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Rebuilding Family Life: An Exploration of Female Refugees’ Experiences of Family Reunification and Integration in Ireland

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Abstract

This research explores female refugees’ experiences of family reunification and integration in Ireland. Proposed by Nasc Irish Immigrant Support Centre this research is an effort to explore the post-reunification experiences of refugees and to identify appropriate support for family members. The literature review examines current policy and legislation and prior research in respect to family reunification in Ireland. Employing an interpretivist, qualitative approach, data was collected from female refugees, who had been reunited with their family members in Ireland. The accounts of women in this study suggest that the processes of migration, reunification and integration had impacted them significantly in terms of disruption and change in their lives and in their relationships with family members. While all identified many beneficial effects of reunification, over time relationship difficulties arose for most participants. While some overcame these challenges, relationship breakdown occurred in other cases. These experiences appeared to be impacted by structural, social challenges and by supports which acted as protective or inhibiting factors for reunification and integration. The findings and literature review inform a number of recommendations made to support and alleviate challenges that may arise for refugee families following reunification.

Keywords: Refugees; family reunification; integration; migration

Introduction

This paper is informed by primary research carried out by the author in 2013, which was undertaken through the Community Academic Research Links (CARL) project within UCC. The CARL project affords opportunities to students to produce research on behalf of Civil Society Organisations (CSO's). Nasc Irish Immigrant Support Centre, the CSO who proposed this research, is a non-governmental organisation (NGO) based in Cork City that provides a free information and support service to immigrants. Nasc has built up a wealth of experience of identifying the needs of migrants through working with service users and key stakeholders in the region for over thirteen years.

Through their direct work, Nasc has witnessed a number of issues arising in refugee³³ families after family reunification³⁴ has occurred. This has included relationship difficulties, conflict and adjustment issues for family members. Nasc recognised a gap in research in relation to the area of family reunification and integration³⁵ experiences of reunited members in Ireland. In an effort to explore this situation further, they

³³ The term **refugee** for the purpose of this study refers to a person who has made a claim for asylum under the Geneva Convention 1951 (UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees). This defines a refugee as 'a person who, owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that society' (Article 1A (2), Geneva Convention). A person that has attained status by this manner is often referred to as a 'Convention refugee' (The National Consultative Committee on Racism and Interculturalism (NCCRI), n.d.). In this research the term also refers to a person who has attained the status of 'Programme Refugee'. This is defined under Irish law (Section 24(1) of the Refugee Act 1996 (as amended) as 'a person to whom leave to enter and remain in the State for temporary protection or resettlement as part of a group of persons has been given by the Government' (Kenny, 2009, p.19). A Programme Refugee is usually afforded protection at the request of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in response to a humanitarian crisis (AkiDwa, 2010). For the purpose of this study, family members who have joined a refugee through the process of family reunification will also be encompassed within the term.

³⁴ Under Irish law (The Refugee Act, 1996) a refugee is entitled to be joined by their spouse and unmarried dependent children (under 18 years) or in the case of a minor, by their parents during a process known as **Family Reunification** (Cosgrave, 2006). In this research project the definition of Family Reunification refers to the attempts of family members *separated* by forced migration to reunite in a country other than their country of origin (Cosgrave, 2006). Today this is one of the principal sources of migration flow in many countries.

³⁵ In this study, **integration** encompasses the process of settlement which refers 'to concrete activities and processes of becoming established after arrival in a country of settlement' (Valtonen, 2008, p.6). However, it also goes further to include the ability of refugees to fully participate 'in the social, economic, cultural and political life of a society' (ibid), whilst continuing to maintain their own cultural identity. This involves the person attaining meaningful status, roles and relationships within the host society.

proposed this research in order to understand the experiences of refugees in greater depth and to identify appropriate support for family members.

Social workers, along with other health and human services professionals, are involved in many ways in the provision of services for refugees, for example in the form of health services, settlement support, supportive counselling and social and educational programmes (Cox and Pawar, 2006). Thus, research to understand the range of issues faced by refugees is also vital to the profession in order to comprehend the lives of refugees, the experience and the needs of this group and most importantly to develop more appropriate and effective responses to their needs.

