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Intergenerational trajectories of inherited vulnerabilities amongst young women refugees in South Africa

Tamaryn L. Crankshaw¹, Jane Freedman^{2*}  and Victoria M. Mutambara¹

*Correspondence:
jane.freedman@cnrs.fr

¹ HEARD, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban, South Africa

² CRESPPA, Université Paris 8, Paris, France

Abstract

There is a paucity of scholarship examining the situated vulnerabilities of young women refugees who are either born in (second generation) or young children/adolescents on arrival in their host country (“1.5 generation”) and how these may impact intergenerational vulnerability or resilience. Based on qualitative research carried out in eThekweni (formerly known as Durban), South Africa amongst young women refugees (18–24 years) we highlight the issue of “inherited vulnerability”, examining how vulnerabilities can be transmitted across the refugee generations due to legal, economic and social structures which produce and maintain situations of inequality, rendering young women vulnerable to violence, exploitation and negative sexual and reproductive health outcomes. Ending the legal limbo in which they live and ensuring access to education and employment opportunities would help break the cycle of intergenerational precarity and support resilience of these young women as they transition to adulthood in South Africa.

Keywords: Refugees, Second generation, Young women, South Africa, Vulnerability

Introduction

Whilst there is an increasing scholarly literature and attention paid to the vulnerabilities experienced by women refugees on the one hand (Freedman, 2015; Freedman et al., 2020), and also on the experiences of “second generation” migrants on the other (Maes et al., 2021), there is little research which addresses the experience of “second generation”¹ female refugees, in particular. Likewise, there is a general lack of attention in research to the generation of children of refugees who fall between the first and second generation in what Rumbaut (1976, 1997) has termed the “1.5 generation”². Instead,

¹ “Second-generation” here refers to the children of primary refugees and immigrants who are native born of foreign parentage.

² Specifically, Rumbaut describes pre-adolescent, primary school age immigrant children (6–12 years) as “the classic 1.5 generation” (2004: 1167) and argues that adolescents (13–17 years) and preschool children (0–5 years) constitute a 1.25 and 1.75 generation respectively since the 1.75 generations’ “experience(s) and adaptive outcomes are closer to that of the ...second generation...and a 1.25 generation whose experiences and adaptive outcomes are hypothesized to be closer to the first generation of immigrant adults than to the native-born second generation”.

children of refugees have been largely “subsumed within the broader analysis of the second generation by both common discourse and scholars”, which means that the specificity of their status and identity is often not taken into account (Chimienti et al., 2019: p. 3). Further, while a potentially useful categorisation, questions persist around the use of the term “second generation” as a socially constructed category since it implies a naturalised status that may not in fact exist (Chimienti et al., 2019). Much of the scholarship around the second generation, and those in between, has focussed on the educational, socio-economic, cultural and inter-generational contexts, and more recently on identity and belonging (Ibid). Little attention has been paid to second generation refugees specifically and the inter-generational context more broadly and we can argue that age and generation are in fact neglected elements in most intersectional analyses of the experiences of forced migration (Hart, 2014). This article aims to remedy this gap and to add to research both on age and generations in forced migration, and on vulnerability, through the development of a concept of inherited or intergenerational vulnerability.

We draw on Fineman’s concept of vulnerability as depending on the particularities of individual embodiment and positions “within webs of economic and institutional relationships” and “the quality and quantity of resources we possess or can command” (Fineman, 2010, p. 30). Within this understanding, vulnerability does not attach to a particular pre-defined group, and is not an essential characteristic of some individuals, but is produced through a range of social, economic, legal and political structures. And in contrast to this, resilience is produced through the quantity and quality of social resources to which individuals have access within the societal structures where they are located. We combine this structural approach to vulnerability, with a situated intersectional analysis (Yuval-Davis, 2015), which highlights the need to analyse the complex inequalities and power relations in societies without reducing these to a single social division such as gender, class etc. Situated intersectionality, therefore, calls for particular attention to be paid to the “geographic, social and temporal locations” (Yuval-Davis, 2015, p. 95) of the individual and collective actors who we seek to understand. As such it is especially relevant to the study of inequalities and vulnerabilities in contexts of migration. As we have argued above, the question of “generation” is one that has often been overlooked in intersectional analyses of forced migration. And thus we seek in this article to draw on existing literature and add to it by developing an analysis of the inherited or intergenerational vulnerabilities of refugee women, analysing the ways in which structurally generated vulnerabilities may be passed down from refugee parents to their children. We do so based on our empirical research with young refugee women from varying generations in South Africa.

