

Radical Women

Welcome All Refugees Open the Borders!

Ranjini is a Tamil refugee who, in May 2012, was thrown into indefinite detention with her two young children because of a “negative security assessment” by ASIO. The spy agency’s reasons are a secret, and there is no right to appeal. Her third son was born in detention. Having fled Sri Lanka’s genocidal war against her people, she was an officially recognised refugee. But she and her sons are now facing the brutalities of life in Australia for those seeking safety here. Ranjini’s nine-year-old is suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder.

At least 60 other refugees, mostly Tamil, have been detained this way. In

December 2012, Australia’s then Labor Immigration Minister Chris Bowen announced that nearly 600 had been deported back to Sri Lanka, despite the likelihood that they would be imprisoned, tortured or killed.

What to do with refugees remains frontline news, and “border protection” has been the subject of much public debate. You can’t open a newspaper or turn on the television or radio without being bombarded with stories about another boatload of asylum seekers “illegally” turning up on our shores. The consistent message, sometimes subtle but usually not, is that it’s out of control and life as we know it is under threat.

Fanning the hysteria are both the Labor government and the Opposition — their only disagreement being how to stop the boats. It’s fine for people seeking refuge in Australia to languish indefinitely in another country while awaiting assessment. Their anguish and anger, demonstrated through self-harm, occupations and burnings of centres, is answered with more punishment. Those who bypass this horror and come by boat must be turned back — to stop the “people smugglers” and the drownings, says the Labor Party. The former Gillard government feigned humanitarian motives. Once installed as Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd showed Canberra’s true colours: on 19 July 2013, he announced that no one arriving by boat will be allowed into Australia, ever.

Racist, sexist spin. Barring people without white skin, money or papers has been the policy of successive governments since the early days of White Australia. In the 1980s, Labor Prime Minister Bob Hawke dubbed the term “queue jumpers” and reintroduced detention for boat arrivals. A decade later, Labor PM Paul Keating legislated indefinite mandatory detention. In 2001, 353 (mainly Afghani and Iraqi) asylum seekers on the SIEV (Suspected Illegal Entry Vessel) X drowned while trying to reach Australian waters. The then Howard government fabricated a story that women used their children as hostages, threatening to throw them overboard unless they were let in. “People like that” — “uncivilised” and probably “terrorists” — are to be kept out, even at the cost of their lives.

These vicious attacks, perpetrated by government and the far-right to malign and demonise people escaping desperate situations, are not only racist, they are fundamentally sexist.

Forced from a homeland: a female experience.

Eighty percent of refugees are women; 44% are children. Local situations may vary, but the cause of escape, by any means necessary, is the same: being oppressed for being female.

Afghanistan, for example, is the home of 25% of all refugees. Women are treated as the property of their husbands and fathers. They cannot choose whom they marry, much less whether they marry, and they are forbidden to walk the streets without a male family member. Getting an education or holding public office are off limits for most. The U.S.-led war on Afghanistan, heavily supported by Australia, has made life even worse. Feudal patriarchy remains entrenched, and the country is devastated by war. As wives become widows, with no financial means to survive, they and their children suffer crushing poverty and deprivation. Domestic violence, “honour



killing,” sexual abuse and murder or imprisonment for breaching repressive laws are widespread. For so many women, escape is the only survival option.

In its genocidal war against Tamils, the Sir Lankan government targeted women. Its objective was to wipe out this ancient nation that claims Tamil Eelam in the island’s north as its homeland. The military raped women, cut foetuses from their bodies, disappeared more than 135,000 men, women and children and murdered 35,000 in 2009 alone. Women still shoulder the effects of starvation and the war, of living behind barbed wire and the tremendous loss borne by their people. Ranjini is one of the more than 35,000 women who were widowed. She was among the 1.1 million Tamils who fled.

Syrian women and children are now fleeing President Assad’s terror. They are 75% of the 1.6 million refugees encamped in nearby countries. UNHCR estimates that the number will double by the end of 2013. They too are seeking safety in countries around the world, including Australia.

These women, children and young girls join the ranks of the tens of millions of displaced and homeless peoples around the world. Faced with danger on the road, they are abused, raped, kidnapped and murdered with impunity by roving militias and inside the camps.

Rape, social stigmatising, forced impregnation, sterilisation and exposure to AIDS and other STDs are commonplace occurrences. Widows, left to look after their children by themselves, are further ostracised if they are victims of sexual abuse or disease.

Those who have made it into Australia are pushed into the most unappealing, lowest-paid, dead-end work, denied equal access to welfare and healthcare and discriminated against in the housing market – and then accused of draining the economy and impoverishing Australian citizens! Refugee communities, such as the Sudanese in Melbourne, are scapegoated for government law-and-order campaigns to fuel xenophobia and justify greater police powers in a general crackdown on civil rights.

Stop the war at home and abroad. By its nature, capitalism has an insatiable need for profit. If it can’t expand its control of resources and markets, it dies. *This* is the cause of war, poverty, environmental devastation, terror and refugees.

After the armies of the U.S., Australia and other partners of the “Coalition of the Willing” invaded Iraq in 2003 to increase their influence, steal oil and enrich cartels like Haliburton and BP, women have been systematically degraded. They used to enjoy a comparatively high standard of living, but the imperialist war and occupation have brought about terrible changes. Opposition and civil rights groups are targets of death squads and military strikes. A new constitution, penned by U.S. officials and Iraqi clerics, strips women of their rights and puts power into the hands of reactionary Islamic patriarchs. Similar horror has stalked the globe, wherever capitalist powers have tread — from the Middle East to Africa, Asia and beyond.

At home, the working class also pays a very high price — services and social security are gutted to bankroll the wars, and jobs disappear in corporates’ quest for cheaper labour offshore. Worst hit are women, who work in the most vulnerable, low-paid sectors and rely most on welfare and social supports. When governments cry poor on the urgent issues of childcare, aged care, decent paid parental leave, healthcare, education, public housing and transport, it’s women who are most denied.

Same struggle, same fight. Parliamentarians fight over the best way to turn refugees away. But *there is a solution* to the devastation that creates refugees: end imperialist wars and abolish the market forces that drive them. Replace this chaotic and cruel system with a socialist one, based on equality, cooperation and sharing the wealth.

Right now, all refugees must have automatic entry and equal rights:

- * open the borders; close the detention centres; abolish ASIO
- * equal citizenship rights for all
- * quality public housing for all
- * free multicultural healthcare, education and training for everyone
- * full rights to welfare; a living income for all
- * equal employment opportunity; equal pay.



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Radical Women

Solidarity Salon, 580 Sydney Road, Brunswick Victoria

PO Box 308, Brunswick Victoria 3056

• 03 9388 0062 • radicalwomen@optusnet.com.au

www.RadicalWomen.org