Methodology

This research was informed by the principles of Participatory Action Research. This form of research is often adopted as a means of ‘solving a pressing community problem or effecting social change’ (Strand, et al., 2003, p. 3) through a ‘grass-roots’ understanding of the issue. Its basis is influenced by the work of Freire who argues that learning should be a two way process involving critical reflection, shared knowledge and participation which aims to empower the oppressed and bring about structural changes in society (Selener, 1997). This process emphasises the interviewee as the expert in their own experience, hence the importance of engaging collaboratively with them throughout the research process (Park, 2001). As a Community Academic Research Links project within UCC the research required ongoing collaboration between the university and community group to address the questions raised. This enabled the knowledge and experience of participants and the CSO to shape the findings and produce a richness of data as a result.

A qualitative method of research was adopted to gain insight into the perceptions and opinions of people from refugee backgrounds who have been involved in the family reunification process. Qualitative research allows for flexibility in research design and an in-depth analysis of information (Ritchie, Lewis and Elam 2003). This was located within an interpretivist framework which ensures the researcher is not only aware of participants’ ideas about the social world, but also the values and understandings behind these ideas (Fisher, 2007). This is a subjective approach to research which

recognises that ‘reality’ cannot be objective but is created through people’s interpretations of it.

The methods of data collection included carrying out an in-depth literature review to assess previous research carried out in the area. Primary data was also gathered from five participants through the use of face-to-face semi structured interviews. Purposive sampling was used where participants were chosen based on particular features which enabled a more detailed exploration and understanding of the central themes of the study (Ritchie, Lewis and Elam, 2003). Thus participants were not selected randomly but instead chosen on the basis of their availability and the CSO’s judgment that they met the criteria of the study. Specific criteria were chosen in order to narrow the parameters of this small scale study. Female participants were chosen for a number of reasons. Firstly, due to the small sample size and time constraints of this study, there was limited scope to explore gender differences in regard to their experiences. Secondly, many of the aforementioned issues of concern have been highlighted by women to Nasc staff through their clinic work. Thus, it was considered that highlighting these issues through the views of women may mirror some of the experiences already related to the agency. Other important criteria included that participants were aged 18 years and over and where family reunification was not an active issue for them. This was chosen in order to pre-empt and minimize the likelihood of distress for participants as a result of the interviews. Data was analysed by way of thematic coding and the Social Work theories of Grief and Loss, Systems and Attachment informed the explanatory phase of the work.

The following table shows the profile of each individual that participated in the research:

Table 1: Individual Participant Profiles*

Participant: Region of origin and status	Reunified with family member(s)	Length of Separation prior to reunification
Respondent 1 Western Asia. Refugee	Spouse: male	5.5 years
Respondent 2 Western Asia. Family member of Refugee	Spouse: male	3 years
Respondent 3 East Africa Family member of Refugee	Spouse: male	2 years
Respondent 4 East Africa Refugee	Children: 5 Age range 10-18 years	6 years
Respondent 5 East Africa Refugee	Children: 3 Age range: 14-17 years	3 years

*Please note: Some information has been generalised to maximise anonymity for respondents.

Ethical Considerations

Due to the sensitive nature of the issues involved, this research was submitted for ethical approval to the School of Applied Social Studies Research Committee at UCC. A number of issues were explored in great detail during this process and revisions were made in accordance with the committee's recommendations. Approval was subsequently granted following this process. Particular attention was paid to harm, consent, privacy and confidentiality and each of these themes was addressed throughout the research process.

Given the sensitive and private nature of family life, all individuals were assured of anonymity and confidentiality. All information recorded was stored securely and details regarding their involvement with Nasc were kept confidential. Participants were provided with straightforward oral and written information as to the purpose of the research, the content and format of the interview. Translated information was also offered to speakers of English as a second language and voluntary informed consent was obtained in writing from respondents.

Particular care was taken when addressing subjects in order to minimise the distress of participants. This included conducting pre and post briefing sessions together with the participant and liaison person within the CSO and using specific techniques within the interviews themselves for example through the use of those as outlined by Alston and Bowles (2003). The CSO additionally put measures in place to provide support to respondents in the event that they became distressed as a result of the interview.

As participants in this study came from diverse cultures and backgrounds, cultural sensitivity was considered vital to informing the successful design and implementation of this research. Thus the researcher became more familiar with the specific cultural backgrounds of each participant in the study in order to ensure respect of peoples' communities and cultures throughout the research.

