

Livelihood Coping Strategies among the Congolese Urban Refugee Women during the Covid 19 Crisis

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ABSTRACT : Coping strategies among the urban refugee women is a study that focusses on the understanding of how refugees in urban setting cope with their livelihoods mostly during Covid 19 lockdown. By focusing on the coping strategies, we critically analyze how refugee women, managed the livelihoods since the economy was in total lockdown and yet there was need to survive. The purpose of this study of the livelihood coping strategies among urban refugee women from Democratic Republic of Congo is to find out if there are any ways refugee women endeavored to find means of sustaining their livelihoods during the Covid 19 lockdown which was a testing time for everybody in the global context.

Keywords - coping strategies, livelihood, Urban Refugees, women

I. INTRODUCTION

It is believed that Covid 19 pandemic disrupted the global health systems and other sectors including; economy, culture, social as well as political. Almost every part of the world has felt the impact of Covid 19 in similar and differing ways. As the World faces the Covid 19 crisis, over 70.8 million refugees who are displaced and are seeking asylum in other countries should be remembered (Bukuluki, P, Sidvha.D, & Palatiyil.G, 2020). These people are known to be displaced due to environment factors like floods and landslides, human rights violations, political persecution and other factors (Bukuluki et al, 2020). In 2019, UNHCR reported that over 84% of the global refugees are hosted by low or middle income countries with poor health systems and limited resources to take care of the needs of the refugees.

Among the refuge hosting countries, Uganda is ranked the third in the whole world and first in Africa hosting refugees from neighboring countries including; Ethiopia, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), South Sudan, Eritrea, Rwanda, Somali, and Burundi. According to UNHCR (2019), Uganda hosted around 1.35 million refugees and asylum seekers in urban areas like West Nile, Northern, and Western parts of the country. The World Bank (2019) indicates that majority of the refugee population are women (82%), and children around (56%) of refugees are below the age of 15, while (25 %) are younger than 5 years UNHCR (2019).

Broadly, livelihood is about how people manage to make a living in their own lives and places. Existing literature refers to livelihood in different ways. For example; (Chambers.R & Conway.R.G, 1991) refer to livelihood as means of gaining a living or combination of the resources used and the activities undertaken in order to live. Chambers and Conway (1991) also refer to livelihood as assets, activities and capabilities. Accordingly, a combination of complex activities and interactions that emphasize the ways in which people make a living gives a diversity of descriptive analysis to understanding livelihood.

Livelihood presupposes the ability of an individual or group to respond to short term needs (or stress) and to long term needs (or shocks), but also sustain them continuously (Chambers & Conway, 1998). The study examines the livelihood coping strategies refugee women in Kampala employ to sustain their livelihoods amidst the COVID-19.

According to USA for UNHCR (2021),

a refugee is someone who has been forced to flee his or her country because of persecution, war or violence. A refugee has a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group. Most likely, they cannot return home or are afraid to do so. War and ethnic, tribal and religious violence are leading causes of refugees fleeing their countries. Refugees can

