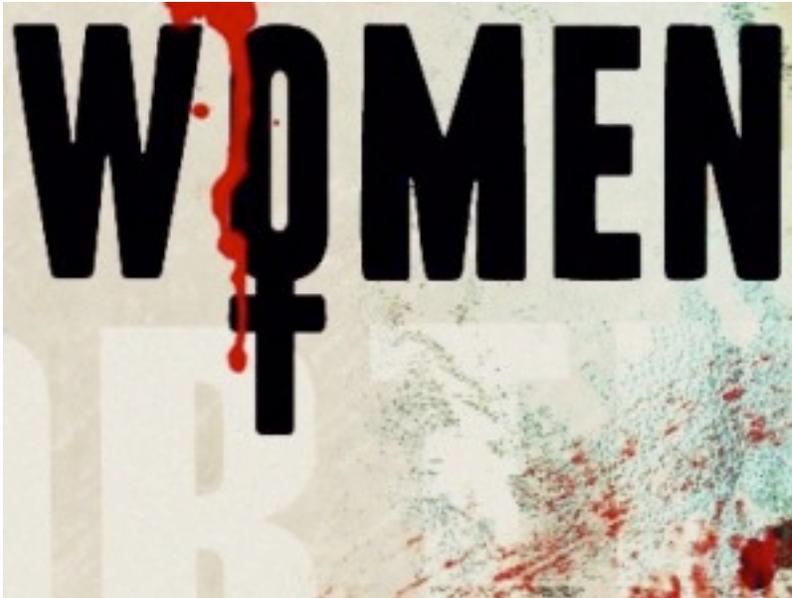


WOMEN AND TORTURE



Of the 23 million refugees around the world today, the majority are women and girls, a forgotten majority who constitute more than three-quarters of the world's refugee population. Of these a large number will have experienced torture, or will have family and friends who have been tortured or killed.

Women who are tortured because of their political activities often suffer special degradations at the hands of their male torturers. They may also be persecuted by authorities in order to gain information about relatives' activities.

Often women suffer inhumane treatment by authorities in order to get at their family, since violence against women can humiliate men who have been brought up to see their role as that of protecting women in the family.

Once in Canada, women carry a heavy load. If they are alone, they suffer the despair of isolation, having lost almost everything, including those people they loved and relied upon. They

then have to make a new life in an alien culture where the rules and expectations for women are often totally different from those they are used to.

Women who are single parents often sacrifice themselves so that their children can succeed. Their stories are often untold since refugee claims are based on their partner's stories and their own experiences are not given attention.

For women who live with their spouses, the re-establishment of the male breadwinner is usually the first priority, along with the needs of the children. If women have to become the breadwinners in traditionally patriarchal families, they will be faced with a conflict in roles and expectations.

Many children have witnessed the torture, rape, or even killing of family members. The burden of their emotional support falls on women. Men also need their wives for support in dealing with their memories of torture and trauma. Many women who have suffered rape also have to carry the burden of shame felt by their husbands since their ordeals.

The following is only a small part of one Latin American woman's experience. She and her husband were part of a resistance movement supporting the poor, factory workers, and peasants, many of the women were indigenous people.

The door opened suddenly and I was dragged in by my hair and the police started abusing and hitting me. I felt I was dying. Suddenly I realized I had an important letter with me and, though I don't know how, I ate it surreptitiously when their attention was elsewhere.

The military officers hit me so hard in the face that they dislocated my jaw and it became swollen and extremely painful. Then they put me under bright lights and took my picture and threw me into a tiny cell with twenty women and children of all ages and classes. I was moved to another prison with a hood over my head and beaten as lay on the floor of the vehicle. They threatened me with torture and sexually abused and humiliated me.

Then I started lying. They threw me in a cell with an Indian woman who had nothing to do with politics. Only her husband and son had been involved, but she and most of the women had been badly and repeatedly raped. But the worst torture throughout was thinking of my children and of the guilt about them. They were threatening to burn and torture them in front of me.

They must have realized my terror of darkness because they put me in black cells where there were no blankets and it was just wet and cold. They shut me in with the insects and I banged my head on the wall and screamed and cried and did destructive things to myself and wanted to die. (Still when I get distressed I find I bang my head on the wall. It all seems to come back to me.)

I wanted to kill myself then and I still feel violent towards myself today. They stubbed a burning cigarette into my arm, they pulled me by the hair until chunks of it fell out. Then they released me and put me under house arrest at my parent's place with armed guards. To this day the children are very quiet. They don't want to talk about home. They are often naughty and torment the cat. The eldest one won't show his emotions and I'm afraid he's mixing with a bad crowd at school that takes drugs.

When we moved into our house here, it was so dark for me too, like prison, so my husband put in extra windows. To this day I feel guilty. I have sweating nightmares and feel hatred towards people. I cry so easily and feel anxious. But who wasn't damaged by those days? Everybody was.

- Torture and Trauma, by I. Reid and T. Strong