Our article is based on research carried out in South Africa, a major refugee receiving country in sub-Saharan Africa (SAA), a region which according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugee hosts more than 26% of the world’s refugees.³ Our research amongst young refugee women in South Africa who were either children native born of foreign parentage (second generation), young children or adolescents on arrival to South Africa (1.75, 1.5, 1.25 generations) or young adults on arrival in South Africa suggests they

³ <https://www.un.org/en/academic-impact/migration-dynamics-refugees-and-internally-displaced-persons-africa>.

encounter specific legal, economic and social challenges which create conditions of vulnerability and which impact on their experiences and their sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR). In this article we contribute to existing literature on women refugees through the development and exploration of the concept of inherited or intergenerational vulnerability—which might be opposed or contrasted to Denov et al. (2019)'s concept of intergenerational resilience—to describe the ways in which these young women experience situated vulnerabilities stemming from their positions within various axes of inequality based primarily on gender, age and legal/refugee status, and how these impact on their SRHR. An analysis of the interactions between “institutional legislation of borders and the interpersonal experiences of ‘second generation’ refugees” (Hirsch, 2019), and other children of refugees, highlights the specific challenges these young women face.

Previous research on families with precarious legal status has shown the importance of considering the impacts of parents' legal status on children (Bernhard et al., 2007), and as Bloch et al. (2015) have highlighted, the experiences of refugee parents such as trauma during forced migration have important impacts on their children. This is highly relevant for the context of South Africa, where despite a theoretically progressive asylum and refugee regime, there are in practice considerable barriers to obtaining secure legal status. This in turn exacerbates economic and social insecurities relating to non-access to employment and social services. For women, these insecurities have been shown to be highly gendered (Freedman et al., 2020).

South Africa is host to a large number of refugees and asylum seekers⁴ fleeing from conflict and violence in their home countries and has historically been viewed as a preferred destination country due to its perceived political and economic stability. In addition, South Africa has an urban refugee policy in place which means that refugee and asylum seekers are not confined to refugee camps or assigned to detention centres and can directly settle in residential areas. The South African refugee policy has historically been viewed as highly progressive (Palmary, 2016), with a legal framework which offers protection to those seeking asylum from a wide spectrum of persecutions. This system was established around the time of the country's new democracy and included an agreement between the South African government and the UNHCR in 1993 where the government committed to the principles of the 1951 Convention on the Status of Refugees. South Africa ratified a Refugees Act in 1998 which was based on the 1951 Convention, as well as the Organisation of African Unity definition of a refugee which extends the 1951 Convention to recognise refugee status in contexts of mass displacement due to conflict. However, the way in which the act has been implemented has meant that it is extremely difficult to obtain refugee status. In practice, there are significant backlogs in the processing of asylum applications with high rejection rates for those who do manage to make a claim. The bureaucratic backlogs have been worsened by the situation of all but three refugee reception offices at border areas being closed in 2011–2012. Only three remain open⁵ which further compounds delays, and makes it difficult even to get

⁴ The most recently available figures in 2018 indicate that South Africa was host to an estimated 273,488 refugees and asylum seekers. Eighty-four percent of these refugees and asylum seekers come from sub-Saharan Africa (UNHCR 2018). There are no accurate data concerning the proportion of women amongst asylum seekers and refugees in South Africa. Estimates suggest that in 2015, 35% of asylum claims were made by women (Johnson 2015).

⁵ Currently, there are three fully functional RROs in Durban, Musina, and Pretoria. Those in Cape Town and Port Elizabeth are not fully functional and are not accepting new applications for asylum.

an appointment to make an asylum claim. If an asylum claim is made, then the applicant should receive a temporary asylum permit for up to six months, which then needs to be renewed by returning to the same refugee reception office. If refugee status is finally granted, they will be given a refugee permit, which is valid for four years and must then be renewed, again by returning to a refugee reception office and applying for renewal.

Methodology

This paper is based on the research findings of a qualitative study which aimed to explore the reproductive health and rights needs and challenges amongst young refugee women in South Africa. The study was carried out in the eThekweni city centre (formerly known as Durban) in the province of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa between September 2021 and May 2022. A total of 35 semi-structured, in person interviews were conducted amongst young refugee women between the ages of 18 and 24 years who were living in the city centre. Participants included second generation children of refugees born in South Africa, the generations of children of refugees who arrived in South Africa at a young age or during adolescence, and first generation primary refugees (see Table 1 for participant profiles). These varying generational profiles allowed us to compare experiences between different generations of arrivals and to explore whether situations of vulnerability varied across these generations. Nationalities of young women included Democratic Republic of Congo ($n = 30$), Burundi ($n = 4$) and Ghana ($n = 1$). One participant's nationality was unknown.⁶ A further 4 interviews were carried out amongst key informants from organisations that primarily support asylum seekers and refugees. The first wave of participants were initially recruited through the Refugee Social Services, a non-profit organisation that primarily provides social services for refugees and asylum seekers in the KwaZulu-Natal province in which eThekweni is located, and thereafter via snowball sampling techniques. A second wave of participants were recruited through the Usizo Lwethu clinic, a project under the Dennis Hurley Center to provide health-care services to the marginalized communities in the province. Both organisations are located in the city centre.