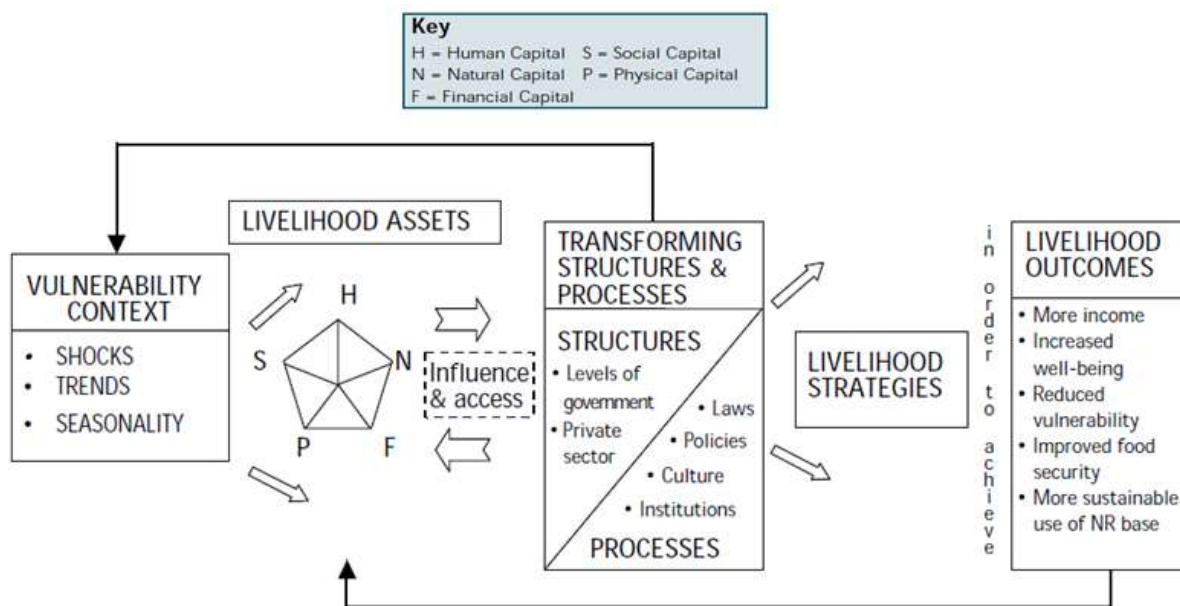
repatriate once the situation in their country of origin ceases to be unsafe, or be integrated within the host community.

The world over, COVID 19 is a global pandemic that has threatened the normal progress and style of living among nationals and refugees. It is probable that refugees living in urban settings are greatly affected by the crisis of post COVID-19 compared to their counterparts in refugee settlements and the host communities. According to the Inter-Agency Rapid Gender Analysis – COVID-19 report, household surveys with over 1,500 refugees in Kampala and the settlements as well as interviews with 185 key informants, revealed that women and girls have been highly impacted in many aspects of their lives, including livelihoods, education, healthcare and protection risks. The same report states that,

The loss of income within the household has contributed to an increased incidence of Gender-Based Violence (GBV) and negative coping mechanisms such as survival sex and sale of alcohol. Fifty-three per cent of girls and Forty-six per cent of women aged 18-24 years reported an additional unpaid work burden, such as cooking, housework, collecting firewood and fetching water. Ten per cent of key informants cited child marriage as one the negative coping strategies families were forced to resort to make up for lost livelihoods (UNHCR , 2020).

In light of the livelihood theory by (Scoones, 2009), this study seeks to explore the livelihood coping strategies among urban refugee women in Kampala. The livelihood theory is a framework that combines the available resources used with the activities undertaken in order to live. Therefore, a descriptive analysis portrays a complex web of activities and interactions that emphasize the diverse ways of living among people. Also, it cuts across conventional approaches to life and looks at rural development founded on defined activities (Scoones, 2009).

Fig 3: Illustration of Livelihood Theory



Source: Livelihood theory/ framework (adopted from Carney 1998)

Review of the Livelihood theory

The livelihood theory in essence is very interesting because it is made up of five types of capital: human capital, which refers to people, physical capital refers to assets, social capital refers to social resources, natural capital refers to the benefits from nature and financial capital, which refers mainly to cash. According to this theory, all forms of capital are interrelated and helpful in assisting an individual or groups/community to survive. This is often determined by the community setting, at different levels and using different processes. It is a complex mix of government and private sector actors, as well as the mediating institutions of laws, culture and policies (Ashley.C & Carney.D, 1999). Once the structures and policies in a given community or organization are functional, the targeted livelihood outcomes can be achieved, in the form of more income, improved food security, increased well-being and reduced vulnerability, as well as a more sustainable use of natural resources

base. All the five components are used to address the livelihood needs of the vulnerable groups in a given community and context. It cannot be over-emphasized that this theory is relevant to the study of urban refugee women, the majority of who are poor and are in a constant struggle to meet their daily needs.

