

Between the Millstones: War and Violence Here and There

A Report on the Situation of Migrant and Refugee Women in Egypt



Summary

Since the outbreak of the war in Sudan in April 2023, and despite the increasing number of refugees and migrants arriving in Egypt by the end of October 2023, Sudanese nationals have become the largest refugee group, followed by Syrians, with smaller numbers from South Sudan, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Yemen, Somalia, and Iraq. These displacements are due to forced migration out of fear of torture and death. At the same time, Egypt is facing an economic crisis that cannot be overlooked, driven by various factors including global influences and the burden of external debts, leading to a rapid price increase. However, in recent months, there have been numerous campaigns spreading hate speech and incitement against migrants and refugees in Egypt, seen on social media platforms, in official statements (from the President and the Prime Minister), and in media statements, particularly on talk shows. Refugees and migrants have been labelled as “guests” who share the “bread of the subsidy” with the Egyptian people and are blamed for the rise in food prices, and housing costs, and are seen as contributors to the worsening economic crisis.

This report attempts to convey some of the challenges faced by refugee and migrant women in Egypt, including discrimination, threats, assaults, and their lack of means to live safely and securely. This research is based on monitoring news related to the violations experienced by refugee women, documentation and testimonies from migrant and refugee women from ethnic minorities in Egypt, activists, and lawyers, as well as reports and journalistic articles exploring the situation of refugees in Egypt, along with international laws and conventions on basic and legal rights.



Introduction:

Physical and psychological safety and the right to life are “inherent rights to every human being, intrinsic to their existence,” as stated in Article 6 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights of 1966.¹

This means that the law must protect this right, and no one should be arbitrarily deprived of their life. To fulfil this responsibility, governments and executive authorities must respect and strive to implement these rights, following the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which emphasizes that all human beings should be free, enjoying civil and political liberties, and free from fear. This is essential for creating the conditions necessary for every individual to enjoy their civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights.

Despite Egypt signing the Refugee Convention under the International Covenant on Human Rights, which stipulates that ‘*each State Party undertakes to respect and ensure the rights recognized in the Covenant to all individuals within its territory and under its jurisdiction, without discrimination based on race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinions, national or social origin, property, birth, or other status*’.²

The country has committed numerous violations against Sudanese refugees. As *the war intensified and brutal crimes against them increased, including displacement, starvation, sexual assault, and murder, Egypt tightened its border-crossing procedures, requiring visas for entry.* Despite the difficulty of these procedures, large numbers of Sudanese were forced to endure these challenges to escape the dire situation in their home country and survive. Amnesty International deemed this to be a contradiction of Egypt’s commitments under the refugee rights conventions it signed and a blatant violation of international human rights law, as highlighted in their report from June 2024.³

¹ United Nations, International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
[International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights | OHCHR](#)

² Same Source as Above.

³ Egypt: “They Shackled Us as if We Were Dangerous Criminals”: Arbitrary Detention and Forced Repatriation of Sudanese Refugees in Egypt [مصر: “كبلونا وكأننا مجرمون خطرون”: الاحتجاز التعسفي والإعادة القسرية للاجئين السودانيين في مصر - منظمة العفو الدولية](#)



Despite the laws and international covenants that stipulate the protection of refugees and their access to rights, Sudanese women face significant challenges, starting from their journey out of Sudan and continuing through their attempts to live and integrate into Egyptian society. They encounter dangerous and violent situations in places of residence, work, transportation, and even markets. With the increase in hate speech and incitement from official and media sources, as well as on social media, there has been a rise in psychological assaults, including discrimination, racism, verbal abuse, physical violence, and sexual assaults. Instead of raising awareness, educating the community, and encouraging respect and acceptance of others, these actions have exacerbated the difficulties faced by refugees, hindering their ability to live with dignity and humanity.

Problem Statement:

Despite Egypt's commitment to international treaties and agreements that recognize the rights of refugees to access all their fundamental rights without discrimination, refugees face numerous problems and risks. These risks have recently increased following an official statement that Egypt hosts a large number of refugees and foreign residents from various nationalities, with national estimates suggesting that there are over 9 million "guests and refugees" representing around 133 countries, making up 8.7% of Egypt's population. The majority of these refugees are Sudanese and Syrian, followed by smaller numbers from South Sudan, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Yemen, Somalia, Iraq, and Libya.