Limitations

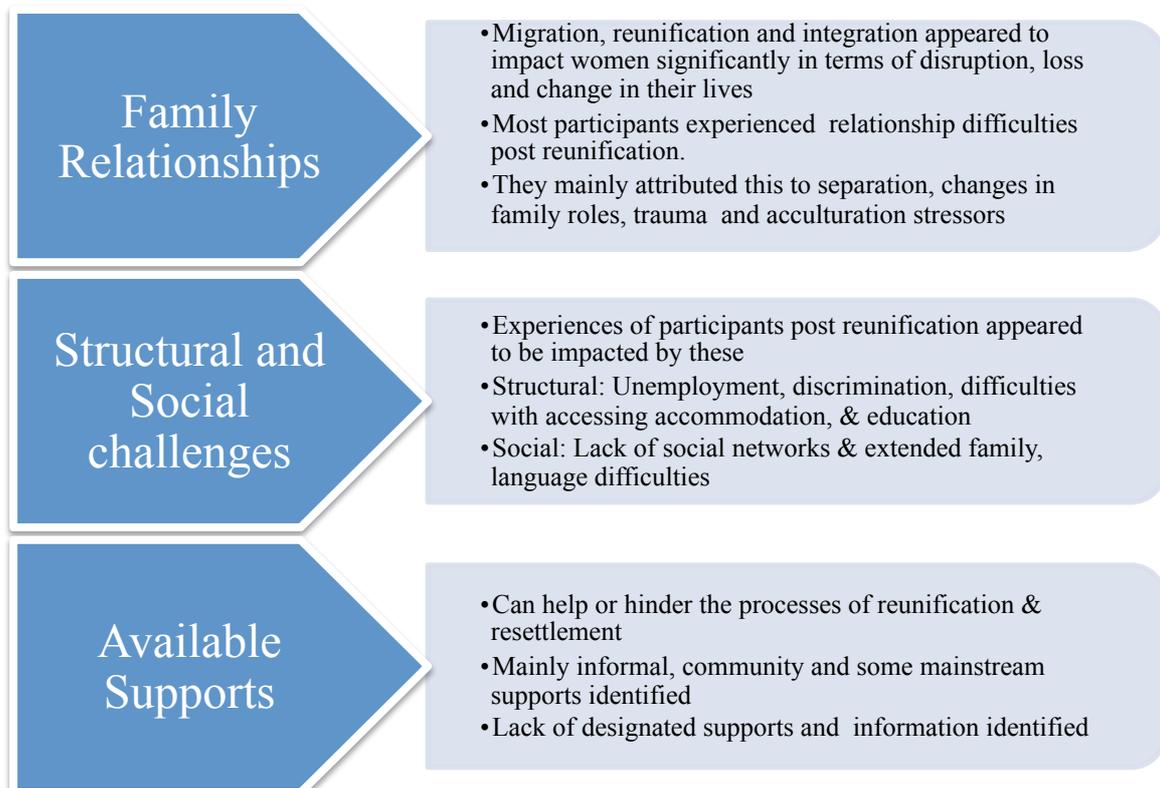
A number of specific limitations can be seen in relation to this study. Due to the small scale nature of the piece the scope and size of the research do not allow it to be generalised. Positionality is also an important limitation to note (Merriam et al., 2001). Because the researcher has been professionally involved with this agency for a number of years and participants have benefitted from and may continue to avail of the service, there is a possibility that they may have felt obliged to take part in research or perceive the researcher as being in a position of authority. Reflexivity was key in this respect and engaging in discussion with participants in regards to informed consent and voluntary participation helped to maintain power relations more equally. Additionally, in terms of language and communication, this may have pose barriers to data collection. While it was originally envisioned that speakers of English as a second language would avail of the interpreters offered, all requested to conduct the

interviews without the presence of an interpreter. The reasons given included that participants felt their level of English language was proficient to carry out the interview. Additionally some stated that they did not feel comfortable in light of the sensitive issues being discussed. This may have influenced research findings in terms of what was being communicated, however it also sheds light on the private nature of the topic and the need to respect the participant's desire for confidentiality. As language proficiency can affect how a person relates their experience (Koulouriotis, 2011), the researcher made every effort to discern the intention of participants and to reflect this honestly in the analysis and findings (Rees and Pease, 2007). Again, reflexivity was significant here to assess the nature of this issue and how it influenced the research.

