

Liberian Refugee Families in Ghana: The Implications of Family Demands and Capabilities for Return to Liberia

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In the summer of 2007, focus groups and interviews were conducted with Liberian refugee women living in Buduburam Refugee Camp, Ghana. The purpose of this study was to learn about the daily experiences of families in protracted refugee situations, and their perceptions of return to Liberia. The results offer a glimpse of the demands placed on families remaining as protracted refugees, and how their capabilities to meet these demands came predominantly through adapted livelihood strategies, the support of their Christian communities, and the hope for a better future through their children's education. The results suggest that these refugees' perceptions of return to Liberia were influenced by their current socio-economic vulnerability in Ghana, and their experiences of violence and trauma during the Liberian civil war.

Keywords: Liberian refugees, protracted refugee situations, livelihood strategies, refugee repatriation

Introduction

In the summer of 2007, focus groups and in-depth interviews were conducted with Liberian refugee women living in the Buduburam Refugee Camp in Ghana. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the means through which Liberian families were able to cope with the persistent challenges of living and raising children as protracted¹ refugees in a camp environment. The aim was to understand the refugees' perceived needs and resources as parents of, or caregivers to, refugee children, as well as their perceptions of return to Liberia.

A significant proportion of the research undertaken with people who have been displaced because of war has focused on mental health outcomes and implications for psychological functioning (see for example de Jong *et al.* 2000; Mollica *et al.* 1997; Sabin *et al.* 2003; Tang and Fox 2001). This academic focus on negative outcomes tends to represent refugees, especially those in camps, as being immobilized victims of psychological trauma who

are helplessly waiting for assistance from the outside world. This prolific research agenda has been challenged by authors who reject these mental health assessments (Summerfield 1999; Bracken *et al.* 1995). These scholars argue that mental health assessments and outcomes have been taken out of context in the West, and applied poorly and prolifically to refugee and other war affected populations in the developing world. Fewer studies have focused on positive adaptation to life in exile, especially life in a refugee camp. Though studies like those by Miller (1996) and Tribe (2004) offer a glimpse of positive adaptation among refugee children and families, the majority of the literature is concerned with psychological assessment. It is difficult to strike an authentic balance between attending to the genuine suffering of the displaced without presenting them as helpless victims, and recognizing their adaptive capabilities without romanticizing their resilience. Thus, this study was designed to investigate the means through which refugees at Buduburam learned to survive, without assuming trauma and mental illness or sensationalized adaptation to camp life.

This qualitative research was conducted in Ghana with a focus on family survival and daily experience in the context of Buduburam Refugee Camp. Given the large amount of stress which these Liberian women expressed, as well as a profound ability to persevere through the challenges of life in exile, a combination of family stress and family resilience theories (Patterson 2002) is drawn upon in this paper to frame the results of these interviews.

Patterson (2002) outlines several constructs that describe processes families actively engage in to facilitate and promote adaptation. Families balance demands (stressors) with capabilities (resources). As families work to balance demands with capabilities, they are constantly in the process of interpreting their circumstances by assigning meanings to themselves and their context. *Family demands* include negative and non-normative stressors, ongoing family strains (unresolved, insidious tensions), and minor disruptions in daily life. *Family capabilities* include tangible and psychosocial resources (what the family has), and coping behaviors (what the family does). These demands and capabilities are mediated by the meaning assigned to them within the family. As families adapt to change, demands and capabilities are interpreted to give meaning to the situation, the family as a unit, and their place in relation to the system outside of the family. Families who interpret their capabilities to meet demands of camp life in a positive confident way, would be more likely to see themselves as capable of returning to their home country. On the other hand, families who interpreted their capabilities as insufficient might be far less likely to consider the challenges of return.

In this paper, I use the language of Patterson's demands and capabilities to organize the results of my interviews with Liberian women at Buduburam. I borrow Rothausen's (1999) definition of family, in which members may be related through marriage, biology and adoption, as well as affection,

obligation, dependence, or cooperation. This definition accommodates the Liberians' varied familial circumstances and guides my thoughts about family and family life in protracted situations.

I gained access to these refugees through contact with a pastor of a church in the camp. This minister was a Liberian refugee himself, and also served as the local director of an NGO established by an American couple. The NGO recruited donors to sponsor Liberian refugee children to attend school. This local site director and pastor recruited refugees who received scholarships from this organization. In so doing, he acted as a liaison between the refugees and me. As a trusted member of their community, he was a reassuring presence for participants during data collection. He assisted me in implementing many of the research procedures, and guided my understanding of the nuanced differences of the *lingua franca*, the Liberians' distinctive use of English.

