

Engendering the refugee experience: female perspectives on forced migration and refugee resettlement

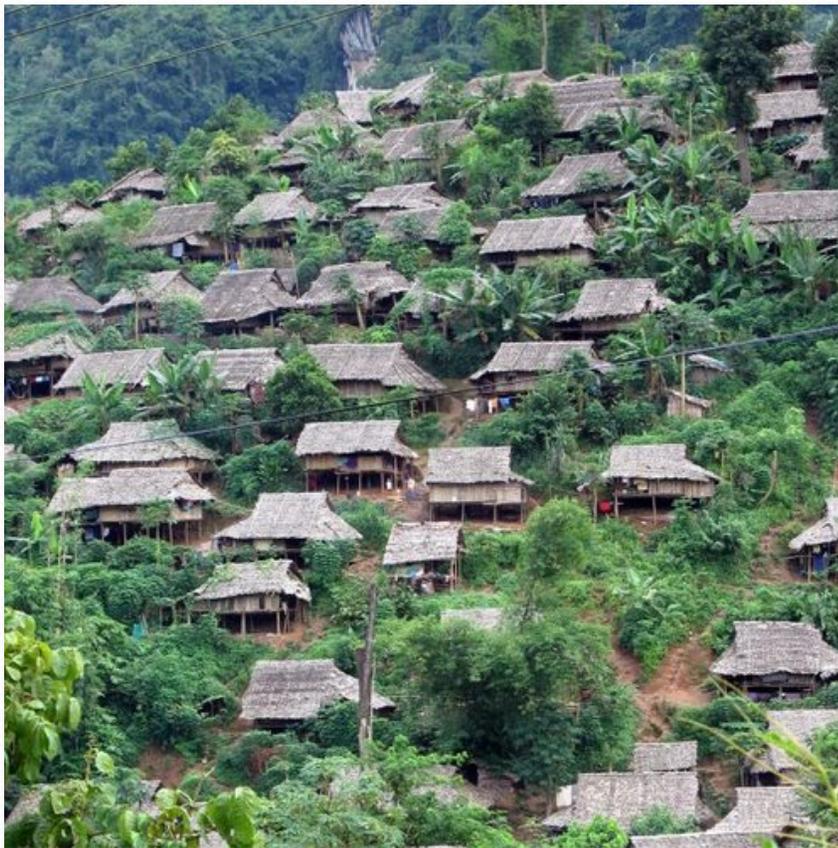
Melissa Fogg
Center on Violence against Women and Children
Rutgers University

Burma v. Myanmar

- 1978: Attained independence from the United Kingdom and was recognized as the “Union of Burma”
- 1989: Ruling military junta’s “State Law and Order Restoration Council” (SPDC) changed the country’s name to the “Union of Myanmar”
- The name “Myanmar” is not recognized by SPDC opposition groups or nations who do not recognize the legitimacy or authority of the ruling military government.



Mae La Refugee Camp, Thailand



Mae La is populated by approximately 43,000 refugees.



The Refugee Resettlement Process

**According to the United Nations 1951 Convention
on Refugees:**

"A refugee is a person who owing to a well founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, member in 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."



The Refugee Resettlement Process

Refugee resettlement is a voluntary process and a combined effort of the U.S. government and private non-profit organizations around the U.S.

1. Any refugee registered at a camp can apply for resettlement.
2. Applicants are approved after a series of interviews with the country's lead resettlement agency and the US Department of Homeland Security.
3. Once approved, they must complete a medical screening and "cultural orientation."
4. Refugees are distributed for resettlement among the ten National Voluntary Agencies that operate throughout the U.S.
5. All resettlement costs are free, with the exception of airfare.



Gender Analysis & I Sha

- Sha is a Muslim Burmese refugee woman who was resettled to Philadelphia in October 2007 from Mae La Refugee Camp in Mae Sot, Thailand.
- Her experiences are emblematic of many of the struggles faced by women in society and thematically linked to issues encountered in social work practice.

