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# Forced migration, gender, social capital and coping strategies in Western Tanzania

**Wambugu, Lydia Wakarindi**

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# ABSTRACT

This exploratory qualitative research systematically analyses the coping experiences of a group of refugee women from Burundi, Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), residing in the western Tanzanian regions of Kigoma and Kagera. The literature reviewed points out that whilst there are still many identified gaps and aspects yet to be documented, it is evident that refugee women are among the social groups most affected by the phenomena of forced migration and displacement. The study explores the kind of coping strategies refugee women adopted under difficult circumstances, and how the women responded to experiences that they frequently described in terms of concrete and material realities.

From the standpoint of social capital as a theoretical tool for analysis, this research attempts to develop an understanding of how refugee women used social capital (social networks) to cope and adapt to new situations as people uprooted and displaced in new environments away from their habitual homes, surroundings and societies. The study focuses on the networks refugee women formed among themselves, which constituted their coping strategies in the attempt to better their lives. The findings of this research suggest that despite the absence of formal counselling, refugee women were able to develop a 'language' through which they verbalised their *problems* and through objectifying them facilitated their solution. A sociological analysis of data from refugee camps in this study of social capital and coping strategies of refugee women discloses significant positive coping strategies by refugee women affected by displacement. Both data and fieldwork observation on coping strategies indicate that an important complementary resource that these women drew upon in facing the problems they encountered in Tanzania was the support of informal social networks, especially

women's groups. Equally important, the majority of respondents socialised with other refugee women who were members of 'merry go round' groups - informal co-operative or peer groups. Interacting with other refugee women, it was proven, brought them solace.

The study reveals that coping strategies by refugee women were embedded in the larger cultural and socio-economic networks that constituted their lives in their home countries prior to displacement. The synthesis of the experiences and coping strategies is contextualised to identify the contribution refugee women make to the overall development in the host country. This study validates the suggestion that aggregated socio-economic activities undertaken by refugee women amount to making ends meet, summed up as coping mechanisms during life in exile.

***Key Words:*** *Forced Migration/Displacement; Refugee Women; Coping Strategies; Social Capital; Human Rights; Tanzania; Burundi; Rwanda; Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC); Qualitative Research Methods.*