

# Introduction

## Global Movements for Refugee and Migrant Rights

Michelle Lowry and Peter Nyers<sup>1</sup>

Refugees and other forcibly displaced migrants are encountering a vast and expanding array of restrictive laws and policies designed to control and exclude their entry. The countries of the North, in particular, have dramatically enhanced the powers of border authorities to interdict and interrogate, to detain and deport. Powers of surveillance have similarly been increased, to the point where we are witnessing the implementation of technologies that selectively determine who shall be excluded based on their (national, racial, gender) profile. While these measures have been under development for some time, the trend to “securitize” migration has only intensified in the wake of the violent attacks on New York and Washington.<sup>2</sup>

The authors in this special issue of *Refuge* are deeply troubled by these measures and their implications for national cultures of asylum and the international freedom of movement. But these moves to restrict movement, to limit asylum, and to sharply distinguish insiders from outsiders are not inevitable or irreversible trends. To the contrary, campaigns for the rights of refugees and migrants have emerged as some of the most energetic and important social and political movements today. Each of the contributors to this special issue takes inspiration from the ways in which these restrictive immigration and refugee policies are being actively contested, challenged, and, in some cases, overturned.

Migrant and refugee rights movements appear in various forms and take on a diverse set of tactics to suit their particular contexts and circumstances. For example, Australia’s notorious policy of detaining asylum-seekers has been met by a vigorous campaign by citizen groups to advocate for the rights of refugees. Here, the traditional tactics of lobbying government officials and organizing letter-writing campaigns exist alongside more radical measures, such as the creation of sanctuary zones and the dis-

mantling of fences around detention centres to facilitate escapes. Similarly, a well-developed movement under the slogan “No One Is Illegal” has emerged in Europe. Caravans for refugee and migrant rights make an annual trek across Germany. Border squats have been organized along the perimeter of “Fortress Europe.” A well-developed campaign targets European airlines that profit from carrying out deportations. Finally, anti-detention campaigns have been successful in closing detention centres such as the Via Corelli in Milan and Campsfield House in England.<sup>3</sup>

The articles in this issue consider the struggles of refugees and migrants taking place in Afghanistan, Canada, the European Union, Australia, and Japan. Together, they demonstrate that both the crackdown on refugees and migrants – and the resistances to these assaults – are a global phenomenon.

A key theme runs through each of the contributions to this volume: the question of political agency. Each piece confronts this fundamental question: When it comes to advocating for refugee and migrant rights, who is an effective political actor? Is it the UN and its agencies? Governments? NGOs? Citizen groups? What of the refugees and migrants themselves? Must they be “spoken for”? Or can they speak, advocate, and organize for themselves?

In the opening article for this collection, Cynthia Wright tackles these questions with a savvy analysis of those social movements organizing around a “no border”/“no one is illegal” politics. Paying particular attention to the prospects for such campaigns in Canada, Wright looks at the effects that the September 11, 2001 attacks has had on migrant and refugee rights organizing. As the so-called Homeland Security agenda in the US looks toward tightening and coordinating its border policies with Canada, Wright argues that activists on both sides of the border need to internationalize

“locally and nationally bound immigration struggles.” Further, Wright argues that it is necessary to examine “current border panics and nationalisms from the standpoint of immigrants, refugees, and the undocumented.” She calls upon activists in various arenas – including anti-racist, labour, aboriginal, anti-globalization and anti-war organizations – to make the links between their struggles and those of migrants and refugees. This, Wright concludes, will set the stage for organizing a “clear and direct challenge to surveillance, detention, racialized citizenship and national security logics.”

The following three contributions all address the complicated situation facing Afghans who have been forcibly displaced due to the (on-going) conflict and violence in their country. While Michael Leach and Mai Kaneko consider the plight of Afghan refugees in Australia and Japan, respectively, photographer Babak Salari and curator Gita Hashemi pose the provocative question: “What happens to the millions who do not make it to the ‘safety’ of the detention camps in Western countries?” Have they been “rescued” or “liberated” by allied forces? With an eye for the divergent possibilities facing the forcibly displaced in the region – for example, the despairing faces found in the IDP camps stand in stark contrast to the energy and hope portrayed in the residents of a camp established by the Revolutionary Association of Women of Afghanistan – Salari and Hashemi tackle these difficult questions through their stunning documentation of the pervasive violence of the border and the struggles of daily existence in tent cities.

For those refugees that manage to escape Afghanistan and other zones of conflict, they often face criminalization and detention in so-called countries of asylum. Perhaps the most well-known and notorious example of the criminalization of asylum-seekers can be found in Australia. Michael Leach provides a thorough account of the disturbing anti-refugee practices and discourses at work in that country. Focusing on the asylum-seeker “crisis” of 2001–02, Leach demonstrates how the Howard government actively deployed racist characterizations of Iraqi and Afghan asylum-seekers as an election campaign strategy. The now infamous “children overboard” incident, in which refugees were falsely accused of throwing their children into the ocean, was used to construct a certain unsavoury identity for the refugees. Leach details how the asylum-seekers were represented as dishonest and dangerous migrants, as immoral and irresponsible parents, and as possessing a value system alien to Australians. The asylum-seekers were, in short, cast as everything that “good Australian citizens” were not. In his conclusion, Leach outlines the connection between these negative portrayals of Afghan asylum-seekers to fur-

ther restrictive measures in Australia’s already strict and exclusionary refugee policy.

