

Exploring the Potential of Intersectionality for Enhancing Refugee Women's Research in Africa

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Abstract: *Refugee women's research strives to bring about transformation, empowerment and seeks to produce knowledge that enhances policy formation on different issues that affect refugee women in the host country. Over the years, as part of this initiative to bring to light the experiences of refugee women important strides have been made to raise awareness on the conditions of refugee women in host societies in Africa. The resultant base of knowledge has been used to inform research and policy. However, the need to pay attention to inequalities faced by refugee women caused by multiple factors (nationality, ethnicity, gender, age etc.) is confronting feminist forced migration scholars in the African region. The need for new conceptual frameworks with potential to produce knowledge capturing such inequalities is inevitable. This paper explores the potential of intersectionality paradigm to produce knowledge that captures how systems of oppression and discrimination overlap and articulate with each other in refugee women's research and forced Migration in Africa. Through review of outstanding research conducted on intersectionality and durable solutions for refugee women in Africa, the paper highlights the value of adopting an intersectionality perspective in refugee women's research to produce insights that can better inform policy as Africa seeks to hone gender dimensions in displacement.*

Keywords: Intersectionality; Refugee women; Policy, Africa

1. Introduction

Since the publication of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) policy on Refugee Women and Guidelines on their protection in the 1990s, refugee women have received increasing attention. Research on refugee women has empowered and given voice to the often marginalized, minority women (in host societies) limited in decision-making power in setting refugee policies and priorities. In Africa, through research, the experiences of refugee women have been brought to light and important strides have been made to raise awareness on the conditions and situations of refugee women in host societies. The resultant base of knowledge has been used to inform policy. However, one central weakness in research on refugee women in Africa is that it often tends to give too much primacy on gender and does not adequately address the interactions of all key determinants (age, nationality, ethnicity, cultural background, socioeconomic status, religion and sexual orientation) of inequality they face in Africa. For example, in considering the attention to refugee women in South Africa, Sinenhlhla Memela (2014) argues that "most feminist scholars believe that women's oppression is caused by the division of gender roles" (Memela, 2014). In Africa generally, while men are seen as heads of households with power and authority, women are often home makers, mothers and the sources of emotional strength as they are prohibited from making economic decisions. Consequently, the issues that interact with each other and cause subordination, inequalities and oppression for refugee women (like socio-economic status, cultural background, sexual orientation, nationality, ethnicity, religion, refugee identity or even age) in host society are usually excluded from mainstream refugee women's research as focus is mostly on gender.

In response to the issues above and combined with the need to hone in gender dimensions for displacement in the

continent by 'Gender Is My Agenda Campaign (GIMAC) 33rd meeting 2019 (Egbetayo & Nyambura, 2019), it is crucial to understand the intersecting dynamics causing discrimination and oppression for refugee women in Africa. In her book, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment*, Patricia Collins (2002) calls for an altogether framework that combines intersection axes of discrimination but does not privilege one over others (like gender). Collins highlighted the need to understand systems of inequality as cumulative and not stand-alone experiences (Collins, 2002).

In Africa, a greater part of research use frameworks that promote gender-based analysis in refugee women's research and it is assumed that these are effective universal models for capturing diverse issues because, as argued by Weldon (2005), "gender analysis must incorporate analysis of race, class, sexuality and other axes of disadvantage, and explore interactions among them" (Weldon, 2005:236). Even though some researchers who rely on gender based analysis do incorporate other variables of investigations, they however continue to limit their analysis to comparisons of women and men producing binary data. These types of research practices fail to recognize systems of oppression and discrimination that overlap and articulate with each other. It is against this backdrop and due to lack of progress in reducing inequalities faced by refugee women more generally, that a growing number of researchers studying refugee women are engaging in research that explores multiple axes of difference---namely intersectionality type of research in Africa.

2. Intersectionality Theory

Intersectionality has its roots within feminist critical theory (Carastathis, 2014) but was coined by Kimberley Crenshaw (Crenshaw et al, 1995) and is now recognised as a research paradigm (Hankivsky & Cormier, 2009; Hancock, 2007;

Simien, 2007). According to the intellectual mother of intersectionality theory Kimberley Crenshaw (2004),

‘Intersectionality simply came from the idea that if you’re standing in the path of multiple forms of exclusion, you are likely to get hit by both. These women [*ed. black women*] are injured, but when the race ambulance and the gender ambulance arrive at the scene, they see these women of color lying in the intersection and they say, “Well, we can’t figure out if this was just race or just sex discrimination, and unless they can show us which one it was, we can’t help them’ (Crenshaw, 2004: 2).

