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Minority Women and Forced Migrations: A Comparative Study of Flight and Settlement Experiences of Women Refugees in India and Australia

RUCHIRA GANGULY-SCHIASE AND ROBERTA JULIAN

This paper draws attention to the factors and experiences of displacement and the ways in which women cope with forced migration and resettlement. Through our comparative analysis of the resettlement experiences of women within the developing countries in the South Asian region and women from the Asian region who have settled in Australia, we challenge and problematise the various bureaucratic categories of "the displaced" (such as political refugee, economic migrant, asylum seeker, illegal immigrant).

The field of refugee studies has a number of weaknesses and limitations. These include: (1) a predominance of small-scale local studies and an associated lack of longitudinal studies. As Khalid Koser has noted, "it would be really useful to trace the development of refugee populations or diasporas, or transnational communities...over ten or twenty years"; (2) the lack of a comparative perspective and the need to be grounded in a wider context such as globalisation, transnationalism; (3) the predominance of empirically based and policy-oriented studies and thus the limited attention to building theory in refugee studies; and (4) the need to go beyond a good/bad dichotomy implicit in viewing refugees as "either vilified or seen as victims".

Further, as Ian Ang states:

"...we are interested in finding out what it means to be a refugee in this time and age, in all its complexities, in all its ambivalences, and in all its contradictions, looking beyond either a total revulsion or moral outrage."

We attempt to embark on the challenge of addressing these limitations. We are working towards a comparative analysis of the resettlement(s) of women who have experienced forced migration and displacement, and one that locates these local studies within an analysis of macro-processes of neo-liberal globalisation. We believe that such an approach will contribute to the building of a theory in refugee studies and offer a greater understanding of the complexities of forced migration and settlement for women.

The complex processes of decolonisation and increased integration of the world economy have set in motion large-scale population movements that render meaningless distinct categories of dislocations. Therefore, we emphasise that the boundaries of various types of gendered forced displacements often intersect and are blurred.

Increasingly, nation states have closed their borders to "aliens" outsiders. In relation to forced migrations we are concerned with the particular infliction the dichotomies of "economic migrants" and "refugees" proper manifest in Australia and the Indian sub-continent. This paper is also guided by a concern over the problem that goals of national development in post-colonial states are often at odds with the rights of minority groups.

Feminist scholarship in this field makes the important point that when addressing the situation of minority women gender justice tends to become sidelined due to problems of women being the embodiment of the minority community's identity. Based on comparative research among East Bengali/Bangladeshi women in West Bengal and Hmong refugee women in Tasmania, we argue that in the global South artificial boundaries constructed in the process of nation making have suddenly rendered the movement of certain groups as illegal despite their long history of migratory journeys and interactions. This has specific gendered consequences. Our argument concerning the global North also refers to another artificial boundary construction, namely the distinctions between economic migrant and political refugee. Through our comparative analysis, this paper draws critical attention to the weakness of the concept of refugees in contemporary post-colonial contexts by highlighting its gendered complexities. Our empirical work on diverse groups of displaced women will show that the conventional demarcations between economic migrant and political refugee are inadequate to explain their experiences. In particular, our analysis of Hmong women's resettlement experiences will highlight that gender and generation are more significant axes of contestation in the construction of displaced women's identities.