The participants in this study were Liberian refugee women. In order to preserve anonymity, pseudonyms have been assigned to each of the interviewees. All interviews were undertaken voluntarily. Of those who responded to the initial invitation to interview, only two were men. Although their views were informative, theirs was a different perspective on camp life. In order to maintain a sense of continuity across the data, I have chosen to present only the findings from the female majority in this paper.

A focus group procedure was used before individual adults were interviewed. Focus groups allowed me to 'test' my general interview questions before using them (Morgan 1988). The opportunity to receive a substantial feedback in a short time allowed me to assess the appropriateness of my questions quickly.

While there was a potential for these Liberians to feel uncomfortable speaking with an 'outsider' who was an American female researcher, I hoped that any awkwardness or discomfort about discussing topics surrounding family might be relieved by the social support of a group experience. Also, by speaking with groups first, I would be better prepared to discuss family issues in a more culturally sensitive way during individual interviews.

In-depth, semi-structured interviews complemented the focus groups by providing detailed individual information. A general interview protocol was followed. Further discussion on a variety of topics was encouraged. This semi-structured approach gave me a chance to gather information on a few key concepts and gave participants flexibility to share further information about their lives. In this way, I was able to gather information that was coherent on issues of family life but represented diversity of experience among participants.

An adaptive approach to grounded theory was used to analyse the interview data (Charmaz 2006). All interviews and focus groups were recorded and transcribed word-for-word. Transcripts were systematically tagged with thematic codes that were assigned line-by-line. These were compared and analysed within each transcript, and between each transcript.

The Historical Context of Buduburam Refugee Camp

Buduburam Refugee Camp was founded in 1990 to receive an initial influx of refugees who fled the civil war that erupted in Liberia on Christmas Eve 1989. To accommodate these new arrivals, the Ghanaian government made land available in the Gomoa District, approximately 35 kilometres from the capital city of Accra. Several waves of refugees subsequently made their way to Buduburam over the course of a 14-year period of civil war and political unrest in Liberia.

Religious institutions were quickly represented and established in the camp. Ghanaian Christian organizations responded to the early refugees by providing humanitarian and spiritual support to the Liberians (Dovlo and Sondah 2001). Soon, Christian churches and 'para-church' organizations sprang up in the camp, along with religious institutions that included Muslim, Buddhist, and the Baha'i (Dovlo and Sondah 2001). Dick (2002a) counted 44 religious institutions present in the camp during her fieldwork in 2000, the majority being of Protestant Christian affiliation. This is a similar finding to the fieldwork of Utas (2004), who identified 40 churches within a Liberian refugee camp in the Ivory Coast, and signifies the importance of religion, especially Christian religion, among Liberian refugees.

Establishment of livelihoods at the camp has attracted particular interest during the latter portion of almost 20 years of the existence of Buduburam. Porter *et al.* (2008) noted that Gomoa is one of Ghana's poorest districts, often lacking in agricultural labour. They note that while an influx of refugees might appear advantageous for the local community, the Liberians at Buduburam were largely ex-urbanites, and this, along with the difficulty of obtaining work permits and the discrimination experienced from their Ghanaian hosts, prevented most from obtaining work in the local community.

The restricted economic opportunities outside the camp gave rise to an assortment of livelihood enterprises within it. Dick (2002a, 2002b) has compiled two thorough reports that focus on the ability of the Liberian refugees at Buduburam to become economically self-reliant in the camp. By 2005, during the fieldwork reported by Porter *et al.* (2008), and 2007, when the research in this paper took place, self-reliance among refugees appeared more difficult. Many refugees continued to arrive in the early 2000s, after UNHCR ceased to give assistance to all but the most 'vulnerable' (e.g. children and the elderly or disabled). Thus, from the beginning of their time at Buduburam, these newer refugees were forced to fend for themselves, without the support of humanitarian aid from UNHCR, and in competition with more established refugees.

Poor relations with the host community in Ghana further exacerbated the lack of economic opportunities. By 2005, Ghanaian hostility had become an established socio-economic reality (Porter *et al.* 2008). Liberian complaints of discriminating treatment by their hosts were common. It was also common

for Ghanaians to hold negative perceptions of their Liberian guests. Many Ghanaians refused to sell to Liberians in the markets, much less provide them with employment opportunities. This discrimination further confined refugees to the camp.

