



AN EVALUATION OF SOCIAL CAPITAL AND WELL-BEING IN THE UNITED STATES
OF AMERICA: THE CASE OF AFRICAN REFUGEE WOMEN IN LAS VEGAS

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the role and impact of social capital upon the well-being of African refugee women residing in Las Vegas. It builds on the researcher's previous study of Liberian refugee women who resided in the Buduburam refugee camp in Ghana. For the purpose of this study, social capital is defined as the social relations of mutual benefit characterized by norms of trust and reciprocity (Putnam, 2000). To date, the scanty literature about African refugees primarily focuses on the trauma that they have experienced. This study illuminates the strategies that African refugee women use to cope with resettlement in the face of this trauma. The study's objectives are: To evaluate the strategies used by refugee women to increase their social capital, in order to help develop the resources and services they need; and, to explore the differential effects that social capital may have on refugees in different locations.

Keywords: Refugees, Social Capital, Immigration, Las Vegas, USA.

1. INTRODUCTION

One of the most serious human tragedies facing the world in recent times is the refugee issue. Refugees and displaced persons find themselves in circumstances created by the forces in their native countries, beyond their control. Many factors have been identified as causing displacement in developing countries. These include civil wars, increasing civility of ecological and natural disasters, human rights abuses, increasing growth of socio-economic inequality, and highly unequal levels of development (DeMartino and Buchwald, 1996; Kibreab, 2004; Cox and Pawar, 2006). DeMartino and Buchwald (1996) for instance, argue that most of current forced displacement results from armed conflict, and that persecutions and threats are other main causes of refugee movements. Cox and Pawar identify these forces of forced migration as push factors, different from pull factors.

According to these authors, forced migration varies considerably in the degree of force, and therefore is seen as a push factor, and not an ideal one. Forced migrants are distinct "from the population of voluntary, official, and relatively permanent migrants, who set out to change their country of residence" (Cox and Pawar, 2006, p. 268). This group is 'pulled' to another country by its attractiveness to them. Uprooted people however, are those who are forced to leave their communities due to persecution and war, forcibly displaced due to environmental devastation, social, and political collapse. The circumstances of the migration are noted to be of

extreme stress, resulting in departure for a relatively unknown destination and under conditions of travel and entry that frequently offer little or no security to those migrating. Such migrants, when they resettle in another country, such as in the United States where the current study was conducted, bring with them challenges characterized by the traumas of protracted conflicts (DeMartino and Buchwald, 1996; Cox and Pawar, 2006).

More than three million refugees have been resettled in the United States since 1975, following the resettlement of thousands of Indochinese or citizens of former Soviet Union, using refugee task force. With this experience, the United States Congress found the need for refugee resettlement services and passed the Refugee Act of 1980, regulating resettlement services for all refugees admitted to the United States. Since the enactment of this Act, annual admissions figures have ranged from a high of 207,116 in 1980, to a low of 27,100 in 2002. (Office of Refugee Resettlement, 2013).

Refugees, fleeing persecution arrive in host countries mainly without their families and friends. Consequently, they have limited relational ties upon their arrival in host countries (Portman and Weyl, 2013). Upon their arrival in the United States, the Department of State and refugee resettlement agencies assist in providing services that include food, clothing, shelter, counseling, and mental health support. After 3-6 months these agencies help these newcomers find jobs and settle into local communities. They then have to fend for their lives. What remains to be known is what happens to resettled refugees in a developed country such as the United States, after former support services are unavailable to them. Findings from an earlier study of Liberian refugee women in a refugee camp in Ghana by the author indicated that the women employed some form of social capital or social networks for their adaptation and wellbeing, after their formal services were cut off.

1.1 PURPOSE OF STUDY

Immigrants and refugees are often noted to hold economically disadvantaged positions in host countries (Bauder, 2003; Potocky-Tripodi, 2004). Relatively, few studies have been conducted on the effects of social capital on the well-being of refugees. Most refugee studies do not include factors that possibly affect refugees' social and economic well-being. It can be very difficult and frustrating to live in a new country, learn a new language, gain training, find employment, and most importantly, feel valued and accepted. Migration is characterized by persecution and trauma, physical and mental health, arrival without all legal documents, separation from family members, whose safety may be at risk, anxiety or uncertainty of life in the host country (Kissoon, 2010). Furthermore, learning the unwritten rules of social and cultural behaviors can be the most challenging experience of all.