The interview guide explored young women's refugee and family background, knowledge around their reproductive health, use of contraceptive methods, prior pregnancies and pregnancy outcomes and access to reproductive health services. Interviews were conducted in English or Swahili depending on participant preferences. An interpreter was used for interviews conducted in Swahili. Interviews were between 30–75 min long and were audio recorded. All participants provided verbal consent to have their interviews recorded. Participants received ZAR100 to compensate them for refreshment and travel costs.

All interviews were transcribed and, through thematic analysis by all authors, collated and coded for themes and sub-themes. These were inductively derived through a coding process as laid out by Corbin and Strauss (2008). Ethics approval was obtained from the Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee, University of KwaZulu-Natal (approval number: HSSREC/00002847/2021).

⁶ PID 35 was born in Zambia to a Congolese mother and a Zambian father.

Table 1 List of research participants

Participant ID	Current Age	Age on Arrival	Date of Arrival	Nationality	Legal Status	Arrived with	Currently residing with
PID 1	20	7	2008	DRC	Asylum Permit	Mother	Mother
PID 2	23	17	2017	DRC	No papers	Boyfriend/ husband	Boyfriend/ husband
PID 3	21	Born in South Africa	DRC	Expired Refugee Status	Mother and father	Mother and father	
PID 4	21	13	2013	DRC	Asylum Permit	Sister	Sister
PID 5	19	15	2018	DRC	No papers	Father	Originally Grand- mother (now deceased)— now alone
PID 6	22	21	2020	DRC	No papers	Spouse	Alone (spouse left)
PID 7	20	12	2009	DRC	Expired Asylum status	Father	Alone
PID 8	20	9	2014	DRC	No papers	Mother	Mother
PID 9	22	11	2010	DRC	Asylum Permit	Mother (Separated from father during flight)	Mother
PID 10	19	3	2004	DRC	Asylum Permit	Mother and father	Mother (parents divorced)
PID 11	18	2	2004	DRC	Asylum Permit	Mother and father	Mother (parents divorced)
PID 12	24	11	2007	DRC	Asylum Permit	Sister's friend	Sister
PID 13	21	3	2003	DRC	Refugee Status	Mother and father	Mother (parents divorced)
PID 14	22	18	2017	Burundi	Asylum Permit	Alone	Alone
PID 15	20	8	2012	Burundi	Refugee Status	Father and brother	Father
PID 16	21	16	2016	DRC	Asylum Permit	Sister	Mother
PID 17	23	18	2018	Burundi	Asylum Permit	Unknown woman	Spouse
PID 18	22	11	2009	Ghana	Asylum Permit	Mother and father	Mother and father
PID 19	23	6	2007	DRC	No papers	Mother	Alone
PID 20	23	13	2011	DRC	Asylum Permit	Aunt	Alone
PID 21	21	21	2021	Burundi	No papers	Alone	Alone (spouse left)
PID 22	23	15	2013	DRC	Asylum Permit	Mother and brother	Originally mother (now deceased) -now alone
PID 23	21	12	2009	DRC	No papers	Mother and father	Alone

Table 1 (continued)

Participant ID	Current Age	Age on Arrival	Date of Arrival	Nationality	Legal Status	Arrived with	Currently residing with
PID 24	22	5	2006	DRC	No papers/ status expired	Mother and father	Siblings
PID 25	22	18	2017	DRC	No papers	Sister	Sister
PID 26	24	17	2015	DRC	Asylum Permit	Alone	Alone
PID 27	22	9	2009	DRC	Refugee Status	Uncle	Spouse
PID 28	24	18	2015	DRC	Asylum Permit	Alone	Alone
PID 29	18	17	2021	DRC	No papers	Aunt	Aunt
PID 30	18	16	2020	DRC	No papers	Alone	Alone
PID 31	24	22	2020	DRC	No papers	Alone	Alone
PID 32	22	21	2020	DRC	No papers	Alone with 2 children (Spouse in DRC)	Alone with children
PID 33	24	22	2020	DRC	No papers	Alone	Alone
PID 34	23	18	2017	DRC	Asylum Permit	Aunt	Alone
PID 35	21	18	2019	Unknown (Born in Zambia to a Congolese mother and Zambian father)	No papers	Alone	Sisters

The precarity of legal limbo

A striking finding from our research was the impact of insecure legal status across all generations of the young women we interviewed, and the fact that this legal limbo was passed down from parents to children, with no opportunities to move into a more secure legal status as the length of stay in South Africa increased (and in fact sometimes the women had even experienced loss of legal status). There was in this respect no discernible difference between the “second generation” and those women who had recently arrived as first generation refugees, despite the fact that the former were born in South Africa or been there since a very young age. At the time of our research, only three women had formal refugee status, with the balance of participants either reporting being undocumented or still holding asylum permits (temporary documents that have to be renewed every 6 or 12 months) despite many young women having been in the country for over a decade. The following participant arrived in South Africa in 2004 when she was two years old:

Participant: *We have been using asylum-seeker documents, and I think it's a temporary paper.*

