they seek refuge, see Parekh (2020).

tried to ensure that the UNHCR did not have too much power and could not hold them responsible for their treatment of refugees. In Barnett and Finnemore's view, Western states designed the UNHCR to 'do very little and only what states told it to do' (Barnett and Finnemore 2004).

Further, the funding structure for the UNHCR was designed to make it dependent on Western states. The UNHCR, unlike many other UN bodies, is dependent on a handful of states for funding. 94% of the UNHCR's budget comes from the US, Japan, and the EU (Loescher 2012, 6; Hammerstad 2011, 252). Because it is dependent on these states for its funding, many scholars see them as beholden to these states and reluctant to go against their interests. Loescher writes, 'The UNHCR's dependence on voluntary contributions forces it to adopt policies that reflect the interests and priorities of the major donor countries' (Loescher 1993, 139); further, the UNHCR 'is in no position to challenge the policies of its funders and host governments' (Loescher 2012, 6). This is at least one reason why the decision-making procedures for refugee protection can be made in ways that support Western, especially EU and US, interests.

I have been claiming throughout this paper that Western states should be seen as interconnected to the secondary harms experienced by refugees as they seek refuge and not solely as rescuers, rescuing refugees from a situation unconnected to them. This interconnection can further be seen in the ways that Western states have implemented two key norms of the refugee regime and in the effects that have resulted from their interpretation of these principles. The first is the principle of non-refoulement, the principle which holds that states cannot send refugees back to their home countries if they have a well-founded fear of persecution. In many ways, this has been extremely helpful to refugees who understand that if they are able to make it to a new country and claim asylum, they will not be sent back to the country persecuting them. But it has also created an incentive for states to make claiming asylum as difficult as possible. The second is the norm that makes resettlement a discretionary act, not a legal obligation. The US, for example, has no obligation to resettle refugees from Myanmar living in refugee camps in Bangladesh. In fact, there is no obligation on the part of states to resettle any refugees; if states choose to work with the UN to resettle refugees from a refugee camp into their country, or even to fund the care of refugees while they are in the other country, it is considered a matter of generosity and good will, not the fulfilment of an obligation. It up to individual states to decide whether or not they will resettle refugees living 'temporarily' in refugee camps in other countries. The outcome is that only about 20 states resettle refugees and only about 1% of refugees are in fact resettled. Taken together, the outcome of the ways that these two norms have been interpreted by Western states is that the majority of refugees are unable to find circumstances that provide the minimum conditions of human dignity. In short, Western states play a powerful role in supporting and sustaining a system that structurally prevents the majority of refugees from finding refuge.

Take the need for asylum seekers to hire smugglers, spend their life savings and risk their lives in order to claim asylum. Because Western states are not allowed to send back anyone who claims asylum before they have been able to assess whether or not they have a well-founded fear of persecution, states have fairly extensive obligations to anyone who arrives on their territory to claim asylum. Many Western states fear that because legal channels to immigration to their countries from poorer ones

are so difficult, economic migrants will use asylum as a backdoor into their countries. This, they worry, will put too big a financial and political burden on their countries and will not allow them to control immigration according to their own laws and principles. In colloquial terms, they worry that they would 'lose control' over their borders as poor, unwanted migrants tried to gain entrance. Hence the norm of non-refoulement gives in-demand asylum states fairly strong incentives to make sure that large numbers of migrants are unable to arrive in their countries to claim asylum. As David Owen put it, when the cost of refugee protection becomes significant, states have a prudential interest in minimizing their own contribution (Owen 2016, 158).

This is why many Western states have put in place deterrence and non-arrival measures that make it difficult to arrive on their territory to claim asylum. Western states have employed both 'fair means and foul' to make seeking asylum as difficult as possible (Gibney 2004, 229) and in some cases, to simply block migrants from accessing their soil (Hansen 2014, 258). Such means include interdicting asylum seekers at sea, making airports international zones i.e., not places where people can apply for asylum, declaring highly questionable countries 'safe' and therefore not allowing people from those countries to claim asylum, and expanding out of country detention (258–259). Recently, the US implemented a policy of separating children from parents claiming asylum in order to deter future asylum seekers (Shepardson 2018). Further, *all* Western states require visas from refugee-producing countries, visas that are extremely difficult to get, which makes it almost impossible for citizens of these countries to enter Western states legally (Gibney 2006, 148). To enforce this, these states place heavy fines on commercial carriers (airlines, trains, boats, etc.) if their passengers do not contain the correct visas.

While the policy of requiring commercial carriers to check for legal visas might not be an objectionable policy in and of itself, the outcome of it is that asylum seekers who fear for their lives in their countries of origin need to find extra-legal ways to claim asylum, ways that are often known only to professional smugglers. Western states have essentially 'criminalized the search for asylum' (Gibney 2006, 143). While the difficulty getting to the UK, Australia or the US may discourage some from making the journey, it does not discourage those who believe that it is their only chance for safety or a life of dignity (Chang-Muy and Garnick 2019). They are, in effect, required to employ highly dangerous, extra-legal means in order to exercise their basic human right of seeking asylum (Article 14 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights). This is how the current situation for asylum seekers, where they must risk life and limb in order to make it to the EU, Australia and the US, can be seen as an outcome of policies that support Western interests.

