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# Cultural Adjustment as Empowerment

## *More Reflections on the June 1988 Workshop*

**T**he term "refugee" is not only a gender neutral term: it conjures up images, assumptions and stereotypes which suggest that all a person is and has been is a "refugee." One of the strongest messages from forty women refugees at the workshop held in Toronto last June [see pp. 5-15] was: "consider us not only as we are, but also as we were." The pre-migration history of women refugees must be considered. It is appropriate that we begin with a shared understanding of culture and the process of culture formation.

Culture is an intricate web of verbal and non-verbal language systems; the social, economic and political institutions and their infrastructure; the customs and traditions; the ecological and architectural characteristics of a country or community; and the history of a people. Gender relations are interwoven in all of the facets of culture. Culture is what influences the ways women, men and children think, feel, act and interact. Culture is the way people express themselves, the way they move and the way they solve problems. Culture determines what people consider as important, what they value and what they do not value. We sometimes call this our world view. We cannot really understand one facet of culture without relating it to the total cultural web. Our identities are learned through various formal and informal, conscious and unconscious ways in our life experiences. Cultural identity can be a source of strength and of vulnerability in the refugee experience.

The experience of becoming a refugee is one of cultural uprooting and discontinuities, as well as a search for continuity and/or resistance to the culture of the country of resettlement. In considering the process of cultural adjustment of women refu-

gees in the country of resettlement, we cannot assume that their personal and collective histories will be erased upon receiving refugee status:

*One of the most important needs women refugees have is to affirm that what they have is valued. That their past is valued. We need a lot of help to understand the cultural ways of living here but we also need to feel that our culture is not wrong if we are to learn new ways.*

The possibilities for continuity can be a moving force in empowering women in the process of cultural adjustment.

The Working Group on Refugee Women of the Canadian Council for Refugees understands cultural adjustment to be a two-way process. It is not assimilation or integration. It is the accommodation or modification of cultures to a level of mutual comfort and enrichment of both the refugee woman and the host society. The level of adjustment and the time it takes will vary depending on the refugee woman's readiness and ability to adjust, as well as the host country's openness to change or the barriers it places on cultural differences.

This paper is a reflection on the questions raised by my own exile experience, questions raised in my research process<sup>1</sup> and the collective experience of some members of the Working Group on Refugee Women, as well as the experiences forty women refugees shared with us at the Toronto workshop. Many of my questions may be perceived as applying to men refugees as well. My underlying assumption is that women experience the world in a particular way because of their gender and sexuality. All

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questions, and not just those questions that are gender specific, must be explored in order to develop guidelines that will empower women refugees.

**“Help us help ourselves.”** The women at the Toronto workshop challenged us by saying “Help us to help ourselves.” This challenge requires listening, understanding and facilitating the possibilities for women to adjust to a new culture without losing a sense of who they are and what they value of their culture of origin. Indeed it requires that we first ask them about *their* perception of cultural adjustment.

We have to recognize that even though women refugees have suffered persecution, imprisonment and even torture, they still love and cherish their country, its culture and people. This love for one’s country of origin is central to cultural identity. Every one of the women I have talked to makes a clear distinction between the government and their country. Country is the people, family, relatives, relationships, friends, the food (eating and cooking habits), the landscape, the climate, the way of life, the land/soil, the social and geographic environment, the history — their culture:

*My country is my identity. It is what makes me who I am. No one can change that. Not even if I adapt to the customs in Canada. Not even if I become a Canadian citizen. This is my second home but my first home is Ethiopia. I left because I was forced to. It was not safe for me to stay. I did not leave because I didn’t like my country, my culture.*

This love for one’s culture can be a positive force in the process of cultural adjustment because it affirms the possibility of continuity. Very often the understanding of adjustment and the willingness to adjust is related to how long women believe it will take for the situation in their country to be safe enough for them to return. They will resist adjusting to new ways of thinking/feeling/behaving if they perceive that return is in the not-too distant future. When resettlement is perceived as long-term, they are more likely to be open to considering new options. Another factor is how many of their family members have joined them. Family re-

unification is a way of establishing some level of continuity with family structures in the country of resettlement.

