‘I am a Widow, Mother and Refugee’: Narratives of Two Refugee Widows Resettled to Australia

CAROLINE LENETTE

School of Human Services and Social Work, Griffith Health Institute, Griffith University, Queensland, Australia

c.lenette@griffith.edu.au

MS received March 2013; revised MS received August 2013

The sparse literature on contemporary narratives of widowhood among refugee women as a consequence of conflict situations indicates that this aspect of lived experience is relatively unexplored. While loss is integral to the refugee journey, there is a paucity of analysis of how the sudden loss of a spouse under such circumstances can compound resettlement anxieties, particularly when women raise children alone. By exploring meanings attached to widowhood using examples from the experiences of two younger refugee women resettled in Brisbane, Australia, this article demonstrates how they negotiated lives characterized by community ostracism and stigmatization attached to widowhood and lone parenting. The limited knowledge specifically on young or middle-aged widowhood, the compounded impact on lone parenting, and intra-group tensions among refugee women are highlighted. Such an oversight should be addressed to provide a full understanding of complex wellbeing experiences for refugee widows with children resettled in western nations.

Keywords: widowhood, refugee women, lone mothers, resettlement, Australia

Introduction

Experiencing the loss of a husband while concurrently living as a refugee represents a specific set of challenges for women, particularly if they have children. Widowhood is an under-recognized albeit significant aspect of uprooting and exile experiences (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR] 2002), as becoming a widow can yield several social, cultural and economic implications (Amirthalingam and Lakshman 2012; Whyte *et al.* 2012). Such a situation would be particularly difficult for a woman who loses her husband and children’s father while living in a camp situation because of the uncertainty of accessing long-term resettlement options to a country like Australia. Yet, it is important to acknowledge that despite being generally subjected to discriminatory patriarchal and religious norms worldwide, widows can demonstrate resilience and resourcefulness to thrive in their lives in various contexts (UN Women 2001).

There are currently an estimated 250 million widows in the world (UN Women 2012), and well over 15 million refugees, of whom 80 per cent are said to be women and children (Refugees International 2013). It should not be surprising then that amongst any resettled refugee population in western nations, there would be a small proportion of women who are widows with children. However, the impact of widowhood on the lives of lone refugee women with children in a resettlement context does not receive a lot of attention, given that, irrespective of gender, marital status and diversity of experiences, all refugees are usually ‘lumped’ together as a homogenous group (UNHCR 2006). It is therefore important to consider the lived experiences of widows with children as a distinct set of circumstances that determine their resettlement process.

In the contemporary literature on refugee issues, widowhood can be mentioned briefly as one aspect of broader studies such as on the changing role of Afghan refugee women in the United States (Lipson and Miller 1994), internally displaced people (IDPs) in Colombia (Aysa-Lastra 2011), displaced female-headed households in Sri Lanka (Amirthalingam and Lakshman 2012), or IDPs in Uganda (Whyte *et al.* 2012). However, rarely is widowhood the sole focus of a research initiative. The Loomba Foundation (2013), a London-based

organization set up specifically to address the critical needs of widows in the developing world, states that

[t]he lot of a widow is shocking in many parts of the world, the sorrow of losing her husband compounded by cruelty and injustice...widows truly are the bottom of the pile – invisible, unheard, the poorest of the poor.

Nevertheless, the socio-cultural and economic disadvantage widows face in many parts of the world is slowly gaining formal recognition particularly among international agencies with a specific concern for gender equity issues, such as the UNHCR (2002, 2006).

In fact, the multiple issues of exclusion and discrimination that widows can face worldwide are entrenched in socio-cultural mores that dictate how a particular society, group or community treats women (and their children) at a time when they experience the loss of a spouse and indeed for the rest of their lives (Chen 2000; Dutt and Harma 2010; Limann 2003; Mand 2005). Such issues are clearly compounded by the upheaval and intense trauma that refugees who flee persecution or civil conflict can often experience. Widowhood therefore represents a complex dimension to the identity of a distinct sub-group of refugee women. This begs the question as to what happens to women who are resettled in developed nations where vastly different interpretations of widowhood can sometimes prevail.

This article begins by outlining current themes in the limited literature on widowhood and refugee women. It then discusses perceptions of widowhood in developing and western contexts for two reasons. First, this approach contrasts and compares distinct notions of widowhood to demonstrate the multiple and context-specific nature of this status. For instance, as South Asian women are more likely to experience widowhood earlier than women in western societies, culturally embedded dimensions differ across, and within, these distinct groups (Mand 2005). Second, resettled women's own interpretations of widowhood constructed while growing up in a developing country, are superimposed on varying western ideas about widowhood, leading to novel understandings and conceptualizations of the concept. By comparing various socio-cultural constructions of widowhood, as well as drawing upon examples from the lived experiences of two refugee women with children living in Australia as case studies, the article aims to highlight contemporary meanings attached to widowhood in this specific context.

What makes the case of these two women particularly compelling, is that they both refused to be 'inherited' following the death of their respective spouses, as they did not want to marry one of their late husbands' relatives as dictated by traditional custom (see Limann 2003; Whyte *et al.* 2012). Clearly, findings based on the experiences of only two women cannot be considered as representative. Rather, these specific narratives of widowhood highlight the impact that entrenched community expectations can have on women whose life choices go against established norms.

By considering the two women's stories of ostracism from local community members (that is, people from their country of origin or language group also living in Australia), as well as discrimination from married refugee women, the article adds a further dimension to the current literature on resettled refugee women's narratives. Specifically, the distinct circumstances of relatively younger widows, added to child-rearing responsibilities as lone mothers, and the tensions emerging from married women's perceptions of widowhood, are discussed as unique contributors to the social worlds of widowed refugee women. It should be stressed that the aim of this article is not to vilify community norms surrounding widowhood but to draw on two women's experiences to explore the concept in all its complexity.

