

Between Home and Refugee Camps: Tracing Gendered Violence against Muslim Women in Maria Von Welser's *No Refuge for Women*

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Abstract

The purpose of this research paper is to analyze Maria Von Welser's book *No Refuge for Women* for the exploration of the status of the Muslim refugee women in the backdrop of the theoretical underpinning propounded by Jane Freedman in her book. Maria Von Welser in her book attempts to validate Muslim women's miseries not only in their territorial boundaries but also across the borders. They are matter of no concern in asylums because they are discriminated in the camps on the basis of gender. The current research also investigates her book as a representative voice of marginalized section of Muslim refugees and it vividly articulates its focus on the evidence from the text to trace that there is no room for this suppressed group. Jane Freedman's theoretical concept of asylum and refugees has been applied for the evaluation of the selected text. Freedman examines the foreign oppressive influence on colonized countries especially with reference to the double marginalization of Muslim women. This study is qualitative and textual analysis is used as a research method.

Keywords:

Muslim Women refugee, marginalization, exploitation, violence, slavery

1. Introduction:

The current paper aims at analyzing the selected text *No Refuge for Women: A Tragic Fate of Syrian Women* in the backdrop of violence against Muslim women refugees in their home and refugee camps. According to the UN, a refugee is a person who has been forced to leave his/her motherland due to "persecution, war, or violence".¹ Beginning from the displacement of the Jews after the holocaust, refugees have been

an important concern in the field of the study especially when it come to the issues related to “citizenship and statelessness...people trafficking, human rights, international law, the ethics of asylum...”² Refugee literature explains the experiences of the refugees and how they overcome the onerous circumstances. Its purpose is to spread awareness to the people about the issues of refugees and how they were welcomed by the receiving states. For the temporary accommodation, the states build refugee camps that provide temporary homes for the refugees. They are built in order to provide shelter and basic facilities to the refugees. According to the UNHCR’s report, “In 2018, approximately 70.8 million people were living in refugee camps”³ However, according to some critics, the issues of female refugees are always concealed. This gender based violence is very common among the refugees, where they suffer from uttermost violence and sexual exploitation. According to Oliveira et al., it “encompasses gender-stereotyped acts of violence, based on unequal power relations and denying human dignity, rights and development”⁴ Therefore, it is an important issue that needs to be addressed.

Gender based violence is the foremost debate in the theoretical book, “Gendering the International Asylum and Refugee Debate” given by Freedman. In this book, Freedman argues that most of the statistics related to asylum seekers ignore women. When the women try to leave their houses in order to leave their houses, they are surrounded by the fear of violence and sexual abuse and when they move as migrants, the danger prevails in the host country too. Moreover, Freedman has also presented the problems that these refugee women face in the camps. It includes issues like, lack of basic resources, persecution, risk of violence and sexual attacks with rapes. There is “the control of women’s bodies to ensure that their social roles and behavior conform to the patterns of gender domination established in societies”⁵ Welser in her book, “No Refugee for Women: A Tragic Fate of Syrian Refugees” has talked about the real life experiences of the life of Syrian women in the refugee camps. Starting from the difference between migrants and refugees, where migrants move in the hope of a better life and refugees move, “threatened by bombs, snipers, gas attacks, grenades, imprisonment”⁶ She has talked about the effects of 7 years long war in Syria, on women. She has discussed the traumatic conditions related to human trafficking, rape, sex slavery and forced prostitution. Therefore this book provides an intense account of women’s gender based violence and sufferings in the refugee camps.

Refugee literature and the issues of the refugees is an important field of literature that has been left unexplored by many researchers. In this regard, the problems faced by Syrian women in the context of Syrian

civil War and how they faced with violence, sex slavery and rape is an important issue that needs attention and exploration. According to Asaf, "These Syrian women refugees are facing sexual and gender-based violence, early marriages, overwhelming economic strife, and psychological scarring".⁷ The current research will bring into light these issues through the real life accounts of the women, as explored by Welser and will add to the significance of the refugee literature in the field of studies. Moreover, it will also highlight the impact of these issues on women and the conduct of the host countries towards these refugees.

