



Latin American Refugees

Adjustment and Adaptation

Recent growing literature on forced migration, refugees, exiles, and the dynamics involved in these processes reflects the fact that social, economic, and political turmoil prevailing in the world, especially in underdeveloped countries, will continue to displace and force people away from their homelands. As a Latin American exile and therapist providing services for Latin American refugees and exiled families, I will try to reflect on the experiences of such refugees from a woman's perspective. Little has been said regarding these areas of women's experiences and perceptions, especially those aspects that, in my opinion, are missing in the literature available. I believe also that the Latin American experience, from a woman's perspective,

shares common elements with the experiences of other refugee groups.

The situation in Latin American in the past sixteen years has been characterized by brutal dictatorships and civil war. The population has been subjected to a wide spectrum of experiences of generalized repression, as well as to more specific individual forms of persecution. There has been an acute fragmentation of families; a collapse of the supportive network of the extended family, friends, co-workers, and neighbours; and the fragmentation of the political group of reference. The removal of the supports, which otherwise characterize normal social life, have forced people to rely upon their own resources in order to survive.

BY MARLINDA FREIRE

The crises experienced at an individual level expands to the family, the community, and the country as a whole.

We have to remember that the ultimate manifestation of the patriarchal system is the military structure, the armed forces. The manifestation of political violence has been different for women than for men. Men have been more frequently the victims of direct repression, whereas women have been the ones left to retain a sense of continuity and normalcy within the context of this very anomalous situation. More frequently, women are the ones trying to locate their detained or missing spouses and children, visiting them in jail and concentration camps, trying to provide for the children when the father has been taken away, or trying to give explanations when there are no explanations to be given.

However, when women have been the objects of direct repression, they have been victims in a very special way. Merely being a woman increases vulnerability in situations of repression. Although women suffer repression in similar ways to men, political violence against women has been frequently equated with sexual violence which, more often than not, goes beyond rape. Women have been left in the nude to be sexually abused by their incarcerators; raped by trained dogs; rats have been introduced into their vaginas; they have not been offered sanitary protection during their menstrual periods; and so on. Women's sexuality has also been assaulted through their role as mothers. Mothering is acutely disrupted or distorted when children are used as tools of repression against their mothers: babies are taken away from the women, women have delivered babies fathered by prison staff, and some of these women are trying to raise these children with all of the conflicts entailed.

Although I would like to believe that sexual violence exercised against women is just an extreme form of primitive male domination, I think that it is not so simple. Although women in general are most vulnerable in times of repression, politically and socially committed and thinking women are even more at risk. These women have dared to break away from the very traditional and passive roles assigned to them. Not only are they joining the men in the struggle for freedom, but they are furthering the cause of women's emanci-

pation as well. The statement well-known in some Latin American circles that "to be a woman is bad enough, to be a political woman is intolerable," makes this point clearly. Women have not always needed to be active themselves to elicit violence as punishment; association with politically active men has alone been sufficient. Sexual torture has a tremendous intimidating effect and a number of meanings. It is the ultimate reaffirmation of power of the armed forces. It is the ultimate reaffirmation of the masculine character of the domination: not only is it an act of violence but it is an act of authority

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against women.

In Latin America (and thus largely Catholic countries) there is a female counterpart to the male concept of *machismo*: the Marianan woman who represents the Virgin Mary on earth. The target of the violence referred to above is directed towards the body of the Marianan woman, a body that has developed within a framework of modesty and virginity. Then, the only symbolic superiority of women, their purity and divine virginity, is taken away and they are impure and debased as a result.¹ This dynamic explains why women who have gone through these experiences, besides developing all kinds of reactive symptomatology and sexual dysfunction, have internalized a tremendous sense of guilt, shame, feelings of dirtiness, and a pervasive sense of not deserving to be loved again. On the other hand, sexual violence against women is also an extremely effective punishment for men. Symbolically it deprives them of their sexual property, of the pure dignified woman who, in the case of Latin American women more often than not, have not had sexual experience with anyone but their husbands. Men also internalize guilt, even more if they have been the primary active ones in political or social activities

and the women of their families have been punished by association.

Dealing with the psychological and emotional consequences of sexual violence, both in women and men, is one of the most demanding areas of therapeutic work. With the passage of time, the rebuilding of family life — with or without therapeutic intervention — some emotional and psychological reorganization takes place. Women do appear in general to function reasonably well at a superficial level: they go to work, do housework, take care of their families, etc., but they remain emotionally and sexually handicapped from moderate to severe degrees for life. Moreover, it is psychologically painful for such women to seek and receive therapeutic assistance because it entails once more exposing what has happened and reliving the past.

I would like to share some of my insights into how Latin Americans have dealt with forced migration and exile, again trying to focus on the women's perspective. Migration under ideal conditions is a very disturbing and disruptive experience, because not only does it reactivate difficulties that the person experienced prior to the migration, but it creates new ones as well. When we are talking about forced migration, additional and very significant dimensions are added. We are now talking of people who did not plan nor choose to leave. There was no time for preparation of psychological adjustment; the person was not part of any decision making; all the separations and losses are very acute, brutal, and often permanent. People go to whatever country is prepared to receive them. Women and children are often left behind for later reunions. Most of these people suffer acute loss of social, educational, and working status in the new country. They find themselves in a state of acute psychological and emotional disorganization. The lack of language is experienced as particularly punitive. People find themselves trying to reinvent a new meaning to their lives. People have to deal with the realization and accept that they are in the new country to stay.