The current study examines the impact of social capital types that refugee women resettled in Las Vegas, U.S.A. possess to enhance their adaptation and wellbeing. The study also aims at comparing the findings to the author's previous study on camp refugee women, to show types of social capital that could be accumulated and used by refugees from different refugee locations. Refugee women comprise a high proportion of displaced populations, data on the impact of their social capital accumulation is vital to inform practice, monitor wellbeing, and influence policy on refugee women and their families.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 RIGHTS-BASED REFUGEE POLICIES IN INTERNATIONAL LAW

There are a number of universal, regional, and domestic human rights instruments, which can be employed to enhance the protection of refugees and asylum seekers. The core of

these instruments is the 1951 UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, and its 1967 Protocol. The escalating nature of post-World War II refugee problem led to the immediate establishment of the International Refugee Organization (IRO) in 1945 under the United Nations, and to the establishment of the 1951 the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (Jaeger, 2003, p.12). At the 1951 Geneva conference, members decided that the convention would include a definition of the term “refugee” as a person who owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, in a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that or, who not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.

In summary, the Convention defines what the term “refugee” means. It outlines a refugee’s rights, including such things as: access to courts of law (Article 16), access to gainful employment (Article 17), access to favorable housing as offered to nationals (Article 21), same treatment as offered to nationals with respect to elementary education (Article 22), access to social security benefits, and access to naturalization, which should be expedited, with charges and costs reduced as far as possible (Article 34). It also outlines a refugee’s obligation to a host government. A refugee under the Convention is required to respect the laws and regulations of his/her country of asylum. A key provision stipulates that a refugee should not be returned to a country where he/she fears persecution. This principle of *refoulement* is part of customary international law and it is binding on all States, both Convention and Non-Convention countries. The Convention also takes into account the interests of the contracting States, it provides for cooperation between the States and the UNHCR; it settles relations between the Convention and previous treaties and contains the usual final clauses.

The 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees as an additional instrument provided that State parties undertake to apply all articles of the Convention (Article 2 to 34), which relate to the status of refugees. It also suppressed in the 1951 definition of the term “refugee,” the time limit of 1 January 1951 (Article 1(2)). The Protocol realized that new situations had arisen since the Convention, and so it was desirable that equal status be enjoyed by all refugees covered by the definition in the Convention irrespective of the dateline. This was to make the 1951 Convention universally applicable. Though these refugee instruments have been the objects of considerable criticism, such as the narrow definitions of the words “refugee” and “persecution,” and for the lack of mechanism to hold States accountable (Hathaway, 1991; Goodwin-Gil, 1996), the remarkable thing is that the number of States acceding to these instruments has increased over the years.

Refugee protection is a collaborative effort between the countries that have thus signed the refugee treaties, and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. The Office of the UNHCR was created in the aftermath of World War II, by the United Nations General Assembly, mandated for three months to protect and find durable solutions for refugees. This was just a commission formed to end refugee issues. But this mandate still exists because the refugee issue continues. The UNHCR thus, seeks to promote accession to the 1951 Convention and its 1967 Protocol. Beside the UNHCR, two sets of actors involved are the country from which people are moving (origin), and the country to which they move (host). U.S. for instance, as a signatory to the 1967 Protocol relating to the protection of refugees is host to refugees from many countries across the world. This is in accordance with the agreement in the last of the three “durable solutions” (local integration, repatriation, and resettlement in a third country) for refugees, put forward by the United Nations. Resettlement is defined as a process during which a refugee, having arrived at his/her new permanent settlement, is gradually re-establishing the sense of normalcy and control in their life. Re-established ‘normality’ may not be as normal as life known before the resettlement (Colic-Peisker & Tilbury, 2003). A third country

resettlement is open mainly to persons found to be refugees in the formal sense of the 1951 Convention definition. These persons are then screened and accepted for resettlement in contracting countries such as the United States, Canada, or United Kingdom. For African refugees, being resettled in a country outside Africa may not necessarily be their third country of resettlement. This is because many of African refugees are noted to have lived in other countries in the African sub region, before being resettled in a developed country (Boateng, 2009; Kibreab, 2004). It is on record that "In recent times, less than 1 percent of all refugees have been offered resettlement, with the proportion probably closer to 0.5% during most of the 1990s (Cox and Pawar, 2006: 286). They may as a result need complex socio-economic settlement support and protection, to enable them to adapt to their new location.