Literature Review

The paucity of literature on widowhood and refugee women indicates that this significant aspect of refugee lived experience remains relatively unexplored. The lack of knowledge on this topic makes it particularly difficult to advocate for and design programmes targeting the specific needs of widows (UN Women 2012). The rare studies on widowhood and resettled refugees focus on later life where ill health, as opposed to situations of upheaval and difficult camp living conditions, resulted in spousal death. For instance, Chou's (2007) Australian-based quantitative, longitudinal analysis of psychological distress amongst elderly migrants aged over 50 showed higher levels of distress for widows and divorcees. Yet, it was not ascertained whether widowhood occurred pre-or post-migration; there was no indication of length of widowhood, or how age and refugee backgrounds might affect findings.

Essentially, refugee loss and grief are generally associated with flight-related trauma and uprooted-ness in exile (Allan and Hess 2010), but are rarely linked to widowhood specifically. While loss and bereavement are usually integral to refugee experiences, there is a lack of emphasis on how exactly spousal loss, whether sudden or anticipated, specifically compounds resettlement anxieties. Hence, notions of widowhood in exile as well as their impact on resettlement circumstances are virtually non-existent. Given the dearth of studies and discussions on this topic, it is useful to explore widowhood discourses in developing as well as western contexts. Different emphases are placed on aspects of widowhood in distinct settings; for example, the focus is usually on ageing in western countries, and on younger widows in developing nations (Chen 2000). Hence, widowed refugee women resettled in countries like Australia 'carry' with them specific understandings of their status developed in another context, meaning that they are compelled to renegotiate a significant part of their identity once they live in a western setting.

Widowhood in Developing Countries

A prevalent 'outsider' perspective of widowhood in developing nations can be influenced by stories of banned practices like 'sati' (the controversial self-immolation of a widow on her husband's funeral pyre) in India (see Ahmad 2009). However, the lives of widows certainly involve more complex and multi-layered aspects. Still, qualitative explorations of widowhood in refugee research are quasi non-existent. This gap in knowledge is particularly striking in developing contexts despite the prevalence of widowhood (Chen 2000; UN Women 2001), especially in camp situations (UNHCR 2002). More recently, there has been a growing interest in documenting issues linked to widowhood in developing nations (for instance, Dutt and Harma 2010; UN Women 2012); however, this does not necessarily equate to recognition of specific difficulties widowhood engenders for refugee women, whether exiled or resettled permanently. The lack of studies on widowhood among refugee women in developing contexts represents a glaring gap in the refugee literature.

Furthermore, narratives of widowhood are largely absent from poverty, health, development and human rights discourses (Chen 2000), although this is slowly changing in the development context (UN Women 2001; UNIFEM 2007) and in gender and human rights discourses (Limann 2003; Widows Rights International 2013). Nevertheless, it is said that 'there is no group more affected by the sin of omission than widows' (UN Women 2001: 2). This is why international agency partnerships like the recent agreement between UN Women and The Loomba Foundation to assist widows in Asia, Africa and Latin America (UN Women 2012) can assist in remedying this situation.

Within the limited body of literature available on widowhood, examples of rich accounts of women's experiences can provide a glimpse of widows' lives in developing settings. Shumbahini (2005) explored the daily realities of Shona (a distinct ethnic group) widows in Zimbabwe and highlighted intricate social, economic and emotional difficulties encountered as women and lone mothers. Shona widows received no emotional or financial

support from their husbands' extended family, friends and former employers. They described certain mourning rituals as oppressive, while some mothers were threatened with having their children taken away. Shona widows developed a strong sense of hope, and at times defiance, in response to such experiences (Shumbamhini 2005).

Furthermore, widowhood rites in Uganda are considered archaic for contemporary times; they may have served some purpose in the past, but most are detrimental to women's wellbeing, and therefore, '[o]ne wonders why half nakedness, starvation or confinement is evidence that a widow is genuinely aggrieved and is in mourning' (Limann 2003: 31). Similar practices are said to prevail in many African nations today (Widows Rights International 2013).

Chen's (2000) landmark study of over 500 widows in rural India, the country recording the largest number of widows worldwide (UN Women 2001), highlighted that a woman outliving her husband is not only regarded with suspicion, but is also considered an economic burden for relatives (Chen 2000). High rates of marriages, particularly between younger women and older men, combined with infrequent remarriages, make widowhood a social problem and indeed an *institution* influencing the everyday lives of women. Diverse socially prescribed duties and roles across religions, regions, age groups and castes in India exemplify 'fears' about widowhood as a threat to social order and to the 'ideal', cohesive family life (Chen 2000). Widows remain at the margins of society because they represent death and mourning.

It is evident that notions of widowhood vary across developing contexts according to prevailing gender, religious, and social norms, amongst other factors. Regardless, customs and beliefs about how widows are expected to live are deeply entrenched and passed on from one generation to the next. Widowhood rituals can thus significantly affect women's mental health and wellbeing (Eboh and Boye 2005), and overall health (Balkwell 1981; Eisenbruch 1984). Consequently, it remains perplexing that such limited attention is given to the circumstances of widows, particularly when compounded by situations of conflict, exile and resettlement.

Widowhood in Western Countries

In contrast with the examples pertinent to developing countries, existing studies on widowhood in western settings mainly focus on psychopathology and distress (such as Boerner *et al.* 2005; Bonanno *et al.* 2004), and quantitative bereavement measurements (Minton and Barron 2008). The longitudinal impacts of widowhood among older adults on wellbeing (Balkwell 1981; Boerner *et al.* 2005; Henderson *et al.* 2004), as well as achieving resilience and adjustment within similar age groups (Bennett 2010; Boerner *et al.* 2005; O'Hearn Pepin 2009; Steinberg 2009) are also discussed. Such quantitative approaches to understanding widowhood are limited to older groups, as seen in a comparative study of post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) among married and widowed women with a history of trauma (Brady *et al.* 2004). Indeed, there is an assumption that it is predominantly older adults who experience widowhood (UN Women 2001).

