

Transnational forced migration and negotiating emotional well-being: the case of female refugees in South Africa

Abstract

This study seeks to gain a better understanding of how a group of female refugees perceive their emotional well-being and how they make sense of their emotions. The discussion is based on a comparative qualitative study done in South Africa among Congolese, Burundian and Zimbabwean refugees. Attention is paid to intrapersonal emotional ambivalence and how the emotional well-being of refugees relates to their socio-economic context and more specifically their challenging life experiences. Reference is made to the role children and religion play in respondents' perceived emotional well-being and hope for the future. In addition, all the respondents had to manage emotions related to transnational familial ties. On the one hand, an acute sense of family separation was experienced. On the other hand, respondents felt a sense of financial responsibility towards their kin who were left behind. Yet, few respondents had the means to provide family members with any form of financial assistance. This in turn had repercussions for their emotional well-being.

Keywords: emotional well-being; transnational forced migration; refugees; transnational family ties; family separation

Introduction

Emotions infuse nearly every aspect of human experience, social interaction and interpersonal relations. It is therefore comprehensible that a strong and often conflicting sense of emotional well-being is interwoven into the very experience and condition of those involved in transnational migration. This is probably even more so for those who have been forced to migrate in order to escape persecution and other human rights infringements in their countries of origin.

In the past twenty years, South Africa has increasingly become a host society for many forcibly displaced individuals and families from across the African continent. According to recent reports on global refugee trends, published by the United Nations Higher Commission on Refugees (UNHCR), South Africa has received the highest number of asylum seeker claim submissions on an annual basis for the years between 2006 and 2011 (UNHCR 2012). In 2013 South Africa ranked third globally in number of claims received (UNHCR

2014a). To date, the cumulative number of refugees in this country stands at 65,881 (UNHCR 2014a).

During the past ten years a substantial number of studies has paid attention to the plight of refugees in South Africa, with specific reference to legal-political issues; xenophobia; daily life challenges; and survival strategies (see Landau and Jacobsen 2004; Amisi and Ballard 2005; Belvedere 2007; Dalton-Greyling 2008; Handmaker et al. 2008; Amit et al. 2009; Amit 2011; CoRMSA 2011; Krause-Vilmar and Chaffin 2011). Although the body of knowledge on the mental well-being of refugees in other parts of the world has been growing (see Brough et al. 2003; Carswell 2011; Donnelly et al. 2011; Kirmayer et al. 2011; Thomas et al. 2011; Lauritzen and Sivertsen 2012), few studies in South Africa shed light on the subjective lived experiences of refugees with particular reference to their state of emotional being. The work of Dalton-Greyling (2008), based on the findings of the Johannesburg sample of the African Cities Project's 2006 quantitative dataset, provides some insight into the well-being of a group of refugees and asylum seekers (n=403). Although the study provides a valuable glimpse into the lives of the respondents, the discussion of the findings is mostly based on descriptive statistics. A recent report released by the African Centre for Migration and Society (ACMS), in collaboration with the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation (CSV), focusses on the "psychosocial and health rights of forced migrants in Johannesburg" (ACMS 2011, 2). A small sample of refugees and asylum seekers (n=35) who received counselling at the Trauma Clinic of the CSV were surveyed and in-depth interviews were conducted with nine others. The findings were used to illuminate challenges faced by respondents to access health and psychosocial rights and the effect daily stressors have on emotional well-being. Against the background of the limitations listed by Dalton-Greyling and the ACMS regarding their respective studies, emphasis was placed on the need for further research in developing better insight into the emotional well-being of refugees in South Africa. Moreover, although many of the South African studies include women in their samples, few highlight possible variances between refugee men and women with regard to their lived experiences. As a result, findings are often discussed in terms of 'generic' experiences voiced by refugees without contemplating the well-being of refugee women in particular.

Based on the findings of a qualitative study concerning itself with individual and family well-being among refugee women in South Africa, this paper explores the perceived

emotional experiences of a group of Congolese, Burundian and Zimbabwean female refugees and how they negotiate their emotional well-being. In conceptualising *emotional well-being* we considered the definition used by Kahneman and Deaton (2010) at the Centre for Health and Well-being, Princeton University. These authors define *emotional well-being* as “...the emotional quality of an individual’s everyday experience...[the] experience of joy, fascination, anxiety, sadness, anger, and affection that make one’s life pleasant or unpleasant.” (Kahneman and Deaton 2010, 16489). Furthermore, the legal definition of the concept *refugee*, as outlined in South Africa’s Refugees Act (No.130 of 1998), was used in this study¹. Except for four participants who had asylum seeker permits and were awaiting the final processing of the documents acknowledging them as refugees, all other participants in the study stated that they held refugee status. For the purposes of this study all participants were considered bona fide refugees.

In the attempt at gaining a better understanding of the emotional well-being of the respondents, we turned inter alia to a cluster of theories in Sociology and Social Psychology known as the *Expectations States Theories* which include, for example, Joseph Berger’s (1988) theory on affect expectation. According to Turner and Stets (2005) this group of theories postulates that “[p]eople develop affect expectations for self, others and the overall situation” (p. 231) and that “[w]hat people expect to occur in a situation and what actually occurs will arouse negative emotions when expectations are not met and positive emotions when expectations are realized” (p. 229). In the same vein, the justice theory of emotions state that an individual tends to experience a heightened sense of emotional well-being when fair procedures are used in the decision making process about specific outcomes (i.e., procedural justice) and when he/she obtains the outcomes expected (i.e., distributive justice). In turn, emotional well-being is affected negatively when a person views procedures to be unfair and/or receives outcomes that are less than what he/she anticipated (Stets and Osborn 2008; Stets 2012). This enquiry not only attempts to