2.2 ECONOMIC ADAPTATION OF REFUGEES

There have been many studies reflecting the problems refugees face upon reorganizing their lives in their country of resettlement. These problems relate to refugees' finding their place in the social fabric of their new country (Colic-Peisker & Tilbury 2006). Factors that impact immigrant/refugee adaptation have been assessed by indicators such as language, education, employment, income, acculturation type, community networks, and welfare utilization (Potocky-Tripodi, 2004; Williams, 2006). According to these studies, the greater the human capital assets, the higher the economic well being of these newcomers. For instance, immigrant households headed by married couples, households with more people working, and households without elderly persons and children, are noted to have a better economic status than their counterparts (Potocky-Tripodi, 2004). Williams (2006) also noted that some immigrants in Britain have joined already-established communities and enjoy their support, as they strive to stand on their own feet. This study further observed that health service providers often used refugee networks unwittingly by using the usually unpaid services of interpreters, who accompany refugees to appointments.

Language seems to be one of the major tasks in the first couple of years of the settlement in a host country, since some refugees arrive without any knowledge of the host country language. Some migrants are noted to be quite resentful in learning the host language, for fear of losing their own identities. Some refuse to take part in active learning, as the task of learning the new language may seem too difficult. Both approaches are noted to eventually lead to very limited employment opportunities for these new comers (Chiswick and Miller, 2001). Host language proficiency is observed in many studies, to positively impact refugees' economic integration, since knowing the language enhances educational and job opportunities (Chiswick and Miller, 2001; Colic-Peisker and Tilbury, 2006). However, one of the issues highlighted by the Colic-Peisker and Tilbury study was lack of information aimed at these refugee migrants on various educational courses and their relevance in their Australian workplace. Given that the Sudanese refugees studied, had few transferable employment skills, they were subordinated into low status paid jobs. Socio-cultural adaptation is observed to lead to successful labor market adaptation. Colic-Peisker and Tilbury, (2006) further observed that immigrants low in host language acquisition and acculturation, experience adjustment issues in their new socio-cultural environment. As a result they may lack jobs, and may have greater chances of suffering lower self-esteem. Findings from this study indicate that many Sudanese refugee migrants were unable to gain entrance into the workforce and/or maintain employment mainly due to their negative perceptions of the host language and the social attitudes around them.

Additional factor noted to impact the economic outcomes and wellbeing of immigrants/refugees is education. Considering the impact of education on economic outcomes of these newcomers, one proposition is that both pre and post migration education represent skills that will enhance economic integration and well-being (De Vroom & Van Tubergen,

2010). However, another research indicates that immigrants have lower returns to foreign education because of “differences in quality and compatibility with the host labor market,” (Friedberg, 2000: 221). The refugees from the Friedberg study came from poor countries with generally less advanced and different educational backgrounds from the Dutch system, with partially recognized or unrecognized qualifications. The Colic-Peisker and Tilbury (2006) study cited earlier further indicate that migrants, especially those from refugee backgrounds, are located in bottom end jobs, regardless of their human capital (skills, formal qualifications, and experience). Their study of three refugee groups, including Sudanese migrants, in Western Australia showed that the recent newcomers are concentrated in labor market niches such as cleaning services, taxi driving, care of the aged, meat processing, and security work. These employment niches comprise low-paid jobs that locals mainly avoid. This study further identified some mechanisms through which the Sudanese refugee migrants have been relegated to undesirable jobs. These included lack of mainstream social networks that could assist in the job search, discrimination on the basis of race, cultural difference by employers, and non-recognition of qualifications as a systematic barrier. Research into refugee/migrant employment in other countries has found similar labor market experiences among refugee migrants (Bauder 2003; De Vroom and Tubergen, 2010).

Other factors affecting economic well being of immigrants/refugees in their host country is length of stay, and how best these newcomers are able to receive formal welfare services. In most cases, immigration and refugee policies aim primarily at reducing the newcomers’ cost to society (Potocky-Tripodi, 2004). Despite their positive contributions to society, immigrants and refugees are noted to experience economic problems, with one in five living in poverty (Bureau of the Census, 2001). In the United States for example, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PWORA) is aimed at reducing the welfare utilization of immigrants and refugees. Some refugee advocates recommend that fewer constraints be put on refugees by the social welfare system and that there should be institutional structures available for refugees (Colic-Peisker and Tilbury, 2003). Other scholars also suggest social capital as an asset to immigrant and refugees’ adaptation (Grootaert, Narayan, Jones and Woolcock, 2003; Williams, 2006).