Second, the two norms described above give Western states an incentive to support refugee camps as the standard way of helping refugees. As Helton writes, 'the relatively capable states in Europe and North America seek to contain human displacement elsewhere, particularly in Africa' (Helton 2012, 31). Supporting refugee camps, which ensure that refugees are contained in countries largely in the global South, was one way to do this. As Franke put it, 'states funding the UNHCR have managed to cultivate a shift in the organization's ethic from one of facilitating resettlement to one largely concerned with containing refugee flows close to the regions of displacement' (Franke 2009, 317).

This was in part due to the way that the notion of 'rescue' evolved. Prior to the Cold War, when refugee flows were primarily East-West rather than North-South,

resettlement was the standard way of helping refugees (Aleinikoff 1992). Starting shortly after the Cold War, when refugee flows from non-European countries increased, the preferred solution became voluntary repatriation. Refugee camps became the standard way to ‘rescue’ refugees as they were seen as acceptable ways to house refugees while they waited to return home via voluntary repatriation. Refugee camps allowed refugees to remain close to their home countries and thus in principle would allow them to return home more easily. Once it became clear that refugee camps did not in fact make voluntary repatriation any quicker or more likely – the average length of time a refugee will remain in a refugee camp is 12 years (McClelland 2014, quoted in Oliver 2019) and only about 2% of refugees are able to be voluntarily repatriated annually – this nonetheless remained the standard way of providing aid for refugees.

In the view of some scholars, this was because refugee camps ultimately served the interests of Western states in making sure that large scale migration did not threaten their sovereignty. The goal was ultimately ‘to keep Third World refugee problems from inconveniencing the developed states’ (Aleinikoff 1992, 133). Verdirame and Harrell-Bond explain that the support of donor states, i.e., the handful of Western states that fund the UNHCR, for refugee camps was due to a desire to ‘protect the boundaries of “Fortress Europe” (or “Fortress Australia”)’ (Verdirame and Harrell-Bond 2005, 278–279). This policy was not deliberately created to harm refugees, but in practice has allowed Western states to minimize their obligations to refugees and has left millions to survive in conditions of extreme hardship and insecurity. This is another example of the way that Western states act as co-contributors to a system that structurally prevents refugees from accessing the minimum conditions of human dignity while they are refugees.

Conclusion

What I have suggested in this paper is that the relationship of Western states to refugees should not be understood primarily as one of rescue. Thinking of Western states solely as rescuers *misrepresents* the reality of the refugee crisis and downplays the harms experienced by refugees as they seek refuge. Instead, I’ve argued that we need to adopt a framework that highlights the interconnection of Western states and their immigration policies to the real options refugees have in the world. The interconnection is based on the ways in which these options have been supported and sustained through the policies of Western countries. The role that Western states play is not solely one of rescue, but of creators and supporters of a system that helps few, harms some and makes it nearly impossible for the vast majority to access the minimum conditions for human dignity.

How we frame an issue can have deep moral and political significance. A frame allows us to pick out certain aspects of a problem, put in the forefront what we think is important and push back the less important aspects of it. In framing an issue, we put it into a narrative that makes sense to us and allows us to consider solutions. How we choose to frame a problem has political significance. For example, if we frame testing medical drugs on animals as a purely *medical* issue – one of efficiency – we are less likely to criticize it than if we were to frame it as an *ethical* one where we take seriously the suffering of animals. Animal rights groups have pushed for a long time for the

public to take this second way of framing the issue seriously in the hope that it would lead more people to reject the practice.

I've suggested above that we ought to reject the rescue framework because it is too narrow. It does not adequately represent the reality experienced by refugees, it diminishes refugees' agency in portraying them as victims to be rescued and covers over the extent to which the failure to genuinely rescue refugees is the result of a system that was set up to promote Western interests and minimize Western obligations to refugees and asylum seekers. I am arguing for a framework that highlights the ways in which Western states contributes to the inability of refugees to find refuge. If we frame the issue in this way, it's clear that obligations of Western states to refugee are far more demanding than what is normally assumed in the rescue paradigm.

I think there is room for debate about precisely which obligations would emerge from the interconnection framework. Responsibility to remediate a harm one has created is usually considered to be a stronger obligation than those of rescue, where the rescuer can balance the obligation to rescue with their own interests. What would it take to remediate the secondary harms experienced by refugees? It may mean much more resettlement (both from Western and non-Western countries); making resettlement a duty, not just an act of discretion; creating, funding and supporting programmes that promote integration and employment in the global South instead of camps; providing safe routes to seek asylum and increasing various kinds of humanitarian and other visas for refugees so that they can enter Western states legally and without smugglers; and more global cooperation and coordination to achieve all of these. But my overall hope is that by reframing how Western states see their relationship to refugees and moving away from the rescue metaphor, we will be able to consider, discuss and debate in a more meaningful way what morality demands in terms of our treatment of refugees.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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