

“Canadian Refugee Policies and Women”

Erin Baines (Dalhousie University)

In the 1980s and 1990s, Canada's interpretation of the 1951 Refugee Convention has made the country a world leader on refugee women's issues. The 1951 Convention provided a definition of refugees based on the applicant's well-founded fear of state persecution based upon grounds of either: race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or participation in a particular social group. The Convention has been criticised because it fails to recognize gender-related forms of persecution; for example, instances in which someone is persecuted as a woman or because she is a woman. In 1993, Canada advanced a set of guidelines on gender persecution which attempted to address some of these critiques, and since then, a number of other states have followed suit.

This paper addresses the challenges of attempting to codify gender-based persecution in international conventions, and the assumptions that the discourse around gender-based persecution contains. In particular, the Canadian discourse assumes that refugee women are vulnerable creatures and need to be protected. More concretely, women who present themselves to Canadian authorities as vulnerable (by crying, for example) have a better chance of getting accepted under current refugee policy. This perpetuates an attitude of Western superiority and the vulnerability of Third World women. Equally, the assumption is prevalent that gender-related persecution always takes place, geographically, in the Third World. This reinforces the cultural “othering” of Third World women, and seeks to mask the injustices at home (where what happens abroad is persecution, while what happens at home is, at worst, discrimination). Despite the leadership shown by the Canadian state, we also need to challenge the assumption that women are granted absolute protection when they arrive in Canada, for in reality, the system often fails them. Finally, the very fact of specifying gender-based persecution as a legitimate criterion for the granting of refugee status, there is still the threat of the further marginalization of women if we don't combat the related assumption that gender persecution equals women, while all other forms of persecution apply to men.

The paper situates these discursive contradictions within the context of developments in Canadian refugee policy, as well as within a global context, where post-Cold War UN interventions and containment strategies to prevent mass migration and displacement have had important ramifications for refugee rights of both women and men.

Section Four: Discourses and practices related to democratization of foreign policy

“Organizing for Beijing: Canadian NGOs and the Fourth World Conference on Women”

Elizabeth Riddell-Dixon (University of Western Ontario)

This paper examines the government-sponsored mechanisms that were established to facilitate NGO preparations within Canada for the Beijing Conference on Women. These efforts, part of the broader effort to democratize the foreign policy process in Canada, reflected the more general discussion within government circles as to how NGOs could and should be involved in foreign policy processes. The paper underscores that in providing venues through which the