

No-one chooses to be a refugee

Latefa Guemar is no ordinary fellow. She is part of the Scholars at Risk scheme and a visiting fellow in the Gender Institute at LSE. Here she tells her story.



In 2012, I applied for the Reconnect with Research course at LSE. It was one of the many turning points in my life. Over the last ten years I have gone from being a young and optimistic female academic in Algeria, to a displaced mother of three in a tough and racist estate in Swansea, to a hopeful academic once again.

Last year I also wrote an article for *The Guardian* newspaper entitled: 'Academic refugees: "my hope is to contribute to this country – if I'm given the opportunity"'. In February I heard that the article had been shortlisted in the online category of the Migrant and Refugee Women of the Year Awards, which recognises outstanding media coverage of women and migration.

As the Reconnect with Research programme is part of LSE's Scholars at Risk scheme, which helps persecuted and displaced scholars and is supported by the Annual Fund, I also wanted to share my story with readers of *LSE Connect*. When I enrolled on the course, which is run by the Language Centre and the Centre for the Study of Human Rights and is designed to equip academics with the language skills to enable them to re-engage with academic work in the UK, I was at a low ebb.

As I explained in *The Guardian*, I became an academic because I was born at a rare moment in the history of Algeria when opportunities were opened up for women. The

support of my parents was backed up by post-colonial Algerian policies that provided free and equal access to higher education for all. I completed a bachelor's degree at Algiers University (USTHB) and was quickly accepted for a work placement in a research laboratory in Algiers, where I was later offered a permanent position as assistant researcher. I worked there and gained a diploma equivalent to a master's degree, until I was forced to leave the country.

As I progressed in my career, Algeria was changing. The National Liberation Front had come to power after independence but faced a struggle for power between rival groups. During these struggles political opponents, academics and journalists were imprisoned or assassinated. According to official records that I cited in *The Guardian*, some 250,000 people lost their lives, 20,000 simply "disappeared" and millions of people were forced into exile. My husband, a journalist and vocal opponent of the rise of fundamentalism, and I (viewed as a left-wing feminist for my involvement with workers' unions) were no different.

In December 2002 my husband fled, seeking asylum at Heathrow Airport. A few months earlier, in July, following several articles by my husband criticising the government, our flat had been ransacked. After receiving death threats and strange phone calls, in June 2003, heavily pregnant and with two small children, I too left Algeria. Getting out was surprisingly easy. Staff at the British High Commission in Algiers were kind, processing our visas at unusual speed. I thought our nightmare had ended. But it was simply the beginning of another one.

As I wrote in *The Guardian*, "Following UKBA [UK Border Agency] dispersal policy, my family was sent to Wales, where we were accommodated in a very disadvantaged area of Swansea. In addition to the culture shock – having to get used to a very different quality of life – almost immediately we started experiencing hostilities and racist attacks.

"When we signed the dispersal agreement, we had no idea where Swansea was, we had never been in Britain before. It was probably one of the longest journeys, a journey that never seemed to end. Nevertheless, Swansea looked so much like Algiers, a beautiful city by the sea and surrounded by hills. We were reunited as a family and more importantly we were safe and feeling protected. Our support worker was excellent. Learning that my husband was also a poet, she passed on his work to Dr Tom Cheesman at Swansea University, who translated and published his poetry. Knowing that I was a researcher, I was put in touch with Dace (Department of Adult Continuing Education) at Swansea University where I enrolled on an intensive English language course. Soon, I got involved in civil society, volunteering with the Swansea Bay Asylum Seekers Support Group (SBASSG) because I was shocked by the treatment of women who sought asylum for gender-based persecution."

As I underwent these experiences I never lost sight of my love of academia. I was determined to add theoretical understanding to my activism and personal experience, and so took a part-time BA in sociology at Swansea University, where I met Professor Heaven Crawley, director of the Centre for Migration and Policy Research at Swansea. With support from the

Council for Assisting Refugee Academics (CARA), I completed a master's and am now studying for a PhD at Swansea.

In addition, my work during the Reconnect with Research course and my presentation at the end of it led to a visiting fellowship at the LSE Gender Institute. Since then, my academic life has taken a completely different and exciting path. Being in a university like LSE has given me access to extraordinary resources and to events and debates that are either directly or indirectly relevant to my research.

I have already presented two papers, co-organised an international conference on Gender and Migration in Turkey and built up an extraordinary academic and professional network. I have been invited to run workshops and lectures at several universities, including University College London and Goldsmiths College, as well as at human rights organisations such as Medical Justice, which works to improve medical care for detainees.

The International Conference on Gender and Migration, at which I am representing the Gender Institute, is the first of its kind to be organised in Turkey under the New Islamic State. Female migrants in general have always been neglected by

researchers and policymakers and largely represented in a stereotypical manner as "passive dependants". Refugee women in particular are considered as victims and classified as a needy group. As there has been very little study of the plight of academic Algerian women who fled during the 1990s to countries other than France, my current research becomes even more relevant. The position of Algerian women in the UK, for example, is still virtually unknown. My aim is to inform policymakers in both Algeria and other hosting countries of the potential and knowledge that these women can bring in both contexts.

It is my experience that people who have experienced oppression and violence, or been close to death, find reserves of strength that enable them to look at life in a different way – searching for new horizons and opportunities. I hope to give more displaced people the chance to contribute to British academia, a chance that LSE has given to me. ■



Latefa Guemar is a visiting fellow in the Gender Institute at LSE. For more on the Scholars at Risk scheme, see lse.ac.uk/humanRights/scholarsAtRisk/Home.aspx