Forced Migration and Exclusion: Nation States and Border Control Policies

Forced and economic migrations are closely related and often interchangeable expressions of global inequality and societal crisis. It is through the deconstruction of various bureaucratic categories that both the diversity and similarity of people experiences can be exposed. According to Sivnanadan the distinction between political refugee and economic migrant is a false one
and is vulnerable to differing interpretations depending on the interests of who such categorisations serve. It is the interests of the powerful that have resulted in the blurring of these categories. Even when experts have examined transnational migration with a gender lens and note the increasing “feminisation” of their attention on the productive sphere and the social production of gender have left out the complexities of different and gendered experiences of migration in an overall theoretical frame. Neoliberalism with its focus on structural adjustment programmes resulted in reduced social spending, leading to the impoverishment and eradication of social welfare and educational provisions to people in developing nations. Resistance to poverty cannot be separated from political resistance and persecution, thus turning the political refugee into an economic migrant. In addition, millions of people become displaced each year as a result of development programmes. It is normally difficult to tell the difference between environmental, economic and political factors and therefore the category, environmental refugee, can obscure the very complex reasons underlying environmental disasters. Often the underlying causes of such forced migration might be found in the chosen path of development followed by the state. According to Castles' discussions which focus on forced migration are essentially linked to the concerns that nation-states have with their national security and border control. Recent developments in industrialised countries indicate that governments are gradually restricting entry of immigrants and asylum seekers. This is most apparent in the border security planning of Australia and a number of countries in the global North such as England, the nations within the European Union, and the United States. In line with the establishment of border control policies in the North, Australia has developed policies that are increasingly exclusionary. Australian Prime Minister John Howard has developed a very firm connection between sovereignty and exclusion in present asylum policies, emphasising the distinction between “genuine” asylum seekers and economic migrants. Recent changes to the Migration Legislation Amendment Act in 2001 (MLAA) suggest that these policies are particularly discriminatory against women. Australia’s current anxiety over asylum seekers is, according to Devek, consistent with Australia’s past fear of othersness. However, the very notion of displaced persons can be called into question by an examination of the diverse forms of displacement in Northeast India. This is outlined by Sumadjoe’s (1999) reconceptualisation of the distinction between “migrant” and “refugee”, which posits the nexus between the two terms and the shared common factor of victimisation. Sumadjoe argues that giving different definitions to displaced populations is a meaningless exercise as "in reality...differences are brisker." Historically, the conceptualisation of the displaced person can be traced to the inception of the UN Convention of 1951 within the context of post-war reconstruction. Here, the definition of a refugee was characterised as a person who, Owing to a well founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable, or owing to such fear, is unwillingly to avail himself of the protection of that country. Although this definition may have been adequate in the reconstruction of post WWII Europe, it is arguably both antiquated and inefficient in the 21st century. With its focus on individual persecution and sovereignty, this paradigm is subsequently Eurocentric and reductionist. Indeed, it has been argued that there is a close relationship between the UNHCR and Western nations that donate large amounts of aid and subsequently, the UNHCR is not as independent as it appears to be. Writers such as Hathaway argue that the definition is anachronistic because refugee movements today are different from those which pertained during the Cold War period in which the earlier one was coined. The stereotype of an individual person fleeing from the persecution of a political system is no longer relevant. Today’s refugees are more likely to arrive in much larger groups than those of the 1950s and in much poorer condition. They do not have the opportunity or the time to prepare for their flight and present themselves at borders without documentation or identification. They are often injured or in poor health. Over eighty per cent of them are women and children, as the biggest reason for flight is civil unrest or war, and men are often killed or imprisoned or tortured from the threat of continued persecution. Arguably, this paradigm also excludes the experiences of women in forced displacement and the experiences of internally displaced persons. Feminist writers also argue that the stereotype of a “refugee” conforms to the Cold War image which is predominantly male. The language of the UN Convention on Refugees is gender blind. That is, it does not refer to females nor does it specifically recognize persecution on the grounds of gender. Although, for example, rape has been recognised as a war crime, the Refugee Convention does not identify rape as sufficient ground for refugee status. However, Haines argues that The failure of decision makers to recognise and respond appropriately to the experiences of women stems not from the fact that the 1951 Convention does not refer specifically to persecution on the basis of sex or gender, but rather because it has often been approached from
a partial perspective and interpreted through a framework of male experience. In 1985 the Executive Committee of the UNHCR (EXCOM) recognised women refugees and asylum seekers as a "particular social group" under the terms of the Refugee Convention but this is not always followed by either member or non-member countries.

"Economic refugees" are not recognised as bona fide refugees because they do not suffer from "persecution" but are assured to have an element of choice in their movements. It seems that nation states expect that families will stay in their own countries and starve rather than cross borders to a country where employment opportunities however limited, are available.