This figure shocked some Egyptians, who began to believe that the 9 million refugees were responsible for the economic crisis and rising prices in their country. This perception has contributed to an increase in verbal and physical assaults against refugees in their daily lives, with little to no deterrent action taken by officials to prevent such crimes.



Report Methodology:

This paper relies on defining the rights of refugees and distinguishing between the terms refugee and migrant, as well as their rights under international law. The paper draws on documentation published by the Safe Law Foundation, which includes specific accounts from Sudanese women residing in Egypt regarding the violations they have experienced. Additionally, it incorporates cases shared on social media, and direct documentation was conducted through personal interviews with these women.

Migrants and Refugees in Egypt and the Distinction Between Them According to International Law Definitions:

Many people confuse the terms migrant and refugee, assuming that anyone living in a country without holding its nationality is a refugee. However, according to the definitions of each, not every migrant is a refugee. There is a difference between migrants and refugees.

According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), a migrant is defined as “any person who moves or has moved across an international border or within a State away from his/her habitual place of residence, regardless of the person’s legal status, whether the movement is voluntary or involuntary, the causes for the movement, or the length of the stay.”

In contrast, the 1951 Refugee Convention, which Egypt has signed, defines a refugee as anyone who “is outside their country of nationality due to a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion, and is unable or unwilling to avail themselves of the protection of that country because of such fear.”⁴

⁴ Amnesty International, Refugees, Asylum-Seekers, and Migrants
[اللاجئون وطالبو اللجوء والمهاجرون - منظمة العفو الدولية](#)



The Reality of Migrant and Refugee Women in Egypt:

In March 2024, the European Union announced a new partnership with Egypt that includes aid and investments totalling 7.4 billion euros, aimed at enhancing cooperation between the two sides in the areas of migration and border control.

Despite this partnership and the increasing number of Sudanese refugees in Egypt, the country continues to commit numerous violations against Sudanese refugee women, including forced displacement and arbitrary detention on the pretext of lacking proper documentation, and inhumane treatment in detention facilities. Amnesty International's report highlighted these issues, noting the deprivation of food, lack of sanitary facilities, being forced to sleep on the ground, and not receiving medical care for injuries sustained during the war.

Moreover, official statements from the Prime Minister claimed that the presence of nine million refugees in Egypt costs the state around 10 billion dollars annually.

However, this figure includes irregular migrants (those involved in unregulated migration) and other migrants who left their countries for work, study, marriage, or other reasons, not just refugees.



The statement oversimplified these categories by lumping all foreigners residing in Egypt under the label “refugee,” overlooking the contributions that migrants make to the economy, including establishing both large and small businesses and injecting foreign currency into Egypt, which the country desperately needs.

Despite these contributions, some Egyptians did not welcome this, as illustrated by a Sudanese woman from an ethnic minority in Egypt who was documented by the **Seif Law Foundation’s “Meddad Initiative”** *She shared*: “Recently, after the speeches and statements, I personally faced harassment for a long time. In a post that went viral, my Sudanese friend, who had opened her café, received comments full of clear hatred, such as ‘You came and occupied us, how do you have a café?’ There were also several comments directed at my Egyptian friends who wanted to visit the place, and they were also harassed and blamed for supporting this. This is all because we are Sudanese and my skin is black; there is no other explanation. The hatred is clear.”

Types of Violence Faced by Migrant and Refugee Women in Egypt:

Despite the arrival of Sudanese refugees in Egypt seeking safety from war, displacement, violence, bombings, rape, and murder in search of a safer and more humane life, they face significant challenges during their journey, from leaving their home country to reaching the Egyptian border. These challenges begin with being forced to deal with smuggling gangs and extend to the arbitrary measures taken against them at the border by Egyptian forces, which often result in detention, forced deportation, harsh treatment, racial discrimination, and hate speech.

