

Crossing Borders: Latin American refugee mothers reunited with their children in the United States

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Oregon Health and Science University Torture Treatment Center of Oregon



At Centro Latino Americano
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Torture Treatment Center at Oregon Health and Science University

- The main mission of the program is to help refugees and political asylum seekers from countries ravaged by war. We assist them to recover from the effects of war, trauma and torture.

Intercultural Psychiatric Program

- Serves 17 language groups from countries such as Afghanistan, Bosnia, Cameroon, Cambodia, the Congo, Central and South America, Ethiopia, Iran, Iraq, Laos, Liberia, Pakistan, Rwanda, former Soviet Union, Sierra Leone, Sudan, Somalia, Togo, and Vietnam.
- It is one of the few cross-cultural mental health programs in the nation.



Torture Treatment Center of Oregon in Eugene

- A bilingual and bicultural mental health program dedicated to survivors of torture and political violence from Central and South America.

United Nations Definition of Refugee

- A person who has the well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion; is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.

Refugees

- 20 million people have been displaced from their countries.
- 24 million have been displaced internally.

Refugees and Gender Considerations



Refugees and Gender Considerations

- The tendency has been to visualize a refugee as a male but it is widely recognized that women constitute more than half of the world's refugee population.
- Gender-specific harm and experiences may go unreported.

Asylum Process

- Latinos do not have the legal status of refugees only as asylum seekers. They do not have benefits that other ethnics group could get under the status of refugee.
- Latinos need to be informed about their rights and the process of applying for political asylum.

Legal Advocates and Mental Health Providers

- A partnership has been developed with Lane County Legal Aid and with Immigration Counseling Services in Portland.
- The clinical documentation helps in the processes of seeking political asylum.

Recounting Trauma Experiences



Recounting Traumatic Experiences in the Judicial System

- Becomes a new and very intense stressor to female clients in their process of applying for political asylum.
- The pressure to convince the authorities of the genuine danger faced by the individual and family generally has a negative emotional impact.

Pre Migratory Experiences



Pre-Migratory Experiences

- Female clients report include but are not limited to domestic violence before and after displacement, rapes or sexual humiliation in the situation of armed conflict.
- Many women reported experience of domestic violence, the combination of domestic violence and sexual assault or sexual assault.

Pre-Migratory Experiences

- Forced disappearances of family members
- Rapes
- Murder of family and friends
- Forced separation of family
- Torture
- Loss of home and community

Migratory Experiences



Migratory Experiences

- Lack of water and food
- Long journeys of displacement
- Exposure to assaults and abuse
- Deportation
- Detentions

Post Migratory Experiences



Post Migratory Experiences

- Women, experience a dramatic shift in their roles in the family and the society.
- Low income jobs are the first form of/step to economic integration into the host country.
- Cultural shock is accompanied by worries for their family and children left behind.

Motherhood and Forced Displacement



Motherhood and Forced Displacement

- A need to reframe family projects, restructure relationships and keeping their traditional roles from the distance.
- Mothers leave their children behind with the hope of reuniting with them in the near future.

Motherhood and Forced Displacement

- Mothering from afar implies long distance strategies of love and care such as making weekly phone calls, sending presents, letters, and videos.
- These mothers work one, two, sometimes three jobs, and still assume the responsibility of supervising their children's care from a distance.

Therapeutic Process



Therapeutic Process

- They declare dear love for their children.
- Feeling great uncertainty about reunification.
- Enraged by their traumatic experiences in their country of origin.
- They express feelings of powerlessness, and are ashamed by the decision to leave the country and their children.
- Guilty and with abysmal psychological pain, they often have a sense of hopelessness.