In line with Crenshaw’s idea Brah and Phoenix (2004), explained that intersectionality as a research paradigm is based on the assumption that “different dimensions of social life cannot be separated into discrete or pure strands” (Brah & Phoenix, 2004). Staunæs (2003) argues that “in principle, there is not a predetermined or pre-hierarchical pattern between categories. It is not gender first, then ethnicity, or the reverse, first ethnicity, then gender” (Staunæs, 2003:105). As such intersectionality does not allow essentializing of categories (i.e. treating all members of a single social group as the same and assuming they share the same experiences). Rather than adding categories to another (like gender, sex, race, class), intersectionality strives to understand what is created and experienced at the intersection of two or more axes of oppression (Kval-Davis, 2006). Therefore, like Zerai (2000) puts it, intersectionality acknowledges the multidimensional and relational nature of social locations and places lived experiences, social forces and overlapping systems of discrimination and subordination at the center of analysis (Zerai, 2000). As such, several levels of difference are captured.

According to Weber and Parra-Medina (2003), “intersectionality models assume a connection between oppression and resistance, between gaining knowledge of oppressive systems and engagements in social activism to challenge them” (Weber & Parra-Medina, 2003). It is as a result of this point highlighted by Weber and Parra-Medina that it is commonly understood that people who engage in research or policy involving intersectionality are regarded as committed to social justice and seek to bring about social change. Intersectionality researchers seek to bring about change by working with different stakeholders (e.g. grassroots activists, policy makers, community groups as well as oppressed communities). As Staunæs (2003), puts it intersectionality acknowledges relational constructs of social inequality, therefore it is an effective tool for examining how power and power relations are maintained and reproduces (Staunæs, 2003). Recent works on intersectionality have also tried to highlight the hierarchy of privilege and oppression, as they explain that not all people experience privilege or oppression at same level or same way (Joseph, 2015).

3. Intersectionality as a Method

Intersectionality as a research design and method that captures effectively all analytical levels of the theory

remains very much under explored. According to Heather Hillsburg (2013) quoting Hancock (2007), “one area of research that remains underexplored within intersectionality is the development of research designs and methods that capture effectively all the tenets of intersectionality theory to social research projects” (Hillsburg, 2013). To Hillsburg (2013) intersectionality methodology is complicated because intersectionality as a theory illustrates that there are innumerable subject positions that can be studied, each marginal and marginalizing of others in a way that is continuously changing (Hillsburg, 2013). Despite its complex nature however, with innumerable subject positions, intersectionality holds the promise of opening new intellectual spaces for knowledge and research production (Weber et al, 2007) as well as the potential to lead both theoretical and methodological innovations (Simien, 2007).

However, due to several reasons, translating intersectional theory into methodological practice is challenging (Cuádriz et al, 1999). Firstly, Hancock (2007) points out that there is a disconnect between intersectionality scholarship and the conceptualization of research questions and designs (Hancock, 2007). In addition, there is a lack of certainty as to how, when, and where intersectionality frameworks should and can be applied (Lutz, 2002). As such, researchers often find it difficult to interrogate their ‘blind spots’ and are not clear about how to (re)consider the topics of their research and their research designs in light of the variety and density of multiple differences (Varcoe, 2006). Furthermore, Verloo (2006) identifies that little work has been done to determine whether all possible intersections might be relevant at all times, or when some of them might be most salient (Verloo, 2006).

The underdeveloped research method from an intersectionality perspective and its complex nature with innumerable levels of analysis remains a major problem to scholars undertaking forced migration or refugee women’s research too. For example, Anna Carastathis et al (2018) illustrate the complexity of doing research from an intersectional perspective in forced migration as she argues that “the majority of (forced) migration scholarship continues to approach the subject of intersectionality without attending to the simultaneity of experiences and co-implication of positionalities shaped by several variables like gender, race, class, and sexuality-based power relations (Carastathis et al, 2018). To Carastathis, intersectional research has consistently shown that experiences of migration and displacement differ significantly depending on how people are positioned in hierarchies of gender, race, class, age, religion and sexuality. Therefore, no single variable can be studied on a standalone position.