Recent non-liberal prescriptions in both Australia and India have been often accompanied by aggressive border protection policies, giving rise to growing xenophobia towards asylum seekers. In post-colonial states the resultant impact has affected women even more adversely than men. In the making of post-colonial nation states boundaries were drawn arbitrarily through ethnic, religious cultural and economic communities. Homogenisation underpinning nationalist ideologies also led to the creation of marginalised and displaced "minority" groups who did not belong in the native state. To the Indian sub-continent, tensions and contention over artificially constructed boundaries have continued since simple movement of populations in border regions can become an illegal act. However, the pursuit of market liberalisation does not seem to be leading to greater tolerance of ethnic and religious differences. On the contrary, border controls are being vigorously enforced to keep alien others out. Most undocumented forced women migrants we spoke with reiterated their inability to secure asylum as they did not meet the official's notion of who might be considered a genuinely persecuted individual.

Borders of nation states are artificial constructs arbitrarily drawn through ethnic, religious, cultural and economic communities. Such borders exist, for example, between Kashmir and Pakistan, China and India, and Israel and Palestine. In India the artificiality is exemplified by the case in Tripura where a border divides a football field. The fluidity of borders that often isolate communities is highlighted, for example, where a river which often changes course is a national border. Political decisions can also produce borders which are moveable, as for example where Australia has excised Ashmore Reef and Christmas Island from Australian territory for the purposes of establishing refugee status. Another recent example is the barrier currently erected between India and Bangladesh.

Gendered Displacement

Women have often been relegated to the periphery in mainstream refugee debates. As noted earlier, women have been excluded from both the internal and external displacement debates due to the very definition of what it means to be a refugee. Recent literature has shown that women are systematically excluded from refugee debate due to the specificity of male experiences, despite the overrepresentation of women in refugee statistics. It has been contended that the UNHCR definition of the "refugee" is simultaneously individualistic and presumptuous in its intimation that violations must be specifically committed by the state. Boyd suggests that this definition privileges the public side of public/private divide by focusing on the actions of the state. This definition "fails to acknowledge forms of persecution that occur in private settings." As women are more likely to be persecuted in the private sphere, they are less likely to be officially seen as refugees.

It has been argued that refugee law is intrinsically gendered and subsequently, needs to be altered. Boyd points that female persecution eventuating in displacement can be conceptualised in two ways. Firstly, a woman can be persecuted as a woman, not because she is a woman. This means that the form of persecution is gendered, such as in the case of rape. Similarly, women can be persecuted because of her gender or because she has broken social mores pertaining to her gender. This distinction is made clearly by Haines who describes the former form of persecution as gender-specific and the second as gender-related. Citing Cawley Haines also describes persecution by sexual violence as a weapon of war, when the "...violation of women's bodies acts as a symbol of the violation of the country."

Significantly, gender inequity and stratification can be reproduced in places of relocation, where women generally possess less education and fewer skills than their male counterparts and hence lack bargaining power in the community. Another important aspect of this analysis is the way in which women's bodies often become sites of contestation in relocated communities. The central findings of our comparative research indicate that the degree to which women are controlled is often a symbol of reconstructed patriarchal authority in many displaced communities.

Methodology

Our observations are based on ethnographic research carried out in the border regions within South Asia and institutional ethnography. Intensive fieldwork among the displaced enabled us to challenge the conventional epistemic notion of what it means to be a refugee, allowing us to present the life worlds of the researched as active agents within our study rather than passive victims. We followed Sorensen's ethnographic approach to deconstructing pre-existing categories of displacement by showing which aspects are relevant on the ground. Roberta Julian along with her colleagues was commissioned to undertake research on the settlement experiences of recently arrived refugees.
in Tasmania. The findings on the Hmong for this paper are based on almost ten years of association with Hmong people—mainly in Australia and the United States, but also more recently in Thailand. We utilized data that has been collected through a methodology known as "institutional ethnography." In explaining this methodology, Dorothy Smith states:

Institutional ethnographic research and analysis does not displace or reconstruct the experiences of those implicated in an institutional regime. Rather, by locating people's site of experience in the social relations of the institutional regime and explicated what we can of the relations that enter into that experience, we can create something like a map of the relations in which people's own doings and experiences are situated and by which they are shaped. The institutional ethnographer recognizes that people are "expert practitioners of their everyday worlds" and is interested in learning from them. However, institutional ethnography "looks for the ways in which the particularities of people's everyday doings bring into being the distinctively generalized forms of the institutional order." The aim is to locate in their accounts the juxtapositions between the everyday worlds as they told them and how they are brokered into relations that connect them beyond scope of experience. (For Smith, I)The project is analogous to cartography. Importantly, this approach also acknowledges the fact that "researchers are in the same world that they are investigating."

