Understanding poverty through the experiences of women who are forced migrants

Considerations for a social work response

Mehmoona Moosa-Mitha, Feinula Bhanji and Fariyal Ross-Sheriff

Introduction

Poverty, as Dominelli argues, is a ‘constant, on-going disaster in its own right and not simply an additional factor to be considered in determining individual vulnerability to disasters’ (2012: 3). This structural definition of poverty points to an important feature of disasters as systemic, holistic and interconnected to other forms of deprivations. A focus on understanding poverty through the lived experiences of forced migrants reminds us that it is impossible to isolate economic poverty from other forms of deprivation for women in disasters, nor are these a result of local events solely; but also transnational in nature.

Poverty, like other forms of disaster is socio-political in nature, as Hyndman suggests: ‘Disasters, whether natural or man-made, are profoundly discriminatory. Wherever they hit, pre-existing structures and social conditions determine that some members of the community will be less affected, while others will pay a higher price’ (Oxfam International 2005, cited in Hyndman, 2008: 101). The effects of disasters are unevenly distributed, based on an intersectionality of identity factors including gender, class, relations of power and nationalism (Hyndman, 2008, Seager, 2006). Acknowledging the socio-political nature of disasters is important in poverty alleviation interventions and practices since social structures and political systems maintain and exacerbate poverty for particular sectors of population, hindering their capacity to overcome these (Dominelli, 2012).

This chapter considers two narratives of poverty through two case studies of the lived experiences of two families told by women forced migrants. Case studies enable researchers to collect rich, in-depth data that can be used to identify issues and concepts of the subjects under study. Although case study data is not generalisable, they are useful for hypothesis testing in future research. Knowledge gained through analyses of case study data can be invaluable for social work researchers and practitioners. These case studies are indicative of the life experiences of large numbers of refugee women with whom the authors have worked over two decades.
We undertake a transnational feminist analysis that examines the lived realities of women and their interconnections to wider socio-political systems. The case studies enable us to derive a definition of poverty that is holistic, gendered/cultured, structurally embedded in power relationships and transnational in nature. This contributes to a broader understanding of women’s experiences of poverty, traumatic experiences of disasters, strengths and resilience and the implications for poverty alleviation strategies.

Experiences of women refugees

Refugee women bear a disproportionate share of emotional and mental distress during all stages of displacement, which include: (1) pre-uprooting in the homeland; (2) uprooting when refugees depart their country of origin; (3) transition in either refugee camps or countries of first asylum; (4) resettlement in first countries of asylum, second countries or repatriation, and (5) integration to the new society for resettled refugees or repatriation to the country of origin (Ross-Sheriff et al., 2012). During these stages, women refugees are exposed to experiences of sexual exploitation, assault, torture, threats of personal violence and violence to their family members, and related atrocities. Forced migration correlates with living in economic poverty in countries of settlement for the first few years (Goździak and Long, 2005). The stories of refugee women’s journey to relative safety are simultaneously narratives of resilience and survival (Rehn and Sirleaf, 2002; Amnesty International, 2004, 2005; Goździak and Long, 2005; Jansen, 2006).

Case study I: Somali refugee woman

Sharifa is a 28-year-old Somali woman who fled Somalia with her husband, Mohammed, their 11-year-old daughter, Ayesha, and two younger sons, Bashir and Caadil. They lived in Kismayo, a southern Somali border town that was controlled by rival militant groups. The soldiers from the rival groups in Somalia had been clashing violently for months. Sharifa’s family and neighbours feared for their lives, and knew that eventually they would have to flee their home, even while hoping that the war would end. When the heavily armed Al-Shabaab took control of Kismayo, Sharifa and her husband, Mohammed, decided to leave with their family because they feared what they saw. Marginalised Bajuni clan members were targeted by Al-Shabaab to enact violence or to ‘buy’ children from poor households as recruits to building their military base. Young girls were recruited for domestic support and forced into marriage or served as sexual slaves for Al-Shabaab warriors. Sharifa and her husband feared for their children’s lives. They mapped their escape overnight, and for safety joined another group of Somalis from the same village who were fleeing on foot to the nearby Kenyan border, towards Dadaab, one of the largest refugee camps.

They were overcome with mixed emotions, fear and relief, as they crossed the border into Kenya. Having crossed the border, they heard guns being fired into the air. People in the group tried to escape by running in different directions and
got detached from one another. Sharifa held onto Ayesha for dear life, but got separated from her husband and sons. Sharifa and Ayesha were captured by four Kenyan police officers, who proceeded to beat and kick them while yelling at them. While Sharifa pleaded for mercy for her daughter's life, the officers gang-raped both mother and daughter.

