



Our flesh is here but our soul stayed there: A qualitative study on resource loss due to war and displacement among internally-displaced women in the Republic of Georgia



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ABSTRACT

Losses experienced by conflict-affected civilians in low and middle income countries is a relatively unexplored area. The aim of our paper is to explore the concept of resource loss in the accounts of internally displaced women in Georgia. We use Hobfoll's Conservation of Resources (COR) theory to guide our approach by examining the loss of *objects, personal characteristics, conditions, and energies*. Semi-structured interviews were conducted on 42 purposively-selected Georgian women residing in internally displaced persons settlements during fieldwork in Georgia from December 2012 to February 2013. Line-by-line open-coding was conducted on translated and transcribed interviews using Nvivo. The conservation of resources theory was utilised to guide the 'mapping' of the relationships between losses which occurred in the post-conflict period. War-related trauma led to the loss of property, which caused the loss of livelihood and subsequent loss of social networks and mental and physical health. The mental and physical health losses, along with the loss of livelihood, constituted a loss spiral in which losses in one area perpetuated on-going losses in the other areas. Interventions at supporting livelihoods are needed in order to address the cascade of losses resulting from war.

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1. Introduction

Mental health is recognized as a key public health issue for populations affected by war (Inter-Agency Standing Committee, 2007). A wealth of literature has focused on the elevated levels of mental disorders and associated risk factors among war-affected groups (Porter and Haslam, 2005; Steel et al., 2009). For instance, among current and previous Georgian internally displaced persons (IDPs), the prevalence of PTSD, depression, anxiety, and comorbidity have been estimated at 23.3%, 14.0%, 10.4%, and 12.4% respectively, with women 1.67, 1.50, and 1.79 times more likely to suffer from PTSD, depression, and an anxiety disorder than men (Makhashvili et al., 2014). Such findings are reflected in conflict-affected populations in diverse settings (Panter-Brick et al., 2008;

Richards et al., 2011; Roberts et al., 2009a, 2008; Sabin et al., 2003; Sachs et al., 2008; Thapa and Hauff, 2005). Explanations for this trend centre on the different hardships faced by men versus women during war, with women more likely to face sexual assault (Liebling and Kiziri-Mayengo, 2002) and the loss of spouse (Morina and Emmelkamp, 2012), and men dealing with detention, abduction, and combat (Somasundaram and Sivayokan, 1994). Other analyses attribute differences in mental health to cultural mores which impose unique hardships for women (Miller et al., 2006) and reduce their access to resources such as housing, education, employment, and healthcare (Husain et al., 2007; Shin et al., 2009).

There has been little in-depth qualitative exploration of women's perspectives on how conflict and displacement has impacted their well-being. The aim of our paper is to qualitatively explore the concept of resource loss as applied to the experiences of IDP women in Georgia. We use Hobfoll's Conservation of Resources (COR) theory to guide our approach by examining the loss of *objects, personal characteristics, conditions, and energies*. The waves of

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loss unfolding over time yield a conceptual model which illustrates the linkages between different types of resource loss.

An exploration into the long-term impacts of war necessitates probing into theories of stress and loss. Lazarus and Folkman (1984)'s transactional stress model has been influential in subsequent research on stress and coping. They argue that an individual experiences stress when internal or external pressures are appraised as exceeding existing resources to manage the pressure. Appraisal stimulates coping efforts which attempt to change the person-environment relationship (problem-focused coping), or regulate emotional distress (emotion-focused coping) (Folkman and Lazarus, 1980, 1991).

Critics of the Lazarus and Folkman model argue that their definition of stress is inherently tautological; a stress exists only if an event/situation is perceived to it overwhelm capacity to respond, and capacity to respond exists only relationally to a particular stressor (Hobfoll, 1989). Lazarus and Folkman's model has been criticised for relying too much on subjective cognitive processes, rather than on the social environment and networks within which individuals are embedded (Guribye, 2011). Moreover, Lazarus and Folkman's model does not account for the far-reaching consequences of a traumatic event over a long period of time (Kleber and Brom, 1992), albeit it does recognize the recursive nature of stress (with individuals engaged in a process of appraisal and re-appraisal as time passes) (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984).

Miller and Rasco (2004) offer another approach to assess stress and loss. They considered war-affected groups specifically in the development of their 'displacement-related stressors' model. These stressors pertain to the losses and adaptational demands which refugees face post-war, and include loss of social networks, social roles and role-related activities, unemployment and poverty related stressors, lack of environmental mastery, discrimination, separation from loved ones, and intergenerational differences in the rates of acculturation (Miller and Rasco, 2004, p. 26).

