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REFUGEE AND IMMIGRANT WOMEN: AN INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

An Introductory Note

Guida Man

Research in migration has historically either failed to include women in the analysis, or has conflated women's experience with their male counterparts, and has subsumed it under men's experience. This is true with regard to both migration theories and methodologies, which have ignored women's situation and experience as the basis of inquiry. The female domain of production and reproduction is considered uninteresting to many migration researchers, they are therefore left unconceptualized and uninvestigated. This one-sided notion of social research has been challenged by feminist theorists who have developed an epistemology for women. Most recently, feminist migration researchers have begun to conceptualize the relations of race, ethnicity, class, gender and region, and have moved from location to political grounds of contestation.

This issue of *Refuge* provides a space for the voices of immigrant and refugee women from diverse race, class, culture and nation to be heard. The papers presented here represent the

views of academic researchers, as well as NGOs and practitioners working on issues involving refugee and immigrant women. They argue for legislative changes, improvement of immigrant and refugee women's conditions, and protection for their legal, social, physical and sexual rights. These articles include theoretical dis-

cussions, empirical research, and policy issues with a focus on the social, economic, legal and political consequences for refugee and immigrant women. They demonstrate that immigrant and refugee women as activists, workers, mothers, and daughters are actors who labour and toil alongside their male counterparts, who struggle

CONTENTS:

An Introductory Note Guida Man	1
Feminist Theories and Migration Research—Making Sense in the Data Feast? Aina Tollefsen Altamirano	4
When Refugees are Women: Emergence of the Issue on the International Agenda Keiko Osaki	9
Gender-Related Persecution as a Basis for Refugee Status: The Emergence of an International Norm Stephanie Kuttner	17
Defining a Particular Social Group Based on Gender Elizabeth Adjin-Tettey	22
Gender Differences and Family Reunion in the European Union: Implications for Refugees Eleonore Kofman and Rosemary Sales	26
Struggling for Rights: African Women and the "Sanspapiers" Movement in France Cathie Lloyd	31
Refugee Stories: Constructing a Bosnian Girl's Identity in Exile—a Case Study Eija Asikainen	35

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and fight for their rights, and reconstruct their identities in the new country.

It is undeniable that increasingly, feminist migration researchers has been using feminist conceptualization in conducting their research, but in what ways can or could feminist theories contribute to the understanding of contemporary international migration? And how do questions of gender, race and nation intersect? These are questions posed by Aina Tollefsen Altamirano in her theoretical paper which explores and evaluates the actual and potential contribution of some recent developments within feminist geography to migration research. Indeed, her questions are echoed by other feminist researchers in international migration who find conventional theory and methodology inadequate in addressing the concerns of immigrant and refugee women. Using Linda McDowell's work as a model, Altamirano distinguishes three main currents of thought within feminist geography: feminist empiricism, feminist standpoint theory, and post-rational feminism. While migration research can benefit from the different traditions in feminist theory, Altamirano proposes to eliminate essentialism from these perspectives.

Equally vital for research on refugee and immigrant women are papers which address policy issues. Despite the fact that half of the refugees in the world are women, it is not until recently that the international community recognizes that refugee women have special needs because of their gender. Adopting a feminist empiricist perspective, Keiko Osaki utilizes the UNHCR's 1997 newly collected gender specific cross-national statistical data on refugees to emphasize the increasing feminization of refugees.

The United Nations, in a series of meetings, recognized that women and children have particular needs, that some women may be considered a "particular social group" within the definition of a Convention refugee, that the civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights of refugee and

displaced women and children should be reaffirmed and backed by laws, policies and programmes, and that women and girls are vulnerable to gender-based discrimination and gender specific violence and exploitation. To meet the special needs of women, Osaki recommended program interventions in the areas of legal protection; protection from physical violence; sexual exploitation and prostitution; and better access to food, health services, education and economic opportunities.

The issue of women as a "particular social group" is further taken up by two academics in law in the following two papers. Stephanie Kuttner's paper discusses Canada's role in the emergence of an international norm accepting gender-related persecution as a basis for refugee status. She examines the causal connections in the interplay between "bottom-up" factors of domestic interest groups and societal norms; "top-down" factors of the international constitutions of law, conferencing, and the United Nations system; and "transnational" factors of principled issue networks and experts operating within the international refugee system.

