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Jessica Gladden

Western Michigan University, jessica.gladden@wmich.edu

Allyson Dykstra

Western Michigan University, allyson.j.dykstra@wmich.edu

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Importance of Education as a Coping Strategy to Sudanese Refugee Women: A Qualitative Study from Kakuma Refugee Camp, Kenya

Jessica Gladden
Western Michigan University

Allyson Dykstra
Western Michigan University

Research shows the level of importance that education plays in refugee youths' lives. However, most research is completed with refugees who have resettled to a developed nation and rarely examines the needs and desires of refugee women living in refugee camps. This sub-section of a study examines the importance of education, as well as a hope of education, in a population of young Sudanese women living in Kakuma Refugee Camp. This study shows that the younger refugee women's primary goal was education, although most were not able to participate in formal education at the time of the study. A hope for education and the ability of education to change the direction of their lives was highlighted.

Keywords: Sudan, refugee, education, hope, coping

The number of refugees spending long periods of time in refugee camps continues to climb. In 2020, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) counted 26 million refugees in the world. Half of them are under the age of 18 (UNHCR, 2020). The number of refugees has grown in recent years. For example, Kakuma Refugee Camp in Kenya, the camp in which this study took place, hosted around 80,000 refugees at the time of the study and currently hosts about 147,000 refugees (UNHCR, 2018). UNHCR (2015) reports that the average duration of a refugee in exile is more

than two decades. Refugees primarily stay in camps, although they may not stay in the same camp or have a continuous residence. Options for leaving the camp—either through a return to the refugees' home country, integration in the host country, or resettlement to a third country—were scarce for many even before the COVID-19 pandemic struck (Siegfried, 2020). Opportunities for resettlement are even more limited now. The numbers reflect this reality: resettlement numbers fell 69% in the first half of 2020 from 2019 figures (McAllister, 2020). Refugee camps exist to provide short-term protection and emergency basic needs; however, refugees' extended stays in the camps reflects a need for greater services and sustainable activities. Women and children are more likely to reside in refugee camps long term and often have additional burdens due to gender inequality issues (UNHCR, 2008).

Although a fair amount of research exists on refugees, most examines those who have been resettled to a developed nation. Less research has focused on refugee women who reside in host countries or refugee camps. As discussed in (Gladden, 2013), the lived experiences of refugee women and girls in camps can be quite different from those of refugee men, and even more different from the refugees who have been resettled to developed nations. We do not know enough about the experiences of refugee women living in camps, what resources they have (Pavlish, 2005), or what they need. The scant research on this issue identifies education—including primary, secondary, tertiary/university, and trade programs—as a significant need for these women (Crea & McFarland, 2015; Dryden-Peterson et al., 2017; Mareng, 2010; Topuzova & Lock, 2013; Waters & Leblanc, 2005). As Waters and Leblanc (2005) discuss, most refugee relief is focused on the immediate needs of shelter, food, water, and protection. However, given the increasing length of stays in refugee camps today, relief should look beyond meeting basic needs to the refugees' dreams for the future. The hope for education contributes to the ability of refugees to cope with their current setting, and when available, education can prepare refugees for their futures. This paper focuses on the importance of education in refugee camps, particularly for women and female youth.

Literature Review

Youth's Desire for Education

Most of the research on refugees has focused on those who have been resettled to or are residing in developed nations (Essomba, 2017; Hattam & Every, 2010; Shakya et al., 2012). Some studies focus on the importance of education, and although a few examine refugees living in camps, most examine refugees resettled in other nations (Dryden-Peterson, 2017; El Jack, 2010; Essomba, 2017; Hattam & Every, 2010; Mareng, 2010; Shakya et al., 2012). Many studies (Crea & McFarland, 2015; Dryden-Peterson, 2017; El Jack, 2010; Mareng, 2010) have reported that refugee youth who reside in refugee camps have a primary goal of receiving an education. Youth see education as necessary to change their own lives and be able to support themselves. This hope for a change from their current situation is highly important for refugee youth, especially in camp settings where there is little else upon which to focus. For many refugee youth, this hope is a highly important coping strategy. Bates et al. (2005) noted that for refugee youth who have been resettled into other countries, education was a key coping strategy, and often a strength for the youth, despite the challenges of attending school in systems that were unprepared to meet their needs. While refugee youth in host country refugee camps may not be attending school, the hope for education in the future can provide a vision of a way to change their current status in life, and this hope can assist them in coping with their daily challenges (Gladden, 2013). Thus, both attending educational programs as well as a hope of education can be important coping strategies for refugees.