In these examples, bereavement is considered from psychological perspectives solely and can depict a partial picture where key contextual dimensions may be overlooked. A few recent cross-cultural exceptions include a United States-based analysis of widowhood (Elwert and Christakis 2006), where race was a significant determinant of mortality rates among surviving spouses. In another example, a gendered study of Holocaust survivors aged over 75 identified widowhood as a determinant of poorer health status for women (Landau and Litwin 2000). Furthermore, Gardner (2002) examined the lives of older Bengali migrants in London and included widowhood as a key facet of their lived experiences. Hence, context-specific studies explore issues beyond psychopathology, distress and bereavement.

The rare studies looking at a relatively younger cohort of women and migration specifically include Mand's (2005) research on the complex intersections of migration and widowhood for Sikh women in Britain, Tanzania and India, which concluded that it was a highly stigmatized status in all three contexts. Thus, socio-cultural perspectives of widowhood, whenever provided, draw attention to diverse and contextual experiences. Nevertheless, existing western widowhood studies are relatively devoid of cultural analysis.

Contemporary research on qualitative meanings attached to widowhood in western settings is increasingly gathering momentum, and may continue to increase due to ongoing involvement of military personnel in long-term wars (Haase 2008). Of particular relevance are studies on young widowhood (Derman 1999; Haase 2008; Tomarken 2009) and middle-aged widowhood (Williamson 2010), which signify a growing recognition that it is not solely significant as a later life event. As Haase (2008: 3) explains:

The unique situation of the young widow is that she just recently established a new identity—that of wife. She went from being a single woman to married and now she is forced to deal with the fact that she is no longer part of a couple.

Young widowhood thus implies unique experiences of bereavement, identity formation and marginalization. Existing research, though limited, highlights that young bereaved partners can struggle for years (Tomarken 2009), particularly when considering new relationships (Giljohann and Ewart 2005).

Haase's study involving women from the US aged 20 to 39 revealed how bereavement was more traumatic, due to the unexpected nature of spousal loss at a younger age. A young widow herself, Haase explains that while older women are expected to remain widows 'forever', younger widows live in a state of 'temporariness' and are encouraged to rebuild their lives. This approach can therefore overshadow the significant emotional toll spousal loss can take on young widows' wellbeing. Hence, 'young widowhood' was seen as an 'oxymoron of sorts' because of the juxtaposition of youth and death (Haase 2008: 106).

As a corrective to constrained notions of widowhood, exploring attachment *among* widows (Silfer 2010) situates wellbeing rhetoric beyond immediate family support. Additionally, stories of widowhood in same-sex couples (Christensen 2008) challenge ideas of 'conjugal' and heterosexual loss as the only form of bereavement, as lesbian widows experience a unique set of issues; their grief can be 'invisible' due to multiple layers of discrimination they may experience (Whipple 2007). Furthermore, relatively novel research themes such as widowhood during pregnancy (Doherty and Scannell-Desch 2008) and multiple widowhood (Miles 2008) show recognition that women in those circumstances have distinct experiences that may have been overlooked in the past. Whilst nascent, the emerging body of literature summarized here demonstrates an impetus to broaden existing notions of widowhood in a range of settings.

Context of Study

This article's findings emerged from a larger 12-month ethnographic study exploring refugee women's perspectives on resilience and wellbeing in Brisbane, Australia, in 2008 and 2009 (see Lenette, Brough and Cox 2013). This qualitative research project sought gender-specific understandings of mental health concepts in resettlement. Fieldwork followed an ethnographic approach, to describe values, beliefs, and practices of cultural groups within a specific setting (Spradley 1979). Combined methods of participant observation, in-depth interviews and visual ethnography – namely photo elicitation and digital storytelling (see Lenette and Boddy 2013; Lenette, Cox and Brough, in press), enabled a multifaceted understanding of plural pathways to resilience and wellbeing. Findings were analysed using

an intersectional approach (Pittaway and Bartolomei 2001) to highlight multiple and enmeshed facets to refugee women's social worlds.

Appropriate ethical clearance was sought prior to the project. The author explained the broader aims of the study and each woman gave informed consent for participation. While the topics discussed could be of a sensitive nature, no major ethical issues were encountered during fieldwork, given the strong relationships of trust between the author and participants.

Participants

Initially, a small group of eight women from refugee backgrounds were approached to participate in this study. The author used established networks in the local multicultural field to identify potential participants, who then recommended other women for participation. Through an initial arms-length approach consistent with ethics protocol, a trusted person encouraged participation on behalf of the researcher through a 'snowballing' technique. The only criterion for inclusion was for women to identify as being from a refugee background. The author only engaged with a small group of refugee women to allow in-depth exploration of the concepts through observations, interviews and digital storytelling over several months. These methods were mostly used in the context of the women's homes; observations of relevant community events, which the author attended with participants, were also included in the analysis. As it turned out, five of the women who agreed to participate were considered as 'single', that is, three were divorced and two were widowed. Each 'single' woman was solely responsible for between one and seven children. The focus of the study thus shifted to understanding their experiences as resettled refugee women who were lone parents. This article only discusses the case of two participants who each were 'a widow, mother and refugee'.

The two widows, Ruby and Doris (pseudonyms are used to preserve anonymity), resided in Brisbane, Australia, and were originally from South Sudan. It should be noted that by the end of 2006, close to 20,000 people had migrated to Australia from South Sudan, with 2,400 living in the State of Queensland and 1,805 in the Brisbane area (Queensland Health 2011); the gender ratio for Queensland was 80.5 females per 100 males. However, it is difficult to access data disaggregated by marital status, and the number of Sudanese women who are widows cannot be easily estimated, except through anecdotal evidence from participants.