Youth were, in particular, perceived by many Ghanaians as deviant, disrespectful, and violent. Dick (2002b: 21) observed what she describes as a growing problem among restless youth, who

have no interest in attending school. One area of the camp, known as 'The Gap', is particularly notorious. The Ghanaian police routinely visit the area to curtail any illegal activity, but without much success. Imitating American style 'gangstas in the hood' these youths spend their days without much to do and get themselves into trouble from time to time.

This was similarly reflected in discussions with Liberians themselves, who felt the youth had become disrespectful and in many cases unmanageable (Hampshire *et al.* 2008).

At the time of the present study, the estimated population at Buduburam was 26,000 (UNHCR 2007a), down from a high of more than 40,000 (UNHCR 2007b). A voluntary repatriation programme was established for Liberian refugees in October 2004 (Kaptinde 2006). For many of those who remained at Buduburam, the prospect of moving to Liberia did not appear attractive. Economic collapse and insecurity in their home country were among their reasons for staying in Ghana. Resettlement to a third country provided a 'beacon of hope' (Porter *et al.* 2008). Indeed, many had family or friends who were able to resettle or seek asylum in a Western country of asylum such as the US, the UK, Canada, or Australia. Between 1990 and 2000, the US alone received over 20,000 Liberians (US Census Bureau 2000). By 2007, opportunities for resettlement had waned, and this was an unlikely solution for most. UNHCR (2007a) observed that misinformation about resettlement to countries like the US or the UK prevented many Liberian refugees from choosing to return or integrate locally.

The refugees who chose to remain at Buduburam lived in small houses made of cement block and capped with tin roofs. The camp enjoyed the benefits of Internet cafes, schools, markets, hair salons, clubs, and corner shops. There were well-established footpaths that followed the general contours of erosion lines. Taxis and trotros (public transportation buses) lined the yard outside the camp gate, coming and going with refugees and visitors. Running water was not available. Toilets were placed throughout the camp, where refugees paid a fee for use. Water sachets (small plastic bags of purified water) were purchased from Ghanaian businesses that delivered large pallets of water sachets to the refugees who subsequently bought and sold them to each other.

Surviving in this makeshift shantytown was challenging for several reasons. The lack of jobs and high rent in the camp made survival a daunting task. The cost of school fees and difficulty accessing health care were also

significant problems for Liberians caring for children. A sense of social stagnation permeated the environment of the camp.

Demands of Living in Camp

Several demands of living and providing for families in the camp emerged in interviews with Liberian women. These demands placed immediate and unrelenting stress on caregivers and family members. The predominant stressors included loss of spousal support, loss of autonomy, expense of basic necessities, fear of insecurity, and the subsequent stress and anxiety these demands produced.

Loss of Spousal Support

But when they kill my husband, and hurt me so much I decided to leave the country. Because he usually encourage me, or helping me do everything. For we Liberian woman our husbands help us. If you're married your man take care of you, you take care of your husband (Ginny).

Loss of a spouse resulted in what is often referred to as 'role strain'. When one member of the family is unable to fulfil their normal role, others must fill the resulting gap in responsibilities. As in any refugee situation, families were, in almost every case, altered by death or separation from family members. Parents and grandparents, extended kin and relatives were, at best, a fragmented support system and network for the women who sought refuge at Buduburam. Most of the women in the focus groups and interviews came to Buduburam without their spouses. Some were sure of their spouse's death. Others were not. This was difficult, not only because of the relational loss, but also because of the significant gap in the family's structure and functioning.

Only two of the women who were interviewed had husbands who were living with them at Buduburam. In these cases, there was a marked difference in their tone of voice, their confidence, and general willingness to volunteer thoughts about their children or their family. In both cases, these women were the primary sources of income and parental care for their children. Nonetheless, both appeared to feel the presence of spousal support, and showed notable hopefulness compared with the majority of single mothers and caregivers. Though these are only two examples among thousands of cases at Buduburam the difference in their interviews suggests the substantial role of a husband and father, even if unemployed or inconsistently paid.

Loss of Autonomy

Among the demands of camp life, one of the most difficult was the inability of these parents and caregivers to provide for and ensure the wellbeing of their children through their own efforts. Loss of autonomy promoted an expressed sense of disempowerment and helplessness. The social and

economic confinement to the camp was a source of frustration for these women, even after years of living at Buduburam. Many refugees at Buduburam received remittances from family in other parts of the world (Boateng 2006; Porter *et al.* 2008). The women in this study were not so fortunate. Those who could not make enough to feed their children relied on the kindness of friends and neighbours, or simply did without.

