

RESEARCH FINDINGS: VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN MIGRANTS AND REFUGEES

Analysing causes and effective policy response

Summary

Women migrants and refugees experience different forms of violence that intersect and occur on a continuum exposing them to interlocking cycles of violence in different settings of their migration experience. These experiences of violence compound each other, so that having been victimised in one instance may render women vulnerable to further violence in another setting. In a destination country like South Africa, the political, economic, and social structures of violence embedded within the asylum context and the conditions for refugee reception intersect with gendered power hierarchies to create specific insecurities for women refugees. Further, the COVID-19 pandemic has deepened the vulnerabilities of women refugees. COVID-19 relief support efforts have not been accessible for refugees, and this has widened the gap between citizens and non-citizens in South Africa.

Background

Attention to refugees, but particularly young girls and women refugees, has increased globally. In 2020, Sub-Saharan African countries hosted approximately 26% of the global refugee population (UNHCR). Ongoing unrest and conflict in countries like the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Burundi have caused high levels of human insecurity and resulted in hundreds of thousands of people fleeing to neighbouring countries, including Angola, Zambia, Tanzania, and South Africa. South Africa is a key destination for refugees in the region due to its perceived economic and political stability and, in theory, favourable refugee regime. We interviewed women refugees in South Africa to better understand the extent of sexual and gender-based violence against refugee women and how policies might contribute to or mitigate these.

The Violence Continuum

Women refugees experience various forms of violence that form part of a continuum that is stretched across 3 linked migration contexts:

- Violence in countries of origin
- Violence on the journey to South Africa
- Violence in South Africa

Inequalities in South Africa

Economic insecurities

- Lack of employment
- Lack of accommodation
- Transactional Sex

Legal dependence and insecurities

Xenophobia and racism

Health insecurities

Research Approach

The analysis presented in this brief is based on a study that was conducted in Durban, South Africa using various mixed methods. We conducted a policy scan and comprehensive literature review with a focus on women refugees in South Africa. For this research, we collaborated with Refugee Social Services and Refugee Pastoral Care, two local NGO's working directly with migrant and refugee women. We conducted 5 focus group discussions and 83 semi-structured individual interviews with migrant and refugee women (18-63 years old) from Democratic Republic of Congo, Burundi, Rwanda and Zimbabwe. The interviews were conducted in English, French and Shona. With the support of an interpreter, some of the interviews were conducted in English which was translated to Swahili, Kirundi and Lingala when the women preferred to use their native language. The interviews aimed to explore women's experiences and impacts of SGBV as well as women's interactions with various institutional actors.

Key Findings: The Trajectory Of Violence

Violence in countries of origin

Most women who were interviewed had fled from situations of armed conflict and had experienced emotional, physical, and sexual violence in their countries of origin. The violence was predominantly perpetrated by armed forces, with some of the participants sharing accounts of their abduction and sexual servitude to combatants, as well as provision of domestic services to armed forces. Many of the women had suffered from compound forms of violence against themselves and their close family members, including the murder of children and spouses.

drivers, or border guards). Whilst some of the participants managed to obtain direct passage to South Africa, several women indicated they had moved from one place to the other, and, in most cases, they did not have access to a proper shelter which meant that they stayed in unsafe public spaces further exposing them to violence. Some women were forced to flee from their countries of origin while pregnant and insecurities along the journey coupled with lack of essential sexual and reproductive health services exposed these women to poor reproductive outcomes.

Violence in transit

The human insecurity resulting from conflict often precipitates flight. However, being displaced also creates a high vulnerability for violence. After fleeing their homes, whilst most of the women fled straight to South Africa, several of the participants indicated that they had first settled in refugee camps in other neighbouring countries which had inadequate and unsafe conditions. These conditions then precipitated women to proceed with their journey to South Africa in search of security and better living conditions. However, forced displacement underpinned by unequal gender dynamics increased precarity of women en route, with participants sharing experiences of sexual or transactional sexual violence en route to South Africa from other male refugees and those facilitating the often-clandestine travel (eg truck

Violence in South Africa

Despite a progressive refugee policy in South Africa, there are challenges in implementation. On arriving in South Africa, most women hoped for a better future with protection and security. However, arrival in South Africa marked the beginning of a new struggle with further forms of insecurity and violence. A combination of legal and economic insecurities, interacting with structures of gender inequality and xenophobia resulted in a continuing state of insecurity and vulnerability for migrant and refugee women. Despite a theoretically progressive refugee policy in South Africa, there are challenges in implementation which mean many refugees remain undocumented. These circumstances combined often left refugees traumatized, extremely poor, homeless living in insecure accommodation and lacking the means to provide for themselves.

