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Negotiating Nationalism: Women's Narratives of Forced Displacement

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Introduction

This chapter is based on interviews with women from the Great Lakes region (predominantly from the Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, Uganda and Burundi) who were asylum seekers living in Johannesburg, South Africa.¹ My analysis reads these narratives as a reflection of the ways in which women asylum seekers (re)construct their sense of self through engagement with broader social and political discourses on forced migration and national identification. The reading is framed strongly within the boundaries of the popular discourse on asylum policy and legislation. This popular discourse involves clear distinctions between the sides of the conflict, and each woman places herself within one of these clear categories. It is the narrative of a stable, coherent self, free from contradiction: one largely required by the asylum process. I will argue that it is also a narrative that distinguishes clearly between public (political) and the private (personal) acts of violence—a mythical division inherent to nationalist rhetoric.²

Another subtext within these narratives, however, shows the multiplicity of identity and how shifting social conditions generate and are themselves redefined by these identities. This paper explores these sub-texts in relation to the ways in which women have been positioned within national discourses (and related discourses on asylum) both internationally and in South Africa. This discussion is intended to frame a particular reading of these women's explanations of how the war affected them and other women and how it continues to affect services offered to forcibly displaced women.

Women, nationalism and forced displacement

The notion that history is dynamic and changing is not new (see for example, Venn 1984). Recently, a great deal of attention has been paid to the ways in which historical events are viewed through the lens of present-day events and experiences, which result in shifting meaning and significance being attached to them (e.g., Corry and Terre Blanche 2000; Gavey 2002). From this perspective, historical events are discursively constructed through a process of bringing some aspects of social reality into sight whilst concealing others (see Parker 1992, 2002). National identity is rooted in these processes of reconstructing history and plays a role in the versions of history that become available as well as being shaped by such histories.

Nations, and national identity, are systems of cultural representation whereby people come to identify with an imaginary, extended community. They are historically produced practices through which social difference is invented and performed (McKlintock 1990; Ranger 1983). The invention and enactment of nationalist mythology requires elaborate systems for the identification of categories of people and the maintenance of 'pure' identity (see for example, Malkki 1995). Thus systems of identifying those inside and outside the system of identification are developed as an imaginary but powerful belief in a shared and common identity.

One of the central ways in which national rhetoric is maintained is through the control of reproduction and the entrenchment of gender relations. National discourse has rested on an artificial construction of a public/private divide in which gender relations are placed in opposition to one another with women being remembered and celebrated for their nurturing and care-giving (i.e., private) roles. They are frequently celebrated as the ones responsible for transmitting values and cultural norms through their role in the socialisation of children. As emblems of national identity, women's bodies are the site for the creation and nurturing of values specific to the national project (Bhaba and Shutter 1994). It is ironic that, in spite of this, sexual violence in times of armed conflict has often been seen as a 'private' crime and, therefore, not as legitimate grounds for asylum applications for women (see, for example, Spijkerboer 2001). In addition, constructed histories of common descent have resulted in the sometimes violent control over women's bodies as witnessed in the use of rape as a strategy of war and the symbolic destruction of women's reproductive systems (Malkki 1995).

The control of sexual and familial relationships is central to the nationalist project and was key to the experiences of the women interviewed in this research. Elsewhere (Palmary 2003) I have argued that one of the consequences, of this rigid and mythical association of women with the private

sphere is that their political involvement, as well as the torture and violence (such as rape and sexual violence) that they suffer, is often not recognised as political at all, rather, it is seen as inter-personal violence or individual crime. This division between 'private crimes' and 'political wars' is one that has been challenged more broadly by Simpson (2002, 2003) in his analysis of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission. It is, however, also relevant to this specific case. Nationalism, and the conflict that it facilitates, is legitimised by the artificial representation of women as rooted in the private sphere. Thus, resistance to the recognition of women's political activity can be understood because of its potential to erode the legitimacy of conflict, that is, the protection of the 'women and children' (Yuval-Davis 1990). This is a rhetoric that permits war precisely because of the representation of women as frail, passive and embedded in the private sphere. This representation is what Jackson (in Dowler 1998) refers to as misogyny in the guise of chivalry.