Researcher: *So, since you came, you've never got the chance of getting that maroon one (refugee status document).*

Participant: *No, No*

Researcher: *What's the story behind that?*

Participant: *I'm not sure. But then, I've never actually asked my mom anything. Yeah, the thing is, my mom does apply for it, but then we just don't get feedback. Or if we're getting feedback, that is not what we expect. (PID 11, 18 years old)*

Another young woman who came to South Africa with her mother in 2011 explained a similar situation:

Researcher: *So, since you came in 2011, you have not yet had the chance to get the refugee status. Why do you think that is?*

Participant: *I think those are their procedures. They wait for the final decision. So, I feel likethey think we're not ready yet to have refugee status. (PID 9, 22 years old)*

These quotes show reveal the uncertainty and precarity of legal status, and a lack of knowledge or understanding of the legal system, reflecting both the complexities of the system and the violence of what might be described as a “hostile environment” (Goodfellow, 2020) for refugees, where legal and political structures have made it increasingly difficult to attain a permanent legal residence status. And indeed this hostile experience was explicitly the case for some women. A 19 year old participant who arrived in South Africa in 2018 spoke about her difficulties in getting a permit on arrival. She told us:

My grandma used to say keep on going (to Home Affairs) and I kept on going but they didn't give me a permit. ...I used to get there at, like, sometimes 5am. When we go there they will be telling us to go home because newcomers are not welcome.” (PID5, 19 years old)

The young woman has remained undocumented and her precarious legal situation has also been inherited by her young child. On going to an Home Affairs office to apply for a birth certificate for her baby, she told us:

When I got there, they told me, no, we can't (get a birth certificate) because my papers had expired. But then a South African lady just came and she didn't even have an ID but because she was speaking (the local language) and she is from here, she was assisted and they only told me to go home and come back with (the) document. I came first but I was served last. I was now getting angry. I didn't go back again. So, my baby doesn't have a birth certificate. (PID5, 19 years old)

This baby, with no birth certificate, has no legal papers either in South Africa or in her mother's country of origin rendering the baby stateless. Article 1 (1) of the 1954 convention relating to the status of stateless persons defines a stateless person as an individual “who is not considered as a national by any state under the operation of its laws”. Being stateless perpetuates legal precarity through yet another generation and it has adverse impacts on the ability to fully enjoy human rights and participate in the economic, social and political life of the country (UNHCR & LHR, 2021).

Another young woman was born in South Africa to parents who had refugee status at the time of her birth. However, even she was not assured of continuing legal status due to the difficulties in renewing her refugee permit. The 21 year old young woman explained:

(I was) born here. My whole life has been here...I have never been to Congo... my refugee ID expired last year because of the COVID thing there was no way to renew. I spoke to my social worker about the documents and I got help with getting my (asylum) permit only renewed, not my ID (denoting refugee status). (PID3, 21 years old)

The gendered nature of legal insecurities are also apparent in the fact that asylum applications are registered under the name of the husband or father of a family, who becomes the “file holder”. This poses important problems in the circumstance of death, family separation or marital dissolution, as was the case for a number of participants, and as shown by the experiences of a 21-year-old participant who is currently undocumented but who has been in South Africa since 2009:

We went to Home Affairs because my father and my mother divorced, and my father went back home to Congo, and he left us. So, when we went to renew the permits, that is when we were told that because we are under our father's documents, we had to come with him if we wanted to renew. (PID23, 21 years old)

As a result, these women were unable to renew their asylum permits and became undocumented.

Another participant came to South Africa in 2006 with her parents at the age of five. In the process of her father applying for permanent residency, he fell ill and passed away, leaving the family in legal limbo since he was the file holder. She shared that, after his death, the family went to Home Affairs to query their status and.

They told us that they had already sent a message to him (her father) that his application for residency was rejected so he had to go again and reapply. But then because he was the holder of the file (and he had already died), he was unable to. There was nobody to do so... So, we had absolutely no idea because he was the head.... my mom had to restart the entire process herself. ...during that time, they would give us 4 months, 2 months, and then they gave us a rejection. So, we went to one of the lawyers in Pretoria, and then they said according to the laws, the documents that were given to us as rejected were not signed by the highest authority of Home Affairs. It was just discussed by the one working on this case, so it's already wrong. (PID24, 22 years old).

As is evident from the participant's account, these legal insecurities are compounded by incorrect handling of applications or xenophobic prejudice and discrimination from officials at the Home Affairs department interface who exercise discretionary power (Spire, 2020) to block or deny applicants whom they judge unacceptable.

