CHAPTER 7

TRANSFORMATIONS AND
FUTURE IMAGININGS

Becoming a refugee, by definition involves geographical displacement, but refugees undergo social dislocation as well... even when refugee households remain intact, changes in human relationships almost always accompany the movement of people from one geographic location to another.¹

Studies of refugee populations have shown that women and men forcibly driven out of their countries of origin strive to retain in their place of exile the essentials of their culture and way of life.² Although women try to practice and maintain their cultures, social positions, and lifestyles, the exigencies of being refugees force them to reexamine their perceptions and to adopt both social, and economic roles, which are contentious or counter to their socially and culturally accepted behaviors. Julie M. Peteet in her study of women and the Palestinian resistance argued that since continuous crises and war were periods of cultural ambiguity, patterns of expected behavior were suspended or redefined as people mobilized to resist the circumstances that affect their situation. In other words, exile usually leads to the alteration of many cultural, social, and gendered relations between women and men. Moreover, meanings usually attached to cultural practices and gender role expectations are redefined and negotiated to allow for adjustment.³

As indicated in chapter 5, southern Sudanese women refugees’ lives have been shaped by particular cultural values and practices that govern the southern Sudanese society. However, due to war and displacement, most of these values and practices have been either altered or redefined for possible adjustment in the refugee situation. This chapter looks into the forces that led to such transformations. It focuses specifically on role reversal between women and men; women’s acquisition of some economic independence; women’s development of new skills and knowledge; women’s involvement in leadership and organizational roles; the host country’s
circumstances; and how these forces combine to influence women’s perspectives and understanding. Examining these issues gives insight into how women refugees use their newly acquired roles, skills, and knowledge to challenge the past, how they confront the image of a victimized and dependent woman refugee, and how they imagine a different future. The chapter further identifies some of the cultural practices and perceptions that are seen as obstacles to women’s progress in the past, and thus need to be challenged and transformed.

Gina Buijis analyzed the dynamics of change in gender relations, arguing that due to refugee life and forced migration, women refugees are forced to examine their roles and relations to men in the new context. However, women’s responses to forced migration and uprootedness are both varied and complex as women traverse geographic, moral, cultural, and linguistic boundaries. Further, women’s responses varied depending on their class, educational level, ethnicity, race, social status, economic opportunities, age and experience in life, stages of flight, and other forms of social difference. Moreover, the process of questioning the traditional values, the victimized and dependent image of a woman refugee, as well as the imagining of a different future, is also determined by these social differences. Thus, it is understandable that not all women refugees in Cairo were engaged in such a process.

Gender Role Reversal

Recent studies on refugees and forced migration have stressed the importance of recovering the voices, histories, and experiences of African women refugees in refugee literature. Influenced by feminist theories and perspectives, many contemporary scholars on refugee studies have come to recognize the importance of gender in the analyses of the refugee population, in general, and refugees in Africa, in particular.

The recognition of gender as an important category in the analyses of the refugee population has helped illuminate the situation of women and men refugees. Like race, ethnicity, and class, gender represents a central dimension of social structures. Thus, focusing on gender can yield important insights into the refugee phenomena. However, for this to be realized, “the analytic focus cannot be exclusively women, but the socially patterned relationships between the sexes as they influence, and, in turn, are influenced by the process of immigration” or displacement. Using gender in its relational, cultural, historical, and context-specific forms has helped me uncover the complexities within gender role reversal among southern Sudanese refugees in Cairo. Similarly, the experience of change for women and men refugees and their construction of a new identity are analyzed in