

Expectations of vulnerability in Australia

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The ability of refugees to gain admission to Australia is increasingly based on perceptions of helplessness, suffering and 'deservingness'. One consequence is that men in particular are marginalised following resettlement.

The rhetoric and policies of Australia's major political parties have sought to differentiate between refugees and asylum seekers. Asylum seekers are depicted as 'fake refugees', particularly because they do not 'mind the queue'. Their action (getting on a boat) is framed as an indication that they are not the most vulnerable but are capable economic migrants and hence undeserving of sanctuary. Actively excluding asylum seekers is therefore considered a necessary measure in order to provide adequate humanitarian assistance for resettling 'genuine' refugees, who have become synonymous with those living for protracted periods in refugee camps and coming to Australia through a managed programme.

After more than two decades in camps, the Bhutanese resettling in Australia represent a global elite of refugees who can access resettlement opportunities. The ability of refugees to gain admission is increasingly based on perceptions of helplessness, suffering and 'deservingness'. These expectations have had an impact on the way resettlement organisations, local service providers and the general public approached the Bhutanese once they were in Australia. In particular, Bhutanese refugee men (and, in particular, able-bodied men) were seen as vulnerable due to the trauma

stemming from past experiences, while women were considered vulnerable due to their gender roles. Men were consistently seen as a barrier to be overcome in order to realise the transformation of vulnerable female refugees into empowered women. These understandings and assumptions regarding the social role of women afforded men few pathways to move beyond their status of vulnerable (but still problematic) refugees.

Trauma morphed into a central feature, with both positive and negative effects, of male Bhutanese refugee identity in Australia. First and foremost, trauma and suffering marked them as deserving refugees and thus welcome in Australia. Several men told me it was important that Australians knew their story, their experiences of torture and the protracted time spent in camps.

"It is really essential for people in Australia to know our history because they will not have information about our background... For example, I have been involved in discrimination on the street. As I was walking along the street someone from a car shouted at me using foul language and they said "you Indian, go back to you country" and made a rude gesture. Therefore it is important." (Male, in his 20s)

Male interviewees believed that it was through suffering that their admission

into Australia was made credible. There was a clear attempt to distinguish themselves from asylum seekers whom the popular press and some political groups speculated were, in reality, economic migrants. One Bhutanese refugee who worked with recent arrivals explained:

"The label refugee is very important. It is very important because it makes people understand we are from refugee camps. It also means more support, support for torture victims." (Male, in his 30s)

Here, suffering in a refugee camp, coming through the correct resettlement process and reflecting the appropriate attributes of a refugee are all identified as significant to legitimise their presence in Australia.

Though participants recognised the potential positive aspects of the refugee label, they also expressed concern that people equated 'refugee' with a lack of capabilities or education. One participant explained, "people won't recognise the skills that we are bringing... people just think refugees are poor people without any skills." (Male, in his 30s). In addition, however, the Bhutanese community also recognised that the label enabled them to access resources that other migrants could not. At a very practical level, being traumatised is a recognised disability that brought with it additional financial support.

In this context, the refugee label was both a help in fostering acceptance by Australians and a hindrance. Male refugees interpreted the expectations that they encountered as hindering their ability to contribute beyond their status as a victimised group and recipients of help. They worried that while the understanding of suffering, trauma and vulnerability was central to mediating their interactions with the broader Australian population (because it helped people understand their journey to Australia), ultimately it undermined future aspirations. They worried that being a refugee would mean little hope of them being seen as equally capable as their Australian hosts.

One refugee man felt that refugee status undermined his ability to fulfil his

obligations to his family. This man was in his forties, had the equivalent of a high-school education, spoke English proficiently, and had held leadership roles in Bhutan and in the refugee camps. He now volunteered for a local resettlement organisation and hoped to one day find gainful employment but did not think this was a realistic aspiration. He pinned his hopes instead on his daughter, who would outgrow her status as a refugee and be able to aspire towards being a contributing member of Australian society. He, on the other hand, found himself without a role beyond being "a refugee the government is helping".

The worries of this generation of men, roughly between the ages of twenty and sixty, also highlighted the different reception of men and women. Once resettled, women were expected to expand their social roles with the help of various service providers who ran numerous programmes with the explicit goal of empowering women. The Bhutanese women participated in a myriad of activities to improve their spoken English and take leadership roles in public situations, and were encouraged to pursue work outside the home. The implicit assumption



Bhutanese refugees resettled to Adelaide, South Australia.

February 2017

www.fmreview.org/resettlement

was that women were vulnerable due to the group's culture. While there were vigorous efforts by service providers to change the role of female Bhutanese, it was felt that men's vulnerability was due to past events and could therefore not be changed.

As women found themselves increasingly expected to be socially active and perhaps even employed (although generally in part-time or casual work), men became entrenched in the domestic sphere. Childcare is expensive in Australia and the cultural norms of the group necessitate a considerable amount of labour each day to prepare food. In this context, it is difficult for dual-earning households to function. One man in his early thirties explained his changing role:

"I used to be a teacher in the camps but here I cannot find a job. Normally, my wife would take care of the children but she found a job – our neighbour helped her. Now, I volunteer but I am mostly the house minder now. I take my girls to school and keep everything running." (Male, in his 30s)

For most men, this was a profound change from the camps where they dominated schools as teachers and the camp's internal management structure. Several men who were farmers reflected that before arriving in Australia, they had aspired to own farms akin to the ones they had in Bhutan. Owning a farm promised self-sufficiency, autonomy and status. Now they were living in Adelaide, however, they did not think owning a farm would be possible due both to cost and the urban setting. Others, particularly those with college degrees, hoped for employment commensurate

with their qualifications. A few men have been able to move into paid employment (mostly with organisations which facilitate refugee resettlement) but these were viewed as exceptional achievements.

Paid employment is not the only pathway towards social status either in Australia more broadly or for the Bhutanese specifically. However, the men I spoke to consistently highlighted the value of paid work. "Eating another man's sweat" through social welfare payments was not considered a desirable way to live. Further, without a robust post-resettlement programme to reinforce the positive aspects of men looking after the domestic sphere it is unlikely that these shifting gender roles will be straightforward.

Conclusion

While trauma can have a powerful legitimising effect, it also reinforces refugees' status as primarily victims and can thereby have a negative impact on their ability to engage with the broader population. By expecting widespread trauma, Australia effectively views a large section of the refugee population as impaired; as such, they are not expected to participate in Australia. Crucially, assuming that deserving refugee men are traumatised and thus incapable may function to transform them from political, economic and social actors, and potential participants in Australia more broadly, into semi-functional dependents.

This is not to suggest that refugees should stop receiving assistance. Rather, a strict migration policy that focuses on suffering and trauma leads to particular forms of assistance that, rather than integrating refugees into citizenry, may cause further alienation from mainstream Australia as dependent, lesser citizens. My interviewees saw themselves as much more capable than this.

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This article is based on research with Bhutanese refugees in Australia between 2012 and 2014.

