

My Personal Experience as a Refugee from Central America

BY CLAUDIA CALVO

*The perception of refugees as potential terrorists, and the need for stringent refugee laws, is challenged by this woman, herself a refugee. She views refugees as victims of violence—usually state violence. Many refugees are women and children who have experienced tremendous loss and suffering, and who are fleeing their homes in search of peace and justice. This painful personal testimony by Claudia Calvo was first published in *Refugee Women* (Vol. 10, No. 1, 1989), one of the most difficult and telling issues produced by CWS/cf.*

It is almost five years since I left my country, and over four since I came to Canada as a "refugee." I have found that some people do not like to be called "refugees." They believe the term makes them different and people will look down at them. But I feel proud to be one: the term means for me that there is a history behind my being here, that like many others I represent the struggle of a people for peace and justice. I came here because the government of my country wouldn't let me or my family stay; our lives were in danger and we cannot go back until things are totally different, until the right to live is the most important goal of the leaders, and the political opposition is freely allowed.

In the meantime, I am here and I am still trying to get used to the cold winters and hot summers — you see the country I come from is commonly known as the city of the eternal spring.

Anyway, what I am going to write about is my personal experience as a refugee from Central America (Salvador and Guatemala specifically) who in many ways experiences the same problems of any immigrant woman. But in other ways life is very different.

I find that one of the things that differentiates refugee women from immigrants is the fact that we all were forced to leave. We came because we had to save our lives and those of our loved ones, and we do not want to stay. Perhaps we will have to stay, but we will always be ready to pack and return home. But do not get me wrong: we, like most people, are looking for a better life and we try to do our best while in Canada. Our goal is to work hard, learn things and prepare ourselves, so that when we go back to our countries, we will be better than when we left and will have something to contribute in what we hope will be a new society.

We, the refugee women from Central America, come from all walks of life: some of us are professionals, others technicians, unskilled workers, mothers and wives. We are different ages and live at different economic levels. But what brings all of us together is that we care very deeply for our countrymen and women, and we all believe that those who leave in poverty and misery have the right to live with dignity, in peace and freedom. We want a better future for our children and grandchildren; working towards this goal, we got involved in unions, associations and organizations fighting



Refugee Woman

Photo courtesy: UNHRC

for the basics of life (shelter, food, education and work). Some of us were not even into these fights, but were married to leaders of the opposition, university students or union representatives: that was enough to signal us as subversives and troublemakers.

Our governments, mainly under the control of the military, look at any opposition as a threat to their privileges and their hold on political and economic power. Many of my friends have disappeared, were murdered and tortured together with their children; just a few of us were able to escape and are now living in exile.

The journey to exile starts with very heavy luggage filled with sadness, desperation and uncertainty about the future. Some of the lucky ones, like myself, leave with the family; some others, like one of my friends, will have to leave only a few days after their husband's funeral, or maybe their son's or daughter's assassination.

After leaving behind friends, family, a job, plans and dreams, one arrives in Canada — which in itself becomes a shelter, a place in which you feel safe (but you feel a foreigner), a place that in many ways welcomes you (but in many others is not prepared to deal with the things that will become your frustrations in the future). Canada is different: it is not your country; the cultural values are different, things are done in a way that is unfamiliar to you; and the people live differently. Most Canadians have never seen five year-old children picking cotton for \$1.00 a day or shining shoes in the streets for \$0.25 a day. Women have not been tortured, raped or left alone as a consequence of political violence. Men have not been taken away and never seen again. And grandmothers still look forward to seeing their grandchildren grow. That is not the reality in our countries. A mother with her children in university will be always wondering if her son or daughter will be coming back that night. A *campesino* mother can always feel lucky if her children grow up to be five years old. And a union leader prepares himself to perhaps not ever come home from work.

The first problem you encounter is the language, you have to go to school and learn it, but in many cases the need to send

money abroad for the number of members of your family, or just the need to work for self-assurance, will send you into the workforce. From then it is really hard to have the time or the energy to attend night school. A profession is very important but your five, six or ten years of post-secondary education are not recognized. You have to start it all over again and that is why there are so many talented men and women doctors, psychologists, lawyers, teachers, etc. working as unskilled labourers for low salaries.

In our culture, although things are changing, women stay at home and raise the children. Here most of the times our husbands do not earn enough to support the family and cover the expenses, and women end up in night cleaning jobs or factory lines — their dreams shattered, facing unfair treatment, discrimination, lack of opportunities and limited access to services. Many people will think ... well, so why don't you go back? It is not so easy. Your life is in jeopardy. So you stay and do the best you can in everything you do. You do not have to prove to anybody you are a superwoman, but you cannot let exile destroy your life. You are an example to all of those who follow you, and you have to show those who turned your life around that they might have left you without the support of your family and the material things you had, but that they didn't break your spirit, and your principles are now stronger than ever and the fight has not ended yet.

Perhaps some day we will go back to the places and faces we left. But it will never be the same: we have changed, those of us who coped will be stronger and more mature; those who couldn't cope will never understand the rationale of their years out of home that left their lives in shambles. It will never be the same, because many of our mothers and fathers died without ever seeing their grandchildren; because we were deprived of being at their bedside to kiss them good-bye, and that we will never forget or forgive.

But, if we go back, it will mean we have succeeded; we have won the fight, and we will rebuild a society with the same values and the same ideals as those who lost their lives in the process. Perhaps then it will all be worth it.

CHAPTER 149 An Act Respecting Indians

Section 11. Subject to section 12,

a person is entitled to be registered, if that person (c) is a male who is a direct descendent in the male line of a male person described in paragraph (a) or (b);

Section 11. Subject to section 12,

a person is entitled to be registered, if that person (f) is the wife or widow of a person who is entitled to be registered registered by virtue of paragraph (a), (b), (c), (d) or (e);

Section 12 (1) (b)

The following persons are not allowed to be registered registered namely, (b) a woman who married married a person who is not an Indian, Indian unless that woman is subsequently the wife or widow of a person person described in section 11.

CHAPTER 149 An Act Respecting Indians

CHAPTER 149 (subsequently)

Father brothers uncles
chiefs warriors politicians
Where are the Women

"out there" you point
"somewhere"

I reach out into the mist
to women you refuse to see
to strength you cannot give

and will not give to emotion
you cannot feel to the other
half of our beginnings

I have myself and my daughters
and you my fathers have
sons and sons and sons

and section 12 (1) (b)
in the Act Respecting Indians

Lenore Keeshig-Tobias