

**BOOK REVIEW****REFUGEE WOMEN: BY SUSAN FORBES MARTIN**

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**INTRODUCTION**

*Refugee Women*, authored by Susan Forbes Martin and originally published in 1992 by Zed Books Ltd(London and New Jersey), turned awareness for the first time to the particular issues faced by women driven from their homes as a result of international conflict. The book is the first edition in the series developed by the Joint UN/NGO Group on Women and Development and has made available succinct information, debate and action taken on the condition of refugee women. Dr. Martin has authored numerous articles on immigration and is also a member of the Board of the Women's Commission for Refugee women and Children.

In a constantly changing world political or ethnic strife has resulted overnight in thousands of people fleeing to preserve their basic rights. Out of the millions that have faced the wrath of international conflicts and had to flee their states of origin, women and children remain the most vulnerable of all. This book was published at a time when not much empirical data was available on the condition of refugees in particular women and has successfully assisted humanitarian assistance practitioners respond to the complex challenges faced in delivering programmes effectively to refugees. It has also been recommended as a required reading for all those who work with or for refugees by various refugee study researchers worldwide.

**THEME AND CENTRAL ARGUMENT:**

The book consists of eight chapters covering varied aspects of the law and practice of protection and assistance to refugee women. Chapters three to six covering, "A safe Refuge", "Assistance: Friend or Foe", "Towards greater Self Sufficiency", and "Durable Solutions" constitute the core of the book.

In an attempt to correctly portray the condition of refugees, the author starts the book with an excerpt from her visit to a refugee camp in Thailand. The narrative put forth by the author

describes the refugee camp as a row of huts and the surroundings to include larger buildings, a rudimentary hospital, food warehouse, a school and the cooking smell of food mixed with the stench of latrines. The typical description of a surrounding that houses thousands of refugees is bound to grip the reader from the very first line. In the First Chapter the author lays emphasis on the definition of refugees as incorporated in the UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, 1951 and the responsibility of international organizations like the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Further the author has stated significant consequences of the refugee situation on the host country, world community and regions in conflict. Chapter 2 expounds on the journey of role reversal for refugee women, who must cope with changes in family structures and take the wrath of their husbands who experience frustration on account of loss of employment and livelihood. The author in the most exhaustive Chapter number 3 discusses the quintessential issue of protection and safety of the refugees. Women separated from families are especially susceptible to physical abuse, and their physical security remains a concern not only during the flight but also in host countries. Internally displaced women as proposed by the author are further victims of immense torture and tragedy since no UN agency has a protection mandate regarding such women.

In Chapter 4, the author shows how refugee women suffer from the inadequacies of the system of international assistance provided to them. Access to food, water, appropriate health care and constraints on access to services, education and skills training for women and children are areas where the author has shed light on along with suitable recommendations. Chapter 5 has the most relevance as it accounts for all initiatives taken by international and national organizations for making refugee women self sufficient and reliant. In the next Chapter 6 the author lists the durable solutions available to refugee women as voluntary return to one's country of origin, settlement in a country of first asylum, and resettlement in a third country and the protection concerns of each of them. The following chapter explores the repercussions a woman refugee might face after having resettled in an industrialized country and the needs and opportunities that resettlement of refugee women provides. The author in the last chapter reviews efforts to improve responses to refugee women in the UN system as well as by NGOs.

#### **WRITING STYLE AND MY REFLECTIONS:**

The ever growing population of refugees and internally displaced people has now posed a serious threat to international peace and harmony. The fact that the author started the book with an estimate of the number of refugee and displaced women and children is testimony to continuing difficulty in effectively meeting the needs of this large population. That women and children constitute 80% of the refugee population is a widely used statistic, yet its implications for policy development have not been fully integrated into decision making<sup>1</sup>.

The author has divided her account on the subject in specific chapters which deal with multifarious aspects of the situation of refugee women and the way forward. Each chapter of the book has excerpts from real life interviews of people which are written in bold and keep the reader deeply engrossed in empathizing with the grim condition of refugees.

It is indeed true to say that in reality, the civilians, including women and children are often the first victims of conflicts. Almost half of the world's refugees are totally dependent on international assistance for the basic needs of food, shelter, and health care. The book considers the assistance issues encountered by refugee and displaced women, using information, largely anecdotal, gleaned from researcher's field visits to refugee camps and the reports of individuals and groups working with refugee women. Further, the book is also an exhaustive compilation of aspects relating to refugee women right from their acquiring a legal status of refugee, physical safety, access to services and healthcare, role in income generating projects, repatriation and life in industrialized countries. The author has adopted a narrative style of writing with common everyday language and long descriptive sentences that are strung together with commas and semi colons.

While the author has highlighted the apathy of refugee women and children by highlighting statistics and instances of countries which expose refugee women to physical abuse and violence, she has also left the readers with a ray of hope by listing various income generating projects involving refugee women aimed at achieving self-sufficiency. This is indeed the best part of the book. The author critically reviews the efforts of UN and other NGOs to improve responses to refugee women and reiterates that much remains to be done; she however also acknowledges that greater policy attention has been brought to the issues of refugee women within these systems and steps have been taken towards protection of the human rights of these refugees.

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<sup>1</sup> Susan Forbes Martin, *Refugee Women*, pg 5 (Zed Books Ltd, 1992)

Most importantly the book has garnered attention on the issue of internally displaced women, who are sometimes even more vulnerable than refugee women. While certain rights of internally displaced women are detailed in the Geneva Conventions, not all governments have ratified the relevant conventions or protocols, and regardless of that, it is always the State's discretion to permit nongovernmental organizations entry into its territory. In such a case, the role of international assistance becomes minimal and the same has been highlighted by the author very predominantly.

The author has further iterated how discrimination and violence from the refugee's women own families and communities in addition to external physical threat can greatly increase their emotional trauma. She has indeed stepped into the shoes of a typical refugee woman and documented the problems faced by them in the light of varying cultural and social structures. Apart from statistics and tables reflecting data, the book contains lifelike pictures of refugee women and children huddled in camps, sitting, cooking and working in lands, which captivates the reader in the very first glance. Throughout the book, the author despite being critical and tactically listing drawbacks and demerits of income generating initiatives by governmental and nongovernmental organizations has also suggested pragmatic recommendations, marked with bulletins, in each chapter which even after 26 years from the date of publishing of the book, hold great relevance. The footnotes in each chapter are further illustrative of various journals and authentic reports relied on by the author for corroborating her propositions.

Providing a complete overview on the subject the author has ended categorically specifying the need to include refugee women in all aspects of programme design and implementation. Further the book also has as annexure, guidelines on organizing meetings to promote awareness for the cause of refugee women and other relevant UN documentation, which makes it the perfect guide on the subject. I revelled in reading the book and I recommend it to all those who are unaware of the poignant situation of refugee women as well as to potential and experienced researchers who wish to research more on the ground realities of refugee women and initiatives taken for their betterment.