



Australian Refugee Rights Alliance

**FROM THE MARGINS TO THE CENTRE:
REALISING THE RIGHTS OF REFUGEE
WOMEN AND GIRLS**

**A MEETING OF THE INTERNATIONAL
WORKING GROUP TO MONITOR
THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE
EXCOM CONCLUSION ON
WOMEN AND GIRLS AT RISK**

JULY 2010

The following is an extract of the presentation by Community Representatives from Australia at the 2010 UNHCR Annual Consultations with NGOs Side meeting:

*“From the Margins to the Centre:
Realising the rights of Refugee Women and Girls:*

*A Meeting of the International Working Group
to monitor the implementation of the
ExCom Conclusion on Women and Girls at Risk.”⁽¹⁾*

The community representatives from Australia were:

- Dr Melika Yassin Sheikh-Eldin (Adult Multicultural Education Services)
- Deena Yako (Fairfield Migrant Resource Centre)
- Endalketchew Gage (Good Shepherd Youth & Family Services)
- Parsuram Sharma Lital (Adult Multicultural Education Services)

Reports from the 2010 UNHCR Annual Consultations with NGOs and the 48th Standing Committee, together with supporting reports can be found at: www.arra.org.au

The Australian Refugee Rights alliance is a coalition of Australian NGOs, academics and advocacy organisations who are committed to advocating for the rights of refugees at an international level. For more information, visit

www.arra.org.au

Deena

I am here today to speak on behalf of my mothers, my sisters and my daughters whose plea for help has been forgotten and left them suffering in silence and living in despair. They are waiting for that special day to come when someone hears their cries for help, but it is always a long way away. As I lay in bed at night thinking of these women who have been the victims of war that have shattered their families and destroyed their country, if I am not their voice who is?

As many of you are aware refugees experience a lot of barriers and women's experiences are even worse.

Those barriers are based upon the pre-arrival barriers and post-arrival barriers.

The pre-arrival barriers are:

- Family separation
- Torture and trauma
- Rape
- Survival sex
- Health/ mental and physical
- Anxiety
- Survival guilt
- Uncertainty (and)
- Fear (are just to mention a few)

Once they arrive in the settlement country their post-arrival barriers include:

- Language barriers
 - Lack of knowledge of life-style in settlement country
 - Lack of information and access to services
 - Lack of access to employment, recognition of qualifications and previous experiences
 - Isolation
 - Teen pregnancies
 - Lack of culturally appropriate child care services
 - Housing and homelessness
 - Role changes
 - Intergenerational conflict
 - Stereotyping and discrimination (culturally)
 - Domestic violence, intergenerational conflict and child protection issues
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Melika

Today from this podium I want to assure the refugee women that they are not alone; there are many genuine people working hard and fighting on their behalf to create a caring and compassionate world.

On this occasion I would like to congratulate and commend the tireless effort and persistence of those brave women who worked hard to get the women at risk resolution passed and supported by the International community.

Risk for refugee women is not a word, it is not a concept but it is an everyday reality, the impact of which lingers with them for a life time.

To day it is a rare opportunity for us to make their distant voices closer and louder by reflecting on the real suffering that many women scattered around the world as refugees and internally displaced have endured and are still enduring.

As a woman of refugee background and one who has seen and felt those suffering first hand I would like to share the stories of some of the women whose lives were cut short as a result of risks that include rape, unwanted pregnancies, survival sex, women being used as bargaining tools, alienation by family and whole society, losing identity and respect as a human being.

My friend who was very brilliant, beautiful and full of life died when she was only 27 years of age.

When war erupted in Eritrea, she fled her country together with the thousands of people who were desperate to get refuge but unfortunately for her she was captured by the rebel army, imprisoned for four months and continually raped. When she escaped from prison she found her self pregnant and didn't know by whom. She went to be reunited with her family but to add to her misery she was rejected and threatened to be killed if she tries to come to the camp, because she brought shame to the family.

Imagine the trauma, the fear, the loneliness and the helplessness along with the lack of food, medication and appropriate care which finally ended her life as she gave birth to twin girls. This injustice did not stop there but passed to those innocent babies left behind, who have no identity, are a product of shame and they are girls which will keep the cycle going on and on unless a solution is reached.

On my visit to the Shaggarab camp in eastern Sudan I met with some young girls who told me that they were dismissed from school because they regularly missed classes

every month due to the fact that they had no sanitary materials and felt embarrassed to tell their teachers.

Another woman from Iraq whose son was beheaded in front of her eyes and after three years in Australia she still has severe panic attacks when ever her youngest son leaves the house in fear that he might not return.

If those women had been protected and supported under a “women at risk” program they would have had completely different lives. These are a few examples of many - those women could have been anyone of us who are here with you today.

- **We would like to say that the women at risk program should be urgently and properly funded in order to be effectively implemented.**
- **We believe that empowering those women and protecting them is a basic human right.**
- **We believe finding practical solutions to barriers encountered in obtaining a safe environment is crucial for survival and successful resettlement or repatriation.**
- **We believe developing a good capacity building initiatives for those women will give them confidence and strength.**
- **We believe family reunion is crucial for successful resettlement.**
- **We believe that it is very important to provide timely and relevant support for victims of rape and survival sex through intensive and culturally appropriate counseling.**
- **We believe that information provision of raising awareness of the legal system in resettlement countries and human rights framework are essential for better access to appropriate services if needed.**
- **We believe that a mentoring program to be developed to link refugee women to mainstream communities.**
- **We believe that women have to be included and consulted on issues concerning their future before making decisions for them.**

We do not have all the answers. The challenge is for the UNHCR, NGOs and partner bodies to continue to develop programs that are innovative and responsive to the changing needs of refugee women in general and women at risk in particular.