Although refugees want education, and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 1948) declares that education is a basic human right, many refugees do not have access. Research reflects refugees who have arrived from camps to resettlement nations typically lack education. For example, Shakya et al. (2012) report low levels of both education and language skills in refugees who have arrived in Canada from refugee camps.

Idleness vs. Empowerment

One problem for refugees, particularly refugee youth, is the lack of constructive activities within the camps. Refugees report feelings of frustration that they have been forgotten (Meda et. al., 2012; Wright & Plasterer, 2010). While older adults often appear consumed with providing basic needs for their families and trying to find a path out of the refugee camps, younger individuals may not have this focus. As Wright and Plasterer (2010) discuss, youth without educational or supportive activities may be “idle and forgotten” (p. 45). Waters and Leblanc (2005) quote Ruud Lubbers, a former United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, stating that the alternative to education is “depression and idleness, and...a range of anti-social activities and the thought of revenge through a renewal of armed conflict” (p. 136). When refugees have opportunities to be involved in educational settings, however, they experience protective factors of meaning and stability (Topuzova & Lock, 2013). Educational opportunities also can assist in preventing violence and allowing for healing in the community (Topuzova & Lock, 2013). Education for children in these settings is necessary to end the existing conflict and rebuild societies once the conflict has ended (Dryden-Peterson et al., 2017).

Education allows individuals to feel empowered and creates purpose. This empowerment may come from a feeling of mastery over specific skills or from an expanded worldview (Crea & McFarland, 2015). Education also can empower community members to support and improve the community. El Jack (2010) argues that education, especially through university levels, “enables refugees, particularly women, to gain knowledge, voice, and skills which will give them access to better employment opportunities and earning and thus enhance their equality and independence.” (p. 19). Educational opportunities can contribute to the long-term support of the communities by strengthening human resources (Topuzova & Lock, 2013). Educational opportunities can be particularly significant for young female refugees to provide a foundation for leadership and allow young women to make informed choices in their lives (Mareng, 2010).

Crea & McFarland (2015) note that education provided students in Kakuma Refugee Camp with specific skills to help their

community. For example, students learned to assist with conflict mediation between different cultures. Educational programs can provide life changing skills even while refugees reside in the camps. For example, with education, refugees could become teachers in the camp schools - one of the few formal employment opportunities available (Wright & Plasterer, 2010). The empowerment model views vulnerable populations, such as women and people of color as "essential forces to mobilize social changes" (Cheung & Canda, 1994, p. 139). These researchers recommend integrating empowerment strategies into trainings to allow individuals within this population to be able to mobilize to help themselves and their own communities.

Challenges for Female Refugees

While all refugee youth have difficulty accessing educational opportunities, the situation is especially dire for females. Topuzova and Lock (2013) note that female refugees are less likely to participate in education due to cultural beliefs and norms, work expectations for women, and safety issues. Bellino (2018) reports that female students have lower enrollment in secondary educational settings and tend to drop out in higher grades. El Jack (2010) reports that for the women in Kakuma Refugee Camp, refugee women experience a gendered and unequal level of access to the education opportunities that are available.

