

Canada's Response to the Issue of Refugee Women: The Women at Risk Program¹

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Historical Overview

Refugee women emerged as a social issue during the decade 1978–88 as a result of a series of historical events. Beginning in 1978, there was an increased number of refugees in the world, and among these, women and children began forming the majority in refugee camps and holding centres; some refugee-receiving countries, such as Pakistan, built "widows' camps." In the same decade, there was a marked increase in the number of churches and other nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), whose global outreach to refugees focused on development projects overseas and sponsorship programs at home. En route to overseas refugee sites, women often attended meetings with immigration staff, intergovernmental, and international nongovernmental organizations, and visited international headquarters of these organizations in Geneva, Vienna, Washington, and cities in Latin America. They became involved with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the Division for the Advancement of Women at the United Nations Office Vienna (DAW/UNOV). Network contacts expanded among advocates of human rights and women's rights as information was relayed back to Canada from official and informal channels and filtered down to provincial and local offices, grassroots organizations, advocacy groups, and refugee coalitions.

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background structure of resources. This was the case when pre-existing links and organizational ties, developed by those women committed to gender issues in the 1900s, sprang to life again in the collective action of the participants in the 1960s' women's movement. As Phillips notes (1991; 761, 780), Canadian women's resources were remarkable because of the "number, strength and diversity of organizations formed at the national level." From the 1960s to the 1980s, these loosely coupled, intergenerational and cross-organizational "networks of action-based relations were very efficient in moving information and coordinating action with minimum resource costs" to the Ottawa hub, the National Action Committee for the Status of Women. Information and organizational strategies were taken back through the network to

dramatic meeting place for women attending government and NGO forums; Africa had become the largest refugee-producing region in the world and many women were involved in NGO projects there. A coalition of committed women's groups produced a document entitled "Forward Looking Strategies to the Year 2000" which included specific reference to refugee women. The coalition began organizing a global lobby, making use of studies developed by major churches and vigilant NGOs to change the perceptions of policymakers by accumulating factual data on human rights violations against women (Anglican Church of Canada 1986; Amnesty International 1988).

Earlier, Canada had demonstrated a commitment to provide humanitarian assistance, first, through a Designated Class (DC) clause promulgated in

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groups in urban centres and rural communities. Despite lulls during the 1975–85 Decade of Women, resources remained accessible. This was especially noticeable when they were reactivated in 1985 at the UN Nairobi Conference marking the end of the Decade of Women. Members of the National Action Committee used sophisticated technology and international media contacts to develop control of the issue of refugee women; some could tap into circles of power and influence policymakers.

Historically, two other factors were critical in moving social issues concerning refugee women forward: the timeliness of the 1985 UN Conference in the context of contemporary world events, and the location. Nairobi was a

1978, which extended assistance to groups of people not necessarily covered by UN Convention Refugee (CR) status; second, by the large-scale application of the DC clause to the Southeast Asian "Boat People;" and third, by responding to pressure from the private sector and working out a plan in which the government sponsored one refugee family for every one sponsored by the private sector. Large numbers of refugees were sponsored through this matching formula. The Nansen Medal for humanitarianism was later awarded to Canada and the Canadian people. Thus, beginning in 1985, a great deal of political pressure was placed on Canada by women activists the world over, who expected the country to live up to its humanitarian

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ian commitment to women refugees in dire need. Overseas, pressure came from Canada's working partners at the UNHCR and DAW/UNOV. Domestically, there was pressure from refugee workers and human rights advocates, including private sector volunteers, who expected their accountability in sponsorship and resettlement projects to influence policymakers.

Canada's Response

To respond, Canada had to consider the policies of its international partners, such as those of the UNHCR for peace and protection, cross-border relationships with the United States, External Affairs' position on foreign policy and diplomatic relations, Canada Immigration (Refugee Affairs Division) stand on admissibility procedures and annual intake levels, the humanitarian concerns of its constituent members, and economic and political responsibilities in immigration law and policy. These issues were in addition to the practical complications of revising policies to include a gender component.

Ottawa began with a structural review of past policies and refugee admission criteria. This involved the UNHCR, both overseas and in Canada, and two ministries: the Department of External Affairs and Canada Immigration (Refugee Affairs Division). At that time, the involvement of the two ministries dealing with refugee policy and procedures was complex and often perceived to be a hindrance (Dirks 1980); however, it may have been an advantage in this review, which focused on a gender component.

