



## PERSONAL EXPERIENCES

# Breaking the Barriers

### *Refugee Women in Canada*

**T**he stories of the refugee women I have met in Canada fill me with woe and wonder. The realities of their past sometimes defy my imagination. The courage with which they find their place in a settled society like Canada is awe-inspiring. Many of them have an aura of calm and beauty which masks the turmoil inside when they try to hold in tension the unbearable memories of the past, the spirit-defying obstacles of everyday life in a cold new country, and the tentative flame of hope which dares to believe that this is the place where their spirits can flourish.

Many of the refugee women are reluctant to talk of their past, sometimes because they are afraid of unleashing emotional despair which they may not be able to control, and sometimes because they need to bury some of the details in order to be accepted by their people here. Breaking the barriers within themselves requires as much courage as breaking the barriers between them and their new society. The stories which I have gathered

here are tributes to this courage. They look inward and outward. They give us truth about themselves, about us, and about the world in which we live together. The women and their stories are a gift to us.

#### **Young Woman From Iran**

A young Iranian man started the conversation: "Women in Iran suffer two times more than men." The young widow accompanying him continued the story. Because her husband wrote down his criticism of the government he was imprisoned. Because she was pregnant with his child, she, too was imprisoned. When he died, the authorities freed her from prison, but she found herself imprisoned by a society which shunned her because of him. She had no right to study, no right to work, no way to survive and feed a child.

She was bitter about her past: "Women are half of a man, except

**BY HELGA KUTZ-HARDER**

when they have to go to prison the same as a man." She told me that many women with children fill the prisons, and many women are executed. Many children lose both parents and become the lost children of Iran, because "nobody is allowed to help them."

She arrived at a Canadian airport, carrying a small daughter and "horrible memories" of family members' executions, and religious repression, especially of women. Immigration officials treated her well and gave her a hearing only two days later. She came to the meeting tired and worried. She did not know what to do when the official thundered: "Why, why, why don't you go home where you belong? Why are you coming and stealing jobs from Canadians?" In her heart she cried: "I can't go home. I would rather be executed than treated like this. I can't stop crying." She needed to believe that she would be helped, not criticized for why she was where she was.

As a single mother she knew that first of all, she must find work. But before that, she must study French because she was in Montreal. She worried about a lot of things. What could she do with her little girl? How could she manage? How could she live if her baby became sick? She could find work in a factory, but how nice it would be to work at her own profession, even at a minimum wage.

She ended her conversation: "Women aren't refugees because of what they have done, but because of what their husbands have done." She bowed her head and, as her lustrous black hair fell over her shoulders, we wept, men and women alike. Will we ever know what keeps her going day after day?

#### **Young Woman From Afghanistan**

She was one of the privileged few who had ventured out of a tradition in which females are sequestered, to attend the university in Kabul. The times away from campus were still spent with women in whose company love and tradition and nurture were felt and passed on. Men were for marrying and for stability.

Then came the terror of war and the flight from danger. Her mother died in her homeland. One sister found her way to Germany. Other sisters found their way to Australia. She married a countryman along the way, and they came to Canada

along with his five unmarried brothers. She and her baby daughter were the only females in the household, and she longed for women to turn to for guidance and cultural continuity.

At twenty-three she saw the advertisement for a youth training program available to anyone unemployed under the age of twenty-four. Toronto apartments are expensive, and a child needs toys and a bed and clothes and books and love. "If I don't take the program now I'll be too old for the age restriction, and when I leave my child with the sitter she cries and will not eat," she explained. At home,

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a mother or an aunt or a sister could have helped. Here, a strange woman with strange customs cares for her child. She sobs over the telephone. I can not solve her dilemma, but I can listen to her story.

She called again recently. She has moved to the suburbs, far away from public transportation, to be able to offer her child a garden to play in. Her loneliness and alienation are intensified. I wonder how long it will be before she walks with a sense of fulfilled promise.

#### **Young Woman From El Salvador**

A church heard about her fear of returning to El Salvador, and quickly agreed to sponsor her into Canada. She waited eleven months in Buffalo while the Canadian authorities read through the stacks of

paper and signed the right ones before she could finally end her journey. The room they provided was so warm and welcoming, and she sank into some pillows, exhausted. Eventually the young man she had met along the way found her, and became her husband.