Being a refugee, we have never seen refugees before and we did not experience it before. And is a very hard thing to describe to be a refugee... You just abruptly be a refugee. You use to provide your own food and your own support for your children education and you cannot turn around to do anything... It is very dark... The problem is there—you cannot solve it (Theresa).

Many of the participants referenced the positions they and their spouses had held in their former communities. Some were small business owners. They were independent and self-sufficient. Some worked in the government. Others were leaders in their local churches. The switch from economic independence in Liberia, especially for those who had professional employment, to inconsistent subsistence strategies in the camp was daunting and disheartening.

I was the principal of a school there... I was a businesswoman also. I was selling dry goods, and also I was working in the pharmacy. So life was all right with me (Hope).

When I met Hope, she was selling candy outside the Buduburam United Methodist Church, and helping a friend with a small business for several hours each week. Inconsistent subsistence was a common theme for all but one of the women—the only one I spoke with who was able to find work in Accra, plaiting (braiding) hair in the market. The rest were scratching out a living through informal livelihood strategies that did not provide a predictable, consistent return. Many sold water and produce in the camp. One woman, unable to establish work elsewhere, walked from house to house, what the Liberians called ‘going around’, to ask if she could help wash clothes. Another received small amounts of money from a church where she was an evangelist. Most recounted stories of previous independence, self-sufficiency, and ability to carve a life for themselves with the help of their families, within the context of their communities. Becoming refugees meant losing this independence and self-reliance that characterized their former lives in Liberia. Though few were completely dependent on help from others, none were able to provide their family’s needs without the assistance of others in their community and beyond.

Expense of Basic Necessities

The most significant frustration brought forward in all the interviews was the cost of basic necessities. The expense of such fundamental necessities as clean

water overwhelmed their limited resources. Water for baths, cooking, and drinking had to be purchased. There was no running water in the camp, and no natural, fresh water sources available nearby. Though a few refugees were willing to walk great distances to a lagoon, fear of Ghanaian harassment kept the majority within the camp. Likewise, using the bush presented a potential threat. Though Liberians would, in other circumstances, be content to use the bush to relieve themselves, fear of gangs and criminal activity kept most within the confines of the camp.

Sometime we go to the toilet that you have to pay money and if you don't have, you have to go in the bush, to go use the bush. And while you're using the bush you have some gangster boys, sometimes will come to attack you because they see you are naked. And they will attack you. So for that reason I don't encourage my children to go in the bush. I rather buy this plastic and there they will use it . . . Because they will be raping the little girls. So I don't allow my children to go in the bush (Sonny).

The financial obligation connected to basic bodily functions was a notable source of frustration and stress for the Liberians. As refugees, the environment dictated even the minute details of their daily lives—right down to where they could relieve themselves. This was frustrating because it was restrictive, and stressful because it was expensive.

Safety

Safety inside and outside the camp was a significant concern. The insecure environment for themselves, and especially their children, promoted hyper-vigilance among parents and caregivers. Many expressed fear of child abduction and rape. Parents of younger children chose to keep them near the house, and brought them inside in the early evening hours. The menacing activities of mischievous Liberian adolescents and the hate crimes of Ghanaian outsiders were a constant source of concern. One woman described her fears of child abduction and murder:

Nearly everyday children are lossing on the camp . . . So I can't allow her [a young daughter] to, and go far from the house. So while she playing, I will be checking on her to see where she is . . . It didn't happen to not only one child. It happened to so many children. Yeah, all they killed. So if you have your little children, don't allow them to go far away (Faith).

These fears expressed by participants are consistent with Boateng's (2006) observations of women's fear of criminal activity within the camp. Insecurity within refugee camps is common (Voutira and Harrell-Bond 1995; Harrell-Bond 1998). Safety concerns for these Liberian parents and caregivers were as upsetting as they were common. Fear for their children's safety caused many to remain in a state of increased tension at all times.

Stress and Anxiety

This study did not set out to assess trauma, nor to investigate negative psychological symptoms or outcomes. To ignore the presence of such information would, however, be a misrepresentation of the data. Stress and anxiety were not apparent in every case. Some of the women were remarkably hopeful and confident about their situation, and their ability not only to endure, but to make the best of it. Many others were not.