Due to the above mentioned challenges in translating intersectionality theory into methodological practice, scholars like Verloo (2006) had pointed out the need for ongoing debates to deliberate ways of moving intersectionality forward and to seek ways in which the theory can inform research design, evidence production and knowledge translation (Verloo, 2006). Also, Burman (2003) had earlier argued that to use intersectionality as a method, there is a need to confront how to “tolerate and engage with the encounter with an/other, without assimilating that other to

received structures and so robbing them of that difference or otherness". Applebaum (2002) observes that many researchers, who seek to understand the "Other" engage in "a certain form of voyeurism and exploitation that further reinscribes privilege and marginalization" (p. 363) instead of beginning any research process with taking into account where they are located in the hierarchies that structure social order. It is in this light that Simien (2007) mentioned that researchers therefore need to think about their intentions in undertaking intersectionality research as well as what key assumptions they bring to the research (Simien, 2007). On the other hand, Staunæs (2003) emphasizes the need to focus on the "different possibilities of interacting and positioning and establishing certain subject positions" in terms of the entire research process (Staunæs, 2003). Meanwhile, Yuval Davis (2008) highlights that researchers need to know how to engage in "reflexive, critical and accountable feminist inquiry" (Davis, 2008).

In reference to Yuval Davis's idea of reflexive, critical and accountable inquiry, some researchers have suggested different methodologies in doing intersectionality research. For example, McCall (2005) suggested an intersectionality methodology which contributes to different kinds of knowledge about social positions and inequalities. McCall posits that intersectionality can broadly be looked at as;

- a) Anti-categorical or deconstructing;
- b) Inter-categorical (examining the relationship among existing categories)
- c) Intra-categorical (acknowledges the stable and even durable relationships that social categories represent at any given point in time, though it also maintains a critical stance toward categories (McCall, 2005; Joseph, 2015).

Thus, the contribution of intersectionality lies not only in drawing attention to multiple forms of oppression but also in challenging the idea of homogeneous and essential social identities, categories or labels (Anthias, 2012).

Another scholar Alba Angelucci (2017) also suggested an outline of a proper intersectional research which is able to address the complexity of social phenomena, limiting the criticalities and drawbacks of the intersectionality analysis (Angelucci, 2017). Angelucci's methodological suggestion of using intersectionality as a method delineates a tripartite method that can be used as guideline in intersectional research. In doing this she poses a question that is crucial to researchers using intersectionality methodology: Which level of analysis does the researcher want to include within the intersectional paradigm? After posing the question Angelucci proceeds to argue that a proper *intersectional method* constitutes three stages namely:

- 1) Construction of categories
- 2) Deconstruction of categories
- 3) Observation of emerging categories

While the first stage known as the *construction of categories* involves stating and deciding which subjects have to be included within the analysis, the second stage entails deconstructing same categories that have been identified in order to avoid their essentialisation. To effectively deconstruct the categories in stage two, Alba Angelucci (2017) propose using an inter-categorical complexity

approach which is more suitable for the purposes of a mere intersectional analysis as it allows one to strategically use categories without making them static and essentialized. In this light of adopting this approach, the researcher is able to use qualitative methods or mixed methods (namely, the integrated use of both qualitative and quantitative methods), without falling into the extreme position of anti- and inter-categorical approaches. The last step which is stage three involves the prosecution and finalization of the first two steps and it concerns the analytical level. Here it is possible to *notice the intersectional categories emerging by themselves*, revealing those processes hidden in the intersections. The role of the researcher here is exactly to observe the emergence of these new categories and to analyze the intersectional processes occurring on this second level. However, Alba Angelucci in delineating her intersectional methodology argues that the three steps mentioned above are intended to be circular and complementary at the same time, and their actual implementation is deeply linked to the instruments and the approach that the researcher decides to use (Angelucci, 2017).

Overall McCall (2005) and Angelucci (2017) approach in using intersectionality as an approach is crucial in the investigation of social phenomena as it enable researcher to gain insight on complexity of social phenomena as well as the different kinds of knowledge about social positions and inequalities at different levels of analysis.

4. Forced Migration, Intersectionality and Refugee Women's Research in Africa

According to Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh (2014), intersectionality research in forced migration refers to the recognition that experiences of displacement are framed by a range of intersecting and overlapping identity markers (including gender, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, and age), and also by a range of power structures (such as patriarchy, xenophobia, Islamophobia, and homophobia). However, while several attempts have been made to study refugees using intersectionality as analytical tool and as a methodology in Canada, Europe and the United States (Heyse, 2010; Clark-Kazak, 2013; Aberman, 2014; Kiorala & Eshghavi, 2017; Zavratinik & Krilic, 2018), not so much has been done in Africa. The only outstanding research on refugees and forced migration that involves intersectionality as an analytical tool and method is Yacob Haliso's study on intersectionality and durable solutions for refugee women in Africa.