Sharifa was in a lot of pain and had difficulty getting up, but the sight of Ayesha on the ground gave her strength to pick her up as she lay unconscious. Concerns about her daughter and the hope of finding her husband and sons kept Sharifa going. They finally reached Dadaab, already overcrowded with over 250,000 people taking refuge. Some lived in tents, and others in mud huts or shelters made from sticks and canvas. Sharifa received help in setting up a temporary home and arranged for blankets and food rations. Once settled, Sharifa knew that her priority should be medical treatment for Ayesha. However, she feared that revealing the rape would result in being ostracised from the community who would deem Ayesha unmarriageable. She would also be blamed by her husband for being raped. She asked Ayesha not to say a word of what the soldiers did to them both. The camp social worker noted the reluctance on Sharifa's part to be examined by a physician and recommended a female physician.

The social worker, Hadiya, also helped them search for their family. After three weeks, the family was reunited. Camp life involved managing her children, protecting them from getting into trouble, or being abused, working hard to get enough wood to cook their daily food, feeding the family and surviving. Sharifa had nightmares and feared being raped again by police. The emotional turmoil was unbearable for Sharifa as she watched Ayesha's anger and aggression towards her brothers escalate. Although Sharifa was depressed and sometimes experienced hopelessness, she was glad that they had a place to live and she kept a watchful eye on her family, especially Ayesha.

Sharifa was concerned that Mohammed was struggling to find a stable livelihood and missing Kismayo and the life they once enjoyed there. She knew many Kenyans did not like Somali refugees. This made it difficult for Mohammed to get a job in the camp or outside it. After six months of daily struggle to manage one daily meal for her family, Sharifa convinced her husband that he should sell the gold bangles that she had received as gifts for her wedding, to buy a cart, fruits and vegetables to sell in the camp market started by refugees. She continued to worry about her son and daughter, but wanted them to go to the camp school. However, afraid of someone molesting her daughter, she did not let Ayesha attend the camp school or let her out of her sight.

After months of living in the camp, Sharifa started attending a women's group where women shared experiences and supported each other. Hadiya had organised this because she knew that culturally, Somali women confide and protect each other. Sharifa found comfort in listening to other women's stories and heard about their experiences of rape and assault by the police. Though several women
had reported these crimes to camp officials, their complaints had not been heard. For Sharifa, hearing other women’s stories, the support they provided and strategies they developed for their children’s safety was comforting. The women’s major concerns were education, good health, and safety of their children. Sharifa wanted to bring Ayesha to the group. However, Ayesha had become withdrawn and did not want to leave ‘home’.

Sharifa then turned her attention to their future, and began discussing this with Mohammed. Camp life was not good for their children and Sharifa was aware of the precariousness of their existence due to the negative attitudes that Kenyans held towards them. She also feared being sent back to Somalia. In her discussions with other women, Sharifa had learned that Somali families were settling in the Eastleigh area of Nairobi, capital of Kenya, where they would be near a masjid (mosque) and get support from other Somalis. She discussed plans to save funds and explore options of travel to Nairobi with her husband. However, she was fearful of being caught by the police during their escape from the refugee camp. With support from Hadiya, the family started application processes for refugee status in the US and Canada.

Over time, Sharifa began to trust Hadiya more and asked her for help with Ayesha’s emotional outbursts. The social worker spent more time with Ayesha and recognised her depression, anger, aggression and withdrawal from daily life as symptoms of rape and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). She worked closely with Ayesha to support her to work through these issues.

Sharifa began to recite poetry/song (known as vave) with the children during the evening hours. The vave was sung yearly during tree-planting season, expressing the socio-political and religious attitudes and perspectives of the Banjunis. This was an artistic expression that preserved the memory of the oppression they had suffered and beseeched God for help. Sharifa did not give up her silent prayer or this evening ritual, as it helped Mohammed, the children and her.

Within three years, Sharifa and Mohammed had saved enough money to get a small plot of land outside the camp where Sharifa could plant potatoes and cassava for their own consumption and sell at the local market. Five years later, Sharifa contacted her cousin Jamila who encouraged her to travel to Nairobi where their children could attend school near a masjid that supported refugee families. Inspired by opportunities to improve the quality of her children’s lives, Sharifa convinced Mohammed to travel to Nairobi.

