



Seeking Refuge

A film by Karen Cho

directed in collaboration with Ian Oliveri
produced by Nathalie Barton and Ian Quenneville



Some 30 000 people seek asylum in Canada every year: this is the story of five of them as they journey through our complex refugee system.

PRESS KIT

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Québec, Canada, 2009, HD Digital Video, Color, Stereo, 70'

Directed by	Karen Cho
Researched and Written by	Karen Cho Ian Oliveri
Photography	Michael Wees
Sound	Paulo Castro-Lopes
Edited by	Andrea Henriquez
Online Editing	Guillaume Millet
Sound Editing	Benoît Dame
Sound Mix	Jean-Pierre Bissonnette
Original Music	Robert Marcel Lepage
Development Producer and Creative Collaborator	Ian Oliveri
Produced by	Nathalie Barton Ian Quenneville

Produced by
InformAction

with the participation of

Canadian Television Fund
created by the Government of Canada
and the Canadian Cable Industry

Québec
(Film and Television Tax Credit - Gestion SODEC)

Canada
(The Canadian Film or Video Production Tax Credit)

SODEC
Société de développement des entreprises culturelles - Québec
Programme d'aide aux jeunes créateurs

with the collaboration of

Radio-Canada
RDI
&
CBC Newsworld

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Three-line Synopsis

Five asylum seekers undertake the complex journey through Canada's refugee system. A moving look at what it takes to reach safety after escaping war, persecution or rape in their home country.

Short Synopsis

Five asylum seekers set out on the lengthy journey to be accepted as refugees in Canada. Plunging into the experiences, hopes and struggles of asylum seekers looking for protection, *Seeking Refuge* follows newly-arrived claimants awaiting their hearings and captures the lives of those who have been denied asylum and are facing deportation. From border crossings to refugee shelters, a moving look at the lives of people who navigate Canada's complex refugee determination system after escaping war, persecution, rape and political unrest.

Long Synopsis

Some 30,000 people will make refugee claims in Canada this year and 40 to 45% will be accepted as refugees. *Seeking Refuge* is the moving story of five of them. Following their lives over the course of a year, the film takes an intimate look at the lives of those who have escaped war, persecution, rape and political unrest to seek safety in Canada.

The film plunges into the experiences, hopes and struggles of asylum seekers as they navigate their way through Canada's refugee system. From border crossings to refugee shelters, *Seeking Refuge* follows newly-arrived claimants awaiting their hearings and captures the lives of those who have been denied asylum and face deportation.

In a situation where peoples' lives are at stake and the decision to grant or deny asylum could mean life or death for the refugee, *Seeking Refuge* offers a provocative look at both the refugee system and those whose lives lie in the balance.

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Director's Statement

As a filmmaker, much of my work has dealt with issues of identity, immigration, and the re-telling of history from unique and often ignored perspectives. I've always been interested in refugee issues and inspired by the courage of people who have fled torture or persecution to begin again in a new country.

The idea for *Seeking Refuge* stemmed from my unease with the post 9/11 "security atmosphere" and global trends towards closing-off borders. I found that refugees are often painted in the media as "security threats", "line jumpers" or "pariahs" in our society. I was concerned with how negative stereotypes and misconceptions could imperil the lives of people seeking safety.

I wanted to make a film that explored the lives of people fleeing persecution and their struggles to seek safety and start over again in Canada. What is it like to leave your family and loved ones behind? How does it feel to have your future, safety, and wellbeing decided by a single interview with a stranger? What goes through your mind when you know you could be deported and returned to danger? *Seeking Refuge* puts a human face to the issue of refugee protection. Told through the eyes and experiences of refugee claimants, the film allows audiences to better understand the human side of Canada's refugee system.

In making the film, I was moved by the bravery and perseverance of the refugees I met. Unlike immigrants, refugees never choose to come here; they are forced to flee their homes and loved ones in search of safety. Having escaped violence, death threats and torture, they now face isolation, cultural and language barriers. Yet each had such will to survive, to protect their children, and to start over.

I was also inspired and encouraged by the dedication of the refugee support-workers, lawyers, and Board Members I met who made it their life's mission to protect the rights of refugees.

Canada is known worldwide as a country that celebrates its pluralism and is defined by its attitudes towards issues such as immigration and refugee protection. But in a world where borders are closing while human migration increases, is this still the case? Our refugee protection system is certainly one of the most generous in the world, but it is also plagued with problems and flaws that can have dire consequences for refugees. I was troubled by how some

asylum seekers had fallen through the cracks of the system and were forced to wait years before a decision would be made on their future. It seemed incomprehensible to me that, in Canada, asylum seekers still don't have a right of appeal despite the fact that Canadian law calls for one. I was appalled and disappointed by how many pillars of our refugee system are slowly eroding.

In the end, being accepted or denied as a refugee can mean life or death for an asylum claimant. Our refugee protection system holds people's lives in the balance; this is something we should never forget.

