
Resettlement and Gender Differences

A Lethbridge Community Study

W

hen people work with, talk about, or do research on “refugees,” they often lose sight of the fact that this is a legal and political term which refers to only one of many things that a person is. Refugees are always unique individuals, each with her particular cultural beliefs and values, her own personality, primary roles, identity, resources for action, and life goals. Indeed, while certain important insights do arise from its use, the label “refugee” also can obscure much of what we want to understand about the lives of those so termed.

As Elizabeth Colson (1988) notes, there is a growing recognition within the anthropological literature on forced migration that, if it used uncritically, we risk the danger of assuming without proof that this political/legal category generated by politicians, aid workers and the media is a real social status and is necessarily the overarching, permanently central fact in peoples’ lives.

In this regard, it is worrisome that many noted researchers like Kunz (1981), who do include some of this diversity in their general models of forced migration, continue to work with an image of a “genderless” refugee. As the articles in this issue show, *gender is absolutely central to the refugee experience.*

Oppression, flight, the distribution of refugee aid, and camp life are all different for women and men. The meanings which women attribute to these experiences derive in part from the societies in which they have been socialized, and in particular from the sex/gender systems which have grounded their identities and their lives. Based on this understanding, over the last ten years feminist scholars have generated an important body of research and social policy discourse on immigrant and refugee women, which has led us to a richness of understanding of these individuals and their communities that was not available before.

At the same time, as perhaps the necessary consequence of how new such discourse is, many of its first-level generalizations about women and men refugees have arisen primarily out of a process of theoretical deduction, and need to be further examined in the light of empirical research findings. It is now critical to inquire in more detail into both the similarities and differences among women who have been forcefully uprooted.

Several such generalizations have implications for refugee resettlement. They concern the ways in which women and men are said to relate to the “private” world of kinship and the family and the “public” world of community, work, and state, both in countries of origin, and in the societies in which they now find themselves. Immigrant and refugee women are often characterized as being primarily grounded in the world of family and kinship prior to flight, while men were far more oriented towards the larger society.

As a broad generalization, this is frequently true, as in the case of various refugee groups from Indochina. My own research on Vietnamese and Sino-Vietnamese in Lethbridge (1988) showed dramatic gender role differences in the participation of husbands and wives in family and public activities prior to flight. My study, like all others of Indochinese in Canada, also showed a sharp divergence between women’s and men’s educational levels and occupational experience; as a case in point, men typically had completed secondary school, while on average women had only a primary school education. On another level, Louis-Jacques Dorais *et al* (1987) found that Vietnamese women and men in Quebec City had very dissimilar perceptions of the present regime in Vietnam which reflected different cognitive orientations to the public and private spheres. Women’s responses

BY DOREEN MARIE INDRA

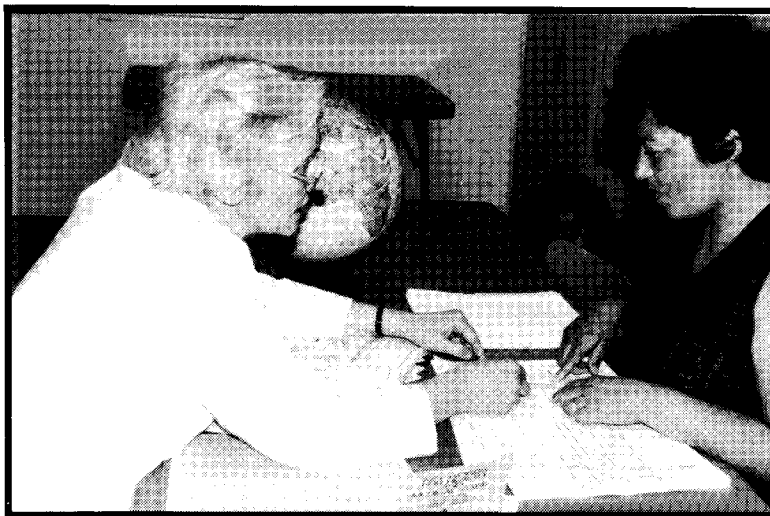
referred to "the concrete consequence of government policies, as experienced in their personal lives...", judging the regime chiefly in terms of its effects on their personal lives and their families. Men tended to be more general and impersonal in their responses, expressing an interest in revolutionary political theory but also a deep disappointment in its practice.

On the basis of such information, women refugees are frequently said to be more marginalized by resettlement in Canada than men. Their self identities and social experience are grounded in family life, from which they are ripped away, and thrust into a foreign social context divorced from their larger kin networks and other solidarity groups. There they suffer the disabilities of gender, compounded with those of being a refugee and a member of a cultural minority group. On the other hand, men are claimed to move more easily from a primary commitment to one public universe to a like commitment to another.