Cultural norms and family responsibilities tend to be barriers to women obtaining education; displacement in the refugee camps compounds these issues. For example, women in the Sudanese culture tend to lag in terms of education (Mareng, 2010). Male children may be preferred to females, as they are considered the heirs of the family lineage. Both genders in the Sudanese culture are taught to follow strict gender roles, and the girls expected to be married off to other families and provide children (El Jack, 2010). Before marriage, young women and girls are expected to stay in the home to cook, collect firewood, and care for younger children. Thus, many parents prefer to keep the female children at home and allow the male children to receive an education (Crea & McFarland, 2015; Dryden-Peterson et al., 2017; Mareng, 2010). Some female students reported desiring education specifically to escape from the traditional cultural

roles that they considered “family oppression,” believing that education would allow them to take control of their lives (Mareng, 2010). The United Nations has projected that COVID-19 may make the situation even worse, with the possibility that half of young refugee girls will not return to school when classrooms re-open (Keung, 2020).

Methods

This paper uses a sub-sample of data gathered in an exploratory study of the coping strategies of Sudanese refugee women living in Kakuma Refugee Camp. This study employed a qualitative interview questionnaire with nineteen open-ended questions based on previous research on coping strategies. Before the primary study in Kakuma, the questionnaire was pilot-tested with a local Southern Sudanese sample and edited as recommended. The author’s institutional human review board approved the study and questionnaire, as did the government of Kenya. Local Sudanese refugee leaders were approached and given information on the study before it commenced, and they assisted in locating the first participants in the study.

Sample and Demographics

This study includes qualitative interviews of thirty adult Sudanese refugee women who were living in Kakuma Refugee Camp at the time of the study. All interviews took place in Kakuma Refugee Camp at the location of the participant’s choosing. The participants’ ages ranged from 18 to approximately 50 (not all women were aware of their ages) and all were from the southern Sudanese Dinka people or stated they were not a part of any ethnic group (via interpreters) but spoke the Dinka language. Interviews took place utilizing an interpreter in the Dinka language, were recorded, and the English interpretations were transcribed verbatim. Swahili was utilized in some cases to clarify points with the interpreter. Participants were located through convenience and snowball sampling. Ten of the participants were in the 18–19-year-old age range. This sub-sample noted a slightly different set of coping strategies. They also reported a higher level of education (several years to some secondary education vs. no education to several years for the older

sample) and all ten reported never having been married (as opposed to the older group, who had all been or were currently married).

Analysis

Data analysis occurred by utilizing NVivo, and a research assistant also analyzed a random 20% of the full interviews to check for coding discrepancies. Both open coding and axial coding was utilized as described by Strauss and Corbin (1990). Negative case analysis with a review for contradictory evidence was also used to discover any cases in which one interviewee's experience showed that not all women shared the general categories of these phenomenon. The field notes, informal interviews, and previous theory from the literature later provided triangulation for this analysis as transcripts were reviewed for similarities and possible contradictory evidence. During analysis, a different set of coping strategies, primarily those focused on future hopes and education, was noted and further analyzed for this paper.

Results

The analysis from the questionnaire indicated that respondents of all age sets listed support from family and friends, religious/spiritual beliefs, formal supports such as agencies within the camp, and a hope that their lives will someday change as primary coping mechanisms (Gladden, 2013). The older age group primarily focused on basic needs such as obtaining food and shelter. They explained, "sometimes I don't have food in the house, neighbor give that. Don't have water. Share it. Help each other." Another response mentioned formal supports for obtaining basic needs, stating "UN (United Nations) people gave us food, the house, even those plate for eating." For the older participants, the primary hope for change appeared to be that God may eventually provide relief, as seen in the quote, "I think that one day, one time, God will change my everything. That is my hope."

One major difference in coping strategies among the younger set of participants was an emphasis on education. While several individuals within the older age categories noted a hope for their children to receive an education, the focus was not on their own

ability to obtain this. One woman stated that “if they go to school they will get a better life, but now they don’t go to school maybe they will be poor or end up survive like me. [...] if the children cannot go to school, how can my life change?” The hope for these older women was that their children might receive an education, which would allow their children to have the financial ability to help themselves as well as the rest of the family. In contrast, the younger age group (18–19-year-olds) was much more focused on education as a pathway to new lives for themselves. All but one individual of the younger age set wished to continue their education. However, at the time of the study, only one was actively attending school. Issues relating to finances appeared to be the most common barrier. One individual stated, “I want to go back to school. There is no chance. I don’t have a sponsor who can help me.” Another woman stated, “I need someone who can put me in school.” In most refugee camps, families must come up with fees for books and uniforms, and many families are not able to afford these minimal costs.