The government instituted a lockdown to reduce the spread of COVID-19 and this affected refugee livelihoods as well as created income insecurity among urban refugees (Yaxley, 2020). This is because urban refugees depend on the informal market economy and small enterprises such as artisans, tailors, hairdressers, traders in precious jewelry and vendors of food and second-hand clothes (Macciavello, 2004). The lockdown directives did not exonerate these small enterprises hence income insecurity. Although this may be perceived as a general global problem in low and middle-income countries, given the high rate of unemployment in Uganda and it is among countries affected by extreme poverty, the situation is difficult for refugees who lack contingency livelihoods and social support networks that can serve as shock absorbers and coping resources. During the lock down, there is a reported increase in sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) including physical, sexual, emotional and its health and psychosocial effects (Nakalembe, 2021) For example, the UN-Women has noted that the “COVID-19 pandemic is a global crisis that risks exacerbating gender inequalities as well as violence against women. As in past pandemics, there are clear signs women continue to bear the brunt of emergent risks to public health, safety, and human rights” (United Nations, 2020). This is because the lockdown has challenged the traditional gender roles in terms of men being the main breadwinners for families. For instance, the closure of markets interrupted the work of male refugees who previously operated as vendors/small scale retailers. Consequently, such a sudden loss of work has resulted in a lack of income to support their children and women under their care (Peterman et al., 2020). As a result, this causes anger and frustration within families which aggravate emotional and physical violence commonly in vulnerable households of urban refugees.

More contextually, Covid 19 has negatively impacted on people’s lives in similar and different ways. After the country lockdown in March, 2021, the government provided food to some categories of people perceived to be vulnerable. During the second lockdown which started in May 2021, the government again provided Sh. Ug. 100, 000 to vulnerable people like the *boda boda* riders, salon operators and others. However, both food and cash were distributed to the Ugandan nationals only and yet urban refugees especially women and children are also characterized with high level of vulnerability since they depend on daily earning to sustain their livelihoods.

Uganda as a country is not adequate to the situation and needs of urban refugees in the context of COVID-19. This is contrary to Article 3 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which states that “everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person” (Tomuschat, 2008). For example, the targeting criteria for entitlement to food support and cash distribution to the vulnerable populations affected by COVID-19 do not explicitly target urban refugees. The food and cash distribution to support the poor and vulnerable urban residents affected by the lockdown requires people to present national identification cards that refugees do not have (Omatta, 2013)

According to (Aslam, 2020) 1.4 million refugees living in Uganda, over 467,000 DRC who are estimated to be living in Kampala city suburbs are unemployed and living in poverty. They are miserable due to high cost of living because they are not able to adequately address high demands for; health, housing, education ... and feeding costs which impacts on their livelihoods (Buscher 2016; UNHCR, 2020; United Nations, 2020). Women refugees typically must rely on hard work to meet their livelihood needs. This however, has of recent been affected by COVID-19 pandemic and in Uganda, the economic recession tends to have lessened support for refugees as the priority goes for citizens’ access to jobs/business, food and social services during the pandemic.

Refugees are entitled to the enjoyment of all human rights, including but not limited to food, shelter, education, dressing, health care, safe drinking water and electricity. This is enshrined in the United Nations Refugee Convention 1951, Article 3, which states that “parties shall not discriminate against refugees on account of race, religion, or country of origin, nor because they are refugees”. Therefore, refugee women in Kampala should be given aid to look after their children and cater for other daily needs.

Given that urban refugees women have limited sources of income to meet their livelihoods, some resort to their communities (within and abroad) for survival whereas others opt for negative coping strategies like commercial sex, illegal trade and child labour. Therefore, the study would want to investigate what livelihood coping strategies urban refugee women employed during Covid 19 pandemic to sustain their livelihoods.

