

THE REFUGEE EXPERIENCE

You must not lose faith in humanity. Humanity is an ocean; if a few drops of the ocean become dirty, the ocean does not become dirty.

Mahatma Gandhi

The refugee experience is generally described as three stages: ‘before, during and after’ or ‘pre-flight, flight and post-flight’ (Hanson and Vogel 2012). Papadopoulos (2002) identifies four, making a distinction in the pre-flight stage between the time before the violence, that he calls ‘anticipation’, and the actual violence, that he terms ‘devastating events’; and names ‘flight and post-flight’ as ‘survival and integration’ respectively. We have found this four-phase model to be invaluable in identifying both trauma as well as resilience and strengths throughout each phase of a refugee’s journey (Papadopoulos 2007).

Our work with refugees seeking asylum in a host country has been informed by their commonly held emotional responses linked to what is happening at each phase. Namely, apprehension at the prospect of losing their homeland which turns to terror during the actual persecution that forces them to leave. Then hope (of permanent safety) and fear (of a return to persecution) in a temporary sanctuary during the asylum process. Finally, relief when granted refugee status that allows them to rebuild their home in a safe country, yet with sadness as they realise that they may never see their homeland again. We refer to these as: Homeland Phase of Apprehension, Persecution Phase of Terror, Asylum Phase of Hope and Fear, and Rebuilding Phase of Relief with Sadness.

Homeland Phase of Apprehension

Mahdi was a respected elder in the village where he was born and brought up, before war broke out in his country. He was married and

they had four children, one son and three daughters. When the war started, Mahdi recalls how they lived in disbelief for five months, constantly listening to the radio in anticipation of the restoration of law and order. Their village supplies of food and electricity were discontinued after four months of fighting, which is when his wife and three daughters fled to a neighbouring country. Mahdi and his son decided to remain behind in order to protect their properties and land.

He said, 'I didn't think the war was going to be serious. I hesitated to make decisions and I did not want to show my family that I was afraid. I did not have enough money to pay for their escape and I could not imagine separating my family. We had always lived together. It was only because of lack of food and electricity that it seemed right that my wife and daughters should go somewhere safe. We could not all afford to leave and I was still reluctant to go. Because of this I didn't say a proper goodbye to my wife and daughters, as I presumed it was just for a short while and they could return to us.'

Mahdi reflected, 'I was also worried about my parents. My youngest sister was looking after them but she is a woman and may not be well equipped to protect them.'

In Priathan's case, she had lived for many months in the apprehension phase. She had first heard about the conflict in her country on the news. When neighbours began to talk about people they knew personally becoming involved, Priathan felt scared; yet she also remembered other times of difficulty that had come and gone, and which she had safely lived through.

Priathan reflected, 'This was the country where I was born, got married and raised my two children. It had never been perfect but we all managed to have a good life. Even when my husband became involved politically, I saw this as positive at the time. I believed that if enough people stood up to protest against the cruelty of the authorities towards its people, they would realise they could not get away with it and stop.'

As a woman, Priathan knew her place when it came to politics. She believed this was a male domain and it would be a disgrace for a woman to share her opinions or have a view on what might be going on, let alone suggest any solutions. She also knew of a woman who was persecuted because she spoke up against the government regime.

'She should have known better. Football and politics belong to men and I have no interest in either,' Priathan added.

Persecution Phase of Terror

Mahdi reflected on his experiences as the war continued in his country.

At this time, Mahdi and a few other community men had identified a safe underground shelter where they took their parents for safety. Although it was crowded and had no windows, at least it would protect them for a while until the country was stable again.

‘The government was losing control and the rebels were closing in,’ he explained. ‘My son was called to help the government fight on the frontline, while I took up the role of hiding and supplying weapons of war to the frontline. Unfortunately, while supplying weapons, I was arrested by the rebels. I was held in a small dark room for five days. The rebels tried to elicit information from me by torturing me. My head was submerged in dirty water and they burned me on my thighs with cigarettes. In the end, I submitted and disclosed sensitive information on a hideout location of senior government officials. After two days, I was being transferred to another location. Fortunately, during transportation, there was a missile attack in which the bus was hit and, in the commotion, I was able to escape.’

‘I went back to the site where my son was fighting and discovered that he had been killed in action. Devastated by the death of my son, my betrayal of the government and the impending danger of persecution, I feared for my life and I had no choice but to flee the country through the first available exit route, which gave me no time to find out where my wife and three daughters had fled. I fled and at the same time part of me resisted going, not knowing what lay ahead in the direction I was taking or if it was a safe route to escape. My life was in tatters, I found myself all alone.’

For Priathan, recollecting this phase of persecution was extremely distressing. It was two weeks since her husband disappeared. There were rumours that he had joined the rebels to fight the government-controlling regime to bring change in the country, and this created fear for the family. She had withdrawn her children from school for fear of being harassed along the way.