Nine of the 10 the younger Sudanese women in the study reported hope for education as one of their primary coping strategies. While they also relied on the above strategies, they appeared to have a stronger hope that they could control and change their own situations if they received an education. One young woman stated, “The important thing is to go to school.” She considered finding a way to receive education as her primary goal. Others had similar statements with a focus on the future. For example, one woman stated her hope that “If I finish school, I will get good life.” Others provided statements such as “I want more knowledge to help me in the future” and “If I finish my education maybe at that time it can change life.” They were hopeful that with education, they would be able to find a more satisfactory path in life. One stated, “If I get time in future, then I will finish my education, I will be happy.” They had hope that, with an education, they would be able to find employment to provide for their needs. These young women saw the older women in the camp who were unemployed and struggled to meet basic needs. Of the 20 older women interviewed in this study, only two reported any form of employment. These two individuals noted they carried water from the water pumps to the homes of other refugees who had more resources in exchange for food. The

hope of the younger women was to be able to obtain an education to find more formal and sustainable employment opportunities.

Unfortunately, due to the limitations of the educational system in the camp, some did not feel that their needs would be met. The one student who was still able to attend school noted, "We have not enough school here in Kakuma." Another individual, when discussing their education in the camp, stated that they "went to school just for the name. I did not try hard." Although the majority of students were able to continue their hope for a better future through education, some, such as this individual, recognized the limitations of what camp education would be able to provide for her.

The majority of the women interviewed in the study were focused on meeting their own basic needs. When one's own needs are so great, it can be difficult to think beyond one's immediate family. Only one woman mentioned a desire to help others. She stated, "If I get knowledge, I can help somebody and I can help myself." This outlook towards assisting the community as a whole appears to be fairly rare. However, it is an important distinction. When refugees are able to look beyond their needs to the needs of the community, they will be able to assist with the long-term rebuilding of their community.

Discussion

As research has shown (Bellino et al., 2018; Crea & McFarland, 2015; Topuzova & Lock, 2013; Waters & Leblanc, 2005), one of the best strategies to help a community improve their conditions is to empower those within the community. Community members have the connections and cultural understanding to make the changes that the community itself wants. Furthermore, individuals who wish to return to their home country also value receiving an education in the camps (Bellino, 2018), although studies also note that formal education alone may not provide for all basic needs.

The fact that so many refugees desire an education that they are not receiving demonstrates the need for a greater commitment from funding sources for educational opportunities. In 2011, UNESCO reported that only about 30% of children aged 12–17 were attending secondary school in conflict areas. Further, less than 4% of total humanitarian funding in these areas goes towards education, and schooling is often the first item cut during budget deficits. Education

in refugee camps is often not of high quality (Shakya et al., 2012). Many refugees may find it difficult to be invested in schooling when they do not know if they will wake up the next morning.

Education for Creating Social Capital

Education in conflict areas can be a restorative and normalizing aspect of childhood, guiding students towards the promise of a better future (Bellino, 2018). Schooling also can provide youth with social and emotional support not otherwise available (McCarthy, 2018). Meda et al. (2012) similarly discusses education as a method of meeting psychosocial needs for refugee children, including coping with trauma. Additionally, being in an educational setting with a clear focus and contact with other like-minded youth can provide students with a way to become invested in a positive activity, reducing issues of delinquent behavior and depression due to boredom. Social and academic supports for youth who are engaged in education in Kakuma Refugee Camp can help these students move from being or feeling dependent on camp systems to being engaged in reciprocal exchanges (Bellino, 2018). El Jack (2010) discusses the importance of the educational structure, citing an interview completed with a Sudanese woman in which she states, "Education is my father and mother. It tells me what is right and wrong and shows me the way" (p. 19). Thus, education can be a stabilizing factor, reducing violence and increasing positive coping (Topuzova & Lock, 2013).

