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Coping Mechanisms amongst Refugee Women and Girls in Post Conflict Situations: A Case of Lusaka Urban Center

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Abstract

Women and girls constitute over half of displaced populations globally, yet their perspectives and needs often go overlooked in policymaking and humanitarian response. This study explores the coping mechanisms utilized by refugee women and girls in post-conflict urban displacement contexts, focusing specifically on Lusaka, Zambia. Adopting a qualitative approach, the research examines the challenges faced, strategies for meeting daily needs, and process of accessing services for refugee women and girls relocated to Zambia's capital. Key findings reveal profound systemic discrimination and barriers obstructing refugees' ability to integrate and meet basic needs. With inadequate access to facilities and widespread harassment, women rely heavily on fragile social networks, exploitative informal work, and

inconsistent aid to survive. Despite resilience displayed through faith, help-seeking, and resolute endurance, social isolation, and barriers navigating complex bureaucracies exacerbate risks. Ultimately the study exposes policy and programming failures fulfilling protection obligations, necessitating urgent actions to empower displaced females. Recommendations include improving access to services, fostering social inclusion, enabling livelihoods, strengthening legal protections, and embracing participatory approaches led by refugee women themselves. Fulfilling commitments to this vulnerable group requires comprehensive reforms addressing root causes of marginalization across sectors.

Keywords: Coping Mechanisms, Refugee, Lusaka

1. Background

Women and girls are frequently the first to react to and most impacted during a disaster. Since many of them are considered as a potential weapon of war and consequently suffer from trauma including in post-conflict settings, they frequently find themselves on the receiving end of the argument. Over half of the 100 million individuals who have been displaced globally, are women and girls according to the UNHCR (2022) ^[16]. The study observed how numerous of their voices or viewpoints are frequently excluded from decision-making processes. Women's perspectives, needs, and primary concerns are frequently overlooked or ignored during the policy-making process, according to Ajayi (2020) ^[11].

According to the UNHCR (2009) ^[17], a sizable proportion of refugees are relocating to built-up areas, including sizable towns and cities in Zambia. Additionally, it shows that there are a growing number of women and children living in these metropolitan regions, who frequently face serious protection hazards. These included sexual and gender-based violence, inequality, intimidation, and HIV/AIDS, to name a few. 18,419 urban refugees from Burundi, Somalia, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo lived in Zambia as of 2021. 8,505 men, 3,939 women, 2,980 boys, and 2,995 girls made up this group of refugees (UNHCR, 2021) ^[15]. This generally corresponds to 38% of urban refugees comprising women and girls.

A variety of livelihood programs conducted are accessible by refugees in urban areas are highlighted in the 2020 briefing note on the Urban Refugee Program in Zambia. They include substantial entrepreneurship training, education, and the delivery of health services, all of which are particularly important for women and girls. The experiences and possible difficulties that women and girls may encounter in any given situation are very different from those that men and boys may experience, all of which have an effect on how they manage and deal with such difficulties. The Women's Refugee Commission (2017) emphasizes that women and girls frequently encounter numerous obstacles, including cultural variations that frequently position women in a lower social status, significantly disadvantageous them. Additionally, they encounter structural difficulties

such a lack of access to resources for health and education, as well as difficulties finding suitable employment. In a new environment like Zambia, these difficulties are more likely to impair women's and girls' coping methods. Zambia has been a refuge for displaced populations fleeing conflict and instability in surrounding countries for decades. According to UNHCR, as of 2021 there were over 100,000 refugees and asylum seekers in Zambia, with a sizable proportion being women and girls (UNHCR, 2021) ^[15].

2. Statement of the Problem

Despite Zambia's long history of hosting refugees, there remain gaps in understanding the experiences of displaced women and girls residing in urban areas outside refugee settlements. Recent UNHCR reports show an increasing trend of refugees moving to cities like the capital Lusaka in search of better socioeconomic opportunities (UNHCR, 2009) ^[17].

Some studies have examined coping mechanisms adopted by refugees in Zambian camps and settlements. These identified reliance on social networks, prayer, and perseverance as common strategies, with some women resorting to transactional sex for survival (Muchimba, 2016; Umutesi, 2015) ^[11, 14]. Meanwhile, Ajayi (2020) ^[1] stresses that women's perspectives are frequently excluded from humanitarian response. To address gaps in understanding urban refugee women and girls in Zambia, this study qualitatively explored the coping mechanisms amongst refugee women and girls in post conflict situations housed at Lusaka Urban Centre.