Biographical Information

- Sha was born in 1955 to a Muslim family of 8 children.
- Father died when she was 9 years old.
- Mother then sold Sha and siblings into slavery.
- Sha met her husband when she was 14 years old. He was 23.
- He saw Sha working and became obsessed with her. He later kidnapped her for marriage.



Biographical information

- Sha and her husband lived in a village of ethnic minorities until rumors spread that linked her husband to a group of soldiers.
- Her husband fled to Mae La refugee camp in Northern Thailand. Sha remained in the village with their children until it was raided.
- She fled with her children to Mae La camp, where her husband was living.
- Her husband was later murdered.





Biographical Information

- Sha vowed to never give her children away.
- Sha and her children lived in Mae La for fifteen years before resettling to Philadelphia in October of 2007.
- Her migration was marred by the exclusion of one of her sons who had been scheduled to migrate to the United States with his family.
- Sha actively mourns leaving her son and reflects on the experience as one of the greatest tragedies of her life



Feminist Perspective

- Social Work from a feminist perspective “locates the origins of women’s oppression in women’s lack of equal civil rights and opportunities as well as in tradition and learned psychology associated with sex-role socialization (Freeman 1998).”
- The culturally literate therapist must acknowledge the significance of race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and other variables in addition to gender as critical to the accurate understanding of people (Greene, 1994).

Feminist Perspective

- Feminist micropractice “offers a theory and practice that recognize the inseparability of the personal and political in the experience and transformation of oppression (Dietz, 2000).”
- Feminist work with survivors of abuse emphasizes the relationship between abuse and oppressive social relations, while clinical social work typically finds problem located in the victim (Dietz, 2000).
- Using a culturally-conscious feminist perspective with Sha acknowledged and authenticated her perceptions of oppression (Greene, 1994) while also highlighting her resilience, morals and survival skills.





Survival and Womanhood

Strength and Survival

- “I decided I would never prostitute and would never steal.”
- “I know that one day we will all die, but we have no choice – we have to survive.”

Obstacles

- “I am not strong anymore, I am sick and weak.”
- “I’ve been through a lot in my life, I’m still not out of the woods yet, my son is still in Thailand.”



Motherhood

“The core experiences of psychological trauma are disempowerment and disconnection from others. Recovery, therefore, is based on the empowerment of the survivor and the creation of new connections. Recovery can take place only within the context of relationships; it cannot occur in isolation.”
(Herman, 1992).

“I was a maid once and was abused. I was determined to not put my children through the same thing.”

“My mother did not understand or know much about how the world worked. She did not understand...she had to give away her children who could work. She kept the children who were very young. After my father passed away, she had no choice.”

“I suffered a lot and I didn’t want my children to go through what I did. That was the most important thing”

Violence



“You are like your family’s puppet. You cannot talk or defend yourself. You wear what rags they give you and eat when and how much they feed you” (on her servitude)

“He stole me...he carried me away...I wanted to return to my home...he saw what my life was at that house and wanted to save me.”

Religion



“Burmese people...they don't like Muslims. So there was always a fight between Burmese and Muslims”

“Many women have been abandoned by their religious communities to feel shame and isolation... Having a safe place to disclose is part of the healing process (Fortune, 2001).”

Resettlement

- "I was always dreaming about it. I heard that kids can go to school in the U.S., because I couldn't send them to school myself. And I know that if they come here they will get education that they cannot get in Burma."
- "Philadelphia is much better than I expected. I feel like my life is almost completed. I know that my children are getting a good education and life is much better than I would have hoped or expected. We have everything that we need or want."



Conclusions

“The experience of telling one’s story to an empathetic witness who validates the betrayal and pain of oppression and abuse is in itself a healing experience (Dietz, 2000).”



Though she continues to struggle with her health, depression, language barrier and innumerable other obstacles; it is certain that the story of Sha is one of spirit and strength.