Life as self-settled refugees in Nairobi was very challenging. Mohammed struggled to find a job; Sharifa worked hard to get their sons in schools. She attended a training program for women to learn embroidery skills. Sharifa constantly worried about her daughter Ayesha’s future. She was then a teenager. Her hope for resettlement in the US or Canada had dwindled and she prayed daily for peace in Somalia so that they could return home.
Case study II: Afghan refugee woman

Saba and her husband Mirza had made the decision to stay in their village in Baghlan Province with their five children throughout the Afghan civil war. They took comfort in knowing that Northern Alliance soldiers would protect them. Early one morning, Taliban forces entered their village, ransacked the homes of several villagers and shot some of the adult males to establish their presence and power, and defeat the Northern Alliance soldiers. They shot Mirza and their eldest son in the presence of Saba and her children, despite her desperate pleas to spare their lives.

Traumatised but fearing for the life of her remaining children, Saba was convinced by her brother to flee with him and his family to Pakistan. The extended family of 10, Saba and her four young children, Saba’s brother with his wife and their three children, travelled by night, fully aware that if captured they would experience worse violence than what they had experienced in the village. Finally, after eight days they reached a camp in Pakistan operated by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) where they received refuge. They thanked Allah for His mercy and for protecting them on their journey.

During the first year in the camp, Saba’s older son, Sohrab, reacted to the violence he had witnessed by becoming extremely vigilant of his mother and would not let her out of his sight. The youngest daughter, two-year-old Hila, cried and demanded her mother’s attention all the time. Support and comfort from her sister-in-law and protection from her brother enabled Saba to survive the perils and stresses of the camp. A UNHCR social worker, Anna, who befriended Saba while her children attended the camp school, listened to Saba as she recalled her year at the camp. Saba cried as she vividly recollected the time when a camp official sexually assaulted her while she made her way to a nearby toilet. Saba could not disclose this to anyone, fearing the stigma and community ostracisation that she would experience and because victim-blaming would hold her responsible for the assault.

Anna, noting Saba’s feelings of hopelessness and depression, wanted to assist her in imagining a future for herself and her children, knowing that culturally Afghans place great emphasis on their children’s future with the hope that their children will care for them in old age. So, Anna helped Saba focus on the next chapter of her life. She asked Saba what her hopes were for their future. Saba’s greatest desire was for her and her children to apply for refugee status in the US. She told Anna that she wanted a good education for her children, a place of safety and peace for herself and her children, especially her daughters, and to live without the constant fear of violence.

Anna helped Saba to seek sponsorship from the Lutheran Family Services (one of many faith-based American refugee agencies, e.g., Catholic Charities and Jewish Community Services) for resettlement as refugees in the United States (US).
under a special category. The sponsorship was granted and Saba prayed many times a day, thanking Allah for this blessing. However, it would be difficult to leave her brother and his family. They had been a great source of strength for them.

The Lutheran Family Services sent Allison, a social worker, to meet Saba and her four children at Baltimore airport and assist them with housing, food, and access to healthcare. Allison also supported their social settlement needs, including encouraging Saba to negotiate appropriate school places for her older children, Sohrab, Laila and Malook and become an active advocate for her children at the school. Allison also helped Saba attend English language classes, anticipating that she would get a job when her youngest daughter, Hila, entered kindergarten.

Most nights during the first year in Baltimore, Saba cried herself to sleep, feeling afraid and lonely without her brother’s support. She continued to have nightmares about her husband and eldest son. Being socially isolated by culture, language and shyness, Saba did not make new friends. There was hardly anyone to whom she could turn, but found comfort in prayer.

After a few months, Saba began to trust Allison and shared her nightmares over the murder of her husband and eldest son, her constant fear following the sexual assault at the camp and her worries about her children growing up in a new environment. Allison also learned that Saba found comfort in prayers. Allison had to decide which of the three concerns to focus upon: the pre-flight experience of seeing her husband and son killed, the camp experiences of stress and assault, or the current stresses of loneliness and feelings of inadequacy in bringing up four children. Allison wondered how she could build on Saba’s one source of support, her faith.

Allison introduced Saba to Fatima, a Muslim Community Caseworker at a local masjid who mobilised volunteers to transport the family to and from the masjid. Saba began attending a women’s group organised by Fatima, where she met and spoke with women from various parts of Afghanistan. They had had similar life experiences before coming to the US and subsequently.