In *Seeking Refuge* I hoped to explore the personal stories of refugees and speak to the humanity of a system put in place to protect people's lives. The result is a moving story of survival, displacement and regeneration.

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Main Characters

The Asylum Seekers

Esly (Honduras)

At 20 years old, Esly has experienced enough violence to last a lifetime. She came to Canada seeking protection from the violent street gangs of Honduras. Timid and tormented by the past, Esly is unable to speak of the violence she experienced, and the recent murder of her common-law husband. She is living with relatives in Canada as she awaits her refugee hearing and the decision as to whether or not she and her son will be granted protection in Canada.

"Until you get through that refugee hearing it's like you are living in limbo and it's like you have to think about these things everyday because nothing is ever resolved. Hopefully getting through the refugee hearing she's going to be able to come to some sort of resolution and be able to live with what has happened ..." – Stewart Istvanffy, Esly's Lawyer

Najia (Afghanistan)

As a Human Rights Activist, Najia spent decades campaigning for women's rights in Afghanistan. Due to her involvement with various social justice campaigns, Najia began receiving death threats. After two of her colleagues were killed and her own family was also threatened, Najia made the difficult decision to flee Afghanistan and ask for asylum in Canada. Due to the strength of her case and the fact that she is a well-known public figure in her country, Najia could be fast-tracked through Canada's refugee determination system. She is awaiting her expedited interview where her future in Canada will be decided.

"It's not easy to be a refugee; to feel that no one knows you and no one knows your value...how useful you were for your people and country. You are working and investing for almost all of your life to establish yourself in a place and when you are leaving that place, you feel that you're lost..." – Najia

Leyla (Democratic Republic of Congo)

Leyla fled the Democratic Republic of Congo, with her young daughter Sophia, to escape the sexual violence she had experienced at the hands of soldiers in her war-torn country. During Leyla's expedited refugee interview in Canada, questions were raised surrounding her identity. Her case has been sent back into the system where she is awaiting her full refugee hearing. Tormented by the past and also fearful of her indefinite future in Canada, Leyla has to do all that she can to obtain identity documents proving she is indeed who she claims to be. The consequences could mean that both she and her daughter are returned to the violence that they narrowly escaped.

"I feel like now I don't see my future. I don't know where I am going. I don't know where I am. I am really worried about my daughter's future. I want her to live like normal kids... That's why I came here." – Leyla

Fouad (Palestinian from Lebanon)

Fouad is a refugee claimant that has fallen through the cracks of the system. Both he and his brother Mohamad escaped Lebanon fleeing threats and violence from the Fateh militia. The brothers claimed refugee status in Canada where their cases were heard before two separate Board Members at the Immigration and Refugee Board. To Fouad's dismay, his claim was rejected while that of his brother was accepted. With little recourse and no possibility of appealing the decision, Fouad faces deportation from Canada.

"I think about my wife. I think about my children. Who stays seven or eight years alone without seeing anyone from their family? It's very difficult." – Fouad

Kader (Algeria)

Kader is a blind man from Algeria who finds himself at the end of the refugee road in Canada. His claim for refugee status was rejected as were his repeated requests to stay on humanitarian and compassionate grounds. In 2005, Kader was given a deportation order and told to leave the country. However, touched by their fellow neighbour, Kader's community of Pointe St-Charles rallied around him offering him sanctuary in their local church. Since taking sanctuary, hundreds of organizations and community groups have supported Kader's case. Determined to stay in Canada, Kader and his supporters are fighting to have the Minister of Immigration grant him status in Canada.

"The government can't forget about me, but they can choose to ignore me. That's how I feel..." – Kader

The "Specialists"

Peter Showler, Former Chairperson of the Immigration and Refugee Board (1999 - 2002)

Peter Showler has written *Refugee Sandwich: stories of exile and asylum*, a collection of stories inspired by his experience as Chairperson of the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada from 1999 to 2002. Peter Showler teaches Immigration and Refugee Law and Advanced Refugee Law at the University of Ottawa. He knows Canada's refugee determination system inside and out, then frequently speaks and writes on refugee issues. He is both a loyal defender of the system and one of its biggest critics.

"No other judge in Canada makes decisions that, if incorrect, result in torture or loss of life. That is the potential consequence of a mistake being made at the Immigration and Refugee Board " – Peter Showler

Fernand Gauthier, Former Board Member of the Immigration and Refugee Board (1988-1998)

Fernand Gauthier spent a decade serving as a Board Member and the Immigration and Refugee Board where he ruled on hundreds of refugee claims. A true insider of the system, Fernand speaks first hand about the difficulties in judging refugee claims and some of the trends he has seen in the system over the years. Fernand continues to work in the refugee field holding regular workshops about Canada's refugee determination system for community groups and social workers.