However, nationalisms are seldom uncontested and national identity has, in many instances, been a site of contestation and resistance. As noted by Henriques et al. (2002: 428), 'Power is always exercised in relation to resistance, though a question is left about the equality of forces'. Along these lines, women have attempted to create counter-narratives that challenge these nationalist representations and create new possibilities for women to reframe their experiences and challenge dominant discourses. Most commonly, this has involved re-writing women's activities into history and highlighting their political accomplishments (see for example, Thurshen and Twagiramariya 1998; Fenster 1998). However, because of the centrality of women in justifying conflict, women's transgression of the gender norms created and reproduced through nationalist discourse has often been met with severe penalties and violent repression. One respondent in this research explained how men who had been involved in fighting the war could remarry and create a new life after the conflict. Women who had been involved in violence, she said, would not be desirable as a wife. Similarly, other authors have also noted (e.g., Dowler 1998) how women who have been involved in armed conflict are seen as tainted, rather than being celebrated as heroes like their male counterparts.

Africa has seen a surge of nationalisms and counter-nationalisms. The power of national identities can be seen in the conflicts in which many African countries are embroiled and is rooted in a long history of nation building practices which deserve far more attention than I am able to give it here. By way of example, however, one can consider how, in South Africa, during apartheid, concepts of 'nation' and national difference were evoked to justify racist practices. Using the social sciences, and popular discourses, notions of 'ethnic nationalism' were used to justify racial inequality and oppression

(Tapscott 1995). Based on the argument that South Africa was made up of different 'nations', systems for maintaining separate identity through the control of gendered relationships (such as the South African Immorality Act of 1950 under apartheid) were created. Following the collapse of the apartheid state, we have, perhaps ironically, not seen an awareness of the dangers of national identities but a new national project which encourages unity and pride through state sponsored programmes such as the 'proudly South African' campaign and the 'come home' campaign designed to encourage (white) South African's abroad to return to South Africa (<http://home-affairs.pwv.gov.za>). A full analysis of the ways in which this new 'rainbow nationalism' continues to be based in an artificially gendered public/private divide is beyond the scope of this chapter. Suffice it to say that we continue to see the familiar mix of romanticising and celebrating women's involvement in the private sphere whilst writing out of history their activities in the public realm. Already, research has begun to show how this new rainbow nationalism in South Africa is implicated in the quite frightening levels of xenophobia we are currently grappling with (for more on this see Harris 2001, Sinclair 1999). This brings me back to the familiar mantra of Ann McKlintock (1990:409) that 'all nationalisms are gendered, all are invented and all are dangerous'.

What this brief sketch of the literature from Africa and abroad has highlighted is that one cannot begin to consider the ways in which people negotiate, adopt and resist national and ethnic identities without considering how these identities are saturated in the construction of gendered identities. This construction of women in times of war, as both the moral imperative for war as well as the keepers of values and norms central to national identity, has impacted on the services offered to women who have fled war and framed the ways in which women make meaning of their war-time experiences. This is not to suggest that women simply adopt such nationalist rhetoric. Rather, the meaning they make of their history will be framed within the context of these powerful social and political discourses and will continually be negotiated, framed and re-framed in relation to them. Thus, discourses make available positions for people to take up (Henriques et al 2002). This chapter is, therefore, an attempt to consider how women make sense of the events leading up to their forced displacement to South Africa within the context of South African and their own nationalist rhetoric.

Negotiating national, racial and gender identities

If we understand nationalisms to function in the manner described above, then it is unsurprising that women's narratives of the events leading to their displacement are continually negotiated within the framework of gendered

familial relationships as it is these relationships that underlie the conflict. The women's narratives were shaped by nationalist rhetoric which emphasise the separation of private lives (in which most of their narratives were located) and public wars (which they saw themselves as largely removed from). The most common situation in the interviews for this research was for women to describe their experience of the war, or the event that caused them to flee, in terms of the political activities of a male partner or relative. However, descriptions of their own levels of agency and activism varied. In many ways, given the extent to which nationalist rhetoric is rooted in inherently gendered familial ties, it is unsurprising that women should emphasise these ties in describing their displacement. In addition, early narratives about reasons for fleeing to South Africa tended not to express any identification with the identities underlying the conflict in the Great Lakes. Many of the women simply described the war as 'governments not seeing eye to eye' or as a fight between two countries. They tended to describe the war as 'somebody else's' conflict and portrayed their own activities as personal rather than political.