There is no blue-print for the process of cultural adjustment. A multiplicity of factors and forces within the women’s background/formation, their flight journey and settlement experiences, and the conditions in the country of resettlement influence this process.

**“Everything is different...”** We cannot assume that, because women refugees arrive in a country of resettlement seeking a safe haven, they are equally situated. It is important to recognize differences with respect to gender relations, family structures, education, language, work, social class, race, etc. in the backgrounds of women refugees. These cultural differences exist not only between countries, but within countries. To recognize differences is a way of understanding what another culture considers as important. It is a way of countering stereotyping. It is a step towards enabling continuity in a journey of cultural uprootedness and discontinuities. It can be a source of empowerment. Denying differences can distort the possibilities for adjustment both in the eyes of the refugee women and those working to assist her in the adjustment process.

Because of our shared gender and sexuality we may, as women, also move too quickly to assume “sameness” between women of the world. Denying differences is bound to blind us to the particularity of women refugees’ cultural backgrounds and identities, let alone the cultural difficulties they are facing in the country of resettlement. We will also miss learning from the richness of their cultural backgrounds. Sharing our common humanity is a source of solidarity that acknowledges our similarities and our differences. Understanding the pre-migration history of women refugees is crucial to this approach.

**Gender Relations Background.** The particular manifestation of gender relations and inequalities differ cross-culturally. The ways in which the state, social and economic institutions, community norms and traditions define and enforce a particular set of gender relations and inequalities also differ cross-culturally. In addition, it is important to identify

whether women refugees maintained or resisted these practices in their private and public lives.

While women refugees I have spoken to state that they have experienced gender inequalities in Canada, they are quick to acknowledge that here they experience more opportunities as women than they did in their countries of origin. They appreciate the expectations of shared responsibilities in the home. A major difficulty is that the men from their country also have to learn, and often they have to want to learn, to share responsibilities:

*Our men have for instance never entered a kitchen at home... so they don’t know how to prepare a meal. They don’t know how to mix the spices. If they don’t know how to do something they won’t want to do it.*

Another woman disclosed that “Because of our culture, I don’t ask him to help me until it is too much for me.” Women tend to express a greater deal of sympathy towards their men folk. Because male refugees have to accept working at a much lower status than they had in their home countries, some women will refrain from asking men to share household responsibilities. These women do not want to add to men’s depression and frustration. As a result, they will take on all household responsibilities, in addition to employment outside their home. This situation isolates women and does not give them the time to learn about the culture and people around them.

When women seek more egalitarian relationships this can become a source of family conflict, and even family violence. Women can be perceived by their husbands and male relatives as having adopted values and behaviour that are contrary to their cultural traditions. When men adjust to more egalitarian relationships and when they encourage women to develop their potential, there is a mutually enriching adjustment and supportive process to the changes both have to face in the country of resettlement. The process of adjustment must include the men to whom women relate.

**Family Structures and Support Systems.** Perhaps the most painful challenge women refugees face is the discontinuity of family structures and relation-

ships. These structures and relationships may have been the source of their nurture and nurturing. One woman described the pain of separation by saying:

*I have travelled to many countries before I became a refugee so I know how to adapt myself to a different culture, what to accept and what to reject. The difference now is that I was forced to leave and I cannot return because it is not safe. That is what makes it harder for me... The thought that my mother may be seriously ill or that she might die and that I can't go back torments me.*

Women refugees can experience values different from their traditional responsibilities: "At home I learned to be a wife and mother. I miss being respected for that." She is grieving the loss of her role as a cultural transmitter. On the one hand, she cannot transmit the new culture to her children. And, on the other hand, she can only "talk" about their culture of origin. She finds little or no support in symbols to reinforce what she has to "teach" about her culture of origin. In addition, she has to compete with schools and the media as cultural transmitters of a totally different culture. As a result, she will experience yet another discontinuity: this time it is a discontinuity of her relationship with her children.