At the time of fieldwork, both Ruby and Doris lived in rental accommodation and each cared for five children, with no other dependents. They had lived in Brisbane for five and two years respectively, had proficient English language skills, and were in part-time paid employment. Ruby and Doris had spent considerable time in refugee camp situations in Africa prior to being granted permanent visas as humanitarian entrants to Australia. Both women had tertiary qualifications gained from African institutions some time ago. Ruby was enrolled in an undergraduate course in Brisbane, and Doris was considering undertaking further studies while working part-time.

Both women lost spouses prior to resettlement while living in precarious camp situations in countries of exile, due to inequitable access to health care. These women indicated that the death of their respective husbands was preventable, had they been living under stable socio-political conditions. However, they did not elaborate on the particular circumstances leading to their spouses' deaths. When the author met the participants, Doris was in her early forties and had been a widow for ten years. Ruby was in her late thirties and did not specify how long she had been a widow. However, her youngest child was eight, which led to the assumption that she had been a widow for between five and eight years. Thus, Ruby became a widow in her late twenties or early thirties and Doris in her early thirties, when they would have been considered as 'young' or 'middle-aged'. These women's

age group at the time when fieldwork was undertaken roughly placed them in the ‘middle-aged’ category. Therefore, Ruby and Doris’ perspectives as younger widowed refugee women reflect rich and textured lived experiences spanning over ten years.

Narratives of Widowhood

Both Ruby and Doris were able to develop strategies in their everyday lives to move onwards and thus achieve a number of outcomes in Africa as well as in Australia. Yet, the discussions surrounding widowhood were continually surrounded by feelings of sadness and frustration. For instance, losing a husband was described as one of the most difficult experiences in Doris’ life. She explored the theme of widowhood in Africa in the script of her digital story:

While in exile, my husband died. The death of my husband was a big blow to my family, things were never the same again, and living in a foreign country without any support was one of the most difficult moments I have ever lived.

Becoming a widow and a lone mother of five children while living as a refugee in exile meant that Doris experienced a drastic role change. This situation forced her to make difficult decisions to provide for her family. For instance, Doris left her children in the care of a relative in their country of exile, and worked in another country under conflict situations for extended periods of time. Her main motivation was to afford her children’s education in private institutions. Spending time away from her children was very stressful; however, Doris felt it was her duty as sole provider for her family to undertake this difficult task.

One aspect that was common to both Doris and Ruby while still in Africa was the firm decision not to remarry despite culturally prescribed customs, mainly for the sake of their children. They did not wish to compromise the wellbeing of their children, lest a stepfather would mistreat or exclude the women’s children from their previous marriage. Having witnessed how other widows with children were treated in their country of origin once remarried, Ruby and Doris were wary of how their own widowhood status would affect their children’s future. Thus, both women’s decisions to migrate to Australia were motivated by a desire to ensure their children’s wellbeing and education. As younger widows, they had to consider future plans without the presence of a husband and decide by themselves what was best for their children.

Thus, widowhood was a salient aspect of the women’s identity because it determined the course of their lives, leading them to Australia. Nevertheless, when Ruby and Doris encountered personal difficulties in Australia, particularly with their children, the women became nostalgic about the absence of a husband. They had not anticipated how difficult it would be at times to raise children alone in a foreign country. For example, Ruby contemplated how utterly different her life would have been if her husband were still alive; she would have received more support to deal with financial stress and family-related issues, and everyday concerns would have seemed more manageable.

Conversely, Ruby also admitted she would have been less inclined to pursue tertiary studies as well as work and training opportunities in Australia, and she would not have been involved in the many community activities she thoroughly enjoyed, if her husband were still alive. Thus, while she could at times feel lonely, Ruby also recognized that she had achieved several outcomes by herself *precisely* because she was a widow. It is clear that widowhood was an important element of the women’s sense of identity.

Community Ostracism

Ruby and Doris were particularly keen to discuss the impact of community dynamics linked to social norms surrounding widowhood, given their bold choice to remain unmarried while

raising several children even after moving to Australia. In a resettlement context, pressures from the local community members did not weaken. Thus, the intense stigma linked to raising five children without the involvement of a man remained prominent. The women vividly recounted how unsupportive their community was, at times openly wishing them to fail at this task. Doris explained:

In fact being single, the community sometimes they consider that a woman, that is just a perspective or a belief they have, that a woman cannot bring up children, because they consider women as the weaker person or the weaker sex, that can't manage a lot of things.

The widows' lives and decisions were scrutinized by community members and they felt constantly on their guard; consequently, the women could at times develop a lower sense of worth. Such determination as displayed by the widows yielded harsh repercussions, particularly for Doris who reported on-going gossip about her, such as rumours of alleged affairs with married men or male colleagues in the Brisbane context.

Similarly, Ruby explained how while she still lived in Africa, her late husband's family tried to 'destroy' her emotionally because of an unfounded belief that a wife is responsible for her husband's death and should be disowned. The family distanced itself from her as well as her children. She was shunned by the community and forced to find means to subsist by herself. At the time of fieldwork, Ruby's children had no contact with their late father's relatives. Thus, both women overcame detrimental attitudes pre- and post-resettlement.

The experiences of Ruby and Doris in Australia thus abound with examples of disapproval and suspicion from local community members because they were widows. For instance, during an interview, Doris explained:

The reason is, some people look at a single woman like a burden, [they think] the women they get so much used to the [husband's] family, all that she's going to do is asking or begging, she will be having lots of requirements and lots of complaints. So they try to isolate you. Some single women because of that, they ended up in relationships that put them in a lot of problems, some succeed, some don't succeed.