The findings on East Bengal/Bangladeshi women are derived from fieldwork among forced women migrants in 2004-2005 in Calcutta (now Kolkata) in the Indian state of West Bengal and its border regions. The women were aged between sixteen and seventy-five and included single, widowed, married women and deserted wives. The observations and analysis are also informed by intensive and intermittent fieldwork carried out in this region over a 15-year period. The first period of intensive fieldwork was carried out by Ruchiya Ganguly-Scaccio for eighteen months in Nadia, a district bordering Bangladesh, where the second largest settlement of refugees has taken place.

Close and continuing relationship since 1988 have been maintained with a number of the current key informants. Our earlier work focussed on comparative gendered migratory journey; other related research examined the social consequences of economic individualisation. Throughout this period close links were formed with a number of displaced Bangladeshi women. Such contacts permitted entry into networks of relocated communities. This access was critical since emerging hostilities towards alien others stemming from changes in the political climate in recent years has made refugees and newly arrived undocumented migrants fearful and reluctant to talk to outsiders. Gaining their trust was vital in uncovering the detailed accounts that were presented.

Hmong in Tasmania, Australia

Hmong refugees from Laos had begun to arrive in Tasmania in the mid-late 1990s but it was not until the early 1990s that their presence became visible to "ordinary" Tasmanians at various sites around Hobart, the state's capital city. One such site was Salamanca Market, held every Saturday predominantly for tourists. The Hmong became familiar faces at Salamanca Market where they sold fresh organically grown vegetables of the highest quality. Their "Asian" faces and broad smiles ensured that they stood out from the crowd in a city where the local population was (and still is) "overwhelmingly white" and Anglo. The members of the extended Hmong families who congregated around the vegetable stalls provided the market with a multicultural presence and their colourful and unique embroidery pag meung, for sale alongside the fresh vegetables, provided an opportunity for the consumption of cultural artifacts. Locals were quick to buy the pag meung for their aesthetic value. The majority were unaware that they were contributing to the maintenance of transnational ties, as the proceeds of the sale would be remitted to Hmong relatives residing in Thai refugee camps.

Tasmanian welcomed the Hmong at Salamanca as they became known to locals. The Hmong quickly came to symbolise a new openness to Asia, a new Tasmanian identity that was inclusive of people of Asian origin. The Hmong became an icon of multicultural Tasmania; they were seen to have successfully integrated into Tasmanian society while simultaneously maintaining their cultural identity, an ideal expressed in government policy statements on Australian multiculturalism. In this context, however, it can be argued that Hmong identity becomes commodified, trivialised and marginalised. The Hmong are represented as "the exotic Other", as a marketable tourist commodity. This encourages an essentialist notion of Hmong identity which homogenises what is, despite its small size, a heterogeneous "community". The dominant representation of Hmong femininity complies with this. Women become the bearers of cultural tradition—cultural icons whose images are a marketable commodity. The Hmong women and children selling vegetables at the market are popular subjects of the "tourist gaze." Many visions to Hobart would have a photograph or two of "the Hmong at Salamanca" in their memories. Importantly, however, this image belies the economic hardships and settlement difficulties experienced by almost all the Hmong in Hobart.
Minority Status and Collective Remembering

Just as the history of Partition in India is deeply etched in the resettlement experiences of Bangladesh in West Bengal, the history of minority persecution and political turmoil in South Asia, particularly the long and protracted wars in Indo-China marks the flight and memory of resettlement of Hmong communities. This has also shaped the dominant refugee narrative which we return to later.