Granted Asylum



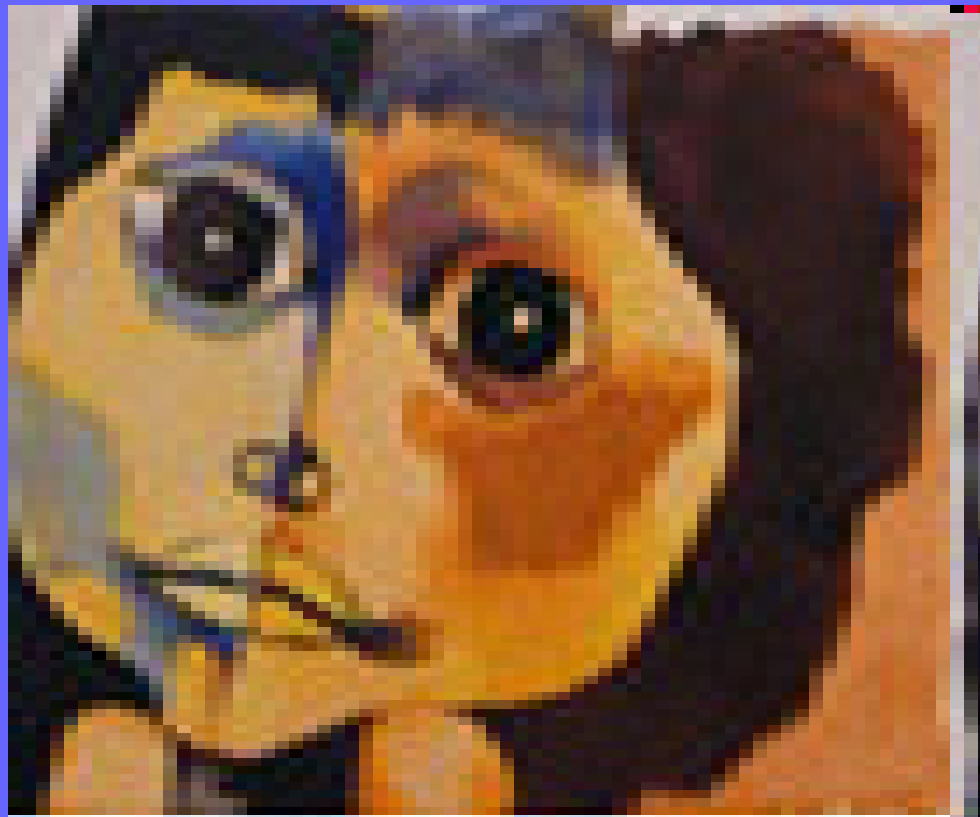
Granted Asylum

- An extreme quantity of energy is demanded to start the family reunification.
- Letters and calls to family members asking to get the documentation required.
- Families are in rural or low income areas with no experience in maneuvering the legal system—which is often very bureaucratic.

Granted Asylum

- Children express conflict in traveling to the U.S.A.
- These experiences bring conflicts with their caregivers, grandmothers, aunts and uncles, whom for years have depended on the money sent by the mothers.

Effects on Children



Effects on Children

- Thinking about the family, where their parents are, whether are they are going to see them.
- Difficulties at school caused by concentration and learning problems.
- Children could be vulnerable to delinquency and early pregnancy because the amount of time the child spent on the street and lack of parental guidance.

Reunification



Reunification

- Reunification can be complicated by children adapted to a new family dynamic.
- Children of immigrants that are apart from their mothers and fathers may feel abandoned and respond by detaching from the parent that left them (Schmalzbauer, 2004; Suárez-Orozco, et al, 2002; Levitt, 2001)

Reunification

- Children expressing a sense of abandonment and questioning their mothers for facing alone some hard moments of life.
- Children constantly express how much they miss their friends and caretakers.
- Children have to learn another language, get adapted to the school system where sometimes they face discrimination.

Negotiating Family Dynamics



Negotiating Family Dynamics

- Mothers have to spend many hours out of the home working and they do not know how to relate to the school system, feeling that they are neglecting their children again.
- Mothers and children find that they have grown apart and recognize that they did not know each other well.

Negotiating Family Dynamics

- It takes energy to learn to live together and accept each other again.
- This adjustment occurs after a period of instability and negotiations about the expectations that they had before reuniting.

Clinical Approach



Clinical Approach

- The social construct of motherhood has evolved to an idealistic concept that is now in conflict with the realities of forced migration.
- We continue in the process of assisting refugee mothers and children to conceptualize and address their positions within the family before and after the relocation in the host country.

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