Even in the more fortunate cases where women manage to secure safe entry into Egypt, they do not enjoy physical and psychological safety. Instead, they encounter harassment, arbitrary treatment, and assaults despite holding valid residency permits and official documents.

Racism, Discrimination Based on Skin Color, and Assaults by Officials:

Here, we present some quotes documented from refugee women residing in Egypt through a survey.



One woman stated that *she has been living in Egypt for several years, and recently, the frequency of violence, hate speech, and racial discrimination against them has increased, particularly based on skin colour. This escalation is especially pronounced following recent official statements that blamed the worsening economic crisis and the rising cost of living in Egypt on the increasing number of refugees in the country.*

We talked with several women about the situation in Egypt and here are some of the quotes that left a mark on our hearts before we tell the stories:

"I don't feel safe."

An airport worker commented, "Aren't the ones we already have enough? More are coming in?"

"I opened my apartment door and found a note that said, 'Go back to your country.'"

An online comment from an Egyptian: "We won't be at peace until we do what the Turks did" (referring to incidents where Turks burned down Syrian shops).

Posts circulating on social media about Sudanese people: "Sudanese have smallpox, so don't let them get housing."

The violations and offensive expressions, including the use of racist terminology in public spaces and online platforms, did not stop there but also extended to government offices, police stations, and even the passport office in Abbasiya, Cairo. Survivors from ethnic minorities shared their experiences of how they were treated in police stations and government offices in Egypt:

"At the police station, they called us 'blackie' and used the same racist language that is directed at us on the streets. I felt that this place wouldn't get me my rights."

"I went to renew my residency permit and received it expired, and the treatment was extremely poor!"

"I was at Abbasiya renewing my passport when I saw a police officer shouting at an elderly woman in front of me, calling her 'blackie' and treating her very harshly. My stomach hurt from fear and terror; since then, I've been extremely scared."



Crimes of Violence and Discrimination by Police Officers:

Authorities are responsible for protecting those residing on their land without discrimination based on race, colour, or gender. **When violations and lawbreaking occur by those who are supposed to enforce the law and protect individuals, it significantly undermines a person's sense of safety. If a crime is committed against us, to whom do we turn?** This leads to either repeated submission and avoidance or the spread of violence and crimes.

A Sudanese woman living in Egypt shared her experience when she went to renew her residency papers: *"I had a bad experience in the street, but thank God, our neighbours are kind to us. However, the hardest scene I've ever witnessed in my life was when I went to Abbasiya to process my residency and saw how the officers treated us, black-skinned people. They treat us as if we are inferior to them. I saw an officer tell a woman, 'Shut up, you black woman!' My stomach hurt from fear and terror; since then, I've been extremely scared."*

We also documented a post by another Sudanese woman named Heba, who shared: *"In my first week in Egypt, a taxi driver tried to kidnap me. When I kept telling him to stop, I was terrified of him. When we finally reached a public place and I was screaming, he started telling people who gathered around, 'What would I do with this black woman?' and kept saying to me, 'I wouldn't even look at a black woman like you.'"*

Anab wrote: *"I'm studying medicine at Ain Shams University. During the final exams, I was sitting in the front row, solving the exam, and most of the hall was filled with Sudanese girls and others from different nationalities, all with dark skin. While I was sitting there, I heard the invigilator say to his colleague, 'In the end, they bring us here to work for slaves.' After that, I was too upset to continue solving the exam or take any action. To this day, I'm angry with myself for not standing up, confronting him, or responding to him."*

Reem shared: *"I live in Nasr City. I opened the door of my apartment and found a note that said, 'Go back to your country.' Since then, I've been afraid to stay in the*



house, and I haven't felt safe until a male relative came to live with us. Only then did I feel a bit safer, along with my family."

Lawyers Confirm the Situation and Demand Legal Action!

