

“I Will Paddle My Own Canoe”: Experiences of Unaccompanied Refugee Children

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ABSTRACT There is a dearth of information pertaining to experiences that unaccompanied refugee children encounter. The purpose of this paper is to explore the experiences of unaccompanied refugee children. The study was conducted using a qualitative case study of a school of refugees in South Africa. Its paradigmatic position was interpretive. Twelve unaccompanied refugee children were purposively selected to participate in the study. The study reported that unaccompanied refugee children face greater challenges compared to their accompanied refugee counterparts. They are denied basic human rights such as rights to education, healthcare and social services. This study concludes that a country like South Africa which is a signatory to the United Nations Geneva Convention on the Status of Refugees should find new ways of accommodating unaccompanied refugee minors to ensure rights of refugees.

INTRODUCTION

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) Article 1 defines a child as “every human being below the age of eighteen years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier” (CRC 1989: 2). Based on this definition, any person younger than eighteen years is a child. The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) defines unaccompanied children (or unaccompanied minors) as “children who have been separated from both parents and relatives and are not being cared for by an adult who, by law or custom, is responsible for doing so” (UNHCR 2006: 5). Children may become separated from their parents as a result of war, famine or natural disaster. They may then seek refuge in foreign countries without the company of parents or guardians.

The experiences of Zimbabwean refugee children can be traced back to the country’s unpleasant political dynamics of 2007 and 2008. Owing to harsh political instabilities and chronic economic problems in Zimbabwe over the past years, many citizens including children, have migrated to neighbouring countries to seek refuge, especially to South Africa (Bloch 2010). According to Chitando and Togarasei (2010: 157), “the period between March and June 2008 represented one of the darkest periods in the post-colonial history of Zimbabwe”. The coun-

try’s situation forced many children to flee, unaccompanied, to neighbouring South Africa. Hammerstad (2012: 1) contends that “the political and economic debacle in Zimbabwe has led to a large-scale influx of Zimbabweans into neighbouring South Africa.”

South Africa is one of the major destinations for people seeking refugee status in the African continent. The country is a signatory to international and regional conventions and protocols on refugees, obliging the state to provide the growing refugee population with protection and provision of basic rights and social services (Gordon 2014). South Africa adopted the Refugee Act, and ratified the 1951 United Nations Convention and the 1969 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees. This unequivocally means that the country has committed itself to providing services and protection to refugees.

However, in spite of all the regional and international policies which are in place, the livelihoods of unaccompanied refugee children in South Africa remain neglected (Meda 2014). Children are deprived of their basic right to education, healthcare and fundamental social services (Consortium for Refugees and Migrants in South Africa [CoRMSA] 2011). Some institutions and organisations in South Africa do not recognise refugee permits; they prevent refugee children from fully benefitting from their legislated rights (UNHCR 2015) and refugee children in South Africa are often denied their right to education. They find accessibility to schools a major challenge, mainly because of their refu-

gee backgrounds (Meda et al. 2012). This is contrary to section 29 of the South African Constitution (1996) which states that every child has a right to quality education.

Refugee children not only face challenges in accessing education, but they also feel insecure since they are very vulnerable to abuse and violence in the communities in which they live. Gordon (2014) observes that most refugees in South Africa face abuse from police and extortion and hostility from immigration officials. They also face unfair treatment from people in communities who subject them to xenophobic attacks (Crush and Ramachandran 2014).

The situation of depriving refugees of access to basic rights is not peculiar to South Africa but is common in various other countries. For instance, healthcare has often been unobtainable for refugees and asylum seekers in Hamilton, Ontario. This is mainly because of language barriers and a limited number of health providers willing to accept refugees as patients (Newbold et al. 2013). This is similar to the refugee situation in South Africa where women and children are often denied healthcare in public hospitals because of their refugee backgrounds (Meda 2014).

In addition to experiencing ill treatment when they try to get certain services, most refugee children face discrimination and unfair treatment by citizens. Dandy and Pe-pua (2015) note that most African refugees in Australia have reported discriminatory acts and experienced unfair treatment including being spat at, verbally abused, called names and being ignored. Similarly in New Zealand, refugees experience destitution, discrimination, and the deterioration of physical and mental health (Bloom and UDAHemuka 2014).

