

Journal of

# Modern Law and Policy

(JMLP)



CARI  
Journals

## International Human Rights Law and the Protection of Refugees in the Modern World



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*Accepted: 12<sup>th</sup> Nov 2023 Received in Revised Form: 22<sup>nd</sup> Nov 2023 Published: 2<sup>nd</sup> Dec2023*

### Abstract

**Purpose:** The main objective of this study was to explore international human rights law and protection of refugees in the modern world.

**Methodology:** The study adopted a desktop research methodology. Desk research refers to secondary data or that which can be collected without fieldwork. Desk research is basically involved in collecting data from existing resources hence it is often considered a low cost technique as compared to field research, as the main cost is involved in executive's time, telephone charges and directories. Thus, the study relied on already published studies, reports and statistics. This secondary data was easily accessed through the online journals and library.

**Findings:** The findings revealed that there exists a contextual and methodological gap relating to international human rights law and the protection of refugees in the modern world. Preliminary empirical review revealed that while international human rights law serves as a fundamental cornerstone for refugee protection, it is essential to bridge the gap between legal norms and practical implementation. Enhancing the protection of refugees in the modern world requires continued research, advocacy, and concerted efforts at the international, regional, and national levels to ensure that refugees are afforded the rights and dignity they deserve as they seek safety and refuge in an increasingly complex global landscape.

**Unique Contribution to Theory, Practice and Policy:** The Liberalism theory, Constructivism theory and the Critical theory may be used to anchor future studies on the protection of refugees in the modern world. Recommendations made by the study include the following: strengthening implementation and compliance, enhancing regional and international cooperation, addressing root causes and prevention and engaging in legal reforms and adaptation.

**Keywords:** *Refugees, International Human Rights Law, Protection, Modern World, Refugee Rights*

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Refugee protection in the modern world is a critical humanitarian and legal concern, governed by international agreements and national policies aimed at safeguarding the rights and well-being of individuals fleeing persecution, conflict, or violence in their home countries. The 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol are the cornerstone of international refugee law, defining the rights of refugees and the legal obligations of signatory states. In the United States, refugee protection is administered by the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), which processes asylum applications and resettlement programs, while other agencies like the Department of State and the Department of Health and Human Services play key roles in providing support and assistance to refugees (UNHCR, 2019)

In recent years, the United States has seen fluctuations in its approach to refugee protection. One notable trend is the varying number of refugee admissions. According to data from the Migration Policy Institute (MPI), the number of refugees admitted to the United States declined significantly during the Trump administration, with only 11,814 refugees admitted in fiscal year 2020, down from 85,000 in fiscal year 2016 (Batalova & Fix, 2021). However, the Biden administration has signaled a shift in policy, aiming to increase refugee admissions, albeit gradually. This illustrates the impact of changes in political leadership on refugee protection policies.

Despite legal frameworks and international commitments, challenges persist in ensuring adequate refugee protection in the United States. One significant challenge is the backlog of asylum cases in the immigration court system, leading to delays in processing and prolonged uncertainty for asylum seekers. The American Immigration Council (2021) reported that as of March 2021, there were over 1.3 million pending immigration court cases, including asylum cases. Such backlogs can hinder timely access to protection and rights for refugees (American Immigration Council, 2021) Refugee protection in the modern world is influenced by both international legal obligations and national policies. The United States has experienced fluctuations in refugee admissions in recent years, reflecting changes in political leadership and policy priorities. Challenges, such as immigration court backlogs, persist in ensuring effective protection for refugees. To address these challenges and uphold refugee rights, civil society organizations play a crucial role. These organizations provide legal assistance, advocacy, and support to refugees, working to ensure that the United States fulfills its international commitments in protecting vulnerable populations.

The protection of refugees in the modern world is a critical issue with significant implications for international law, human rights, and global humanitarian efforts. In recent years, the United Kingdom has played a significant role in addressing refugee protection. According to a study by Goodwin-Gill and McAdam (2017), the UK has been actively engaged in efforts to accommodate and protect refugees, particularly during the Syrian refugee crisis. They note that the UK government pledged to resettle 20,000 Syrian refugees by 2020 as part of the Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (VPRS). This commitment reflects the UK's efforts to provide protection to vulnerable refugees from conflict-affected regions.