Two years after settling in the US, Saba began to earn an income. Allison and Fatima discovered that Saba was a good cook, and they encouraged and assisted her to begin catering Afghan food from her home. Fatima helped Saba negotiate with a few local ethnic grocery stores to provide supplies at a discount; and recruited customers from the masjid to order Saba’s food when they entertained.

Allison and Fatima continued to monitor the family’s progress for five years and noted that Saba gradually began to feel hopeful. She continued to worry about her siblings and their families, who by this time had repatriated but found their village homes destroyed and land ownership disputed.

The women who were part of the Afghan refugee network at the masjid, helped Saba discover her extended family members who lived in Annandale, Virginia. Mina, her cousin, was excited to meet Saba and family after being separated for so many years. Mina and her family owned a restaurant and hired Saba until she
found a job to her liking. Saba discussed the possibility of moving with her children, and they agreed to move to be near family. Saba enjoyed the positive social influence of extended families, and was an asset to the restaurant business.

Transnational feminist analysis of poverty

Transnational feminists are particularly interested in the complex interconnections between life experiences of poverty for women within specific contexts and its relationship to wider social and political systems. They define poverty as a social phenomenon that cuts across the local/global divide and across nation-state boundaries in the context of emergent global capitalism (Grewal, 2005; Mohanty, 2006; Mohanty, 2013). Transnational feminists also challenge narrow definitions of poverty that are income-based to promote a broader understanding of poverty that is multidimensional and grounded in women’s lived realities (Jaggar, 2009, 2013b). Transnational feminists undertake intersectional analyses that examine experiences of poverty according to race, gender, nationalism, class and other divisions. They also examine women’s resistance and resilience in the face of poverty. They emphasise poverty’s socio-political nature, making it both a public issue and a private experience (Moosa-Mitha and Ross-Sheriff, 2010; Moosa-Mitha, 2016).

Analysis of the case studies

Five themes relevant to defining poverty emerged from the transnational feminist analysis of the case studies: (a) holistic understanding of poverty; (b) women’s vulnerability to violence that exacerbates poverty; (c) marginalised power relations as a form of poverty; (d) women’s unpaid care work as poverty; and (e) transnational nature of poverty.

Defining poverty holistically

The debate on defining poverty has a long history. Townsend (2010) when exploring the meaning of poverty in the 1960s argued against the prevailing income-based definitions of poverty on three grounds: (a) poverty was a relative concept and understanding it through a universal, single indicator simply did not do justice to its complexity. He pointed out that people’s definition of necessities differed according to their class and culture as it did in comparison to other countries; (b) any universal standard sociologists adopted to define poverty was arbitrary rather than based on objective fact. The subjective nature of poverty, Townsend (2010) contended, would make it impossible for one standard to capture the multiple ways in which people living in poverty would themselves define deprivation; and (c) poverty was not a static, but a dynamic concept that changed and responded to the web of relationships within people’s lives. Standards, on the other hand, were static.

In the 50 years since Townsend first argued against a universal, economically based, standard definition of poverty, not much has changed in how it is defined. The normative definition of absolute poverty is that of the World Bank Organization (WBO) which measures poverty using the universal standard of the ‘International Poverty Line’ (IPL) which is measured at earnings of $1.90 a day (World Bank Organization, 2015).

There are vigorous debates and critiques of IPL as the standard way of assessing poverty. A number of attempts have sought to introduce more multi-dimensional definitions of poverty
that are not entirely income-based or universal. Survanien (cited by Anand et al., 2010) has suggested garnering information on the national level of the cost of goods and services specific to each country. Others have attempted a definition of poverty that assesses ‘distress and degradation’, or non-economic measure such as well-being and longevity (Anand et al., 2010). Hunt (2010) argues for a broader definition of poverty giving the example of Indigenous peoples who consider themselves poor as a result of the loss of relationships with kin. Yet, the IPL continues to dominate governments’, non-governmental organisations’ and social services’ definitions of poverty.

The case studies of these two migrant women reveal the paucity of an income-based notion of poverty. In both cases, forced migration temporarily suspended their ability to participate in the formal economy. As forced migrants living in refugee camps they remained largely outside the formal economic system. Income-based definitions of poverty have no way of articulating the particular circumstances of refugees living in refugee camps. They cannot be assumed to earn an income. Moreover, the women themselves articulated their own definition of a quality of life that was not entirely income-based when they spoke of the importance of housing, education, peace and safety as primary considerations when seeking alternative refuge. This, however, does not mean that income is not important to a sense of well-being, as is clearly evident in both case studies. Rather, a singular notion of poverty that is entirely income-based does not reflect the multi-dimensional nature of poverty. Moreover, Jaggar (2013b) argues that among its other flaws the IPL has a gender bias as it does not take into consideration other forms of poverty that women are particularly vulnerable to. We consider this in our subsequent discussion.