3. Objective

To establish the coping mechanisms of refugee women and girls in post conflict situations in the Lusaka Urban Centre. The study was guided by the following key question: What are the coping mechanisms of refugee women and girls in post conflict situations in the Lusaka Urban Centre?

4. Research Methodology

4.1 Research Approach

Creswell (2012) ^[3] explains that the qualitative research process involves exploring how individuals address social problems that they face in their given setting. Further it focuses on analysing data that is based on perceptions, opinions and beliefs all of which are not quantifiable and cannot be measured numerically. Since women's and girls' experiences of coping in post-conflict conditions are not quantifiable, a qualitative method is the one that is best appropriate for this study. Both primary and secondary research methodologies were used in the study. Focus group discussions and responding subjects' interviews were the main study methodologies. Data was gathered via internet publications and already published literature as part of the secondary research methodologies.

4.2 Research Design

The research used a qualitative exploratory approach. Exploring the topic and its surrounding areas helped the researcher develop a deeper grasp of the research problem. Additionally, it enabled the researcher to get significant and priceless insights through the involvement of informants. Additionally, an exploratory research approach is typically employed when there is little to no data. This design contributed to the corpus of knowledge because there isn't

much written on female refugees and their coping techniques in urban areas of Zambia. With the support of this research design, the researcher was able to approach the subject with curiosity and an open mind, which enabled the researcher to develop a viewpoint as the research went on.

4.3 Sampling Techniques

Purposive sampling and semi-structured, open-ended interviews are just two of the data collecting and processing strategies that Dudwick *et al.* (2006) ^[4] claim are used in qualitative research. Creswell 2012 adds that intentional sampling is predicated on the idea that the researcher wants to learn, comprehend, and acquire insight and must choose a sample from which the most may be inferred. The participants in this study were chosen on purpose using this as a reference. Focus groups and semi-structured interviews were both used in the study.

Kelly *et al.* (2010) ^[9] explains that in order for research to yield appropriate and useful information purposive sampling should be used as a means of identifying respondents. This sampling technique is adopted in qualitative research on the basis that a specific individual needs to be part of the sample since they hold different views about the social problem given the objectives of the study (Mason, 2017) ^[10].

4.4 Sampling Size

In order to ensure quality analysis of data Sandelowski (1996) ^[13] stresses the importance of having small samples when conducting qualitative research. Further Ritchie *et al.* (2003) ^[12] suggests that a researcher who conducts individual interviews as a data collection tool should not conduct more than 50 interviews to ensure they can handle the complexity that arises because of analysis. Since there is no agreement on a particular sample size for qualitative investigations, Dworkin (2012) ^[5] recommends that 5 to 50 interviews be enough.

Purposive sampling was used to choose a total of 25 respondents for the study. There was a total of 5 key informants, who were useful in providing a variety of viewpoints on the experiences and coping methods of women and girls in Lusaka, as well as on service use and access constraints. These consisted of:

1. One (1) protection officer from United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) representation office. UNHCR has been instrumental in providing support in various sectors and responding to the needs of refugees in Zambia.
2. One (1) officer from the Office of the Commissioner of Refugees under the Ministry of Home Affairs and Internal Security. This ministry holds authority over refugee related actions by all Zambian government officials as well as NGO staff and refugees.
3. One (1) field officer from urban refugee center. The transit center is located in Makeni, Lusaka that houses refugees with pending results or those who have permission to travel from the camps to Lusaka for educational or medical purposes.
4. Two (2) community volunteers who work from the urban sites and directly deal with refugees.
5. Twenty (20) key respondents who included Ten (10) women and Ten (10) adolescent girls.

4.5 Data Collection Methods

The study adopted four data collection methods to address

the specific objectives. These methods allowed for both primary and secondary data to be collected. They included the following:

1. **Desk review of literature:** Literature review was conducted using existing academic work and policy reports and papers that discuss refugees living in urban areas in general, specifically the Zambian women and girls' refugees.
2. **Focus group discussions:** Two focus group discussions were conducted with adolescent girls in groups of five (ten girls in total). These were selected from the urban center in Makeni with the help of the UNHCR office who are currently managing the center. The selection ensured diversity of the refugee population (nationality and length of stay in Zambia). The discussions helped the researcher in confirming the meaning behind facts as well as get an in-depth understanding of the coping mechanisms of adolescent girls.
3. **Semi-structured interviews:** 10 semi structured interviews were conducted with women. These types of interviews are often used when a researcher wants to deeply explore personal and sensitive issues. It combined pre-determined set of open questions which further allowed for the interviewer to explore responses further. Older women are unlikely to open-up in a group as compared to adolescents. This method allowed for them to freely share their experiences and coping mechanisms without fear of being judged by their peers.
4. **Key informant interviews:** Five in-depth interviews were conducted with key informants who work within the protection system for urban refugees. The individuals were purposively sampled based on their job description from UNCHR, Office of the Commissioner of Refugees and Lusaka Urban Center.