Unfortunately, many refugee camps lack both the structure to provide educational opportunities for refugee youth and the funding to do so. Wright and Plasterer (2010) state that primary and secondary education desperately need an increase in funding. Bellino (2018) discusses the difficulty of the structural gap between primary and secondary school in Kakuma Refugee Camp, limiting many youths to only primary education. Low quality education and poor learning conditions compound this challenge. Some students in Kakuma noted that they had to walk up to 10 km to get to school (Mareng, 2010). Crea & McFarland (2015) note that students reported challenges around the lack of school materials and issues of food insecurity which present major barriers to attending school. Another compounding issue is that some funders are concerned about ensuring

that refugees do not receive a higher quality of education than the local population (Dryden-Peterson, 2017) where camps are located.

Lack of Higher Educational Opportunities

Bellino (2018) warns that primary and secondary education may be insufficient to change the lives of refugees if the infrastructure to provide opportunities for employment or higher education is not available. The schools in Kakuma Refugee camps are not only lacking in funding and teachers, but also lacking in support from the community (El Jack, 2010). One study notes the lack of tertiary or university education available to most refugee students (Crea & McFarland, 2015). The scarcity of quality education for refugee youth is concerning, especially as the access to education is an important part of the durable solutions for refugees in Africa (Meda et al., 2012). Refugees need access to education to gain the knowledge and skills they need for durable solutions, whether repatriation, local integration, or resettlement (Wright & Plasterer, 2010). The education provided in Kakuma Refugee Camp is not sufficient to assist the students in their goals of attaining any of the durable solutions (Mareng, 2010). Further, students may not invest in their education when few opportunities seem to be present once education is complete. A student in the Shakya et al. study (2012) shared a traditional saying from their people group that implied that whether one was educated or not, one would be likely to obtain similar forms of employment.

Despite the overwhelming challenges, some hope remains. For example, some programs are exploring the possibility of providing tertiary education within a camp and allowing for transfer of credits once a student either resettles or repatriates (Crea & McFarland, 2015). Distance learning with university partnerships may also provide the possibility of continued education (Wright & Plasterer, 2010). A few programs are seeking to provide these opportunities, such as the World University Service of Canada together with the Albert Einstein German Academic Refugee Initiative and the Borderless Higher Education for Refugees Program (Dryden-Peterson et al., 2017). The greater availability of online education would seem to be a promising way to increase educational opportunities; however, this initiative requires infrastructure such as computers and internet access. An increase in the availability of programs such

as these will be essential to provide refugees with the skills and knowledge they need to navigate society.

Another way to bridge the gaps in formal education programs is through trade and certificate programs. Some initiatives provide focused education in areas that will increase refugees' ability to learn a skill and possibility lead towards future employment. These programs offer similar benefits as more formal education: they provide a constructive activity that can give refugee students hope and a positive community. Examples such as the Community Service Learning Track (Topuzova & Lock, 2013) have shown positive results that parallel those seen in formalized educational programs. These trade programs have been able to provide a sense of empowerment to both the individuals and the communities that participate, as well as leadership skills for the participants (Topuzova & Lock, 2013). An additional benefit to these programs is that they may not require the completion of a primary or secondary education to participate, which would be useful for adult refugee women who have not had these previous educational experiences.

Reducing the Gender Gap

Female refugees face particular challenges in refugee camps. Specific programs should be created to encourage the attendance of young refugee women in educational settings. The cultural norms in many parts of the world, including for the Sudanese in this study, must be considered, and the benefits of female education will need to be shown in local communities. Mareng (2010) stated that girls had a strong commitment to studying to increase their sense of independence, and they wanted to be free from the family expectations of solely taking care of the family through cooking, cleaning, and childcare. Women have shown some successes when given opportunities. One Somali woman in Kakuma Refugee Camp was able to obtain a diploma and become a teacher in the camp schools (eventually becoming the headmistress), which increased enrollment of girls in that school dramatically (Crea & McFarland, 2015). One study noted that young refugee women hoped to become teachers—one of the few employment opportunities available in refugee camps (Pherali & Turner, 2018).