There is much general truth to this conception of refugee women and the challenges that resettlement poses for them. But like the image of "the" refugee, this general image of "the" refugee woman also obscures a great deal of variability in situation and response that is a function of ethnicity, class background, personal goals, and dimension of the resettlement experience. Indeed, recent work suggests that women refugees and other immigrants are systematically more marginal than are men is certainly not always so, and may not even be generally so. This may especially be true for psychological adaptation. Research on a number of refugee and immigrant groups in North America now shows that in terms of felt experience, women may sometimes have greater adaptive psychological resources than men, and may have fewer psychological difficulties in adapting to North American life. Pessar shows that this is so among Dominican migrants in New York City, where initially men are placed in a psychological bind by being oriented towards two groups—their communities of origin and the family. Dominican

women, who were originally primarily grounded in the household, did not lose the centrality of this orientation as a result of migration. Afterwards, these women did not as frequently dichotomize paid work and household affairs as did men (despite Piore (1980) inappropriately claiming that this is general for "immigrants"); rather, they saw their outside work involvement as an extension of their household concerns, and as giving them new opportunities to further their family-linked goals.

Out of a long practical and research in-



A new arrival receives instruction in Calgary

volvement with Southeast Asian resettlement and an interest in how men and women cope with forced uprooting and loss, I recently carried out a study of the community organization and resettlement of Vietnamese and Sino-Vietnamese (Vietnamese Chinese) women and men in Lethbridge, Alberta. I was particularly interested to see whether, some six to ten years after their arrival as refugees, the self concepts of these individuals were still being negatively affected by flight and, if so, whether this was different for women and men.

These communities are surprisingly large, considering that Lethbridge is a small city (population 60,000) quite far from Calgary, the nearest metropole. There are roughly 350 Sino-Vietnamese, 200 Vietnamese, and a 100 Khmer and Lao living there at present. Almost without exception, they are post-1978 immigrants, most of whom came as refugees. Individuals had typically been living in Lethbridge for five to six years in 1985-86 when I carried out this study.

At that time, both communities still clearly showed the objective effects of uprooting and loss in every aspect of life. For example, many ethnic Vietnamese had not been able to re-unify their nuclear families in the intervening years. Twenty-four percent did not have their spouses with them, and 18% did not have all their under-age children there either. One-third of Vietnamese adults were unmarried, mostly because there were many more young men of marriageable age than women. While virtually all Sino-Vietnamese nuclear families were intact, and

far fewer were unmarried (14%), they were even more likely than Vietnamese to be found in unenumerative, low-status jobs like housekeeping (23.5%), dishwashing (23.5%), and restaurant work (18%). Most adults in either group who had worked outside the home in Vietnam were now either in lower status jobs or not working; 21% of Vietnamese men and 51% of Sino-Vietnamese men not (formally) working, and the proportion of women not working outside the home was even higher — 28% of

Vietnamese and 63% of Sino-Vietnamese. Roughly 60% of those in both communities lived in or near a 1950's housing project, and virtually no one had bought their own homes. Most had once lived in extended households, yet very few do now. All continued to be deeply concerned over relatives in Vietnam, as well as those who had been scattered elsewhere around the world. All had lost a way of life, sundered kinship networks, and cut themselves away from richly rewarding community networks. Few in Lethbridge had established many social ties with those outside their communities, and neither community had many formal institutions. Many had a weak command of English.

Because both groups had lost a lot as a result of flight, one might assume that this would have severely undermined self-confidence and self-esteem. In fact, while it is always difficult to generalize about self-concept responses due to their cultural-dependence, testing showed that most individuals' perceived self-esteem

(self-acceptance, sense of self-worth, and self-respect) was quite high. Individuals' expressions of self-confidence was somewhat lower, as one might expect of people in the midst of resettlement. A decided minority reported that they felt that they were less successful than they would like, or sometimes were picked on by others, unnoticed, mixed up, or under too much family pressure.

What is extremely interesting was the big differences in reported self-concepts as a function of ethnicity and gender. Vietnamese individuals had much lower self concept scores, as measured by the Coopersmith Adult Self-esteem Scale (1981). The first-level reason for this is that Sino-Vietnamese individuals had been far more successful in re-assembling their nuclear families in Lethbridge. Indeed, high self concept for women and men of both groups was strongly correlated with being married, and with having all one's children and spouse with them. Several secondary factors arose also. Sino-Vietnamese individuals had also been able to tap into an extant Chinese

community. Vietnamese additionally reported more profound feeling of loss of country — a country that they could neither return to or change. Also, as Gold (1988) notes, Vietnamese had not experienced minority status before coming to Canada, as had Chinese. These results arose despite Vietnamese having a decided socio-economic advantage in resettlement: higher educational levels, greater English fluency, better jobs in Canada, and more of them. This cautions against casually assuming that refugee psychological adaptation is a simple function of such socio-economic measures, either for women or for men.