Legal insecurities are perpetuated and inherited across the generations in these complex ways which results in a legal limbo or state of almost permanent

temporariness (Olwig, 2021; Tize, 2021) which have a major impact on the young women's ability to plan for their future lives under conditions of uncertainty, and "living on the edge" (Hyndman & Giles, 2017). As Khan (2007: 4) from the Refugee Rights Unit in South Africa observes, "South Africa is an extremely identity driven society and it is not possible to access any service in South Africa without an identity document – be it accessing education, health care, opening a bank account or even buying furniture", and these difficulties were echoed throughout our participants narratives. For example:

So, most times, if you're applying for a job, if they look at your permit, they will be, like, "For how long will you be here?" If you tell them, "I'm committed", they'll be, like, "No, but your document is saying something else. We need a person who is permanent." (PID 12, 24 years old)

Legal insecurities intersected in key ways creating barriers to accessing education and employment opportunities, and worked to undermine these women's resilience in the face of situations of vulnerability.

Impacts of Inherited Vulnerabilities on Education and Employment

According to the South African Refugee Act of 1998, a refugee "is entitled to the same... basic primary education which the inhabitants of the Republic receive" (section 27(g)). However, young women shared multiple barriers to accessing basic education due to lack of documentation which resulted in some women either not attending school on arrival in South Africa as a child or not being able to write the final senior certificate exams (Matric)—without which access to tertiary education⁷ and formal employment opportunities are very limited. The 21 year old above (PID23, 21 years old) whose father's departure resulted in her and her mother becoming undocumented could not write her final exams because she did not have a valid identity document. This highlights the multilayered and compounded vulnerability created within situations of intersectional inequality. Another participant, who arrived in South Africa in 2013 with her sister but who at the time of our research still held an asylum permit, told us she dropped out of school at age 17 because "there were too many things" that were happening at the time. When asked to explain what she meant, she replied:

Participant: *First of all, my sister, she doesn't have a nice job, she is just trying. So, that kind of money for transport, there was no one helping my sister because my sister does not have a husband but then she has a baby and there has no one to help her.*

Researcher: Okay. So, you dropped out because of money?

Participant: *Money and also here in South Africa when you are reaching Matric and you don't have that ID you cannot write the exam and I only got the asylum permit. (PID 4, 21 years old)*

⁷ The National Senior Certificate exams with a Matriculation Endorsement are the minimum academic requirement for admission into any South African higher education bachelor's degree programme.

The above participant experienced an unintended pregnancy shortly after dropping out of school, when she was 18 years old, evoking global discussions over the importance of keeping girls in school for improved SRH, educational attainment, economic opportunity and other important gendered outcomes (Psaki et al., 2019).

Previous research has identified that refugees face a number of barriers (e.g., language, age and grade placing) to accessing education for their children and this topic is a major focus of scholarship on the second generation (Chimienti et al., 2019). Research in Europe shows that children of refugees may experience greater hardship at school than migrant children from non-refugee backgrounds due to parental experiences of trauma of forced migration, insecure immigration status, and uncertainty about the future (Bloch & Hirsch, 2017). A key barrier in access to schooling for children of refugees in South Africa is the poor understanding of both school authorities and refugees of the rights conferred through the various legal instruments to children of refugees enabling them to access basic education. For example, even if children of refugees qualify for school fees exemptions, as per the South African Schools Act of 1996, they are often requested to pay school fees as a mandatory requirement for attending school (Khan, 2007). And even when young women do gain access to school, our research highlighted the ways in which protracted economic and social insecurities experienced by their refugee parents/guardians play a role in them discontinuing their schooling, with negative consequences for their SRH. One young woman who arrived in South Africa at the age of 13 told us:

I came here to study and I came with my auntie, to stay with my auntie. But then my auntie did not have the support of anyone or a man to support me to finish school. So, I stopped going to school in Grade 11. In Grade 11, I got pregnant, I have a baby and he is turning 3 years. (PID20, 23 years old)

The influence of a guardian's precarious legal and economic status on children's schooling trajectories were present in a number of participant narratives. The following participant arrived in South Africa at the age of nine and, at the time of our research, was undocumented. She shared her unhappiness at not continuing her schooling due to economic necessity:

My mom was not the one who said: "No! You should stop going to school!" You could just see that things were not going well and sometimes you would come back after school and you would find her sitting in the house crying. So, there would be no food to eat and then sometimes there would be no money to pay for school transport. So, we decided that we will not be going to school and we will try and help her. (PID8, 20 years old)

Even with successful completion of schooling and on obtaining a Senior Certificate, children of refugees continue to face challenges to accessing higher education. South Africa has a National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) in place for young people who wish to attend tertiary education but who cannot afford to do so. However, in order to be considered for NSFAS funding, a South African identity document is required, which automatically excludes asylum seekers and refugees. And while the UNHCR does offer bursaries, albeit a very limited number, specifically to refugees and asylum seekers in

South Africa through the Albert Einstein German Academic Refugee Initiative (DAFI) programme, a refugee participant told us she was not eligible for the DAFI funding since she still didn't yet hold a section 24 permit (Refugee status) despite having lived in South Africa for over 15 years. And for some of those who had been successful in securing funding for their tertiary education, their "inherited" legal insecurities worked to negatively impact their opportunity for formal employment. The following participant arrived in South Africa in 2009 but was still a holder of an asylum status which, at the time of research, had expired:

I studied to become a chef. But unfortunately, my permit is not yet out. Since I've been applying, there's no results yet. So, I can't apply for a job without a permitOkay, so on my asylum, the thing that confuses me is that on my asylum, it's only written there. I'm allowed to study not to work. So, I don't know what's going to happen because I'm done with school now. (PID7, 20 years old)

This quote again illustrates the uncertainty of the lives of the young women we spoke to, an uncertainty rooted in legal and economic situations of vulnerability.

