



BRYCS Parenting Conversations: Mary, A Sudanese Mother

On March 22, 2007, Mary, met with BRYCS staff to talk about her life and experiences as a refugee from Sudan, now raising a family with her husband in the United States.

Family Background and History:

My name is Mary. My family and I came to the U.S. in July of 2006. I am 28 years old and my husband is 32. We have been married for about 11 years. My husband, Daniel, is from Malakal in Southern Sudan, and his family is Nuer. He has one brother and two sisters; two of his siblings now live in the U.S. also. I am from Juba and my family is Nagaraw. I have three sisters and four brothers, but they are all still in Sudan. Aside from English, I speak Nuer, Nagaraw, and Arabic. Traditionally in my culture, families arrange marriages, but my husband and I chose each other. My father did not want me to marry my husband because he was young; my father wanted me to marry someone older and more established.

My husband and I have a ten-year-old son named Jon, a 3-year-old daughter named Victoria, and a 3-month-old girl. Our second daughter was born five months after we arrived in the U.S. In my culture, we often name each child according to something that was going on at the time the child was born. Our baby girl's name means that you have had a difficult time but you turn it into something good, because we came through a difficult time in Egypt to start a new life in the U.S.

Khartoum to Cairo

When my son was about four months old, we left our town and moved to Khartoum, the capital of Sudan, so that my husband could attend university. All students at the university were required to take Islamic religious education classes. My husband and some of his friends said they did not want to take these religious education classes, and they organized debates at the university about this requirement. Some of the Muslim students were upset by these debates and there was fighting between my husband's group and the Muslim students at the university. Afterwards, some of the young men in my husband's group were put in jail for criticizing the government. My husband feared that he would be put in jail too, so we fled to Egypt. I was 22 years old and our son was four. I wanted to return to Sudan, but my husband did not think it was safe for us. We stayed in Cairo for six years. We had some friends in Egypt who helped us to register as refugees with the United Nations office in Cairo. There were lots of Sudanese in Cairo.

I worked in Cairo doing housecleaning and babysitting for a British woman and a Dutch woman. While I worked, either my husband or his aunt cared for our son. My husband tried working for about two years while we were there, but women could get paid more for housecleaning and babysitting, so part of the time my husband stayed home with our son while I worked.

When my children were ages 2 and 8, I had to leave them at home alone. I told my son, the eldest, to call me if he had any problems. When our middle daughter was about 2-and-a-half years old, our ten-year-old niece began watching them. One time, our niece walked out onto the apartment balcony and my daughter pushed the balcony door shut, which automatically locked. My son was sleeping while this happened, so there was no one inside the apartment who could open the door. She watched as my two-year-old daughter picked up a knife and began playing with it, but my niece could not do anything except watch, so she just sat on the balcony and cried until my husband came home. After that, my employer said that I could bring my daughter to work with me while I cleaned.

Sudanese and Egyptians

There was a lot of mistrust between Sudanese and Egyptians in Cairo. Sometimes Egyptian children would spit on my son, or throw water or rocks at us. When we would ride the metro trains, Egyptian youth would try to push us out of the train so that the doors would close on us, and the elder Egyptians would not stop them from treating us this way.

In Egypt if you wanted to go to the doctor, the U.N. would pay half of the cost and a church group would pay the other half. There were rumors among the Sudanese in Cairo that if you went to an Egyptian doctor for a Caesarian-section, the doctors would remove more than just the baby from the mother's body. The UN office would only refer us to certain doctors who were known to them.

Childbirth

My son was born at home in Sudan. Female relatives—like my aunts, grandmother, and sister-in-law—were present during my son's birth, along with a female doctor. In Nuer culture, female relatives care for the new mother for forty days after the childbirth. The new mother is given very hot baths, and she does not go out of the house.

Other women take care of the household tasks, like shopping and cooking. The afterbirth [or placenta] is usually either buried in the floor of the home, or placed in a secure container and thrown into the river. This is done so that animals will not get it; otherwise people believe you will not be able to have another baby.

Our second child was born in a hospital in Cairo. There, only the doctor and the nurse were allowed into the room while I was giving birth, no one else. I didn't like this hospital very much. There were five patients in one room. I could have stayed in the hospital overnight, but I didn't want to stay there, so I came home the same day as the birth. The U.N. referred us to a specific doctor, where I had to show a card with my U.N. refugee case number, and the U.N. paid the hospital bills.