II. METHODS

This research is a case study of livelihood coping strategies for the refugee women from Congo who live in Kampala city slums. Case studies are about studying features of social phenomena through comprehensive description and analysis of a single situation or case, for example, a detailed study of an individual, group, episode, event, or any other unit of social life organization (Zina O’Leary 2017: 127). To

understand a case study, often emphasis is placed on understanding the unity and wholeness of a given case. It may also refer to the form and shape of 'participants' even though some researchers use it as a methodology (Zina O'Leary 2017). What make this study a: "case" is the nature of the participants targeted to give their opinions and views on the livelihood coping strategies during the Covid 19 lock downs when everybody was forced to stay home to prevent father spread of the virus.

Since case studies are characterized with qualitative research methods, the researchers will stick to the most appropriate methods to apply to this study which are; in-depth interviews through focus group discussions (FGDs), key informant interviews (KII) as well as direct observation. Case studies follow inductive thought and reasoning whereby, the descriptive approaches are detailed with data on peoples' experiences, views, opinions,) to learn about their social construction and develop appropriate theories. Thus this study, will come up with appropriate theory(s) on livelihood coping strategies for Congolese refugee women living in urban setting. More strategically, a case study was chosen, because cases attempt to build holistic understanding through the development of rapport and trust. The goal is 'authenticity' and a richness and depth in understanding that goes beyond what is generally possible in large-scale survey research (Zina O'Leary 2017: 128). The study of the livelihood coping strategies for Congolese urban refugee women, is a typical example of a case study whose main goal is to establish the authenticity of information about the means of meeting daily needs during Covid 19 with limited government and humanitarian assistance. This will form a framework to theory which can guide refugee women especially those in urban setting to sustain their livelihoods with appropriate coping strategies. Case studies are very important because they provide subjective evidence for a theory or to triangulate other data collection methods, and inductively generate new theory. However, they can be expensive for the researcher during data collection. Some participants are hard to get, while others may limit the amount of information required as well as emotional costs on both the researcher and the participant (Zina O'Leary 2017). To overcome such instances, the researchers determine their participants in a timely manner and created a rapport in advance which limited occurrences that could have affect data collection.

We collected data from the urban refugee women of the Democratic Republic of Congo ethnicity living in Kampala city suburbs and analysed it using qualitative content data analysis method. We chose to use content analysis because it is suitable for the kind of data we collected since our research study of "coping strategies for Congolese urban refugee women livelihoods" is purely qualitative research. We wanted to understand the parameters through which refugee women in urban setting met their daily needs during Covid 19 lockdowns when a lot of activities were closed. The major components that made our analysis include; assets, capabilities, activities, means of survival and challenges. We anticipated that Congolese refugee women could be having assets that they turned into cash to buy food and other daily needs. We also thought that refugees in general have capabilities to perform certain work like in formal and informal employment to find a source of livelihood. We further assumed that there could be activities that refugees conducted to get income to meet their daily needs. However, we also anticipated that despite free movement policy offered to refugees by the government of Uganda, they could be facing some challenges, and we wanted to know how these challenges affect their lives. In addition to conducting KIIs and FGDs to get participants views and opinions on the subject matter of the study, we also used observation method to understand the behaviour of refugee women and host community relationship during their interaction.

III. DISCUSSION

Assets owned by refugee women

During focus group discussions with refugee women, we asked them if they possess assets that they could sale to get money for meeting their daily needs during the two spells of Covid 19 lockdown. Refugee women mentioned some assets which they indeed sold off to get some money during the lockdown. Most of them did not have expensive assets but what was available was sold off. These items include; beds, bed sheets, mattresses, clothes (Bitenge) cupboards, TV sets. These items were sold basically to get money to buy food since there was no source of food.

Even though refugee women sold some items specifically to buy food and other requirements, they also conducted a few activities including risking to hawk some items mainly Jewelleries and assorted items like; wallets, belts, perfumes, clothes, watches and artificial hair.

