

Trauma and Criticality: How Stories Raise Our Consciousness and Can Heal Our Past

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Should women with power support women who are at risk or hidden from society?

What if critical consciousness could be improved and be helpful as a way to raise awareness in wider society?

How could we benefit from deeper communication through storytelling to understand others and not just ourselves?

When I migrated to Malaysia in 2017 I had experienced trauma. We experience trauma not only from leaving our home country but also through the challenging situation in Malaysia. That time was full of darkness; I was judging my present life from my past and I always was fearful of the future. I had mood swings, often behaved harshly and blamed others. I can recognize that causes for the trauma may be different, but the result of fear and depression are much the same inside us.



Photo Credit: Kirandeeep Kaur PAR project Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia 2017-18. Photo Titled: Papers and Borders. Taken with Afghan refugees in the Nahel Afghan Community Centre.

Whilst there are great mechanisms such as local and international organizations providing therapy, counselling and skills to empower women with trauma. However, this assistance alone cannot provide what the women require to succeed.

Refugee women in Kuala Lumpur are unable to find their own identity and they cannot feel at peace with themselves. To help you picture how women are experiencing violence the ways this creates a lack of visibility of their lives and challenges, I will break down the cases of three Afghan refugee women who are educated and are mostly young girls with depression and stress who are keen to be heard. They had access to primary and secondary school education in their home country previously. These young and educated women are not hired in job employment even if they have sufficient further education degrees. Due to the legal situation they can't be hired in their professions. Often these ladies are sent to work outside their chosen fields in for example sewing or other traditionally feminine occupations. Furthermore, they experience domestic violence in their homes from their partners. In the second group are refugee women who never had the chance to gain a skill and are living in survival mode, further these women face to sexual abuse and job harassment, exploitation, even brutal and verbal harassment by their partners and family.

For myself, as group facilitator and Afghan women with experience in their situation, it is obvious that how women are interested to take action but they are concerned about their starting point. To bring changes we need a

new combined skillset in building authenticity in self-identity through storytelling so that women are able to better access support and find ways to heal from trauma. As we see the level of education, and accessibility to support through NGOs can help women but it is not sufficient. Let's meet three women¹ and understand their traumas through their stories; a mother called Zohra, a young, now single, divorced woman known as Nargis and a survivor of SGBV, Shamila. Through these three women we understand more about different groups and their ability to access social support.

Zohra is struggling with herself and she feels she cannot heal from her past. She is 35 years old and mother of a young girl. Tears always appeared to be on the verge of dropping from her eyes, and a knot seemed to live permanently in Zohra's chest, 'I don't know why I feel like this. Is this my fault? Am I bad Muslim? Is all this a result of my weak beliefs in God?'

Zohra shares a story about some female refugees who are being abused sexually, who often unconsciously go for a relationship where they experience emotional abuses. She further explains about her young girl in a similar position, and who stays in black market work to be able to provide funds for their family. Working in Malaysia might provide financial freedom, however, it is also dangerous and leaves the young women more vulnerable to exploitation. There are stories of young women who are hired by men, often non-Afghan, to be companions for the evening by attending restaurants or parties with them. This might not be sex work directly but leaves the young women in vulnerable situations. This can cause

Footnote:

¹These women are not actual women but examples drawing on the experience of women in the Afghan community living in Malaysia. This is to protect the identity of the women in the projects.

a cause a stigma or gossip in the community about the young women, who is labelled a 'gold-digger'. If any young woman is seen with a foreign man the community will assume there might be a sexual relationship, even if there is not. This means for the young woman and her family feel shamed by the community. Potentially leading to further abuse by the family for the young woman. Zohra concluded her story crying, "I worry for our young girls. They do not know what to do here in Malaysia". Zohra after finishing her last sentence she mumbled, "The point is we know we need freedom, I am still stuck and confused about what to do. I pray every day for answer."

Zohra is desperate for change for her children. However, she constantly blames herself and believes her problems are due to religion. It is common for Afghan women to believe that their circumstances is due to not praying enough, or losing their community roots by becoming refugees in Malaysia and religious identity. In order to create change for women like Zohra, we need to offer her the ability to understand her situation more critically. This means giving her a space to tell her story and for her to hear other stories of the women in her community. In storytelling we learn about gender, self-identity, connection with the audience and what our relationships mean. Through writing we discover ourselves in a new way. Through a facilitator she can learn more about her own specific niche, her own strengths and how she can empower herself. Storytelling allows us to also search and explore the answers to our own questions about the troubles in our lives. Engaging on this journey she can raise her own critical consciousness and awareness. Critical consciousness for Zohra could mean having a new vision of her life and how she wants to develop the men and

women in her community. If she can build partnerships with men as well as women, they can help each other working collaboratively and finding a stronger belief for themselves and others.