Our third child was born here in the U.S. I had my own room in the hospital, and it went fine. With this child, it is like having a baby for the first time, because with my first two children I had other women around to help me at home. My husband says I am now an American wife because I am doing it all myself this time.

WIC

The baby and I are eligible for help through the Women, Infants and Children program (WIC), which allows me to buy certain foods that are healthy for the baby and me. I like to buy Nido brand powdered milk [a brand more common in Europe and Latin America with higher milk-fat content than U.S. powdered milk], because it is what I am used to, but sometimes the store cashiers will tell me that it is not covered by WIC, even though WIC covers powdered milk. It helps to have a church friend with me to convince the cashier that this is okay.

Housing

When we first arrived in the U.S., we moved into the house of my husband's sister and her husband. They have six children and live in a three-bedroom house. It was very crowded. We stayed in the downstairs family room; in July it was very hot, I was pregnant, and there was no air conditioning. I remember that during cultural orientation they said that things would be better in the United States, but after one week here, I wanted to go back because this was worse than Egypt.

My husband's sister had only one car, so they could not always drive us where we needed to go. I remember calling a Sudanese friend in Portland, Maine, who suggested that if my brother-in-law cannot take me to an appointment, then I should ask my resettlement caseworker to drive me. Soon after that, in a meeting with World Relief, our caseworker asked my sister-in-law how long we could live with them. She said we could stay with them for about six months, but I said I wanted to live in my own house. Our caseworker then took us to several government offices, to sign up for food stamps and public housing. The public housing office said they could provide a housing voucher for up to \$600 a month. About one week later, our resettlement caseworker told us that she had located a two-bedroom townhome through subsidized housing that only cost \$85 a month. The rent is based on our income, so as our income increases so will our rent. We are happy here. We have met our neighbors, many of whom are either Russian or Mexican.

Son's Schooling

Our son is now in fifth grade; he has had some problems on the bus with a few children. They would push him as they were walking home from the bus, or throw his backpack, or not let him sit where he wanted on the bus. I called my son's school and they said they would talk with the bus driver about this. My husband also took our son over to the home of one of the boys who was bothering him, and my husband told the mother what had happened. The school also set up a meeting between our son and a boy that was bothering him. This all happened a few months after our son started school, but it seems to be better now.

In Egypt, when there were problems with another student after school, the school said it was the parents' responsibility. When we were in Cairo, our son was bothered by some of the Egyptian children, so we moved him to a school run for refugees. Most of the students and teachers there were Sudanese. The school was taught in Arabic with one class in English. He went to school there for six months before we left Cairo to come to the U.S.

Our son is doing well in school, and he says that he likes the school here. He has already gone beyond the school's expectations for him for this year. Here we meet with our son's teacher for school conferences, but in Egypt the parents would only visit the school for a celebration or if your child had done something bad in school.

Employment, Education

My husband works stocking shelves at a department store from 10 PM until 6:30 AM, five days a week. Someone from the church drops him off at work at night and then picks him up everyday in the morning. It is not too far away, but I don't like having him gone at night. He does not work on Monday and Tuesday, so he goes to English classes at the county workforce center in the mornings from 9:00 until 12:00. He is in the advanced level English class.

I also took English classes at the county workforce center. People from the church would drive my daughter to daycare so that I could go to class. I started out in the middle level English class, but I passed a test and was placed in the advanced English class. I stopped going to class when the baby was born, but I will start up again when the baby is about four months old.

As a child, I went to an Arabic school up to Grade 5. Then in Khartoum I went to an Arabic school up to Grade 12, and I took one class in English. Last month my husband and I also took a test to enroll in a nursing assistant course. My husband passed the entrance test, so he will begin the nursing assistant course in a few months. I will try to take the test again after I study some more English.

Transportation, Church Help

The most difficult thing has been living here without a car. We are in a more suburban county, where there is no public transportation. At first we missed appointments, or our resettlement caseworker would drive us to appointments. Our caseworker had told us that many churches in the U.S. help refugees, so we tried calling a Methodist church nearby. The pastor said he would come visit us the next day. He came and talked with us at our house; then a little while after the pastor left, a woman from the church came and wrote down everything that we needed for the house. She left for a while and then started bringing things for the house. The church has given us furniture, clothes for the children, blankets, jackets. They also help us a lot with transportation. The church has really been helping us. We also go to the church on Sundays. The county helped us to file our taxes. We used the refund to buy a car, but we must wait until my husband gets his driver's license before we can use it.