Data Analysis and Findings

For the purpose of analysis a number of major themes have been explored namely: the experiences of family relationships post reunification; challenges encountered by participants and supports that helped or hindered the processes of family reunification; and, integration.

Fig 1: Key findings



Experiences of Family Relationships Following Reunification

Accounts of participants immediately following reunification often reflected a sense of relief to be reunited with their family members again and to be in a position of safety:

I'm very grateful to have place, as a home again and to finally be safe with my family... I'm *overwhelmed* and I will be very grateful for the rest of my life for this. (Respondent 1)

This mirrors previous research carried out which conveys how in general people relate improved circumstances and wellbeing following reunification (Immigrant Council of Ireland (ICI), 2013; Huddleston, Dag Tjaden and Callier, 2012; RASNZ, 2012).

However, most of the participants in this study also relayed that challenges in relationships had occurred post reunification. These challenges most commonly related to an increase in tension and conflict between family members which included in some cases, family breakdown over time. While some managed to overcome these challenges through renegotiating family roles, others experienced the further loss of family members. In one of these cases, a woman was left in a situation of homelessness following domestic violence and separation from her husband:

He just leave me, he part himself, I don't know where he go, he just go, without anything. I don't have one cent. (Respondent 3)

Another participant described increased conflict between family members which resulted in one of the children leaving the family home and entering a foster care arrangement. Women commonly related feelings of sadness, disbelief, guilt and disorientation as a result of these experiences.

It was very, very difficult and I couldn't believe that was happening because I didn't see it coming, I didn't expect that....really... I felt ashamed at one point, I felt very disappointed. I just went through a lot of thinking, I was thinking constantly. (Respondent 5)

Similar experiences have been reflected by participants in previous studies (Rousseau et. al., 2004; ICI, 2013), which highlights that grief, loss and attachment difficulties can be experienced by refugees following reunification.

Relationship Stressors:

Impact of Separation

A number of women in this study related that the experience of separation from their loved ones had subsequently impacted upon their relationships. In terms of their initial separation, participants commonly related experiencing difficulties in dealing with this. This period of separation was compounded by either having to remain in an unsafe home environment or having concerns about family members that were left behind in potentially life-threatening situations:

I wasn't able to keep in touch with my husband because I was afraid if they knew or felt that we're still in contact they might kill the child and hurt him and hurt me.... So we stayed apart for more than five years. (Respondent 1)

The departure of a family member from the home can be likened to bereavement as it is often marked by unresolved feelings of hurt, grief and a sense of ambiguous loss (Boss, 1999). Frater-Mathieson (2004) also states that for those who have experienced additional losses through trauma and displacement, as with these cases, the experience of grieving can be more complex. A number of participants linked the experience of separation to difficulties encountered in family relationships following reunification. For example, one respondent stated that the length of separation had affected their knowledge of the children and how she related to them:

I just felt that - I couldn't fill the gap...because within the three years I've obviously forgotten ... what they looked like, or what they might be like, or how they behave or you know what they like. (Respondent 5)

This view is supported by other research findings which explain how 'particularly lengthy separations between parents and children can often create tension when they are finally together' (Menjívar, 2009, p. 316). In terms of the parent child relationship, attachment bonds between caregivers and children can be disrupted as a consequence of these changes (Bowlby, 1969). During the period of separation, most of children referred to in this study remained with other carers in their family of

origin. Thus, the subsequent relocation and reunification with their caregiver in the host country may have led to a loss of stability, and grief for their missing carer, leading to weakened attachments and challenges for the relationship. In the following case, this may have been a contributing factor to family breakdown:

She (child) claims she didn't know me when she came over, you know she knew me when I was back in (country of origin) but when she came over here it was different. (Respondent 5)

A number of participants also noted that roles and dynamics between family members had altered:

For a long time, I was the mother and the father and the sister and daughter and everything for a long time...so once when they come and say 'I want share with you, I wanna help you' starting at first... 'I'm not sure you're gonna do it in the right way', you know? (Respondent 1)

Previous research supports this and notes that role changes which occur as a result of separation, force individuals within the family system to redefine positions and their perceptions of authority within it (Coakley and MacEinri, 2007; Rees and Pease, 2007; Rousseau et al, 2004; Suarez-Orozco, Bang and Kim, 2011). This can cause considerable stress for families as they work to renegotiate and reshape their roles and responsibilities within the family system.