The Hmong in South East Asia

The experiences of women in this study are part of a larger, on-going, cross border fluid movement of populations into North East India. Looking at it historically, it is noted that seeds of dispersion along communal lines were sown way back in 1901 when the British ruled India. The province of Bengal was partitioned into East and West with the former being largely predominated by Muslims and the latter by Hindus. Based on this, partition took place in 1947 with two nation states being carved out, viz., India and Pakistan. In 1947, a large majority of Hindu Bengalis arrived as refugees in West Bengal but a significant proportion continued to live in East Pakistan as their identification was along local culture rather than nationalist identities. Bengali cultural nationalism drawing on secular principles and regional identity intensified in East Pakistan again; Punjabi dominated exclusionary politics of Pakistan, culminating in the war of Independence and formation of Bangladesh in 1971. In Bangladesh growing instability, poverty and militarisation has given rise to Islamic fundamentalism, progressively pushing out Bangladesh Hindus as well as the Muslim poor. In the Indian state of West Bengal in the past half century while cultural politics and public culture has been shaped largely by secular and democratic principles, often spearheaded by the post-partition "East Bengali" refugees, fractures are also appearing as a consequence of assaults on two fronts: Islamic fundamentalism of Bangladesh and growing Hindu nationalism of greater India. Since the 1970s West Bengal's ruling Left Front government and especially the Communist Party has consistently maintained an anti-communal stance and enjoyed popular support due to its pro-poor politics. At the same however, its pragmatic approach of expanding its support base by incorporating immigrant Bangladeshis (including Muslims) into the electoral list and thereby indirectly engineering citizenship rights is a source of intense hostility. While discourses of "foreign isatization", initiated primarily by Hindu nationalists have dominated public debate in West Bengal in recent years, in the surrounding States, the resentment is far more violent.

Refugee Narratives of Dislocation

Bangladeshi refugee women narrated their experiences in terms of the factors that forced them and their families to migrate to India. Some were categorical in stating the fact that fear of religious persecution compelled them to leave their homeland and find shelter in another country. Yet, despite their references to communal tensions being a cause for their dislocation, they did not personally experience physical attacks or coercion on them by the Muslim majority. What they did acknowledge was that there had been a constant fear in their minds given that they had young daughters at home. They had heard of incidents whereby Muslims had abducted Hindu girls or even raped them. It is interesting to note that while they recounted such details of Muslim atrocities happening somewhere in their country, in case of their own safety, they were grateful to the Muslim neighbours who had protected them.

Such views are evident in the comments that were repeatedly expressed by a number of women refugees:

Hindu women and grown up girls had to live with a sense of insecurity.
We normally avoided venturing alone in places outside our house.
Women and girls from our community were constantly under threat.
There were incidents of sexual harassment by Muslim youths... But we were not physically attacked. There was fear of an attack always... (40 year old, deserted woman, from Rajshahi district, Bangladesh)
Here, it is important to note the radically differing views of young people. For example, a sixteen-year-old girl who worked as a seamstress in Kolkata emphasized that she did not really like being in India as she failed to relate to the local Bengalis. She was unlike older women who appeared to be grateful to have a home and livelihood in West Bengal.

Most of the refugees said that they had migrated with their families. Only one mentioned doing so in a group of fifty to sixty people.

From the discussions with the immigrants from Bangladesh, it can be inferred that reasons for migration were not merely political and religious persecution as minorities, but economic as well.

Hardships in Resettlement

Even though there were not many hardships faced by the refugees while crossing the border all of them had to struggle with regard to finding a place to stay and employment. Some of them mentioned being harassed by local headmen and some said that there was a constant fear of eviction for which they had to bribe the local police.

While in Bangladesh, most of these women stayed within the confines of their homes, in India, they were compelled to find jobs so as to be able to support themselves as well as their families. Like many Bengali women, Bangladeshi refugee women play an active role in the public sphere since their husbands were out of work and did not support them financially. Subsequently, women had to assume the role of the breadwinners in their families. Ironically however, they seemed to be enjoying more freedom in the place of settlement in terms of movement within the city and feeling safe as well.

In Bangladesh, we never moved around freely. Life was confined within the walls of the house. I could never think of doing a job outside my house in Bangladesh. Besides that, there was no present threat of physical (sexual) assault at the hands of local Muslim youth. In West Bengal, there are no such threats. The atmosphere in West Bengal is easier for women. Women can be seen everywhere in the markets, at the workplace and in the fields of West Bengal, which was not the case in Bangladesh. (33 year old, deserted wife, Rajasai district, Bangladesh)

When we need, almost all the refugees mentioned that neighbours as well as employers helped them but not always financially. If they required food items, neighbours came to their help and in case of illness, employers gave them leave and sometimes money to get themselves treated. Most of them get financial help from their relatives living nearby.