Citing legal case studies, Elizabeth Adjin-Tettey maintains that women constitute a particular social group both because of an innate characteristic that they share (gender), and because of their susceptibility to serious human rights violations. Adjin-Tettey further argues that whereas all women are part of a social group, only those who are likely to be victimized or marginalized because of their gender will be eligible for Convention refugee status as they will be the only persons within the category who are genuinely at risk of persecution.

The consequences of policy changes in access to family reunion, and the gendered implications for women entering European countries as family migrants, and as applicants to sponsor family members is addressed by Eleonore Kofman and Rosemary Sales. The authors demystify the notion that primary migration in Europe has

ended. In fact, one of the most significant social changes in Europe in the last twenty years has been an increasing feminization of immigration flows into Europe through family reunion and the independent migration of women. As a consequence of the European integration, restrictive immigration changes in access to family reunion, as well as policies to limit the social rights of immigrants and refugees within Europe have been implemented by many states. This occurs in the 1990s, at a time when the number of asylum seekers were increasing. As a result, there has been a drastic reduction in the number of asylum seekers gaining refugee status. Hence, other forms of temporary protection on humanitarian grounds has been developed. Kofman and Sales propose legislative changes which would recognize the contribution of immigrants to economic, social, political and cultural life in European societies, and which would be based on securing rights as well as controlling immigration flows.

An example of the consequence of restrictive immigration changes in Europe is best illustrated by Cathie Lloyd's paper on the *sanspapiers* movement in France. The movement arose in the context of draconian Pasqua laws, resulting in many West African immigrants falling into the category of "illegal" even though they had entered France legally. Through their own women's organization, West African women, led by activists such as Madjiguène Cissé, participated and played a prominent role in the movement. Many of the women had been left alone in France because their husbands had been deported, and they now faced destitution and isolation, unable to speak the French language fluently. The *sanspapiers* and their supporters challenged the "closed frontiers" consensus on immigration, and argued for a more realistic approach to accepting immigration in France. The dispute has succeeded in voicing the personal experiences of women and men who lost their legal status as a result of immigration controls.

While many migration researchers illuminate the lives of refugee and immigrant women by voicing the trials and tribulations for these women, other studies validate and empower the women's experience by letting them voice their own experience. The last paper of this issue employs the latter method. In utilizing narrative identity approach, Eija Asikainen is successful in giving voice to Hajra, an adolescent Bosnian girl in exile in Finland. The story of Hajra serves as an interpretation of the events in Yugoslavia, and as a process through which an adolescent became first a refugee, and who then became aware of her own and of other people's ethnicity. Hajra was endowed with the identity of a refugee on the day she had to leave her home, and with the identity of a Bosnian girl on the day she came to Finland. She told her own story in changing situations and contexts. She used these stories to organize her experiences, to produce meaning for the events, and to construct her own identity.

Although this issue is devoted specifically to highlight immigrant and refugee women from an international perspective, I want to emphasize that the concerns of immigrant and refugee women could not possibly be adequately addressed in only one issue of *Refuge*. I was overwhelmed by the response and enthusiasm I received as demonstrated by the large number of submissions. Regrettably, I could not fit all the papers in this issue due to space limitations. However, I am optimistic that immigrant and refugee women's concerns will continue to be reflected in future journal issues as you continue to support and inform us of their concerns in your submissions.

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Asylum: A Moral Dilemma

By W. Gunther Plaut

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Every year the refugee landscape changes, but only in that more problems are added, fewer are solved, and all become constantly more urgent. Fuelled by the explosion of the world's population, the quest for asylum is one of the most pressing problems of our age. Refugee-receiving nations—located frequently, but by no means exclusively, in the Western world—have to respond to masses of humanity searching for new livable homes. Human compassion for these refugees can be found everywhere, but so can xenophobia and the desire to preserve one's nation, economic well being, and cultural integrity. The clash between these impulses represents one of the great dilemmas of our time and is the subject of Plaut's study. In exploring it, he provides a far-ranging inquiry into the human condition.

The book presents political, ethnic, philosophical, religious, and sociological arguments, and deals with some of the most troublesome and heartbreaking conflicts in the news.

Contents: *The Issues; Questions Without Answers; Definitions; Religion, Natural Law, and Hospitality; A Look at History; Some Ethical Questions; Through the Lens of Sociobiology; Community and Individual; Contended Rights: To Leave, Return, Remain.*

The Practice; Refugees in Africa; Four Asian Lands; Glimpses of Europe and Central America; The North American Experience; The Sanctuary Movement; A Final Look; Bibliography; Index.

Asylum—A Moral Dilemma is simultaneously published in the United States by Praeger Publishers, and in Canada by York Lanes Press.