



# CANADA'S PERIODICAL ON REFUGEES REFUGEE

Vol. 17 • No. 1

February 1998

## REFUGEE AND IMMIGRANT WOMEN: AN INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE, PART II

### Introduction: Refugee and Immigrant Women as Workers

Guida Man

Women all over the world have always worked. From sunrise to sunset, women are always busy working. They are often engaged in the formal labour market, working in factories, hospitals, schools, businesses; and in the informal labour market, doing home sewing, baby-sitting, or bartering; as well as being occupied in household work, cooking for others, feeding their babies, washing clothes, fetching water, cleaning house, caring for the aged and the infirmed, listening to other people's problems. The work that women do are important and indispensable as part of the household strategy for survival, and yet they are often invisible and taken for granted because women are not being recognized as legitimate workers.

This issue of *Refuge* assembles a collection of studies which represent the voices of refugee and immigrant women. In particular, these studies document and analyze the day-to-day, traditional and non-traditional work of these women. From Kenya to Canada, from the isolated remote refugee camps to the

hustle and bustle of cosmopolitan cities, from hauling water for daily subsistence, to providing health care to strangers for pay, these studies explore how refugee and immigrant women do

their work and how they manage their daily lives.

As Jennifer Hydman's article on the daily work of Somali refugee women in the Kenyan camps of Ifo, Hagadera,

#### Contents

<b>Introduction: Refugee and Immigrant Women as Workers</b> <i>Guida Man</i> .....	1
<b>Shedding Their Refugee Skin: Constructions of Women Refugees and International Aid Regimes</b> <i>Maryanna Schmuki</i> .....	4
<b>Representing Refugee Women: Gender and Work in Three Kenyan Camps</b> <i>Jennifer Hyndman</i> .....	10
<b>Refugee Women in London: The Experiences of Somali Women</b> <i>Rosemary Sales and Jeanne Gregory</i> .....	16
<b>Migration and the Transformation of Work Processes: Voices of Chinese Immigrant Women in Canada</b> <i>Guida Man</i> .....	21
<b>Speaking with Migrant Women Health Care Aides: On Marketing and Making Sense of Caregiving in Canada</b> <i>Gail McCabe</i> .....	26
<b>Human Rights: Setting the Stage for Protecting Refugee Women</b> <i>Maryanna Schmuki</i> .....	31
<b>Canadian Truth Commission Attempts to Overcome Guatemalan Refugees' Fear and Cynicism</b> <i>Judith Pyke</i> .....	37



CANADA'S PERIODICAL ON REFUGEES

# REFUGE

Centre for Refugee Studies  
Suite 322, York Lanes  
York University  
4700 Keele Street, Toronto  
Ontario, Canada M3J 1P3  
Phone: (416) 736-5663  
Fax: (416) 736-5837  
Email: [refuge@yorku.ca](mailto:refuge@yorku.ca)

Vol. 17 • No. 1  
February 1998

Editor

MICHAEL LANPHIER

Guest Editor

GUIDA MAN

Managing Editor

MAREK SWINDER

*Refuge* is dedicated to the encouragement of assistance to refugees by providing a forum for sharing information and opinion on Canadian and international issues pertaining to refugees. *Refuge* was founded in 1981.

It is published six times a year by the Centre for Refugee Studies, York University, Canada. *Refuge* is a non-profit, independent periodical supported by private donations and by subscriptions. It is a forum for discussion, and the views expressed do not necessarily reflect those of its funders or staff.

All material in *Refuge* may be reproduced without permission unless copyrighted or otherwise indicated. Credit should be given to the author or source, if named, and *Refuge*. Submissions on related issues are welcome for publication consideration.

Current subscription rates for one year (six issues) are: Canada Cdn.\$50; all other countries U.S. \$60. (Cheques must be drawn on a Canadian or a U.S. bank.) Current volume single issues are available at \$10 per copy.

Please enclose your purchase order or payment.

ISSN 0229-5113

and Dagahaley illustrates, refugee women are not merely "vulnerable," helpless victims of circumstance, passively accepting their fate. Hydman deconstructs this stereotypical notion by demonstrating that these women are active participants who employ various survival strategies and indigenous skills in their daily struggles, and who engage in informal cash economy to make ends meet.

For those refugee women who have higher education and professional qualifications, they have always been able to combine work and family in their home country due to the support of the extended family. This is confirmed by Rosemary Sales and Jeanne Gregory's study on the Somali refugee women in London. However, these highly educated Somali women professionals were unable to find permanent employment in Britain despite an urgent need for Somali speakers in teaching, medicine and social work. This is so because Somali qualifications are not recognized in Britain, and few refugee women have the resources to undertake the necessary training to allow them to work in Britain. Refugee women therefore face multiple barriers to employment due to their uncertain legal status, and the racialized and gendered structures of the labour market.

The employment barriers encountered by the Somali refugee women are also experienced by the Chinese immigrant women in Canada as revealed in Guida Man's study. Man demonstrates that institutionalized discriminatory processes in the requirement of "Canadian experience," and the inadequacy of an accreditation system to calibrate immigrant's qualifications make it difficult for the Chinese immigrant women to obtain employment which commensurate with their qualifications and experience. Consequently, these women experienced underemployment and unemployment. The differences in the social organization of Canadian society vis-à-vis their home country also makes life increasingly difficult for these women, intensifying their daily workload.

