



The experience of Congolese women refugees in South Africa: A Church response

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Abstract

The lives of women refugees are often challenging wherever they find asylum, and Congolese women refugees living in South Africa are no different. Many left their home country during the six-year war (1996-2002) in the Democratic Republic of Congo, but the migration continues because of political and economic insecurity, among other reasons. Refugees are motivated by a desperate search for a more secure life. In this paper the focus is primarily on the challenges faced by female Congolese refugees in South Africa, especially in Pietermaritzburg, and how they manage to live and overcome the plight of displaced people. The Church¹ has an important role to play in the lives of these refugees.

Keywords: Sexual abuse, self- reliance, discrimination. Self- actualization.

Introduction

The problem of conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) that has caused many women and their families to flee is well documented in print and internet publications. The war in the DRC, mainly in the east, makes life so hard that young men and young women are compelled to seek asylum abroad.

The long rule of the late president Mobutu Sese Seko (1965-1997) resulted in a plundering of the country's resources, leading to political and economic chaos. The Mobutu regime was so abhorrent to Congolese people that it resulted in the seizure of power by the late president Laurent Kabila and his allies in 1997 (Norwegian Refugee Council 2002:41). In the meantime, tense relations with Rwandans, Burundians and Ugandans posed another problem which led to the massacre of many Congolese people. The Hutu people who have fled from Rwanda and settled on the border of the DRC have exacerbated the problem. For example, President Kagame of Rwanda was afraid that these refugees would fight back because they fled with their weapons,² resulting in Congolese people being casualties and dying in large numbers as well. According to the United Nations High Commission for

¹ In this study I use the word Church in its broad sense as the union or communion of persons with one another through the grace of Christ (Dulles 1985:15). I am not interested in promoting one particular denomination but the whole body of Christ represented by Christianity in general.

² For six years, several armed groups from the abovementioned countries organised large massacres against the Congolese when pretending to protect the new government led by President Kagame in Rwanda. The Rwandese people were able to do this because they partnered with President Laurent Kabila whose aim was to take power from Mobutu.



Refugees (UNHCR) more than one million people were displaced by the end of 1999 because of the fighting (UNHCR, 2000:272). A cease-fire was agreed upon, but in spite of that peace has remained fragile and many people are continuing to leave the country, especially the youth, both male and female.

Most of the Congolese women in South Africa, particularly in the Pietermaritzburg area, fall in the category of people defined as refugees by the convention of the Organization of African Unity (now the African Union). According to this convention, a refugee is any person who,

owing the external aggression, occupation, foreign domination or events seriously disturbing public order in either part or whole of his country of origin or nationality is compelled to leave his place of habitual residence in order to seek refuge in another place outside his country of origin or nationality (Mayotte, 1992).

The concerns raised in this paper arise from my experience of living among Congolese women refugees in Pietermaritzburg since my arrival in 2003 and when I was doing my Honours degree in Theology and Development at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (2005). They have been and still are a source of inspiration to me as I consider how they manage to live and overcome the plight of displaced people.

In this paper I am not focusing on painting the misery of women refugees for fundraising purposes, as is the habit of many humanitarian organisations, but I would like to show how these women are able to transcend their plight. The paper deals with the efforts of Congolese women refugees in Pietermaritzburg to make the best out of their challenging situations. Unlike their male counterparts, who sometimes abuse alcohol and engage in illegitimate activities, adult females are generally preoccupied with life-sustaining activities and are able to overcome enormous obstacles using their skills. They organise income-generating schemes such as hairdressing, dressmaking and hawking goods to provide a living for their families here in South Africa, and even to support those remaining in the Congo.

My argument is that the Church, in its theology of love and human dignity, should play a significant role in creating activities that can help women refugees in generating income for their survival.

Methodology

This paper is the result of my research work among Congolese women refugees living in Pietermaritzburg during my study in Theology and Development at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. It is mostly a reflection of the life Congolese women living in Pietermaritzburg, sharing their experience as female refugees.