In Africa, the concept of intersectionality has "particular applications and meanings in various contexts" (Meer & Müller, 2017). Other scholars like Oyewumi (2004) had earlier argued that the range of social categories that inform individuals lived experiences and the production of social relations on the African continent maybe different from the staples of gender, race and class found in the American or European focused literature (Oyewumi, 2004). With this general idea of how doing intersectionality research in Africa differs from western perspectives, it is worth noting that a few researchers focusing on forced migration especially on refugee women are adopting intersectionality

as a theoretical concept and tool for research in Africa. The following section review and explores Yacob Haliso's study that explicitly uses intersectionality analysis in highlighting forms of oppressions, discrimination and domination that pose as disadvantage for African refugee women accessing durable solutions in the African context.

4.1 Olajumoke Yacob Haliso: Intersectionality and Durable Solutions for Refugee Women in Africa

Olajumoke Yacob-Haliso from the department of Political Science and Public Administration, Babcock University, Nigeria has conducted extensive fieldwork in Liberia and Nigeria on refugee women and their experiences in accessing and experiencing sustainable durable solutions in host country. Yacob-Haliso's over 12 years research involved a field survey conducted with 130 women refugees from Oru refugee camp in Nigeria 2004; in-depth interviews with 100 returnee women and officials in five counties in Liberia in 2006, with cross-validation of data in Liberia in 2009; and interviews with four experts at the UNHCR headquarters in Geneva in 2012. In her study she explores first of all the dual intersection of identities and systems which determines refugee women's experiences of durable solutions; secondly she investigates the problem involved in applying three durable solutions- repatriation, local integration and resettlement to refugee women in Africa using Nigeria and Liberia as case studies.

Using an intersectionality framework, Yacob Haliso analyses refugee women's experience of integration (which is one of the durable solutions set forth by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees) in Africa and show that refugee women face a double disadvantage. Yacob Haliso calls this 'intersectionality of disadvantage' which according to her arises from the diversities among refugee women that positions them differently as individuals complicating their interaction with proposed durable solutions as sustainability of the durable solutions will also vary amongst them. Sustainable durable solutions refers to the ability of a refugee to become fully re/integrated in a new context within a reasonable time, and having access to basic rights, privileges, and services (Yacob-Haliso, 2016).

According to Yacob-Haliso (2016), there is an intersectionality of disadvantage, a dual intertwined convergence of personal and systemic factors that make refugee women doubly disadvantaged in accessing and experiencing sustainable durable solutions. As such she comes up with a theory of personal and systemic intersectionalities that affect the sustainable durable solution of integration of these women.

a) Yacob Haliso's Personal and Structural Intersectionalities

For Personal Intersectionalities Yacob-Haliso explains that refugee women go through many personal issues. For example, some women becoming refugees are just being thrust out of gender roles and may be navigating public spaces for the first time and as such may not be informed of their rights. To Yacob-Haliso, when women do not know they have rights, or if they are not aware of opportunities or threats in their environment, either in exile or upon return or

integration, their ability to achieve sustainable durable solutions is threatened. This indicates that even the process of integration might be affected. To Yacob Haliso, information is crucial and she highlights that most protection problems themselves are as a result of lack of information and such problems become complicated because of lack of information still (Yacob Haliso, 2016). Furthermore, Yacob Haliso points out that other factors like age (girls and elderly women face triple intersecting disadvantages that make them most vulnerable), disability and residence (refugee women in dispersed urban areas find it difficult to access durable solution than those accessible in camps) are key demographic variables that regularly intersect with gender to determine access to and availability of durable solutions for refugee women. In addition, discussing about class, Yacob Haliso mentions that majority of the camps are middle and lower class people who were unable to make preparations to escape the country before conflict or other political upheaval caught up with them (Yacob Haliso, 2016).

On the other hand, the structural/systemic intersectionalities factors that affect women are produced by international 'structure' (Yacob-Haliso, 2016). Global economic conditions have always been a powerful determinant of durable solutions offered to refugees but economic conditions are strongly reinforced by international politics as well as xenophobia and racism which all affect integration (Yacob-Haliso, 2016).