Such reflections indicate how community pressures could lead to negative outcomes in terms of wellbeing for refugee women forced to remarry. Conversely, as the local community generally denied the widows any support for going against dominant cultural norms, Ruby and Doris were fully aware that if a woman agreed to be inherited or remarry following widowhood, she may experience a very different set of outcomes—some of which could be positive. For example, the two widows were conscious of the connections absent from their lives in resettlement, as exemplified by Ruby's comments on this issue:

In my case, being a woman with children... let me just give an example, like when my husband was there, I had constant visitors but now, it's no longer the same, that connection of people coming in and out, it ceased after [his death].

Similarly to Ruby, Doris emphasized that acquaintances would have been more involved in her life had she remarried. Thus, it is clear that at times, anxieties from community attitudes were the source of a sense of loneliness.

Equally, community segregation also shaped both women's sense of self-reliance and determination to achieve everyday goals in Australia. To add to this resourcefulness, while

Ruby and Doris turned negative community attitudes into a source of motivation, they also recognized that further disengagement from local communities would mean ostracism for their children and loss of cultural capital. Since they wanted their children to maintain strong cultural ties in Australia, Ruby and Doris were determined to continue to be actively involved in local community activities, despite some of the detrimental dynamics they could experience.

Nevertheless, both Ruby and Doris reported that some community members praised them for not becoming financial burdens as widows. Such people expressed astonishment at the women's achievements in Australia as well as their ability to maintain ties with family overseas. Despite the financial stress Ruby and Doris could experience as sole parents to five children each, they worked hard and knew how to manage their income. They were prompt with paying bills, provided for their children's needs, and were able to send money to their families back in Africa. Both of them were able to afford the trip to reunite with their families overseas during fieldwork. According to these two women, people were clearly surprised at how well they fared under circumstances characterized by lack of support. They acknowledged the women's efforts in ensuring their children received a good education and 'stayed out of trouble'. The community expressed disbelief to the widows at their achievements without the presence of a man in the household.

Discrimination from Married Women

In addition to facing disapproval from local community members in Australia, the two widows encountered further hardships resulting from the attitudes of some married women within their community. The latter tended to 'look down' on single women generally as inferior and treated them as such. This is an aspect of their lives that neither Ruby nor Doris had expected to confront. In fact, married women were not intentionally unkind but 'followed the norm', as Doris explained:

Married women do, they make it harder for other women. Like you are born, the system is like that so you just follow the rest, without questioning why is it like this.

Doris recounted a recent incident where a married woman singled her out because she was an unmarried widow. This conversation took an emotional toll on her. Doris recalled:

Some women they were going out, they were putting on make up and they were all married. I was also doing the same, happy in their company. Then one commented, 'For you, why are you wasting your time decorating yourself, which man is going to look at you?' ... I was so stressed and angered... This is not good, it is so hard, for me. I call it an insult. It is like we have closed the chapter and someone is still opening it. When she talked to me like that, I just felt, if my husband was here, nobody would have talked to me like that. But now he's gone. It brings back his memory to me. I'm undergoing all these things because he's no more there... They said, 'Why do you decorate your room, you don't have a man, just live the simple life'.

In that instance, Doris was made to feel ashamed about her status as a widow, and felt lonely and ostracised as a result. This example shows how the constant strife for acceptance impacted upon her overall wellbeing. Doris explained further:

For me, mentally, it affects so much, on myself sometimes I think 'Why is this happening to me? Is it because I'm single, people don't appreciate what you do, people don't recognize what you do. You become so stressed, so frustrated and sometimes even

you hate participating in some community events, and sometimes even when we are there, you start hearing this bad gossip behind your back, it is so stressful. Most of the single women are stressed and depressed because of that. Every now and then there is some accusations.

As a result of such attitudes from married women in particular, Ruby and Doris reported finding it easier to regroup with other lone mothers in Brisbane to find solace in one another's company. This minimized the chances of being confronted with gossip and scrutiny from other community members. Tensions between married and lone refugee women remain unexplored because of the assumption of homogenous experiences for all refugee women. The examples from Doris' story in particular are a testament to the diverse experiences of sub-groups among refugee women.

Discussion and Implications

Widowhood is far from being the sole aspect of concern to refugee women like Ruby and Doris. From an intersectional perspective (Pittaway and Bartolomei 2001), issues such as social class, language abilities and economic status compound the realities of being a widow with children. However, the refugee women's narratives outlined in this article, contribute to enriching perspectives on socio-cultural expressions of widowhood in diverse contexts, which have received little attention in explorations of resettlement thus far.

The examples discussed in the literature review show that widowhood is a heterogeneous concept and is dependent on several factors such as religious beliefs, geographical location or prevailing gender norms. Yet, two elements, namely changes to social and economic status, are usually common across widowhood experiences globally (UN Women 2001), (as in Haase (2008) in the US, and Shumbamhini (2005) in Zimbabwe), even when legislation is in place to protect widows' rights and interests as in Uganda (Limann 2003). Clearly, widows' realities can be vastly different as Ruby and Doris recounted. Changes and difficulties characterizing the lives of widows in resettlement as exemplified here, indicate why this topic deserves more attention.

The contextual intricacies of experiences shared through these two case studies challenge this dearth of analysis in the refugee literature. More specifically, three key aspects highlighted in Ruby and Doris' stories add a rich dimension to refugee women's narratives in a resettlement context, namely: the distinct experiences of widows who are younger, the link between widowhood and lone parenthood, and the contrast of experiences when compared to married refugee women.

Young and Middle-aged Widowhood

The experiences of Ruby and Doris are specific given their young age at the time of spousal loss. The journeys they undertook leading to relocation to Australia were shaped by this loss and decisions they made, for instance in relation to work options to provide for their children. Mand (2005) concurs that younger widowhood can often involve taking up new activities in the public sphere due to changes in social and economic status. Thus, contemporary understandings of widowhood should encompass further experiences of young and middle-aged widows, as their issues are distinct from older widows' concerns and are likely to exist for a longer period of time (see for instance Balkwell 1981). Indeed, becoming a widow at a younger age, sometimes before reaching adulthood, implies that women carry this stigma for longer (Tomarken 2009; UN Women 2001). This topic requires deeper exploration to reflect the complex shifts in notions of 'self' over time. For Ruby and Doris, they carefully and continually negotiated changing identities as young widows over several years, not only in Africa, but also while building new lives in Australia.

