Chapter 24

Social Work with Refugee Women: Narrative and “Empowerment”

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter on resettlement social work with women refugees, they are portrayed as resilient yet reluctant users of social work services. While the field of social work with refugees has already been widely introduced and discussed, less attention has been paid to resettlement work with women refugees. In order to contextualise this discussion, key terms are briefly defined, and relevant legislation together with demographic features are covered. The chapter includes a case study, presented by one of the authors, herself an expert by experience. We present open source as well as current research published in academic journals relating to this field of practice. Research methods and ethical issues including practice dilemmas associated with the concept of empowerment are discussed. Practical applications and cultural concerns derived from the research suggest how practitioners and refugee women may work together using participatory methods to draw on the strengths and experience of the refugee women to achieve goals which are consistent with those set out by the United Nations High Commission.

INTRODUCTION

Lareen, Mary and Antoinette have worked together to enhance this version of a previous chapter (Nash & Umugwaneza, 2015) bearing in mind that the new emphasis required an additional focus on research methods and the latest thinking in this field.

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Lareen has updated the literature for this chapter. A key word search through the Massey University library Discover tool focused on material published after 2010 using the following search terms: women refugee/s, empowerment, narrative work, intimate partner abuse, domestic violence, risk assessment and resettlement. No claim is made to comprehensive coverage and this iterative process snowballed as it progressed. Material was selected for its usefulness to this study and in particular about resettlement women and others. In many of the articles cited, the research methods used were predominantly based on a variety of forms of participation and narrative. In the original article, key words and terms used in the literature search included “refugees”, “women refugees”, “social work with refugees”, “women and human rights”, “refugee resettlement”, and “resilience”.

Mary has previously researched the experiences of social workers in New Zealand working with refugees and migrants. Antoinette came to NZ as a refugee and is now working as a caseworker supporting refugee resettlement.

The International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW, 2012) reminds us that the “issues surrounding refugees are matters of justice and peace. Social workers in the vast majority of countries will be required to address the problems facing refugees in their practice” (para. 4). Potocky-Tripodi (2002) has argued that “Social work practice with refugees and immigrants requires specialised knowledge of the unique issues of these populations” (p. 3). Without this knowledge, we consider that resettlement support work will be jeopardised. It is therefore surprising to note a number of recent publications that fail to distinguish systematically between asylum seekers and refugees, despite the fact that social workers must inevitably practice in accordance with the legislation of their country, which most certainly provides quite differently for these two categories of people (Verwilgen, M., de Mol, J., Broekaert, E. & Derluyn, L. 2014. Maggie O’Neill. 2010).

There is a broad consensus in the statistics cited by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 1990) that

... refugee women represent, either as single women or with their dependents, approximately 80 per cent of the UNHCR’s target population and that programmes can be effective only if they are planned with an adequate understanding of, and consultation with, this group. (p. 7)

While the field of social work with refugees has already been widely introduced and discussed in the literature, less attention has been paid to resettlement work with either women refugees, or more specifically single or widowed refugees with children. It was interesting to note how often, when searching documents on-line, the word “women” failed to turn up, suggesting that it is timely to focus on women refugees and how they manage the issues involved in, and the processes of, resettlement. The latest articles we have reviewed also make reference to the dearth of research that has studied refugees through a gendered lens. For example, Verwilgen et al observe that ‘exact figures for unaccompanied refugee mothers are non-existent world-wide.’ (2014, P2024)

This chapter, therefore, approaches the topic of resettlement social work with a focus on women refugees and their rights to citizenship and participation in society, and through the case study portrays them as resilient yet reluctant users of social work services. We recognise that women refugees comprise a diverse group, from different cultural and religious backgrounds and with different levels of education. Some women are responsible for dependent children or other family members, others are accompanied by their husbands and all will have their own experiences of grief and trauma. This chapter will move, therefore, from a discussion of human rights to a micro and applied perspective in which women refugees and their daily concerns as new settlers are considered.