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A response paper prepared for the Comparative Urban Studies Project, Woodrow Wilson International Centre for Scholars and the Fetzer Institute seminar entitled:

'Community resilience in the twenty-first century'

Using my experiences working with migrant women in inner city Johannesburg, this brief reflects upon the questions posed to seminar participants, and papers by John Paul Lederach and Jill Simone Gross'. To do this, I wish to step back and unpack the ways in which 'marginalised', 'vulnerable' 'unhealthy' communities are constructed in dominant discourses. Using refugee women as my case, I unpack how displaced women and children are represented in iconic photography, and how this shapes how we talk and describe their experiences. I argue that the ways in which displaced or refugee communities are represented, tends to *erase their agency* and *homogenise* their experiences in ways that limit our understanding of displacment and our ability to develop appropriate policy responses. This has broader implications for all communities labelled 'marginalised' or 'vulnerable' in one way or another. The current frameworks and conceptual tools employed to explain conditions of marginality, are often only partial renderings of their realities. I argue that we need to develop frameworks that locate 'communities[1]' within the multiple social and economic realities facing them. It is through recognising the power relations *within* communities, and between them and institutional actors that more appropriate interventions can be developed.

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[1] A term which is problematic because it tends to mask the inequalities that exist within a social group.

The construction of displaced women and children in iconic photography

My work with asylum seekers and refugee women from the rest of the continent, living in Johannesburg has led me to question commonly held assumptions about displaced populations, particularly how women and children's experiences are articulated. Policy and scholarly research has recognised the need to draw attention to the gendered nature of displacement, and the different ways it impacts on men and women. Although highlighting this is important for more targeted and appropriate interventions, gendered analyses have tended to represent women as lacking agency – as 'silent emissaries' who are vulnerable, disempowered, and desperate (Malkki, 1996).

Contemporary iconic images of refugees and displaced populations represent women and children as victims – malnourished, violated, and weak. These images are not accidental, they do not simply occur. Rather, they are, as Foucault suggests constructed within a 'regime of truth' which is supported and informed by scientific discourse, political and economic power, educational institutions, the media and so on (Foucault, 1980: 132).

Refugee camp at Benako Tanzania   **The Refugees:**

QuickTime™ and a
decompressor
are needed to see this picture.

Zaire

Some of the most famous images of human displacement are the works of award winning photographers Sebastião Salgado (1994, see above) and Kevin Carter (below). So compelling are these images that they circulate in official UNHCR calendars, in newspapers, television the Internet and other media. These photographs are essential in

raising the awareness of human suffering. While compassion and humanitarianism are important, what these images do is deny refugees any agency, any action contemplated is outside the refugee. As Malkki says, refugees' apparent helplessness and silence calls for the actions of others more powerful (Malkki, 1996).

Kevin Carter, 1994.

These images have been used as examples of how images and discourses shape the ways practitioners and scholars *see* vulnerable populations. My work with migrant women in Johannesburg has consistently revealed the disjuncture between how women talk about and see themselves, and how they are represented in dominant discourses. Like Lederach, I have been drawn to their tactical ability to negotiate and survive the immense structural barriers that they face. But I have also been acutely aware that without the right kind of support, breaking out of structural cycles of poverty and dependency is an incredible if not impossible task. I will return to this later.

To understand the character of women's displacement (or any other 'marginalised' group) we need to move beyond the one-dimensional view that they are often represented as. Epistemologically, for my own work, this has implied putting on analytical par 'scientific' knowledge –– the schemas of planners, states and international organisations –– *and* women's subjective knowledge and the ways in which they understand, view and interpret their own experiences. These subjective readings have not only provided gendered insights into social processes of displacement, but significantly help me rethink

the conceptual frames used to understand displacement and its socio-political and economic implications.

Intersecting identities and realities

One of the issues that my research has revealed is the fact that while refugee women in Johannesburg share many common experiences, their specific social locations determine how well or not they do. Factors such as ethnicity, nationality, gender, sexuality, HIV status, marital status and so on have a bearing on whether they are materially and psychologically better off than others. A single woman with three children for example, may be more vulnerable than a married woman with the same number of children because she has a partner who can assist in supporting the family. A woman who is HIV positive could be more vulnerable than one who is not. One's ethnic affiliations could be a source of support or oppression amongst her community. Women's national origins, and in particular whether they have refugee status or not, could determine their access to state health and other services. These differences are extremely important, because they point to the fact that even amongst people from the same social category, there are varied points of vulnerability which need to be addressed. A one size fits all policy is inadequate in dealing with these differences.

This has a direct bearing on the concept that the response papers have asked us to reflect upon: the notion of *resilience*. Even if we were to adopt the term as more appropriate than others in creating healthy communities, we would need to reflect upon three critical issues. **The first is that resilience cannot be assumed to be present, in equal capacity amongst all individuals in a social group.** The questions who is resilient, how and when are therefore most critical if the term is to be useful. In any group, some will be more resilient than others. Moreover, there exist different forms of resilience amongst different individuals. We therefore need to understand how different community members respond in times of crises – where they draw their strengths from, and where they remain vulnerable.

Secondly, **no matter how resilient an individual or group, they cannot always overcome the structural conditions they face.** Drawing an example from my work experience, no matter how resourceful migrant women are, they alone cannot transform

the structural exclusions that keep them in spaces of vulnerability. For example, many women lack access to bank accounts, housing, and basic health services because they are not South African citizens. Recent xenophobic attacks have drawn our attention to the vulnerability of foreign populations in South Africa, violently excluded from participating in the country's economic and political processes because they are not South African citizens. These are structural conditions that the state, and civil society need to take responsibility for.

Thirdly, given this context, **we need to conceptualise the notion of resiliency as mediated by other social factors such as gender, class, sexuality, nationality, ethnicity and so on.** Unless the term is understood within a broader framework of intersecting identities, it remains abstracted from the everyday realities facing populations whose conditions we wish to understand.

Both papers rightly point to the inadequacies of current frameworks for understanding the full experience and realities facing vulnerable communities. By unpacking the metaphors of location, safety and voice, John Paul Lederach highlights the complexities of these experiences which are disappeared when labels such as 'Internally Displaced People' are used to define an all encompassing reality. Similarly, Jill Simone Gross shows how institutional responses fall short of developing appropriate and more enduring interventions. In order to realise the goal of developing healthy communities there needs to be a shift the lenses through which we see and understand vulnerability in communities. This means developing methodologies that bring to the fore the ways in which vulnerable populations interpret and understand their own experiences, and the tactics they employ to survive. Doing this requires more textured analytical frameworks that locate vulnerability within the multiple and intersecting identities that shape everyday experiences.

References

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