

Special Essays

Dislocated Subjects: The Story of Refugee Women

Introduction

The notion of a dislocated subject is not an uncommon one in today's social and political landscape. Our society is characterised by what many political scientists refer to as an erosion of the values and knowledge systems which used to structure our existence. Traditional modes of authority, identities and social structures are collapsing, creating a vacuum as we struggle to construct new ones to replace the old. Dislocation represents a natural consequence of this process. It describes a psycho-social transition whereby the individual's identity and sense of self are disrupted, causing trauma but also forcing the individual to seek out a new identity in order to adapt to a new social context. Dislocation can be caused by a number of factors. To a large extent it can be viewed as a natural process. After all, society and culture are not static and monolithic constructs, but processes that evolve and change. Societal change rarely occurs on an even basis and many people experience some sort of dislocation as they try to come to terms with the transformation of their society. Another source of dislocation is war, a process that represents transition in its most violent and bewildering form.

A third source of dislocation is derived from coerced human displacement. Today it is estimated that more than 21 million people have been forced to cross internationally recognised borders in order to escape human rights abuses. Refugeehood, therefore, represents an imposed state of being that is the result of the trauma of persecution. The dislocation that refugees experience is an integral part, if not the definitive aspect, of the refugee condition. Flight, migration and becoming a refugee bring an avalanche of changes to an individual's material and social situation (Maciej Domanski, 'Insights from Refugee Experience: A Background Paper on Temporary Protection' in James C. Hathaway (ed), *Reconceiving International Refugee Law*, The Hague, 1997, pp. 23-28). His/her social status, self-image and identity become greatly disturbed, as the individual's role system is dis- and re-organised.

The objective of this paper is to analyse the refugee experience of dislocation from a gendered perspective, with particular reference to the situation of Afghan refugee women. Women together with children make up 80% of the world's refugee population; their numerical dominance alone justifies a critical

interrogation. More important, however, is the fact that gender represents a useful category or methodology through which to analyse the refugee experience and the phenomenon of dislocation. Refugees are not a homogenous or uniform category of people. They are divided along cultural, linguistic, ethnic, political and religious lines, to cite but a few differentiating factors. Gender represents such a factor. The term "gender" will be used to refer to the construction of differences between men and women and ideas of "femininity" and "masculinity". It is not within the scope of this essay to discuss the basis of this difference. It is, however, noted that difference has been said to rest in such concepts and processes such as biology, culture, socialisation, language and linguistics.

Gender, therefore, serves to fragment or at least problematise categories, which would otherwise essentialise the refugee experience. Gender, as a unit of analysis, allows us to contrast the lives of men and women within the context of the refugee experience. It illustrates that women experience the dislocation of refugeehood in a different and unique way. This paper recognises the problematic nature of the concept of gender. Like other categories, it is unstable because identity itself is unstable and constructed from a combination of other (macro) identities. In our case, this means that refugee women are not merely women, but possess other identities that relate to race, class, ethnicity and religion. These other identities may divide women more than they are united by their common gender. Despite the limitations of a gendered analysis (a limitation that is inevitable in any conceptual framework), gender clearly represents a useful method to analyse and understand dislocation in the context of the refugee experience.

The Dislocated Refugee

If dislocation is a natural experience brought about by the changes that any evolving society undergoes, then the refugee condition represents dislocation on a far greater, more radical and accelerated scale. The social, psychological and economic consequences of living as a refugee are profound. Being a refugee has been described as a form of bereavement where the individual is forced to endure the loss of roots, geography, emotional support and status (Mutoz in Helia López Zarzosa, "Internal Exile, Exile and Return", *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 11 (2), 1998, p.192). Egon Kunz, for

example, compares the refugee condition to a state of suspension in which the refugee experiences “the spiritual, spatial, temporal, and emotional equidistant of no man’s land.” (cited in Domanski, p. 28) Similarly, Simon Turner sees in the refugee condition elements and processes of social rupture: social disintegration, undoing, dissolution and decomposition, all of which are produced when accepted social structures and norms are suspended or lost (Simon Turner, “Angry Men In Camps: Gender, Age and Class Relations Among Burundian Refugees in Tanzania”, *New Issues in Refugee Research, Working Paper No.9*, June 1999, p. 8).

The infantilisation or “de-maturation” that refugees are forced to endure is a critical and fundamentally disenfranchising process. It begins with the transference of decision-making power from refugees to officials, with the latter assuming the right to intrude into the private world of the former (Domanski, “Insights from Refugee Experience”). Refugees have little chance of influencing administrative decisions relating to their life. This is because their knowledge and perception of their own problems are viewed as limited, biased and more subjective than those of experts. The result is that refugees experience a lack of power and self-determination. To overcome this state effective psycho-social adjustment is required.

