

Challenges of Refugee Families: International Policies Do Matter

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The purpose of the World Family Policy Forum is to reaffirm and demonstrate that the natural family is a vital part of society and to encourage support for the family on an international level and within the United Nations system. The experiences of refugee families demonstrate the effects that international policy can have when written for individuals without regard to the family as a fundamental unit of society. It is important for policy makers to recognize how international policy can have a detrimental effect on the family, including refugee families. International policy needs to support the rebuilding of families.

Our research identifies factors that assisted in the long-term recovery and resiliency of refugee families. It highlights the need for policies, programs, support, and resources that have demonstrated helpfulness to refugee families in their recovery of extreme hardships. Through our analysis and understanding of what factors helped refugee families survive unimaginable trauma, loss, and separation, we can improve international policies that protect families.

Definition of a Refugee

The definition of a refugee is clearly established in international law and treaty. On 28 July 1951, a special United Nations conference approved the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. The 1951 Refugee Convention defined who is considered a refugee and the kind of legal protection, other assistance, and social rights he or she should receive from states participating in the document. Equally, it defines a refugee's obligations to host governments and certain categories of persons, such as war criminals, who do not qualify for refugee status. A refugee is a person who "owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country. . . ."¹

Facts about Refugees

There are more than twenty million refugees in the world. This number does not include those fleeing for economic migration or voluntarily immigrating. Additionally, 5 percent of the refugee population (or one million) are children who have been lost from their families.² Children in the age range of three to seven years are at highest risk of being separate, due to the physical reality that they are often too big for their mothers to carry them and too small to run fast enough to keep up with the family during an escape

from armed conflict. They can become easily confused and get lost in the turmoil of an outbreak of war.

Almost half of the world's twenty million refugees are children and adolescents. Often conflict takes its greatest toll on the poorest communities. Children, at risk from poverty and deprivation of needed resources, are further endangered by war.³

Refugee Families and International Policy

Refugee policies were designed to protect individuals. Therefore, some policies inadvertently work to separate families. Many policies affect the family's ability to function in a healthy manner. The effects of these policies are often multigenerational and longitudinal, highlighting the importance of the thoughtfulness towards family lives when policies are designed.

There are policies which define when a youth must be considered an adult and thus, can no longer be resettled with their family. In some countries it is eighteen, while in others it is twenty-one years of age. However, many youth are caught in transition, and then "age out" or become too old before they are cleared to be resettled with their families. The consequence is that they may live on different continents without the option to be with their family.

The western definition of adolescence is primarily a medical term from western child development theories and it cannot be applied across cultures. The age range is not a valid social description of an age in the process of life in many cultures. Older children that are thrust into adulthood prematurely are at high risk.⁴

Another difficulty arises from using a rigid definition of a traditional "western" family consisting of two parents and their biological children. Due to the high death rate during armed participants studied from the Sudan, "Mary" was separated from her family when she was fourteen years old. Her mother was killed by a lion in a refugee camp. Mary had many "aunties" and had been raised in a home that included grandparents and aunties and uncles all in the same household. Mary was resettled on her own, while other members of her family, including her true aunts and grandparents were not only settled in different countries, but on entirely different continents. Mary is now married and has four children, but she struggles to raise them outside the usual support provided by the traditional family that included grandmother and aunts in her village.

Another problem that was frequently reported in our study was in many East African countries family members

have two names, both a Christian and a tribal name. They are sometimes not allowed to report both, but have to choose one or the other. If there is a discrepancy, they are not allowed to be reunited, because the records do not agree with what they originally reported. For example, one young man had the Christian name of Augustine and the tribal name of Imogi. His father had reported him missing and filed papers using his Christian name, Augustine. When the officials questioned his son, he gave them both names, but they only documented his tribal name. Unfortunately, because the names did not match, he was not resettled with his family.

Problematic Effects of National Policies

Serious problems in policy can be found in every developed country that accepts refugees for resettlement. In the U.S., recent changes in social security policy leave no options for support of senior refugees in their seventies and eighties, unless they become citizens. Unfortunately, becoming a citizen is a time-consuming process and leaves them without support until they can pass the test and qualify.