Acculturation Stress

Adapting to a new environment and adjusting to changes in the family are interactive processes involving multiple overlapping systems. Thus, the ability to cope with the consequences of migration, reunification and integration involves not only the individual and family but also the wider social structures in society (Frater-Mathieson, 2004). In this respect, a number of participants in this study listed adjustment to new norms and cultures as another reason for increased familial tensions. This was discussed by the following participant in terms of her relationship with her spouse:

In Africa we used to be...if you are married you have to do everything for your husband... So you can't go school, you can't do anything just have a baby and stay home and take care of the houseWhen I came I see him just he

think like before, like the way we think granddad thinks like - ... He want me to do *everything*. (Respondent 3)

Another respondent noted how the differences between parenting practices and the children's gradual adoption of new norms and cultures in the host society had led to difficulties for family members:

Parents here are very different – the parenting role here in Ireland is very different to the one in (country of origin).....At the beginning it was...it was like that like the way we did when we were back at home ... But as time went on, as they mixed up with other children that changed... so I felt they kind of moved away from that. (Respondent 5)

Acculturation stress cannot be seen in isolation of separation as it can serve to compound how people adapt. Previous research has identified that different rates of acculturation can occur amongst family members following separation, where one has had more time to adjust to new ways of life prior to the arrival of their family member (Frater-Mathieson, 2004). This in turn can cause difficulties in how members of the family relate to one another.

Trauma

A number of participants also discussed the emotional consequences of traumatic experiences and admitted that these had impacted upon family relationships:

I'm angry most of the time, also I'm trying to hide it, be very calm, talk slowly and be friendly but still I have a *huge* anger problem and depression also... It's affect me yes, it affects my family but I just don't know what to do ... (Respondent 1)

Experiences of trauma such as this can lead to higher rates of stress and anxiety and where grief remains unresolved in relation to trauma, this may have consequences for family relationships (Rousseau et al., 2004; Weine, Stevan, Knafl et al, 2005). These experiences can subsequently challenge their ability to integrate in their host society and maintain relationships with family members (Suarez-Orozco, Todorova and Louie 2002).

Structural Challenges to Reunification and Integration:

Recent research conducted by the Immigrant Council of Ireland (ICI) on the impacts of family reunification on integration in Ireland (2013) and the RASNZ (2012) study on refugees' experiences in New Zealand, have identified that structural factors can impact integration experiences and family relationships. In these and in the current study structural challenges identified by participants included unemployment, immigration restrictions, discrimination and difficulties in accessing social protection, accommodation and education. Some of these are looked at in more detail here.

Immigration and Social Services

While not all accounts of contact with these services were negative, a number of women in this study did express difficulties in accessing their rights and entitlements through immigration and social services. This included requests from immigration services for documentation that could not be produced during the registration process. For instance, a passport was requested from a participant whose country did not issue these to the ethnic minority group that she was from. Another respondent spoke of being wrongly informed by social services that following her marital separation she was not eligible to stay in Ireland:

They say it's good to go back in your country... I have no right to stay this country anymore... I cry here - they tell me to go back in my country.
(Respondent 3)

This led to a high degree of stress for her as well as long delays in gaining financial support, during which time she depended on food vouchers provided by a voluntary organisation.