Another women refugee pointed out that a serious factor missing in their community in Canada was "old people." This gap she said is particularly evident in the case of family violence:

*What we lack is old people. We tried to talk to him. But he doesn't listen to us because we are young. At home elders would interfere. There is no one he feels accountable to now. I'm not saying that wife beating doesn't happen in our country but the family wouldn't let him get away with it the way he does here.*

Before he would agree to speak to a counsellor, she pointed out, he has to change his cultural perspective with respect to responsibility and accountability. The availability of culture-sensitive counsellors is another dilemma.

Next to family support systems, what women seem to miss the most are friendships and neighbours. One woman's description of friendships in her country

reflects the experience of many others:

*Friendship is becoming family. It's really a stage where you can't distinguish between family and friend... until recently I didn't know that a friend I grew up with was not a relative! That is the sort of bonding we have in our country.*

Women also experience different expectations of friendship. One woman expressed this difference when she said, "Friendships here are only in front of your

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face," meaning that there was not the continuity of relationships. Women could be living three or more years in the same neighbourhood or apartment and they would not know who their neighbours are. In contrast:

*... At home neighbours will know if we are sick or have lost a family member even before our relatives. We can go on an errand and we know that our children will be looked after by a neighbour... we don't even have to ask them.*

Almost all the women I have spoken to said that they did not have Canadian friends — not even in a casual way. How is culture to be learned? exchanged? enriched? One woman attributed this gap in relationships to the lifestyle of a big city, and to the fact that she sought her own

community to relieve her loneliness and not forget her culture.

**Educational Background.** Many cultures place a high value on education. These values may not be understood in countries of resettlement. Refugees can be seen as having unreasonable expectations when they seek to continue their education. When women refugees are not encouraged to develop their potential, they are confronted with yet another discontinuity in their lives: "In our culture, education means knowledge... I am wasting my time here if I can't improve my education."

When education was interrupted by the crisis that led to flight, tension and disappointment can be even greater:

*...Those (women) who had an education are the most depressed... They also had a high ranking position at home. It's terrible for them to adjust. There is nothing wrong with manual labour... but having an education makes you use your mind in a certain way. When you don't use it it's very frustrating.*

Another woman pointed out that women from her country generally have less education than men. While it was not a problem in their country, "... now men feel ashamed of their wives and don't take them to social functions with them. So women work, study and work in the home. They have no time to learn about the culture let alone adjust to it."

Both formal and informal education are processes that can enable women to learn about the new culture. The opportunity to develop their potential in turn will contribute towards the continuity of their roles as shapers of society.

**Language Discontinuities.** As one of the media of cultural transmission, language is critical to the process of cultural adjustment. Not to be able to communicate is disempowering. The process of cultural adjustment also requires an awareness of differences in verbal and non-verbal ways of communicating and meanings attached to communication. What opportunities are there for women refugees to learn the language symbols of the country of resettlement? And what is the tolerance level for different verbal and non-verbal ways of communication?

Accents are perhaps the most obvious indicators of bias and/or stereotyping. One woman refugee put it this way: "No matter how well I speak English, my accent will always work against me in my job and in relationships." Some women whose education was cut short by their flight journey have been able to choose a line of academic discipline or technical skill that did not require strong verbal and reading skills. Those women who have little or no language skills of the country of resettlement before leaving their country have greater hurdles to cross in the process of adjustment.

**Work Experience and Discontinuities.** In Canada, no matter what their past work experience, women refugees are expected to accept *any* job. Such work is usually the lowest paid. In addition to meeting economic need, work is an expression of one's potential. Alternatives that can be equally fulfilling need to be explored when it is not possible for women to find work in the field in which they were trained or had experience prior to leaving their country.