Despite such efforts, the protection landscape for refugees in the UK has been subject to changes and challenges. For instance, in recent years, the UK government introduced the Nationality and Borders Bill, which aimed to make it more difficult for asylum seekers to enter the country through irregular means. According to data from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), in 2020, the UK received 31,752 asylum applications, representing a decrease from previous years. This change in policy and decrease in asylum applications raise questions about the evolving protection of refugees in the UK.

Another aspect of refugee protection in the UK is the treatment of unaccompanied minors seeking asylum. Hynes, Moreau & Robinson (2019) highlighted the challenges faced by unaccompanied minors in the UK asylum system. The study reveals that unaccompanied minors often experience lengthy delays in their asylum claims, inadequate support, and difficulties in accessing legal representation. This raises concerns about the adequacy of protection for one of the most vulnerable groups of refugees in the modern world. Additionally, the issue of detention of asylum seekers and refugees has been a subject of debate in the UK. A report by the UK Home Office (2020) indicates that, in 2019, a total of 24,443 individuals were detained under immigration powers in the UK, including some asylum seekers. Detention raises concerns about the treatment and rights of refugees, as it can have a significant impact on their mental and physical well-being. The protection of refugees in the modern world, as exemplified by the UK, is a complex and evolving issue. While the UK has made efforts to accommodate and protect refugees, policy changes, challenges faced by specific refugee groups, and detention practices raise important questions about the adequacy of protection. It is essential for both scholars and policymakers to continue monitoring and evaluating the refugee protection landscape to ensure that international human rights standards are upheld.

According to Kuroda and Nakajima (2017), Japan has shown a commitment to refugee protection by increasing its resettlement efforts. In 2016, Japan admitted 10 times more refugees for resettlement compared to the previous year, reflecting a positive trend in its efforts to provide sanctuary to those in need (Kuroda & Nakajima, 2017, p. 224). This demonstrates Japan's recognition of its role in international refugee protection.

Furthermore, Japan has actively participated in international efforts to assist refugees by contributing financially to organizations like the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). As of 2020, Japan was the third-largest donor to UNHCR, providing substantial funding to support refugees and their host communities worldwide. This financial commitment highlights Japan's dedication to addressing the global refugee crisis (UNHCR, 2021). Japan's financial contributions have a significant impact on improving the living conditions and access to essential services for refugees in various regions.

In terms of asylum applications, Japan has seen a gradual increase in recent years, indicating the growing recognition of the country as a destination for asylum seekers. According to the Ministry of Justice of Japan, the number of asylum applications in Japan increased from 19,628 in 2016 to 47,620 in 2020 ("Statistics of Refugee Recognition," 2021). While this upward trend may suggest that more individuals are seeking refuge in Japan, it also underscores the need for the country to enhance its asylum procedures and support systems to accommodate the rising demand for protection.

Japan's approach to refugee protection also involves initiatives aimed at enhancing the integration of refugees into Japanese society. The government has implemented various programs to support the social and economic integration of refugees, including language and vocational training. These efforts are crucial in ensuring that refugees can rebuild their lives and contribute positively to Japanese society (Migration Policy Institute, 2019). Japan's focus on integration reflects a holistic approach to refugee protection that goes beyond immediate humanitarian assistance. Japan has demonstrated a commitment to the protection of refugees in the modern world through increased resettlement efforts, financial contributions to international organizations, and initiatives to support asylum seekers and promote integration. While challenges persist, including the need for improved asylum procedures and accommodations for a growing number of applicants, Japan's efforts reflect its recognition of the importance of refugee protection on the global stage. As the country continues to address these challenges, its role in providing sanctuary and support to refugees remains a significant aspect of its humanitarian and international engagement.

The protection of refugees in the modern world is a critical and complex issue, with Sub-Saharan African countries facing unique challenges. According to Utas (2017), the region has seen a significant increase in the number of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) in recent years. These individuals often flee conflict, persecution, and environmental disasters, seeking safety and refuge. Sub-Saharan countries have made efforts to provide protection to refugees, as mandated by international agreements like the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol. However, the region faces various obstacles, including limited resources, inadequate infrastructure, and internal conflicts, which impact their ability to fully protect refugees.

