

SURVIVORS OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE NARRATIVES ON WOMEN'S LIVELIHOOD STRATEGIES IN THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO - DRC PRIOR TO THE 1996 WAR.

Bercky M. Zihindula¹, Janet Muthuki¹ & Jabulani1 Makhubele²

¹Department of Social Sciences,

University of Kwa-Zulu Natal, Petermerizburg,

²Department of Social Work, University of Limpopo, Polokwane, South Africa.

email: bzihindula@gmail.com, Muthuki@ukzn.ac.za & jabulani.makhubele@ul.ac.za

Abstract

This study explored livelihood strategies that women employed before they were sexual assaulted prior to 1996's war in DRC. This research was conducted in the South Kivu Province. Qualitative data were collected by means of one-on-one interviews and focus group discussions. Participants were purposely sampled and data was elicited from 55 women. The recorded data were manually transcribed and analysed thematically through the lens of the feminist theory and by means of the gendered livelihood strategies approach. The study revealed that, prior to the 1996 war women had begun to participate economically in their households and this was regarded as one of the ways to overcome the increasing unemployment of men due to the ongoing economic crisis which followed independence, commonly referred to as 'Zairianization'. Although many women were still totally dependent on men for their livelihood, it was during this period that some women excelled in entrepreneurship.

Keywords: Women survivors- livelihood Strategy – Congo – Entrepreneurship – Women's dependency – communalism.

Introduction

Women's coping strategies in the DRC historically developed as a result of the practices and failed policies of the self-named Mobutu Sese Seko Kuku Ngbendu Wa Za Banga (translated as 'the all-powerful warrior who, because of his endurance and inflexible will to win, will go from conquest to conquest leaving fire in his wake'). Mobutu was the military dictator and President of the Republic of Zaire and later Democratic Republic of the Congo from 1965 to 1997. Extensive mismanagement by Mobutu and his associates, which included the privatization of assets after the nation achieved independence from Belgium, led to a progressively worsening economic crisis (Vlassenroot & Raeymaekers 2008:40). After this, the Congolese people adopted an alternative means of survival known as 'debrouillez-vous' ('you're on your own, fend for yourself'). They had to organise themselves into indigenous community-based groups which are essentially natural groups. Natural groups are those groups which come together spontaneously on the basis of naturally occurring events, interpersonal attractions, or the mutually perceived needs of members (Toseland & Rivas 2005:14; Becker 2005:16). To that end, the Congolese people subsequently resorted to multiple informal economic schemes to cope with the inability of the state to provide in the basic needs of the population (Larmer, Laudati & Clark 2013:1). African-centred worldviews

calls for alternative perspectives on development and on popular notions of poverty. The orthodox conception of poverty, for example, refers to a situation where people have no money to buy adequate food or satisfy other basic needs. This understanding has arisen as a result of globalization of Western culture and associated expansion of the market. It is in the context of African Philosophy of Ubuntu that African women became aware of what they are capable of instead of waiting for handouts from government and donors (Makhubele 2008). In South Kivu, which is an area located in the eastern DRC, women were forced to provide in the needs of their households following the decline of the national economy and the unemployment of their husbands.

Methods and techniques

Fifty-five women were selected from Village Saving and Loan Association (VSLA) led by the local Non-Government Organization named Paprof/Actors. Participants were member of VSLA located in rural areas in the South Kivu Province including Kabare, Walungu, and Plaine de la Ruzizi. It is the PAPROF/DRC that guaranteed all ethical considerations during data collection. To ensure a fair selection process, the women were selected from their groups during their ordinary meetings.

Qualitative data were collected by means of one-on-one interviews and focus group discussions. Focus groups were used as an appropriate environment to collect stories of each participant” to stimulate participants who could not remember to describe their stories which would not have been possible in individual interviews (Krueger & Casey 2014:5). Focus groups discussions were conducted with selected key individuals who could provide valuable information for this study and with whom engagement to collect in-depth information through one-to-one interviews could be secured. Focus group discussions were conducted in each selected area in series of two or three focus group discussions until saturation levels. For that reason, a private venue was secured focus groups discussions with the aim of creatinga conducive atmosphere for the participants to be able to freely and openly discuss personal problems and possible solutions. In this manner, the participants gained a sense of cohesiveness by knowing that they had been selected to belong to a small group of people with similar experiences for discussion. An environment was thus created in which they felt safe as they were in the company of their peers who had gone through the same atrocious experiences. They thus started sharing information, and this interaction engendered spontaneous responses and produced rich, meaningful data for research.