Stress and anxiety surfaced in the majority of the narratives. Both inhibited wellbeing and the ability to cope with other demands of life at Buduburam. Some of the women were visibly distressed, faces taut with worry and hands clasped tightly in their laps, voices quivering. They related inability to sleep at night. They recounted the overwhelming demands of the environment and their children's needs, expressing how incapable they felt under such pressure. Theresa, a grandmother and a single caregiver, related,

It is really a problem. The children, the grandchildren be all around me. I feel really miserable and tired. I don't even have to sleep at night because I still praying to God 'what will I do? How will I get help for these children? How will I get these children to be what they are aimin' at?' Some of them have big plans, but then how do I implement it?

All the women expressed frustration with the difficulty of providing for children in their limited situation at Buduburam. It was the caregivers with sole responsibility and few resources who appeared and sounded the most downtrodden. Their circumstances were the most overwhelming and the least hopeful.

It is often the case that the most vulnerable are unable to leave their countries during crises like the Liberian Civil War. Those with the resources to plan and fund their journeys to exile are often the fortunate ones who are able to leave (Van Hear 1998). The inverse appears to be equally true for these people trapped in a protracted refugee situation. In the case of the women at Buduburam, neighbours and friends had moved on or moved back to Liberia. It was these women with the fewest resources and greatest needs who remained.

Capabilities

The women in this study met the demands of the environment at Buduburam in several ways. Family capabilities included adapted livelihood strategies, the psychosocial and spiritual support of their Christian faith, and financial aid from the American NGO. These were significant resources that enabled refugee parents and caregivers to provide for their families and cope with life in the camp.

Adapted Livelihood Strategies

Adapted livelihood strategies included use of new and old skills, and multiple family members who engaged in diverse subsistence activities to survive with

limited resources in a limited environment. The majority of the women were unable to acquire work similar to what they had done in Liberia—especially for those who held professional jobs. Professional jobs were scarce. One woman, a nurse, explained that her qualifications had not been accepted outside the camp, and that she was unable to obtain work as a trained medical professional. This is consistent with previous findings at the camp. Dick (2002b) observed that the Ghanaian government did not recognize Liberian medical qualifications. Though some medically trained refugees were called upon within the camp, these informal and inconsistent opportunities limited their ability to rely on their training.

Therefore, acquiring new skills was a popular strategy for many of the women. Several were enrolled in refugee-established schools for training in beauty treatment, such as plaiting (braiding) hair and giving manicures and pedicures. Others had found opportunities to learn photography and baking.

Most of the women made their living through informal livelihood strategies shared among multiple members. This is common among many families in the developing world (Narayan *et al.* 2000). Livelihood strategies were shared by multiple family members across several generations. Children who were old enough to help, and were not attending school, often contributed to the family effort for survival.

We will make market together . . . My daughters roast fish at night to sell and I sell kerosene (Martha).

One woman described her son's weekly routines surrounding school and work.

Only on Saturday he help me, because he don't [have] the time. When he come [from school] he has to go back. When he come he get small thing to eat and he go back to study class. He will not come from study class 'til six o'clock (Dana).

Some women were able to rely on children. Others were unable to develop livelihood strategies in which children could be included. One young mother had no strategy at all. Her live-in boyfriend occasionally contributed through informal means. Aside from this, she was left to the mercy of her friends and neighbours to provide for her two daughters. Most of the women rose in the early hours of the morning to engage in a variety of subsistence activities that provided for their family needs. Family survival was accomplished through new skills and shared subsistence efforts.

Psychosocial Support of Church

References to faith in God and commitment to Christian churches on the camp spontaneously emerged throughout the interviews. Christianity has previously been identified as the major avenue through which Liberian refugees at Buduburam cope with their difficult situation of exile in Ghana (Dovlo and Sondah 2001). Though Christianity is not the only religion represented at

the camp, it was a central part of the lives of those who participated in this study. Christian faith was a powerful source of psychosocial and spiritual support, as well as a means for active coping. Spiritual support of Christian beliefs reinforced a positive sense of identity and bolstered hopefulness among many of the women.

Every day important because I wake up, I see the sun then I give God the glory. Because He the one who woke me up. He protect me through all that, me and my children. So every day I give Him thanks, for his protection and love (Faith).