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK – SOCIAL CAPITAL THEORY

Social capital proponents are of the view that social capital resides in the relationships between and among people, and rests on the premise that individuals’ connections with other people can help them in times of need (Coleman, 1988b, Putnam, 2000). Social capital is a broad term that refers to the ‘norms and networks facilitating collective actions for mutual benefits’ (Woolcock, 1998: 155). It is all about establishing connections intentionally, and employing them to generate benefits in short or long term. The definition of the term makes it prone to multiple usage and interpretations, which span various theoretical traditions. Broadly, social capital can be characterized under three dimensions: bonding, bridging, and linking (Grootaert, Narayan, Jones and Woolcock, 2003).

Bonding social capital is identified to be relationships that tie people in similar situations together, and exist between immediate family members, neighbors, and close friends. Bridging social capital is noted to be more distant relationships with other helpers, such as church members, association members, and fellow employees. Linking social capital refers to ties with “outsiders” in dissimilar situations, such as the ties between a refugee and his/her service provider. Though these three kinds of social capital are interrelated, they vary in density and size, and occur among both individuals and groups. Additionally, there is expectation of reciprocity, that a short or long-term service or kindness will be returned. Furthermore, norms, and trust bind the people in the relationship, to be willing to take risks or initiatives in a social

context, with the assumption that others will respond as expected (Coleman, 1988b; Putnam, 2000).

Social capital theorists believe that social capital is based on the premise that social relationships have potential to facilitate the acquisition of economic or non-economic benefits to the individuals (Woolcock, 2003); can be seen to reside in the relations and not in the individuals themselves (Coleman, 1988b); includes the development and maintenance of social relations or social networks consisting of “strong ties” with close friends and “weak ties” with acquaintances and institutions (Putnam, 2000). Both types of relationships are known to be crucial in providing material and emotional support, and for generating social capital for groups of people, including immigrants and refugees. Social capital provides access to information about resources; services and jobs that newcomers may need to succeed in their host country. It is noted to contribute to economic survival and wellbeing, though people may lack economic resources such as education, vocational skills, and financial capital (Bauder, 2003). In view of this, the study explores kinds of social capital of African refugee women in Las Vegas. The concept of social capital is of course part of refugee policy, since the policy highlights family reunification, and the provision of both informal and formal services to enhance refugee protection.

4. METHOD AND MATERIALS

The author’s earlier study was a mixed-methods analysis of social capital of Liberian refugee women residing at the Buduburam refugee camp in Ghana. The present study expands on the prior study by using a sample population from two African countries (Liberia and Congo) that reside in Las Vegas. Additionally, this study specifically tests whether social capital is higher for refugees living in Las Vegas than for refugees living at the Buduburam camp in Ghana. Five of the refugees relocated to Las Vegas from the Buduburam camp in Ghana. The proposed study seeks to address the following research questions:

- What are the social capital resources and strategies that the African refugee women use in securing and enhancing their livelihood and general well-being?
- Are the needs of refugee women resettled in Las Vegas different from those at Buduburam Refugee Camp in Ghana?
- In what ways can governmental, nongovernmental, and refugee organizations contribute to the well-being of African Refugee women?

4.1 DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

The participants were recruited from the African community in Las Vegas. This site was selected because Las Vegas has a large population of African refugees in the State of Nevada, and the author resides in Nevada. Many of the Las Vegas’ refugees are members of the African community church, or the African Association in Las Vegas. Participants were selected on the basis of referrals from the African community church. The director of Catholic Charities, a refugee agency in charge of the refugees, was additionally interviewed.

The study employed qualitative data procedures. It was exploratory and descriptive, to ensure that data are rich in detail, thus providing insight into the women’s lived realities. Twenty participants were recruited with the help of the African community church. Ten of the participants were Liberians, and the remaining ten were from Congo. Participants’ ages were between 20 and 60 years of age. These were the ages available. Nine of them were married, and eleven were single, divorced, or widowed. Of the 20 women, four have college degrees, eight have a high school education, four have an elementary education, and the remaining four have no formal education. With regard to years spent in the U.S., one had spent less than a year, one

had spent two years, four had spent three years, eleven had spent five years, two had spent six years, and one had spent fourteen years in the U.S. Before their settlement in the U.S., nine of the women had lived in refugee camps in Africa: one had lived in one refugee camp in Africa, four had lived in two camps, and six had lived in three camps.