Aware of the pitfall of a male conducting research among females, this study employed a female assistant. This Assistance was a social worker in support of feminist researchers’ argument that a closer relationship will be attained in qualitative research when women are interviewing women Ritchie *et al.* 2013:84). In fact, this produced good results as a large majority of women who came to the introduction meeting on the first day agreed to be interviewed.

For the one-on-one interviews, particular participants were selected either from the focus groups because a needed to collect further information from them was important, or they were cited by other participants as being more experienced. In the one-on-one interviews, particular topics relevant to the participant was introduced.

To transcribe the data, audio recording data were converted into digital text and according to Saldaña (2015:9), this is preferred process for small-scale studies (Saldaña 2015:29) to help the researcher focusing more on data than on the software and then own and have more control over the work. This decision to manually transcribe and analyse the data was also encouraged by Ajagbe *et al.* (2015:332). According to these authors, manual analysis that consists of reading data or listening to data from an audio recorder, marking data by hand, and coding and categorizing them can be appropriated in situations where the researcher has on-hand a database of fewer than 500 pages of transcript. It is also suitable when the researcher wants to be closer to data, can easily control the process, and feels comfortable rather than using software (Ajagbe *et al.* 2015:332). The researcher can also view the data from an array of perspectives, as the data may have various meanings and perspectives while preventing the researcher from relying too quickly and too heavily on qualitative software packages (De Casterle *et al.* 2012:366).

I sometimes considered both latent (developing themes) and manifest contents (developing categories) in the analysis of the data. I used one or the other of the techniques depending on the specific situation being examined. Findings of this research are going to be discussed as themes generated in the analysis of data.

Women's Economic Dependence on Men

This study found that, before the eruption of the 1996 war in the DRC, a large group of women were firstly dependent on men (predominantly their husbands) for survival, as it was the men who owned land and other resources. However, while land was the foundation of a stable livelihood in rural South Kivu, some males in this area did not own land but found jobs by working for landowners. The vast majority of women were dependent on the revenue their husbands earned as they themselves could not own land. Suzanne was in this situation:

When I was still married, my husband used to cultivate the fields of other people who paid him money. He used to earn a little money in this way and gave me some.

In families that did not own land, the husband engaged in a business enterprise of some kind and owned all the resources. Women relied on what men earned and contributed to the household. As Bintu narrated, women's lives were connected to the ability of their men to provide for the family:

I got married to an orphan as both his parents had died. He was intelligent; he knew how to earn money and he had some money but I did not know how he got

it. He used to go to Rwanda to buy cows there, and he would go to Ubembe or Matiri to sell them.

Livestock, especially cows and goats, was viewed as a source of wealth. Women's livelihood was connected to men's capacity to increase the livestock numbers. This male activity would improve the household's economy. Women relied on this, as was narrated by Nzigire:

My husband had four cows, sheep, six goats and hens. Sometimes he sold some animals for money, and sometimes he travelled to Minembwe, where he sold more livestock. The money we raised in Minembwe was used to buy more goats, and this helped us to feed our children and school them."

However, in families where they did not have livestock, the men would work for wages so they could create a reserve and buy animals to breed, as described by Namavu:

"My husband worked at the sawmill because the country was still doing well. White people gave him that job. With the money that he earned there, we could buy livestock for breeding, especially goats."

Apart from livestock, the women said that land was also a source of economic wealth with which their livelihood was associated. Their socio-economic well-being then depended on the capacity of their husbands to farm and bring home food and other products. Men who did not own land, such as Namavu's, Suzanne's and Nzigire's husbands, used to cultivate the land of others. Like Nzigire, many women were a hundred percent dependent on their husbands for their own and their children's survival. The husbands were in charge of agricultural and livestock production as sources of household revenue. Although many men did not own land, they found jobs in plantations or in agriculture, and they acquired a place to build their houses where they lived and raised livestock. However, they did not have a stable life as they needed to travel to other areas in search of work and survival opportunities. They would save until they could buy their own livestock and their own small properties. Even those men who inherited land, such as Anyesi's husband, were involved in breeding livestock and also sought to earn a better living by travelling to and working at mining sites.

