# The Treatment of Refugees from Sub-Saharan Africa

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**Introduction**

The treatment of refugees has become a development topic due to the rise of political insecurities worldwide. As a result, formal international organisations were formed in efforts to provide legal conventions to govern and protect individuals who are displaced (Betts et al., 2012: 8). Specifically, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) is a formal international organisation that was created in 1950 to respond to the increasing demand of refugee crises due to war which led to millions of people moving from their countries of origin to seek protection in other neighbouring countries (Betts et al., 2012: 8-9). The rise of refugees globally has caused many European and North American countries to create migration and immigration policies to protect their borders and close their borders to the influx of refugees seeking asylum (Betts et al., 2012: 9). These western governments who have taken the approach of protecting their borders from refugees in order to prevent refugees from entering their countries, raises concerns about the treatment of refugees in the Global North.

This essay will critically analyse how western norms and ideologies influence the treatment of refugees from Sub-Saharan Africa. It will explore how these westernized norms and ideologies contribute to the lack of humanitarian compassion for refugees, ineffective international public policy that reinforces power inequality, and the stigmatization of refugees. These three arguments will draw on the constructivism theory in international relations in order to bring an understanding of the

negative impacts of western customs on refugees from Sub-Saharan Africa. The constructivism theory studies the ways in which "social phenomena are constructed through interactions among humans, who interpret one another's actions and define situations based on those interpretations" (Badie et al., 2011: 2). Constructivism will examine how the social construction of refugees in the Global North results in them being treated differently as opposed to the citizens in western countries. Furthermore, it will explore the interactions of refugees from Sub-Saharan Africa in order to highlight the lack of support refugees receive from western governments due to their socially constructed notion that these refugees do not belong in their countries. Constructivism also studies how race and ethnicity shape the interactions of individuals in society as specific racial categories are deemed belonging in western countries such as the United States of America (USA) and the United Kingdom, whereas other races are estranged (Badie et al., 2011: 2). For instance, individuals who are identified in the Black racial category are treated differently than individuals who are White. Therefore, a refugee who is recognized as a person who belongs in the Black racial category significantly impacts the quality of care they receive from western governments.

**The Lack of Humanitarian Compassion**

Refugees from Sub-Saharan African countries fail to receive humanitarian compassion from the governments in their host countries. According to Idris (2021: 2), refugees from sub-Saharan African countries such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Sudan, and Eritrea are not provided adequate social service support when they arrive in the Triad area of North Carolina, the United States of America and this leads to them having a difficult time transitioning in their resettled locations. However, when refugees from sub-Saharan African countries are placed in other states in the USA, which have a predominantly sub-Saharan immigrant community, it allows them to assimilate as they are able to find employment, learn English and send their children to school (Idris, 2021: 2). However, when these refugees are placed in Triad in North Carolina, they are not able to receive adequate social service as they are in neighbourhoods that lack the immigrant community, which can allow them to thrive in their new life and create positive social connections with people from the same culture.

It has been reported that refugees from sub-Saharan African countries such as Sudan and Somalia are able to quickly reintegrate into states such as Minnesota and Maine because there are large diaspora social networks in these states compared to states that do not have these ethnic representations (Idris, 2021: 3-4). This is because "in smaller and less diverse cities, these sub-Saharan African refugees face the risk of experiencing discrimination due to racism and cultural stereotyping" (Idris, 2021: 4). The notion that sub-Saharan African refugees experience differential treatment based on the cities they are hosted in because of their racial and ethnic identities relates to the constructivism theory. This relates to the constructivism theory as it indicates how race and ethnicity play a significant role in how individuals experience their daily interactions. In this case, it shows that these refugees who belong to the Black racial category are socially constructed by smaller cities as not belonging, which in turn results in them being discriminated against (Badie et al., 2011: 2). Thus, the lack of humanitarian compassion for refugees from sub-Saharan African countries is influenced by political agents and the media's representation of them. According to Bhambra (2015), politicians in western countries such as the United Kingdom promote the belief in the media that refugees from Africa seek asylum in developed countries due to economic motivations rather than for genuine reasons such as the risk of persecution. These notions of refugees shape the interactions of refugees in developed countries as politicians are agents who influence their society (Onuf, 2012: 4). The belief that refugees come to countries like the United Kingdom and the United States solely because of economic motivations reinforces negative stereotypes of refugees as it suggests that they immigrate to these countries only to abuse the system rather than to seek protection. These stereotypical views of refugees negatively impact how they are treated as politicians do not create adequate policies to support their needs.