Below we highlight the interactions of various forms of insecurities that women refugees face on arriving in South Africa.

Economic Insecurities

Lack of formal employment opportunity

Being undocumented is a barrier to formal employment which means most participants were working in the unprotected informal sector as childminders, street vendors, or working in hair salons.

Insecure housing options

Most of the participants revealed that they often found it difficult to find safe and secure accommodation. The lack of accommodation and the fear of sleeping in the streets often led them to become dependent on men for accommodation and this usually created an imbalance of power relations, often leading to violence. On arrival to South Africa, several of the women also found shelter from the local refugee churches and they would stay with some of the congregants or a pastor. However, several participants revealed that they were exposed to continued sexual exploitation because they did not have the option to find another place for accommodation. Our research also found out that whilst the participants got assistance with accommodation from civil society organisations it was only for a limited time, usually 3 months.

Transactional sex

Precarious economic and living conditions create vulnerability for refugee women who may create reliance on men who are better resourced and leave women with little choice but to engage in transactional sexual relationships for survival.

Barriers to health care

- Lack of documentation
- Lack of money
- Xenophobic attitudes and behaviour of health providers

Legal Insecurities

Women's asylum claims in South Africa are processed with their male partner as a joint file where the spouse is treated as the file holder. In the event that a woman separates from her spouse, her asylum claim will be forfeited. This creates legal dependence and in the case of domestic violence which is common, locks women into abusive relationships faced with the alternative of leaving and becoming undocumented.

Health Insecurities

Experiences of sexual violence and transactional sexual relationships expose refugee women, to HIV and other STIs. Several women tested positive for HIV on settling in South Africa. Economic constraints in the form of food insecurity make it challenging for refugee women living with HIV to adhere to antiretroviral treatment. Barriers to health care included lack of documentation and finances particularly if they had to seek over the counter medication or use private doctors. The other barrier was xenophobic attitudes and behaviour of health care staff. Most of the women had not been able to or had not tried to access the health service they needed.

Xenophobic Insecurities

Frequent experiences of different forms of xenophobia in different spaces intersected with gender inequalities which further marginalized an already highly vulnerable and marginalized population of women. The constant xenophobic violence such as harassment of street vendors, that occurs in the Durban Central Business District often leaves many migrant and refugee women struggling to sustain their livelihoods.



Impact of Covid-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic worsened pre-existing economic vulnerabilities of refugee women since lockdown measures brought the informal sector, in which women refugees participated, to a standstill. Before the lockdowns, most women were already surviving on a day-to-day basis which meant that on the closure of their workspaces due to the lockdowns, women had no savings to fall back on. Women who were employed by other smaller informal businesses did not receive their wages and in most cases lost their jobs. In the early phase of the lockdown, refugee women were excluded from social-economic assistance since only citizens were eligible for State-supported social relief grants. However, a legal challenge resulted in a ruling by the Pretoria High Court on 18 June 2020 where asylum seekers and special permit holders were rendered eligible for the Social Relief of Distress (SRD) grant. However, there were several challenges to obtaining this grant and of all the participants that we interviewed only one indicated that they had managed to access the grant.

Recommendations

Developing targeted strategies for addressing SGBV

Targeted interventions and programming specifically designed to address the challenges that refugee women encounter in obtaining safe accommodation and sustainable livelihoods are required. Shelter and livelihoods are the two greatest areas that create SGBV vulnerability for migrants and refugees. Whilst refugee women receive support from civil society, in most cases, these are temporary solutions. Furthermore, it is important to question what happens to refugee women who face SGBV. There is a need for comprehensive programmes addressing the way forward after experiencing SGBV.

Addressing mental health needs

Advocate for the specific mental health needs of forced migrants to be considered in public health system responses.

The mental health impacts of the multiple forms of violence and trauma experienced by refugee women require further attention. Coping mechanisms that refugee women engage with to face their daily stressors and their alternative healing strategies need to be better understood. Initiatives that strengthen human rights, and by extension, the psychosocial and health rights of refugee women as well as counselling support are needed.

This research brief is based on research findings from a study investigating and analysing the causes of violence against women migrants and refugees and the effectiveness of policy response.

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