We discussed the testimonies and situations we observed with a human rights lawyer who is actively involved in refugee and migrant issues. He shared his experience of assisting some of the victims among the refugee women:

"In 2022, I received a call from a Yemeni refugee woman who told me she had been physically assaulted and sexually harassed by a taxi driver. A significant amount of time had passed between the incident and her contacting me, and I understood from her that the reason for this delay was her fear of entering a police station due to harassment she had previously experienced in another police station. She asked me to have my phone number recorded in the report because the police officers had been calling her and harassing her after that previous incident. It took me a long time to convince the officer to file the report, and I felt there was a deliberate attempt to delay us, hoping she would back down. The issue didn't end there; there was also significant negligence in the procedures following the police report. The police station refused to review the camera footage or investigate the incident and the suspect. I wanted to mention the year this incident occurred to highlight that the lax treatment of issues concerning refugee women existed even before the increase in their numbers in Egypt."

Another human rights lawyer confirmed the same issue, stating, "As a lawyer, I'm not asking the state for anything beyond the implementation of the constitution and the law. What I see happening to migrants and refugees in police stations and even in the prosecution offices is neither lawful nor humane. There is violence, humiliation, inhumane treatment, harassment of women, and racism. It's a disgraceful and humiliating situation for the state, for us, and for our clients."



Conclusion and Question for the European Union

What stands out most in all these testimonies is the absence of legal protection, and even the involvement of some security personnel in committing crimes against refugee women, including discrimination, racism, intimidation, and negligence in assisting them.

Despite Egypt's legal obligation to protect migrants and refugees—by virtue of its signing of the 1951 Refugee Convention and all the international treaties it claims to respect in international forums—none of the constitutional provisions or international laws have been translated into reality in Egypt.

In fact, the government itself, through its institutions, is part of the hate speech and violence directed against migrants and refugees, especially those with black skin and from religious minorities.

Regarding the continuous support and assistance from the European Union to the Egyptian government, **one Sudanese activist posed a critical question:** *“The European Union continues to provide aid to Egypt under various pretexts, all of which ultimately aim to economically assist Egypt in bearing the burden of migrants on its soil, improving services for them, and ensuring that the borders are secure from illegal migration to Europe. But there is no attention paid to the suffering we experience in Egypt— the insults, inhumane treatment, racism, and discrimination we face. It’s as if we’ve escaped the horrors of war, the threats of rape and murder, only to end up in a vast prison where we fear for our lives. While there are many people who treat us well, our fear stems from the fact that there is no law, no system, and no one to protect us if someone decides to harm us for any reason. And it seems that Europe doesn’t care about this by providing continuous support to the Egyptian regime without considering our concerns.”*



Recommendations

From the situation we have observed during our work and the testimonies we have gathered, we offer the following recommendations to address the noted and escalating challenges.

Coordination and Cooperation: There is a need for coordinated efforts between governmental and non-governmental institutions to develop mechanisms and methods of protection, providing real and diverse opportunities for legal, psychological, and all necessary support for migrant and refugee women in Egypt.

Training and Employment: Training and employing qualified personnel who can effectively interact with people from different nationalities and languages, to facilitate communication and dealings among them.

Simplified Entry Requirements: Establishing non-prohibitive and standardized entry conditions to Egypt at reasonable costs, and simplifying the process of obtaining official documents to reduce crimes that occur at borders and in deserts, and to prevent the trafficking of human lives.

Transparency: Ensuring transparency in announcing the actual numbers of refugees, distinguishing between them, migrants, foreigners, and irregular migration in Egypt, and making such data accessible. This would prevent the exploitation of their crises to blame, mistreat, or hold them responsible for the current economic challenges.

Compliance with International Agreements: Adhering to international human rights conventions and covenants, ensuring that no person is deprived of their right to basic life necessities, and granting them better treatment.

Legislation for Safety: Enacting and enforcing legislation that ensures the freedom and safety of women and children in Egypt, protecting them from bullying, hate speech, discrimination, persecution, and psychological and moral terror.

Implementation of the Three-Year Residency Law: Enforcing the three-year residency law that grants refugees the right to a residency permit for a minimum of three years, rather than shorter durations as has been the case recently.



Media Regulation: Activating the role of the Supreme Council for Media Regulation in monitoring and combating hate speech and incitement.

European Union and international institutions should also closely monitor how the Egyptian government is using the funds it receives from them, and consider the state of human rights in Egypt.