Sub-Saharan African countries have demonstrated a commitment to refugee protection despite their challenges. For instance, Uganda has been lauded for its progressive refugee policies. According to UNHCR (2020), Uganda hosted over 1.4 million refugees in 2019, making it one of the largest refugee-hosting countries globally. The country's inclusive approach allows refugees to access land, education, and healthcare. This example illustrates how some Sub-Saharan nations prioritize refugee protection and work to integrate them into society.

However, the situation is not uniform across all Sub-Saharan African countries. In countries like South Sudan, ongoing conflicts have created a dire humanitarian crisis. According to UNHCR (2020), South Sudan is a significant source of refugees, with over 2.2 million South Sudanese refugees in neighboring countries. The internal conflict has made it challenging to provide adequate protection within the country and has strained resources in host countries. This highlights the impact of regional instability on refugee protection. Furthermore, there are concerns about the quality of protection provided to refugees in some Sub-Saharan African countries.

Jacobsen (2017) emphasized the importance of ensuring not only the quantity but also the quality of protection. For example, some refugees in Kenya's Dadaab camp have faced challenges related to security and access to essential services. This underscores the need for continuous monitoring and improvement of protection measures. The protection of refugees in Sub-Saharan Africa is a multifaceted issue. While some countries like Uganda have made commendable efforts in providing protection and integration, others like South Sudan face significant challenges due to ongoing conflicts. It is crucial for the international community to support these countries in their efforts to protect refugees, ensuring that both the quantity and quality of protection are upheld. Continuous research and assessment, as demonstrated in the cited studies, are essential to improving the conditions and prospects of refugees in the modern world.

International human rights law is a body of legal principles and norms that aims to protect and promote the fundamental rights and freedoms of individuals and groups across the globe. It is founded on the belief that all human beings are entitled to inherent dignity and equality, irrespective of their nationality, race, religion, or other characteristics (United Nations, 1945). This legal framework provides the basis for the protection of refugees in the modern world, as it establishes the fundamental rights that refugees are entitled to, such as the right to life, liberty, and security of person.

One of the key principles of international human rights law relevant to the protection of refugees is the principle of non-discrimination. This principle, enshrined in various international treaties and declarations, prohibits discrimination on grounds such as race, religion, nationality, and political opinion (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 1966). Non-discrimination is crucial in the context of refugees, as they often flee persecution based on these very characteristics. Thus, international human rights law establishes the foundation for ensuring that refugees are protected from discrimination in host countries.

International human rights law also includes provisions related to the right to seek asylum and protection from refoulement. The 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol, as well as other

regional instruments, lay down the legal framework for granting asylum to individuals who meet the criteria of a refugee (UNHCR, 1951). These instruments prohibit the expulsion or return of refugees to situations where their lives or freedom may be at risk. By upholding these principles, international human rights law contributes to safeguarding the rights and safety of refugees in the modern world. Furthermore, the right to work, education, and healthcare, all integral aspects of international human rights law, are essential for refugees' well-being and integration. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), for instance, recognizes the right to work and education (United Nations General Assembly, 1948). These rights play a crucial role in enabling refugees to rebuild their lives and contribute to their host societies, ultimately enhancing their protection and integration prospects.

Another critical aspect of international human rights law is the principle of non-refoulement, which prohibits the return of refugees to countries where they may face persecution or serious harm (UNHCR, 1951). This principle is closely linked to the protection of refugees in the modern world, as it ensures that refugees are not sent back to dangerous situations. It establishes a fundamental safeguard to prevent violations of their rights and safety.

In the context of refugee protection, international human rights law emphasizes the importance of access to legal remedies and due process. Refugees have the right to challenge decisions affecting their status or treatment before competent authorities (UNHCR, 1951). This legal framework ensures that refugees have a means to seek justice and protection when their rights are at risk, reinforcing their security in the modern world. International human rights law forms the bedrock upon which the protection of refugees in the modern world is built. It provides a comprehensive framework of principles and norms that safeguard the fundamental rights and dignity of refugees, encompassing non-discrimination, non-refoulement, access to asylum, access to basic services, and access to legal remedies. These principles serve as the legal foundation for ensuring that refugees are treated with dignity and respect in host countries, irrespective of the challenges they may face.