Discrimination

Discrimination was discussed by most of the participants and this cut across many areas of life including access to employment, social protection and adequate accommodation. One woman described her experience when attempting to access private accommodation:

say for instance you would pick up the Evening Echo and you would ring up to go and view a house...and well you get appointment anyway but once you got there... they tell you the house is gone but there are other people standing

out there who are still going to view the house. So that was very difficult as well to take in. (Respondent 5)

Language and Social Networks

The lack of extended family, social networks and language difficulties were also highlighted as challenges for women in this study which hindered their ability to integrate in their host society. This reflects what has been discussed by authors previously (ICI, 2013; RASNZ, 2012). While a minority of participants had acquired some English language prior to coming to Ireland, most related the challenges in this respect. Most of the women had taken language classes provided by voluntary and religious organisations, however some had not attended classes and this appeared to limit their ability to integrate. It also seemed to increase their dependence on family members to provide them with support in accessing services. For instance, when referring to her husband, one woman related her dependency on him for this support:

Every day he help me....I ask him what's the word for ...what is the word for?...that is door, what is this?light.... I question, he reply me every day, every time. (Respondent 2)

In terms of language for children, while all mothers stated that they had learned English in their country of origin and were improving their proficiency; one child needed additional language supports in school while another child struggled without educational supports. In the latter case, the respondent felt that this had compounded the child's isolation from peers. This is echoed by previous Irish studies where participants reported a lack of formal English language support in schools, which led to significant delays in their educational development and ability to integrate (Moreo and Lentin, 2010; Sheridan, 2008).

The lack of social networks and extended family in Ireland was also named by most women as a challenge to reunification and integration. Some experienced difficulties in engaging with people outside the home and in reforming social networks. Additionally, when referring to extended family, many participants described the importance of members outside of their immediate family and how the absence of these relatives had impacted their lives. Immigration restrictions and conflict in the countries of origin were the main reasons given as to why they could not see their

extended family members. One woman spoke of how the lack of family had impacted childcare and she related feeling a sense of isolation as a result:

without family is prison, like you can't go shop, like I'm upstairs I can't go shop ... So I have to look somebody to push together my buggy downstairs ... Sometimes I can't... have anything to eat because two/three days because.. the buggy go downstairs...(Respondent 3)

The lack of extended family support and social isolation has been identified previously as a factor influencing successful integration for families (Pillinger, 2007; Coakley and MacÉinrí, 2007).

Protective Factors

Practical Supports

The impact of factors such as separation, loss and coping with change is commonly mediated by support systems. Thus the level of accessibility to resources within the host community is pivotal in determining how well people will adjust and in determining outcomes for family reunification (Ahearn, 2000). Systems theory can support understanding of how the necessary interventions (or lack of them) can influence the experiences of family reunification and integration.

In terms of access to information; friends, acquaintances and networks made in asylum centres were commonly cited as being the most beneficial to the women in this study. Thus information appeared to be primarily gained on an ad hoc basis. NGOs were also commonly referred to as playing a large role in filling the information/support gap: '... I think (NGO) is where I got the most support ... other than that no you wouldn't get the information' (Respondent 5). This view is supported by previous literature (Coakley and Healy, 2007) which views NGO's as providing a targeted support to refugees and their family members.

One participant also spoke of designated supports she received upon entering the state. This differed from the rest of the women in the study as she had to come to Ireland as a programme refugee. The supports her family received included having a designated settlement officer, being provided with information about Ireland and how the system here operates, assistance with sourcing accommodation and English

language support: 'I remember the first warm, kind welcome smile in Ireland... I will never ever forget that smile' (Respondent 1).

In contrast, the rest of the interviewees discussed accessing mainstream supports for basic health and immigration needs; these were primarily in the form of contact with health and social services, schools and immigration services. A number of these services were regarded satisfactorily by participants, with one expressing that their children's school support was especially valued. Others singled out officers in community and social welfare services that had provided them with income support in their time of need.

Community Engagement

In terms of other supports, community activities and education were commonly recounted as playing a significant role in enhancing many of the respondents' participation in the host society. One woman spoke of how education had reduced her sense of isolation: '.....So at that time they (training college) ring me the good time, because I have to do something, I was boring in that house and they ring me to come ... and I get English and Computers...' (Respondent 3) Another spoke of how a community development programme had helped her mother to integrate: 'integration, activities that helps a lot. I saw that with my mom had that experience. It was wonderful' (Respondent 1). This correlates with literature which suggests that education, training and links to community organizations can serve as protective factors in enabling individuals to adjust and adapt to their host environment (Rees and Pease, 2007; Coakley and MacEinri, 2007; Moreo and Lentin, 2010).

