



CANADA'S PERIODICAL ON REFUGEES

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SPECIAL ISSUE ON WOMEN REFUGEES — PART 1: ISSUES

Voice and Empowerment: The Gender Relations of Forced Migration

Over the past few years the literature on refugees has begun to address how different the experiences of refugee women are from those of their male counterparts. The unequal treatment women confront in flight, exile, resettlement, and repatriation has become an important, though still understudied focus of refugee research. In a two-part issue of *Refugee*, we address resistance and social change among refugee women internationally.

The events described in the following articles occur in diverse cultural contexts and are addressed from sociological, policy, and grassroots perspectives. The most important theme addressed is that of women voicing their need to have control over their lives—to be regarded as having rights. Women are also described as using these rights to improve their situations and those of their families and communities. The literature on refugee women is beginning to “humanize” women—to describe them as not always empowered and powerful, nor always vulnerable and “victimized.” The papers in this issue (Part

One) take this approach and address some policy and theoretical issues. Part Two (in the next issue) focuses on specific case studies concerning women refugees.

We open Part One with several papers that provide a Canadian perspective on refugee issues. The first paper by Judith Ramirez discusses the Canadian Gender Persecution *Guidelines* that are the product of the Gender

Working Group of the Immigration and Refugee Board, as well as the lobbying efforts of many NGOs. Ramirez discusses how the *Guidelines* are a response to the privatization of issues affecting refugee women, a privatization that silences them and effectively removes their right to speak out. She also refers to the position of the *Guidelines* in the context of the current debate around issues of universal human

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rights versus more cultural relativist perspectives. Victoria Foote pursues research on the *Guidelines* to analyze how the classification of women as a "particular social group" arises out of what she refers to as a "masculinist framework." Her article brings feminist theory concerning issues of identity and difference to bear on the refugee literature and its construction of women as a "social group."

In the paper on Canada's response to the Women at Risk Program, the complicated process involving international and national women's networks, NGOs, and government, that resulted in Canada's formal participation in the Women at Risk Program, is described and critiqued by Noreen Spencer-Nimmons. While Spencer-Nimmons lauds Canada's involvement, she also challenges the government to recognize that refugee women do not solely draw on Canadian resources, but bring their own to resettlement.

Inger Agger's paper raises the issue of women's rights as human rights in a unique way. She describes how, as a therapist working with victims of torture, framing the experience of torture in the context of human rights has been and can be a consciousness-raising experience for both the women she has worked with and herself. She refers to the "ritual" space (both physical and metaphoric) where both the personal and the political are shared between the women and the researcher/therapist. She challenges the artificially created boundaries between the two roles/functions of the counsellor and the counselled by showing how they overlap and in fact intersect.

The final paper in this issue is Helene Moussa's bibliography. It provides an overview of research that she carried out on the gender relations of "citizenship," particularly as it pertains to Muslim women.

In Part Two (Vol. 14, No. 8), we focus on several regional case studies beginning with Kate Halvorsen's perspectives on Southeast Asia, where she questions the inequalities that are embedded in the refugee assistance

available to repatriating and repatriated women. Comparing the cases of Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam, she argues that poorly informed and resourced women cannot be productively engaged in their own resettlement. Women need to be integrally involved in plans that determine their future. The theme of giving voice and control to women is echoed in the paper by Dodo Thandiwe Motsisi on elderly Mozambican women in a refugee camp in Zimbabwe. Her focus on elderly women is an understudied area in refugee research and is welcomed. She stresses the necessity of listening to elderly women in order to understand their needs and their skills. As well, she advocates giving women control over resources that can enable them to be more independent and productive.

Through an analysis of activist women's groups in the former Yugoslavia, Maja Korac's paper also addresses the importance of refugee women (re)establishing control over their lives. The "inclusive" politics of the women's groups that work "with" women rather than "for" them, challenges the paternalism of traditional approaches to refugee assistance. Her paper speaks to the efforts of women's groups to look beyond ethnic differences and see themselves as "sharing the identity of 'woman,'" as well as an opposition to the war.

Continuing a focus on the former Yugoslavia, Cacic-Kumpes considers the effect that war-rapes will have in the refugee and post-refugee period in that region. The violence perpetrated against women (including fear of rape) is one of the many layers of a strategy of genocide with which women constantly struggle. Surviving rape leaves women to confront feelings of degradation and trauma, as well as shame related to prejudices derived from their religious/patriarchal socialization. Cacic-Kumpes also raises a rhetorical question: will the surviving men, who have themselves been humiliated by torture and sexual abuse, spend their lives in revengeful activity?

In the final paper, Marlinda Freire argues that the Latin American refugee