Fragmented family structures and lack of support networks

Forced migration commonly involves separation of families as a result of violence in the country of origin and on the journey to a new host country, as well as the complications of travelling, such as lack of economic resources to pay for the whole family to travel, separation at borders, decisions to send one family member on ahead temporarily because they are in greater danger (Dubow & Kuschminder, 2021; Wilmsen, 2011). Previous research has often highlighted the impacts on mental health of these family separations (Fazel et al., 2012), but another element that emerged strongly from our research is that of a lack of family support networks (Wachter & Gulbas, 2018) which had wide-ranging consequences on young women's economic, psychological and social vulnerabilities. Several of the participants highlighted family separations that had occurred because of conflict or during flight. Due to their young age at the time, they were sometimes unclear or unaware of the exact circumstances in which this had happened, as one young Burundian woman, living with her father and brother explained:

Oh, my mom, we left her in Burundi. I don't really know why because that is between my father and my mother, because I came here when I was young. (PID 15, 20 years old)

Or as another young woman from the DRC recounted:

I came with my mother because I do not know what happened to my father. Something happened because my father was working there, so that thing, for the government. So we ran away from that side and we left him. I don't know until now what happened to him. (PID 22, 23 years old)

Another young woman was 6 years old when she arrived in South Africa with her mother after her father had died in the DRC. She later suffered further bereavement when her mother died, leaving her in an even more vulnerable situation:

I came to South Africa in 2007 with my mom. The reason why we came to South Africa was when my father died ... But, unfortunately, my mom came here and she died. She passed away in 2013, and I was only left with my brother, and then my brother was into drugs and he also passed away last year during the COVID lockdown. (PID 19, 23 years old)

She shared that she is living alone with her two young children from different fathers, both of whom had deserted her. She told us:

When my mom died, I was struggling, that time I didn't even know how to do hair (styling to secure income). So, like, I had no one to help me. So, I met this guy, the first father of my child. He was the one who gave me a place to stay and helped me. But when I just got pregnant, he just changed and he just disappeared."

Participant narratives such as the one above revealed very fragmented family structures which meant these young women had very limited familial support networks, if any. This resulted in a lack of "safety net" structures often offered by family networks and which, as our research shows, negatively impacted schooling trajectories and employment opportunities for some participants in very particular ways. Further, family separations in other cases reinforced legal vulnerabilities in a particularly gendered way, as shown above. Many participants noted the lack of familial support networks was particularly marked in relation to pregnancy and childcare. Young women pointed to these support networks as a key difference between their situation and that of their South African peers who are more likely to have their mothers or grandmothers to assist with child care. Thus families, which in some research have been cited as a source of resilience (Pieloch et al., 2016) or integration and connectedness (Smit, 2015), for children of refugees seem to fail in these instances to provide this support. As one young woman explained:

Life is very difficult. You see people from here, like South Africans, they can get pregnant and they will go and give (the baby to) their mothers to take care of the baby, even the baby's shelter and food. It is easy for them and it is not that difficult as it is for us. Here as a refugee, you will be renting and the landlord will be telling you that you can't live with 2 babies. You can find a house and they will only be allowing 1 or 2 babies. It is very difficult. (PID 2, 23 years old)

Fragmentation of existing family units not only occurred during flight and in transit, but also while living in South Africa through parental divorce, reflecting previous research which illustrates the strains for forced migration and its impacts on couples and marital and family relationships (Abbasi-Shavazi et al., 2018). This was shown by the experiences of parental separation of several of the young women described above and also of young women who had been left by their parents after arrival in South Africa. The following young woman migrated with her father, but was then left alone with her grandmother:

When I came to South Africa, I came with my father, After that my father went back to Mozambique because he said that here it's very difficult. (PID 5, 19 years old)

Relationship breakdown and desertion by a partner was also a concern for the women who had arrived at a slightly older age with their partners. One young woman explained

for example that her husband had left her shortly after arrival in South Africa, leaving her in a precarious economic and emotional situation:

He went there to the Eastern Cape and he left me here with the pregnancy. He went for like 6 months and he never came back. He was talking to me but he never came back, he never sent anything and I said, "Haibo, I can be sitting by myself in this house!" He was paying the rent for the house when he was there and when he stopped paying, I said, "Eish, I can't survive!" (PID 2, 23 years old)

