

Support for refugee families

Settling in a new country is one of the most difficult experiences in life. While access to services is of vital importance, emotional support is critical when confronting the unknown. The Families in Cultural Transition Program has succeeded in creating a supportive environment for refugee families to discuss and share their experiences.

By Cherie Lamb

A family, however it may be constructed, is the basic unit of social support, therefore, it must be upheld and nurtured. This is the philosophy behind the Families in Cultural Transition Program (FICT) which has just completed its first year of operation at STARTTS.

The refugee experience and the resettlement that follows, places enormous pressures on individuals and families at all levels. Confusion, frustration and a feeling of impotence and loss of control are an intrinsic part of the settlement experience. Many do not understand what is going on outside and even worse, what is happening to them and their families.

While nothing can take away the difficulties and pain associated with resettlement, our experience at STARTTS has demonstrated that conceptual information can actually assist individuals to better understand the process they are going through and empower them to better deal with the challenges.

The program, which has assisted scores of newly arrived refugee families from Africa, The Middle East, Asia and Europe, includes a series of 10 psycho-educational modules run by 15 bilingual facilitators in a 10 week, part time course.

While refugees can attend English classes and access welfare, health and housing services run by government and non government agencies, little attention has been paid to the emotional support needed to be able to cope with the less tangible problems of social isolation, family

breakdown and intergenerational conflict, which emanate from situations of extraordinary stress and hardship produced by the refugee ordeal.

Extended family and kinship networks are crucial to a person's sense of identity and the loss of these usually leave a void in the lives of the refugees who enter Australia each year.

The commonality of this experience led STARTTS counsellors (from different cultural backgrounds) to speculate about the universality of loss and grief experienced by exiled and displaced people, when trying to re build their lives. They acknowledge the fact that very few refugees are aware of the source of their personal anxiety or the reasons why resettlement is so painful and fraught with frustration.

FICT assists refugees identify particular sources of conflict, which are likely to erupt within families and to generate discussion around tools or resources which can be used to solve conflict when it arises. It is of some comfort for people to meet and discover that they are not alone because others have lived through the same experience and yet are willing to listen and to provide support.

One of the most challenging tasks and the proudest achievement has been the completion of the first group of Somali women. Ifrah Ibrahim, the group's facilitator worked very hard to cement a group of people from different clans and tribal groups, who were previously involved in civil conflict in Somalia.

Naturally she battled issues of trust and the constant challenge to her own integrity.

"At the beginning some group members made comments like 'What can you teach us? Are you one of us?' and 'What can we learn by talking? We should forget the past! Can't we get a sewing class instead of this?'

However by the end of the second session women were feeling more comfortable with each other and with the program," says Ifrah.

Changes in attitude were common among participants: "Since I started the course I have changed a lot. I plan my shopping now and I can talk to my son without yelling" a group member explained.

"I attended all of the sessions because I was given the chance to talk and share my ideas and feelings. I wish that the course was longer as it was the only day each week that I left my home" another participant said.

At the end of the module on trauma and healing nearly all participants realised that they had all been through similar experiences and talking about them to each other provided a sense of relief. This is an important step in the process of healing. "I thought that I was the only person who felt like this," one said.

Participants will continue to meet together by attending the English classes for Somali women, run by a dedicated volunteer teacher and the local Adult Migrant Education

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create a powerful dynamic. Selling slaves back to their families for \$50 to \$100 each –with the financial assistance of Westerners- is far more profitable than selling them for about \$15 in the northern slave markets.”

There are other ethical considerations to take into account. UNICEF, The United Nations Children's Fund, has called the practice “intolerable,” because according to them “the buy-back program implicitly accepts that human beings may be bought and sold.”

Supporters argue that slave redemption is good publicity that draws public attention on the political and social situation of Sudan; that it undermines the slave trade one person at a time; and most importantly it contributes to diminish the personal suffering of slaves and their families.

However the war in Sudan has intensified, the number of raids has increased in the last few years and consequently the number of slaves may be increasing as a result.

James Jacobson, head of Christian Freedom International, a former supporter of slave redemption, now believes new approaches need to be taken for fighting slavery. These could include the use of trucks to stop raiders who normally travel on horseback; paying slave rescuers a salary and providing other incentives, also using lists, databases of missing people.

POLITICAL SOLUTIONS

War, abject poverty combined with systematic methods employed by local power holders to exploit the weak, have contributed to the resurgence of slavery in Sudan. Without peace it is highly unlikely that it will be abolished. However the world seems oblivious to Sudan. No political or diplomatic effort has been made to bring the two parties to negotiation and put a stop to the endless war. American policy towards Sudan changed at the end of the Cold War. In 1997 the US imposed economic sanctions because they believed that Sudan sponsors international terrorism. According to

William Finnegan “Sudan’s strategic significance to the United States today is negligible, with the Horn of Africa no longer a cockpit of American-Soviet competition. Egypt is our key regional ally; Sudan is a sideshow.”

The international community has certainly invested heavily on humanitarian aid through Operation Lifeline Sudan, which so far has cost more than two billion dollars. Such funds could have been better employed in the reconstruction of the country.

Fighting slavery through foreign abolitionist policies may not be effective because the international community simply lacks the power to implement or even enforce them. On the other hand, the S.P.L.A. may lack the tools and possibly the will to fight slavery.

Abolishing slavery is the government’s responsibility. It could do so by creating and enforcing anti slavery legislation and granting power to law enforcement bodies to assist former slaves and to punish those who continue to engage in slavery.

However after having lived years of degradation the road to emancipation for slaves will be fraught with uncertainty. Freedom in itself may mean little without basic resources such as food, clothing, shelter and most importantly, having the means to gain economic independence through agricultural programs. Without some form of moral and material compensation that will grant them back their humanity, there can be no real emancipation of enslaved populations. ■

REFERENCES

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Program and a sewing class, organised by the local Islamic Centre.

The women have also been connected to health, welfare and educational services in their local area and have been given information about local markets, the public transport system, banking families and a range of other government and community based services of which they were previously unaware.

An important aspect of running the course in a public school is that parents now feel part of the school community. They are more confident to send their children to school and some have even volunteered to participate in parents activities, such as helping out in the library and at the school canteen. Teachers and school counsellors have commented that the behaviour of children, whose parents have attended FICT, has noticeably improved.

The Multicultural Education Unit of the Department of Education is now in the process of piloting a similar program within selected public schools with high populations of newly arrived refugees. Facilitators have been selected from a pool of ethno-specific teachers’ aids and community information officers. The program is due to commence in term three.

FICT was funded by the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs and supplemented by the NSW Department of Women.

So far the program has been well received. It has filled a void in many people’s lives and has provided the beginnings of a substitute family or at least a network of familiar and like minded people.

The importance of overcoming isolation for new arrivals cannot be overstated and may well be the most beneficial and longstanding outcome of the program. It is hoped that its success will encourage the Department to fund and sustain it on a continuing basis. ■

Cherie Lamb is the co-ordinator of FICT program.