Endalkatchew

As a former refugee, I used to live in the Kakuma camp and other Urban centers in Kenya - an experience that gave me an sight into the lives of refugee women and girls .I witnessed firsthand the stark realities of refugee women in general and the heightened risk and vulnerabilities along the continuum of the forced migrations. Allow me to share some of these experiences which I believe would give you a glimpse to their lives.

In the early days of my sojourn in the Kakuma refugee camp 2001, I noticed the socio cultural and socio economic circumstances that virtually reduced refugee women to teen and forced marriage, survival sex, prostitution, teen pregnancy , mortality and morbidity associated with their gender. To my horror, I learnt that Kakuma had brothels where women try to make a living out of it.

I had a similar observation of refugee women's experience in Nairobi's urban setting. One of the regular persons I used to see at the Protection desk in Nairobi was a Somali women who used to live in the squatters of the Westland suburb. She could have been in late twenties and had a son about 10 years of age. Her precarious living conditions had exposed her to countless misery including rape. She had contracted HIV/AIDS; worse she been ostracized because of the stigma associated with HIV/AIDS.I sadly recall that her file sent to resetting county were rejected because of her health condition. She has remained in my mind all of these years and wondering what has happened to her and her son.

For countless refugee women and young girls, survival sex and gender based violence has become a normal way of life.

My experience of working with refugee women and girls in the resettlement context has equally been challenging. Many are reeling from the colossal impacts of forced migrations. The psychological impacts have been immense affecting their capacity to manage daily routine of life and their transition into the host society.

This is one of the few reasons why I feel so strongly about the plea of these refugee women and why I support their cause.

Parsu

My name is Parsuram Sharma Luital. ... I originally come from Bhutan.

As said in the old Chinese proverb: "Tell me and I'll forget; show me and I may remember; involve me and I'll understand." I am here today to understand myself for advocating the rights of refugee women in our society.

Growing up in the mountains of Bhutan, and coming from a culture where women were treated as a work machine to run for 24/7 for the service and duty of man, I will be failing on my duties if I don't speak for those women who have suffered and are suffering in the name of culture and traditional. From my childhood I have seen the plight of women in many forms. The women were perceived as a readymade tool to look after and raise children, take kitchen responsibility of cooking and feeding, contributing as a farm labour, and at the same time being mothers and wives, all, but for men, in our society who has never tried to acknowledge and honour the role of women.

Whether resettled in the new countries or in the camps, new laws, systems and rules are framed for better facilities or service delivery and are imposed to follow. One thing that is not imposed is, to change the attitude and culture of men towards women and their right of equality and freedom.

There is an assumption/perception from the resettlement agencies and service providers that women who have lived in camps under traumatic and harsh situations will less care about the rights of women since she no longer has to hide from the haunt from the military and rebels, or has to worry for a leaking roof or quest for food. These assumptions perhaps have made us more ignorant to look for the wellbeing and security of refugee women.

I have seen in my own small Bhutanese community how a refugee woman has gone through unspoken trauma and has become the silent victims of serious domestic violence by men. The mother of two teenage children who was admitted in the hospital has refused to come home for several days for fear of physical abuse and beating by her husband. The woman could not openly speak of the violence to her own community members for fear of back lash from the community that may break up the family, and for fear of legal consequences if reported to the service providers or authorities. The other case is the suicide of a single mother with 4 children (two step children and two her own) in 2009 after a year of resettlement in Australia. Lack of family support and appropriate counseling, isolation may have contributed to the cause.

My own [*female family member*] is the rape victim of Bhutanese army who died when my father was in prison in Bhutan. I was away from home for fear of being arrested by the Bhutanese army in 1990 where 100s of 1000s of Nepalese speaking Bhutanese were evicted from Bhutan by the ethnic cleansing policy adopted by the Bhutanese regime.

Today, I am here as a White Ribbon Ambassador from Australia to urge this forum to engage more men and share the responsibilities with women through education and awareness, which may help to reduce the violence against women, along with the strong support from UNHCR, NGOs and women rights groups across the world.

Thank you

Deena: A poem written by my sister Melika...

We're from the jungles, from vast deserts, high-mountains, deep valleys, extended plains and bright skies

We're the children of the humble, the generous, the brave, the kind. The caring people with bright hearts so white

We're from the cradle of civilizations, its source of humanity, victimisation, exploitation, the beginning of colonisation and its demise

We're living proof of the world's injustices, its battle field, its political games and sacrifice

We're the cries, we're the sorrows, we're the suffering but portrayed as a symbol of despair and disguise

We're artists whose love, passion and creativity for nature and a peaceful world is reflected in our words, in our dances in our songs in our laughs, our melodies and our sighs

But also we're the challenge, we're the hope, we're the future, a living testimony of survival, of joy and of life

We're against all violence, intolerance, injustices and discrimination

We're for fairness, equality, dignity and humanity and from the rubbles of injustices we rise and rise and rise

We're REFUGEE WOMEN of the world.

(Dr Melika Yassin Sheikh-Eldin 2010)