
Women at Risk

Employment & Immigration Canada

The life of a refugee is, by its very definition, an existence founded on pain, loss and sadness. For women refugees on their own, this life surrounded by strangers, can be extremely lonely and dangerous.

Many such refugee women are in need of resettlement, but there is a small number who are in particularly vulnerable situations. They may be in immediate physical danger because local authorities cannot, or will not, ensure their welfare and safety.

Whether they are living in a camp or elsewhere, women refugees on their own no longer have the traditional social structures that once sustained and protected them. They have no male protector and therefore they are vulnerable to neglect, violence and abuse — perhaps even from members of their own community. If life in their host country requires them to violate their community's cultural mores, they may lose whatever perilous grip on stability they have. The chances for escape from this existence through resettlement are very low. They seldom have the language or employment skills necessary to adapt to a new country. They may have small children to care for. They may be traumatized by the experiences that led them to flee the land of their birth. All of these factors impede their ability to adapt to a new culture and greatly reduce the likelihood that they will be chosen as refugees within Canada's normal refugee programs.

Early in 1987, the Canadian office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees approached Employment and

Immigration Canada to request assistance in some of the most critical cases. The Commission's response was to initiate a pilot project. The pilot was successful and, by February 1988, the "Women at Risk" program had evolved and was formally implemented.

To be eligible under this program, applicants must be "Convention refugees" or members of Designated Classes. They would not normally be accepted under regular refugee selection criteria because they need more assistance than is usually available to government-sponsored refugees. However, with the added assistance of a private sponsor, they can be deemed to have the potential for successful resettlement. Most will receive sponsorship under the Joint Assistance Program.

Through the Joint Assistance Program, the federal government provides health and rehabilitation care and general settlement services, including maintenance costs for such items as food, shelter and incidentals. Private groups offer community orientation services such as job search counselling, childcare, transportation, and psychological support. Sponsorship is usually for one or two years. Only member groups of national organizations who have signed sponsorship agreements with the Canada Employment and Immigration Commission can participate in this program.

The "Women at Risk" program is not solely a "government" program. Because of the special needs of those selected, the involvement of private, voluntary organizations is essential in every case. It is very much a joint effort; and it is only through the ongoing commitment of all

concerned that the program can continue to work.

"Women at Risk" may be identified by a Canadian visa office or by a field officer of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees. Once a woman is accepted under the program guidelines, processing is carried out as fast as possible. Voluntary or non-governmental organizations in Canada are contacted and given information on the applicant, along with a request for a sponsorship. In the interim, medical and security checks are carried out.

By the end of last December, thirty-six women and their dependents had been admitted to Canada under the program, and processing for about the same number was under way. The following stories represent three "Women at Risk" cases:

* * *

Farnaz (not her real name) is from Iran. She is in her mid-thirties, a divorced mother of a teenage son. When the Iran-Iraq war broke out, her family was persecuted because of her father's Baha'i faith. She lost track of her parents, sisters and brothers, all of whom went underground or fled the country. In 1980 Farnaz was fired from her teaching job. In 1986 her son was dismissed from his school, and her husband divorced her.

Soon after, she fled with her son to a neighbouring country. Because she is divorced, she was frequently harassed sexually. In 1988 her country of first asylum refused to renew her temporary permit and threatened to return her to Iran.

Farnaz had a good education. However,

she knew no one in Canada, spoke no English or French, and had no skills relevant to the Canadian labour market.

* * *

Maria (not her real name) is a Honduran in her mid-thirties. She has six children.

Maria's husband was a union leader. He disappeared in February 1988, three weeks after two other union leaders were murdered. Maria is sure that he, too, is dead. Her requests for an official investigation led to threats and physical harassment. She fled with her children, finally reaching Guatemala last May. Her sixth child was born while she was awaiting resettlement. Her situation became precarious when her whereabouts were discovered and her life was again threatened.

Maria had thirteen years of education and some experience as a sewing machine operator. However, she spoke only Spanish and knew no one in Canada.

* * *

Thi Kim (not her real name) is from Vietnam. She was separated from her husband and five children in the overland trek to Thailand and does not know their whereabouts. Thi Kim was abducted by resistance fighters and was the victim of violence. She was finally interned at a camp on the Thailand-Kampuchea border.

Thi Kim had six years of education and some sewing skills. She spoke no English or French, and knew no one in Canada.

* * *

The traumatic experiences of these and other women in the "Women at Risk" program will make their adjustment extremely difficult. Employment and Immigration Canada plans to monitor the program in order to gain a better understanding of the settlement needs of these women.

While the program itself is narrowly defined, and small in terms of the number of persons it assists, it has had the positive effect of creating greater awareness of the

plight of all refugee women and generating interest in assisting their resettlement.

Many refugee women will not be eligible for the "Women at Risk" program. Their needs are nevertheless significant and without the aid of private sponsors their prospects of resettlement are meagre. Employment and Immigration Minister Barbara McDougall and her officials deeply appreciate the dedication and generosity of the sponsors who are already working with "Women at Risk." Those who would like to become involved in assisting refugee women to come to Canada may be assured that the Commission will respond with alacrity and gratitude. The collaborative effort between the government and the private sector will assist Canada in honouring its long standing commitment to the international effort to assist refugees.

Anyone interested in sponsorship should contact a Canada Immigration Centre, or the Chief of Settlement at Regional Offices, Canada Employment and Immigration Commission.

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