The model proposed by Miller and Rasco (2004) has the strength of firmly defined losses and stressors, which makes it possible to directly apply and test the model. However, the typology of stressors does not allow a basis upon which to examine the *interplay between* these stressors and losses. Like the Lazarus and Folkman (1984) model, this model does not provide a basis upon which to map out relationships between losses over a period of time.

Hobfoll (1989) COR stress model was developed in order to address perceived shortcomings in other theories of stress and loss outlined above. The central tenet of COR theory is that "people strive to retain, protect, and build resources and that what is threatening to them is the potential or actual loss of these valued resources (1989, p. 516). Stress is a reaction to the threat of a loss of resources, the actual loss of resources, or a *lack of gain* following the investment of resources. Resources can take the form of *objects*, *personal characteristics*, *conditions*, or *energies* that are of value in and of themselves, or are valuable in attaining additional resources.

Object resources are considered of value because of their concrete nature essential for survival or because of the potential of the object to acquire status for the owner. A common example of this type of resource is a home. *Condition resources* are sought-after states of being such as having a supportive social network, membership in organizations, and having steady employment. *Personal characteristics* include one's orientation toward the world such as seeing events as predictable or in one's best interest, and possessing confidence and a positive sense of self. Finally, *energies* are resources which include time, money, and knowledge which, although having little intrinsic value in themselves, can facilitate the acquisition of resources (Hobfoll, 1989). Rather than operating independently of one another, resources tend to develop or

decrease in aggregate in what Hobfoll (2012) terms 'resource caravans.' Therefore, initial losses in one resource type typically lead to subsequent losses of other resources, with losses unfolding over time (Hobfoll, 1989).

COR theory predicts that sudden losses associated with traumatic events usually have a severe initial impact, followed by resource loss and psychological distress, forming a 'loss spiral' with both making the other worse over time (Heath et al., 2012). The loss spiral concept has proved a helpful approach in a number of studies exploring the sequelae resulting from traumatic events (Palinkas, 2012), including war-affected groups (Betancourt et al., 2014; Guribye, 2011; Heath et al., 2012). In this study we apply Hobfoll's COR theory to the experiences of conflict-affected women in the Republic of Georgia, in order to examine the *interplay between* losses resulting from war and displacement over a considerable period of time.

1.1. Research setting

This research focuses on the country of Georgia, located south of Russia between the Black and Caspian Seas. Georgia experienced significant armed conflict at various points since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Tensions between Georgia and the break-away region of South Ossetia culminated in a war between Russia and Georgia from 7 to 12 August 2008. The conflict led to the displacement of over 100,000 ethnic Georgians from the area of South Ossetia into Georgia proper. In the months following the war, the Georgian government oversaw the construction of 13 settlements for IDPs, composed of 3964 single-storey "cottages," as well as the renovation of 1600 apartments (The World Bank, 2013). It is estimated that approximately 27,000 persons remain internally displaced by the 2008 conflict (The Government of Georgia (2015)). While many of those who were displaced from the buffer zone have returned to their homes, those displaced from deep within the disputed territory have remained displaced due to a lack of political agreement allowing their return. Many face poverty, poor living conditions and infrastructure, a lack of access to land, markets, employment opportunities, and financial services (The World Bank, 2013).

In-depth interviews were conducted with 42 Georgian women (aged 20 to 73, average age of 43). Most were married (69%) and unemployed (74%). A minority were divorced (5%), widowed (17%), or single (never married) (10%) (further details are provided in the online Annex). All women were living in one of three IDP settlements in Georgia proper: Shavshvebi (n = 13), Skra (n = 13), and Karaleti (n = 16). These settlements were selected due to their distance from the buffer zone in order to mitigate physical risk to the research team.

Skra settlement (population 296) is located relatively close to the village of Skra. Shavshvebi (population 608), is much more isolated than Skra due to separation from the nearest village by a major motorway. Karaleti was the largest settlement included, at 1650 persons. It is located on the outskirts of the city of Gori. As over 4 years had passed between the 2008 war and the interviews, the women were in a position to describe losses unfolding over time as resulting from the initial war trauma and displacement. The Georgian concept of trauma is largely consistent with the definition and content of the concept used in Western societies, and the concept is used frequently in Georgian writing, teaching, therapy, and the media.

2. Methods

This study was conducted in collaboration with the Global Initiative on Psychiatry–Tbilisi (GIP-T), which provides mental

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