These women believed that God had helped them in the past, he was helping them at present, and he would help them in the future. This firm belief in a loving God who was watching over their families and protecting them was uplifting in the midst of a depreciated existence in the camp. These women and their families lived on the margins of society, unwelcome in Ghana, separated from family and friends because of the war. Their day-to-day lives were characterized by inconsistent subsistence and inaccessibility of basic resources. As Agier writes, 'each displaced person, each refugee, carries within them the experience of being undesirable and placeless' (2005: 28). The faith of these Liberians spoke a different message from those resonating within their daily experience in camp. They were not rejected by God, but welcomed. They were not lost to him, but rather very near. In a situation characterized by scarcity and inconsistency, God was always listening, and always ready to provide for their needs. God's provision for their lives, no matter their loss or difficulty, was cited over and over as the empowering source of meaning and purpose for their lives and their family's future.

Church involvement also contributed to positive identity by creating opportunity to obtain a social status within the community. Many of these refugee women proudly announced positions of leadership or participation within their churches. They held titles such as 'evangelist', or 'secretary to the head deaconess.' As refugees, isolated from mainstream economic opportunities and socially marginalized, they were of least significance in Ghana. Most held no official job, and their days were filled with the basic tasks of survival and care for children. Positions of leadership or participation on committees and choirs gave opportunities for recognition and a sense of importance.

Church also functioned as a gathering place for social and emotional support. The women spoke of feeling happy when they were at church, a description given to no other circumstance that they discussed with me. Church was a place to meet friends and be encouraged.

The church is important to me and when I don't go to church, I don't feel good...And also, reading the word of God, it helped me a whole lot. It encouraged me that I will not feel lonesome, me being refugee (Dayna).

You have comfort at church. You go to church to meet up with friends. You meet up with people to give you words of encouragement (Theresa).

Our pastor that is here, he speak to us. When we get back home I feel so happy when he finish preaching to us, advising us, talk to us—I feel good. If there were no church—eh-heh! But church is here. So anything that come to me I put it before the Lord and I know the Lord will take care of everything (Charity).

Religion provided a means of active coping. These refugees alleviated anxiety and stress, at least temporarily, by participating in church through prayer and praise to God. Most women and their families attended church on a weekly, if not a daily basis. In church, their belief system was reinforced as they were reminded about the character of their loving God, and their duty to serve him through obedience to commandments and care for one another. They believed that if they asked God for something in prayer, and were faithful to serve him, he would hear and grant their requests. Church involvement was a coping behaviour to seek permanent relief from the strain of camp life through obedience and petitions to God.

Education

Scholarships for school fees contributed to family resources and hope for the future. These Liberian parents and caregivers received funds through an NGO based in America. These scholarships covered school fees. This was a resource of substantial significance for these women. In families who could not always provide daily food for their children, money for school was not possible. The relief from this financial burden came to these women through the donations of Americans who sponsored their children.

This was an immediate relief with long-lasting implications for these families. The Liberians saw education as an investment in the wellbeing of their children, and their entire family. From his work with Liberian refugees in the Ivory Coast, Utas (2004) observed that Liberians' intense urge to have their children educated stemmed from two contextual sources. First, they had lost all other wealth acquired through their lifetimes, and education was the one resource that could not be looted. Second, especially for those who came from urban areas, education increased their ability to obtain higher quality jobs.

This latter point in particular was reflected in my discussions with Liberians living in Ghana. Their children's education was their ticket out of the camp, and into a better way of life. It meant higher paying jobs that would increase their children's quality of life, and their ability to support aging parents. The hope provided through education offered a small light at the end of a very long, dark tunnel of impoverished struggle.

The whole world is education. That best thing you can give a child.

I also want to say something. It's not easy, especially being a single parent, sending child to school and feed them. It is not easy, especially on refugee camp. My only daughter is scholarship and myself they gave me money to

send her to school. So I thank God for the organization and the person that formed it (Participants, Focus Group 2).

I am hopeful about life because I have children. I know... in the future, my children will live better life than me. I will also live better life through their support (Ruth).

I want them to be real educated, go to school and be educated. Yeah, then they can help me (Emoline).

What it Means to Stay or Go

During the time of my research at Buduburam, the camp was at a critical juncture. UNHCR planned to close the camp in mid-summer, though they promised to continue their repatriation programme (free transport to Liberia, and a stipend of five US dollars) through the end of the year. Though this programme had been going on for several years, the dilemma of return gained a heightened sense of urgency as a result of the coming closure. Thus, my discussions with women often turned to the question of return to Liberia. The Liberians I spoke with negotiated the prospect of return by assessing their capabilities to meet the known demands of living in Ghana, in contrast to the unknown or perceived demands of moving back to Liberia.