¹ “[A] person qualifies for refugee status [...] if that person (a) owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted by reason of his or her race, tribe, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership of a particular social group, is outside the country of his or her nationality and is unable or unwilling to avail himself or herself of the protection of that country, or, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his or her former habitual residence is unable or, owing to such fear, unwilling to return to it; or (b) owing to external aggression, occupation, foreign domination or events seriously disturbing or disrupting public order in either a part or the whole of his or her country of origin or nationality, is compelled to leave his or her place of habitual residence in order to seek refuge elsewhere: or (c) is a dependant of a person contemplated in paragraph (a) or (b)” (Chapter 1, Refugees Act, No. 130 of 1998 of the Republic of South Africa).

foreground the perceived emotional well-being of female refugees but also ponders how their expectations as well as other factors in their human and non-human surroundings may be related to their emotional state of mind.

Background to the study

In reviewing the literature on international forced migration it is not surprising to find that those seeking refuge often experience heightened feelings of emotional distress and a low sense of emotional well-being. It has, for example, been found that many refugees experience mental health problems for a considerable time due to the horrific atrocities they were exposed to in their home countries (Bandeira et al. 2010; Carswell 2011; Kirmayer et al. 2011). Some refugees develop depression which may persist long after arriving in the host society (Bolton 2001; Palinkas et al. 2003; Donnelly et al. 2011). Pessimism and a low sense of well-being were, for example, evident among a sample of refugees involved in a survey in South Africa in 2006 (Dalton-Greyling 2008). This muted sense of well-being was attributed primarily to the high levels of poverty among refugees and the fact that refugees are often victims of crime and on the receiving end of xenophobic sentiments. Inadequate accommodation, the lack of a stable livelihood, as well as the difficulty in accessing social welfare, primary healthcare, and education were identified as some of the daily stressors experienced by refugees (Landau and Jacobsen 2004; Amisi and Ballard 2005; Dalton-Greyling 2008; ACMS 2011).

However, it is not only daily survival challenges that leave refugees feeling anxious about their 'here and now', but many also experience anxiety and distress because of their concern for the well-being of their loved ones left behind in their countries of origin (Brough et al. 2003). In their study among Bosnian refugee families in Chicago, USA, Weine et al. (2004, 155) observed, for example, that family separation took "huge emotional tolls on family members". Refugees often also manifest a strong sense of obligation towards family members who have been left behind and feel morally compelled to provide transnational financial support (Pittaway et al. 2009; Kankonde 2010).

The debate about the feminisation of migration as well as the emphasis placed on gender as an important variable in explaining the differences in the lived experiences among migrants (Kihato 2007; Piper 2008; Jinnah 2013), point to the significance of studies employing a gender lens in researching the perceptions and experiences of those forcibly

displaced (Binder and Tošić, 2005; Amirthalingam and Lakshman 2013). Although studies focussing on refugee women in particular highlight similar issues to those raised in studies which include both men and women in their samples, the former cluster of studies report on additional matters that are of specific concern to refugee women when reflecting on their sense of well-being. This include, for example, bitter-sweet nostalgia and grief about how things used to be which impacts negatively on their sense of well-being particularly when contemplating the great loss they have suffered - loss of loved-ones, property, home, and a sense of belonging (Keyes and Kane 2004; Isfahani 2008). In addition, refugee women often seem to experience feelings of isolation, loneliness and a lack of social support (Schafer 2002; Keyes and Kane 2004; Goodson and Phillimore 2008). Moreover, culture shock and a sense of liminality have been reported by some refugee women – especially during the initial phases of resettlement (Keyes and Kane 2004; Baird and Boyle 2012). Women’s concern for their children’s well-being has been cited as one of the primary motivators in doing their best to support their families and remain hopeful amidst challenging life experiences (Pavlish 2007; Baird and Boyle 2012; Bokore 2013).

The role of religion in maintaining hope has been cited in a number of studies focusing on refugees in Southern Africa (Sadouni 2009; Gerloff 2010; Nzayabino 2010). For many refugees religion offers a framework for making sense of traumatic experiences associated with fleeing their countries of origin; the daily hardships faced in the host country; and the conflicting emotions they often experience. Moreover, religion does not only provide spiritual support, but plays an important role in facilitating the integration experiences of refugees in the host society. One could argue that for some refugees participation in the activities of religious organisations is part of their daily survival strategies. By so doing, refugees are able to access social support networks and faith based humanitarian relief (Sadouni 2009; Nzayabino 2010).

Method

The research population constituted refugees hailing from three African countries, i.e., the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Burundi and Zimbabwe. All three of these countries have witnessed armed conflict and human rights abuses resulting in numerous deaths, large scale internal displacement and cross boarder forced migration (Human Rights Watch 2014; Insight on Conflict 2014). The Congolese civil wars, which started in the mid-

1990s, have been referred to as the deadliest since World War II, with an estimated death toll of 5-6 million. In spite of several initiatives since 2003 to promote democracy and build peace, violence and human rights violations have not subsided in the eastern regions of the country (Human Rights Watch 2014). The citizens of Burundi have faced similar human rights violations. Nearly a decade has passed since the end of the civil war (1993–2005), yet ethnic violence still persist in Burundi. Although the dialogue between the Burundian government and opposition parties has had positive outcomes, the incidence of politically motivated violence remains high and large numbers of the population continue to seek refuge in other countries (Human Rights Watch 2014; Insight on Conflict 2014). Politically motivated violence against civil society and the economic crisis in Zimbabwe have been listed as the key reasons for the large number of Zimbabweans seeking asylum in neighbouring countries – South Africa in particular - since the mid-2000s (Boddy-Evens 2011, Human Rights Watch 2014). At the start of the study in 2009 these three refugee populations were of particular interest to us. Although UNHCR data at the time indicated that repatriation among Congolese and Burundian refugees had taken place, renewed political instability propelled yet more Congolese and Burundian asylum seekers to follow others who have fled to South Africa. Furthermore, the numbers of Zimbabweans applying for refugee status in South Africa increased dramatically as a result of the political violence in the aftermath of the presidential elections in 2008 and 2013 respectively (UNHCR 2014b; Human Rights Watch 2014).