Despite racism, class discrimination, and gender oppression, McCabe's investigation of migrant women health care aides in Canada found their caregiving practice to be an aspect of an ethics of care that allows for moments of empowerment and resistance to an oppressive social context. McCabe argues that the Canadian market for care has been shaped largely by discourses that devalue women's work and commodify migrant women caregivers.

Departing from the theme on refugee and immigrant women as workers, this issue of *Refuge* also includes two provocative papers by Maryanna Schmuki. Her first paper opens the issue by interrogating the fundamental concern of how refugee women is constructed. In particular, she poses the questions: How do the knowledges created by the West about refugee women affect the process by which a woman becomes a refugee? How does this knowledge affect the process and likelihood that the refugee will shed the label "refugee"? How do women refugees become "normal" again and how do the groups intending to aid refugees mitigate this process? Are the voices of women refugees incorporated into the knowledge production process? In answering these questions, Schmuki explores how the development and humanitarian assistance establishment as a construction site produces a distinct discourse on refugee women. She contends that the knowledge produced creates an image of the women refugee that may be intended to benefit not only the refugee herself, but also the regimes and individuals that make up the international system of emergency relief and assistance. She suggests that for refugee women to be able to shed their refugee skin, a delicate balance must be struck between the power inherent in the international aid community and the liberatory effects of the new found category of refugee women.

This issue of *Refuge* concludes with Schmukis' second paper which explores the development of women refugees as a category within human rights discourse. In her final paper, Schmuki reiterates her concern that given the



western cultural values, western epistemology, and western institutional form predominant in the contemporary aid arena, how do human rights instruments and images help or hinder the process of women refugees returning to normalcy, i.e., does the construction of refugee women reflect the voices of women refugees? And how would refugee women be able to shed their refugee skin? These are significant considerations that we need to keep addressing and renegotiating. In order to adequately respond to these questions, I suggest we continue our dialogue with academics, practitioners, NGOs, grassroot organizers etc. working on issues concerning refugee and immigrant women in future issues of *Refuge*. ■

---

*Guida Man, Ph.D., teaches at Ryerson Polytechnic University, Toronto, and is a visiting research associate at the University of Toronto/York University Joint Centre for Asia Pacific Studies, York University, and an affiliate of the Centre of Excellence for Research on Immigration and Settlement, York University, Toronto, Canada.*

## Refugee Rights Report on a Comparative Survey

By James C. Hathaway and John A. Dent

Toronto: York Lanes Press, 1995, pp. 82. \$11.95 • ISBN 1-55014-266-6

Are visa controls intended to keep refugees from reaching an asylum country legal? Can asylum-seekers legitimately contest conditions of detention? At what point do refugees have the right to work, or to claim social assistance?

These are among the many issues addressed by *Refugee Rights: Report on a Comparative Survey*, a ground-breaking analysis of the human rights of refugees around the world. Working in collaboration with thirty renowned legal experts from Europe, Africa, Asia, Oceania, North America, and Latin America, Professor James Hathaway, Osgoode Hall Law School, York University, and John Dent, Senior Research Associate, International Refugee Rights Project, Osgoode Hall Law School, York University, analyze the international legal instruments that set the human rights of refugees. By grounding their analysis in real-life challenges facing refugees today, Hathaway and Dent have produced a book as valuable to activists as to scholars.

*Refugee Rights* will provoke debate on the adequacy of the international refugee rights regime. It is essential reading for everyone concerned to counter threats to the human dignity of refugees.

Available from Centre for Refugee Studies

Fax: (416) 736-5837 • Email: [refuge@yorku.ca](mailto:refuge@yorku.ca)

## Asylum: A Moral Dilemma

By W. Gunther Plaut

Toronto: York Lanes Press

ISBN 1-55014-239-9; 192 pages, indexed; \$19.90.

Every year the refugee landscape changes, but only in that more problems are added, fewer are solved, and all become constantly more urgent. Fuelled by the explosion of the world's population, the quest for asylum is one of the most pressing problems of our age. Refugee-receiving nations—located frequently, but by no means exclusively, in the Western world—have to respond to masses of humanity searching for new livable homes. Human compassion for these refugees can be found everywhere, but so can xenophobia and the desire to preserve one's nation, economic well being, and cultural integrity. The clash between these impulses represents one of the great dilemmas of our time and is the subject of Plaut's study. In exploring it, he provides a far-ranging inquiry into the human condition.

The book presents political, ethnic, philosophical, religious, and sociological arguments, and deals with some of the most troublesome and heartbreaking conflicts in the news.

**Contents:** *The Issues;* Questions Without Answers; Definitions; Religion, Natural Law, and Hospitality; A Look at History; Some Ethical Questions; Through the Lens of Sociobiology; Community and Individual; Contended Rights: To Leave, Return, Remain;

*The Practice;* Refugees in Africa; Four Asian Lands; Glimpses of Europe and Central America; The North American Experience; The Sanctuary Movement; A Final Look; Bibliography; Index.

*Asylum—A Moral Dilemma* is simultaneously published in the United States by Praeger Publishers, and in Canada by York Lanes Press.

Available from:

Centre for Refugee Studies

Fax: (416) 736-5837 • Email: [refuge@yorku.ca](mailto:refuge@yorku.ca)