Data was collected in two stages. In the first stage, semi-structured interviews were conducted with individual participants. Semi-structured interviews allowed the author to work directly with participants and to probe and ask follow-up questions. In the case in which participants spoke only African languages, an interpreter was used. You might want to note that the researcher was a native of Africa. Each interview was approximately 45 minutes, and was conducted at the African community conference center. The interview included questions about close members participants' contact in times of need, such as family and friends (bonding social capital); their relations with groups, associations and host community (bridging social capital), and their relations with formal organizations (linking social capital). These interviews were audiotaped with the participants' permission, for transcription and analysis.

The second stage of the study comprised two focus group sessions. The first session comprised five Liberian refugees, and the second comprised five Congolese refugees, who also participated in the one-on-one interview session. Focus groups generate data through the give and take of group discussion. Each focus group session was meant to give each group a platform to share their unique migration experiences. The focus group questions explored various aspects of the research topic, and served as a follow-up to the one-on-one interview.

The questions explored the women's previous lives in camps in Africa, their present lives in Las Vegas, what has changed for them, what has not changed for them, including their suggestions that would help better their lives. Each focus group session approximately two hours in length; was audio taped, and was conducted at the African community conference center. The data were grouped according to the women's country of origin. This allowed a comparison of the social capital of each group. Using an inductive approach, interview and focus group data were analyzed for themes and compared across groups (Creswell, 2005). Emerging themes were then analyzed and interpreted in relations to the research questions guiding the study.

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The findings indicated that participants possessed some form of bonding and bridging social capital, but very low linking social capital. Bonding Social Capital – adopted and defined in this study as relations with immediate family members and friends. Of the twenty participants, ten were living with their relatives in Las Vegas, six were living with their friends from their native country, and four were living with friends from other African countries. Social capital they receive from these close relations include money, food, living accommodations, child care, and being provided with transportation to the mall, or to other places in town. The study found that the African solidarity, that is inherent in social capital, is effective in the women's lives. They are bound together with norms of trust and reciprocity, they support each other with services, such as money, food, babysitting, believing that they cannot do without the help of family members and friends around them. Bonding social capital of course reinforces family reunification, one of the criteria to migrating to the United States.

Bridging Social Capital – was defined in this study as participants' relations with groups, associations, and the host community of Las Vegas. Participants discussed the types of groups or social organizations that they join, and the nature of the exchanges. The main social groups or organizations that the participants joined were church, ethnic, and job associations. Fifteen of the twenty women joined a church, and they are supported by their church in various ways.

The African community church is the largest African church in Las Vegas. It really is a church family for African immigrants and refugees. Spirituality or religion is a way of life, and a context for people to understand their experience. To many people, their first organizational loyalty is to their church, whether for spiritual, religious, social, cultural, or economic reasons. With the study participants, their church serves as a safe heaven, as they maneuver through life in their new country. Churches provide counseling and therapeutic care, and it is a good place for such people who have suffered through a civil war, to seek help.

Linking Social Capital - was defined in this study as formal services participants received in the past or are receiving at the present from formal organizations, such as government/state, private, and nonprofit organizations. Responses indicated that participants received governmental services at certain times during their stay in Las Vegas. The three main services many received were food stamps, money for rent, and household items such as kitchen utensils, blankets.

Sixteen of the twenty participants stated that they had received food stamps from the welfare office for the first three months of their stay, two others stated that they were given food stamps for six months. The remaining two people said they never received food stamps, or any other services. Eighteen of them received money for rent, and four received household items, such as cooking utensils, and furniture. According to the women, the more newcomers that the government brought to Las Vegas, the more they reduced services such as food stamps, and money from the previous or "resettled" refugees. Fifteen of the participants stated that they received neither food stamps, nor money at the time. Twelve of the participants indicated that they had no jobs at the time. With those who have had some work experience, twelve of them had worked as housekeepers, two as nurses' aides, and six have no job experience. This confirms a study by Colic-Peisker et al (2006) of Sudanese refugees who were relegated to bottom-end jobs, regardless of their human capital, and were concentrated in labour market niches, such as adult care, cleaning and meat processing. Fifteen of the women stated that they had no mainstream social networks with people from the host community that they could contact in times of need, such as assisting them in the job search. Resources should be committed to providing better support for participants' emerging social networks. Refugees come from different economic, cultural, social, and political backgrounds, and carry with them unique resettlement issues. The particular socio-cultural background of each refugee is critical to understand their respective experiences in their host countries.