Refugee women need to see examples of women in leadership and educational roles. Wright and Plasterer report that the efforts of local NGOs to improve female attendance in schools has been met with some success, requiring the involvement of community outreach programs, scholarships, and adult literacy programs to strengthen adults' investment in learning (2010). Dryden-Peterson et al. (2017) note that when girls' mothers were supportive of their daughters receiving an education—even if they themselves had none—the girls were able to find the courage to attend school. The mothers were able to decrease the domestic work expected of the girls and to provide the encouragement needed. Additional programs and community-based work could increase these examples and provide more young refugee women with the support needed to attend school.

Limitations

While this study has strengths in focusing on the words and experiences of refugee women currently living in a refugee camp, international research holds its own set of limitations. Data collection was challenging in this setting, as the primary researcher is a Western-based Caucasian female. Although the parameters of the research study were explained to participants, it is likely that some refugees who participated may have edited their responses for what they may have seen as either a possible link for additional resources or to protect themselves by not providing information fully. Time limitations did not allow for extended time within the camp to develop more trusting relationships.

Language barriers are common challenges for international research. This researcher participated in four years of Swahili courses to attempt to prepare for and limit the difficulties of language barriers. The participants in this study were Dinka speaking individuals, some with Swahili as a second language, and thus interpreters who spoke Dinka, Swahili, and English, referred by the United Nations and Sudanese communities, were utilized. The interpreters utilized the Dinka language, with some questions being discussed with the researcher in Swahili when questions arose. Additionally, the original study questions from which this sub-set of data was developed was pilot tested with Dinka speaking refugees in the

local community of the researcher to screen for questions that may not have cultural relevance or be confusing in the Sudanese culture. Based on the pilot testers' feedback, the study was deemed culturally appropriate.

Conclusion and Recommendations

All but one the younger Sudanese women in the study reported that the hope of an education was one of their primary coping strategies. The majority of the young women hoped that if they had the opportunity to become educated, they could change their lives. The women reported the hope that they would be able to find employment if they received education. The women would then be able to support themselves as well as their family members and communities. Although none of the women in the older age brackets expressed having hope of education for themselves, several of them reported a hope that at least some of their children would be able to receive an education. Unfortunately, as the participants in this study reported, despite the desire for education, they were not able to access educational programs. Refugees need access to an education in the camps whether they return to their home country or remain in the camps. This research confirms a need to move beyond emergency short-term services in camp settings, and to include education as a priority (Topuzova & Lock, 2013).

In order to provide for the levels of educational services desired by younger refugees (females, in the case of this study), a greater amount of funding will be required. As stated earlier, less than 4% of total humanitarian funding in these areas goes towards education, and schooling is often the first item cut during budget deficits, causing both the availability and quality of education to suffer (Shakya et al., 2012). Due to COVID-19, the numbers of refugee youth attending school has dropped, particularly for young female refugees. UNHCR (2021) reports that it is estimated that half of the female refugee students who previously attended school will not be returning for the next academic year. Greater funding commitments from supporting developed nations will be necessary to increase and improve educational systems within refugee camps, with an emphasis on assisting female refugee students who wish to return to school. With greater funding, a variety of educational

opportunities, such as online learning and trade schools, could be offered to support various levels of need within the refugee community. Although funding is always scarce, an increase in this area could potentially have a high return. Benefits could include increased ability for refugees to cope with their current situations, improved social capital and independence, higher levels of skills for durable solutions such as repatriation to the refugees' home countries, and a reduction of the gender gap. As one woman stated, "The way people can help is with helping children in school. Then you can change her life."

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