Like most new immigrants, their monthly income was minimal, unequal to the expectations she placed on herself as a good wife. In her understanding, that included serving expensive cuts of meat and spending the day at home to protect the timing of the evening meal. Meanwhile, her sponsors ate bean sprouts and granola, and watched her weekly allowance used up in apparently inappropriate grocery bills. They advised when they could, and in time the grocery bills got lower; so did her self-esteem as a wife. She learned how to fit into the Canadian economy, but felt she was betraying her cultural values.

How do any of us know which culture should be imposed on which? Will she eventually be a Canadian Salvadorean woman, or a Salvadorean Canadian woman? Either way, she may feel as if she has failed at being a good woman.

#### **Young Woman From Burundi**

She had been a refugee in Africa for seven years, and was relieved when Canada selected her as a government sponsored refugee, along with her four small children. She came to Montreal, fluent in French and full of hope. Two children went to school, and two children went to daycare. She was one of the lucky ones; she got a job in a factory. Factory work itself was an unfamiliar experience. She began to sense that no one wanted to talk past her black face. She tried to realize what was happening around her: "I cried in the washroom, and nobody noticed my tears when I came out. I wondered why nobody cared about me until I realized that nobody cared about anybody. Nobody even said 'excuse me' when they stepped on a toe."

Machines frightened her, and she was transferred to a simpler one. It wasn't simple, though, to be working with men for the first time in her life. She finally decided to leave her job, and was amazed that the boss was sad. She realized with surprise that he thought she had been doing a good job. He never told her!

She stayed home for a while and worried about the other women. She had never been involved in collectives of any kind, but she knew they needed each other. She went to an International Centre and told them about her worries and how they could help each other. She filled out complicated forms to create a job to help other women, and got a grant for a new job. Now she works with women and helps them from her own experience in Canada. "All those women are slaves to their culture," she said. "They forget their own possibilities."

Can we ever fully understand why they are here? Can we learn from their experience? Can we understand them as individual women? Will we ever look at them without prejudice?

### Young Woman From Somalia

She was highly skilled in Somalia: a typist and telex-computer operator. But after her husband disappeared (just one of thousands) her life changed, because in Somalia a working woman needs a male sponsor. At first her uncle sponsored her, but he disappeared, too. And so she was fired, with no place to go. "The war in Somalia is an anarchist war. It is a war on the women," she said. Any woman between the ages of eighteen and forty is not safe from being forcibly removed to the army camps to be raped and violated. And that's only the beginning. If her husband finds out, he kills her for the shame of it all; if they know that he has found out, they kill him, too; if he goes into hiding instead, and she won't tell where he is, they kill her.

And so she escaped to Canada, aching because she left a young baby with her sister, who couldn't come to Canada as protection for her sister: only a girl with a baby is safe from violation. And so she sacrificed her baby daughter to save her



Photo: UNHCR

sister. Most of all she feels so alone because there are not enough Somalis in Canada to form the kind of community to which she needs to belong, in order to stand upright in the midst of the pain and the memory of the flesh and blood she left behind.

### Young Tamil Woman From Sri Lanka

As a child she had heard stories of bombings from her mother. Then, one of the bombs killed her young husband, and she felt them in her soul when she realized that her unborn twins would never know their father. She was a high school teacher, and one extra-violent day her principal warned her to stay at home. Frozen with fear, three women watched while thugs

ran to the back of the house with torches to burn it down — just because she was a Tamil. Only wit and the need to survive kept them moving to a temporary safe haven, a room 6'X10' for fifty people. "I still feel the scars of that burning," she said.

The nurse who helped her wash the twins asked: "When are you going home?" She remembers bursting into tears because she had no home to go to. They kept moving, sleeping with their clothes on and a bit of food nearby, ready to move when necessary. For three months they stayed in India, then they found their way to England, where a Canadian church heard about them and sponsored their move to Canada. They waited eleven more months before arriving at the welcoming church. One of the first comments from an unthinking person confused her: "You a refugee? Surely immigrant is more like it."

The sponsoring church is kind, but the trauma and depression remain. Holding her teaching skills tight in her memory, she wonders

why only the men are easily given studying opportunities here in Canada. She shared some of her disappointments with us: "The cultural transition lies heavily on the women. The guilt for having left home is heavy." Beneath the warm smile and the classic beauty lies a lot of pain.

These refugee women will never forget the land of their birth. Without doubt, the scars of past traumas will also never be forgotten. Perhaps they did not know much about Canada before they arrived here. But now they know that Canada is their homeland. They know that the peace and safety they have found in Canada will give them a chance to start a new life. Now they have an opportunity to develop their potential and contribute their talents to the land which gave them refuge.