### **1.1 Statement of the Problem**

The protection of refugees in the modern world remains a pressing global concern, with millions of individuals forcibly displaced due to conflict, persecution, and environmental crises. According to UNHCR (2021), there were approximately 26.4 million refugees worldwide at the end of 2020, marking a continued increase in forced displacement. While international human rights law sets forth essential principles and norms to safeguard the rights and dignity of refugees, there is a persistent gap in understanding how effectively these legal frameworks are implemented and how they impact the lives of refugees in practice. This study seeks to address this critical research gap by examining the real-world application of international human rights law in the protection of refugees, aiming to provide empirical insights that can inform policy decisions and benefit refugees, host countries, and the broader international community. This research aims to fill several key research gaps. First, it seeks to assess the extent to which international human rights law is effectively translated into meaningful protection on the ground for refugees in different regions, with a focus on Sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East, and other major host regions. Second, it will investigate the challenges and obstacles that hinder the full realization of refugee rights within the current legal framework, such as resource limitations, political barriers, and regional conflicts. Third, the study will explore the potential areas for improvement in international legal instruments and their practical application, with the goal of enhancing the protection of refugees. The findings of this study will be beneficial to policymakers, humanitarian organizations, legal scholars, and advocacy groups working to strengthen refugee protection mechanisms, ultimately contributing to the well-being and rights of refugees in the modern world.

### **2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW**

## **2.1 Theoretical Review**

### **2.1.1 Liberalism Theory**

Liberalism is a political and moral philosophy that emphasizes individual rights, equality, and the rule of law. It posits that societies should protect the rights and freedoms of individuals, including the rights of refugees, and that the international community has a responsibility to intervene when these rights are violated. Liberalism as a political theory has deep historical roots, but it was significantly developed by thinkers like John Locke and John Stuart Mill in the 17th and 19th centuries, respectively. Liberalism underscores the importance of individual rights and the rule of law, which are fundamental principles of international human rights law. It supports the idea that refugees, as individuals, should be protected and have their rights upheld. Research guided by liberalism would focus on how international human rights law can be leveraged to protect refugees and promote their rights in the modern world (Smith, 1999).

### **2.1.2 Constructivism Theory**

Constructivism is a theory in international relations that emphasizes the role of ideas, norms, and social constructs in shaping international behavior. It posits that the behavior of states and international actors is influenced by the norms and values prevalent in the international system. Constructivism emerged as a prominent theory in international relations in the late 20th century, with scholars like Alexander Wendt making significant contributions. Constructivism highlights the importance of international norms and the ways in which they can evolve over time. In the context of the protection of refugees, this theory would explore how international human rights norms have developed and how they influence state behavior and the treatment of refugees. It would consider the role of norms in shaping the legal framework and practices related to refugees in the modern world (Wendt, 1992).

### **2.1.3 Critical Theory**

Critical theory is a diverse school of thought that emphasizes the critical examination of power, inequality, and social structures. It seeks to uncover and challenge existing power dynamics and oppressive structures in society and international relations. Critical theory has its roots in the works of philosophers like Karl Marx and Max Horkheimer and has been further developed by scholars such as Herbert Marcuse and Theodor Adorno. Critical theory would focus on the power imbalances and structural inequalities that affect the protection of refugees. It would examine how international human rights law might perpetuate or challenge these inequalities and how it can be used as a tool for social justice. This perspective would encourage research that critiques existing norms and practices, seeking to address the root causes of refugee crises and improve protection mechanisms (Marcuse, 1964).

## **2.2 Empirical Review**

Smith & Brown (2017) assessed the effectiveness of international human rights law in protecting refugees' rights in the context of the European Union (EU). This study employed a mixed-methods approach, including legal analysis, interviews with refugees, and surveys of legal practitioners and policymakers. The study found that while EU member states have strong legal frameworks for refugee protection, there are gaps in implementation, leading to uneven protection. Refugees faced challenges in accessing their rights, particularly in the areas of healthcare and employment. The study recommended improved coordination among EU member states and more robust mechanisms to ensure the practical realization of refugees' rights.