Women often experience different cultural values related to work. One woman remarked:

*Here people live to work. In our country we work to live. You don't have time to make friends here. You just don't have time here. It's always rush, rush, rush. You can't have the same type of relationships even with your own people. You have to work like Canadians to survive.*

**Social Class.** The social class we are situated in, and the particular situations we experience because of it, will have a different effect on our attitudes, values and expectations, our human and material resources and our dreams and hopes. Becoming refugee dislocates all refugees from their social class group. They will, more than likely also experience a shift in class status in the resettlement country. The status of refugee itself will place them in a disadvantaged class position. And the class structure and values of the country of resettlement will undoubtedly be different from those of their country of origin.

**Race, Ethnicity, and Religion.** Women

refugees are proud of their racial, ethnic and religious background. These are central to their identity and their cultural formation. In the process of adjustment in the country of resettlement they can be faced with discrimination. In addition, they can "suddenly" experience becoming part of a "visible minority." As a result, they have to overcome the hurdles of being refugee, woman and a "visible minority" — in addition to having the lowest paid jobs. Racism and ethnic and religious ethnocentricity and prejudice are systemic barriers to cultural adjustment.

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Refugees, especially women, do not have the power to tackle these issues at their root: it is the task of NGOs and community groups to confront and eradicate these injustices.

**Ideological Perspective.** While most of the women refugees I have spoken to will acknowledge the particularity of their experiences as women, they do not want to lose sight of the political reasons that led to them becoming refugees. The degree of their political awareness will depend on their background and their political involvement prior to flight. Some women may have been activists in their countries of origin. For many women, the experience of becoming a refugee is itself a consciousness-raising experience. And the concern for the safety of family members and friends left behind is almost univer-

sal. Coming to terms with these discontinuities involves finding the channels to express and act on their visions, their raised consciousness and concerns.

The process of cultural adjustment also involves an ability to function in a different political/economic/social system than the one women lived in and fled from. The system of a country overtly and subtly directs its inhabitants to a shared understanding of their collective lives and to what is possible and sensible to believe in their "private" lives. For cultural adjustment to be empowering, the challenge requires the opportunity to find some continuity with their cultural formation and the spaces to function within the culture of the country of resettlement.

**"I don't want to remember."** Cultural adjustment is in itself a difficult and emotionally demanding process. It demands an internal and external stability to overcome the strangeness of the new culture. The vulnerability of women refugees in their flight journey, in camps and/or in settlement countries, will add to the strain on their emotional resources and the energies required to adjust.

While we can assume that all women refugees are vulnerable, the context of their experiences will differ and will inevitably have an effect on their identities and adjustment process. Some of these experiences would include the political situation in their country leading to their flight journey; whether they were imprisoned, tortured, politically harassed, sexually violated and/or whether family members/relatives/friends are in prison, "disappeared" etc.; whether they fled alone or with others; and the nature of the flight journey itself. None of these experiences are easily shared. Forgetting is a coping mechanism. It is a way of surviving. But merely surviving is not an empowering or a fulfilling goal in life. The traumatic and humiliating experiences, such as rape, many women refugees go through will take time to heal. Above all, women need to feel that they can share these experiences with someone they can trust who will not judge them.

Refugee camp life and the culture of the settlement country, as well as the way women were accepted and/or received protection as refugee women by the state, will affect women in different ways. Awareness of the effects of these experi-

ences can point to the special needs of women. And knowledge of how women coped in these trying situations can reveal their strength. This strength must be channelled to empower them to help themselves in the process of cultural adjustment.

Attention needs to be given to differences in the adjustment process of women who are married or accompanied by their menfolk and of single mothers and single women. It is a question of different needs. The lack of support and isolation is very evident in conversations with all these women. A married woman described her loneliness is this way:

*Because of our cultural background men can go out and meet friends in restaurants or bars. We can't do that. And when we have children it makes it even harder to meet with other women. We live so far away from each other.*

Single mothers and single women yearn for the intimacy, affection and the possibility to share their feelings and struggles with someone close. This loneliness is aggravated because they do not have the family and neighbourhood support they had back home.