Discussion and Conclusion

The overall aim of this research was to gain a greater understanding of the experience of refugee women post reunification, with a view to gaining an increased awareness of their needs at this time. Through the review of existing and primary research, it has been established that the processes of migration, family reunification and integration can have a profound impact on refugee families. The overarching themes that have emerged from these findings include that firstly participants identified many beneficial effects of reunification and expressed a great sense of relief to be together with their loved ones and to be in a position of safety.

However, the findings also reveal that participants have been exposed to multiple losses as a result of their experiences. These include the separation from family members, loss of the home, culture and way of life and in some cases the loss of family members following reunification. Findings further reveal that challenges in family relationships arose for the majority of respondents following reunification and this led to family breakdown in some cases. These challenges were commonly attributed to separation, altered family roles and authority structures, the experiences of trauma and acculturation difficulties. Structural constraints named by participants included unemployment, difficulties in accessing social protection, immigration restrictions and discrimination. The lack of extended family, social networks and language difficulties were also highlighted as challenges for women in this study which hindered their ability to integrate in their host society.

Access (or lack of access) to supports since reuniting with family members have emerged as protective or inhibiting factors in terms of outcomes for family reunion and integration. These factors appeared to lead to easier or more difficult family reunification processes depending on how they are experienced. Overall, however insufficient resources and information did appear to compound difficult situations for families.

Recommendations

It is clear from the research findings that every woman experiences the processes of reunification and integration differently and each has a unique set of needs in relation to coping with the loss and change that is brought about by these events. However, a number of key recommendations have been highlighted by the participants themselves and by the researcher following an analysis and review of the literature and findings:

1. Access to Information: The availability of information to families prior to entering the state or at the point of entry emerged as an important requirement for women in this study. This includes information on their legal status in the country and what their rights are should family breakdown occur. This information needs to be transmitted to and conveyed by frontline social service and immigration staff accurately.
2. Targeted Support: A number of women in this study also spoke of the desire to have a designated worker as a form of support and somebody that they can trust and

link in with following reunification. This reflects the UNHCR's recommendation that a targeted layer of support would be beneficial for refugee families to aid transition and adaptation prior to accessing mainstream services (UNHCR, 2009). Social Workers are well-placed to play a role in this form of support and to act as an intermediary in connecting those in difficult family situations with other professional helpers. While recognising that in a period of economic downturn this can pose a barrier to its implementation, when compared to the resources expended on foster care arrangements and crisis social services, this could have the potential to reduce not only the financial burden but the emotional cost for the family. As one woman stated in the study: 'Social Workers usually come when there's a fire but they don't come in before the fire...I think it is better to come in before the fire starts'(Respondent 5).

3. Updated Policy and Legislation: Another recommendation arising as a result of this work require policy makers to recognize the role played by policy and legislation in generating dispersed family arrangements which can subsequently shape their experiences following reunification. Because immigration restrictions and current administrative procedures can limit or delay opportunities for family unity, this results in situations of family separation for prolonged periods of time, which can have negative repercussions for the family (ICI, 2013). Key areas that could bring about improvements in the lives of refugee families include:

a) The adoption of the Directive 2004/38/EC on the Right to Family Reunification into legislation or alternatively, by adopting the principles within it through policy (ICI, 2013). This Directive aims to establish common rules of law relating to the right to family reunification, 'to protect the family unit and to facilitate the integration of nationals of non-member countries' (Europa, 2011).

b) The availability of an independent appeals mechanism; this would allow for the transparent consideration of family reunification applications.

c) Independent residency status should be laid out in clear legal provisions and afforded to family members of refugees following a defined period of time. There should also be a guarantee of the continuation of residence to those whose family relationships break down due to situations of domestic violence, separation or death.

5. A Comprehensive Anti-Racism Strategy: Following on from The National Action Plan Against Racism (NPAR) 2005 – 2008, a new strategy could provide direction in combating racism and discrimination in Ireland and promote a more inclusive society.

Concluding Remarks

These findings reveal that the situation post reunification can often prove to be more complex than originally imagined. Most women in this study recounted significant challenges in adjusting to new dynamics in family relationships and in adapting to their new society. Thus, it appears that the need to support for these families does not cease following reunification and it is vital that policy makers, state and community services recognise and respond to this effectively.

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Weine, Stevan; Knafl, Kathleen; Feetham, Suzanne; Kulauzovic, Yasmina; et al
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