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When we were asked to put together a special issue on women refugees for *Canadian Woman Studies* we were excited and challenged by the task. Each of us has been touched personally by the refugee experience. We are involved in refugee networks nationally and locally, in advocacy work, in research and in services to refugees. This issue is therefore important to us personally, professionally and politically.

Our priority for this issue was to give a voice to women refugees. Many of the pieces are written by women refugees. *Why is it important to have a special issue on women refugees?*

After World War II the estimated number of refugees was two million. These refugees were predominantly in Europe. Today the estimated number is fifteen million, most of whom are in the "third" world; fifty percent are in Africa. Eighty to ninety percent of these refugees are women and their dependents. Awareness of the "existence" — let alone the plight — of women refugees seems to have been catalyzed by a UNHCR (United Nations High Commission for Refugees) paper presented to the 1980 UN Decade for Women Conference in Copenhagen.

What have we been able to accomplish since 1980? Most important, we have been able to put on the agenda of international law and refugee-receiving countries the awareness that it can no longer be assumed that the experience of men and women refugees is the same. Women refugees need protection because of their sexuality and gender in their flight journey, in asylum countries, and even in refugee camps. Nor can it be assumed that men and women refugees are equal under the law.

Our task is not yet accomplished. Women will suffer the most from Canada's new refugee determination law.

This issue highlights the causes and circumstances that led to women becoming refugees; the harrowing experiences of their flight journeys; the dehumanizing nature of camp life; the frightening, disempowering experience of living in limbo in a country of asylum; and the emotional, cultural, legal and political difficulties in the adjustment process in a

country of resettlement such as Canada. Their struggle, their pain, their fears, what they want to remember and what they don't want to remember, their hopes and their visions: writing their experiences has been a very painful process.

In selecting the articles we also tried to challenge some myths. *First:* the myth that all refugees are "the same." We want to point to the differences between women refugees — differences arising from their particular culture, the political situation in their country of origin, their age, their class position, their political awareness. Because of these differences women refugees will have different needs. *Second,* we want our readers to become aware of the strength and talents of women refugees. While women refugees are and have been victimized, they do not want to be seen as victims all their lives. *Third,* we want to challenge the myths that refugees and immigrants are the "same." Refugees are *forced* to flee their countries because it is not safe for them to remain. Most often they leave without documents — indeed, it may not be safe for them to get documents. It is usually not even safe for refugees to say goodbye to loved ones, friends and neighbours. It is not safe for their families to know of their flight. It is not safe for them to return if a loved one is seriously ill or dying. Refugee families are fractured families. Many refugees see themselves as exiles.

Research on women refugees is still exploratory and disparate both regionally and in its objectives but, as our bibliographies demonstrate (see pages 115-21), it is well underway! One of the major accomplishments to date is the organization of local and national NGOs (non-governmental organizations) which have been instrumental in placing on the agenda of governments, and their own organizations, the special needs of women refugees. The First International Consultation on Refugee Women, held in Geneva in November 1988, marked the beginning of a collaboration between NGOs around the world and women refugees.

We have begun. We will not turn back. Much more needs to be done to change the conditions that produce refugees and to create the situations that can empower women refugees to be active contributors and shapers of a just world.

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