**Ineffective International Public Policy that Reinforces Power Inequality**

The international public policy system fails to provide effective procedures to address the needs of refugees from sub-Saharan African countries. According to Verwimp and Maystadt (2015: 2), international public policy fails to address the economic and social needs of refugees after the emergency phase as there are minimal long-term plans to address their resettlement in their host communities. This statement indicates that governments who host refugees do not consider the ways

that refugees can contribute to their economy through their previous work experiences. For instance, "many refugees have entrepreneurial skills, entertain active trading networks, act as brokers between refugees and the economic operators in their country of origin" (Verwimp and Maystadt, 2015: 16). When host countries do not utilize the skill sets of refugees, it does not provide refugees the opportunity to grow economically as they are dependent on government support to meet their needs. However, if their work experience from their country of origin is acknowledged and appreciated, it gives them the opportunity to seek employment in order to increase their financial independence.

Betts et al. (2012: 10), argues that international public policy neglects the needs of refugees from sub-Saharan Africa because there is a collective international agreement that promotes anti-immigration in most countries. This suggests that most countries in the world have been socially constructed to ignore refugee problems as it threatens their commitments of anti-immigration. This notion of refugees stems from the belief that "tight fiscal constraints and high unemployment levels at home should limit any humanitarian initiatives on behalf of refugees from abroad and that no particular foreign policy benefits would accrue" (Betts et al., 2012: 10). This collective belief of refugees by governments is problematic as it undermines the traumatic experiences of refugees in their country of origin as it suggests that international public policy should disregard them. Furthermore, when countries promote the rhetoric that they need to overlook refugee problems, it reinforces power inequality as the developed states can uphold their wealth and power while marginalizing refugees from developing countries.

The constructivism theory in international relations claims that when countries promote the rhetoric that refugees are a strain to their economy, it is used to support their perspective that individuals from other countries are enemies therefore, they need to create protectionism policies to keep them out of their country (Badie et al., 2011: 5). Furthermore, when developed countries enforce these protectionism policies against refugees, other developing countries accept refugees despite lacking the economic means to take care of them. For example, Addaney (2017: 72) reported that countries in sub-Saharan Africa receive over 6.2 million refugees, which is about 29 percent of the refugee population in the world; however, they are the least equipped to take care of them. This is because these developing countries do not receive sufficient support from international organisations

such as the UNHCR, which is designed to provide aid to refugees. The UNHCR supports this claim as they have reported that the global refugee system will progressively become weaker and divided due to many governments in the developed world leaning towards closing their borders to refugees (Addaney, 2017: 72). Therefore, the division of the developing and developed worlds impacts the treatment of refugees from sub-Saharan Africa.

**The Stigmatization of Refugees**

Western governments stigmatize refugees from sub-Saharan Africa as they are otherized due to their geographical and racial background. This is evident as western countries foster liberal ideologies, which classify these refugees as strangers who need saving and uninvited guests (Danewid, 2017: 1675). The classification of refugees as strangers stems from the narrative that society has hierarchies as some lives are deemed more valuable than others. In this case, the lives of refugees are considered less vulnerable by western governments as they are perceived as bogus, perishable, and unworthy of saving (Danewid, 2017: 1677). This notion of refugees by developed countries contributes to the cycle of neglect on sub-Saharan African refugees as it encourages anti-immigration policies against refugees while also creating the narrative that refugees do not belong in their country. Finnemore and Sikkink (1998: 906) note that governments in developed countries construct these international norms of refugees because they are uncertain about their international reputation.

Western governments play the role of actors in legitimizing the insecurity of refugees entering their countries, which creates a hostile environment when refugees arrive in their countries. Badie et al. (2011: 4), suggests that the behaviour of western governments towards refugees produces a social problem as citizens in western countries will treat refugees as unworthy since their politicians promote this rhetoric of refugees. Politicians are actors in their countries, therefore when they make discriminatory claims about refugees, it negatively impacts the way refugees are treated in their host countries. According to Hailu et al. (2021: 3), refugees from sub-Saharan Africa experience xenophobia as the media perpetuates a racialized moral panic. For instance, in Australia, the media and conservative politicians describe African refugee communities as violent thugs and crime gangs

(Hailu et al., 2021: 3). The media and conservative politicians creating this moral panic against refugees is extremely harmful as it raises fear of crime and contributes to the notion that developed countries are victims.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, this essay examined how the westernized social construction of norms impacts the treatment of refugees from sub-Saharan Africa. It explicitly recognised the lack of humanitarian compassion towards refugees, ineffective international public policy that reinforces power inequality, and the stigmatization of refugees. These issues were observed through the constructivism theory in international relations in order to understand how social interactions among humans define situations involving race and ethnicity (Badie et al., 2011: 2). It addressed how actors such as politicians in developed countries and the UNHCR fail to provide adequate support for refugees, which results in them being a marginalized population in their host countries. Furthermore, this international issue of refugees was explored in order for international politics to bring more responsiveness to the increasing topic of human rights. Sikkink (1998: 517) recommends that international politics should evaluate marginalized human rights and why dominant economic and hegemonic countries pursue specific international problems based on their own self interests. When international politics studies the intentions of countries who hold economic power, it will bring awareness to why sub-Saharan African refugees experience xenophobia and racism in developed countries.

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