Two focus group sessions were conducted. The first session was with five of the Liberian women who participated in the one-on one interview and relocated from the Buduburam refugee camp in Ghana. The second session was with five Congolese women who also participated in the interview session. The two focus group sessions were intended to identify common themes in the women's stories. Additionally, it was meant to identify changes in the Liberian women's social capital acquisition, moving from the camps in Africa to resettle in Las Vegas.

The Liberian women mostly agreed that there had been changes for the better for those who had been able to secure jobs (linking social capital). They indicated that they felt safer in Las Vegas than living in the camp in Ghana. At the camp, riots were rampant, sometimes, they did not have much food to eat, and they experienced frequent power outages and unsanitary living conditions. According to them, they did not experience any of these in Las Vegas; they felt more secure. When they were short of food at home (Vegas), they went to the African community church to collect food. They stated that they received some services from some refugee agencies in Las Vegas during their first three months stay in Las Vegas, which to them is similar to the services they received from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and some other Ghanaian organizations during their initial stay at the camp in Ghana. In other words, many of them are still dependent, even in Las Vegas. The women agreed that

faith-based organizations have played an important role in their adaptation and wellbeing, both at the refugee camp and in Las Vegas (bridging social capital). According to the refugees, they depend more on church in Las Vegas than on individuals, friends and neighbors.

The Liberian women also appreciated the fact that in Las Vegas, unlike the refugee camp in Ghana, they are permitted to work. So those who are able to find jobs move on with their lives. In Las Vegas, some have their own apartments, their own cars, and they are integrated into the host society. At the refugee camp, on the other hand, though it is an open camp, they were secluded from the host Ghanaian society, and were identified as refugees throughout their stay in Ghana. They however added that, though they are integrated into the host Las Vegas community, and share apartment buildings with host community members, there is very little or no interaction with the host community members in their apartment buildings.

The second focus group interview with five of the Congolese women took place in the Congolese church building in Vegas. This group indicated that one of their main challenges is the language barrier. The Republic of Congo is a French-speaking country, having been colonized by the French. Three of these women could speak no English at all, and the church pastor's wife became the interpreter for the author. This group indicated that when they apply for jobs, they are asked to fill job application forms online and in English. That intimidates them, puts them off and they give up trying to apply for jobs.

It was obvious that this group depended on the Congolese church and its pastor for most of their needs. According to the pastor's wife, when some of the refugees lose their jobs, it is the pastor or the church that assists them. When their children find themselves in trouble at school, it is the pastor or his wife that is called by the school to come in for a meeting. In view of this, the pastor and his wife indicated that they needed some financial assistance to help with the refugee children's education. The Liberian refugees were noted to relate more with other Africans from English speaking countries, such as Ethiopia, whereas the Congolese women relate more with other Africans from French speaking countries, such as the Cameroun. This finding confirms that refugees experience language hardships in their host countries (Bauder, 2003; Colic-Peisker, et al, 2006). Lack of active language learning may lead to very limited job and lower educational opportunities.

Participants in both focus groups were of the view that many refugees go through hardships after their support of the refugee agency is terminated, which is generally three months after their resettlement. These are mainly financial and adaptation hardships. They all stated that they would need family support, including food, money for rent, health care, and day care for their children. They were also concerned about the high filing fees that the immigration office charges to file a visa application for their family members to join them in the U.S. Those who have jobs cannot afford to save from their menial jobs to pay for visa fees that exceed \$1000.00; others without jobs become helpless on this issue, leaving their families disintegrated. They requested for further assistance from the U.S. government and refugee agencies after the three months service termination. Another financial concern was with the monies they paid for their air ticket from Africa to the U.S. According to them, nobody told them in Africa that they would have to reimburse the refugee agency after securing a job in the U.S. They have been told in Las Vegas by their refugee agency that they would have to pay. Additionally, the women viewed skills training or education as crucial to their wellbeing and that of their children. According to them, they were given two weeks of English as Second Language (ESL) training. This was too brief a training to help them learn English, or to qualify them for any good job. Additionally, the women indicated the need for provision of some form of education or instruction, on how to do things to facilitate the adjustment into the American culture. One respondent explained that:

“... Credit card, they don’t even teach you about credit and the implications ... you spoil your credit before you even have it, the process is too complicated, and hard to go through ... If you don’t pay, they send you to collect.”