1.1. Problem Statement:

Civil wars lead to displacement forcing people to migrate from their countries to seek temporary residence. Such people get the status of "refugees" and they face many hurdles in their temporary accommodation. However, the descriptions related to refugees have been limited to general discrimination and the sufferings of women in particular have not highlighted. They undergo through many troubles like violence and sex slavery, which need to be addressed. The current research analyzes the selected text to explore such issues faced by the Syrian-Muslim-women refugees during the Syrian Civil War and how it developed the traumatic conditions for them.

1.2 Research Questions:

- How does the selected work highlight the violence against Syrian refugee women in home and refugee camps?
- How does the selected work underscore the impact of maltreatment on Muslim Syrian women?

1.3 Research Objectives:

1. To highlight the violence and slavery faced by the Muslim women refugees during war, through novel.
2. To evaluate the impact of these issues on Muslim women as portrayed in the novel.

2. Literature Review

The issue of Syrian women refugees has been explored through multiple perspectives like that of displacement before. One of the studies conducted by Alkhaled and Sasaki talks about Syrian refugees in terms of liminality and displacement. The study explored the women who flew to "Jordan, the Zaatari Refugee Camp in Jordan the United Kingdom" and

faced with the issue of settlement in the country they moved⁸. As a result they became the “liminars” belonging to nowhere. The research was an ethnographic study and the data collection methods that were used included interviews and observations. The research concluded that the refugees are not allowed to settle in the hostage country and rather are expected to return to their own countries after the end of the war, even if the circumstances are dangerous for them upon returning. Thus, women in these countries like Jordan and the United States should be provided with adequate opportunities to fulfill their responsibilities. The research focuses on the problems of liminality as considering one of the issues of refugees whereas this study will focus on other problems related to sexual violence and slavery experienced by these women.

Similarly, another research named “Manzuaat wa Musharadat, Uprooted and Scattered: Refugee Women Escape Journey and the Longing to Return to Syria” talks about the same issues of loss and a desire to return to roots, faced by the Syrian women. The researchers say that the women faced multiple issues like “housing difficulties, high cost of living, illegality of work, scarce economic resources, poverty, hostility of locals” in the host country⁹. For the research, the researchers used the method of interview and tried to explore the psychological condition of these women. They were interviewed about their experiences before the war and after the war. Most of them showed their desire to return to Syria. They also discussed how their society got fragmented and everyone got displaced from their homes due to the war. Thus again, this research is loosely related to issues of loss and displacement.

Another research conducted by Asaf debates about the ignorance of the role of women in peacemaking, during the war situations. According to the researcher, “wars are gendered, both in causes and consequences”.¹⁰ In order to prove that, the researcher has taken the example of Syrian women and how these women have overcome the conflicts and have used multiple strategies of peacemaking. The study is a secondary study and method that has been used is the re-analysis of already available data, reports or any relevant data that is available. The researcher has challenged the most common notion of women as “victims of wars”.¹¹ The research concludes that women are not provided enough resources of confrontation during wars and are also not included in political decisions and discussion of important matters. Thus, this research has a totally different approach as compared to the prevailing study because it talks about the role of women in war whereas the current study explores issues of women during the wars.

FIDH (The International Federation for Human Rights)¹² reveals that all human beings are born free and they are endowed with reason and conscience but Syrian women are at periphery in this section, they are abducted, assaulted and harassed during their journey. The FIDH delegation visited three refugee camps, Al Zaatari, King Abdullah Park and Cyber City and held meetings with 80 refugees. In this visit they were informed how Syrian women are entrapped and sexually abused. The study also examines how fear of being raped motivated women to flee from their own country. There was also a group of several women which was called "survivors of rape" but this group was also forced to get married in order to "save family honor". It was almost difficult to conduct different interviews with reluctant rape survivors due to social, religious and cultural pressures but later on they publicized how they were sold at different places and how they were imprisoned in horrible narrow cells and in retaliation they could not do against physical strengths. The current research will explore the similar issues in Welser's novels.

Yasmine & Moughalian's¹³ study examines the problems of migration of Syrian women refugees from their own country to Lebanon. Since the unrest in Syria in March 2011, over 4.3 million Syrians have voluntarily migrated to neighboring countries like Lebanon, Turkey and USA. This study observes the sexual and reproductive health issues of Syrian women. An increase in gender-based violence and early marriage, a lack of access to emergency obstetric care, limited access to contraception, forced cesarean sections, and high cost of healthcare services, all contribute to poor sexual and reproductive health. Due to war, trauma, and displacement, women of Syria are still facing mental health issues, neither they are stable and standing for themselves nor they are playing any prior role to raise their families. The study also examines that in order to alleviate the impacts of this societal and psychological trauma, NGOs can play their vital role to raise the voices of this marginalized section before the world. NGOs can establish the solidarity web and design measures for enhancing security from sexual violence at the camp in order to help and support refugee women of any country.