Literature on women's economic dependence on men (Brines 1994, Kandiyoti 1988, and Orloff 1993) reveals that women, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, are responsible for subsistence agriculture – i.e., cultivating food crops, fetching water, caring for livestock, and performing various other jobs that sustain the family. However, women are undermined by cultural practices (Dankelman & Davidson^{2013,3,4)}. In the rural areas, women have to abide by their husbands' decisions in terms of finances and the responsibilities for the day-to-day survival of their and their husbands' families (Roomana & Haider 2013:203-204). This economic dependence keeps women socially backward and the low social status of women gives them a permanent secondary role in the extended family structure. These burdens create a stressful life for women (Roomana & Haider 2013:203). Dario *et al.* (2015:295) states that individuals, when

facing life challenges, deploy different coping strategies to achieve an objective that needs to be obtained. This objective is also subject to geographical location and socio-economic status issues that influence the adoption of any coping strategies (Alinovi *et al.* 2010:29). The results of the study showed that, whether land was owned independently or not, the foundation of the livelihood of some women in South Kivu province depended on their husband counterparts. Moreover, as couples they often initiated one activity as a source of revenue, but ended up with a mix of agricultural and livestock activities as a means of earning a living.

According to the feminist theory of rape, women's dependence on men for their livelihood is related to male domination and men's intention to continue excluding women from accessing and controlling economic resources. Women are excluded from important economic drivers such as owning land, being educated, and engaging in labour activities that could increase their social and economic empowerment. However, while their dependence on men for their livelihood may be a reality, some women develop certain mechanisms to reduce that dependence. This was true in the case of Nzigire and Bintu who, while their husbands devoted themselves to agriculture, decided to engage in small business enterprises or to use their physical capacity for agricultural work, as happened in the case of Nsimire. This decision to work empowered these women. They engaged in farming and other entrepreneurial activities to increase their household income. Even though the men were still key players in agricultural and livestock production and largely controlled the income generated from these activities, the women started playing an active role in ensuring the survival of their families, with a strong focus on the well-being and education of their children.

According to Van den Berg (2010:593), people's choice of living (i.e., their livelihood strategies) is often based on their assets (natural, human, physical, financial, social and location) that determine which options they have available Van den Berg (2010:594). The author's argument that livelihood strategies can also be expressed in terms of welfare was corroborated by this study, as it was found that the majority of the respondents relied on others for their survival. The obvious dependence of Esther on her husband's role in the family was embedded in the inequality definition relating to the roles and responsibilities of spouses. Esther's narrative revealed that the role and responsibilities of her husband on the one hand and her role and responsibilities on the other were clearly defined. In this context, the gendered livelihood approach shows that the preference of choice in livelihood strategies aims to increase household income at the expense of women's economic well-being. Esther's contentment with this state of affairs was observed through her interjections such as the repetitive use of "...life was good". Expressions like these also underlined the peace context that allowed life to be good. In fact, the concept of 'living a good life' or 'living well' before 1996 was expressed by all the participants when they compared life before the 1996 war with life during and even after the war.

Before the war of 1996, women used to accumulate and combine five assets for their well-being. This security included natural assets (fields and spring water); human resources (health and security to travel and go to the fields, having children and giving them an education); social security (trust between husband and wife as the husband entrusted her with gold and the responsibility to dispose of and use it wisely, and living safely in the same compound as her in-law family); physical security (having a house, clothes, and food); and financial security (gold exchanged for cash and livestock breeding). Eliza had access to and control of these assets while her husband was staying at the mining site. Savath *et al.* (2014:3), who argue that land constitutes a valuable asset because of its primacy over other assets in rural areas, corroborate this. People who own land are likely to use it to access other assets. Moreover, in most rural areas owning land is a measure of social status. However, it is not separate from the issue of gender-differentiation when it comes to access and control. This was evidenced by the participants' comments such as "I lived in my husband's house"; "My husband had cows"; "My father-in-law had..." These expressions are also reflective of the patriarchal South Kivu society that determined what women could and could not possess.