Intersecting vulnerabilities and constrained agency in sexual relationships

Public health research on SRHR in migrant and refugee communities has discussed intergenerational differences in health knowledge and attitudes (Dean et al., 2017; Kaczowski & Swartout, 2020), showing sites of conflict between parents and children, where migrant or refugee parents expect children to adhere to "traditional" norms of sexual behaviour of their countries of origin, whereas the children are more likely to adopt their sexual behaviours to those of their peers in their new home country. In our research, however, we found that the major intergenerational issue seems not to be that of intergenerational conflict, but of the intergenerational impacts of forced migration resulting in fragmented or absent families, leading to a lack of family support networks and which, in turn, increases insecurities for young refugee women. As the above case shows, these compounded legal and familial insecurities can also directly impact the SRH of young women with no form of "safety net" either through welfare grants or extended family ties or structures. This may result in their engagement in sexual economic exchanges with men for survival needs. As one participant recounted:

Some people they get to the level whereby there's no mom, there's no dad there's no one here to support you. Only you can support yourself (PID 13, 21 years old).

This lack of choice over engaging in transactional sexual relationships was shown clearly in the case of the participant described above whose father had left her, and who was then living with her grandmother in South Africa. When her grandmother then died, she explained:

And then I started sharing a room with somebody after my grandma passed away. And then after that, I didn't know what to do. I wasn't doing anything. I didn't know any job. I didn't know what to do because by then I wasn't speaking English very well and they couldn't give me a job. I suffered a lot. And then after that, I found a man who was like, 'Oh, come and stay with me.' I had no choice and I went to stay with him. After that I got pregnant and then I gave birth to my baby I had no choice. I was depending on him and I was just going to do what he said. I didn't have an option, I was depending on him. (PID 5, 19 years old)

The young woman was 15 years old at the time, and explained that after the birth of her child, the man who she was living with asked her to leave.

He didn't kick me out. He was just saying, 'You can go and share a room with your friends.' (PID 5, 19 years old)

She commented that many of the other young refugee women she knew were in similar situations of economic vulnerability which led them to transactional sexual relationships:

They don't have anywhere to sleep, and also men, they take advantage of them and they just take them and they go and stay with them in their homes for like one week, or 3 days and then you will go to another man like that. (PID 5, 19 years old)

There is a wide literature on sexual-economic exchanges of different kinds on Sub-Saharan Africa (Crankshaw & Freedman, 2023; Freedman et al., 2021) which discusses the nature of agency and/or constraint in these relationships. It is striking that many young women in our study expressed the perception that they had “no choice”, with severe economic insecurity leading them into various types of sexual-economic exchanges. As seen above, legal and economic insecurities intersect with the lack of social support networks to create a situation of highly gendered dependencies on (often older) men with access to more resources. Sexual-economic exchanges were widely discussed amongst participants, either in the form of early marriages, “marriages of convenience” or non-marital transactional sexual exchanges. Age-disparate relationships between “blessers” or “sugar daddies”, who are typically older and relatively wealthier men, and younger women, including adolescent girls of school going age, were reportedly common. Participant accounts suggest that there are differences in types of “sugar daddies” depending on the area in which young women lived highlighting the importance of paying attention to the situated intersections of vulnerability. Nigerian men were mentioned by many participants who were living in the city centre, and often linked to the drug trade, while one participant spoke about her school friend engaging with “older white men” in an established residential area on the outskirts of the city. An 18 year old participant shares her view based on her experiences:

Communities have put it out there that Nigerian men are rich, loaded. So, then yeah, even most of the... when I used to stay in (beach area of the city), most of the sugar daddies were Nigerian men...the new trend now is old white men. Yeah, one of my friends in school said that, because she stays in (residential suburb). And in (the suburb), there are older people staying there. and things like that. and the whole reason is just to get money out of it. (PID11, 18 years old)

While the literature on non-marital transactional sex often emphasises agency and consumerist needs (Leclerc-Madlala, 2003; Zembe et al., 2013), the sexual economic exchanges which most participants described were based on survival needs arising from their insecure situations linked to their inherited vulnerabilities, with young women speaking about having “little choice” but to remain in the sexual relationship. The very young age of many of the women created further situations of sexual exploitation and vulnerability within these relationships.

For several young women, these relationships also led to unintended pregnancies, which in turn had a destabilising impact, something that has been found to be common in relationships characterised by lack of trust and low expectation of partner commitment (Crankshaw et al., 2016). Combined with gendered norms around child rearing which place the weight of responsibility for looking after young children on women (Crankshaw et al., 2014; Lewinsohn et al., 2018) this led to many young women finding themselves

bringing up their children alone, and with little family support (as described above). The following 23 year old who arrived in South Africa in 2007 told us:

I just mistakenly got pregnant because I actually got two kids. I mistakenly got pregnant with two guys and they just rejected me and they are gone, gone, gone. The first (child) is four years old and this one is 2 months old. (PID 19, 23 years old)

These young women not only lack broader family networks to assist with child rearing so that they may go back to school or find employment, but they are also unable to access any State social grants unless they have refugee status or permanent residency. One 23 year old participant who had been in South Africa since 2011 and who still held an asylum permit dropped out of her practical training component of a Hospitality course when she discovered she was pregnant. She explains why she never returned to complete her course:

I didn't get the money that was needed because I was doing the practicals (far from where she lived) and we would start at 5 am and then finish at 5 pm every day. So, I did not have the support with the child. There was no place I was going to leave the child at 5 am in the morning. So, I couldn't go back to school. (PID20, 23 years old)

This woman's account illustrates the ways that despite these young women's agency in seeking education and employment to secure a better future for themselves and their children, legal insecurities and lack of social and familial support can combine to hinder this agency and restrict their resilience in the face of multiple sources of vulnerability.

