

Under Many Fires

The Lives of Women Refugees

by Ana Maria Barrenechea

Dans cet article, l'auteure passe en revue les expériences passées et présentes des femmes réfugiées au Canada. L'auteure examine ces expériences dans un contexte familial et elle explique le rôle crucial que ces femmes jouent dans la cohésion

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et l'ajustement de leur famille à une nouvelle société. Finalement, en comparant les femmes qui immigrèrent volontairement à celles qui sont violemment déracinées, l'auteure met en relief la différence de leur processus d'ajustement.

The explosion of the refugee population constitutes one of the acute problems faced by the world today. Nineteen million people have been uprooted (two-thirds of them in the past 20 years). Nearly 80 per cent of refugees are women or children (Turley).

The decision to leave one's own country is a difficult one under normal circumstances. If forced to leave, the grieving process is imbued with a sense of powerlessness and anger that comes from having been deprived of one of the most basic human rights: the right to choose the place of one's residence. These thoughts and feelings are sometimes the only luggage refugees bring with them when they come to countries like Canada looking for a safe environment in which to live.

We tend to look at the personal histories of refugees as if they began with the situation of state repression. We focus on anecdotes of how they were the direct victims of repression, of what was done to them, when was it done to them, how many times it was done to them. We forget that they have been abused and oppressed even in cases when they have not been the direct target of state repression. In the case of women they were victimized by their own society long before torturers interrupted their lives by using inhumane, cruel, and sophisticated methods to break them down. We must remember that these women were once well-adapted, socially productive individuals.

Each of the "fires" here described represents a set of experiences in the life of refugee women. Being aware of these experiences will help the adaptation process of

women refugees, as well as facilitate a greater understanding of their needs by society as a whole.

The traditional fires

Over the past 50 years, social rules and social expectations for women have dramatically evolved. However, abuses to women's minds and bodies, including child abuse, forced prostitution, and genital mutilation, are still practised throughout the world. Values and expectations that determine women's roles as passive and submissive are still accepted both in countries which produce refugees as well as in countries of asylum. Women's access to education and participation in social or political life remains minimal and controversial.

Common to some cultures is the need for women to have a close male figure to protect them and to act as a spokesperson on their behalf. Expected to avail themselves of this so-called protection, many women do not find it necessary to even define what their rights are, let alone learn how to defend them.

There are documented cases of women who have been accused of political participation in their country of origin by virtue of their relationship with males. Their "involvement" may have been something as trivial as serving tea or coffee at meetings where men discussed political matters. In many cases, these acts are enough for women to be labelled "dangerous subversives" by repressive regimes.

The new fires

In many countries around the world, women's political involvement is currently in a transitional stage as women's expectations of themselves, as well as social expectations, are being redefined. In my many years of participation in women's struggles, as well as in my clinical practice with refugee women, it is evident to me that women who opt to be politically involved often fear the repercussions it might have within their families. This "mixing in men's business" is a demanding task, one that may restrict the time and energies devoted to meet the needs of the families. This results in blame and guilt that is reinforced by social criticism. Furthermore, women report that their right to privacy and intimacy is being violated by angry men who claim "free mind equals free sex." These men see politically involved women as free-minded, and therefore more sexually available (Van Willigen).

In the middle of the fire

Some of the strategies to perpetuate power used by

authoritarian regimes are violence and intimidation. Cultural and social institutions are used as instruments to make the population more vulnerable and compliant. On the one hand, organizations and their members are attacked if they dissent, and on the other, they lend themselves to reinforcing the regime's directions or policies.

Family dislocation is a generalized phenomenon that occurs under repressive circumstances. Sometimes, both partners are taken away and children are left to their own devices. If the male partner is the person who has either gone into hiding or been taken away, the woman finds herself alone, without resources, exposed to criticism and abuse by the community. The repressive authorities might make her a target in trying to find or trying to break down her partner. In some instances, the women's families lend her their support but at the same time blame them for having made a wrong choice in marriage. Aside from the partners, the children may also be targetted by the repression, adding another layer of pressure to the lives of women.