More specifically, the study focused on the refugee population living in downtown Johannesburg and Pretoria (Tshwane) in the Gauteng province of South Africa. Given that the South African government does not provide any accommodation assistance to those who are forcibly displaced, refugees often resettle in urban areas and are inclined to take up residence in rundown apartment buildings and informal housing in inner-city areas (Amisi and Ballard 2005; Dalton-Greyling 2008; ACMS 2011). A qualitative approach was used in the attempt at gaining insight into the subjective emotional well-being of refugees. For the purpose of this inquiry, the focus fell on a sample of female refugees with children who were identified as possible participants using purposive sampling.

Three focus group discussions were held with 30 Congolese and Burundian refugees in May 2009. Most of the participants were identified and recruited by approaching refugees who have indicated their interest in attending English classes for French speaking refugees,

living in the inner-city of Pretoria, jointly offered as a community engagement project by The Bright Site Project, the Department of English at the University of South Africa (UNISA) and the Jesuit Refugee Services (JRS). A few of the participants were approached and recruited by a Masters student and trained fieldworker in the Department of Social Work at UNISA, who was a valuable gatekeeper to the Congolese and Burundian refugees living in the area. The focus groups consisted of ten members each and were grouped according to familiarity of language and home country. Each of the focus group discussions was facilitated by one of the researchers with an interpreter translating from either French or Swahili into English and vice versa. The focus group data yielded interesting results and the decision was made to use in-depth interviews as an additional method of data collection. It was clear from the focus group discussion that children played a central role in the participants' subjective well-being which prompted us to interview refugee women with children in their care.

The above-mentioned Masters student was able to contact a further four Burundian and six Congolese refugee women who were willing to be interviewed. These women did not participate in the original focus groups discussions. The interviews - which took place in November and December 2009 - were conducted by the Masters student in either French or Swahili and subsequently translated into English. Similar themes to those explored in the focus groups were probed in greater detail during the in-depth interviews. Follow-up interviews proved difficult in light of the fact that the interviewees were either hesitant to provide their contact information or did not turn up for scheduled and confirmed appointments. All interviews were therefore single interviews.

At this time we decided to include a third group of refugees in the study, i.e. female Zimbabwean nationals who fled to South Africa. The interview schedule used during the interviews with the Burundian and Congolese participants was also used to conduct interviews with twenty Zimbabwean refugee women living in the inner-city area of Hillbrow, Johannesburg. We were able to gain access to these respondents via a Zimbabwean post-doctoral research fellow in Sociology at the University of Johannesburg. The interviews were conducted in either Shona (n=9) or Ndebele (n=11) with the transcripts translated into English. These interviews were conducted between May and July of 2011.

The study received approval from the Faculty of Humanities Academic Ethics Committee at the University of Johannesburg. The nature and purpose of the research were

explained to all participants with emphasis placed on their voluntary participation. In addition, participants were given assurance of confidentiality. In anticipation of possible re-traumatisation, the contact details of the Department of Social Work (UNISA) and the Centre for Psychological Services and Career Development (University of Johannesburg) were readily available.

Glaser and Strauss' constant comparative method (see Babbie 2007) as well as Giorgi's (1985) four-step phenomenological praxis proved useful in analysing the data and identifying core themes. Acknowledging the exploratory nature of this qualitative study, the findings were viewed as sample specific and in no way generalizable to the perceptions and experiences of all refugees living in Johannesburg and Pretoria.

As far as we could ascertain, all the Burundian and Congolese refugee women who participated in the focus group discussions had at least one child. The women's ages ranged between mid-twenties and mid-forties. From the discussions it was clear that none of them had permanent employment or a stable livelihood and that they mostly relied on petty trading in generating an income.

The ages of the in-depth interviewees ranged between 22 and 48 – most of whom were either in their late twenties or early thirties. At the time of the study, the respondents had been residing in South Africa between two and ten years. In terms of their marital status, six were married (and shared a household with their spouse), five were separated, four were divorced and one was a widow. Eight respondents were co-habiting with partners, but not married, and six had never been wed (and were not in an intimate relationship at the time of the interviews). All the women in the sample had at least one child of pre-school or primary school age. Thirteen women had only one child, while all the other women in the sample had two or more children. Seventeen of the women were either unemployed or involved in precarious informal work such as hawking. The other 13 women (all of whom were Zimbabwean) were involved in some form of employment. Yet all, but one, of these women were in some or other way underemployed. Although all the respondents could speak more than one language, only the Zimbabwean women were proficient in English. Even after living in South Africa for a number of years, the Burundian and Congolese respondents found it very difficult, and in some cases even impossible, to converse in English.