Importantly, while Balkwell (1981) argued that widows aged 45 and under and who cared for dependents tended to experience the worst outcomes in terms of psychological adjustment, the examples drawn from Ruby and Doris' lives revealed an ability to successfully navigate challenges and opportunities linked to experiencing widowhood at an earlier stage of their lives. The literature review in this article highlights that the growing interest in younger and middle-aged widowhood is fairly recent. Certainly, more research is needed on the experiences of younger and middle-aged widows from refugee backgrounds, with particular emphasis on longitudinal studies.

Additionally, Haase (2008) explained that all but one of her young participants were of Caucasian origin, and all were from the upper-middle class. This limitation indicates that cross-cultural studies of young widowhood are lacking. Analysing widowhood in the context of cross-cultural bereavement (see Eisenbruch 1984) is useful to compare and contrast different conceptualizations. Reflecting contemporary concerns such as displacement and resettlement is still required. Consequently, the stories that Ruby and Doris shared add an important piece of the puzzle to this nascent discussion on young and middle-aged widowhood from socio-cultural perspectives. Further longitudinal studies on widowhood across the lifespan and with women from diverse backgrounds would yield key information on micro-determinants of processes of change, adaptation and identity reconstruction, pertinent to both refugee and widowhood narratives.

Lone Parenting

Widowed refugee women can clearly encounter additional resettlement issues as lone parents. Ruby and Doris focused on their children's wellbeing as a key priority that determined choices of remaining unmarried and migrating to Australia. Yet, this did not minimize the difficulties associated with raising children alone; Balkwell (1981: 123–124) explained that '[y]ounger widows who have dependent children tend to believe that their offspring give meaning to their lives, although the children's needs may exacerbate the economic problems which the widows experience'. Haase (2008) on the other hand did not include women with children in her study on young widowhood *precisely* because of further intricacies involved in raising children as part of women's everyday realities. Consequently, the absence of local community support and intense ostracism encountered as widows and as lone mothers represented an even more complex set of circumstances to navigate for Ruby and Doris.

Furthermore, the expanding body of literature focusing on lone parenting in various settings (Amirthalingam and Lakshman 2013; Rafferty and Wiggan 2011; Wall 2003) lacks information about resettled refugee mothers in particular, and recent research attempts to remedy this situation (Lenette *et al.* 2013). Based on this article's findings, it is evident that community attitudes from men and women alike, at times 'blaming' the women for their husbands' passing and severing ties, significantly impacted on the widows' overall sense of wellbeing as they raised children alone in exile and in resettlement. Any praise the women received for their achievements in Australia as lone mothers, as well as for their children's successful adaptation and education, was evaluated against the assumption that they should not have succeeded in the first place because they challenged established community norms on marriage and family.

Nevertheless, the wellbeing of their children remained a central concern for these two lone parents, allowing the refugee widows to overcome frustrations linked to navigating intricate community dynamics, and thus achieve positive resettlement outcomes regardless. When discussing the experiences of migration for Sikh widows, Mand (2005: 423) explained the clear 'shift in women's identities as their marital situations alter from the role of wife to that of mothers'. The theme of parenting is therefore inextricably linked to widowhood in many respects, although this intersection tends to be neglected.

Married Refugee Women

Romanticized notions of solidarity among 'refugee women' as a homogenous group overshadow the distinct experiences of unmarried women, particularly when stigmatization originates from married women themselves. Indeed, cultural protocols and norms surrounding marriage, family and the role of women determined intra-group relationships and created additional stress for Ruby and Doris who had undergone immense suffering linked to widowhood. This comes into sharp contrast with the circumstances of participants in Haase's (2008) study, who largely received more social or family support, unlike the exclusion Ruby and Doris recounted. Mand (2005) on the other hand identified that 'the moral and social standing of being "wife"' associated with being Sikh could heavily influence conceptualizations of widowhood and attitudes in migration settings. Here, the sense of superiority or 'higher moral ground' which some married refugee women felt as exemplified by Doris' quotes, fuelled gossip and intense stigma in relation to widowhood. While it is not intended to establish a 'dichotomy' between single and married refugee women, findings about such tensions reflect their heterogeneity and demonstrate the need for further analysis of intra-group axes of differences.

The exploration of suspicions and tensions between married women and widows within broader communities is virtually non-existent. Yet, Shumbamhini's (2005) research is an important exception, where one Shona widow specifically recounted the mistrust she experienced from married women at the loss of her husband, and the shifts in attitudes from her brothers-in-laws' respective wives who were scared that one of their husbands would inherit her. This possibility had a myriad of social and particularly economic implications, and such feelings of suspicion about the widow's intent (which was to never be inherited) caused the women to act indifferently towards her (Shumbamhini 2005). Parkes (1998) concurs that in western settings, a widow's female friends concerned about their own husbands could often stereotype a widow as a 'man-chaser' and remain distant. Doris' recollections of similar incidents show that such tensions can characterize the lives of widows across contexts. Evidently, more research among refugee women with a focus on intra-group relationships is warranted towards a full understanding of such circumstances.

Concluding Remarks

It may be tempting to focus on the difficulties refugee women who are widows encounter in a resettlement context. However, such circumstances equally present opportunities and challenges for women who were ingenious and resilient in everyday life (see Lenette *et al.* 2013 for full discussion). Additionally, it should be noted that newly arrived migrants to Australia who are widows cannot access financial assistance from the Commonwealth Government in the form of a Widow Allowance, until they have resided in the country for at least two years, unless they are from a humanitarian or refugee background (Parliament of Australia 2012). Waiving the two-year residence requirement for refugee widows signifies an understanding of the particularly precarious socio-economic circumstances such women can face.