Yacob-Haliso's study is significant as it addresses issues of structural dynamics that shape the lives of refugee women which are largely ignored especially if an intersectional approach is not used. Besides, she point out different levels of disadvantage refugee women face as a result of personal and systemic factors. This provides in-depth understanding of the refugee women's situation in Africa and provides room for policies that can address this problem as both UNHCR policy and states' practices regarding refugee women do not sufficiently address this issues (Yacob Haliso, 2016). However, given the need for honing gender dimensions to forced displacement in Africa (Egbetayo & Nyambura, 2019), and the continuing refugee crisis in Africa, further research using intersectionality is necessary to make room for transformative knowledge that can inform policy today.

5. Discussions and Way forward

With Yacob-Haliso's study, it is clear that the use of intersectionality as an analytical tool and a research method can produce knowledge which is able to bring about transformation. Hence, it can foster the formation of policy that can better the situation of marginalized groups involved in force migration.

Dina Taha (2019) in her literature review paper titled "Intersectionality and Other Critical Approaches in Refugee Research" mentions that intersectionality is a critical framework that challenged homogenizing experiences and categories in the global refugee context. To Dina Taha (2019), intersectionality seeks to enable the analysis of multiple experiences, recognize multiple and fluid identities that are context dependent, and demonstrate how such

identities intersect to create disadvantages as well as privileges for different individuals. Furthermore Taha elaborates that an intersectionality framework has the potential reveal the systematic discrimination in refugee and migration policies and systems, point to disparities in accessing durable solutions, highlight oppression as well as emancipation due to refugee-ness, and challenge rigid labels and categories (Taha, 2019).

In this light, intersectional approach to force migration spotlights the diversity amongst refugee groups and highlights the refugee experience as shaped by multiple identities including national origin, class, age, socioeconomic status, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation and even age. As such refugee policies and programs must take into account this diversity of experiences, rather than incorporating a single universal approach for all refugees.

Consequently, as earlier mentioned, in the African context, it has been recognized that the concept of intersectionality has different applications and meanings in different contexts (Oyewumi, 2004; Meer & Müller, 2017). Africa, with its diverse groups of people especially in the case of forced migration and displacement needs target research with and on these diverse groups so the full experiences, vulnerabilities and issues of diverse displaced/refugee groups especially refugee women are not obscured. A unique and promising direction for this work is intersectionality- an empirical research paradigm for studying, understanding and responding to the ways in which gender intersects with other identities contributing to unique experiences of oppression and privilege. Intersectionality has a transformative potential in refugee women's research and policy. As Dina Taha (2019) puts it "as an analytical framework, intersectionality responds to some critiques in refugee research which often focuses on the problems and tend to overlook strengths and resilience since one of the objectives of intersectionality is to give voice to the oppressed or invisible groups (Taha, 2019). It provides important insights into why a primary focus on any axis of discrimination (like gender, nationality, religion, age, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation) obscures the significance of other factors.

The lack of analysis that take into consideration a cumulative standpoint from a holistic approach produces analysis that are less analytically sound than would otherwise be the case. Besides, such research fails to capture the underlying causes of many marginalized refugee women's oppressions and underlying causes of their challenging experiences in host societies. Intersectionality focuses attention, therefore, on how patriarchal generalizations "in that they represent the problems of refugees (most often refugee men and their family) as paradigmatic 'refugee women issues'. As such, this perspective has the potential to broaden the field of refugee women's research in Africa to explicitly address power structures (xenophobia and patriarchy typical in refugee experience) that are more serious for refugee women in particular.

6. Conclusion

In Conclusion, by highlighting the above intersectionality study done in Africa by Yacob Haliso, this paper reveals the usefulness of an intersectionality approach for furthering refugee women's agenda in Africa. In questioning the disadvantageous position of refugee women in Africa for attaining durable solutions, Yacob Haliso produces research findings that inform policy and practices intended to benefit diverse refugee women in African host societies. In order for the full potentiality of intersectionality to be realized in refugee women's research in Africa, however there is need for methodological development so that research design can reflect innovative thinking about identity, equity and power. In exposing some of the analytical and methodological realities of engaging with an intersectional framework, this paper aimed at making clear the many promises of intersectionality. Nevertheless, there is still a lot more to be done as intersectionality request that researchers understand how, the researchers themselves and the people living and working in community, live at multiple, fluid and always changing intersections. Researchers therefore need to build up-to-date methods that suit and build intersectionality in effective ways to use in quantitative, qualitative or mixed methods to go pass single categories of social identity like gender, so the complexity in various oppressions in captured and in the process issues of power and intersecting domains of inequalities, inclusion or exclusion are addressed.

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