Background elements of the newcomer, experienced prior to migration, the degree of transcultural dislocation and the attitude of the receiving country are some of the facets that will determine to some degree the initial adaptation and adjust-

ment during the resettlement period. Solidarity activities; identification with the social, political and cultural groups of reference; possibilities of communicating within the new language; and finding a place for oneself in the new society are all healing, soothing, and nurturing elements that will facilitate resolution of the acute state of disorganization. Resolution is never total and appears to be achieved through an equilibrium of the process of acculturation (accommodation and integration of some elements of the new culture) and the reinforcement and rescue of the elements of the old culture that will allow the continuity of the self. Actually, keeping a strong sense of identity with the Latin American culture provides not only a sense of self-esteem, but also has a tremendous protective value in terms of mental health and facilitates the development of a new sense of identity in which dual systems of values and codes of behaviour will interact.

In the new society, women have found themselves, again, as the ones who are not only trying to cope with their own emotional survival, but trying to maintain the continuity of the family situation. During the initial, very stressful resettlement period, there is an increased potential for violence in the home: women have found themselves targets of this violence. Women have become breadwinners — in many instances, for the first time in their lives. Later on, as children become integrating elements of the new culture faster and more readily than their parents, women become the mediators between values of the old culture (represented by themselves, fathers and other elders), and the new culture (represented by peers and other external influences).

Drawing upon my clinical experience in working with the Latin American population, and my observations of this community at large, it is my impression that women, in general, have been able to adapt, adjust, and accommodate in the new country with greater ease and less distress. In my opinion, there are a number of possible explanations for this. I think that, although women's family, social, and occupational tasks might be similar to those in the country of origin, this society can offer greater potential for women's development. For example, as a consequence of working outside the home, women have come to realize the value of

their productivity, and have taken a more direct role in allocating and managing money, learning to drive, being more active in their own and their children's education, etc. Here women are more likely to realize that they have rights to opinions in family and non-family matters: they have started to demand to be heard by their partners and others. In general, they have become more assertive. Women realize that they do not have to accept physical abuse, that there is a community support system (including such things as hostels, family allowance, welfare, mother's allowance, etc.), that could be available in the replacement of reliance upon the extended family. Latin American women, perhaps more than others, are slowly starting to discover that they could and should have a life and identity of their own within the context of family life, and that there is no need to exist solely through their children and their partners.

Family roles in North America are different from those in Latin America and here there is more room for women's self-development. Latin American men have started helping with household chores and with the raising of children, but the workload is still far from being equitably distributed. It is my impression that women learn the new language more quickly than men — perhaps because their roles entail more social, and thus linguistic, interaction with their daily lives.

The changing roles for women have entailed changes for men as well. Men have had to adjust to working and more independent wives, they are starting to share power which once had been theirs alone. Although life in a new country has forced change for both men and women, the rate of such change has not, in my opinion, been equal. I believe that women have adapted more readily and changed more quickly. In understanding why this might be so, it is important to examine the culture from which they came. In that culture, women's lower status and very difficult conditions of life required them to develop a greater variety of coping skills in order to survive and to meet their responsibilities (such as feeding and caring for the immediate and extended families). In those societies, because of the lack of social programs, it fell to the women to function effectively in the face of all adversities and crises. Women also

have had fewer expectations and less opportunities for themselves, and so were less likely to be disappointed in new, changed situations.

All these factors have had a tremendous survival value during the acute state of disorganization and shock before, and at the time of arrival in the new country. Whereas work in a factory might well have a devastating effect on a man who had previously been a professional, it might be perceived as a tremendous gain to a woman who had never worked outside the home or been paid for her work. Loss of status, which is more likely to happen to men, would constitute a psychological blow and so serve as an impediment to adaptation and language learning in the new culture. The change in women's status is usually upward, and may well increase motivation to make further gains.

The changes of status and roles that are entailed by migration to a new country and adaptation to a new culture induce, as a natural consequence, changes in the relationships within families and within couples. For example, a 'normal' generational gap has become wider with the addition of bicultural elements. This increasing gap leads to a greater incidence of family dysfunction. The change of relationships within a couple are not always workable; marital breakup is more frequent. Additional difficulties are being faced by single Latin American women, who find themselves trying to formulate their own concept of the 'couple' with men who are internalizing the new, less traditional, more free, non-committal approach to inter-personal relationships. I have also encountered young homosexual Latin American men and women who are feeling freer to establish their sexuality in a society that, even though not fully accepting, is at least more tolerant of sexual alternatives.

I have been able to cover only a few of my impressions of the experience of Latin Americans who immigrate non-voluntarily and under extremely difficult circumstances. Some of these observations are also applicable to voluntary migrants of the same culture. Of course, it will be necessary to further document these impressions with systematic study.

¹M.E. Valenzuela, "TODAS IBAMOS A SER REINAS," Edicions Chile Y America — CESOC: ACHIP, September 1987.

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