The theme of widowhood itself, while socio-culturally rich and complex, remains at the margins of discussion of women's lived experiences, despite the fact that it marks critical shifts in women's roles, social status and economic circumstances. While such shifts are equally pertinent to refugee and resettlement experiences, the absence of widowed refugee women's narratives in various settings remains striking.

Based on the narratives shared in this article, there is an impetus to develop a deeper understanding of the impact of migration and resettlement on conceptualizations as well as lived experiences of widowhood. For both Ruby and Doris, the absence of a husband

influenced their life choices, the nature of family and community dynamics, while also reinforcing some of the refugee women's skills and aptitudes. The theme of widowhood clearly requires further contextual explorations in refugee studies to enrich discussions on adaptation to new contexts.

Acknowledgements

The author wishes to thank Dr Pooja Sawrikar for providing feedback on the final draft, and Associate Professor Mark Brough and Dr Leonie Cox for their guidance during fieldwork.

- AHMAD, N.** (2009) 'Sati Tradition - Widow Burning in India: A Socio-legal Examination'. *Web Journal of Current Legal Issues* **29**(2) Available: <http://webjcli.ncl.ac.uk/2009/issue2/pdf/ahmad2.pdf>
- ALLAN, J.** and **HESS, L.** (2010) 'The Nexus between Material Circumstances, Cultural Context and Experiences of Loss, Grief and Trauma: Complexities in Working with Refugees in the Early Phases of Resettlement'. *Grief Matters: The Australian Journal of Grief and Bereavement* **13**(3): 76-80.
- AMIRTHALINGAM, D.** and **LAKSHMAN, R. W. D.** (2012) 'Impact of Displacement on Women and Female-headed Households: A Mixed Method Analysis with a Microeconomic Touch'. *Journal of Refugee Studies*. First published online May 21, 2012. doi:10.1093/jrs/fes007
- AYSA-LASTRA, M.** (2011) 'Integration of Internally Displaced Persons in Urban Labour Markets: A Case Study of the IDP Population in Soacha, Colombia'. *Journal of Refugee Studies* **24**(2): 277-303. doi:10.1093/jrs/feq054
- BALKWELL, C.** (1981) 'Transition to Widowhood: A Review of the Literature'. *Family Relations* **30**(1): 117-127.
- BENNETT, K. M.** (2010) 'How to Achieve Resilience as an Older Widower: Turning Points or Gradual Change?' *Ageing and Society* **30**(3): 369-382.
- BOERNER, K., WORTMAN, C. B.** and **BONANNO, G. A.** (2005) 'Resilient or At Risk? A 4-year Study of Older Adults who initially showed High or Low Distress Following Conjugal Loss'. *The Journals of Gerontology* **60**(2): 67-73.
- BONANNO, G. A., WORTMAN, C. B.** and **NESSE, R. M.** (2004) 'Prospective Patterns of Resilience and Maladjustment During Widowhood. *Psychology and Aging* **19**(2): 260-271.
- BRADY, K. L., ACIERNO, R. E., RESNICK, H. S., KILPATRICK, D. G.** and **SAUNDERS, B. E.** (2004) 'PTSD Symptoms in Widowed Women with Lifetime Trauma Experiences'. *Journal of Loss and Trauma* **9**(1): 35-43.
- CHEN, M. A.** (2000) *Perpetual Mourning: Widowhood in Rural India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- CHOU, K.-L.** (2007) 'Psychological Distress in Migrants in Australia over 50 Years Old: A Longitudinal Investigation'. *Journal of Affective Disorders* **98**(1-2): 99-108.
- CHRISTENSEN, M. A.** (2008) *Women Losing Women: Narratives of Grief Over Same-sex Partner Death*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Wyoming.
- DERMAN, D. S.** (1999) *Grief and Attachment in Young Widowhood*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Temple University.
- DOHERTY, M. E.** and **SCANNELL-DESCH, E.** (2008) 'The Lived Experience of Widowhood during Pregnancy'. *Journal of Midwifery and Women's Health* **53**(2): 103-109.
- DUTT, V.** and **HARMA, R. F.** (2010) *Invisible Forgotten Sufferers: The Plight of Widows around the World*. New Delhi: Konark Publishers.
- EBOH, L. O.** and **BOYE, T. E.** (2005) 'Widowhood in African Society and its effects on Women's Health'. *African Health Sciences* **5**(4): 348-348.
- EISENBRUCH, M.** (1984) 'Cross-cultural aspects of bereavement. II: Ethnic and cultural variations in the development of bereavement practices'. *Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry* **8**(4): 315-347.
- ELWERT, F.** and **CHRISTAKIS, N. A.** (2006) 'Widowhood and Race'. *American Sociological Review* **71**(1): 16-41.
- GARDNER, K.** (2002) *Age, Narrative and Migration: The Life Course and Life Histories of Bengali Elders in London*. Oxford: Berg Publishers.
- GILJOHANN, B. A.** and **EWART, C. E.** (2005) 'Younger Bereaved Partners: Thoughts about New Relationships'. *Grief Matters: The Australian Journal of Grief and Bereavement* **8**(3): 58-61.
- HAASE, T. J.** (2008) *Young Widowhood: Reconstructing Identity*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, George Washington University.
- HENDERSON, J. M., HAYSLIP Jr, B.** and **KING, J. K.** (2004) 'The Relationship between Adjustment and Bereavement-related Distress: A Longitudinal Study'. *Journal of Mental Health Counseling* **26**(2): 98-124.