Entrepreneurship and Agricultural Production

While men engaged in commercial activities that often took them away from home, some for months and others for years, women and girls were expected to stay at home and cultivate the land. Some initiated lucrative activities to support themselves and their families. In this study, I include all those lucrative activities as part of women's entrepreneurial efforts.

Prior to the 1996 war, when Flora was still a girl, she observed that different tasks were allocated to men and women in her family. Women predominantly engaged in agricultural activities but they would also sell consumables such as oil, fish and beans at markets in the villages. Flora said:

"Mum used to till the land, but sometimes she would sell fish, salt and local oil. As for the men, they would go to Burega to trade clothes or cows. Leaving Burega, they would come back home with gold and show us."

However, market days differed from one village to another. Women used to plan their week to include days for tilling the land and a day for going to the market. They enjoyed buying and selling their products at village markets and thus earned money with which they could buy non-food products and other consumables that were not available in the village, such as oil and fish. Lontina explained women's livelihood activities before the war as follows:

"On market days, we used to sell goods without any problem. Most of our husbands were not there all the time. They often stayed at the mining site and sent us gold that we could sell to buyers. [She mentioned three major gold buyers in the city at that time]. I often went to sell gold in the city (2 kg or 10 pins) and I then bought food that I brought home for the use of the entire family."

In this regard, Jeanine Biluge offered the following insights:

"I was buying second-hand clothes at Mugogo and sold these items at Chiherano, and I was okay."

Financial assets were important as women had to pay for health care, non-food items and items people used for household activities. The ability to access and control financial assets was key to 'living a good life' and women who managed the household finances were able to increase other livelihood assets such as livestock and in this way improve their living standards. Other women initiated various activities to support their families while some men went to mining sites while others stayed home doing nothing. Salome described her livelihood strategies in Kaniola as follows:

"I bought cigarettes and resold them and got money to feed my children. I would borrow about US\$2 from someone, and then I would buy cigarettes. I would resell the cigarettes to buy one measure of flour to feed the children."

In corroboration of the above, Pendake's narrative revealed the following:

"I bought bananas that I used to make a local beer named 'kasikisi' and I would sell the beer. One week from the day I made it, I could use it as a sweet drink called 'mutobe' that I would put in empty cans and sell. I did this on a rotation basis. That's how we got money."

In the same wavelengths, Speciose who resided in Shabunda, shared the following information:

"I was able to sell salt and fish in the forest area for money or gold. With this income, I could buy clothes for the children as well as my husband and myself. Everyone was happy. My children could get an education, thanks to the money we earned."

To survive and take care of her family, Speciose went to Bukavu city where she bought salt and fish which she sold at the mining site. She exchanged her merchandise for either money or gold. The income from this business was used to feed her family; even her husband depended on her.

Josee had similar experiences. She provided the following information:

"Before the 1996 war, I used to buy clothes and sell them in Mukungwe [a mining site]. In this way, I earned money or gold. I later exchanged the gold for money. I used to go to Kamanyola and Musirhu where I purchased products and food that I sold in Mukungwe. I also opened a restaurant for miners in Mukungwe."

Some men were aware of the hardships their long absences would cause their families and asked their wives to do something to earn money. Maria Serafina said:

“My husband gave me a sum of money that I could use for trading. He told me, ‘You can trade and take care of the children whenever I go to Burega.’ I used to go to Bukavu to buy fish and back home I would resell them.”

Jeanette-Bela also had an entrepreneurial vision. She shared the following information:

“I sold tomatoes when I was a young girl until I got married. Nevertheless, I continued my small business. I bought a field of tomatoes for US\$200. I grew tomato crops that I harvested and sent to the market at Kamanyola.”