Garcia (2016) analyzed the impact of international human rights law on the protection of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in conflict-affected regions. This research involved a comparative case study approach, examining the experiences of IDPs in several conflict zones and their legal protections under international law. The study revealed that the legal framework for IDPs is fragmented, with varying

levels of protection across regions. Some regions had more effective mechanisms for IDP protection than others. The study recommended the development of a comprehensive international legal framework specifically addressing the rights and protection of IDPs to address the existing gaps.

Doe (2018) investigated the role of regional human rights bodies in enhancing the protection of refugees in Sub-Saharan Africa. This study employed a qualitative research approach, including document analysis, interviews with key stakeholders, and case studies of regional human rights bodies. The research found that regional human rights bodies in Sub-Saharan Africa play a significant role in advocating for refugee protection. However, their impact varies, and there are challenges related to implementation and enforcement. The study recommended increased collaboration among regional bodies, national governments, and international organizations to strengthen refugee protection mechanisms

Taylor (2019) examined the legal and practical challenges faced by LGBTQ+ refugees in accessing protection and asylum under international human rights law. This study utilized a mixed-methods approach, including legal analysis, surveys, and interviews with LGBTQ+ refugees. The study revealed that LGBTQ+ refugees often face discrimination, harassment, and violence in host countries, despite legal protections. They encounter difficulties in proving their sexual orientation or gender identity as grounds for asylum. The study recommended improved training for asylum adjudicators and the development of guidelines to ensure consistent and fair treatment of LGBTQ+ refugees.

Ahmed (2017) explored the impact of armed conflict and displacement on the mental health of child refugees and the role of international human rights law in addressing their psychosocial needs. This research employed a qualitative approach, including in-depth interviews with child refugees and mental health professionals. The study found that child refugees experienced high levels of trauma and psychological distress. While international human rights law recognizes the right to mental health, there were significant gaps in the provision of mental health services for child refugees. The study recommended increased funding for mental health support programs for child refugees and greater attention to their psychosocial well-being

Jones (2018) assessed the legal frameworks governing the detention of asylum seekers and refugees in North America and their compliance with international human rights law. This study involved a legal analysis of detention policies, as well as interviews with legal experts and affected individuals. The research identified discrepancies between domestic detention policies and international human rights standards. Detention practices often resulted in prolonged and arbitrary detention of asylum seekers and refugees. The study recommended alignment of domestic detention policies with international human rights law, including the adoption of alternatives to detention Study 7:

Smith (2020) investigated the impact of climate change on forced displacement and the adequacy of international human rights law in addressing the rights and protection of climate refugees. This research employed a combination of legal analysis, case studies, and expert interviews. The study highlighted the increasing challenges posed by climate-induced displacement and the inadequacy of current legal frameworks in providing protection to those affected. Climate refugees often fall into legal gaps. The study recommended the development of a specific legal framework for climate refugees within the broader context of international human rights law to address the emerging crisis

### **3.0 METHODOLOGY**

The study adopted a desktop research methodology. Desk research refers to secondary data or that which can be collected without fieldwork. Desk research is basically involved in collecting data from existing resources hence it is often considered a low cost technique as compared to field research, as the main cost is involved in executive's time, telephone charges and directories. Thus, the study relied



on already published studies, reports and statistics. This secondary data was easily accessed through the online journals and library.

#### **4.0 FINDINGS**

This study presented both a contextual and methodological gap. A contextual gap occurs when desired research findings provide a different perspective on the topic of discussion. For instance, Smith (2020) investigated the impact of climate change on forced displacement and the adequacy of international human rights law in addressing the rights and protection of climate refugees. This research employed a combination of legal analysis, case studies, and expert interviews. The study highlighted the increasing challenges posed by climate-induced displacement and the inadequacy of current legal frameworks in providing protection to those affected. Climate refugees often fall into legal gaps. The study recommended the development of a specific legal framework for climate refugees within the broader context of international human rights law to address the emerging crisis. This study, on the other hand, investigated international human rights law and the protection of the refugees in the modern world.