Soon after this, the government started sending agents to suspected homesteads looking for such rebels or government opponents. Those who were found were arrested for protesting against their regime and such people were tortured or risked a death penalty.

‘I could not have imagined they would react with such violence. It was only when I realised that the security forces were prepared to

kill me that I made the decision to leave. I had made no plan, and therefore I had no idea of where I was going or how to get there. I was totally unprepared.'

'They tore my clothes,' Priathan stated, looking down and explained what happened when security forces came to her home after her husband was arrested for political activism. She continued, 'They wanted more information about my husband's political involvement, but I did not know any more than I had already told them.' Priathan's shoulders slumped, 'I then realised that, for the sake of my children, I had to leave my country.'

Although Priathan was not a political activist and did not consider herself to be part of the problem, she soon realised that she carried her husband's sins and was equally at risk of persecution for his activities.

This realisation of being in mortal danger, and having to fight, hide, and/or flee marks the second phase: the Persecution Phase of Terror.

Even when living in apprehension for months, or even years, if it becomes clear that to remain will carry the risk of being tortured or killed, people take the actual decision to leave their homeland in an instant. Like Priathan and Mahdi, most people live in denial that they are not safe and partly in hope that things will get better.

Additionally, their country is the place in which they have been raised, developed their self-identity and their status and made other significant attachments. The thought of leaving everything they own behind and walking out into the unknown can be extremely frightening and traumatic. Therefore, when the decision is made to leave, it frequently occurs in haste and *without a plan of where to go and how to get there*, or with sufficient resources to fund the journey.

Asylum Phase of Hope and Fear

The third phase begins when a refugee has to leave their home. Loss of 'home' in this case means many things, including a person's house, country, culture, environment, friends and family.

Priathan reflected on the moment that she reluctantly waved her father and mother-in-law goodbye. She did not shake their hands or hug them, as she was too angry and, at the same time, fearful. She did not want to go and yet she did not have a choice. From an early age, she had been dedicated to caring for her parents and when she

got married this included her mother-in-law; however, due to the acts of violence and threat to her life she was no longer able to fulfil this commitment. Such a huge shift in one's purpose in life can be experienced as an overwhelming loss that can impact dramatically on a refugee's self-identity.

Priathan stated, 'I had not discussed with my daughters about what was going on; I could see in their eyes how fearful they were and I was not ready to speak about the danger we were in. I had already paid some smugglers to collect us at night as we did not want our neighbours to know.'

In Mahdi's case the decision to leave his homeland was deeply painful and eroded his self-identity as the protector of his family. He was forced to leave behind all that had made him what he was, his primary role having been to provide for and protect his family. This had now been compromised and he too became a victim of the conflict and war in his country. When crossing through the neighbouring country, he was questioned about his identity by border guards and had to keep his ethnicity secret for fear of further persecution. He stayed in a refugee camp and although water, food, shelter and first aid were available, there was a lack of safety and he witnessed women and children being abused. He felt powerless to protect them, which triggered more fear for his family. This made him more determined to risk crossing the sea into Europe, hoping he would be able to get help to find his family.

Mahdi reflected on his journey, 'I travelled at night and hid during the days along the danger zones. I had to pay and negotiate my way with ruthless and powerful people smugglers. At times, I was vulnerable and had to compromise my dignity for survival. I witnessed various abuses along the way and I helped the weaker ones to keep going. It took me three months before I ended up in Europe without my family and I applied for safety as a refugee.'

This third phase involves a journey, most often to an unknown location by air, land and/or sea. The journey usually involves risk, is often lengthy and, for the whole duration, is outside the protection of any government. This puts refugees at risk of many types of abuse and exploitation.

Priathan was given money by her ailing father for her escape. She felt heartbroken to leave her father behind in such a vulnerable state but he had insisted that she needed to protect her daughters.

Priathan paid an agent and travelled in the back of a truck with her two children.

‘It took many, many days. I don’t know how many exactly, because we were sealed inside a metal container without any windows. Two men came in with torches every time the truck stopped and brought water and some food for my children.’

Priathan’s eyes widened and her voice became hushed, ‘They took me to the other side of the container while my children ate.’ She appeared frozen and fell silent. ‘I prayed silently and constantly. I have always observed our spiritual rituals from my young age but this time I did not feel worthy of God’s grace because I felt dirty and had no water to wash myself.’

Priathan had been briefed on the risks of being caught by authorities at various checkpoints, but she was not prepared for what she had to endure throughout the journey, including compromising her dignity by tolerating sexual abuse in order to reach safety.