Each woman emphasised parts of her story that fitted within the asylum principles and all emphatically began with the assertion that the war made them leave. In response to the question 'Why did you come to South Africa', each woman emphasised that it was the war: 'So far as she's concerned it was the war; So I went because of the war; She came to South Africa firstly because of the war and secondly the volcano, the earthquake'. Even in the instance where there was a volcanic eruption (in Goma in 2002) the war is stated as the most important reason for this woman's displacement. This can be read within the current xenophobic climate in South Africa where it is popularly believed that many asylum seekers are actually 'economic refugees' seeking better employment opportunities. For example, in a recent meeting with the Australian High Commissioner for Refugee Affairs, the South African Minister of Home Affairs stated that:

During the 50th anniversary of the 1951 Geneva Convention on Refugee Affairs, I raised the issue that even though in a very small manner as compared with other countries of the world, South Africa is confronted with the constant abuse of its system of refugee protection. Almost 80 percent of the applications we process are unfounded. This means that we employ most of the scarce resources we have available for refugee protection to process the applications of those who seek to abuse the system (Buthelezi 2003).

Of course, all the women discussed the fact that they were suffering economic hardship, unemployment and lack of basic services. However, these were

narratives that were far more difficult to access which is likely to be related to the ways in which 'economic refugee' and 'illegal immigrant' or 'unfounded application' have come to be interchangeable in the context of South African immigration. Furthermore, in asylum legislation and procedures it is commonly assumed that political violence can be separated from crime, economic hardship or family instability and that people make decisions to flee based on a single, clear-cut persecution as a result of neatly defined political acts. This has particular consequences for the women in this research whose political activity engaged with the ways in which gender oppression manifests itself in times of war and so blurred the boundaries between family and war. However, recognition of activism that challenges gender norms inherent to nationalist, ethnic and racist projects has not often been recognised as political by state structures and within the state apparatus for processing asylum claims. Based on the literature described above, it could be argued that states have a vested interest in portraying gender relations as apolitical (and women as politically passive) if they are to justify ongoing conflict and nation building projects.

However, the range of national identities that women expressed was rather more complex than these early narratives suggested. Few women could specify their national identity and few national identities could be sustained in the face of complex social situations. For example, one woman who identified herself as Congolese stated, 'During the war [of 1976] my parents went to Uganda. That's where we're grown up, in Uganda. In 1994, we were still in Uganda. That's when the war started, so my husband was in Rwanda and I was in Uganda. In 1995, after the war, that's when I went back to Rwanda'. Ethnic identity (in this case either Hutu or Tutsi) was confounded with national identity in complex and sometimes contradictory ways. Malkki (1995), in her study of Hutu refugees in Tanzania, found that urban based refugees expressed far more complex and multiple identities than those based in refugee camps. She argues that this was a 'pragmatics of identity' where different labels allowed for different access to social networks and services. Although this was clearly the case for women in this study, their experiences of the war and violence was still often rooted in their nationality and the contestation of this nationality was, at times, the key to survival. National identity was sometimes described as a historically located and essentialist notion of what it meant to belong to a particular group, and, at other times, a pragmatic portrayal of one aspect of oneself over another.

This suggests that in spite of the narratives that appear to reflect very clearly the kinds of re-produced nationalist discourses described above, there were frequent contradictions in these constructions, and it is perhaps these that are most interesting in a study of how women frame their displacement.

Several women in the project described themselves as being of mixed parentage. One woman (who emphasised her mixed parentage based on national identity, that is, she saw herself as mixed Rwandan and Congolese) had lived all her life in the Democratic Republic of Congo. She also identified herself as Tutsi and her husband as Hutu and felt her persecution was equally a reflection of her Tutsi identity. She describes the extent to which the nationalist project interfered with her own identity.

