
Spanish-Speaking Refugee Women

The Spanish-speaking community is relatively new and has experienced rapid growth in the last few years. As yet there is little statistical data about the community; government funding for the research has not been forthcoming. The extent of psychological disorders in the Spanish-speaking community is therefore not precisely known. In particular, there are no statistics on the extent to which refugee women have been affected by the experience of frequently violent political upheaval, persecution, torture, exile, and the process of immigration.

The following observations are based on the first-hand experience of community workers with Spanish-speaking refugee women. They are only preliminary; they show that in-depth, formalized research is badly needed.

New immigrants must confront a new culture, a new lifestyle and, for Spanish-speaking immigrants, a new language. The acquisition of English language skills can be particularly difficult: grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and new forms of conceptualization all must be mastered. This mastery is crucial. When they first arrive, immigrants are enthusiastic, sometimes almost euphoric. But as the process of adjustment unfolds, lack of basic English language skills forces many — no matter what other skills they may possess — to take low-paying, unstable jobs. They are unable to communicate and labelled a minority. As time goes by, they begin to develop feelings of low self-worth, despair, and loneliness. They become discouraged and live in a permanent state of anxiety. Life in the new country bears no resemblance to what they had envisioned and hoped for.

The capacity to endure the psychological strain that immigration causes depends on many factors: the possession of market-

able skills, education, and inner strength, to mention only three. But there is one very important factor that is not generally recognized. Most immigrants — whatever their fortunes in Canada — freely *choose* to make a new life here. But political refugees have not made this choice. In this important sense, they have no control over their destiny.

Fleeing meant leaving everything behind: unfinished plans and dreams, material goods (if they had them), social networks and families. A violent separation occurred of everything that was important to them and that defined them as individuals. Experience of repression, persecution and torture vary in degree, depending on the individual and the country of origin. But all repression aims at the same minimum objective: to rob human beings of their dignity. The process of exile is like the process of mourning and bereavement. In the host country refugees are anonymous entities who usually carry great pain — a pain that bureaucrats do not care to know. Personal experiences of persecution, added to the strain of immigration, create a fertile ground for mental disorders. A large percentage of refugees are women and children. That women experience additional hardships because of their sex has been amply demonstrated. They face all the forms of repression that men face. But they are also victims of sexual intimidation and rape.

Organized supportive settings where Spanish-speaking refugee women can deal with their rage, guilt, and sadness are not readily available. They carry these burdens with no hope of outlet. While men can organize themselves into groups, denouncing through political action the atrocities they may have faced, sexual abuse is a powerful stigma, and women seldom talk about it — let alone denounce it.

BY MAGALI SAN MARTIN

Whatever their experiences have been in the country of origin, whatever their physical or mental state, once in Canada refugee women are expected to care for their children, the 'home,' and also to contribute to the household income. They have been compelled to fulfill the role of guarantor of social continuity; it is presupposed that they will be the bearers and teachers of cultural values. In a new country, children are confronted with an entirely new environment, a vastly different system of education, and entirely new set of social expectations. Children who have suffered political persecution, who have had no say over the decision to leave their home country, are never acknowledged as victims. In this climate women are expected to make their children conform to values that have no obvious relevance. Refugee children become resentful of their parents. Invariably, this leads to confrontation within the family. Neither women nor children have a social frame of reference. Language and values are foreign.

Spanish-speaking refugee women come from different social classes. However, later waves of refugees from Latin America have come from mainly working-class and rural backgrounds. For these women remunerated work has always been necessary in order to survive; but, like refugee men, they lack marketable employment skills.

It must be emphasized that the roles and responsibilities of refugee women have been defined not only by the society from

which they came, but also by the conditions existing in the host country. Many refugee women have arrived as 'sponsored' immigrants — they are brought to Canada by their husbands or common-law spouses. As such, they are denied English as a Second Language training. Another concrete example of the way in which the government fosters dependency is by refusing to deal with anyone but the 'head of the family,' whom they usually determine to be the man. By actions such as these, the government determines second-class status for refugee women. Women are forced into relations of dependency, relations that are further maintained by the structure of Canadian society.

When women are unable to overcome the extreme trauma caused by the experience of torture, they are said to lack motivation to 'adapt' to the new environment. Often mental health professionals will define the problems of immigrant women, and refugee women in particular, as problems of 'adjustment' created solely by the difference between their cultural background and the culture of their new setting. They presume that women from the third world are 'submissive,' 'subservient,' and cannot cope as well as Canadian women in Canadian society. This perception disregards the real experiences of refugee women. It ignores the fact that they lack English training, daycare, employment services, and support groups that address the mental health problems mentioned above.

Very different symptomatology — depression, psychosomatic problems, eating disorders, etc. — are often treated simplistically: with tranquilizers.

Although the process of immigration is one that affects all people at different levels, refugee women especially suffer incredible hardship — hardship that is specifically related to the fact that they are women.

Women have resisted oppression from time immemorial. Refugee women are no exception: they have fought oppression and have managed to survive. But there are many wounds that have not healed. Indeed, our experience as community workers tells us that there are those who have given up, who can no longer hold onto hope, and who have no place to turn to. What is needed immediately are services and resources to facilitate healing and growth. Services in the fields of mental and physical health, language skills, and training programmes are essential.

Ultimately, if refugee women are to regain control over their lives, political changes are needed. The process of healing, growing and developing as full human beings requires the collective efforts of the Spanish-speaking community and of government institutions. It requires understanding and knowledge of the realities that affect refugee women. It requires concrete services and financial support. Refugee women have had the strength to survive. The least we can do is to collectively find solutions that can offer them hope.

REGINA HAGGO

Anna

Across the street, lights shine
On the winter swept pavement.
My side of the street is cold and
dark.

A child crosses the street,
Holds out her hand to me,
Speaks to me.

I cannot understand her.
She is not my daughter.
I wish I could go home.

BERNADETTE RULE

Relocation

(for Nora)

I am making tortillas
beside a window
full of snow.
Flour on my hands,
the sun a furnace
in my mind,
I dream of Honduras
where each tree
is a shifting dream
of bright birds and fruit,

...where officials
murdered my husband slowly

for speaking the truth.

Now I live
in moderate Canada
where weather is
the cruellest element,
and I struggle
to bring my spirit
and expectations
into line with the patience
around me.

I am making tortillas
beside a window
full of snow. Honduras
a furnace in my mind.

From *Full Light Falling*
(Hamilton: Image Publishing, 1988).