Faten Sabouni¹⁴ in his research, states that since 2011, the surging point of Syrians' crisis, around 10,858 Syrian refugees have applied for asylum in the UK and 5000 refugees have entered the UK legally through the "vulnerable person location scheme". His research also states that refugees in the UK are experiencing huge social and cultural losses, which can affect their mental health and well-being. They added that refugees suffer from extreme stress and anxiety, and from the loss of cultural norms, social support systems, and religious traditions. These effects will

leave this vulnerable population in increasing need of mental health support. This study also reveals that Syrians are deployed with their rudimentary rights like healthcare, education, employment, and housing sectors, which need to be valued and channelized. The UK Government failed to provide them basic human necessities.

Aside from Syrian women, Sarmento¹⁵ defines how violence is executed against Africans on the basis of knowledge. His search reveals how colonial powers settled in Africa and how they made them suppressed and marginalized. They snatched their lands, made them geographically weaker nations and still are part of large-scale processes of dispossession. Colonialism, as Valentin Mudimbe argues, is closely tied to the ‘formal and elaborate ceremony of appropriation of a terra nullius’. He also states that colonial powers are slow poison and more toxic than leukemia and cancers.

Talking about the theory of “Refugee Literature”, the area has been researched by different researchers. Gallien in his study states that this form of literature deals with the “dehumanizing conditions” faced by the people who go to European or other countries as refugees.¹⁶ This literature also helps in exploring the areas that have been kept away from the eyes of the public. In postcolonial literature, refugee literature talks about the issues of the colonized people, when they move to other countries as Diasporas. Similarly, the researchers Braithwaite, Salehyan & Savun after exploring the area of refugee literature, state that “by the end of 2017, more than 68.5 million people...had been displaced from their homes”.¹⁷ These migrations are either voluntarily or involuntarily, prevailing to the conditions of natural disasters and conflicts. The refugees’ issues include the lack of resources, opportunities as well as the constant suffering from violence. The focus of the current research is around the violence faced by the Syrian refugees and it will be analyzed in the context of refugee literature, when their lives roam around the camp life with extreme violent conditions.

Grace Berry¹⁸ defines that a refugee is someone who has been forcibly removed or who has had to flee their country due to a well-founded fear of persecution, war or violence. His study examines the mental health of post resettled refugees and integration process through past studies. PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) is a common disease among them and 62% of the refugees are facing this dire mental illness and 51% of the total population of refugees faces Great Depression. His research reveals that 65.5 million people are forcefully displaced from their localities and out of this figure 22.5 million people are refugees and their sufferings, which severely impact their mental health, begin after

being displaced. Similarly, 51% of the refugees are school going children who can never chase their dreams and they remain unfulfilled. Thus these refugees look forward to other regions which could have better opportunities for their survival. During these traumatic and devastating states, they think about their resettlement in foreign territories which actually bring havoc of uncertainties and fears.

The gap of the research is that the book that is under discussion, “No Refuge for Women: The Tragic Fate of Syrian Refugees” by Welser has not been explored before and it is an important book as it discusses the real life accounts of the Syrian women. Moreover, the theoretical perspective that has been chosen for the research is by Freedman that has also not been used before, for analyzing this text. Thus, the research will provide an application of a new theoretical perspective on the selected text.

3. Research Methodology

The research would analyze Welser's novel *No Refuge for Women*. In order to conduct the research, the methodology that has been selected by the researcher is Qualitative and the method that has been used is Method of Textual Analysis given by Catherine Belsey. Belsey has defined textual analysis as a method that “involves a close encounter with the work itself, an examination of the details without bringing to them more presuppositions”.¹⁹ Taking the notion of poststructuralists, Belsey treats text “as a tissue of signifiers” that assists a researcher in the process of signification.²⁰ Furthermore, Belsey has stressed upon Barthes “The Death of the Author” as according to it the meaning of a text lies in the hands of the reader as the final destination of the text is the reader. If the text is given to the Author, then it closes the meaning of a text and provides a final signifier. Therefore, the method will help in analyzing the text from the researcher's perspective.