What is especially pertinent to the discussion here is the finding that in both groups women tended to have considerably higher self-concept scores than men. This was so despite women being much more marginal in education, job skills, formal employment, and English language fluency.

Following the above theoretical argument, one might expect to find evi-

dence that in contrast to men, women felt less psychologically marginalized because a majority of them had successfully re-established many aspects of their family lives that had always been central to them prior to coming to Canada. There was considerable evidence for this thesis. Married women had higher scores than those who were single, although it should be noted that this was equally true for men. In addition, household-based activities in the domain of women in Vietnam (like cooking, cleaning, and tending children) remained predominantly women's



Play-school for refugee children in Calgary

activities in Canada (despite increased men's involvement when women worked outside the home), and they continued to give strong, positive significance to these activities.

Moreover, like Dominican men, those in these two communities appeared to face a number of structural and psychological barriers to having a high self-concept. For example, Dorais *et al* (1987) suggest that political and economic forces may have already made Vietnamese men more psychologically marginal than women well before they left Vietnam. Wives and husbands both reported that wives in Canada were more frequently performing activities involving control and decision-making than they had when in Vietnam (such as working for a wage, paying for goods and services, and disciplining children). One might expect that this would have given comparatively less support for men's self-concept. Actually, neither men or women seemed to derive much psychological benefit from participating in such activities. It may well be

that men's expectations for control and for social recognition were higher than those for women, though I do not have any concrete data to support this. Certainly, among men, the higher their educational level, the lower their self-concept. Young, unmarried Vietnamese men, who may often have lacked both strong grounding in family life, much personal control, or social recognition, had the lowest self-concept scores of any identifiable type of person.

At the same time, many results could not be solely explained by a general proposition that the self-concepts of women in these two communities were stronger just because their lives were grounded in a largely reproduced traditional family structure. As a central case in point, it should be recalled that the majority of these women had lived in extended families in Vietnam, and yet virtually none of them lived in such households in Lethbridge. In addition, unmarried women had as high a self-concept score as married men, and women who remained separated from their spouse or

some of their children had about the same self-concept scores as other women. In regard to self-concept it mattered more to men that their families were here intact.

It would seem from this that women may have found other supports for self-concept not equally available to men. Several patterns arose in my inquiry that give support to this idea. It seems clear to me that women's self-concepts benefited greatly from their ability to use extra-familial social contacts for psychological support. It may be that the quality of women's interaction, as they visited or telephoned each other, went shopping, or conversed at work, was such that they were more easily able to form solidarity and support groups than were men.

One thing is certain. Despite the reality that in many immigrant-origin communities women are more socially isolated than are men, both Vietnamese and Sino-Vietnamese women claimed that they knew more people in Lethbridge and visited them more frequently than did men. Indeed, Vietnamese women claimed

that they knew roughly twice the number of people well enough to visit — and this was their perception about their patterns of visiting in Vietnam, too. Women also reported much more cross-sex visiting and many more cross-sex friends.

This much greater involvement in social community on the part of women may well have been emphasized by the close geographical proximity of Indo-Chinese families, by the strongly expressed feelings of many women that it was hard for them to get around to such things as children's schools and stores, and perhaps even by their having more time for cultivating such relationships. Whatever the cause, all three of these measures of informal community networking — the number of people known well enough to visit, the number of times in a given period that they actually were visited, and the number of cross-sex friends a person had — were strongly correlated with high self concept. When questioned, men reported it was much more important for them to have more friends and a stronger community, yet women were the ones that had gone further to achieve both.

In overview, some of the literature on refugees and other immigrants now suggests that women may often be more

adaptable than men in the ways in which they deal with some of the psychological challenges of uprooting and resettlement. This study certainly illustrates such a pattern. In presenting this information, I do not minimize the significance of the many social, cultural, economic, and political disabilities facing refugee women in Canada today. Rather, I simply wish to emphasize that psychological adaptation has its own gender dynamics — dynamics which in some ways may be partially independent of the basic kinds of socio-economic measures that we too often let stand as indications of refugee adaptive success.

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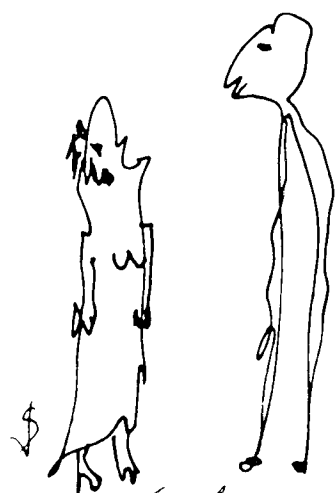
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