- LANDAU, R.** and **LITWIN, H.** (2000) 'The Effects of Extreme Early Stress in Very Old Age'. *Journal of Traumatic Stress* **13**(3): 473-487.
- LENETTE, C.** and **BODDY, J.** (2013) 'Visual ethnography: Promoting the Mental Health of Refugee Women'. *Qualitative Research Journal* **13**(1): 72-89.
- LENETTE, C., BROUGH, M.** and **COX, L.** (2013) 'Everyday Resilience: Narratives of Single Refugee Women with Children'. *Qualitative Social Work* **12**(5): 637-653.
- LENETTE, C., COX, L.** and **BROUGH, M.** (in press) 'Digital Storytelling in Social Work Practice? Learning from Ethnographic Research with Refugee Women'. *British Journal of Social Work*.
- LIMANN, L. H.** (2003) *Widowhood Rites and the Rights of Women in Africa: The Ugandan experience*. Available: http://repository.up.ac.za/bitstream/handle/2263/1036/limann_lh_1.pdf?sequence=1
- LIPSON, J. G.** and **MILLER, S.** (1994) 'Changing Roles of Afghan Refugee Women in the United States'. *Health Care for Women International* **15**(3): 171-180.
- LOOMBA FOUNDATION** (2013) *The Issues*. Available: <http://www.theloombafoundation.org/about/the-issues>
- MAND, K.** (2005) 'Marriage and Migration through the Life Course: Experiences of Widowhood, Separation and Divorce amongst Transnational Sikh Women'. *Indian Journal of Gender Studies* **12**(2-3): 407-426.
- MILES, R. C.** (2008) *Identity and Meaning Construction in Multiple-widowhood*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Fielding Graduate University.
- MINTON, M. E.,** and **BARRON, C. R.** (2008) 'Spousal Bereavement Assessment: A Review of Bereavement-specific Measures'. *Journal of Gerontological Nursing* **34**(8): 34-48.
- O'HEARN PEPIN, K. E.** (2009) *Single . . . After All These Years: The Impact of Spousal Loss on Elderly Widowers*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, The University of Nebraska.
- PARKES, C. M.** (1998) *Bereavement: Studies of Grief in Adult Life* (3rd Edition) Madison, Conn: International Universities Press.
- PARLIAMENT OF AUSTRALIA** (2012) *Australian Government Assistance to Refugees: Fact v Fiction*. Available: http://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/BN/2012-2013/AustGovAssistRefugees#_ftnref26
- PITTAWAY, E.** and **BARTOLOMEI, L.** (2001) 'Refugees, Race and Gender: The Multiple Discrimination against Refugee Women'. *Refuge: Canada's Periodical on Refugees* **19**(6): 21-32.
- QUEENSLAND HEALTH** (2011) *Sudanese Australians*. Available: http://www.health.qld.gov.au/multicultural/health_workers/Sudanese2011.pdf
- RAFFERTY, A.** and **WIGGAN, J.** (2011) 'Choice and Welfare Reform: Lone Parents' Decision Making around Paid Work and Family Life'. *Journal of Social Policy* **40**(2): 275-293. doi: 10.1017/S004727941100002X
- REFUGEES INTERNATIONAL** (2013) *Helpful Facts and Figures*. Available: <http://www.refintl.org/get-involved/helpful-facts-%2526-figures>
- SILFER, P. A.** (2010) *An Attachment Perspective on the Associations between Close Relationships and Well-being in a Group of Widows, Ages 60-85*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Adelphi University.
- SHUMBAMHINI, M.** (2005) *Storying Widowhood in Shona Culture*. Unpublished masters dissertation, University of South Africa.
- SPRADLEY, J. P.** (1979) *The Ethnographic Interview*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- STEINBERG, A. R.** (2009) *Interpersonal Factors in Resilience to Experiencing the Death of a Spouse*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Adelphi University.
- TOMARKEN, A.** (2009) *Prolonged Grief and Resilience in Young Bereaved Spouses and Partners*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Long Island University.
- UN WOMEN** (2001) *Women2000: Widowhood: Invisible Women, Secluded or Excluded*. Available: http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/public/wom_Dec%2001%20single%20pg.pdf
- UN WOMEN** (2012) *UN Women and the Loomba Foundation Join Forces to Empower Widows in Three Continents*. Available: <http://www.unwomen.org/2012/11/un-women-and-the-loomba-foundation-join-forces-to-empower-widows-in-three-continents/>
- UNIFEM (UNITED NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT FUND FOR WOMEN)** (2007) Currents: UNIFEM's electronic newsletter. Available: http://www.unifem.org/news_events/currents/issue200711.html?#india
- UNHCR (UNITED NATIONS HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR REFUGEES)** (2002) *UNHCR Policy on Refugee Women and Guidelines on their Protection: An Assessment of Ten Years of Implementation*. Available: <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/>
- UNHCR** (2006) *Refugee Livelihoods: A Review of the Evidence*. Available: <http://www.unhcr.org/4423fe5d2.pdf>
- WALL, K.** (2003) 'Lone-parent Families: Dossier «Family Life in 2001 Census: Characterization and Development of Domestic Structures in Portugal'. *Sociologia* (43): 51-66.

- WHIPPLE, V.** (2007) 'Working with Lesbian Widows'. *Grief Matters: The Australian Journal of Grief and Bereavement* **10**(1): 4-7.
- WHYTE, S. R., BABIHA, S. M., MUKYALA, R. and MEINERT, L.** (2012) 'Remaining Internally Displaced: Missing Links to Security in Northern Uganda'. *Journal of Refugee Studies*. First published online December 13, 2012. doi:10.1093/jrs/fes040
- WIDOWS RIGHTS INTERNATIONAL.** (2013) About Widows Rights International. Available: <http://www.widowsrights.org/index.htm>
- WILLIAMSON, V. L.** (2010) *Giving Sorrow Words: The Experiences of Middle-age Southern Women who are Survivors of the Sudden Death of a Spouse*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, The University of Mississippi Medical Center.