Discussion of the Findings

The data revealed elements of intrapersonal ambivalence on the part of the respondents when reflecting on their emotional well-being. On the one hand, the women clearly experience emotional distress and a low sense of well-being. This constituted one of the overall themes linked to the respondents' experience of (a) fear for their own and their children's safety as well as distress about their families' challenging living and financial circumstances; (b) frustration as a result of the difficulty applying for refugee status as well as finding employment and affordable housing; (c) disillusionment because of unmet expectations regarding life in South Africa; and (d) sadness and melancholy for having to flee their home countries and being geographically separated from family members. Yet, on the other hand, there was a distinct note of hope in respondents' narratives despite their challenging daily life experiences. This second major theme focusses on the resilient nature manifested by the refugee women as well as the role religion and children played in enhancing their sense of well-being. In the following section these two major themes will be discussed in more detail.

Emotional well-being: are negative emotions tipping the scale?

Although it may not be all that surprising to find that the refugees in our study exhibited emotional distress – which also speaks to the experiences of refugees in other studies (see Brough et al. 2003; Dalton-Greyling 2008) - it is, however, alarming that these negative emotions persisted even after years of residing in the host society. Granting that memories of the past elicited a low sense of emotional well-being, it was evident that feelings of anxiety, sadness, fear, distress, and frustration were linked more directly to the respondents' present reality and their near future. This will receive further attention in the subsequent discussion.

Fear and distress

For most of the respondents the lack of a sense of physical security in South Africa heightened feelings of fear and distress. Being a refugee in a country known for its high crime rate and sporadic incidences of xenophobic violence deprived many respondents from having peace of mind. A Zimbabwean respondent described it as follows:

What do I feel? Mostly fear [...] I do not feel safe. South Africa has a lot of criminals – there are too many criminals here [...] I was once attacked by thieves who took my cell phone and money when I was going home after work. South Africans do not like Zimbabweans. They are lazy and do not want to work and so they hate us for working hard. I do not feel safe here in South Africa [...] and I do not want to make South Africa my permanent home. One day I will go back to Zimbabwe. (Twenty-four year old Zimbabwean interviewee, Johannesburg)

Feelings of distress were fuelled by the lack of a regular income, dreading the all too frequent incidences of police harassment and fearing eviction by landlords. This was particularly true for the Burundian and Congolese women. In describing their sense of well-being, respondents used expressions such as "... it shakes us" and "[... there] is some kind of stress in me". A Burundian single mother of three, who lost a pregnancy as a result of being assaulted three years after her initial arrival in South Africa, said, for example, the following:

I was attacked and beaten and lost my pregnancy in the process. The perpetrators were put behind bars but [...] the police helped them to escape but they were caught again. This time they were released on bail. Problems lead to more problems [...] My life does not have any meaning. I have been here for seven years – but look, we are staying in a shelter [...] We stay right in front of a place where thugs and criminals gather. We see them every day. It is unsafe. What if they just enter the place and kill us? (Thirty-two year old Burundian interviewee, Pretoria)

To a more or lesser extent all the women in the study felt anxious and distressed when it came to the well-being of their children. Having an insufficient financial income and living under deplorable conditions in densely populated apartment buildings had an impact on the safety and physical well-being of their children. For example, a thirty year old Congolese refugee, whose husband died during the civil war, described how she could no longer afford the rent for a room in the apartment she and her five children shared with other families. The possibility of being evicted was something she constantly feared which elevated her concern for not being able to ensure the physical well-being of her children:

The man [who owns] the flat has now decided to throw me out because I cannot pay him. I have five children but no husband. They say that the JRS [Jesuit Refugee Services] may help me, but nothing yet. My children may end up sleeping on the street. Imagine if your child becomes a street child! [...] Sometimes the one who is four years old will wake me up for food, yet there is nothing in the house and it is very disturbing [...] When your children look

at you and see that there is nothing you can provide – it [brings] great despair [...] and stress. (Thirty year old Congolese interviewee, Pretoria)

A few refugee mothers were not only anxious about their children's physical quality of life, but also acknowledged their concern for the emotional well-being of their children. One of the Congolese refugees - a mother of three - mentioned that it was troubling to know that her children were cooped up in an overcrowded apartment building:

The problem is that since we came to South Africa, the kids have not really been coping. They [would] love to stay in a house of our own. [Now], whenever they want to play, people would complain about the noise. (Thirty-one year old Congolese interviewee, Pretoria)

For another refugee mother the concern about the mental and emotional well-being of her children was even more acute:

They feel they are not like other children. The oldest one has already told me that if our lives do not change, then for sure he will kill himself [...] Looking at the life my children have now, it is like we are stuck in a box. (Thirty-two year old Burundian interviewee, Pretoria)

Apart from fear and a sense of distress, there was also a clear note of frustration (which sometimes bordered on anger) in the words of all the participants when giving accounts of their life challenges.

Frustration

One of the **biggest** frustrations was linked to the difficulty in filing an asylum claim at the Department of Home Affairs (DHA) and obtaining refugee status. Nearly all the respondents spoke about how they got entangled in the bureaucratic red tape of the DHA, how they had to stand for literally days on end in long queues in order to submit their paperwork and how some of them were confronted with corrupt DHA officials whom they had to bribe in order to get documents processed. Describing this tedious process one of the participants said:

Coming to this country one has to get your refugee document. That is when the problem starts. They do not give us extensions at Home Affairs and you are paying a corrupt system. And there are always huge queues. It was very difficult to get it. For me to get the paper, it took me five months [...] I had to sleep in front of Home Affairs. (Burundian focus group participant, Pretoria)

As was also found in studies among other refugee populations in South Africa (see Landau and Jacobsen 2004; Amisi and Ballard 2005; Dalton-Greyling 2008; ACMS 2011), the difficulty in securing employment in South Africa was a major source of frustration.