Changes in U.S. security clearance policies since the attacks of 11 September 2001 have caused a severe delay in getting security clearance paperwork processed, a necessary step in the refugee resettlement process. The time period to clear a refugee has gone from several months to several years. Two single-parent mothers in our study were told that it may be three or four years before their husbands could rejoin them. A substantial period of time in their children's lives will pass without their fathers being present. The stress of being a single parent mother to refugee women is extreme. They must try to acculturate to a new society, learn a new language, and job skill. They must find child-care and then go out into the workforce, something they never did in their own countries. Many refugee women do not drive or understand banking, so there is a difficult and lonely learning curve for them. These women's desperation to be reunited with their husbands is extreme, but due to the increased security precautions there appears to be no hope to facilitate their reunion.

A closer look at any developed country that accepts refugees reveals that improvement in the system is needed. Australia has had numerous reports of atrocious conditions in its refugee camps. The camps are in desert areas and are isolated from mainstream society. There is a paucity of services to assist the refugees in rebuilding their lives.⁵ A report on the United Kingdom by an NGO, typically a leader in compassionate refugee policy, shows that their care for unaccompanied refugee children is inadequate.⁶ It is likely that all developed countries that accept refugees have some limitations. However, the conditions highlight the need for improved policy, financial support, programs, and resources that are offered to refugee families.

Methodology

All participants in this study gave written consent for their stories to be shared. The following countries were represented in our sample: Palestine, Southeast Asia, Chile, Iran, Kuwait, Bosnia, Togo, Sudan, Afghanistan, Somalia, and Iraq. Factors were identified through qualitative interviews that helped the family survive and recover from the atrocities of war. We call these factors "family resiliency," which refers to the family's ability to protect their children, while helping each other survive and recover from the atrocities of war.

Policies Concerning Refugee Camps

While living in refugee camps, there are many things that can be done to enhance a family's resiliency. Measures to enforce adequate security and protection from the enemy, while living in the refugee camps, is essential. Refugee camps are dangerous and the quality of life is poor. Sexual assaults, attacks by animals, and extreme weather conditions are just a few examples of dangers that the refugees reported encountering in addition to the enemy. One of our research participants said, "The UN would give us food rations every day. However, then enemy soldiers would come through the camps terrorizing, killing, and raping. I joked with my friend and said, 'Are they feeding us just to fatten us up before we are killed? Why can't they provide better security?'"

Help in locating and reuniting with family is given by the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. However, these organizations are staffed by mostly volunteers and work within an extremely limited budget. There is a great need for improved technology and additional resources to reunite families. A lack of accessible medical care in refugee camps leads to a greater number of deaths and more complicated illness. A two-year-old child of one of our participants died in a refugee camp from an infection that would have been easily treated with antibiotics—if available. Further increasing the family's suffering was the lack of availability of any traditional grieving rituals and a proper burial.

Adequate health practices and physiological support such as exercise, regular sleep, and sufficient nutrition, water, and sanitation are extremely helpful in dealing with the extreme stress of refugee camp conditions. Filth and extreme temperatures without adequate resources add to an already traumatic situation for families.

Learning materials and activities allow children to make progress in their development and education. We have learned from the Palestinian refugees that including cultural history as part of their learning is important. There are many children in this world that literally grow up in refugee camps, unaware of what their country was like before the war. If families are not repatriated, then in addition to the steps mentioned above, they need an orienta-

tion to the new country in which they will be resettled. It is helpful to dispel myths and grandiose thinking about the country that they will be going to. Some refugees have unrealistic expectations about how it will be in their new country and get crushingly disappointed when they discover their beliefs are false. Also, helpful is education in the new language of their country. Once children are settled and can attend regular school, it is helpful if it is skill based rather than age based until they achieve an adequate level of competency.

Toys allow the child to play for diversion as well as express their inner fears. Play is a child's work and the way they mentally cope with their situation. Thus, toys in refugee camps are important to help children deal with extreme stress.

Living conditions that allow for privacy and the family to be together is important. Resources such as sheltered living space, water and food among others are limited in refugee camps. However, at critical moments when the necessary resources are given, it can mean the difference between life and death to refugees.

