

Depression and Learned Helplessness among Refugee Women in Sub-Saharan Africa: Prevalence and Context

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Abstract

The violence that often produces refugees has complex and multiple direct and indirect effects on refugee communities in relation to reproductive health and psycho-social well-being. This study utilized the Reformulated Theory of Learned Helplessness (Abrahamson et al., 1978) to investigate the prevalence of depression and learned helplessness among refugee women in the context of a camp setting in sub-Saharan Africa. As a theory, learned helplessness is characterized by a person's failure to take harm-avoidant responses even when such responses lead to reduced exposure to harm or risk of harm. The assumptions of the reformulated theory of learned helplessness include the expectation that events are uncontrollable and it is the critical determinant of non-contingency. This theory postulates that attributions by an individual serve a mediating role between perception and expectation of non-contingency. Thus, reactions to uncontrollable events are determined by the causal attributions about the event (Olson, 1983). Depression is a condition that has been shown to be a typical collateral outcome of learned helplessness (Hogben et al., 2001). Motivational, cognitive, emotional, and behavioral deficits that lead to depression have also been identified in individuals experiencing learned helplessness (Southwood, 1986).

A cross-sectional survey of refugee women was conducted using a systematic random sampling of households and selecting an eligible participant in a household by simple random sampling. Refugee women who were at least 21 years of age and residing at the Dukwi camp in Botswana (n = 402) were selected from the eligible households (n = 900). This study found that more than half of the participants (55%) experienced learned helplessness and about 90% were depressed. Learned helplessness was also found to be positively and significantly correlated with depression among this population. A binary logistic regression analysis was used to predict depression from learned helplessness. The odds ratio was defined as the likelihood of developing depression from learned helplessness (a risk-factor). Learned helplessness was shown to be a significant predictor of depression among refugee women (Wald $X^2 = 4.11$; $df = 1$; $p = .04$; odds ratio = 2.36; 95% CI = 1.02 – 5.42).

The findings of this study provide social work and public health practitioners who are faced with the multi-faceted task of intervention and implementation of programs in refugee situations, with some indicators of the psycho-social needs of refugee women in a camp setting. It will equip social workers with the knowledge-base to assume primary roles in conducting psychological assessments and implementing interventions that target salient risk factors such as learned helplessness and depression among refugee populations in Africa.

References

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