**Women’s vulnerability to violence**

One of the salient features of the case studies presented is the sexual violence that the women experienced and the fear of sexual violence that marked these women’s lives. Sexualised violence leaves a deep and traumatic effect on the lives of women. The case studies highlight sexual violence as a barrier to education and other social services for fear of exposing oneself to further violence, impeding efforts at income elevation and impacting upon mental health.

Experiences of violence more generally is a fact of forced migrant women’s lives. Saba witnessed the murder of her husband and son prompting their move to Pakistan and forced migration. Sharifa’s family lived with the spectre of violence hanging over them due to the resentment at their presence that some Kenyans expressed in violent forms. Raising the income level of these two families would not result in a better quality of life on this count. Ignoring the gendered nature of violence and the degree to which it impoverishes the lives of women overlooks a significant aspect of what constitutes a poor quality of life.

**Unequal power relationships**

Poverty is a structural issue that exists within unequal power relationships where one group of people maintains a dominant status over another economically, politically and socially. Inability to affect change against dominant systems is a common experience for people living in poverty as demonstrated by the case studies. While both women in the case studies showed incredible resilience and agency in changing their life conditions, their ability to do so was constrained by the power dynamics in the refugee camps. These were gendered, racialised and nationalist. For example, in spite of the strength they displayed in fighting for the survival of their families, they did not have the power to seek redress for the sexualised violence they experienced. Their
marginalisation was particularly apparent given that their rights of protection as refugees were violated by the police officers and camp guards who were entrusted with the task of safeguarding them. Furthermore, patriarchal cultural traditions in both cases barred them from seeking justice due to victim-blaming where the women would be held responsible for the sexualised violence that they had endured. Jaggar (2013b) speaks to broadening the definition of poverty so that it takes into account women’s experiences of marginality in relation to exercising power within systems and structures that dominate them.

**Gendered dimensions of unpaid care work**

Labour is a gendered concept where care work, overwhelmingly undertaken by women, is either unpaid or undervalued monetarily both locally and globally (Pyle, 2006). The work of social reproduction involved in looking after the needs of the family is simply not counted as ‘labour’ unlike the ‘productive’ work performed by working in the marketplace (Jaggar, 2013). It is striking how much ‘work’ both women put into primary care, taking responsibility for providing emotional support to their children, particularly their daughters, attempting to protect them from further sexualised violence. The women were actively involved in ensuring that their families not only survived but also thrived by experiencing a greater sense of belonging in the refugee camps, utilising economic, affective and cultural resources, such as continuing the tradition of the *vave*, to make this happen. In both case studies, the women take the initiative to plan long-term to get the family out of the refugee camp. For refugee women who are in a precarious labour market, not receiving material rewards for the indispensable care work that they undertake produces even greater economic poverty.

**Poverty as transnational**

Government and non-governmental inter/national agencies such as the WBO, assume a state-centred approach to defining poverty. The narratives of forced migrants reveal the transnational nature of poverty in several ways. Refugee camps themselves occupy a transnational, liminal space within nation-states, existing at the margins of society that are usually maintained by international organisations like the Red Cross and the UNHCR (Amnesty, 2005). Due to lack of funding, these refugee camps are often unable to provide for adequate shelter, food, clothing and schools for children. Nation-state based assessments of poverty do not take into account a vast number of people living in refugee camps and detentions centres.

The transnational status of forced migrants as a result of their movement from one nation-state to another results in poverty due to loss of income because their education, credentials and skills are often downgraded by receiving societies (Ross-Sheriff et al., 2012). It can take up to five years for forced migrants to reintegrate fully into receiving societies (Goździak and Long, 2005).

Global capitalism is a transnational phenomenon, which due to deregulation of markets across nation-states has substantially increased the gap between rich people and poor people (Grewal, 2005). This has caused economic hardship resulting in forced migration with people seeking economic stability in other countries. This renders them vulnerable to harsh treatment by receiving countries, resulting from commonly held anti-immigrant sentiments reflected by the richer countries in the global North (Rygiel, 2011). Globalisation and the increased movement of people forced to migrate has triggered a rise in nationalist rhetoric and sentiments as can be seen in the rise in racist violence, closing of borders and anti-immigration policies not just in countries in the global North but more widely (Mohanty, 2013). Sharifa’s family was
forced to migrate due to a nationalist civil war in their country and was met with further violence in the refugee camp. This made it harder for these two families to immigrate to more stable societies, whether Kenya or the US. Living as a minority in conditions of nationalist extremism is a facet of poverty that undercuts local/global boundaries (Rygiel, 2011). In a world where refugees account for 65 million people globally and rising (Edwards, 2016), this oversight in policy and scholarship is striking.