For many, return was an unrealistic ideal. As conveyed by many refugees around the world (Čapo Žmegač 2007; Zetter 1999; Graham and Khosravi 1997), women expressed nostalgic longing for the comforts of their former homes in Liberia, but saw little chance of resuming life as it had been, should they choose to go back. Liberia had changed. Their families were gone. Their villages were burned or destroyed. Though they were not happy in Ghana, few saw the possibility of becoming happy if they were to repatriate. Most felt that staying was more advantageous than returning. Staying appeared more economically feasible, despite the difficulty of sustaining livelihoods in the camp. Staying also seemed safer.

Return as Economically Unfeasible

We would be willing to go back. Liberia is our home. But we have been here for quite a long time. You go home and your family all are gone. You go home and you don't have nowhere to sleep, nowhere to live and no one to help you, to say, 'I be willing to help you to start,' to be able to start from. You go back, you are going back the same as you in refugee camp. So some of us decide that we will stay here, and we will manage here (Participant, Focus Group 1).

Most saw return as a setback rather than an improvement to their economic situation. As Harrell-Bond (1989) has pointed out, the longer refugees remain in exile, the more difficult and complicated it may be to return. Most parents and caregivers were unwilling to sacrifice the roof over their heads, the scholarships for their children's education, and the meagre subsistence

they had established at Buduburam. Though further impoverishment was not certain in Liberia, the strong potential for such an outcome was enough to keep these women from moving back.

At least you are comfortable where we are. We have our own place. But if you pack your things now and leave, where are you going to stay? That mean you have to start afresh. Find a house and you don't have money to pay rent. So what are you going to do? So when we look at it, we see better and we stay here (Sonny).

What was central to their conclusions was their inability to imagine a stable economic situation for their family survival. As discussed earlier in this paper, most had difficulty seeing their way through the day. The phrase 'finding food' was often used to denote the inconsistency of sustenance for most families. In cases when women were unsure about the means of survival through the course of a day, imagining the preparation, energy, and resources needed to return to Liberia was unthinkable.

For post-conflict governments like the one in Liberia, returning IDPs and refugees are often seen as the means through which nation building takes place. The manpower of citizens is needed to rebuild and revitalize a devastated nation in the wake of destruction. As observed in other refugee contexts (Glazebrook 2004; Donà and Berry 1999), the Liberians were less inclined to see return as a citizenship and nation-building issue, so much as a means of personal or family development. Since the prospects of development were not foreseeable, none of the women I spoke with were interested in repatriation.

Insecurity

What these refugees could imagine was the insecurity they would face if they were to return. Most of the women and/or their families had encountered severe violence and loss as a result of the civil conflict in Liberia. Many feared that their past run-ins with government or rebel troops would result in further trouble upon return.

They hunt you if, for example, you live here and work in the government, huh? And something happen and they get rid of you. They will have to get rid of all your children because they don't want them to come back and work in our government again. So they have to get rid of your children. That what I mean, 'hunt you.' That mean they will be looking for you all over (Participant, Focus Group 2).

Not with children. Now if, if we decided to go back, we'd go alone... Our level is risky. They will kill us and get our children, you see? (Faith).

Ghanem (2003) summarizes the prospect of return by noting that the life-threatening environments refugees escape in their home country, as well as the traumatizing events that most have been exposed to, undoubtedly redefine

their perception of, and their relationship to their home country. This was the case for the parents and caregivers in this study. Given the severe brutality of 14 years of civil war and political unrest, it is little wonder that these victims would feel apprehensive about returning. In the case of these Liberian women, a plausible argument could be made for severe trauma and recurrent negative psychological outcomes. However, the survival and prominence of former warlords who continued to live in Liberian society (Junge and Johnson 2008), not to mention the thousands of ex-combatants, offers further credence to their fears and unwillingness to return. Similar to the Guatemalan refugees observed by Donà and Berry (1999), the Liberians in this study were not staying because the economic situation offered notable potential, but rather, because the risk to personal and family safety in Liberia was so plausible.

Conclusions

In many ways, life at Buduburam strongly resembles the way of life for others throughout the world who live in enclaves of poverty (Narayan *et al.* 2000). This impoverished struggle is common in protracted refugee situations throughout Africa (Crisp 2003). These Liberian refugee families struggled to survive with few resources. As refugees who remained in the camp long after return was deemed 'safe,' and repatriation programmes were well established, how can we understand their experiences of protracted life in exile and thus, their perception of return?