Inherited refugee identities

We have shown the ways in which the young women in our study have inherited legal and economic precarity and a state of "permanent temporariness" from their refugee parents. This also impacts on their identities and ability to imagine any kind of "integration" into South African society. Indeed, continued marginalisation through lack of legal status, lack of social support and perceived xenophobia from the host society may lead to strengthening of an "outsider" identity as a young refugee. Several young women spoke about the rejection of "foreigners" that they had experienced in the country. One 23 year old who had been in South Africa since the age of six explained that despite the length of time she had spent growing up there she still experienced regular xenophobia:

No, I won't lie, South Africans, they are not friendly, and this thing of 'kwerekwere' (derogatory South African slang for non South African black nationals) when you enter the hospital. They give you attitude because you could be speaking to them in English but then they will be replying to you in Zulu and they will be telling you that you don't know Zulu yet you are living in our country. So, yes they aren't friendly (PID 19, 23 years old)

Gilmartin (2008) highlights the role of the State in ensuring the conditions and pathways to integration for refugees in a country of destination. But as outlined above, the failure of the State to provide access to secure legal, economic or social conditions in South Africa seems to lead to the maintaining of a refugee identity amongst the young

women we interviewed. Despite many participants having been in South Africa for longer than they had lived in their “home” countries, they most often identified with the nationality of this “home” country. As one young woman who had been living in South Africa since 2003 when she was just three years old put it:

Although I'm living in South Africa, I am a Congolese and I am a refugee ... I meet different kinds of people all the time, Zimbabwe, Zambia, but I have that thing in me that I am Congolese. So, I grew up with Congolese people surrounding me, and relationships from church, because the church that I go to as well is a Congolese one. I also speak Lingala. (PID13, 21 years old)

Other participants also spoke about church communities as an important influence in their lives. It seems that in some cases these may replace state institutions in providing certain services (Bompani, 2013; Kenge, 2017), and also replace or supplement the missing or fragmented family networks described above (Tippens, 2020), and/or may on the contrary contribute to vulnerabilities, particularly of women, through the reinforcement of unequal gender norms. Several of the participants spoke about pressures on young women from church leaders and community to get married, and a few mentioned marriages arranged by their churches.

Conclusions

This article has pointed to the existence of “inherited vulnerabilities” among young refugee women in South Africa. Our research highlights the ways that vulnerability can be inherited across the refugee generations due to legal, political, economic and social structures which produce and maintain situations of inequality, rendering young women vulnerable to violence, exploitation and negative SRHR outcomes. Whether these young women had been born in South Africa or arrived during childhood or young adulthood, their age and gender appear as particularly important determinants of vulnerability. That is, not only did these young women experience inequalities and discrimination based on gender, age, social class and nationality/ethnicity but these were situated within a particular constellation of legal, economic and social structures, thereby creating complex (and cumulative) conditions of vulnerability. Importantly, young women’s conditions of vulnerability were experienced during their critical adolescent and early reproductive health years which have the potential to negatively impact their long term sexual and reproductive health outcomes and lead to lifelong situations of vulnerability. We thus argue that in relation to current scholarship on age and “generation” of refugees, age is a more pertinent category of analysis, with young ages seeming to create situations of particular vulnerability, and especially for young women refugees. Martha Fineman’s scholarship around the vulnerable subject and the responsive state presents the concept of resilience as a counterpoint to vulnerability which Fineman argues “should be central to our theories of justice and the politics of allocating individual and collective responsibility” (2022: 114). In this light, the perpetuation of inherited vulnerabilities points clearly to the failure of the State in fulfilling its commitments and institutional mandates with regard to these young women. Ending the legal limbo in which, they live and ensuring access to education and employment opportunities

would help to break the cycle of intergenerational vulnerability and to support resilience of these young women as they transition to adulthood in South Africa.

Abbreviations

SRHR Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights
UNHCR United Nations High Commission for Refugees

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Author contributions

TLC contributed to research design, data collection and analysis, writing the article; JF contributed to research design, data collection and analysis, writing the article; VMM contributed to data collection and analysis and made input into the writing of the article. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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Availability of data and materials

Our data is not available for sharing because of the necessity of protecting the confidentiality and anonymity of respondents.

Declarations

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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