Implications for social work practice

Transnational feminist analyses of poverty based on the lived realities of the two families offer important lessons for social work practitioners that we discuss next, according to the five themes identified earlier. Understanding poverty in holistic terms (Samuels and Ross-Sheriff, 2008) requires social workers to work in multi-faceted ways with families rather than simply targeting income generation, as the examples of Hadiya and Anna demonstrate. These social workers understood that the cultural, psychological, social and economic deprivations were all a part of what it meant to experience poverty. It required them to prioritise different aspects of intervention depending on what the families presented. At the same time, they also worked on income asset formation. This is exemplified by the way in which Anna worked with Saba to identify and encourage her talent in cooking to generate income. Given the barriers to income generation, this constitutes an important area of intervention (Eltaiba, 2014). Simultaneously, Anna intervened to address the educational, health, mental health, safe housing, and culturally satisfying relationship needs of the family.

Gender and cultural sensitivity is an important aspect of social work practice with families living in poverty, particularly forced migrants. Given that poverty is a gendered phenomenon, it is important that social workers practise in a gender-sensitive manner. Gender sensitivity is not divorced from culturally sensitive practice, as is evidenced in these case studies. Both women lived in patriarchal cultures that made it impossible for them to disclose sexual violence without being blamed for it. Eltaiba (2014) also identifies the importance of gender sensitivity when working with women refugees experiencing poverty. All three social workers in the case studies showed their capabilities in working in nuanced, gendered and culturally sensitive ways. For example, Alison working with Saba in Baltimore made good use of culture and faith-based resources to address Saba’s needs. Green social workers develop locality-specific, culturally relevant forms of practice to empower those they work with (Dominelli, 2012).

The marginalised status of forced migrants requires that social workers use the powers that they have as professionals to engender structural changes (Dominelli, 2012). For example, Hadiya and Anna both recognised the sexual assault that the women had experienced and while they helped the women individually to heal, they did not attempt to address structural changes by getting the officials at the refugee camps to address this injustice. It is possible that their doing this would not have been tolerated by the officials. However, social workers should view it as part of their mandate to challenge oppressive systems within which they work on behalf of their clients/service users, as encouraged by green social work (Dominelli, 2012). The case studies also reveal the effectiveness of working within a strengths-based model of practice. All three social workers identified, acknowledged and valued the sources of resiliency in these two women. For example, Anna understood that faith and culture were important sources of Saba’s strength and used these effectively to enhance Saba’s quality of life.

Social work practice with families experiencing poverty is intensive, long-term work. As both case studies show, it took these families over five years before they acquired some sense
Poverty among women forced to migrate

of hope and belonging in the countries in which they had settled. Government settlement programmes in most countries do not take a long-term view and offer short-term settlement services for refugees. These overlook the complexity of their needs.

Transnational social work practice entails understanding the transnational lives of forced migrants. This means taking into consideration the different effects of the journey/ies undertaken on each member of the family. These families may have close relatives who live in refugee camps or countries from which they have fled. Concern about their welfare and whereabouts will also affect them. Social workers should be sensitive to the anxiety, survival guilt, and divided sense of belonging that many forced migrants experience. Like Alison, they should seek ways of forging connections between the families they serve and other community and family networks that are available in the same country and occupy a similar transnational status.

Conclusion

Jaggar (2013) has argued that conceptual analyses of poverty overlook the voices and lived experiences of people living in poverty. We have analysed the definition of poverty based on the narratives of women who are forced migrants to address this gap. This located our alternative understanding of poverty within the specific contexts of the lives of two families who became forced migrants. Transnational feminist analyses enabled us to examine and make connections between the lived realities of two women’s families living in poverty and their wider socio-political systems. We conclude that an alternative definition of poverty is holistic, gendered, intersectional, political and transnational.

At the end, we consider the implications of our conceptual analysis for social work practices and recommend a set of practices that are congruent with transnational feminist insights into poverty. Transnational feminists focus on the uneven effects of poverty because a disaster leaves some people more devastated in its aftermath than others. Green social workers’ holistic orientation provides a useful model for working with forced migrant women.

References