Policies that Support the Rebuilding of Refugee Families

A key factor in the family's well being is their ability to acquire employment and sustain their living. The transition toward independence and financial stability is more challenging for some refugees. Many women refugees are widows who now as single parent mothers have to be the financial supporters of their family. Many come from cultures who have maintained traditional roles (father as provider, mother as the nurturer of the children). In moving into western society, these families need greater assistance in making adjustments, particularly the widows and single-parent mothers who have never worked (and cannot drive cars, use a checkbook, or speak the language). Our current system provides a very limited amount of time that they can receive any support or training. Policies designed to reduce dependence may have a detrimental effect on families who haven't been given the opportunity to acquire basic language abilities, a minimal level of cultural adaptation, and employment skills. Without childcare providers and financial support, instead of reducing dependence on welfare, these policies disenfranchise and disempower these young widows and create a permanent state of poverty level living without hope of making progress.

Preserving cultural traditions, heritage and family values were factors that were helpful to the families. Policy makers need to understand that whenever possible resettlement of groups of extended families or refugees from a similar area and background is helpful. They can then form their own support system that helps them deal with the acculturation stress in the resettlement country. For example, a group of Sudanese women in our study has formed a support group and they have written a book of poetry to

help raise funds for their families. This excerpt from one of their poems highlights their determination:

Life has not been easy for us

The war has brought us and our families untold suffering

But the suffering has not broken our spirits

It has only strengthened our resolve to succeed at life as we start over again⁷

Giving their children a sense of optimism and permanency was a factor that helped many refugee families. Unfortunately, a number of families were settled, only to be told they weren't allowed to stay, were moved, and moved again. Other refugee parents could not give up on their dream of returning to their homeland. For example, one Chilean Refugee said:

Each year my parents said, "This will be the year we return to our homeland. . . ." Unfortunately, this did not happen, but I spent my childhood living out of boxes, because my parents refused to unpack. They refused to accept that this was our new homeland. When our country was freed from the cruel dictatorship, my brothers and I did not want to return. We have a good life in this country. My parents tried to go back, but it wasn't the same. All their children and grandchildren live here. Because we always thought it was temporary, we never adjusted as well as we could have to living in the U.S."⁸

Conclusions: International Policies that Help Refugee Families and Children

Armed conflict is one of the most profound destructive forces on the integrity of families and safety of children. The children in our study endured unimaginable horrors such as losing their homes, witnessing the killing of family members, being orphaned, being forced to be soldiers, or being caught in the torturous destruction around them and separated from their families. Refugee camps provide a life for a child that often includes prolonged suffering and enduring physical, emotional, and psychological abuse. When the conflict is over, and if the refugees return home, the effects on the family and the danger for children do not end. Land mines, which come in toy-like shapes, are appealing to children. Sanctions, often a political consequence imposed, have effects on children. When refugees cannot return home, the families face trying to rebuild their lives without the sense of belonging or cultural, social, spiritual, and economic resources of their former homeland or village.

Despite these enormous challenges, there are families who do survive and rebuild their lives after their suffering through war. International policies that support the integrity of the family and support their resiliency are needed. Maintaining the integrity of families and protecting children through the prevention of armed conflict must be our primary goal whenever possible. However, when war happens, how to mitigate the effects on family and

children is fundamental for political entities, international policy makers, the UN and nongovernmental organizations to understand.

NOTES

1. UNHCR. *United Nations High Commission on Refugees: Basic Facts (1951)*, retrieved 14 July 2003, <http://www.unhcr.ch/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/home>.
2. *Ibid.*
3. Chatty, D. "Disseminating Findings from Research with Palestinian Children and Adolescents," *Forced Migration Review*, 15, 2002, pp. 40–43.
4. Loughry, M. and E. Flouri. "The Behavioral and Emotional Problems of Former Unaccompanied Refugee Children 3–4 Years After Their Return to Vietnam," *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 25, 2001, pp. 249–263; Stanley, K. *Comfort: Young Separated Refugees in England*, Save the Children, London, England, 2001.
5. MacMullin, C. *A Method for Identifying and Understanding the Concerns of Refugee Children and Adolescents*, London, England, University of Oxford, 1998.
6. Stanley, K. *Cold Comfort: Young Separated Refugees in England*, Save the Children, London, England, 2001.
7. Sudanese Women's Refugee Group of Salt Lake City, Utah. *Our Lives: The Collective Life Experiences of Sudanese Women Refugees Living in Salt Lake City, Utah*, Salt Lake City, UT, Asian Association of Utah, 2003, p. 25 [For more information on purchasing this book that will help provide funds to the Sudanese Women's Group, e-mail: aau@aau-slc.org].
8. J.C. Confidential refugee statement, 2003.