It is impossible for any woman under these pressures to prioritize the many urgent tasks that confront her—whether these involve providing for her children, protecting them, maintaining what is left of the family structure, searching for her partner or older children, as well as participating in the struggle for their freedom.

The reactions to these stresses vary widely. In some cases, women totally break down. However, in most

instances, they confront the tasks as well as they can. Many of them develop an overwhelming sense of guilt arising out of their painful awareness of the tasks that they are not able to accomplish.

An even greater disolation occurs when women are forced to enter refugee camps for "protection." Women and young girls, particularly women without male protectors, are relegated to the bottom of the social hierarchy in refugee camps. They are harassed and intimidated, their food rations are smaller or the rations are withheld unless they pay for them with sexual favours. Many women have reported being repeatedly raped while on the road trying to escape state violence (Kelly).

My discussions with several Chilean organizations, such as the Families of Disappeared Prisoners' Association, Families of Political Prisoners' Association, and Women Prisoners' Support Group, as well as with a number of women jailed in other countries have revealed that men and women respond differently when their partner is taken away in cases of state violence. When men are held prisoners, they generally have their partner's support, if the partner is available. They are visited, their children are brought to them, and the women, in most cases, take on the task of fighting for their partner's freedom.

Women prisoners report different experiences (Agger). In some cases women's incarceration has meant complete family dissolution because her partner has also been taken away or is in hiding. Male partners do not seem to visit as often even when available and they seem to be less active in pursuing their partner's freedom. Women prisoners have sometimes been forced to relinquish custody of their children. One Chilean woman writes about trying to make contact with her two daughters 15 years after she was forced to sign papers giving them up permanently in exchange for her own life and that of her father and her grandmother (Vicencio).

Great damage can be inflicted on a human being by violently intruding into their intimate lives, tearing apart their personal lives and family structure, and leaving them exposed to social condemnation. Women are the objects of physical and psychological abuses with sexual connotations much more often than men. Gang rapes and repeated rape while under custody or during house searches are systematically used as deliberate weapons of intimidation. An example of how the sexual torture of women can be used as a political tool is seen in the latest conflict in former Yugoslavia.

There are women all over the world who are expecting or are raising children conceived through rape by soldiers or other men who are members of an oppressive regime.

The fires of exile

Cultural shock and adaptation into a new society are phenomena that are experienced differently by exiles and immigrants. The grieving process common to all up-



Tlaquepaque, Mexico 1994

Photo: Valerie Alia

rooted groups is characterized in exiles or refugees by an ambivalence towards adapting to the new society, and by anger at having been forced to leave. Interwoven with the survivor's guilt: the feelings arising out of being relatively safe, but with the knowledge that your loved ones and your political partners continue to be in extremely precarious situations.

Those who were politically involved in their own country and have been forced to leave often feel that they have abandoned the fight, and that they have abandoned their comrades for safety and a more comfortable life. One man in this position said, "The minute you start allowing yourself to adapt you feel guilty of leaving the fight." Some refugees tend to distort the conditions in which they had



Tlaquepaque, Mexico 1994

Photo: Valerie Alia

to leave their country, believing that they did have a choice and blame themselves for having taken the "easy way out." Others tend to magnify the risks they fled from in an attempt to cover up their feelings of guilt for having left.

There are many differences in the way men and women confront the process of adaptation, the resources they need to access, and how they prioritize the information received. Women are often unable to access and use services and programs available to them. English as a Second Language (ESL) courses are an example of this. Illiteracy may be more frequent among women than men and this prevents their participation. In some cultures, women will not be able to successfully perform if they are in language classes with men. The provision of daycare spaces for women refugees enrolled in ESL classes becomes essential when the support systems that formerly existed in the country of origin are no longer available. Refugee women and their children may have both suffered traumatic experiences and will experience different levels of anxiety in separating from each other. They will need to be given special consideration. Geographical closeness between daycare facilities and ESL classes which would allow the refugee women to gradually separate from their children would be beneficial in this context.