Now let's meet Nargis, who is 25 years old and divorced. Women who are divorced, including older women who might never have married, similarly suffer within refugee communities. The word "refugee" for these women is a dream of freedom. But, in Malaysia this does not giving them legal status, and causes stigma even from their partners and society. "I do not know how should I introduce myself; a divorced woman? Single? Never want to marry? But I have to explain my marital status, because many ask me every day", explains Nargis. This is how even women who do not get married or break up with their partners suffer and often live in shame in the eyes of their community. Nargis points out the importance of social acceptance and finds herself apart from society where she cannot dare to find a definite label for herself. Often women prefer to say their husband has died or is in another country rather than admit divorce. To admit divorce, the women face a similar stigma from the community to the young women who are seen to be involved in sex work. Often they are labelled as 'bad women'. Nargis migrated from Afghanistan as a result of emotional abuse from her husband's side, but still she has mental health issues since she cannot find her own thoughts behind her decision. Similar to Zohra, Nargis can start a journey through storytelling to understand her own trauma and the stigma surrounding divorce. She has been involved previously with skills workshops "I had many short courses here in Malaysia about women's empowerment. I had a sewing class but I have a problem that why I am here? My nights are

worse than before". However, this had not got to the heart of her problem with her trauma, which she cannot speak about openly. Whilst sewing classes might allow her work in some places, it does not empower herself to heal. Financial income is not the only way to have empowerment. To increase her own critical consciousness, she needs to learn for herself what her own needs are and choose how she wants to be more empowered.

Shamila, our final story, joined a workshop entitled "Violence and Women", which focused on SGBV and discovered more about what it meant to experience beatings and violence she had lived with. SGBV is a common label now that many organizations use when discussing how to fight for women who experienced violence. The main solution for NGOs is to provide

awareness workshops and SGBV programs. These services are available for refugees as well. Shamila, like many women, decided to attend one of these programmes. However, in the workshop Shamila is confused, "But what if I see at myself as a crazy and worthless girl? I do not know what should I do. I know my relationship is abusive. What should I do?", says Shamila, a 20 years old lady. Shamila got married with her loved one, but he has been gaslighting her to believe her abuse is her own fault. However, she stays in her relationship because she feels it is safer, more financial stable home environment and she cannot be independent. Despite the support she receives from the NGOs and domestic violence counselor, Shamila chooses not to leave her partner due to the fear of lack of financial stability and the stigma she may have from her community.



Photo Credit: Kirandeep Kaur PAR project Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia 2017-18. Taken with Afghan women who wanted to show the invisibility of Afghan women in Kuala Lumpur. Used as part of Photo voice exhibition in refugee-led conference titled In Their Own Voices: Refugees as Development Actors as part of final event of my PAR project in May 2018.

Shamila has come to believe this problem of abuse is rooted in the lived reality of all women. The solution is not simple for her, especially when we are talking about women who have complicated relations with families and their communities. Shamila feels that "I accept the brutal relations. I see other women also in brutal relations. A woman is forced to be responsible for the man's emotion and she must accept how he reacts when he is sad or angry with his wife", said Shamila to her friend and decided to stop sharing her story. In Shamila case, she is not ready or able to share her story, empower herself or heal from her traumas. We often hear feedback from refugee women who are dealing with similar mental health and domestic violence issues:

"I never could explain what I wanted to share, my background is very different with what others understand it", says a divorced woman. Another young girl, who is disappointed from talking about her wishes, "becoming refugee caused me to lose my identity more than what I was judged before for my interests".

So critical consciousness is aimed to build agency - i.e. the ability to act and create change in your circumstances. Women can have solidarity with people who have very different identities to our own. But, Shamila would need time to understand her value as a woman and her own ability to choose, act and speak. She is unaware of how a counsellor might support her through her story. She doesn't want to talk if she is only sharing her experience. She does not believe that sharing her experience will change her situation. The problem is people assume they do not have ideas, skills or ability to work on.

We can benefit by self-coaching and two-sided communication in storytelling and understand

others as well as ourselves. I would like to propose a project for refugee women to be able to share their stories. I hope this project will have the combination of two components: art (storytelling) with ally-ship (frame of coaching for public). Here is the form of ally-ship which combined with art of storytelling: many searches showed their positive answers for positive impact of coaching and storytelling for social change, but now we need to implement it through fun way.

By developing critical awareness of the benefit of storytelling, I mean to build a sense of authenticity of their self-identity. This is the start where we can learn from each other as women, but also access more information from other more experienced people. This is important for women who never studied and are in marginalized communities. Many workers women, survivors and women whom are interviewed in projects are all saying they are ready for change, and they are ready to take responsibility for their wellbeing. We have to of course accept that many women might not be ready to share their stories. Many want to get success but they do not know what success is for them, and it is the problem. I hope through my project to show even with the refugee status women can find ways to empower themselves with support from other women.



Painting titled: ***A Woman is not a Shadow*** by Parisa Ally used as cover for her book. Please click to see the book titled [Three People in A Suitcase: An Afghan girl's fight against the stigma of trauma](#)