Although most of the Zimbabwean women were engaged in some form of employment, they expressed frustration due to the fact that their current jobs were not remotely tied to their vocational training. For example, one of the Zimbabwean respondents was a trained teacher but was at the time of the interview running the kitchen of a bar in a run-down part of Johannesburg.

I was a primary school teacher in Zimbabwe before coming to South Africa. My highest educational qualification is a diploma in teaching. When I came here to South Africa I did not have proper documentation and it was difficult to look for a job in my field of training [...] I spoke to the Nigerian who is the owner of the bar and he agreed to give me space to run a kitchen. I pay the bar owner R1500 every month for the space. (Forty-three year old Zimbabwean interviewee, Johannesburg)

Employment-related frustrations were, however, more acute for the Congolese and Burundian respondents. Being unsuccessful in securing any form of employment and finding it difficult to generate a stable family income was a cause for distress which left many of them feeling desperate. Furthermore, whereas most Zimbabweans could speak English relatively well, the majority of the Burundian and Congolese respondents were not proficient in English even after being in South Africa for a number of years. This impeded both their ability to secure employment and to converse with the local South African population. One respondent explained:

My problems are: no job, no peace. [I] have] stress caused by joblessness and [I] lack peace – it is like we are living a war. When you sell [goods], they [Metro police] chase you. You ask for a job but are denied [...] Getting a job is my dream [...] [My] English is not good [...] I just [know] a little bit but I am trying [...] I do not actually interact a lot [with South Africans]. (Twenty-two year old Burundian interviewee, Pretoria)

Language barriers, therefore, left Congolese and Burundian respondents feeling frustrated and all the more hesitant to leave their ethnic enclaves in the inner-city areas of the host society.

Not being able to access affordable and adequate housing also caused frustration which enflamed some respondents' anger towards the South African government for not providing accommodation-related assistance to refugees. All the respondents and their families were, at the time of the interviews, staying in less than ideal living conditions. Even the Zimbabwean refugees, who were more likely to have some form of regular income, could only manage to pay for accommodation in dilapidated apartment buildings. For most of the

refugees, particularly those who came from the DRC and Burundi, feelings of frustration about their deplorable living environments touched on despondence. Lack of privacy, high noise levels and overcrowded living conditions were seen by respondents as being far from an ideal milieu in which to raise children and function as a family. The following words of a focus group participant echo the narratives of many of the refugee women in the study.

I am a widow with four children. We were chased out of the place where we used to stay and the place where we stay now is only a small room. The place stinks – there is really a bad odour. Because there are bad men around the place every evening, we cannot open [the window] even when you want to suffer from all the smells. We are really living under bad and tight conditions. I have no job and no one to help us, and keeping up a standard and having something to eat is difficult. We really stay in very, very bad conditions, and if you want, I can take you there right now so you can see exactly what I am talking about.

(Burundian focus group participant, Pretoria)

Respondents' low sense of emotional well-being, and particularly their feelings of anger and frustration, was in some ways clearly related to their sense of perceived procedural injustice (see Stets and Osborn 2008; Stets 2012). The overly bureaucratic government departments, unhelpful officials, and the difficulty in securing employment despite having the necessary skills and qualifications were a far cry from the treatment they expected as refugees arriving in a country on which they pinned their hope for a new beginning.

Disillusionment

The participants did not experience culture shock (see Keyes and Kane 2004; Baird and Boyle 2012) as much as they felt a sense of disillusionment with life in their host society. For many of the women this feeling persisted long after their arrival in South Africa. Most of them had high expectations for a better existence in South Africa which, for them, would be far removed from the political and economic mayhem they originally fled from in their countries of origin. Yet, unmet expectations and the challenging - and sometimes cruel - reality left many of them with shattered illusions. A thirty year old widow with five children from the DRC mentioned, for example, that she decided to migrate to South Africa in hope of a better life. Her experiences, however, contradicted this perception. Fleeing a war-torn country, she was all the more taken aback by her disillusionment with South Africa – a country where, in her words, “there is no safety” and where she constantly felt threatened:

I decided to come and stay here because I heard that South Africa is a country where human rights are respected. When my husband died [fighting in the civil war in the DRC], they wanted to kill me. [...] So I met some ladies heading to South Africa and decided to join them. They told me that the South African government will help us. We followed them to Jo'burg, then they left us at Home Affairs [...] [But] the only thing I see in my life now is problems surrounding me. (Thirty year old Congolese interviewee, Pretoria)

Feeling depressed

The memory of being forced to flee their home countries and barely being able to support their children in South Africa, left most of the Burundian and Congolese respondents feeling depressed. Even when they were asked what makes them happy and gives them cause for celebration, apart from referring to the joy children brought to their lives, most of these respondents found it difficult to pinpoint anything that put them in a festive mood. A Congolese woman, who fled to South Africa with her children six years ago, responded in the following way:

At the moment life is really not good. My feelings are dominated by a feeling of 'lowness'. When I walk I see people begging and expecting me to give them something, and because I cannot give what I do not have, I feel [that] I am a very low person. A person needs to feel able to do something [...] When you do not have anything, you feel sad. Life does not have the completion it is supposed to have. We do not have anything to make us happy. (Forty-four year old Congolese interviewee, Pretoria)

In contrast, not many Zimbabwean respondents spoke as emphatically about general feelings of lingering depression and sadness. Whereas most Congolese and Burundian respondents were saddened by the fact that they could not sufficiently provide for the financial well-being of their families, the Zimbabwean refugees, who were all proficient in English, were more likely to generate a steady income through employment which contributed to some sense of security in the family.