The Department of External Affairs, for example, had a controlling mandate over the Immigration Department and other government units, such as the International Women's Equality Division. The link between development and equality and the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) was complex in itself because of two subdivisions of critical importance to women and women refugees: the Human Rights Division,

which worked through the Department of External Affairs, and Women in Development, which dispensed funds to the churches and NGOs to design and operate programs for women in Third World countries.

In responding to the challenge of refugee women, Canada had to consider a sub-category of women within the sub-category of refugees and this involved moving through the politically complex process of acknowledging:

1. the protection of refugee women in life-threatening situations;
2. Canada's humanitarian role in the world in offering protection;
3. problems in previous criteria relevant to women refugees; and
4. financial considerations of direct payments overseas or transfer payments to provincial ministries and NGO implementing partners.

One consideration led to another as a special program began to unfold. A policy was needed that would recognize that refugee women and young girls who were alone in camps were particularly vulnerable to violation and exploitation. These would include women whose protection structures were missing both inside "the refugee community" and who could be vulnerable to "elements outside the refugee community," women who may be out-cast, and women who were experiencing special difficulties in adjusting to a new culture (internal NHQ memo IS3.52, 1).

The latter brought into question immigration policy relating to refugee admissibility and eligibility criteria under the Convention Refugee and Designated Class categories (CR/DC1, CR/DC3, and CR/DC5) with a specific reference to women. Two of these categories involved private sector sponsorship and adjustment assistance programs. Thus, the government had to consider the mood of NGOs as implementing partners to make the program work in rural and in urban locations across Canada. As well, differing ideologies and cultures in government bureaus and NGO offices affected perceptions and expectations

by each group of what ought to be done by the other.

Admissibility

Under the CR/DC1 category of government sponsorship, admissibility criteria presupposed prior qualities that assisted a refugee in the resettlement process, such as the ability to find a job with only basic federal training assistance in order to repay the one-way travel loan advanced by the government, and to achieve self-reliance within one year. New guidelines would have to advise responsible parties overseas and domestically that a "certain relaxation in admissibility criteria" would be necessary; refugee women who qualified should be assessed on a sliding scale so that "the greater the need for protection, the lower the threshold which the applicant should have to meet in terms of potential for successful establishment in Canada" (NHQ memo IS3.52, 1-2). This humanitarian stance reduced the gap between CR and DC status by accepting that admissibility criteria may have been too stringent in the case of some refugee women.

The CR/DC3 category referred to refugees likely to become self-sufficient within one year of date of arrival, with the support of a sponsoring group. The government provided transportation loans, emergency medical assistance, job referral assistance through its employment centres, language and occupational training. The sponsoring organization assumed resettlement responsibility. Sponsorship groups were generally supportive of CR/DC3 because it meant that more refugees could enter Canada, over and above those "provided for in the Annual Refugee Plan ... [and would] receive all necessary material assistance: accommodation, food, clothing and incidentals, for a period of one year from the date of arrival in the community or until the refugee becomes continuously self-supporting, whichever is less" (CIC 1978).

Refugees were also supported by the Adjustment Assistance Program fund and linked to the Host Family

Program. In the 1980s, a community group, usually an "immigrant services" organization, received up to \$50,000 to administer this program. Within two to four days of the refugee family's arrival, a volunteer host family was "matched" based on the refugee's "need, gender, age, marital status, family size, and language capabilities." Sustained personal contact with the private sector provided orientation, and social and moral support served the important function of bridging the gap between the state and the individual. Most women at risk and their children would be in particular need of this benefit (Internal NHQ memos IS3.52, IS3.61).

The DC5 category referred to government/private joint sponsorship of

they continued to need assistance (from Joint Assistance or Adjustment Assistance Programs), and further negotiation could occur at the provincial level if cases extended beyond two years.

Eligibility

The Canadian review process considered that "some deserving female heads of family" were being rejected because their "eligibility hinges on an absent male, or because their ability to settle is hampered by dependent children, poor ability in either official language, poor job skills, or a combination of these factors." Under a new program, eligible refugee women "in dire need" would be assessed. They would have to be "at special risk in countries

Refugee Affairs in Ottawa, an interview with the identified woman would be arranged, along with medical and background checks and the assurance of a willing Canadian sponsorship group. Refugee Affairs would telex officers overseas to initiate a Destination Matching Request (DMR). The DMR provided relevant information that would assist the Settlement Branch to identify a specific sponsor. Refugee Affairs would play the coordinating role, maintain careful records, track the cases from first identification by UNHCR Protection Officers overseas, and provide the UNHCR Ottawa Branch with regular status reports.