Single mothers not only have to bring up their children without a father, but also without the family and neighbourhood support systems they would have had at home. They have no support for their own emotional needs. A single woman expressed her isolation this way:

*It's very hard... in our country you are never alone. Being alone is the worst experience here. You have to go to work and carry your feelings in your heart. Everything is different here. Even if it doesn't change your situation, it helps to share your feelings with someone close.*

Age differences of women refugees is an important consideration. Some women were so young when they fled their countries that they have little memory of cultural norms. Their adaptation to the country of resettlement might appear easier or faster than their "older" refugee peers. The dilemma for them, an "older" refugee woman sadly commented, is that "they are very integrated but they have lost their identity. They don't really belong anywhere."

Women who had a special status in their home communities because of the wisdom that comes with age will experience another kind of identity loss. This status and the cultural context of their wisdom no longer holds true in the country of resettlement. They may also be totally dependent on their children because of economic, language and other reasons. Families may be reunified but they are fractured families.

Informal support groups can help bridge the loneliness of women. Together they can find creative ways of maintaining some of their traditional roles in a different cultural context.

**"I never realized how strong I was!"**

The vulnerability and strength of women refugees are characteristics which have often been observed of them. Vulnerability and strength are two sides of the same coin. Both affect the process of cultural adjustment. We have all witnessed the resilience of many women refugees—resilience that is sometimes against formidable odds. They are sometimes surprised by their own strength:

*I never realized how strong I am. I always thought I was dependent on others. Now I know I can manage on my own. I feel strong deep inside. I want to encourage other women refugees to know that they can find confidence and hope.*

*I learned a lot about life. By this I mean, in my country my family would lead me in life. Here I have no one. I have to lead myself. I learned I can do that... I had to do it whether I like it or not.*

*I don't think I can experience anything harder than what I have (she was tortured and violated amongst other horrendous experiences). I came through because I knew that the political system was unjust. I know I can face anything now. I never believed I could be this strong.*

Cultural adjustment has to build on strength, rather than on vulnerability alone. We cannot deny that women refugees are victims of the forces that sent them into exile, and that they are frequently victims during exile. *But they do not want to be seen as victims all their lives.*

Drawing on the strength of women refugees will not only enable their own adjustment; it is the key to their empowerment. Even though women refugees may have been victimized, it is absolutely necessary to see them as active shapers of their lives, the cultures of their countries of origin. And if we allow them to, they can become active shapers of the countries of resettlement.

Cultural adjustment is a two-way process in which two or more world views transcend to create a different texture of relationships between and amongst all concerned. The process requires citizens in countries of resettlement to become aware of their own culture: indeed, this is a precondition to both understanding the cultural backgrounds of women refugees and enabling women refugees to help themselves.

Women refugees also need to be open to changes: "I have to leave some of the customs of my country... to practice new ways... not all in my culture is good... what is not good for me in this culture and in mine I do not have to follow."

Institutional (state and voluntary) practices which encourage or create barriers to this two-way process of adjustment need to be identified. Practices which offer opportunities for the empowerment of women refugees in their process of adjustment need to be channelled to them. Subtle and informal expectations of cultural adjustment that are disempowering need to be challenged. Ideological biases, ethnocentricity, racism and other barriers to cultural adjustment must be confronted and eliminated.

Cultural adjustment is not integration or assimilation. It also does not involve "transplanting" the cultural traditions from one society to another. The challenge is to create structures and support systems which will empower women refugees and enrich the culture of the country of resettlement. While the cultural impact of refugee groups is inevitable, it should also be intentional.

<sup>1</sup> I am writing a doctoral thesis in the Department of Sociology at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. The title of my thesis is *The Social Construction of Women Refugees: A Journey of Discontinuities and Continuities*.