Although many refugee experiences are marked with suffering and traumatising, it is interesting to note that some communities are concerned about the wellbeing of refugee children. The staff expressed a genuine concern for the wellbeing of French-speaking black African-born students who entered Canada as refugees. They were enthusiastic to find ways of helping the students succeed in their education (Schroeter and James 2015). Such refugee treatment is very rare, mainly because countries which are compelled to provide services and offer protection fail to live by the agreements of the 1951 Convention on Refugees.

The failure by host countries to keep to the stipulations of the 1951 Convention on Refugees is exacerbating the livelihoods of refugees. For example, Jordan's inability to address basic needs of Iraqi refugees is causing more suffering for those forced migrants (Gibson 2015). Forced migrants, especially refugee children who travel to another country without the company of an adult, struggle to make ends meet. Worse still, there is a dearth of scholarship concerning the actual representation of refugee children's voices. The voices of refugees themselves remain largely unreported (Dandy and Pe-Pua 2015). The purpose of this paper is to address that gap by presenting experiences of unaccompanied Zimbabwean refugee children in South Africa.

Conceptual Framework

According to Anderson et al. (2004), and Bhugra and Gupta (2011), refugee experiences can be categorised into three stages: pre-migration, transmigration and post-migration experiences. This study uses the three stages of refugee experiences as a conceptual framework.

The pre-migration stage involves forced migrants making a decision and preparing to move to another country (Anderson et al. 2004). The second stage, transmigration, is the physical relocation of individuals, involving the journey refugees undertake to reach the host country (Bhugra et al. 2011). The journey could be rough because it will be a forced one (Kirkbride and Jones 2011). Kaplan (2009) argues that children may experience arrest, detention, sexual assault and trafficking during their journey to the host country. The third stage (post-migration) is viewed as the absorption of the immigrant into the social and cultural framework of the new society (Bhugra et al. 2011). It entails challenges that refugees face when they settle in the host country, such as acculturation, development of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and difficulties in accessing basic services such as health, education and employment.

METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted using a qualitative approach under the interpretivist paradigm. A qualitative approach was preferred mainly because the study was dealing with a vulnera-

ble group of people (refugee children). According to Liamputtong (2007), qualitative methods are especially appropriate to the study of vulnerable people because they allow the research subjects to express their feelings and experiences in their own words. The qualitative method was also chosen because it could allow researchers to collect data by interacting extensively and closely with participants during the study. The interpretivist paradigm was ideal for this study as it allowed researchers to interpret and understand the phenomenon (experiences of unaccompanied children). A single-case study in an explanatory form was used. Case study research was selected because it is useful for an in-depth study of problems to understand processes or situations in context (Yin 2009).

The study was conducted at Sangoma Refugee School (pseudonym) where the majority of refugee children are unaccompanied. Purposive sampling, which is characterised by deliberate targeting of respondents, was used to select a refugee school and learners in Grade 11. The Grade 11 stream was selected because it had the greatest number of unaccompanied children. Students from only this grade were also chosen because they were mature enough to fully respond to interview questions and participate in group discussions. Twelve unaccompanied learners were chosen by using snowball sampling. The principal of the school and teachers were asked to help choose twelve unaccompanied children. Nine boys and three girls were selected. The ratio of boys to girls in the selection reflected the ratio of boys to girls in actual school numbers.

Data collecting tools used were semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with students. Interviews were preferred because they allowed respondents to freely express their views about the subject under study. Validity and trustworthiness were ensured by a pilot survey which was conducted prior to the actual study. Data was analysed using content analysis. Ethical issues were observed by first informing students that they were going to participate in a study and were informed about the purpose of the research. All students were informed that their participation was purely voluntary and that they were free to withdraw from the study at any point. Consent for the participation of children was sought from the bishop in charge of the unaccompanied children. Each student signed

an assent form. Maximum confidentiality was ensured and pseudonyms were used. We had a trained counsellor on standby in case painful memories came to learners' minds during and after the interviews. Liamputtong (2007) asserts that it is immoral not to conduct research with the sensitive and vulnerable groups because there is a need for understanding their experiences in order to improve their care and to meet their needs.

RESULTS

All twelve unaccompanied children reported that they left their home country mainly because of political instability, harsh economic conditions and abuse. These conditions normally force people to leave their places of origin and seek a better life elsewhere. They brave every possible discomfort in the hope for a better tomorrow.

The findings were thematised as follows:

Political Instability in the Country

Politics was reported by all learners to be the cause of disruption of their education. Schools were not operating and many teachers had left the country to find work in neighbouring countries which were politically stable.