I am staying in a two bedroom flat with my husband and daughter [...] I have a full-time job and my husband is an electrician [...] I am happy here in South Africa. At least I am working and I am staying with my husband and child [...] Yet it is painful to be in a foreign country. I miss my mother who is in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe. (Thirty-four year old Zimbabwean interviewee, Johannesburg)

Sadness and the reality of family separation

As was the case in research among female refugees elsewhere (Weine et al. 2004; Isfahani 2008), all the women in our study experienced sadness associated with family separation. None of the Congolese and none, but one, of the Burundian female interviewees had any relatives in South Africa. Many of the focus group participants also mentioned being geographically separated from their relatives. In contrast, all the Zimbabwean respondents reported having a number of kin members living in South Africa and that they were to a more or lesser extent embedded in a local familial support network. This, however, did not ease feelings of sadness linked to being separated from close family members who remained in their country of origin.

The Burundian and Congolese respondents mentioned that the sheer physical distance and the costs associated with staying in contact with family members in the home country made it difficult to maintain strong ties with their kin. Even in the age of high-speed information and communications technology (ICT), few of these women and their family members 'back home' had access to internet services or could afford making international phone calls. Although this was not so much the case for the Zimbabwean women, who were more likely to use ICTs to stay in contact with their loved ones, it was, however, particularly true for the Congolese and Burundian refugees. One of the Congolese interviewees spoke for example about the fact that the emotional bond with her family, who remained in the DRC, was not as strong as it used to be.

My parents and my sisters are still back home [...] My relationship with them is not the way I would wish. The problem is that one has to be in touch with them to maintain the relationship, but it demands money to make a call. (Thirty-two year old Congolese interviewee, Pretoria)

Similarly, a Burundian woman expressed that she still felt a sense of responsibility towards her younger siblings in Burundi, yet the physical distance and the years of separation have left their mark on the relationship, which deeply saddened her:

Even though we are far away, I still feel like a mother to them, [but my relationship with them], I cannot say, I do not see them anymore and something has changed. (Thirty-four year old Burundian interviewee, Pretoria)

For other Burundian and Congolese respondents the civil war and armed conflict in their home countries have brought about a more acute sense of family separation. Not knowing

the whereabouts of family members or even whether they were still alive left some respondents with a sense of loss and sadness:

My family disappeared without a trace during the killer war in Burundi. [Now] my life is just me and my children. (Thirty-two year old Burundian interviewee, Pretoria)

Due to life's conditions, everyone has gone their own way. Times have changed and we are isolated. We used to have time to talk, counsel and so on but now everyone is going their own way. Those in the Congo - we have categorically forgotten each other. (Congolese focus group participant, Pretoria)

While the Zimbabwean women did not necessarily fear for the lives of their relatives (as many of the Congolese and Burundian respondents did), they still longed to see parents and siblings and were concerned about their relatives' financial well-being. For some of the Zimbabwean women, the strain of family separation had an additional dimension. That is, nine of the Zimbabwean respondents mentioned that they had left at least one of their children in the care of family members, mostly grandparents, who remained in Zimbabwe. One mother, whose children stayed behind in Zimbabwe, longed to see them. Although she felt that she managed to maintain a relationship with her children, it was far from an ideal relationship. In her own words:

I have two children - one is ten and the other eight years old. The first one is a boy and the second is a girl. They are both with my mother in Harare. Our relationship is okay, but I miss my children very much. The biggest problem I face is providing for my children. Most of the time I cannot afford buying [and sending] them what they want [...] I am lonely and sad most of the time because I am struggling to survive and I miss my two children very much [...] Being with my children will make me happy [...] My future plans are to bring my children here to South Africa - [that is] if my life improves [...] [but] I would rather like to return to Zimbabwe one day. (Thirty-six year old Zimbabwean interviewee, Johannesburg)

In contrast to the Congolese and Burundian refugee mothers, who never contemplated leaving their children behind in a war-torn country, these Zimbabwean women thought it best at the time of leaving Zimbabwe not having their children accompany them to South Africa. Although Zimbabwe has seen political violence and human rights violations, it is not to the same extent as the civil wars and genocide in the DRC and Burundi. Furthermore, most of the Zimbabwean respondents expressed the desire to return to their home country as soon as the political and economic situation improves. Despite the economic turmoil in

Zimbabwe, the educational infrastructure remained intact which may explain to some extent why these mothers thought it wise to leave their children in a familiar milieu in the care of those who remained behind. The fact that Zimbabwe borders South Africa geographically also makes the possibility of returning home more feasible. Although these Zimbabwean mothers might not be separated from their children by vast geographical distance and granting that many felt some sense of relief that their children were not sharing the difficulties associated with refugee life in South Africa, being away from their offspring remained, nonetheless, very difficult for them. Moreover, the fact that they were not able to actively parent their children also created an emotional distance between parents and children which saddened them.

Unmet transnational family obligations: feeling ashamed and helpless

Many of the respondents, in both the in-depth interview and focus group samples, felt a sense of responsibility towards their kin which found specific expression in feeling an obligation to provide financial support. This finding corresponds with attitudes observed among refugees in other studies (see Pittaway et al. 2009; Kankonde 2010). Yet, due to economic constraints, none of the Burundian and Congolese participants had the means to provide family members with any form of financial assistance. When contemplating the inability to send remittances 'home', especially in light of their own challenging circumstances, a Congolese respondent said the following:

We are all like patients [...] in the same hospital. Who will help whom? Maybe in future with the grace of God but at the moment – No. (Thirty year old Congolese interviewee, Pretoria)

This sense of obligation to provide financial assistance was fuelled, for some of the respondents, by the expectations expressed by family members. This made their inability to meet such expectations all the more distressing – leaving some of them ashamed and feeling helpless:

In my country, when someone leaves for another country, all eyes are set on him or her. They regard you as the blessed one and there is much expectation [...] Yes, [I feel responsible for them], but there is nothing I can do at present [...] and as a result others feel that [I am] irresponsible. (Forty-four year old Congolese interviewee, Pretoria.)