In this article I chose Wilson's data collection method in his *Less-structured method: Face-to face interview in free format* (Wilson, 1996: 94-120). This approach has the advantage of being less artificial and more natural because supplementary questions can be asked according to the reply received, in a way that does not interfere with the natural flow of conversation (Wilson 1996:94-120). It is like natural conversation between two people,



letting the informants feel free to share their own experience to enrich the understanding of issues related to the study.

I used open-ended questions to encourage women and informants to speak as freely as possible on life issues affecting them, conditions of lodging and how they earn their living. Topics such as abuse, violence and family breakdown were dealt with and we inspired one another.

My research was limited to Congolese women refugees living in Pietermaritzburg. This choice was governed by a number of factors. Firstly, Congolese women in Pietermaritzburg were accessible to me. Secondly; culturally and linguistically I am at an advantage because I belong to the community of Congolese women. Thirdly, the analysis of the condition of Congolese women in Pietermaritzburg may constitute a sample from which one can understand the condition of Congolese refugees in South Africa, since they have similar aspirations and life styles throughout the country. Congolese refugee women in South Africa work in salons, sell goods in the streets, and a few of them sew Congolese clothes.

Challenges encountered by female Congolese refugees

Congolese women refugees face the same major problems of refugees everywhere, which consist of getting a shelter, safety, food and primary health care. Since there is no refugee camp open for them, displaced people from Congo who arrive in South Africa are left to their own devices in finding accommodation. In many cases, they are penniless upon arrival because the little money they had when they left the DRC or refugee camps elsewhere was spent during their migration to South Africa. They struggle to acquire legal papers for resettlement and also to earn a living. The solution is often found in the solidarity of those who are already settled. Congolese persons living in South Africa often share their homes and scarce resources with the newcomers until they obtain their identity documents and start earning some money. The most distressing reality is that even after they have secured the legal documents, the kind of jobs available are those that generate insufficient returns. As a result, most of the refugees are obliged to share flats with others and sacrifice their privacy and hygiene. These conditions make women refugees suffer more than their male counterparts. In this paper, I will share three stories of women interviewed in Pietermaritzburg. I have agreed with them to write their stories but not to reveal their names for ethical reasons. The codes WR1, WR2 and WR3 are used to represent the three women.

Congolese Women's Stories

WR1

WR1 is married and a mother of four children, three sons and one daughter. They have been in Pietermaritzburg for six years,³ after a short stay of three months in Durban. Her husband is employed by another Congolese in a barber shop for men, while WR1 hawks articles for children on the street. The husband is paid R600 a week and WR1's income varies with circumstances. She said that often she returns home without having made any sales. She moves several times from one street to another particularly because some nationals are not friendly towards foreigner hawkers. She says they are called *makwere kwere*, a derogatory expression used by South Africans which means 'strangers'.

³ This story was heard in 2005.



The family shares a two-bedroom flat with one other couple and three single men. WR1 complained of poor sanitation because no one is committed to keeping the common kitchen and toilet clean. According to Congolese culture, the three young men cannot sweep the floor, clean the kitchen or toilet when there are two women in the flat. WR1 used to clean the whole house, but stopped because she refused to be a slave of men with whom she had no connection apart from all being Congolese refugees. In desperation, she cannot move to another house due to insufficient income: 'Our income is too small that we cannot afford to rent a flat of our own, we are obliged to share until we get a better wage,' she says.

For WR1, the environment is not good for teaching moral values to children. Each couple sleeps with their children, young and old, in the same room. In the lounge, the three single men bring in their girlfriends from time to time. It is not rare to find them having sex with their girlfriends in the bathroom.

WR1 was a singer in the church when she was in the DRC but now she thinks she has lost her faith. 'I cannot attend church because I work every day and I make more money on Sunday because there are few hawkers on the street. The church is unable to supply for my need.' She believes that if she were given an opportunity to sew fashion clothes as she did in the DRC or if her husband could have his own barbershop, they could live a better life.