After everything had quietened down [having been released from detention where she was tortured] she was back at work. She was in work again and again last October they came to her work to interrogate her again. And still by the Secret Police who arrested her [previously]. So they took her to UNHCR and from there they went to [names a non-governmental organisation]. So when she got there other Rwandese, who she didn't really know, were already there. And the former Interior Minister of Congo [DRC] was present. So the minister, you know, made a speech and told them that we're going to take pictures of each of you and these pictures, you'll be surprised one day because we'll take you from here to your country. We'll take you back to your country. So she asked him the question 'Our home? Where?' And then the other people you know, the other Rwandese told her, 'well, back to our home in Rwanda'. And then she said, 'No, she's not Rwandese, she's Congolese'. And then she went to see [names a UNHCR official], and she told her she wasn't Rwandese, she had all her documents with her to prove that and this lady told her 'the decision doesn't come from me it comes from government'. They took pictures of her and after that she went back to work.

It was in response to her forced 'repatriation' that this woman arranged with a client of hers to take her out of the DRC to Zambia following which she came to South Africa. This extract shows the artificial intersection between national and ethnic identities with Tutsi being seen as Rwandans and forced removal being framed as a 'return home'. Similar to projects across South Africa, and, indeed, the continent, projects of national and ethnic 'purification' often justify imposed social engineering in the name of respect for culture. Mamdani (2001) notes how traditionally, a woman and by implication any children, would take on the ethnic identity of her husband when she marries. However, in this instance, she strongly resists this and identifies herself as Tutsi. In spite of this, she describes her daughter as a Hutu even though this is an identity that her daughter finds extremely distressing. She says: 'No, mum, I can't believe it, no. The Hutus kill, they don't care'. This woman resists the kinds of gendered norms which are central to the nationalisms on

which the war is based by refusing to take her husband's identity. Thus, her resistance to cultural norms of marriage is itself a resistance to the war and was the reason for her persecution. Challenging the validity of identities imposed through nationalist projects is thus profoundly political as the moral imperative for the war is created through regulating patriarchal family structures in such a way that social divisions (such as Rwandese/Congolese, Hutu/Tutsi) are created. This extract also shows, however, that service providers have often failed to challenge the mythical nature of nationalism and have accepted such identities, thereby reproducing them in their own work. The assumptions about women's political activity and what gets defined as political activity structures the kinds of services that are provided and to whom.

This is of course not unique to women's experiences in their countries of origin. The intersection of gender, 'race' and ethnicity also need to be analysed in the South African context to show how it affects refugee women. For example, when this same woman reached South Africa with her daughter, the reception officer at the Department of Home Affairs refused to register the child as hers because she said she was too dark-skinned to belong to this woman. As with her experiences in the Great Lakes conflict, the identities underlying the conflict in South Africa are rooted in gendered familial relationships and the boundaries of the social groups are maintained through enforcing family norms. Thus, we need to consider that nationalism, ethnicity and racism take particular forms for women whose bodies and actions are often manipulated in the attempts to maintain group boundaries. Because of the ways in which national identity is rooted in gender relations their political engagement can be expected to emphasise the gendered nature of 'racial' and ethnic divisions.

However, the negotiation of multiple identities, although often implicit, can also be very conscious, particularly in a conflict situation where particular identities may serve a protective function. That is, not only do women continually resist imposed identities but they also highlight some aspects of identity over others based on the social circumstances they live in. For example, in the earlier extract, the woman could have taken her husband's identity in order to avoid forced removal from the Democratic Republic of Congo. Indeed many women did this. In a discussion about the ways in which women have identified with or dissociated from the war, one respondent had this to say:

Mostly men [are involved in the conflict and in politics], but some women, you know, participate actively. It's just starting, but a few women, especially the smart ones take part. Yeah, a few women participate in the war. They—not actively, but yeah they do in some ways. But as far as politics is concerned, it's just started. Some women, the smart ones are trying to participate, get

involved in politics. Most of the women back home are not active in anything. They are just housewives. They just take care of the children, stay home and take care of the family. [Begins speaking in French] What she wants to add is that even when the war started, even women who weren't very active in politics—once you say just a few words about politics or the rebels or, you know, something against the rebels you can easily get killed because people will label you as a politician, so they will kidnap you—even the children as well, the same thing... you have to be very prudent.