NGOs kept pace with the review and many women workers registered their input. In Ottawa, the major concern of those drafting new policy guidelines was to get departmental approval of the concept, based on need, so that the program could become operational quickly.² A pilot phase of the "Women at Risk Program" (AWR), was launched in November 1987 and officially adopted in February 1988.

NGO Support and Concern

Advocates, NGOs, churches, and immigrant services delivery organizations welcomed the AWR program. Inspired by the international political lobby and action plans for refugee women's issues which emerged at Nairobi, NGO members of the Canadian Working Group for Refugee Women (WGRW), a subgroup of the Canadian Council for Refugees, made their support and concerns known by meeting with officials at all three levels of government. Many of these women were in charge of refugee desks at the national headquarters of churches, and were active in inter-church coalitions and social groups feeding into the National Council of Women. Women in government positions included those directly assigned by Refugee Affairs to design the program in consultation with women in CIDA's Human Rights and Women's Rights divisions, UNHCR, External Affairs,

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refugees who are part of the Annual Refugee Plan. Government funds can be extended through the Joint Assistance Program if resettlement problems are greater and require more time such as those, for example, affecting the elderly, disabled, illiterate, and unemployable persons. The CR/DC 5 could be extended to include Women at Risk who "are not likely to become self-sufficient without the extensive assistance available under the Joint Assistance Program. These applicants should be considered to be particularly disadvantaged culturally and/or socio-economically" (NHQ memos IS3.52.2, IS3.53.1). In addition to matched benefits, CR/DC5 refugees were eligible for a monthly allowance paid by the government. Joint sponsorship allowed an organization to help refugees who "would not normally be admitted without assurance that such special assistance would be forthcoming from the sponsoring group" (NHQ memo IS3.61). Women at risk cases would be subject to review at the federal level if

of first asylum and ... in urgent need of resettlement" (NHQ memos). To enter Canada under any CR/DC sub-category, they would have to qualify under the Convention Refugee definition. Exactly how CR status would be gained was problematic because of the universality of the UN Convention and its lack of specific focus on women, gender, and social group persecution. Canada's DC category could overcome the problem in and of itself, partly because the clause did not dismiss gender (or recognize it) as a designation category but, more importantly, because DC and CR status became entwined in Canadian immigration law in 1978 and status could be settled inland.

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and other ministries, including Status of Women and Citizenship and Multiculturalism. It was an era of cooperation.

However, some NGOs thought the government perceived AWR women to be a burden rather than resourceful, flexible, and determined individuals who utilized scarce resources carefully in order to reconstitute self-esteem and family life (Spencer-Nimmons 1986, 1994; Wong 1987; Coomarasamy 1988; Sirisumbhand Gordon 1990). In November 1988, NGOs, in accordance with their accountability in sponsorship, emphasized that they would assist the AWR women. The WGRW was relieved that the AWR program was in place, but made a formal statement through the Executive of the Canadian Council for Refugees (CCR) that they supported the AWR program and "regular refugee programmes (government assistance, joint assistance and private sponsorship of women and their children)." They wanted to increase the "total intake of refugee women to more adequately reflect the resettlement needs of the global female refugee population," to increase resources, allocate them equitably, and for "refugee women to be involved in the design and development of creative and innovative resettlement programmes" (CCR 1988, 4).

NGOs and churches involved in refugee sponsorship were concerned that too much time would be spent establishing the eligibility category of a refugee woman whose life was in extreme jeopardy. Even if a Minister's Permit was issued and the woman airlifted to safety, she would have to file a claim and join the backlog of cases awaiting a hearing by the Immigration and Refugee Board. What would this add to her pre-migration trauma? How would her psychosocial well-being be measured and reported, and her resettlement progress monitored?

In the Pilot Project phase, nine cases of government-sponsored "Women at Risk" entered through the CR/DC1 category—women with the least pronounced resettlement problems. They tended to be educated, fluent in Eng-