"Before you is someone with a story you could never imagine and you'll never have enough time to really understand, despite all your expertise. Being a Board Member is very tough. You're never totally certain of doing a good job..." – Fernand Gauthier

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Karen Cho's Biofilmography

Short Biography

Native to Montreal, Karen Cho is an emerging filmmaker who has carved out a name for herself directing both documentary and fiction films. Karen's films often recount un-told histories and explore themes of immigration, activism, self-identity and social justice. Her approach to filmmaking is shaped by personal experience, pop-culture and her background in a richly multi-ethnic family. Karen is interested in using film as a tool for social debate. A graduate from Concordia University in 2001, she has already received several awards for her work.

Filmography

In the Shadow of Gold Mountain, 43 minutes, Documentary, 2004

Seeking Refuge, 42'30" / 70' minutes, Documentary, 2009

Long Biography

Native to Montreal, Karen Cho is an emerging filmmaker who has carved out a name for herself directing both documentary and fiction films.

In 2001, she graduated from Concordia University's Film Production Program where she received the **Mel Hoppenheim Award**. Her graduate film *EVE* also won the award for **Best Cinematography** and premiered at the NYC Flicker Film Festival in 2002.

In 2003, Karen was the winner of the NFB's "**Reel Diversity Competition**." The result was the chance to direct *In the Shadow of Gold Mountain*, her first professional documentary. The film uncovers the stories of the last living survivors of the Chinese Head Tax and Exclusion Act. It premiered at the Montreal World Film Festival in 2004 and was broadcast on CBC Newsworld's "**Rough Cuts**" in 2005. The film was awarded a **Golden Sheaf Award for Best Multicultural Documentary** at the 2005 Yorkton Film Festival and also garnered an **Honourable Mention Certificate** (Humanities Category) at the 2005 Columbus International Film and

Video Festival in Worthington, USA. In 2006, the Canadian Association of Broadcasters honoured the film with a coveted **Golden Ribbon Award for Diversity in News and Information Programming**.

In 2004-2005, Karen worked as a series director for *Past Lives* (Global) a 13 x 30 minute documentary series about Canadians in search of their ancestral roots. Karen has directed 4 episodes of the series on topics ranging from Chinese Immigration to Inuit history to Japanese-Canadian WWII Internment to Scottish Home Children.

In 2006, Karen directed the National Film Board's first ever video podcast. Entitled *Chinese Head Tax - the Government Officially Apologizes*, the 10-minute documentary captured the unveiling of and reaction to the redress package that ended the Chinese Canadian 22-year-struggle for redress.

Karen is currently in development of a feature-length documentary and mini-series entitled *Ten Thousand Roses: The Making of a Feminist Revolution* about the history and future of Feminism in Canada, based on Judy Rebick's book of the same name.

Karen is also working as a series director for *Extraordinary Canadians* (Omni), a 12 x 30 minute documentary series based upon the *Penguin Extraordinary Canadians* collection of books. The series explores the lives of eminent Canadians from the perspective of leading contemporary writers.

Karen's films often recount un-told histories and explore themes of immigration, activism, self-identity and social justice. Her approach to filmmaking is shaped by personal experience, pop-culture and her background in a richly multi-ethnic family. Karen is interested in using film as a tool for social debate.

Seeking Refuge is her second auteur documentary, a film produced by InformAction with the collaboration of Radio-Canada, RDI and CBC Newsworld.

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The Production Company

InformAction, founded in Montreal in 1971, produces single documentaries and mini-series on social issues, international affairs, art, world cultures and human rights. Many have won awards and all are distributed internationally.

InformAction produces on a regular basis for Canadian prime-time television (Radio-Canada, CBC/CBC Newsworld, Télé-Québec, Canal D, TV5, Artv, Bravo) and has done several successful international coproductions, in particular with France. Several projects are currently in development with La compagnie des taxi-brousse.

Latest titles include ***Shock Waves*** by Pierre Mignault & Hélène Magny (*Film Most Likely to Change the World Award @ Detroit Docs 2007, CIDA Award for best Canadian documentary on international development @ Hot Docs 2008*), ***A Dream for Kabul*** by Philippe Baylaucq and ***Afghan Chronicles*** by Dominic Morissette, both coproduced with the National Film Board of Canada, ***American Fugitive: The Truth about Hassan*** by Jean-Daniel Lafond (*Hot Docs 2006, Marseille 2006, FNC Montreal 2006, Dubai 2006, DocuDays - Beirut 2006*), ***The Magic Touch*** (*3 Gêmeaux Awards 2005, including Best Cultural Documentary*), ***Lifelike*** by Tally Abecassis (*3 nominations at the Gemini Awards including Best Science/Nature Documentary, Vancouver VIFF 2005, Hot Docs 2005, SXSW 2006*), ***The Genocide in Me*** (*Best International Feature @ Staten Island 2006; Finalist for the Pierre and Yolande Perrault Award 2005 – Best emerging documentary director – and for the Ruth and Alex Dworkin Award for Tolerance 2005, Finalist for the Golden Sheaf Award for Best Point of View Documentary 2006*).