WR2

WR2 is 25 years old, working in a salon as a hairdresser. She joined her husband in South Africa four years ago. After being in a refugee camp in Tanzania, her husband left for South Africa and, when he received his resettlement papers, his wife joined him. Upon arrival, WR2 discovered that her husband was living with another woman. She suffered from beating and being thrown out of the house several times until her husband decided to move out with his new wife to Newcastle, another town in KwaZulu-Natal. The husband said that it was his way of expressing thanks to his South African wife that he got the South African permanent status, and, therefore, he could not divorce her. WR2 is working hard to earn money to pay for a room in a house hired by other Congolese refugees. She feels too young to remain single with her two sons. On the other hand, she is afraid of remarriage because many single men among Congolese refugees have South African girlfriends. She fears getting involved in the same kind of relationship she had before and again being divorced. WR2 is still attending church but nobody has approached her to hear her story. 'Do you think the church can find a solution for my case?' she asked me.

WR3

WR3 was a primary school teacher in the DRC, but in Pietermaritzburg she sells Congolese food. She is in the shop early in the morning and comes back late in the evening. She told me that it is the only way to make a living. Her husband does casual jobs. Unfortunately while in South Africa he has become a drinker. Several times her husband had close encounters with death but, by grace, he is still alive. They live in a one-bedroom flat with two other men who are also drinkers. WR3's fourteen-year-old younger sister takes care of her children while she is out. WR3 is a wounded woman. The two single men eat at her table every day without contributing to the cost. They are friends of her husband because they drink together and the husband encourages them not to cook for themselves because, culturally, women do the cooking. However, what offends WR3 the most is that, during her prolonged absence from the house, her husband and one of his friends sexually abused her younger sister. WR3 finds herself in a dilemma. She cannot send her sister back to the DRC because they lost their parents, so she is the one who is responsible for her. She also



cannot rent a separate room for her because she does not have enough money to do so and even if she did, her sister is too young to live alone. She says that it would be an act of betrayal to report the case of her husband to the police because the Congolese community would not forgive her. As a community living in a foreign country, matters are settled in the family and not with the police. Besides, divorce is not culturally encouraged. She argues: 'Because of my children, I cannot divorce my husband. My Congolese pastor asked me to be patient and pray for the conversion of my husband. But now I fear for my younger sister and myself becoming infected with HIV.' She also said 'Maybe my sister and I are already HIV positive but we are afraid to be tested, and of what will happen to my children if my sister and I die.'

The above stories and many others I have heard among these women drew my attention to a number of challenges they have to confront in their lives.

Cultural challenges

Culturally, women refugees struggle to cope with habits and customs of the land of their asylum. They have to break some cultural barriers of clothing, language and food in order to be integrated into their new environment. They have to learn languages of the country for communication when they trade on the street or work in hair salons. Most of them easily learn to speak local languages from their customers but few speak English. The reason is that English requires formal education that they do not have. Congolese women refugees also suffer because of their social background. They are expected to do all the domestic work even when they spend the whole day working outside their homes for a living. Culturally, men in most tribes of the DRC are not supposed to do house work such as cleaning, cooking and dish washing when a woman is present. Since many Congolese refugees share one flat to minimise the cost of rental, the load of cleaning the toilet and kitchen, sometimes even cooking, is put on the women living in the flat. It is not rare to find that refugees live in flats with poor sanitation when the few women are busy trying to make a living. In her comment on 'Hospitality and Spirituality' Oduyoye considers this voluntary sacrifice as dehumanising for women:

Women face daily survival issues of managing their households and they give up their time and energy, muster their ingenuity and creativity to assure life for others. The question some have raised is whether we can label sacrifice, 'that which one does because one cannot do otherwise' (Oduyoye, 2001:107).

The situation becomes disturbing when one realises that strangers who have no familial ties with the couple, apart from being males living under the same roof, are exploiting women. For 'cultural' reasons, many husbands accept that their wives carry on the duty of serving other males sharing the same flat. It takes courage to raise a voice of protest to challenge oppressive cultural traditions.

Marital instability

Although there are few cases of divorce recorded among Congolese refugees, the instability among couples is very high. Many women are affected by the insecure marital life they lead



in South Africa. There are several causes of instability in refugees' marriages. From my previous study⁴ I have distinguished two major reasons for insecure families.