lish and/or French, familiar with Western lifestyles, had some job skills, and were unencumbered by dependants or disabilities. In 1988, eight cases entered in the CR/DC3 private sponsorship category and 22 cases were admitted in the CR/DC5 category, in which the greater Joint Assistance Program needs, transfer funds to NGOs, and tax credits were supplied. Some of the major NGOs received up to 90 percent of support funds from federal, provincial, and local levels of government.³ The NGO's implementation of sponsorship and Host Family programs also required significant human and financial resources; community members handled a great deal of the work and responsibility. By the end of 1988, NGOs became concerned about the low number of AWR cases accepted by NHQ Ottawa. They challenged the wording of a program guideline, "will attempt to solicit," because they felt they had sufficient sponsorship commitment among their organizations and private sector Host Family volunteers to handle more cases. Canadian visa officers overseas had problems, including rejections from Ottawa. They perceived internal control by Ottawa, despite the "no ceiling" advertised. Officers complained of scarce resources; there were too few officers in the field and caseloads were high. This made it impossible to identify and expedite cases quickly, according to a memo from Refugee Affairs in 1987. The ambiguity of mixed ministries dealing with refugees had a negative effect on staff overseas, who felt that competition and conflict between the Immigration Department and the Department of External Affairs, which had the controlling mandate over the former, left them caught in the middle trying to satisfy two masters. Since the overseas staff often had to make independent assessments, any mistake might mean that neither department would support them. NHQ Ottawa was concerned that NGOs involved in joint sponsorship were "naming referrals ... at issue is the perception by visa officers that this undermined humanitarian intent" (CIC 1991, 4).

NGOs argued that visa and protection officers, both overseas and inland, needed gender-awareness training. They perceived that most officers had poor understanding of gender-specific needs and that the experiences of refugee women were therefore not fully understood. They claimed that because visa officers took applications in camps and recommendations from UNHCR officers, independent criteria and political suitability were often used rather than applications that identified dire need.⁴ In that context, "mistakes are easy to make, impossible to correct and catastrophic once made" (Matas 1989, 11). Activists in working groups overseas and inland wanted risks for all women refugees reduced at source. Their concerns energized the international web of women's networks; activists in North and Central America and elsewhere joined forces in insisting that one single program could not address the real issue—that risks for all women refugees be reduced at source. Pressure was then brought on the UNHCR to develop training, protection policies, and security systems in camps with input from refugee women themselves.

Statistical Record and Preliminary Evaluation

Nevertheless, Canada's response to the issue of refugee women was hailed by human rights advocates around the world, and the lives of many women and their children have been saved. From 1988 to 1994, the six major countries of origin in cases referred to Destination Matching NHQ in Ottawa were Vietnam, Ethiopia, Somalia, Iran, El Salvador, and Laos. There were thirty visa posts listed, from Abidjan to Warsaw; the top seven of these were Nairobi (226), Bangkok (110), Guatemala City (66), Cairo (62), Manila (61), Lisbon (61), and Tel Aviv (57). There were 294 cases involving 828 people (women at risk and their children): 44.5 percent of the cases were from Africa, 33.6 percent from Asia Pacific, 11 percent from the Middle East, 8.5 percent from Latin America, and about 2 percent from Europe. The intake peaked

in 1991 (33.6 percent), and was followed by an overall decline in the number of cases to 21 percent by 1992, then to 17 percent in 1993 (Refugee Affairs Statistics 1994).

Certain factors emerge when the statistical data are broken down into two time periods. Between 1988 and 1991, there were 183 cases involving 461 people, none of them from Europe. Forty percent of the cases were from the Asia Pacific region, 37.7 percent from Africa, about 13 percent from the Middle East, and 9 percent from Latin America. Between 1992 and 1994, there was a marked decline, from 40 percent to 27.9 percent, in the percentage of women from Asia. This probably reflects Hong Kong's political concerns about mainland China rule in 1997, local integration, and the initiation of UNHCR's new "Voluntary Repatriation Program." Elsewhere, cases from Latin America and the Middle East declined by less than one percent, while cases from Africa increased by

56 percent. This suggests a heightened awareness of African politics, the continuing refugee crises on that continent and the likelihood of NGO sponsorship of groups now established by African refugees, who had arrived in Canada earlier.

Private sector sponsorship of refugees, which dipped in 1981, began to increase slowly but, beginning in 1988, jumped to 48 percent (12,247 to the government's 13,464), and then to 61 percent in 1989 and 1990. NGOs were sponsoring refugee women at risk as well as refugees with special needs, the disabled, and unaccompanied minors. Joint Assistance Initiatives reflect these activities, as shown in Table 1. It includes the actual arrivals of women at risk in Canada between 1988 and 1994.

Conclusion

The AWR program was implemented as a life-saving measure. It acknowledged that many refugees who are

women are at particular risk. Thus, it addressed gender conflict and the human rights of women through the revision of former immigration and refugee criteria, and allowed certain refugee women to enter Canada without qualifying under previous, stringent criteria. To some extent, the AWR took into account the resources of women who might become self-sufficient and resettle quickly, and the needs of those suffering from pre-migration trauma and other cultural problems that might prolong their resettlement. It acknowledged the cooperation of NGO implementing partners in helping to make the program work.