Women have less access to the host community when

their partners are considered legally to be "the head of the family." In these cases, only men may give information about the available resources and how to access them, and they may not share this information with their wives.

Access to other members of their community of origin is in many instances also restricted for women. This is particularly true for those who have arrived on their own, especially if they were sexually abused in their home country or while trying to flee to safety. Many cultures, for example, have rigid expectations that women will be virgins at the time of marriage. A sexually abused woman is, therefore, seen as inferior and is not respected by her countrymen. This means that she will feel ashamed to seek protection within her own community (Van Willigen).

Overall refugee women lead solitary and isolated lives without proper language training, without appropriate orientation to the new society, and with restricted access to the support of their own communities. In spite of this, women are still expected to make the family environment conducive to survival and growth.

Family reunification and family restructuring are among the changes families of refugees go through. There are instances where women have arrived in Canada by themselves, to be joined later by a damaged partner whom they have not seen for years while he was in the hands of the repressive forces. Role changes within the family structure have taken place due to the absence of this partner and to new models introduced into the home by the host society. The different values and expectations that each family member develops during their own individual adaptation also affects the families' reunification and restructuring.

Some of the most significant role conflicts within the family structure result from the children acquiring elemental mastery of the host society's language faster than their parents. This may make them feel more powerful than their parents and they may want to test limits, increasing the parents' already disempowered position within the new cultural and social context. This, in turn, makes the children feel unguided, unprotected, and frustrated. A woman who came here as a refugee from South Asia remembers how terrified she felt when at the age of 12, she had to go into an emergency department to act as interpreter for her mother who had made a suicide attempt. She fought with the doctors and said "My mother will never do that to us."

The availability of jobs in the countries of asylum influences other changes in family structure of newcomers. Although non-English speaking men as well as women refugees for the most part, can only find employment in unskilled jobs regardless of their professional training, unskilled jobs seem to "fit" women immigrant and refugees much better than they fit their partners. While men seem to have some difficulties acknowledging deterioration of their social status and their economic value in society (Nguyen), women assume the task of earning a living for the family much more readily, and take the jobs that are available. This allows them to acquire some

financial power, in many instances for the first time in their lives. Along with this, they may begin to share their thoughts, feelings, and difficulties with other women and to develop the notion that they have the right to ask for some help with household chores and child care which were traditionally their sole responsibilities. The conflict between a newly empowered woman and a damaged, frustrated, disempowered man trying to regain his role within the family in many instances leads to family violence in the form of wife assault.

Being fired at, once again

The need to produce evidence in refugee hearings is unavoidable. However, long waiting periods, repeated unnecessary examinations, and staff attitudes might trigger painful and dangerous flashbacks for refugee claimants. A woman refugee claimant, remembers her refugee hearing as a repetition of previous experiences. "It was too much, it was so critical, it was so confrontational, it was like my mother, it reminds me of the interrogations during detention."

The frequent presence of emotional symptoms among refugees does not imply the need for a psychiatric diagnosis. Appropriate diagnostic and treatment modalities must be employed as culture plays a crucial role in the ways of expressing and understanding emotional disorders (Bowland and Bruno).

Symptoms reported by people who have been victims of state violence usually meet the criteria for more than one category in the current diagnostic system. However, the course of the illness and the response to conventional methods of treatment are usually different from what is expected. Permanent consequences might be minimal if culturally appropriate treatment modalities are employed. For example, people might avail themselves more and be more compliant with treatment required when they recognize some commonality with the practitioner (Beiser; Delgado).

The quality and quantity of pressures that refugee women bring when coming to a country of refuge such as Canada should be looked at as a gender issue not only because the abuses that men and women are subjected to are different, but because their personality make up and the social expectations determining their responses to the traumas they have faced have been differently shaped. Once we have acknowledged these factors, we can only hope that the host society will be able to provide not only an environment which is physically safe but an environment which is conducive to the healing process refugees need to go through in order to continue with their lives. We will only be able to achieve this goal if we actively promote the public education of Canadians in order to avoid harassment and segregation of refugees either by public officers or by the public at large.

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