

Reflections on research among Liberian refugees

by Linda Kreitzer

Phenomenology is concerned with the study of lived experiences, an endeavour to gain a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of everyday experiences through first-hand experience of the people being studied. When I decided to go to live in the Buduburam camp for Liberian refugees in Ghana I hoped to capture the experiences of refugee women and help redress the lack of documentation of their experiences through their own narratives.

I was introduced to the camp by two of my Liberian refugee students while teaching at the University of Ghana in 1995. The fact that Buduburam camp had been operating for seven years allowed an opportunity to look at refugee women's role in planning and implementing programmes over a long period. Aware of the vital need to develop relationships of trust among the people that one is researching, I obtained permission to live in the camp for four months. In retrospect I realize that a longer period would have been less stressful and would have allowed me to complete data analysis and get feedback from each interviewee. As it was, I worked seven days a week to conclude my interviews and provide each interviewee with a copy of their interview.

On arrival I was faced with three recurrent questions: What is your mission? How will your study help me in a practical way? Do you have any money? I tried to answer with honesty and sincerity. Once the refugees knew my reason for being in camp, I sensed a shift towards acceptance and recognition of my interest in learning about camp life and the contribution that women made to the camp programmes. I was the student and they were the experts. I lived in one simple room similar to the rooms of the refugees. I fetched water, rode local transport, ate in camp and bought most of my food supplies in camp. I socialized with people while walking the streets and usually had a drink with refugee friends at the local drinking spot. In every

way possible, I tried to integrate myself into camp life. Most refugees commented on and appreciated the fact that I was prepared to live with them, put up with the irregularity of electricity and drink the water they had to use.

As a female researcher I was aware of sexual harassment and gender stereotyping. Many of the women I lived among were subject to abuse from male refugees and camp staff. I realized that if I were to enter into an intimate relationship with either a refugee or member of camp staff it would have had a detrimental effect on the trusting relationships I had established, particularly with refugee women.

After preparing a transcript of each interview I would sit down with each interviewee and work through the transcript, making any changes that they felt were needed. Receiving a final version which they could keep meant a great deal to them for there was very little reading material in the camp and possessing their own personal refugee story was greatly appreciated.

Concerned that the output of my phenomenological research should not be confined to my thesis, I sent copies to a wide range of agencies and NGOs interested in women's issues. I hope that distribution of the thesis and related articles concerning the experiences of these women will lead to greater inclusion of women in planning and implementing programmes in refugee camps.

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