The government had some concerns about NGO and private sector facilitation that did not meet government expectations (although these concerns have not been spelled out in a public document). The department stood by its earlier promise to conduct an internal review of the program. The review provided an overall evaluation, in which the participants expressed the view that the program was worthwhile and should be continued because it offered resettlement opportunities "as an instrument of protection" (CIC September 1994, 16). The review concludes that selection criteria based on admissibility still remain open to question and need clarification; it acknowledges concerns about processing time, communication among ministries, departments, overseas posts, sponsors, monitoring, and the quality of NGO services (*ibid.*).

In the perception of NGO implementing partners, the AWR program still does not fully acknowledge the resources that refugee women bring to resettlement, nor does it recognize that resettlement programs should be tailored more specifically to women's needs. Members of the WGRW, which included women in government agencies, NGOs, academia, and advocacy organizations, offered to cooperate with the UNHCR and the Canadian government in designing a monitoring system and strategies that would ensure that a humane and equitable ad-

Table 1: Joint Assistance Initiatives and Actual Arrivals, Women at Risk, Special Needs, Disabled, Unaccompanied (UA) Minors during 1988-94

Year		Women at Risk	Special Needs	Disabled	UA Minors	Total Arrivals
1988*	Cases	40	17	4	0	61
	People	97	91	14	0	202
1989	Cases	0	5	4	2	11
	People	87	197	14	26	324
1990	Cases	28	63	7	14	112
	People	67	244	29	15	355
1991	Cases	65	62	7	13	147
	People	140	316	12	13	481
1992	Cases	36	39	2	0	77
	People	111	175	6	0	292
1993	Cases	51	24	2	2	79
	People	153	93	2	2	250
1994	Cases	7	11	0	0	18
	People	29	34	0	0	63
Total						
1988-94	Cases	227	221	26	31	505
	People	684	1,150	77	56	1,967

*The 23 cases referred during the pilot phase are reflected in 1988.

Source: International Refugees and Migration Policy Branch/ Humanitarian and Resettlement Policy Division November 1994.

aptation process was implemented. To date, no cooperative government-private sector monitoring system has been developed. Instead, the government expected "regions to monitor sponsorships at certain minimum levels," with regional settlement officers establishing guidelines within their jurisdiction. About 50 percent of the cases are monitored, and CIC representatives cite inadequate resources. Where monitoring is in effect, field staff report that it provides valuable feedback, direct contact with refugees, reassurance to sponsors, and the opportunity to assess future sponsorship (CIC September 1994, 10). While the AWR program reflects the continuing synergy between the Canadian public and private sectors, it also points to the fact that the government may be underutilizing private sector NGOs and community workers and thus may not be achieving a full assessment of the progress on resettlement needs of all refugee women at risk brought to Canada. However, a preliminary analysis shows how difficult it is for one small Canadian program to cope with the huge populations of refugee women in the world. This is especially true in view of the fact that in Canada, the AWR functions as a small satellite of the overarching immigration and refugee bureaucracy for dealing with refugees. The weight of bureaucratic complexities in Canada is doubled when overseas components are factored in.

Nevertheless, there are three major reasons why advocacy groups were proud that Canada had made the first response to an international issue:

1. it set a precedent and acted as a model for other countries;
2. its signal role substantiated the need to combine protection and assistance for refugees who are women; and
3. historically, Canada's response acknowledged, *by law*, the need for a gender component in situations of forced immigration.

The fact remains that one program can get lost in this maze despite everyone's best efforts, and women's con-

cerns, which have always had low priority, tend to be threatened more than ever. Women's advocacy groups are preparing for the 1995 International Women's Conference in Beijing; once again, they are pressuring governments for support through their expansive web of network associations.

Clearly, from the earliest advocates of women's issues in the 1900s, through intergenerational and organizational structures during the Decade of Women, 1975-85, and into the 1990s, these networks have helped to sustain a collective identity by building on the meaning of women's identity and continuing to make an international statement that equality, protection, development, and human rights are all women's issues and at the heart of women's advocacy work. ■

Notes

1. This paper extracts and extends material from a chapter in my dissertation, "The Emergence of Refugee Women as a Social Issue: 1978-1988."
2. Conversation with Trudy Kernahan, Refugee Affairs, who was previously in a field office overseas and was given credit by Jasmine Pankathy (Acting Chief of Programmes) for writing the guidelines. Ms. Kernahan was the first coordinator of the project.
3. Information gathered during a Western Canada NGO immigrant services conference in Vancouver, June 1990, at which government representatives were present.
4. Kathleen Ptolemy letters and private communication with the Director of MOSAIC, Vancouver, B.C.

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