4. Theoretical Framework

Jane Freedman in her book *A Gendered Approach to Refugee and Asylum* gives some grounded reasons why women are forced to flee their countries and take refuge in other places and how women are oppressed and persecuted in their own motherland and asylums as well. To strengthen her idea of persecution, Freedman in her book gives some causes and forms of persecution which are gendered based. She takes the stance of the idea of persecution that although it is central but in Western states the idea is not generally accepted. These states do not welcome the notion of “persecution”²¹ and refuse asylum seeking women refugees who

are exploited and discriminated against on the basis of gender. However, the concept of persecution cannot be refuted altogether. It also does not mean that women are safe and not tortured in their own places. In fact, women worldwide are taken as objects and hence maltreated in many ways on their social, economic and political status.²²

There are some forms of persecution like rape, female genital mutilation, forced marriages, abortion, sterilization and domestic violence which force women not only to flee their own homeland but also compel to remain silent against them throughout their lives. However, for most of the women, violence and persecution has been normalized to such an extent that they are willing to accept it and hence do not raise their voices against them. According to Freedman, gender-related violence is done because “women are women”.²³ To be a feminine is a sin in specifically patriarchal societies. If the women had not born in these societies they would not have been exploited, tortured and even murdered. She further explains that oppression of the women is not only confined male dominating societies, but they can also be sexually and physically assault anywhere and everywhere because they are considered a piece of flesh. She further illustrates three basic reasons of persecution on which women are even arrested. The first reason is that they are mainly convoluted in some political movements, make speeches and write articles against “an incumbent government’s actions”.²⁴

Following their arrest, they are captivated in cells and are therefore raped by military forces. In this situation, the form of persecution is rape and it might be argued on the basis of gender difference. This mortification and shame is inflicted upon women to give them no space in the society. Usually, this kind of power is exercised to further demoralize them and it may also be used to “reinforce nationalist aims in times of conflict”.²⁵ In the second scenario, the motif which is usually raised against women is they do not take veils or hijab where it is requisite to wear. Therefore, they seduce and entice men to molest them. They openly and freely move in society and hence they are physically attacked by policemen and hooligans of respective areas. Here, Freedman takes another stance and says that this kind of persecution is not “explicitly gendered”.²⁶ It may be one of the grounds of suppression rather than the actual form of suppression. In such cases, as women fail to behave like a “proper woman”,²⁷ therefore, they are severely punished because they do not fulfill the basic requirements of society and hence indulged in breaking societal norms and laws. The third reason of persecution which Freedman further brings forth is when a woman undergoes female genital mutilation to make her proper woman. This is supposedly done in norms stricken

areas, where people believe it their holy ritual to control the sexuality of women.

Having described these three scenarios, Freedman adds that these are ideal type situations and that as with other attempts at categorization, it is very hard, or perhaps impossible, to establish firm boundaries between these different causes and forms of persecution. What is clear, however, is that these types of persecution occur because of gendered relations of power within different societies and they are not merely the result of individual acts of violence or 'private' matters but part of larger structures and ideologies within which women have unequal shares of political, economic and social power. Defining "violence and conflict"²⁸ she says that both violence and conflict also construct and reproduce particular gendered identities and representations, propagating specific conceptions of femininity and proper feminine behavior that are often centered on women's bodies and their reproductive functions.

The stance which Freedman holds about rape and wartime sexual violence also needs sheer attention to consider. "Sexual and gender-based violence"²⁹ can occur at every stage of the refugee cycle: during flight, while in the country of asylum and during repatriation. She refers that the majority of displaced people still trapped across the border and the widespread stigma of rape keeping many women silent, those interviewed comprised but a small fraction of the total number of victims. It shocks, but then it loses its distinctiveness. Typically, when rape happens in the midst of war, no individual soldier-rapists are identified by the victims, by their senior command, or be the media (if there). The women who suffer rape in wartime usually remain faceless as well. They merge with the "pockmarked landscape"³⁰; they are put on the list of war damage along with gutted houses and mangled rail lines. Rape evokes the nightmarishness of war, but it becomes just an indistinguishable part of a poisonous wartime stew called "lootpillagelandrape".³¹