In this paper, I have presented findings that inform our understanding about the demands and capabilities of protracted refugee families, and how these are influential in their decisions to return or stay. Adapted livelihood strategies, psychosocial support of the Christian church, and education scholarships were influential resources that enabled these families to meet the demands of living in this camp in the long term.

Family survival was an overwhelming task because of role strain, a sense of disempowerment and helplessness, overwhelming economic deficiencies, and insecurity. These demanding circumstances produced significant stress and anxiety among Liberian parents and caregivers. These refugee families were not helpless victims, but they were economically, socially, and mentally vulnerable. Their ability to meet the demands of camp life revolved largely around their adapted livelihood strategies, the psychosocial and spiritual support of the Christian church, and the accessibility of education. Their family capabilities enabled survival, but were insufficient to promote the capital, social networks, and self-efficacy needed for return.

Liberia was an unknown financial and security risk. With legitimate concerns for family survival and safety in Liberia, as well as confirmed hostility from their host community, these parents and caregivers saw little chance of improving their situation. Their hope for social and economic mobility rested

in their children's education, or the less likely possibility of resettlement to a developed country. Thus, from their perspective, viable options were almost entirely outside the realm of their control.

Many of these families had been at Buduburam for over a decade. Most had nothing to show for their time but mere survival. Their lives were lived in environments characterized by anticipated, ongoing, and pervasive poverty, deprivation, discrimination, and loss of autonomy. Such conditions have been labeled as Mundane Extreme Ecological Stress (MEES) in research about racial discrimination among black families in the US (Peters and Massey 1983). Peters and Massey suggest that families who live with such unrelenting environmental stress often display muted expectations about opportunity. When crisis occurs, they are prone to respond with no action, characterized by an acceptance of society's definition of self and situation, or with action often taking the form of rebellion or protest.

In a similarly marginalized situation, the refugee parents and caregivers in this study took the first approach. When pressed to decide on return or local integration in Ghana, they chose to do nothing. Return appeared unmanageable. Integration was not acceptable—for them or the Ghanaian community. Though they were not helpless victims, these Liberian women had experienced a significant loss of agency over a long period of time in a protracted situation. With so much lived experience under such unchanging circumstances, it is reasonable to conclude that many felt too disempowered (economically and personally) to foresee success. Their life experiences were characterized by extreme, unrelenting stress and challenge. After years of internalizing such circumstances, most could see a way out of their suffering only through the agentive lives of their children, or the intervention from an outside source, such as an offer of asylum elsewhere.

Educational scholarships provided by the American NGO were additional incentives for these Liberians to stay at Buduburam, even in the event of camp closure. In a situation of social and economic immobility, these families were unwilling to sacrifice this valuable resource by leaving. By continuing to provide this aid, the NGO was facilitating (at least in part) this immobilized socio-economic situation. This raises questions about the context of aid intervention, what aid is truly in the best interests of a particular group, and for how long.

For these Liberian women, what remained at the end of the day was a chance for survival tomorrow and a hope for their children's future. These possibilities were interwoven with their belief in a God who loved them and surety that he would provide for them. They anticipated little other than some relief in their elder years.

This dilemma of protracted, vulnerable refugees is an area that needs continued discussion, research, and intervention. Many solutions for long-term refugees have been put forward, but met with little success when applied (Crisp 2003). These were not cases of learned helplessness or complete dependency. The Liberian families in this study displayed persistence and adaptive

agency to meet the demands they faced at Buduburam. However, their vulnerability and lack of viable options led these families to choose social and economic stagnation over the unknown risks of repatriation. In cases where return and local integration are not plausible solutions, alternative, innovative interventions must be explored.

Postscript

The data presented in this paper were collected in the summer of 2007. In February 2008, some of the remaining Liberian refugees at Buduburam began a protest for resettlement to a third country of asylum. This resulted in several deportations and many arrests. The ultimate result was a tripartite agreement between the governments of Liberia and Ghana, and UNHCR. The repatriation programme was reinitiated. Many Liberians have since returned (UNHCR 2008).

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1. For the purposes of this paper, I use Crisp's (2003) definition of 'protraction', which refers to the situation of refugees who have lived in exile for more than five years, and still have no immediate prospect of finding a durable solution to their circumstances by means of voluntary repatriation, local integration, or resettlement.

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