In this case, acting within and embracing the kinds of gendered identities celebrated within nationalist discourses acts to protect women's safety. Thus, negotiating between identities is not simply a matter of convenience but also survival. The best possibilities for survival are to be 'just a housewife'. This narrative is not unlike that described by Malkki (1995: 168) when she notes that Hutu urban refugees in Tanzania 'manage one or more adoptive identities or labels that were already given and rendered workable by the lived-in settings in and around town'. Thus, women shifted between identifying themselves as 'simply a housewife' or as politically engaged and active depending on the context in which they found themselves and the consequences of this representation. That women would overtly choose to represent themselves as politically inactive in order to avoid persecution further highlights the centrality of gender norms for legitimating war and how much of a threat challenging these norms would be to the nationalist project. Women's resistance to the conflict and the identities that it imposes is inherently gendered due to the specific representations of women in times of war and the reliance on nationalism to control women's bodies. In spite of this, countries around the world have been reluctant to recognise gender as a basis for persecution. In some cases (see Spijkerboer 2001) it is argued that this would result in too many applications, whereas in others it is because of a failure to consider the ways in which war is gendered and how this impacts on women's engagement in the conflict and their victimisation. Gendered oppression, even in the context of war, is seen as a cultural norm rather than a central mechanism by which war is legitimated.

In addition to negotiating multiple identities in order to survive and to resist certain gendered positions, women continually negotiated such identities when accessing services in South Africa. Among the women who were of mixed parentage it was felt that this mixed identity impacted on the services they could access in South Africa. In an informal discussion with one of the women in the projects she described her experience. The field-notes that describe this conversation are as follows:

She has been to [the agency] and was forced to tell them about her mixed Rwandan and Congolese parentage [as this is the reason she is seeking asylum]. Since then she has been suspicious that this is why they are not giving her financial assistance. She believes that other asylum seekers have been given money for rent on several occasions but with her they told her that they only gave once. She also knows that the official she spoke to told other people about her mixed parentage because when speaking to another person in the agency, he made remarks about 'you Rwandese', in spite of her having presented herself as Congolese. The person who made such remarks is himself Congolese. This is perhaps how conflict, or at least prejudice is displaced across contexts.

The irony in this narrative is that the basis for asylum claim (her persecution based on her mixed parentage) is the same reason for being denied services designed for asylum seekers. This does raise a question about whether and how conflicts from particular regions may be displaced in the contexts in which forced migrants live. Although the context may not be conducive to the emergence of violence in the same way as it has emerged in the refugee producing country, especially among city-based forced migrants, clearly prejudice remains. Some analysis of how this may intersect with local prejudice (such as manifestations of racism in South Africa) may be important to predict such conflict.

Some conclusions

It has already been described how positioning oneself within stereotypical gender identities can be essential to survival whilst resistance to the kinds of gendered norms that legitimate conflict have been a central form of women's political resistance. I have also suggested that service providers have, at times, failed to challenge the stereotypical representations of women as rooted in the private sphere. Refugee women are often represented by service providers as particularly steeped in their gendered activities and norms. We regularly celebrate women's role as caregiver and mother, an approach often encouraged by women's organisations. Refugee women in particular are positioned as 'natural caregivers', good mothers and domesticated (see Malkki 1995; Zabaleta 2003). However, as such images and rhetoric are taken up and become normalised, they serve to marginalise the other competing positions that women occupy and they begin to influence both programme funding and service delivery. The emphasis on African refugees as mothers can be seen in the vast amounts of funding dedicated to the reproductive health of refugee women. Jolly (2003), in her analysis of sexuality in development programmes, notes how, in development discourses in the North, issues of sexuality

emphasise reproduction, disease and violence whereas programmes in the North tend to emphasise love, desire and pleasure.

One of the primary consequences of failing to challenge these representations of women rooted in the private sphere is that their resistance has seldom been recognised as political as seen in the refusal to accept gender based violence as sufficient grounds for asylum (see for example Spijkerboer 2003). By failing to challenge the ways in which nationalisms have artificially relied on such gender stereotyping, the political actions of women have remained largely unrecognised as have the forms of persecution that they face.

Notes

1. Some interviews were translated from French and extracts from these appear in the third person. Some of the women had been waiting for up to two years for a decision on their application for asylum. I would like to thank Erica Burma and Dr Daniela Casselli for their helpful comments on this paper and their ongoing support on the project as whole.
2. This narrative may well have emerged even more dominantly given that I was a relative stranger and because the women are likely to have been unsure of my ability to influence decisions on asylum, in spite of my assurances that I was affiliated to an independent NGO.

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