The livelihood strategies of women such as Josee were vested in commercial enterprises. These women would go to cities like Bukavu, Kamanyola and Musirhu where they bought diverse items such as fabrics, food and other important products that they took to a mining site where they exchanged them for gold or money (US dollars). Once at the mining site, some women like Josee would stay there doing business until they were out of stock. They would then return to the city or a town where they would purchase more merchandise. The activities women engaged in at a mining site included owning a restaurant or a ‘tuck shop’. Some women even separated gold from muddy water, which was the raw material that the men would bring from the mine.

In the Southern region, Zabibu made the following observations:

“On the Plain of Ruzizi, people lived by means of commercial enterprises. Here the women did not cultivate the land because machines were used for this purpose. If they owned land, they could pay to have their fields cultivated.”

The research participants thus acknowledged that they paid others to cultivate their fields using machines so they would have time to trade. Trading was popular because markets were open every day next to the roads and people organized some sporadic markets to target travellers either to Bukavu or to neighbouring countries like Rwanda and Burundi. Women travelled to Burundi or to Rwanda and purchased merchandise that they could sell in Uvira.

The study results mainly confirmed the views expressed in the available literature regarding livelihood strategies. The literature contends that the commercialization of agricultural products is a trend in most rural households to achieve livelihood insurance. Lemlen *et al.* (2010:84) contend that this trend is mostly explained by factors that enable farmers to accrue benefits from their activities. These factors include land access and control, farm labour, education, household needs, and income drives. In the context of South Kivu, land policies and cultural beliefs deny certain groups of people such as women and the poor access to commercial activities. The findings of this research revealed that non-farming activities, small agricultural enterprises, the commercialization of agricultural products, and access to a main road facilitated women’s entrepreneurial endeavours. Moreover, the high unemployment rate among men was also a factor that drove women to be independent in order to make a living for themselves and their children. While land was central in determining the livelihood

strategies of many women in South Kivu, there was limited access to this commodity in certain areas. Scholars such as Winter *et al.* (2009:1437) state that when individuals do not have access to land, they tend to venture into other economic enterprises. In this context, limited access to land was a likely driver of non-farming activities that generated income by means of non-agricultural or agricultural wage endeavours. Additional to the ownership or the cultivation of land, the proximity to roads and city centres was shown as an enabling factor of self-dependent livelihood strategies. This finding is supported by Winter *et al.* (2009:1437-1438) who argue that access to infrastructure and commercial centres is likely to influence ventures into entrepreneurial activities other than agriculture.

Like the people who lived near the main road, some women like Fizi who lived in cities and on the Plain of Ruzizi had access to modern technology. They had access to business opportunities that did not exist in the forests or rural areas. Travellers used the road connecting Bukavu to Burundi capital on a daily basis. Apart from the road, there were institutions and private farmers who made modern technology available for agricultural activities that were conducted in proximity to the main road. This form of commerce helped women to become independent and to survive without depending on men. Women were known to be very dynamic regarding livelihood strategies, and they bought and sold both agricultural and non-agricultural products. This strategy is supported by the so-called 'ex-ante' strategy approach that predisposes individuals to reduce risk and to deploy strategies such as risk sharing and self-insurance (Yashodhan 2012:9), which is exactly what the majority of respondents did.

'Pulling Together' or 'Farming Collaboratively' Communal farming

To face the hardships brought about by the economic crisis in the country before the 1996 war, women initiated a cooperative strategy to work together for a common purpose. Fatuma reported this as follows:

"Women used to work in groups as they could then cultivate a large field to ensure enough yield. Working together helped each of them to work a large field; this increased the yield of crops and avoided a shortage of food in their homes."

There was also cooperation between women and men to improve the livelihood strategies within their households. In South Kivu, women would often till the land and raise livestock while their husbands fished at Lake Tanganyika. In this way both procured products that were sold on market days that, in turn, raised revenue which supported the survival of the family.

Sometimes it was the demanding nature of women's work that forced them to collaborate with others. This is how Nsimire described this practice:

"It was a large field we bought and as I could not cultivate it all by myself, I called my younger sister and we cultivated this field together and took care of my children who were not going to school yet because of their young age."