Refugee Women and Dislocation

Refugee women experience displacement and dislocation in a different way to male refugees. Their gender often functions to their disadvantage and this is apparent in a number of ways. The unique types of persecutions that women are subjected to and which may compel them to flee their countries of origin, are not enumerated as grounds for persecution in the international legal instruments that define refugees. The 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees does not provide for a separate category for women who face gender-specific persecution or human rights abuses which often occur in the private sphere and the sanctity of the home. As a result, women who fear harsh or inhuman treatment because they transgressed their society’s laws or customs regarding the role of women, find it difficult to establish a claim under the current international definition of refugee. In other words, women have less of a chance of obtaining refugee status as the key criteria for being a refugee are primarily drawn from the realm of public life, which, in many societies, is still dominated by men. The Executive Committee of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has encouraged the states to consider women who are subjected to particular human rights violations to be covered under the “social group”, but it is left to the

discretion of countries to follow these recommendations (UNHCR, “Guidelines for the Protection of Refugee Women”, EC/SCP/67, Geneva, July 1991, paragraph 53/ I a)

Due to the intrinsic social and economic instability that the refugee condition presents, the physical and emotional safety of all refugees is compromised. However, it is women and their dependants who are particularly vulnerable. They often face rape and other forms of sexual violence prior to, during their flight, following their arrival in countries of asylum and in some cases even during repatriation operations and re-integration phases. The potential for abuse increases considerably when women and children are separated from their families amidst the confusion of flight. The perpetrators of this sexual abuse include military personnel, immigration personnel, bandit or pirate groups, other male refugees and rival ethnic groups. The abuse may be as flagrant as outright rape and abduction or as subtle as an offer of protection, documents or assistance in exchange for sexual favours (UNHCR Guidelines for the Protection of Refugee Women, 1991). Data on Vietnamese boat people from UNHCR indicates that 39% of the women had been abducted and/or raped by pirates while at sea. (Dorothy Q. Thomas in “Preliminary Report of the Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women to the Commission on Human Rights”, E/CN.4/1995/42, paragraph 215).

Even residing in a refugee camp can magnify the problems that refugee women face. The physical structure and location of the camp itself can undermine the safety of refugee women and contribute to the increase of sexual violence. For example, refugee camps can be located in areas with serious crime problems; they can be geographically isolated from local populations, making police protection difficult. Simple problems like poor lighting can compound the risk of sexual attacks at night. Women are also targeted when they leave the camp to collect water, firewood or simply when they have to use the facilities which may be located away from the security cordons of the camp.

While residing in host countries, refugee women experience the negative aspects of refugeehood (such as losing traditional roles, responsibilities and supportive networks) just like their male counterparts. They are uprooted from their social and cultural context, which previously structured their behavioural roles and value systems. However, displacement and dislocation for women often means the dismemberment of families, which produces drastic changes to family structures. Many refugee women

are vulnerable because they are single or widowed. Thus, the lack of safety that the refugee women experience is largely due to the altering of social and family structures which would otherwise have provided stability and protection. Many female refugees have become the heads of their household, not out of choice, but due to the loss of the male head of the family. In the case of Afghan refugee women, many of their men were forcibly taken to do military service in their country of origin and lost their lives in the process. In other instances, men have returned to their country to conduct business (for example, small trade, selling their property) to cover financial expenses in the country of refuge, and have never returned. Whatever the mode of loss is, the fact is that it has made these women more vulnerable. A large number of single or widowed women are forced to enter into non-consensual relationships in asylum countries in order to obtain protection and food security for their family. Others are forced to engage in prostitution or illicit trade in drugs and alcohol to survive.

Many refugee women, particularly those in urban contexts, have had to adopt not only new familial roles, but also new social and economic responsibilities, new values and ways of thinking, new lifestyles and occupations. Lacking an effective male support or an alternative means to maintain their families (particularly children) many refugee women were forced to marry in order to procure a male protector and provider. Others have to abandon the private sphere they inhabit as housewives to find paid employment (primarily in the informal sector) or take up an economic activity so as to supplement the family income. In the Indian context, many Afghan women sell home-prepared meals in markets or do some tailoring and stitching at home. The economic activities which Afghan women engage in are often centred around the domestic sphere, leaving the men to work in more public places, like markets and shops. Burmese women, on the other hand, sometimes find employment as domestic workers in private homes.

A number of urban refugee women are educated professionals who sometimes had to flee their country for precisely this reason. A number of studies have shown that these women are often unable to use their skills in the country of their asylum and find gainful employment. In India, this is primarily due to the fact that the majority of refugees are not able to obtain a Residential Permit, which would regularise their stay in this country. Even with a Residential Permit, refugees do not have the right to work. Because India has not signed the two international legal instruments relating to refugees and has no national refugee policy, refugees

in India enjoy none of the basic economic and social entitlements, which their counterparts in other parts of the world do.