Mateo stated: *"I left because politicians were forcing us youths to participate in political rallies. We were forced to beat people who were not attending political meetings in villages."*

In a separate interview, Mello said: *"I was forced to drop out of school to cook food for people who were attending political rallies."*

In a focus group discussion, Naomi said: *"Our teachers were not coming to school because they were afraid of political leaders who were threatening and accusing them of supporting the ruling party. As a result, there was no learning in school."*

Larry said: *"Our neighbour was beaten severely by a group of youths for not attending political rallies. He died on the way to the hospital because of intensive bleeding."*

Tiyazana said: *"Our house was burnt and I witnessed people dying because of dirty politics in our country"*.

The struggle for power by most politicians can make them take desperate measures of re-

moving children from school, threatening teachers and forcing them to get involved in political activities. These forced actions of abusing other humans are unbearable to children. That is why the study sample of children fled the country in fear of death and consequences of not attending compulsory political gatherings. The political tension in Zimbabwe prior to presidential elections was disturbing. Learners reported that they witnessed people who were burnt and beaten to death. The political violence made people flee from their home country. Nobody wants to be in a place where he or she must witness people being killed for not attending a rally. It is traumatic. For children, it brings fear and insecurity such that the only option they see is to run away to a secure place.

Economic Challenges

Some learners reported that it was mainly the economic freefall which made them leave the country. Serious economic challenges caused professionals and children to flee from starvation in the country.

Tiza said: *"I left the country because of inflation, shortage of food and teachers and doctors were leaving the country for greener pastures."*

Shingi stated: *"Sometimes we had no food for days; there was no food to buy in shops and sometime it was just too expensive for us to afford"*.

Mimi stated: *"You cannot survive in Zimbabwe; the government does not care for the people. A loaf of bread was not affordable, it was costing millions of Zimbabwean dollars; there are crazy high prices for staple food"*.

Subi said: *"Every day I felt that if I do not have courage to leave and go to a better place where I get food, I will die. I did not know anyone in South Africa, but I still came. I better die trying to better myself than die sitting and not making any effort to make a difference in my life"*.

Food and shelter are some of the universal human rights declared by the United Nations (UN 1948). Those who violate these basic human rights opens themselves to national and international condemnation. The Zimbabwean economic situation was very dire that children preferred risking their lives by going to South Africa unaccompanied.

Transmigration Challenges

All children who participated in the study were unaccompanied. Each of them had to paddle his or her own canoe in order to make it to the host country. Only three learners of twelve had passports. The rest had hectic transmigration experiences in trying to cross the border illegally. They had to soldier on to make it to their destination since there were no caregivers to help them.

Marko said: *"I did not have a passport; I had to ask a truck driver to hide me in one of the containers in his truck. That is how I crossed and made it to Johannesburg."*

Mamba stated: *"I did not have a passport, so I joined a group of people who were jumping over the fence. We were caught by soldiers who asked us to give them money or get arrested. We gave them all that we had. The problem was that we did not have money to board buses from the border to Johannesburg. We walked for about 60 days to reach our destination."*

Malio said: *"I paid immigration officials in order to cross the border without a passport"*.

Vigie stated: *"I was hidden in a container which was in a big truck. Immigration officials did not see me. Truck driver forced me to have sex as a payment for helping me cross the border"*.

Some children reported that they had to bribe immigration officials in order to be allowed to cross the border without legal documents. Bribing and slipping past immigration officials was reported by learners who did not have passports. They saw other people making it to their destinations without any identification. That is why they took their chances in crossing without any travel documents. All learners reported that their transmigration experiences were hectic since they did not have adults or caregivers to help them or protect them from danger. Some reported that they were sexually abused by truck drivers who smuggled them into the host country. Some children reported that their transmigration experiences were worse than their pre-migration experiences. Learners unanimously reported that they had to "paddle their own canoes harder" when they reached the host country.

Post-migration Experiences

The post-migration period involves experiences which refugee children faced when they

reached their destination in the host country. Learners' experiences suggest that life was very difficult for them without the help of adults to get services that they needed. They reported that pushing things by themselves was a familiar situation for them in a foreign country.

Mwila stated: *"We have to do everything for ourselves here. If we do not, we will starve to death and end up getting deported by the police."*

Lucia said: *"Since I came to this country in 2008, I have been going to try to get my asylum in order to legalise my stay. But, it was not easy, I was not being served because I am a child and nobody could stand up for me"*.