4.6 Data Analysis

The data collected was analyzed using a thematic analysis approach. Thematic analysis helps researchers understand those aspects of a phenomenon that participants talk about frequently or in depth, and the ways in which those aspects of a phenomenon may be connected. The steps included the following:

1. Familiarizing oneself with the data. This involved reading and listening to the data set (interviews and focus group discussions) for the researcher to make sense of the data and ensure that it is well organized.
2. Creating a set of initial codes that represent the meanings and patterns within the data. Points that carry the same meaning had the same codes applied.
3. Grouping into themes: The researcher arranged the codes into themes as words that are connecting were identified.
4. Reviewing and revising themes. This allowed for the researcher to ensure that each theme has enough data to support it. Through this the researcher was able to merge themes that did not have enough data to back them up.
5. Writing the narrative. This is the final step which required the researcher to validate the analysis as a means of showing the relevance of the research. It included quotes that will help back up the data collected.

5. Research Findings and Discussion

Coping mechanisms of refugee women and girls in post conflict situations in the Lusaka Urban Centre

This study has revealed that refugee women and girls in post conflict situations in the Lusaka Urban Centre rely on informal social networks and inconsistent aid mechanisms, rather than the provision of sustainable livelihood opportunities. This paints a poignant picture of the challenges faced by refugee women and girls striving to subsist in Lusaka. The reliance on fragile social networks underscores the ad-hoc nature of the support structures available to displaced individuals, thus, emphasizing a critical gap in the provision of stable and sustainable resources that are essential for their well-being (Kabran, 2017)^[8].

The study has revealed that the refugee women and adolescent at Lusaka Urban Centre facility at the time of this study used make shift survival strategies not only highlight the resilience of the individuals but also point to systemic shortcomings in policies and programs designed to meet their basic needs. The data collected suggests a failure in the formulation and implementation of policies and programs that adequately address the fundamental requirements of displaced populations in urban settings, as outlined by Campbell (2006)^[2]. The implications of these findings extend beyond individual resilience, emphasizing the urgent need for a comprehensive reevaluation of existing policies and programs.

While the significance of social capital becomes apparent in the absence of robust state supports, there was utilization of ethnic ties to access limited economic resources at Lusaka Urban Centre and this posed significant challenges for displaced groups to navigate competitive and inhospitable urban settings, as elucidated by Fiddian-Qasmiyeh (2016)^[6] and Omata (2017) that the struggle to leverage ethnic networks highlights the complex dynamics at play, where the mere presence of social capital does not necessarily translate into equitable access to economic opportunities for displaced populations.

Another aspect revealed by this study as coping mechanisms of refugee women and girls in post conflict situations in the Lusaka Urban Centre was the reliance on informal economic participation as a partial substitute for insufficient humanitarian provisions becomes a critical coping mechanism in the face of protracted refugee situations, as illuminated by Jacobsen (2006)^[7]. This adaptive strategy underscores the resilience of displaced communities striving to meet their basic needs, especially in the absence of adequate external support. However, a closer examination reveals that this reliance on informal economic activities, particularly in fields like cleaning work, introduces a set of challenges that impedes sustainable integration and perpetuates the social marginalization of displaced women, a concern raised by Zetter and Ruaudel (2016)^[20].

6. Conclusion and Recommendation

Based on the findings of this study and the discussion that followed, there is an intricate interplay between social capital, ethnic ties, and gender dynamics exposes the multifaceted challenges faced by displaced groups, particularly women, at Lusaka Urban Centre settings. Addressing these challenges requires a nuanced

understanding of the complex intersections between social, economic, and cultural factors. Policy and programmatic interventions should aim not only to provide economic opportunities but also to challenge and transform gender norms, fostering an environment where refugee women can access resources, build resilience, and navigate urban displacement with dignity and agency.

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