5. Analysis and Discussion

No Refuge for Women highlights the core issues of Syrian women such as the "crisis, displacement, poverty, dehumanization, devaluation of moral values and specifically women's marginalization".³² In her book, Welser got the opportunity to conduct different interviews with different Syrian women and tried to find out what kind of problems they and their family had to face during migration. Her first encounter was with a woman named Miryam, who is the victim of brutality of Bashar al Assad force in her homeland which is dissecting and disrupting their own people. First,

she seemed reluctant to reveal her story but after getting some acquaintance with the writer she started narrating her story. The story which she told was not less than heart wrenching. She told her that refugees experience multiple forms of oppression on social, economic, cultural, psychological, political or religious grounds. She also narrated that at one time people of her own home town raze to the ground with dozens of projectiles that are dropped every day around Aleppo, in Daraa, and, above all, in certain suburbs of Damascus. Miryam's own suburb of Kafr Sousa was also ruined by ISIS militia. Her voice quivered when she talked about her parents, about her friends, because where, in her Damascene suburb, once stood markets, schools, clinics, and houses now are only trails of death and destruction. Not only the female characters were manipulated and tortured but all the family members were shattered and dispersed into different places. They like strewn petals moved from one place to another place for shelter and accommodation. When the women took flight to give them shelter, as Freedman calls, they were objectified and hence on the way, they were raped and molested.

According to Freedman's theoretical perspective, women are exploited on the basis of gender. Wesler, in her book, pulls away this idea by narrating the story of Miryam who has been instructed to "wear long enveloping robes"³³, on the way to Sudan. Here, the word "enveloping" is categorical, which refers to hiding into the body. If the refugees' women do not hide themselves in such a kind of cardigan in Sudan, "they are kidnapped and sold, and also whipped".³⁴ The women in Sudan are entangled to such an extent that they cannot choose attires and costumes for themselves. This is not only canonized for the native women but it is also implemented on the women who come in Sudan, either they are migrants or they are the tourists, they are treated equally. In that particular area of Sudan, "rape is not a criminal offense".³⁵ The writer is well aware of these areas that is why she gives more details about the cruelties of laws. When women are raped in Sudan, they do not report it to the police, and certainly not to the courts, as judges consider women who have been raped to be partly to blame. In the worst cases, women are imprisoned as punishment for having enticed the men to rape them. Countless other laws discriminate against and marginalize women, as Prithivi says, "women are still discriminated against, stereotyped and unfairly disadvantaged".³⁶ The time has never been kind to the refugees' women, traveling from Syria to Sudan then depositing themselves into the merciless hands of traffickers is the matter of palpitation. On the way, Miryam is informed that all the women are in great danger on this route and almost every women experience some form of sexual assault, including rape, and that thousands

of children are sold as child soldiers or sex slaves, bringing the smuggling gangs a lot of money. People become commodities and are put up for sale. Even worse, women cannot fail to be noticed on these routes.

Navigating from one land to another, the miseries of women never leave them unattended, they go with them in their troublesome journey. Therefore, women are instrumentalized in the hands of police, border officials, "military personnel, and militiamen" in order to get more cash from them.³⁷ The human traffickers disguise themselves and come in the way of refugees as another misery. The UNHCR Trafficking guidelines have described different forms of exploitation used by the traffickers such as, "abduction, incarceration, rape, sexual enslavement, enforced prostitution ... physical beatings".³⁸ At every checkpoint, traffickers are lurking in the ways of refugees, get them down from the backs of the trucks and demand six times more money from refugees. Those who refuse to give them money, "they are beaten with sticks, belts and tubing".³⁹ The officials also force the refugees to part with their jewelry and watches, therefore, they have to sacrifice their personal properties in order to save their lives and shelter for asylums. Welser also exposes that those who fail to voluntarily hand over their "possessions are prevented from continuing on" hence, they are not forcibly asked to continue their journey.⁴⁰ On the way in the desert, the condition of the women is worse than the men. They are dragged off to the back rooms of the stations, beaten, and raped. The route through the desert is extremely dangerous, and for many fatal. Especially for women traveling alone, it is deliberately made difficult for the women to travel alone in the desert. Therefore, she does not move in the desert alone either in day time or at night.