Siya said: *"I was taken out of the queue for asylum-seekers. The official said my parents/guardians should come and apply for me. I explained to an immigration official that I was unaccompanied. He said, 'Go back home, kid.'"*

Milli said: *"Local youths hate us indeed. They isolate us because of our labels as refugees and they always accuse us of taking their jobs and increase crime rate in South Africa."*

Theo, in a focus group discussion, said: *"We unaccompanied children are blamed for bringing HIV and AIDS and other deadly diseases to South Africa. They say that because there was an outbreak of cholera and people were dying of curable diseases in our home country (Zimbabwe). Locals say every disease that their children suffer from was brought to South Africa by us refugee children."*

Buba said: *"Although xenophobia ended in 2008, we are still indirectly experiencing it in our community. We are called by hurtful names such as Kwerekweres. We are sometimes isolated because they say we don't bath and that we smell."*

Ngwena said: *"We do not get all the support from the community centre that we live in. So, we have to do some part-time jobs such as washing cars, selling newspapers and sweets in streets in order to raise money to supplement food and school expenses."*

All learners reported that getting asylum was very difficult. They were not being served because they were minors. All focus groups unanimously reported that it was a nightmare for them to get their asylum and refugee status. The children reported that they were eventually able to get their legal documents only because of help from the bishop. All learners reported that they

were discriminated against by community members where they were living. They also raised the issue of xenophobic comments coming from local children. With all the threats and abuses that unaccompanied refugee children face, they have to remain focused on their studies against all odds. Although all learners who participated in this study were living in a community centre hall under the guidance of a bishop, they reported that it was hard to live in a foreign country as unaccompanied children.

DISCUSSION

Suffering is a common feature that unaccompanied refugee children face in their home countries until they reach the host nation. Information from both interviews and focus group discussions pointed to different factors significantly contributing to Zimbabwean refugee children's perilous journeys. Children encountered traumatising transmigration experiences while they were in their home country (pre-migration), on the journey to the host country (transmigration), and when they eventually arrived in South Africa (post-migration) (Human Rights Watch 2012).

Economic challenges and politically motivated persecution are major causes of refugee movement in African countries (Rugunanan and Smit 2011). Zimbabwean children's pre-migration experiences were similar to those of Somali refugee children who had to seek refuge in other African countries because of massive political persecution and economic problems (Williams 2010). Such problems can force children to make unplanned journeys, on their own, which result in traumatising because of the absence of travelling documents. The journeys end up involving border-jumping, river-crossing and lengthy stays in refugee camps (Henley and Robinson 2011).

The ill-preparedness of unaccompanied refugee children compounds the stressful post-migration experiences they have. In the South African context, despite the country's constitution clearly stating aspects of inclusion, unaccompanied refugee children are always side-lined in all fraternities (UNHCR 2015). Sometimes, the situation is worsened by people who are entrusted to protect people in communities, including unaccompanied refugee children. Gordon (2014) reports that some law-enforcers in South Africa perpetrate the abuse of refugee children.

This unfortunate experience is caused by the country's inability to reinforce refugee laws as they are written in international documents. The situation resembles that of Iraqi refugees whose livelihoods are deteriorating because of Jordan's inability to honour its refugees' rights (Gibson 2015).

In South Africa, unaccompanied refugee children struggle to obtain food, let alone education and other basic needs (Meda et al. 2012). The situation bears a resemblance to what happens in Australia where refugees struggle to meet their needs and face discrimination from communities (Dandy and Pe-pua 2015).

CONCLUSION

For unaccompanied refugee children, pre-migration, transmigration and post-migration experiences are relatively major life occurrences which are characterised by stress. Without support, these children encounter traumatic experiences which have great potential of causing PTSD. The extreme suffering that refugee children experience causes them to develop some degree of psychological distress, and the common one is PTSD. In order to enhance protection of unaccompanied refugee children, host countries have an obligation to live up to the stipulations of refugee acts. Signing refugee acts mandates them to ensure provision of rights of refugees. This aspect of pragmatism of refugee rights is still lagging behind in South Africa, which is symptomatic of the global refugee experience. If refugee rights are not adequately addressed in a country like South Africa – which is the leading destination of forced migrants in Africa, the Millennium Development Goals will not be realised anytime soon. South Africa needs to create alternative ways to accommodate refugee children.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommends that host countries should provide more assistance to unaccompanied children. This will enable the children to acquire basic education, health and social services. Ministries of home affairs in countries which have refugees should ensure that unaccompanied refugee children get legal documents which will enable them to obtain humane necessary services.

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