Minority Women and Forced Migrations

Elaborating on their current financial situation, they mentioned more of less a hand to mouth kind of an existence. This was further reinforced when the participants were asked whether they remitted any money back to their relatives living in their native villages. While some said that they had no relatives back in their rural villages, others were vehement that they hardly earned enough to manage their own households. As one woman remarked bitterly, "No, I can't even manage my own family." (40 year old, widow, migrated from Daularpur, Bangladesh)

Maintaining Kinship Networks

Most of the women immigrants from Bangladesh reported having a kinship network in West Bengal with some of members of their families living in and around Kolkata as well as in other parts of West Bengal.

As mentioned above, displaced Bangladeshi women have been compelled to take up gainful employment in contrast to what their role had been back in their native villages. Most women were employed either as domestic help or as seamstresses after migrating to Kolkata. Their educational status varied from being illiterate to completion of primary school. Their monthly earnings were quite meagre ranging from Rs. 500 to Rs. 1000, with the exception of one woman, who ran a small business. Although in most cases, women were the main breadwinners, they did not attribute their decision-making powers within their households solely to their financial independence. It varied according to the women's location within the life cycle. Older women with sons exerted greater power. The following comments typify older women's views:

...Even if I am not earning money, it is my voice that is heard. But if I am earning, my voice is heard loud and clear! (70 year old, married woman, migrated from Narangar, Bangladesh)

and,

No, in my house, whatever my words, whatever I say, others do the same. I distribute, spend money. I am the one to do it. Everyone leaves it to me. (40 year old, married woman, migrated from Raghunathpur, gram, Bangladesh)

Younger women, by comparison, despite being breadwinners had little decision-making power.

In terms of freedom and safety/security, these women refugees felt that it was certainly better here than back in their rural villages in Bangladesh.

Our informants suffer from economic deprivation and policies that systematically exclude them from outside assistance. Our findings among displaced women in India also reveal that female labour within impoverished communities is taken for granted and capitulated on. In both situations, female
Labour doubles, yet labour within the home is taken for granted within the global market system. In the specific case of structural readjustment in India, job loss for men also entails an extra burden for women, who have to provide for their families. While women are exposed to many vulnerabilities, confront threats of violence, and reinforced patriarchal authority, our findings also reveal that there are possibilities of empowerment. Most women valued their freedom of mobility and enhanced sense of self-confidence that the new environment presents them. However, women who have arrived as undocumented migrants, their awareness of being non-citizens is acute. They openly speak about their sense of being deprived of the rights of citizenship. For example, they find it difficult to obtaining ration cards even enrolling their names on electoral lists and even in admitting their children to schools (where they are asked to produce birth certificates). They can never aspire to have a regular job or the basis of their education (they achieved in Bangladesh) because that is not recognized in India. They feel disadvantaged for not being Indian citizens, particularly due to the constant harassment by the local police. They compare their situation with earlier migrants (who are fellow villagers, caste fellows or relatives) who have now established themselves in economic, social and political arenas.

Growing class inequalities and mobilization by the CPI (M) has facilitated a shared degree of identification between local West Bengali and Bangladeshi displaced women. Both groups provide essential urban services to the middle classes, but are frequently labelled as “undesirable.” As Kaviraj’s account of India’s Tejpur/Tinsukia revolution suggests, elites are compelled to share public spaces with their “habitual inferiors” which often includes crowded and filthy pavements, middle class neighbourhoods being run over by shuttles, standing or sitting next to a shirtless fellow citizen on a public bus and so on.

Additionally, Bangladeshi women were further demonized as “illegal” and “infiltrators.”

Despite their hardships in resettlement women repeatedly emphasized the freedom of mobility to their place of settlement and enhanced feelings of safety and security. However, refugee women while emphasizing the accommodative atmosphere among the local population, held the police responsible for threatening their security. This is a radical departure from earlier decades. West Bengal government, traditionally supportive of refugees regardless of their legal status, has enacted draconian laws under pressure from both the Central government and localised reactionary forces. The West Bengal police now have a special cell for the detection of illegal migrants. Further, official discourses of producing “documentation” of all kinds amounts to targeting vulnerable immigrants since vast majority of non-literate Indian citizens do not possess many of these documents. Indeed, accusations of illegal infiltration and ill treatment of Bangladeshi rural poor who have travelled to major cities elsewhere in India, in search of work highlight the impossibility of distinguishing between internal labour migrants and cross border refugees.