Firstly, some male refugees are taking wives among South African nationals to get citizenship and enhance their chance of integration in South Africa. The hunt for South African women out of self-interest or for pleasure is destabilising marriages among Congolese refugees. The little money that refugees earn daily puts them in a better situation than some poor citizens. For this reason, many young, poor women citizens are attracted by Congolese refugees. Cases of unfaithfulness are reported in many families of Congolese refugees in South Africa. In contrast, women are socialised to be dependent on and supportive of their husbands to meet cultural and religious standards of marital life. They cannot initiate divorce because it sounds odd to the family, unless the husband decides to desert the home and run away with his South African girlfriend. Madipoane Masenya remarks:

An African Christian woman who decides to remain faithful to the cultural expectations of men's control over her sexuality as well as to the men-friendly interpretations of the Bible therefore, finds herself in a dilemma (Masenya, 2003:123).

Masenya also discusses the situation of women in South Africa with regard to the HIV and AIDS pandemic. The statement is applicable to Congolese women refugees who accept hardship at the hands of unfaithful husbands. It is a dilemma because they feel insecure in their marriage and their health, living in a country with a high prevalence of HIV infection, but unable to break off their marital bonds. Culture has taught them to sacrifice their lives for others. One cannot prove that women refugees are not being unfaithful to their husbands but because a wife's infidelity is condemned in Congolese culture, it is likely that most women try to remain faithful in their marriages.

Secondly, marriages also become insecure because of the lack of family life. Flats are so crowded that each family has to share one room or half a room with grown-up children. Husband and wife are separated for a whole day as each partner has to earn something for survival, and when they come home they cannot enjoy a private life as a couple. Children and other flatmates are all around them. The result is that some men have resorted to spending time drinking alcohol, and come back drunk just to sleep. However, wives are not socially allowed to spend evenings in the bar because they have the duty of catering for husband, children and friends. Marriages become fragile among Congolese refugees because of the kind of promiscuous life they are forced to lead and the absence of privacy and intimacy among the couples.

Sexual abuse and violence

The promiscuity in refugees' homes and drunkenness among male refugees are key factors that cause violence towards and sexual abuse of women. Single women and young girls experience rape and other kinds of sexual abuse from male refugees or relatives. As mentioned earlier, refugees are obliged to share the house in order to be able to pay the rent. The bigger the house, the more occupants there are and married and single people live under one roof and sometimes share one bathroom and one toilet. Grown-up girls and parents or relatives sometimes sleep in the same room or in the lounge. It becomes very difficult to maintain moral conduct in such a house because there is no privacy. Young girls

⁴ Unpublished project for Honours degree on empowering Congolese refugee women in South Africa, UKZN, 2005.



and single women often fall victims to rape, incest and other kinds of sexual assault. As described above in the case of WR3, many Congolese refugees do not report these cases to the police. Refugees live in fear and they do not like to be involved or interact with the police. Many of them do not have valid documentation and they are afraid of being jailed or repatriated. Moreover, to report a fellow Congolese to the police is considered an act of betrayal. Cases of women abuse are often dealt with in the family, but in many cases they are simply covered up. The law of silence seems to prevail, ignoring the trauma of those women who are victims of such a humiliation. This is the kind of women's silence that Isabel Phiri has observed in some Christian homes as she explains:

They have acknowledged that there is a problem of violence in Christian homes in KwaZulu-Natal, yet the Churches and the victims are not using their human rights to speak out and find solutions (Phiri, 2000:85).

The silence is not only kept in cases of rape and incest but also in frequent wife beating induced by drunkenness. Women are taught to endure hardship and domestic violence without disclosing them to the public. Many of these women feel that it would be better to die than expose their husbands to the police. Despite the provision of human rights guaranteed by the government of South Africa, these rights clash with the socialised habit of silence among Congolese women.

Discrimination

Discrimination is not a new phenomenon to refugees but women seem to feel it intensely because they are discriminated against as foreigners and also as women. Most of them are hawkers on the street where they have frequent contact with customers. Since many of them cannot speak the language of the common citizen, they are labelled *makwere kwere*. Some customers refuse to buy their products just because they do not know the local language. The fact that Congolese refugees trade on the street also creates antipathy among nationals doing the same job. Rivalry is great among hawkers and in most cases it results in persecution and violence. Often the police arrest them because they do not have valid licences to trade. Discrimination against foreigners is observed in the professional job market. Congolese refugees have problems getting well-paid jobs in offices and companies because priority is given to nationals who are also in need of jobs.