Welser, in one of her chapters "The Women of Syria" shares the form of violence which the women have to face in their own home. Freedman says that the women have to go through different forms of violence like sexual abuse before the journey, during it and even in the host country. Before the beginning of the Civil War, "women in Syria had rights"⁴¹. They have their independent life, they have their rights to enjoy, dreams to fulfill. However, after the Civil War, twenty percent of the total population are working in Syria. Their condition is not more than satisfactory; women are cramped for household chores, girls are not allowed to get education. The reason for this, above all, lies in the "patriarchal structures" still embedded in family and social life⁴². It's true that women were allowed to open up businesses, earn their own money, and own property, but in practice, social pressures, lack of self-confidence, and lack of education often force women to hand over social and economic control to male family members. Welser advocates that rape, as a weapon

of war, is common in the battlefield. Jihadists are another weapon used to torture women, they devise different plans to exploit the rights of the women. Family honor must never be defiled, and thus in this war the rights of women dwindle. It shows that women in Syria are threatened, “Arbitrarily imprisoned”, detained, and tortured, both by government and by opposition forces⁴³. The women with which Welser interview are physically abused and tortured, and dramatically restricted in their choice of clothing and freedom of movement. Thus, women have not been spared any aspect of the brutality of the Syrian conflict, but they are not merely passive victims. Women are taking on increasing responsibilities whether by choice or due to circumstances and they should not have to pay with intimidation, arrest, abuse, or even torture.

Another panicking story which the writer hears is about the girl Sari, who tells her about the selling of the girls in the hands of ISIS terrorists. The young girls must be bearing all the tortures on their nerves. Sari tells that once a girl was caught by terrorists, she was imprisoned for days without water or food and brutally, “repeatedly raped”⁴⁴. Now, according to Sari, the girl is about to be married to a terrorist, which Freedman in his book has described that it is a common practice in Syrian refugee camps for women to be married forcefully. If she shows any signs of hesitation, ISIS will be either sold or killed. During the narration, Sari frequently breaks into sobs and she hardly completes her story. It has been very difficult for every girl to survive in the misogynistic societies where patriarchy is dominant and women only face hatred and brutality, therefore, they forcibly move from their own homeland to alienated places.

The women in Eritrea went through the same situation when they wanted to seek asylum. One of the refugees, named Almaz was granted with an unwanted child, as she was raped a multiple times. The women had to sell their bodies, in order to seek refuge as they had no other option. It is a country that is filled with horrors and these horrors overshadow the women. According to the reports that have been presented by Welser in her novel, Eritrea is famous “extrajudicial executions, widespread torture, sexual slavery and forced labor”⁴⁵. Forced labor was without pay and a little amount of food. Welser has described the situation of forced labor through Ashanti, whose husband was forced into military services and has been missing for 9 years since he joined the services. Freedman says that it is problematic for a woman to “live alone or with her children without the protection of her husband or another male relative” and this is evident in the novel when Ashanti tried to save her family after her husband disappeared⁴⁶. In order to save her family, she tried to escape from Eritrea by collecting money and to her surprise she found people, that many of

“her compatriots were selling their organs to raise funds for their further travels”⁴⁷. Therefore, the traffickers try to make profit by obtaining money and the refugees don't have protection in Eritrea, while they try to seek asylum. For women, Freedman says that it is near to impossible to migrate anywhere due to the different issues they may encounter.

6. Conclusion

To conclude, the research has revealed the different forms of gendered violence that are directed against the refugee women. The journey of these Syrian women have been difficult before migrating and after migration. They have underwent different forms of sexual exploitation, forced marriages, rape and a miserable life without their families. These refugees have been displaced from their houses and have faced objectification, having nowhere to go. They don't have a right of protection of their bodies and are suppressed under the patriarchal values in the refugee camps, where they are not even provided with the freedom to save their lives from all the miseries they face in the camps. The human traffickers take away all their personal possessions and when they resist to do so, they are beaten brutally. During the journeys, the woman cannot travel alone due to the fact that she can be caught by anyone. Thus, gendered violence is a great issue of concern for the women, who have no refugee to seek asylum as a result of the war scenario created in their country. Welser in her novel has successfully depicted the real-life accounts of the women, who are still struggling to obtain a refugee status and are still trying to protect their families, by applying for different refugee camps.

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