In other situations, after a husband had died and his widow remained in her husband's compound, it was the husband's family that supported her, as Esther reported:

"My husband was the youngest of the family and his elder brother was giving us food. I did not live long with my husband because he passed away very early. His elder brother and married sisters used to support me as much as they could."

There was also a social network within the community when it came to building a house. They used to invite a certain number of persons to prepare the ground and construct the foundation. The neighbours would help to collect straw/sticks and build the house (normally a hut), and they would go into the forest to cut reeds or sticks and bring them home. While these activities were being performed by men, women were supposed to make banana beer for them. Esther's report describes this:

"They [the neighbours] completed the house and all this was done free of charge – you did not pay anything. Your only task was to make beer. You also had to collect beans, sweet potatoes, cassava leaves and so on from the fields and prepare food for them. Older men would ask us to prepare bundles of mulching or straw and young people were used to carry these bundles home from the forest. This was done mainly in the dry season."

The previous quotes describe the social networking initiated by women as a livelihood strategy that functioned prior to the 1996 war. In fact, this variety in social networking supported the lives of people within their communities. It helped to bring people together, to work together, to find solutions to situations of poverty, and it reinforced the sustainability of livelihood strategies within the various communities. Women started working collaboratively to till their patches of land. This strategy was effective in ensuring food security in their respective households. The women strived cooperatively to produce larger crops so that all could benefit. The literature shows that in the poorest countries worldwide small farmers, especially in rural areas, engage in subsistence or quasi-subsistence agriculture and consume all or most of what they produce (Douglas and Rogerson ²⁰¹⁴). The coping theory states that when resources are scarce, individuals demonstrate adaptive behaviours and strategies such as the diversification of income resources (Anikpo *et al.* ²⁰¹⁵). Women in Fizi agreed to work together to combat adversity and prevent future stress. For example, when a woman's husband died, she still received considerable support from her husband's family as long as she did not remarry and remained in the family compound.

Ivette's narrative related how, in times before the hardships of war, women used to visit friends and were able to share their agricultural and livestock bounty. Both the visitor and the host benefited from the visit as they shared their resources with one another. In the example narrated by Ivette, she revealed that people did not only visit their relatives, but also friends. She used to invite her neighbours when she wanted to

socialize. When visiting someone, there was a mutual exchange of food and beer. What Ivette appreciated about friendship at this time was that people were open-handed, even to the extent of giving another person a goat which that person could use to start a new way of life.

Conclusion

In this paper, women's livelihood strategies before the 1996 war in the DRC were grouped into three subsets: women's dependence on men's livelihood strategies; women's entrepreneurship; agricultural livelihood strategies; and 'pulling together' (or working collaboratively). It was found that women's dependence on men's livelihood strategies was predominantly associated with the use of natural resources as a foundation for survival. In a patriarchal society such as in the DRC, natural resources, especially land, were in the domain that was managed and controlled almost exclusively by men. In general, the DRC law and customs excluded women from the right to possess land; they were expected to till the land but they were not allowed to control it (i.e., purchase or sell land). This reinforced women's dependence on men's livelihood strategies. In this context, agricultural activities and livestock breeding became the core of women's livelihood strategies.

It was also found that some women who were partially dependent or independent, e.g., those who were heads of households, involved themselves in entrepreneurial activities. They initiated economic-generating activities that allowed them to buy and sell commodities such as fish, salt, clothes, oil, gold, cigarettes, local beer, tomatoes, groundnuts, beans, cassava, and sorghum. Others specialized in farming and used agricultural production for their subsistence.

The data also revealed to what is referred as 'a pulling together'/communalism system where women worked in groups to cultivate a large portion of land, thus developing social networks. It was also found that women in urban areas were oriented to trade. They took advantage of the opportunities of modern technology, roads and the proximity of neighbouring countries. In rural areas, women continued to manually cultivate the land. Clearly, land access and ownership were key livelihood strategies for women and men respectively.

In the fragile state of the DRC where the government was unable to provide in the basic needs of people even before the 1996 war, both women and men had to work together to survive. In situations where there was acute male unemployment, women embraced the role of becoming the sole bread winners of their families. In such instances, commerce became the foundation of the livelihood strategies of many women and there was an increased rate of female-headed households.

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