Hmong Women’s Active Role in Resettlement

Women’s labour has been significant in Hmong settlement strategies. Like many Bengali male refugees there is high levels of unemployment amongst Hmong men; they have also found it difficult to reconstruct meaningful identities in the process of resettlement. By contrast women have made important economic and cultural contributions to their family, clan and community. Yet, despite women’s contributions to the household economy, men are more highly valued than women in this social system and women are subject to male authority and decision-making in the household.

Hmong women in Tasmania are subject to the constraints and expectations of a patriarchal kinship structure. A Hmong woman becomes a member of her husband’s clan upon marriage and is expected to fulfill the expectations of a daughter-in-law. This includes looking after young children, doing the housework, growing vegetables on the family’s land and generally being involved in all household activities under the supervision of her mother-in-law. These are close parallels here with Bengali daughters-in-law.

However, women have been central actors in rebuilding the displaced Hmong community in Hobart. They have played active roles in all spheres of social life namely health, education, work and kinship. The first contacts to be made with the health and education systems are typically made by women in relation to child birth and child care activities. Knowledge of Hmong customs by mainstream service providers thus often develops through their efforts to deal with the needs of Hmong women and children. For example, Hmong women have had to negotiate birthing practices and postnatal care with hospital staff and administrators.

While in Laos the political leaders and representatives of cultural tradition are men, in the context of settlement it is women who play the most public roles. Hmong women have strong relations with the social world outside their minority community; these include younger women helping older women negotiate the school system, women who have lived in Hobart for longer periods of time accompanying new mothers to the hospital to assist in the negotiation of birthing practices and older and younger women together being responsible for selling vegetables at the Saturday market.

Despite this extensive involvement in life outside the Hmong community, it is male leaders who remain as the spokespersons for the Hmong community and who, as powerful gatekeepers, manage the “image” of Hmong culture which is being constructed to fit the context of Australian multiculturalism. High unemployment rates contribute to a pattern in which male social networks are
available to the Hmong in Australia (compared to their US counterparts) is more restricted. As a very small and dispersed population with generally low socio-economic status, the Hmong in Australia have limited resources to draw upon. For Hmong women in Australia, the global narrative provides the dominant "cultural notion of gender at play". At the level of the nation-state, the rhetoric of multicultural policy in Australia "encourages" the presentation of Hmong identity. Typically, however, multicultural spaces in Australia are aimed at the white middle-class or the tourist market—the identities presented are essentialist and "traditional". As Hage has argued, they are limited to representations that sustain "fantasies of white supremacy among the dominant majority. In Australia, multicultural policy thus reinforces the power of the global narrative; it does not offer spaces for translation". Consequently, while in the United States, resistance takes the form of "translation" and "reorientation in the third space", the lack of such spaces in Australia leads to a "wholesale rejection of, or disinterest in, Hmong cultural traditions".

Given Australia's ambivalent relationship with Asia and "Asia" in her spaces for the creation of hybridity are limited. They include an emerging media in the field of popular culture but the Hmong have limited access to these. Nevertheless, there are two such spaces available to the Hmong. Significantly, both are grounded in the transnational social space. One is the Internet and the other is the transnational "community" of Hmong women. First, the Internet offers a space within which Hmong in Australia can engage in the translation of Hmong identity. It is used by Hmong youth and is dominated by Hmong in the US. Second, Hmong women who have made their mark as "trailblazers" in the United States, have become increasingly aware of the situation of Hmong women in Australia. Through e-mail communication and visits to Australia, they have begun to establish transnational ties. Importantly, these ties are not clan-based; they are gender-based ties among Hmong women. Educated Hmong women in the US are offering themselves and their experiences as resources for the translation of Hmong feminism in Australia. The ultimate goal, however, is to contribute to the survival of Hmong identity in the diaspora.

Conclusion

In this paper we have highlighted gendered complexities of forced displacements by exploring the resettlement experiences of Hmong and Bangladehsi refugee women. Our findings suggest that women's narratives of displacement can address the problem of exclusion in forced migration debates. They challenge the normative and functionalist accounts of displacement debates that construct the "forced migrants" identities as static. Additionally, our comparative methodology demonstrates that ethnographic approaches operate to dispel the precise narratives of citizenship, nationhood and territorial contiguity that the existence of displaced persons threatens to disrupt.