While the treatment of Afghan refugees in Australia has been well-documented, their plight within Japan is less well-known. Japan, like many Northern states, initiated a crackdown on asylum-seekers in the immediate post-September 11, 2001 context, enhancing the powers of authorities to detain and deport asylum-seekers. In an inspiring account, Mai Kaneko considers the Free Afghan Refugees movement, which was successful in mobilizing large number of Japanese citizens against these oppressive measures. This campaign brought together many segments of Japanese society, including large numbers of people who had never before been politically active. Kaneko argues that this movement was not only successful in securing the release of many of the detained Afghan asylum-seekers, but was also able to force the Japanese government to introduce significant and progressive changes to Japan’s asylum system.

In her study, Helena Schwenken compares various political campaigns waged in the name of international domestic workers in the European Union. She argues that a “trafficking” frame and a “rights” frame result in very different political outcomes and consequences for these migrant workers. In their call for tightened border controls, return programs, and the regulation of domestic work, anti-trafficking campaigns situate domestic workers in a discourse of illegal immigration and trafficking. The rights approach by contrast, recognizes domestic labour as work, and therefore calls for employment legislation that ensures the rights of migrant workers as well as the regularization of all non-status workers. In advocating for the latter approach, Schwenken refuses to see domestic workers as “the problem,” and instead poses an important challenge to frameworks which reinforce restrictive state policies on migration.

Nandita Sharma also provides a critique of anti-trafficking campaigns. She too challenges the idea that the movement of people across borders is somehow a “problem” that needs to be managed and controlled. Rejecting the distinctions between “illegal” and “legal” migrant, “genuine” and “bogus” refugee, and “smuggled” vs. “trafficked” persons, Sharma argues that when anti-trafficking campaigns utilize these tropes they reinforce the power of the state to control borders and deport those deemed undesirable. Ironically, anti-trafficking campaigns that claim to serve the interests of migrants can in fact be anti-migrant in nature. They reinforce the idea that migrant women are agentless and voiceless victims, rather than self-determining agents. Employing an anti-racist critique, Sharma suggests that “anti-trafficking campaigns need to be replaced with a political

practice that actually listens to and privileges the standpoint of undocumented migrants.”

The articles by Wright, Schwenken, and Sharma all illustrate the thorny political problems that arise when activists organize *for* rather than in solidarity *with* migrant and refugee communities. From the rioting refugees in Woomera to the *sans papiers* in France, refugees around the world are acting as political agents in their own right. How then can “citizen groups” and activists work effectively and in solidarity with refugee and migrant communities? Which strategies and tactics have proven successful in creating political change? Within refugee rights social movements and campaigns, how are gender inequalities and the experiences of refugee women being addressed? We raised these questions, and others, in our roundtable discussion with a group of activists working on refugee and migrant rights campaigns in Canada. Members of Montreal’s *Action Committee for Non-Status Algerians* shared their experiences of living as “non-status” in Canada, and the challenges of organizing against their deportations. Members of Montreal’s *No One is Illegal* and Toronto’s *Ontario Coalition Against Poverty* also joined the discussion with their thoughts about how to effectively engage as allies in refugee and migrant rights campaigns.

An additional article, outside the theme of this special issue on the global movements for refugee and migrant rights, concludes this volume. Ekuru Aukot’s case study of Turkana refugees in Kenya makes a powerful case for considering the impact of refugee camps and assistance policies on the local populations of host countries. Aukot argues that refugees will not be able to enjoy the rights accorded to them in national legislation and international conventions if significant attention is not paid to refugee-host relations.

In conclusion, we agree with Étienne Balibar’s assessment of what “we” owe the global *sans-papiers*: “The *sans-papiers*, the excluded among the excluded (though certainly not the only ones), have ceased to simply play the victims in order to become the actors of democratic politics. Through their resistance and their imagination, they powerfully help us give [politics] new life. We owe them this recognition, and to say it, and to commit ourselves ever more numerously at their side, until right and justice are repaid them.”<sup>4</sup>

#### Notes

1. This is a jointly authored essay and the order of the authors’ names is alphabetical.
2. R. Whitaker, “Refugee Policy after September 11: Not Much New,” *Refuge: Canada’s Periodical on Refugees* 20:4 (2002), pp. 29–33.
3. T. Hayter, *Open Borders: The Case against Immigration Controls* (London: Pluto, 2000).
4. É. Balibar, “What We Owe to the *Sans-Papiers*,” in L. Guenther and C. Heesters, eds., *Social Insecurity: Alphabet City No. 7* (Toronto: Anansi, 2000), pp. 42–43.

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