Hitting Wives and Children

In Sudan, it is okay for husbands to beat their wives, but it is not okay here. We have a Sudanese friend who lives in Canada, but his wife is still in Sudan. The husband does not want to bring his wife to Canada, because he says that here the wife is over the husband.

It is not good for the men to beat the women. Some of the men understand this, but it may be harder to change for those who do not have education. In some Nuer villages, the wife and children would live in one place, while the husband would live separately, so some men and women are not used to living together in the same house. Also, in Sudan men may have more than one wife.

I remember being told, during our three-day cultural orientation before coming to the U.S., that you cannot beat your children in the U.S., and that children over age 18 are free to do what they want—in Sudan even if a woman is 32 but not yet married, she will be expected to stay at home with her parents. As a child, if I was bad my father would beat me with a stick, but my mother never hit me. In my husband's family it was the reverse—he was beaten by his mother but not by his father.

A relative who lives in the U.S. has a teenage daughter who did not want to listen to her parents, so she went outside the house and sat under a tree. Then she went to the police and told them that she was not happy and that her mother was beating her. When the police brought her back home, she lied to the police and said that her mother was her stepmother. The police eventually found out that the girl had been getting into fights at school and that her mother had hit her for this. The girl finally admitted that she had called the police because her mother was not allowing her to do what she wanted.

I like that there is not beating here like in Sudan—in Sudan, even if you're 18, your father has the right to beat you—but I don't want my children to call the police on me, like this child did.

I don't think there is a big difference between U.S. and Sudanese values, but here the rules say that parents should not hit their children. So, here in America, what *do* you do?

Advice to Others

My advice to other refugees just coming to the U.S. would be to talk with people who are already here, to network with them and get advice from others. If I don't know how to do something, I ask somebody. A good thing in America is that if someone is having problems, people want to help; they like people to feel happy.

Also, in my culture there is a saying: "Hurry, hurry, no blessing." This is a way of saying that you need to be patient. I remind myself of that.

BRYCS would like to thank World Relief for their help in arranging this interview. Learn more about World Relief's work with refugees.

Discussion Questions for Refugee Serving Agencies:

1. What guidance or information would you offer Mary's family regarding discipline practices in the U.S.?
 - BRYCS Resource: *Raising Children in a New Country: A Toolkit for Working with Newcomer Parents*
 - *Positive Discipline* (available in English, Hmong, Somali and Spanish); Regents of the University of Minnesota, and the Children's Hospitals and Clinics; Minneapolis-St. Paul, MN (1999).
2. How would you help families like Mary's to understand what public schools expect of parents in the U.S.?
 - BRYCS Resources:
 - Spring 2007 Spotlight: *Involving Refugee Parents in their Children's Education*
 - *Limited English Proficient (LEP) Parent Involvement Project: A Guide for Connecting Immigrant Parents and Schools*
 - *A Guide to Your Children's School: A Parent Handbook* [available in English, Arabic, Bosnian, Russian, Spanish and Vietnamese]
3. How can refugees in your community get around if they do not own a car? What transportation resources are available in your community to assist refugees? How do transportation issues affect your agency's ability to work with refugees?
 - Resource: *RefugeeWorks newsletter on transportation issues* (Summer 2000)
4. What cross-cultural issues can arise for refugee mothers enrolled in government programs like the Women, Infants and Children program (WIC)? How does your agency address food and nutrition issues with refugees?
 - Resources
 - U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants, *Healthy Eating, Healthy Living in the United States Flip Chart*
 - Web list of "Ethnic/Cultural Resources" related to food and nutrition
5. What kind of orientation is, or should be, provided to refugees in your community on U.S. laws and norms about domestic violence or spousal abuse? "
 - Resources
 - *Refugee Women's Alliance (ReWA) Domestic Violence Program, including sexual assault educational videos in Cambodian, Chinese, Amharic, Russian, Somali and Vietnamese*
 - *Tapestri Inc., Immigrant and Refugee Coalition Challenging Gender Based Oppression*
 - *The Government Response to Domestic Violence Against Refugee and Immigrant Women in the Minneapolis/St. Paul Metropolitan Area: A Human Rights Report*