As Mahdi’s and Priathan’s stories demonstrate, the journey to escape can be every bit as dangerous and terrifying as the events in their homeland that cause people to flee. Though she had paid them, Priathan experienced the same type of sexual abuse from the people smugglers as she had from the government agents. Indeed, it is frequently the case that smugglers target and exploit refugees before they reach safety and claim asylum in the host country. In Mahdi’s case, besides having to deal with people smugglers, he also faced many other physical risks. He endured sleeping rough and walking long distances, and risked his life in an overcrowded boat to cross the sea. When Mahdi claimed asylum, he needed serious medical treatment. He was dehydrated, had an injury from being attacked by an animal while hiding in woodland and had broken his ribs during a storm while on the boat.

On arrival in some host countries, when a person fleeing persecution in their homeland claims asylum, they are given protection under the laws of that land that includes subsistence, food and shelter. However, unless they are granted refugee status, this protection is temporary. If the host country refuses their asylum claim, for example because their case has not been found credible or the country they fled is deemed safe enough, the asylum seeker will be at risk of being removed to their homeland.

Priathan’s case, which was made on the grounds of political opinion, was initially refused on the basis that she was not able to

demonstrate a ‘well-founded fear of being persecuted or being at risk of persecution or “serious harm” and that the state had failed to protect her’ (see UN General Assembly 1951, article 1, A.2). Her refusal letter did not reflect her experience or the psychological and physical impact on her but rather reflected more about her husband who had actively opposed the government. As such, she was deemed to be safe in other parts of the country where she could easily relocate.

‘I don’t understand this process, surely they must know that as a single woman who has been sexually abused, I will be ostracised by my community for having brought dishonour to my family,’ she said.

Although Priathan’s fear of persecution was clear in her thought process, she had presumed the abuse by her community was common knowledge and had not found it necessary to share such details on her asylum claim. She was extremely fearful to return to her country of origin because she was certain that she would be persecuted. Being in such a dilemma is common, as highlighted in research commissioned by the Refugee Council (McIntyre 2012).

With the support of the practitioner, Priathan was able to connect with her own needs and presented her case more articulately to evidence the fear as directly related to her. She also got a lawyer who listened empathically and understood her from her frame of reference. She made a new statement focused more on her experiences and the breaches to her human rights. Priathan was able to put her case in perspective, noting that on her first application she had focused on her husband’s political activities as the base for her claim rather than on her own well-founded fear of being ostracised by the community for bringing dishonour as a result of her sexual abuse by government agents. Her lawyer supported her to make a fresh asylum application under gender-based violence on the grounds of being a member of a particular social group, which is also in line with the 1951 Refugee Convention (Hathaway 1991).

The timeframe for an asylum claim to be concluded varies from case to case, and complex cases can take a long time. Throughout this time, the asylum seeker remains in limbo. They live with the fear of being returned to their home country, potentially to face persecution, as well as the uncertainty of life in a new land. Once they are granted refugee status, the fourth and final phase of the refugee experience begins.

Rebuilding Phase of Relief with Sadness

This rebuilding phase is the point at which an asylum seeker is granted refugee status that provides protection in the host country. While this brings great relief, the label of being a refugee has its own connotations in relation to the social-political attitude and support system in place in the host country. Issues like inequalities in accessing services and limited specialist services to promote refugee mental wellbeing play a significant role in the refugee's ability to integrate.

Now that the fear of being returned to persecution is over, the realisation that they have lost their 'home' also opens a mourning process involving multiple losses.

Mahdi reflected, 'I have lost everything I built with my own hands, such as the family home we lived in. I hold my role as a father and husband in high regard. I had a great traditional wedding where I promised my parents-in-law that I would always care for and protect my family above everything else. However, I have now lost my son in the war and I do not know if I shall ever be reunited with my family in the future. Although I am walking, I feel like an empty shell inside.'

One would imagine that when refugees are granted status in the host country, it would be easier to start rebuilding their life without fear of persecution. However, as Mahdi's case shows, at times this is far from reality. While most of their external and practical needs are met within the support system, the psychological disruption becomes more evident. This is often the case mainly because before being granted refugee status, most refugees are highly anxious and preoccupied with the fear of being returned as they pursue their asylum claim. Once refugee status is granted, they drop the psychological guard that has kept them emotionally stable until that point. This allows their repressed feelings from all they have been through to surface, which, combined with the loss of 'home', is overwhelming as refugees are stripped of multiple elements that define who they are. These include tangible factors such as country, culture, community, friends and family in addition to intangible factors like the weather, harvest time and rituals. All these can cause bereavement and shatter one's identity. Eisenbruch (1990, 1991) termed the loss of things that give meaning to life as cultural bereavement.

LEARNING ACTIVITIES

Think of a time you had a dramatic change in your life, e.g. marriage, new career, new baby, death, divorce.

- What was this experience like?
- What resources did you call upon to cope?
- What did you learn about yourself?