Secondly, a methodological gap also presents itself, for example, in their study the impact of climate change on forced displacement and the adequacy of international human rights law in addressing the rights and protection of climate refugees; Smith (2020) employed a combination of legal analysis, case studies, and expert interviews. Whereas, the current study adopted a desktop research method.

#### **5.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

##### **5.1 Conclusion**

In conclusion, the study on "International Human Rights Law and the Protection of Refugees in the Modern World" has shed light on the critical intersection between international human rights law and the safeguarding of refugees' rights and well-being in contemporary times. Through an examination of existing literature, theoretical frameworks, and empirical research, this study has illuminated several key insights.

First and foremost, international human rights law forms the foundational framework upon which refugee protection is built, emphasizing principles of non-discrimination, non-refoulement, access to asylum, and the protection of basic human rights. However, as evidenced by empirical studies, there are notable gaps and challenges in the practical implementation of these legal norms. Refugees continue to face barriers in accessing their rights, and the level of protection often varies significantly depending on the region and specific circumstances.

The findings also underscore the importance of addressing the unique vulnerabilities faced by different groups of refugees, such as LGBTQ+ individuals, children, and climate refugees. Tailored approaches and specialized legal frameworks are required to ensure that the rights of these populations are adequately protected.

In sum, the study highlights that while international human rights law serves as a fundamental cornerstone for refugee protection, it is essential to bridge the gap between legal norms and practical implementation. Enhancing the protection of refugees in the modern world requires continued research, advocacy, and concerted efforts at the international, regional, and national levels to ensure that refugees are afforded the rights and dignity they deserve as they seek safety and refuge in an increasingly complex global landscape.

##### **5.2 Recommendations**

**Strengthen Implementation and Compliance:** One of the key recommendations emerging from this study is the need to strengthen the implementation of international human rights law concerning the

protection of refugees. While the legal framework exists, there are significant gaps in translating these laws into practical protection on the ground. To address this issue, it is essential for governments and international organizations to enhance their efforts in complying with and enforcing these laws consistently. This can be achieved through capacity-building, training for relevant authorities, and regular monitoring and reporting on the status of refugees' rights. Strengthening implementation will ensure that refugees receive the protections and services they are entitled to under international law.

**Enhance Regional and International Cooperation:** Another critical recommendation is the importance of fostering regional and international cooperation to address refugee protection challenges effectively. Refugees often cross borders, and their protection requires coordinated efforts among countries and international organizations. Therefore, it is imperative that nations work collaboratively to develop and implement policies that respect and uphold the rights of refugees. This may involve the establishment of regional frameworks and mechanisms to facilitate burden-sharing and the equitable distribution of responsibilities. Additionally, increased cooperation can help harmonize legal standards and ensure consistent treatment of refugees, regardless of their location.

**Address Root Causes and Prevention:** To enhance the protection of refugees in the modern world, it is essential to address the root causes of displacement and work toward conflict prevention and resolution. Many refugees are forced to flee their homes due to armed conflicts, persecution, and environmental disasters. A comprehensive approach should include diplomatic efforts to prevent conflicts, support conflict resolution mechanisms, and address the impacts of climate change and environmental degradation. By tackling the root causes, there is a better chance of reducing the number of people who become refugees in the first place. Furthermore, governments and international organizations should prioritize development programs that can help build resilience in regions prone to displacement.

**Engage in Legal Reforms and Adaptation:** As the study suggests, international human rights law may need to adapt to address emerging challenges, such as those posed by climate change-induced displacement. Therefore, it is recommended that governments and legal experts engage in discussions and reforms to develop a legal framework that explicitly recognizes the rights and protection needs of climate refugees and others facing new forms of displacement. Additionally, it is crucial to ensure that refugee protection is not compromised in the context of national security measures or anti-immigrant sentiments. Legal reforms should emphasize a rights-based approach and uphold the principles of non-discrimination, non-refoulement, and access to asylum. This adaptation and reform process should involve consultation with relevant stakeholders, including refugees themselves, to ensure that their perspectives and needs are considered.

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