

Life Histories and Action Research

by Penny Van Esterik

Responding to Doreen Indra's comments on the research paradigm, one strategy for keeping gender issues central to refugee issues is the collection of life histories of refugee women of different ages and backgrounds. These biographies document life changes and significant events in these women's lives in their birthplaces, in the camps, and in the country of asylum. Viewing the refugee process from the perspective of individual women's lives provides another approach to complement more quantitative research. After collecting a number of representative biographies, analysts could look for common themes and issues emerging from the life histories. In this way we could interpret events through their impact on local communities and specific individuals.

There might be several practical applications for research of this kind. The process of constructing one's life history might have real psychological benefits as women come to view their personal worth and identity through the eyes of a sympathetic listener. In addition, we might begin to identify the factors promoting and hindering successful adjustment in North American communities. For example, we know refugee women who sit isolated, depressed, and powerless in their communities, and refugee women who hold together their families and friends while pursuing activity schedules that would exhaust many of us. Life histories would help us understand the differences between these groups of women. In addition, life histories are an excellent source of action research questions -- research which can inform new programme initiatives for refugee women. For example:

1. How do refugee women utilize their time? How do they find time to participate in whatever language, skills, income generating or cultural adaptation programmes that would assist them?

2. What work conditions do refugee women face?
3. How is the content of English as a Second Language (ESL) courses relevant to the life experience and needs of refugee women?
4. How do refugee women deal with the educational system on behalf of their children? What are their expectations regarding the education of their male and female children?
5. What informal systems have refugee women developed to deal with child care, medical problems, housing, and food shortages?



For a Cambodian refugee family, life in Canada now means freedom to play.

6. How do refugee female heads of household differ from male heads of household in adjusting to resettlement?
7. Are refugee women more at nutritional risk than refugee men?
8. What are the most important markers of personal and ethnic identity for refugee women?

One Cambodian Woman: For example, the life story of one Cambodian woman reflects more generally on the experiences of Southeast Asian women. Her life story (to be published in a forthcoming issue of the *Atkinson Review* dedicated to Refugees) reveals both structural features and personal characteristics that may be important predictors of successful refugee adjustment.

Throughout her life in Cambodia, this woman's commercial and entrepreneurial skills were encouraged and utilized. Consequently, she developed a calculating sense of how to use profits to insure her family's security. In spite of (or perhaps as a result of) her concern with the careful shepherding of economic resources, she spent a proportion of her profits on the regular support of the religious institutions of Theravada Buddhism. During the years under the Pol Pot regime and the family's escape, she struggled to reunite the extended family and keep it intact after the decision to flee. Her commitment to family is demonstrated by her decision to include two elderly sick female relatives in her family's escape and resettlement plans, even though they represented a financial burden on the family's scant resources.

There are certain structural characteristics of her situation which contributed to her capacity to adjust to the new sets of constraints and opportunities facing her as a refugee. First, her children were teenagers and took responsibility for themselves. In addition, the youngest son and daughter (thirteen years and fourteen-years-old, respectively) took over the domestic work of running the household, leaving their mother free to attend English classes and vocational training. Second, as a widow she was entitled to certain benefits and treated as a female head of household, eligible for ESL classes, basic education, and vocational training. In

programmes with limited placement, men are often favoured over women. Being a female head of household allowed her to receive these services without "bucking the system" before she knew how "the system" operated.

Finally, the fact that she was surrounded by a network of supportive female kin enabled her to reassert control over the reunited family. As her English skills increased, she and her mother became key figures in family decision-making. Her mother retains her position as head of the family, even though she speaks virtually no English and has no intention of learning any.

The personal characteristics that contributed to her successful adjustment include her absolute realism; her capacity to live in the present and retain a sense of humour and serenity throughout; her ability to accept the loss of her children and her wealth; her persistence in attempts to obtain all possible rights and opportunities available to her as a refugee. During the most difficult months after resettlement, she was saved from the depths of depression facing many of her family members by her optimism and practicality (her pride did not stop her from accepting used clothes, unlike some of her relatives). She refused to acknowledge her marginal position in society and lack of opportunities, attributing her problems to her lack of sufficient English skills and the economy. As a result of this attitude, she continued to seek out business opportunities, confident of her abilities and business potential.

Her entrepreneurial excitement should not be stilled: perhaps it will even be contagious, infecting her refugee sisters with a renewed vision of women's potential and new strategies for changing existing conditions. Judging from one woman's struggle, the women of Southeast Asia who come as refugees will enrich our lives and contribute a sense of detached, composed strength which cannot be compromised. For they know their worth.

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Refugee Women in Canada: The Lingering Effects of Persecution, War and Torture

by Mary Carmen Romero-Cachinero

Since the Second World War, it is estimated that about half a million refugees have settled in Canada, about half of whom were women. Despite the great differences in their social, economic and cultural backgrounds, these women share a common experience of escaping from life-threatening circumstances. They also share the experience of being forced to abandon their homes and native lands, with all the trauma that entails. Finally, most refugee women share the status of "sponsored relatives" upon arrival in Canada, a category which generally denies their true plight.

What effect does this traumatic background have on their adjustment to life in Canada? Let us look briefly at three individual cases. The names of the three people have been changed to maintain confidentiality.

Case 1: María is twenty-three years old. She came from South America. Her father was tortured to death and her only brother managed to flee the country after having been detained and tortured himself. Though very young, María was forced to leave school and earn her living as a sales clerk. She became an active member of a local union, and as such was subject to harassment by the police. She received threatening phone calls, her family's home was regularly searched, and her mother beaten. She was detained for five days in solitary confinement and interrogated, beaten, and raped. She was also threatened with being made to "disappear" (as her father did) if she did not become a police informer. Upon her release, María fled to Canada. She had to undergo a process of one and a half years to have her claim as a sponsored refugee accepted.

María has found her adjustment to Canada very difficult. She is subject to periodic bouts of severe depression, anxiety and intense rage against the authorities of her country of origin.

Case 2: Lillian is in her early thirties and comes from a country in Eastern Africa. During a political upheaval in her native land, her fiancé, along with many others, was detained by the authorities, and never heard from again. She was later detained at work and accused of being disloyal to the new military regime. Lillian spent over five months in prison, without charges being laid against her. She was deprived of adequate food, water, clothes, medical care, and forced to live in an overcrowded and dirty cell. Eventually, her fiancé's family was able to provide sufficient money to gain her release and she escaped to a nearby country without contacting her family. After two years she was sponsored by a Canadian church group to immigrate to Canada as a refugee.

Even though she could speak English, her professional qualifications (hotel management) have never been accepted, and she has been forced to support herself doing cleaning. Alone in Canada, she has experienced great loneliness and lack of support, which she has tried to overcome by becoming actively involved in church activities.

For years, she has retained the belief that her fiancé is still alive, a situation which has inhibited the development of new relationships with men. She lives in constant anxiety about the safety of her family in her country of origin.

Her brother-in-law disappeared leaving her sister with three young children to support. The worst blow of all was when she received the news that her fifteen-year-old sister had been raped, murdered and decapitated. Lillian herself, in addition to her psychological trauma, still suffers the physical effects of her ordeal. She has permanent kidney damage and numerous scars all over her body from the beatings that she received while in detention.