Whereas none of the Burundian and Congolese respondents were able to provide transnational support, the Zimbabwean women in the study mentioned doing their best to send remittances to close family members. This was more so the case for those women who had left children in the care of grandparents in Zimbabwe. The fact that the Zimbabwean women were more likely to be employed or have some form of household income, made it possible for them to provide transnational financial assistance – albeit far from what they would have liked to remit and what family members expected of them. For example, in talking about her sense of responsibility towards her family ‘back home’, a Zimbabwean interviewee said:

I feel I should help my mother because she looks after my children. So, sometimes I send her money but sometimes I find it difficult because of money problems. (Thirty-six year old Zimbabwean interviewee, Johannesburg)

Overall, based on the narratives of the respondents, it thus seems that these women’s general emotional state of mind is dominated by a combination of negatively laden emotions and a sense of distributive injustice. Many of the respondents, especially the Burundian and Congolese refugees, look upon their ‘here and now’ and immediate future having little reason for optimism. One respondent gave an apt description when she summarised her lived experiences in South Africa and her sense of emotional well-being:

South Africans see no importance in you [...] Staying here like this is a problem [...] It is like there is a mountain that begets discouragement in us. (Thirty year old Congolese interviewee, Pretoria)

Yet, despite the lack of joy and onerous conditions of life, when respondents look beyond tomorrow and contemplate the future, hope prevails.

Resilience, hope and agency

Whereas the respondents in a 2006 quantitative study among refugees in South Africa had no or very little hope for times to come (Dalton-Greyling 2008), the narratives of the respondents in our study were interlarded with hope for the future. Though the refugee women did not appear to have high levels of resilience in the sense of having “the capacity to rebound from adversity strengthened and more resourceful” – to use Walsh’s definition of the concept (1998, 4) – there were, however, distinct traces of a resilient approach to life. Granted that the daily lives of the respondents and that of their families might resemble what Carver (1998,

246) refers to as “survival with impairment”, their prospects of the future, nonetheless, allude to having at least an attitude characterised by resilience. These traces of resilience were particularly evident when the narratives of the respondents were viewed against the backdrop of Strümpfer’s (2001: 36) conceptualisation of resilience as an active attempt and motivation “...to be strong in the face of inordinate demands, which energizes goal-directed behavior to cope and rebound (or resile).” This can be seen in the following verbatim quotes:

Even though we suffer, we still fight to have victory [...] to understand that suffering can sometimes teach us and lead us to a [higher] experience. (Thirty-two year old Burundian interviewee, Pretoria)

We are still alive [...] one can just walk with this objective. Patience and courage is very important. One cannot just despair. We need to be courageous [...] I have always dreamt of changing my life. To improve my life and live the best out of it. (Thirty year old Congolese interviewee)

We have hope that all will be okay and change will come. We count on that and we know that today’s life will one day change. (Thirty-one year old Congolese interviewee, Pretoria)

A resilient inclination was also evident in the participants’ tenacity to do all they could to ensure the survival of their families. These women employed two livelihood strategies in particular. The first revolved around generating some form of income through work and/or trade. The Zimbabwean women were all able to contribute to their household income on a relative consistent basis through some form of employment or informal business activities - albeit of a precarious nature. In contrast, due to persistent unemployment, largely because of their limited command of English as a language, the Burundian and Congolese interviewees and focus group participants mostly engaged in informal work (such as braiding hair) and petty trading (often without the necessary trading permits). A second strategy used by the Burundian and Congolese women in particular was to remain tireless in asking others for financial and material help. Being shy or prideful has long since given way to being vigilant in identifying opportunities to ask for assistance - may that be from relief organisations such as the Jesuit Refugee Services, religious groups or individuals in their social network. Although they are clearly active agents in trying to ensure their daily survival, the women’s narratives oscillated back and forth between hope for a better future and feelings of despair and distress.

How then do these refugee women negotiate the intrapersonal ambivalence they experience when contemplating their emotional well-being? Shapiro (2002) highlights the important role awareness and appraisal of subjective well-being play in managing one's emotional state of mind. Far from using skilled techniques, the respondents nonetheless acknowledge their conflicting feelings. One way in which they make sense of their emotional state of being is through their religious convictions. It seems that for many of the women, being able to survive and endure hardship required more than just human determination. Their daily survival was, according to them, reliant upon God's active presence in their lives. For them, trusting God makes the turmoil of emotions more manageable and their (challenging) lives more meaningful. Respondents used, for example, expressions such as "[t]o have faith is to have hope in God, to expect his miracle"; "[t]o have hope in God and for everything in life"; and "[t]o praise and glorify God in all problems we face [...] and to hope that one day God will give [us] his grace". One respondent elaborated on how her church attendance and faith in God was a comfort and a source of hope to her:

Sometimes I sit and look at my children and I get discouraged and I do not know what to do. It is like I am about to give up everything and then I go to church and hear about the Word of God and then realise: No, I am still alive [...] there is nothing I can do without God – that is why I like going to church because it is [a source of] support to me in another way - not materially, but giving me hope that says: 'I can make it, I can believe in myself'. (Thirty-seven year old Congolese interviewee, Pretoria)

Notwithstanding the fact that religion might be a habitual ritual and the words 'faith' and 'hope' mere superficial mantras to some respondents, for others having faith in God was a deep-seated conviction. Religion, nonetheless, appeared to play a key role in the ability of respondents to cope with their challenging life experiences and to help define the meaning attached to their lives. This speaks to the literature highlighting the significance of religion in the lives of refugees elsewhere in Africa (see Sadouni 2009; Gerloff 2010; Nzayabino 2010).