Interesting to note is that, during the discussion with the refugee women, they told us that many refugees have qualifications but they hardly find employment in Uganda. Their perception is that Ugandans do not like employing Congolese because they keep on referring to them as refugees who do not deserve to be employed in Uganda despite having qualifications. Some of the qualifications mentioned during the focus FGD with refugee women include; nursing, accounting, engineering, teaching, hair dressing, social workers, drivers. However, some go to informal sector and mix with the host community to compete for activities like; car washing, brick laying, house maids, carpentry, and hawking to sustain their livelihoods.

Major activities

The major activities in which urban Congolese refugee women engage in to survive include; trading in; Jewelleries, shoes, watches, clothes/garments, and artificial hair. In addition, during the two lockdowns, refugee women survived by providing some casual labour in the neighbourhood which include; temporally house maids, washing clothes for neighbours, cleaning houses for neighbours, brick laying.

Apart from selling off their assets and conducting some activities as coping strategies during the Covid 19 lockdown, urban Congolese refugee women also received some irregular assistance from the host community and humanitarian organisations. They told us that the host community allowed them to pick plant leaves (beans, cassava, sweet potatoes, and pumpkin) to use them to make local source which they ate with food. However, some neighbours would sell the leaves to them at the cost of Sh. 1000 per bundle, otherwise, they would not be allowed to access the gardens. During the FGD, refugee women mentioned two humanitarian organisations that delivered some food items to them. They said that JRS provided food items (posho, beans and rice) only once during the lockdown in very small quantities. Each household received 5Kg of each food item mentioned. According to them, this was very little and could not sustain them for more than three days because of big families. Another organisation called ECHOSI which is found in Ndejje Ssabagabo Division also provided a few food and non-food items including; 1 Kg of cassava flour, 2 and a half kgs of sugar, 5 Kg of posho, and a bar of soap per household. Still this was unsustainable and the refugee women told us that survival during the lock down was very difficult.

Challenges

During this study, another major interest was to understand the challenges urban Congolese refugee women are facing. However, they also shared with us generally the challenges Congolese refugees' community is facing in urban setting. Firstly, Congolese refugee women and other refugees in general fear to go back to Congo because of rampant insecurity. They told us that in their home communities, people are still dying of bomb explosions in different parts of the country which is a source of more fear and insecurity for them to go back. For that matter, they prefer to be assisted to go to European countries in which they feel they would be more secure and have opportunities to work. The Congolese refugee women have a feeling, their countrymen who have migrated to Europe are living a far better life than them. They are arguing the Ugandan government to assist them with European links since they are not happy here in Uganda because of more suffering they face that makes them not live a dignified life. Secondary, another contentious challenge being faced by the Congolese community in Uganda is the language barrier. Congolese have a background of French and Swahili languages plus their local dialects. These languages are inferior in Uganda as the national language is English followed by Luganda that is widely spoken in Ugandan communities. Congolese refugees find it harder to easily communicate since they take long to grasp both English and Luganda. As such, they are cheated while buying items in market and transacting business as well as face communication barrier with the host community. Apart from insecurity in DRC and language barrier in Uganda, Congolese refugee women also shared with us more challenges including; high cost of health care, high house rent, lack of income generating activities, xenophobia by host the community, high level of discrimination, social abuse, lack of adequate assistance from local leaders in case of a dispute as well as Ugandans not willing to pay for the items they acquire from Congolese business women on credit.

IV. CONCLUSION

Our study aimed at understanding the coping mechanisms employed by Congolese urban refugee women during the Covid 19 lockdowns when there were regulated movements of people to control the spread of the virus. Basing on the aforementioned findings, we therefore conclude by stating that the government and humanitarian agencies provided very limited support to urban refugees in general to enable them have a livelihood and majority of them struggled to meet daily needs since their businesses mainly of hawking goods were put at a halt to prevent further spread of Covid 19 pandemic.

We further conclude that the livelihood coping strategies for urban refugee women to meet their daily needs during Covid 19 lockdowns were somehow dehumanizing since refugees were not eligible to receive support from the government. The little that was provided by UNHCR was like a drop in the ocean and did not create any significant impact during such hard times.

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