The lack of work opportunities adds to the dislocation that refugee women experience. In India, there is a case of an Afghan refugee woman, who was one of the first few women to work in the building and construction industry in Afghanistan, earning government recognition and representing her country at international workshops. She was also a member of the Women's Organisation of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan and mobilised thousands of women to leave the domestic sphere and engage in paid work. Lack of a steady flow of income and rejections from various Embassies for resettlement to a third country have rendered her desolate and forced her to contemplate suicide if her situation does not improve.

Refugee women with male support are also in a problematic situation. The collapse of traditional structures of patriarchy and the lack of stability or security have undermined traditional gender roles. Many men, confronting the erosion of their once domineering male identity, have resorted to violent means in an attempt to re-establish their sense of worth and self. Men, once the providers and breadwinners of their families, become perpetrators of domestic violence, beating their wives and children. In such instances, many refugee women are powerless and fearing social ostracisation, do not report such crimes. Fear of engaging in a legal process in a foreign country without the benefit of a certain legal status, is another factor that prevents refugee women from reporting acts of violence against them. Furthermore, domestic violence represents an all too common occurrence in the lives of women all over the world, whether they are refugees or not. Many societies either endorse the right of a man to chastise his wife and children or mystify the true extent and severity of the problem behind myths that represent the home as a safe and loving place, and never the cradle of violence. As a result, acts of violence in the home are largely carried out with impunity and are under-reported.

Refugee women also face unique problems when it comes to their resettlement to third countries. UNHCR promotes the resettlement of women-at-risk. This category encompasses women who have protection problems, and are single heads of families or are accompanied by an adult male who is unable to support and assume the role of the head of the family (UNHCR, *Resettlement Handbook*, Geneva, 1997). Intrinsic to a successful application for resettlement is the establishment of a refugee claim. This is

problematic, since most women have refugee claims based on the activities of other family members that placed their lives in danger. In other cases, a lack of gender-sensitive interviewing skills has led to the scarcity of adequate information. Cultural considerations, taboos and fear of further victimisation, also inhibit refugee women from completely elaborating on past persecutions. There have also been cases where widowed or single refugee women have married refugees who do not have a very strong refugee claim. Upon marriage, almost all husbands become the principal applicants on the refugee certificate, accepting responsibility for all people on the certificate. This is in line with the traditional background of many refugee women, which dictates that the husband is the head of the household. The main problem with this approach is that it can have serious ramifications for resettlement chances. Because prospective embassies only review the refugee claim of the principal applicant in reaching a decision regarding resettlement, refugee women who have married male refugees with weak claims are severely disadvantaged.

The protection problems faced by refugee women during flight and in their country of asylum often follow them on their return home. Most of the time, decisions to repatriate are made by men on their behalf and often motivated by the lack of any other durable solution in the country of asylum. Many women face physical torture when they return home or are once more subjected to restrictive cultural, religious, educational and political practices that discriminate on the basis of sex. In many cases, they have been subjected to physical and sexual violence by the military forces still in control of their area. Many victims have trouble reporting these crimes to those who are monitoring their safe return, particularly if there is a lack of female monitors. (UNHCR, *Guidelines for the Protection of Refugee Women*, paragraph 42, 1991)

Conclusion

Despite the aforementioned difficulties, refugee women have exhibited a remarkable openness to change. They are not powerless victims. Forced by changing circumstances, they have assumed new and unfamiliar roles even in environments and communities that are characterised by an opposition to women's independence and self-assertion and have a very low degree of tolerance for non-conformity (Gaim Kibreab, "Eritrean Women Refugees in Khartoum, Sudan, 1970-1990", *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 8 (1), 1995, p.10).

It must be emphasised that dislocation is not always a negative process. While it is true that during periods of intense crisis and dislocation patriarchy can

intensify and deepen the subordination of women, it is equally true that new space for manoeuvring is created. Dislocation can produce a climate in which women are no longer obliged to adhere to traditional, culturally determined roles. As Kibreab argues, displacement need not necessarily be a disenfranchising experience but can, for example, represent liberation from patriarchal control and domination exercised through families ("Eritrean Women Refugees in Khartoum, Sudan, 1970-1990", p. 8). A similar point is made by Simon Turner, who sees in social rupture an opportunity to transgress hitherto accepted norms and customs, which have oppressed certain members of the community. In other words, dislocation can be accompanied by positive processes such as growth, transformation and decomposition and the reformulation of old elements into newer and more progressive patterns (Simon Turner, "Angry Men In Camps: Gender, Age and Class Relations Among Burundian Refugees in Tanzania", p. 8). Alternatively, we must be careful not to romanticise displacement and dislocation. Refugee women are still a vulnerable category of persons whose human rights are circumvented. Dislocation, particularly in the context of refugeehood, is a profoundly traumatic experience that can undermine an individual's sense of self as well as threaten his or her physical well being. Clearly, the case of refugee women must be studied in greater detail and policies need to be formulated in order to address their pressing needs and concerns.

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(The views expressed in this article are those of the authors, and are not necessarily shared by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) or the United Nations.)

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