The women agreed that as much as there are good things in America to make their lives better, there are other things that shock them. They provided examples such as: the host people being individualistic, children talking back to their parents, which to them points to lack of discipline. They were concerned about the cultural differences in disciplining children, and also the host people’s attitude toward their accents:

“... At my job, they understand what I’m saying, but they ask me: Can you say that again? Even though they understand. .. So they make me shut up the whole day.”

The author interviewed the director of the refugee agency that takes care of the refugees in this study. This meeting was held in the director’s office. The director was congratulated for all the services her agency had provided and continued to provide the refugees. The major findings from the study were shared with the director. The discussion, for instance, touched on the need for following up on the refugees after their support is terminated. The director indicated that many of the refugees relocate or disconnect their phones, which makes it difficult to keep in touch with them. To enhance follow-up, the director agreed with the author that she needs to link with the two African churches/pastors in a collaborative effort to assist their common clients. For instance, the African community pastor has connections with a food bank that brings food to the church to be distributed to the members every Sunday. The refugee agency could work with the church and other social service agencies to coordinate support for the refugees.

Advocating for the use of more interpreters for the French-speaking refugees is crucial. The issue turned out to be the unavailability of interpreters. The author was concerned why French-speaking refugees are not given the option of resettling in French-speaking countries that host refugees. This would have been a way of addressing the language barrier, and making it easier for refugees to integrate into their host communities. Both the director and author agreed that an extended English as a Second Language class is crucial for all refugees, and should be provided for at least six months. The question that cropped up was getting funds to run the class. On the issue of higher visa fees for refugee family reunification, the author thought that refugee advocates could band together to advocate for the state to reduce the fees, in order to give refugees some priority, when it comes to filing visas for their families at home to join them in their host countries.

6. CONCLUSION

This paper examined the needs and experiences of African refugee women in Las Vegas in terms of social capital and well-being, based on 20 interviews and two focus group discussions. Though the participants in this study live in Las Vegas, United States, they still lack enough of all three forms of social capital explored in this paper. Though participants possess some forms of bonding and bridging social capital to help them get by, their rights under the 1951 UN Convention are not really met. For instance, refugees have the right to work. The majority of participants did not have jobs.

Those who have had some work experience were mainly subordinated into low status or odd jobs that do not provide enough money, to be able to rent an apartment. Their right to

favourable housing is therefore compromised. Additionally, the majority of participants lacks formal education vocational training, and adequate English as a Second Language training. As such, having a good and a less stressful job in the United States is far fetched. Participants need adequate information on further education courses, since they carry with them the education value system from Liberia and Congo. Furthermore, many of the participants are no more provided with the formal services enshrined in the social security package, such as food stamps, health and disability services that they are entitled to, as refugees. Comparing the findings of this study of the author's previous study, it could be noted that refugee women, wherever they are located, depend mainly on churches, associations, and have pressing needs. Refugee women are therefore more at risk in the situations in which they find themselves after flight (Cox and Pawar, 2006). Services for them are crucial, since they comprise a high proportion of displaced populations, and bear a significant burden in times of conflict.

Comparing the current study to the author's previous study of Liberian refugee women living in a camp in Ghana, it was observed that the needs of the camp refugee women included lack of participation in decisions that affected their lives, inadequate resources to meet their basic needs, limited educational opportunities, engaging in petty trading within the camp, riots and insecurity in the camp, which kept them in their homes, and thus hindered acquisition of bridging and linking social capital.

The needs of the Vegas participants in the current study on the other hand, included inadequate resources to meet their basic needs, a brief provision of services such as food stamps, housing, English as Second Language course, and their inability to file for a green card, because of lack of funds. Both studies indicated language barrier as a problem hindering bridging and linking social capital. As such participants joined groups within their own ethnic cultures, and possessed bonding social capital in the form of group solidarity, networks and collective action. Both groups indicated church and ethnic associations as their major source of assistance. Both possess very little interaction with their host communities.