Counteracting Dominant Narratives

The narratives recounted here support and reinforce an essentialist notion of Hmongness and encourage the maintenance of ideas of "traditional" and "authenticity". However, it is possible to identify resistance and challenges to the global hegemonic discourse identified above. Such resistances arise where the narrative of the "refugee success story" does not resonate with lived experience. These resistant voices arise in local contexts and reflect differences within the Hmong diaspora based on gender, age, class, religion, "migration" and place. The voices of resistance are predominantly those of educated Hmong women, primarily located in the United States. Nowadays, they have been joined by the voices of Hmong youths, both male and female. The main topics of contestation and debate include clan structure; youthfull marriage; cross-cultural marriage; polygamy and levirate; "kidnapping" marriages; women's education; and the significance of Hmong language for Hmong identity. New communications media, such as the Internet, provide a means of reaching a global Hmong audience. There is an on-line Hmong journal and at least one Hmong home page in both America and Australia. Young Hmong people in the United States and Australia discuss issues surrounding Hmong identity in various chat rooms. Yet, the repertoire of adaptive strategies (including gender strategies)

Gendered Implications of Dominant Refugee Narratives

The dominant identity narrative in the global discourse on Hmong Identity can be described as the quintessential "refugee story". It is a "heteronormative" narrative that incorporates a number of themes: the war and the military, exodus and the refugee experience; and continuity with the past through a valuing of clan ties, "traditional" Hmong culture and memories of a "lost" homeland. While this dominant narrative is predominately articulated by male elites, it is also reproduced by women. This is most apparent in the "storytelling" (paj nham), a form of needlework first made around 1960 in Ban Vina refugee camp. Commonly, the storytelling chronicles village life in the mountains of Laos, depicting religious ceremonies, or illustrate Hmong festivals. The majority created in the "west" or for the western market, however, recount the transition from village life prior to the war, through the escape from Laos after the war, to life in refugee camps in Thailand and often "end" with an image of the plane in Bangkok that was to take them to "freedom" in the United States.

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relatively closed and confined predominantly within the Hmong community. It is this image-making that lies at the heart of the problem of resettlement of the minority Hmong community in Hobart and it presents a great challenge for gendered identity formation. Our final section therefore focuses on this issue.
The major difference that underpins in displacement experiences of the two groups of women is in relation to the younger generation. Hindu young women have some opportunities opening up to them, which enables them to challenge the dominant patriarchal norms and traditions, while Bangladeshi young women continue to be subjected to greater vulnerabilities. This is in part due to the absolute poverty of the latter community.

While enduring many difficulties in the settlement process, Hindu women have played a significant role in re-building their communities. However, under current draconian policies in Australia asylum seekers face a grim future. In the present post-Cold War era, the Hindu would not be considered worthy recipients of refugee status. Similarly, hardening attitudes towards Bangladeshis prevail in India. The building of barri ers along the Indo-Bangladesh border is an example of this. Despite the fact that a large section of post-partition refugees were turned into veritable beggars, there is equal evidence of the positive role East Bengal refugees played in their self-rehabilitation10. Future generations may not be so lucky.

End Notes


3. This research is supported by IRC gran t, Gendered Exclusion: Women and Forced Migration, University of Volantang.


15. Ramabai Sanaa, The Marginal Nation: Transborder Migration from Bangladesh to West Bengal, (New Delhi, Sage, 1999).


34. Smith, Institutional Ethnography, p. 49.


38. Smith, Institutional Ethnography, p. 38.


47. This is particularly so in the case of increased sexual violence, where female refugees lack male counterparts; see Anonymous, "Protecting Refugees Women: From policy to programme implementation," Migrant World Magazine, Vol. 23, Issue 5, 1995, p. 36.

48. The significance of the ration card is that the government provides subsidized food and fuel to all citizens. Therefore anyone holding a ration card is always synonymous with being a citizen. However, it is also important to note that under neo-liberal adjustment policies these subsidies are under threat. While the Indian middle classes with education and skills to access high paying jobs in the new economy (i.e. not needing a ration card), the poor are under even greater threat of marginalisation.