Another source of hope for the future and pivotal element in enhancing their emotional well-being is their love and concern for their children. Except for one interviewee, who found it difficult to convince herself that her two year old child will be better off in time to come, all the respondents were of mind that their children's future will be secure. This was their conviction even despite their current challenging life experiences. Similar to the findings in studies by Pavlish (2007) and Baird and Boyle (2012), the dreams of many of the

respondents and the hope they have for their own future were intermingled with the hope they have for the future of their children. One respondent expressed it in the following way:

It is only my hope that their future will be better. There is no woman who may wish to see a bad future for her children. They say it is good to keep faith, so I have faith for them. (Forty-four year old Congolese interviewee, Pretoria)

For most of the refugee women hope and joy revolved around their children. Being physically and emotionally close to their children, ensuring that their children receive an education, and seeing their children happy were some of the few things that brought joy to their lives. For the sake of their children they put on a happy face and persisted in building a life in South Africa. Believing that their children will succeed in becoming recognised active citizens and that their children will have the opportunity to live a better life, sparked hope that they themselves may someday be better off.

Conclusion

Although the emotions experienced by the refugee women in our study are no different to the emotions anyone else might feel, it should be recognised that their sense of emotional well-being is congruent with their experiences of transnational forced migration, their status as refugees, and the challenges they face on a daily basis. Undoubtedly, past traumatic experiences associated with human rights violation and fleeing their countries of origin continue to impact the individual psychological state of well-being of most of the refugee women in the study, yet it is also (and in some cases more so) their current surrounding social, economic and political milieu that evoke strong negative emotions. With this we emphasise the central importance of present social and economic context in shedding light on the emotional well-being of refugees. This speaks to the work of Summerfield and colleagues (see Summerfield 2001; Summerfield 2002; Summerfield 2008; Giacaman et al. 2011) noting that mental health and well-being cannot be viewed as "...independent of culture, society and situation" (Summerfield 2008: 992).

Much of the emotional distress experienced by the refugee women is related to unmet expectations they have of themselves, others and their larger social context. The respondents' expectation of South Africa as a champion of human rights and saviour of the downtrodden is very different to the actual reality they experience. Instead of embracing those who have suffered human rights violations and having sympathy with their plights as

refugees, these women were confronted with xenophobic sentiments and at times outright hostility on the part of some members of the receiving society. As a consequence, many of the respondents were left with a sense of disillusionment when they recognised that their anticipation of a better life in a new country, where they would be given the opportunity to make a contribution as skilled and committed individuals, will not materialise in the near future. Moreover, most of the female refugees felt a sense of helplessness and in some cases shame because of the fact that they, due to their dire financial position, were not able to adhere to the normative expectations in providing financial support to significant others in their home country. Because expected outcomes did not materialise, many of the female refugees in the study experienced a strong sense of distributive injustice (see Berger 1988; Turner and Stets 2005; Stets 2012).

Though South Africa has a liberal urban refugee policy that encourages self-settlement, the government does very little in supporting refugees. Despite the fact that the South African Constitution and the Refugee Act (1998) afford refugees particular rights, such as the right to employment and to access healthcare and educational services, it is clear that the female refugees in our study continue to experience daily stressors because they find it challenging to exercise these rights. Moreover, the bureaucratic red-tape of government departments managing affairs associated with refugees heightens a sense of procedural injustice instead of aiding refugees in the settling process. This makes it all the more difficult to integrate into the host society and feel a sense of belonging, which, understandably, impact negatively on their sense of emotional well-being.

Whereas most individuals might experience distributive and procedural injustice from time to time, it is striking that the refugee women in our study experienced these forms of injustice as a constant underlying subjective awareness. Despite their active and motivated efforts to change their circumstances and make a living in South Africa, many of the women, particularly those from the DRC and Burundi, felt that the odds were stacked against them and that a sense of injustice will continue to persist – explaining why they experienced such a wide range of negative emotions.

At first glance, it might seem that the respondents' state of being is veiled only by negative emotions due to their challenging existence, yet there are also sounds of emotional ambivalence in the accounts of these women. Most striking is their sense of despondency which is contrasted with elements of resilience, hope for a better future and an attempt to

enhance their state of mind. The comfort the women find in religion and the hope for their children's brighter future ameliorate in some ways the negative impact their socioeconomic context has on their emotional well-being. The way in which the women negotiate their sense of emotional well-being not only shapes their engagement with their physical and social worlds but also reflects their resilience and agency.

This positive inclination in the face of daily adversity is a common element among the refugee women in the study. Yet, the findings also highlight the importance of recognising the diversity among the women in terms of their perceptions of their social context and the experience of emotional well-being. In contrast to the Congolese and Burundian refugees, the Zimbabwean women's fluency in English aided the process of securing some form of employment. Moreover, these women were more likely to have sustained contact with their family support network both in South Africa and in the country of origin. These intrapersonal and social resources play an important role in mediating the effect of their stressful lives as refugees. The fact that the Congolese and Burundian women had fewer resources amplified the effect of the challenges they face on a daily basis. This may also explain why their awareness of certain emotions seemed more acute. The nuances in the emotional well-being of the women from the different countries of origin in this study as well as their different perceptions of the social context in the host society acknowledge the importance for researchers and practitioners to remain mindful of the fact that refugees do not comprise a homogenous group.

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