The Liberian refugees live in an isolated camp, not integrated into the Ghanaian community, and speak their own Liberian English, which is hard for the Ghanaians to understand. Additionally, the Liberian refugees stated that most Ghanaians prefer using their local language, Twi, which the Liberians could not understand. This situation is similar to the plight of the Congolese women studied in Vegas, who did not speak English, and even with the Liberians in the Vegas study, who spoke Liberian Pidgin English. Little interaction with their host communities therefore hindered bridging and linking social capital, which enhance the capacity to discover new productive opportunities and relationships in both locations (Chiswick and Miller, 2001; Teixeira and Li, 2009).

It must be noted that while the Vegas participants expressed a sense of happiness and optimism for their future and that of their children, the camp group expressed pessimism and a bleak future. This is because the Vegas group has come to settle in the United States and believe that if they are not able to make it in the present, their children and future generations would have better opportunities, including education, to realize the American dream. But with the camp group, living in an African refugee camp for years would not yield any future prospects. All of the 20 camp participants therefore indicated that they were against local integration and preferred a developed country resettlement to integrating into a developing country such as Ghana.

This study further raises important questions for future research. For example, further research could explore the socio-economic adaptation strategies adopted by refugee agencies in other states of America, or other countries. As stated earlier, this study was pursued in Nevada, a state that has been mostly hit by the current global economic crisis, making it difficult for many, including the participants studied, to find employment. This further research will be helpful in future refugee quota allocations to the states. Long-term response to the needs of

resettled refugees is crucial. Above all, there is the need for the international community to task itself to take measures to uproot civil wars in societies that displace people, especially in Africa. Just agreeing to laws to host refugees, is like putting a band-aid on a wound. Social activists and world leaders need to do more with regard to reviewing global policies that negatively impact developing countries and replace those with policies that would foster socio-economic development in these countries. Additionally, world leaders need to hold other leaders and rebel leaders who subject their citizens in situations that generate civil wars accountable. Such leaders should actually face the international criminal courts, to serve as a deterrent to others.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

One crucial thing both groups of refugee women studied in Ghana and in Las Vegas lack the most is linking social capital. Little institutional/formal support is also reported of Karen refugees resettled in the U.S (Kenny and Lockwood-Kenny, 2011). This study noted, for instance, that refugees experience substantial hardships in the initial stages of their resettlement, in part due to the lack of institutional support available to them. There should be collaborative efforts of refugee organizations, government/state, nongovernmental organizations, including the United Nations, to enforce refugee laws, including the 1951 refugee convention, and UNHCR's guidelines on the protection of refugee women. Lack of employment opportunities for refugee families is additionally noted as the main source of weakening economic situations of families, increasing tensions and stress in households, deterioration of quality of life, and fostering harmful behaviors such as prostitution, violence, and child labor (Al-QDah and Lacroix, 2010).

Refugee social workers could mobilize group or community-based approaches to locating resources within the wider community. Integration into the host country should target education, vocational training, employment, and social participation. Successful integration of refugees is noted to result in adaptive strategies such as access to affordable housing in a safe, welcoming environment, access to adequate sources of income, empowerment, good education, formal social support, language skills, legal status, and employment (Kibreab, 2004; Markovic and M Andersen, 2000). To enhance bridging and linking social capital, refugee agencies could facilitate support networks within the community, such as identifying interest groups and community members to support and mentor refugee families. Staff and volunteers could also be drawn from among the refugees, since they have suffered the same trauma, and could, therefore, show a deep understanding of the problems shared with them, and help revive traditional approaches to healing.

Social workers working with refugees should target intervention at the micro level (psychosocial assessments) and mezzo level (family and group counseling/support; fostering social networks). There should be collaborative efforts of refugee agencies, the state/government, and nonprofit organizations to assist the refugees with basic services crucial to their survival, such as food, and shelter. There also should be legal programs to help them with their legal needs, such as legal advice or representation on acquiring a green card, and naturalization. According to Article 34 of the of the 1951 UN refugee convention, contracting states shall make effort to expedite naturalization proceedings and reduce as far as possible the charges and costs of such proceedings. Such processes are crucial, yet beyond the means of the refugees studied. Case managers can facilitate and advocate for inter-country case work programs on resources and services refugees are eligible for, including family reunification into the United States, at a minimal fee, and with a shorter process. Host countries, social workers and refugee activists need to develop knowledge concerning the political contexts of refugees, refugee laws, and available services.

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