Xenophobia leads to a situation whereby unskilled nationals are often given jobs while qualified refugees are rejected. There is also a barrier of language and equivalence of qualifications. It is not easy for employers in South Africa to understand the academic qualifications of some Congolese because their credentials are written in French. Some job opportunities are open to refugees in the field of security work but even there, men are preferred to women. As a result, the chances for Congolese women to have regular jobs are very slim.

The above list of challenges faced by Congolese refugees, especially women refugees, should not make us lose sight of the inspiration and determination that Congolese refugees demonstrate in coping with their hardships.

Congolese women refugees as human asset

I have shown in this paper a number of challenges that make the life of Congolese refugees miserable. Women suffer more than their male counterparts because of their dependency, gender discrimination, abuse and xenophobia. Nonetheless, their situation is not doomed to



remain hopeless; they have become a source of inspiration and courage to others. Congolese refugees are working tirelessly, especially women, for the survival of their families. They are ready to challenge the barriers of language, rejection and abuse in order to earn a living in a hostile environment. Their example has become a real stimulus to nationals who have learnt to fight poverty. Many people in South Africa, including women, who used to wait for a meagre social grant to live on for a whole month have learned how refugees can make money and raise their families from what were considered odd jobs. The two main sectors where Congolese women refugees operate are hairdressing in salons and hawking on the street.

Today many South African citizens are now working on the street and in hair salons to earn money. Many women who used to be housewives in the DRC when their husbands were breadwinners have become a primary support to their families in their country of refuge. While some husbands are often involved in drunkenness and immorality, women are committed to bettering their lives and overcoming the plight of being a refugee. They earn money for food, clothes and sometimes money for funding the education of their children. Some of them send support to people in the DRC. Bernadette Mbuy Beya, a Congolese writer, expresses clearly this new trend:

The African woman is accustomed to being maintained by a man. Today she finds herself in a society of increasing poverty, in which one person can no longer see the needs of many other people (Mbeya, 1992: 165).

The above statement finds its full application in the situation of women refugees, who are compelled to be proactive so that they may supplement what men earn for living. The hardship faced by refugees and their effort to make the best out of their misfortune becomes a driving force behind their establishment. The UNHCR acknowledges the positive impact which returnees have upon their country. 'When former refugees and displaced people go back to their homes, they frequently contribute to the peace-building process by revitalising the local economy' (UNHCR 1997:168). This positive impact is not restricted to returnees in their home areas but can be displayed in their country of asylum if they are allowed to participate in the process of development by host nations. Host governments often overlook this aspect of seeing refugees as an asset because of the negative connotation attached to the status of refugees. What Congolese refugees, and other African refugees, are doing is a great contribution to the development of South Africa. Kibread affirms that African refugees are a stimulus to economic development,

I will try to piece together some fragmented evidence to indicate that African refugees also display a capacity for hard work and perseverance to attain self-sufficiency despite all odds, and that they do not in all cases represent a drain on the resources and services of the host society, but actively contribute to economic growth (Kibread, 1985:124).

My argument in this paper is that the Church has an important role to play in order to empower and channel the energy and determination of refugees towards more constructive activities. The Church can provide theological reflections to back the process of transforming refugees from being a burden to becoming an asset for the development of their country of asylum.



Theological insights and the role of the Church

The Church has the knowledge and capacity that can enable it to play a positive role in changing the perception of the status of refugees. As God's agent, the Church is called to preach good news to the poor and alleviate the misery of the needy and has the mission to interpret the Bible and present the Gospel of freedom and liberation to both refugees and nations who host them (Luke 4:18-19). Biblical accounts portray being an alien for a short or long period as a normal situation in the life of human beings. The book of Genesis describes all the patriarchs of Israel as aliens and foreigners moving from one place to another in search of a better life. At the end Jacob and all his descendants relocated to Egypt, escaping the drought in the region of Palestine (Genesis 46:1-7). The Law of Moses reminds the Israelites to be kind to foreigners because they were also foreigners in Egypt.

When an alien lives with you in your land, do not mistreat him. The alien living with you must be treated as one of your native-born. Love him as yourself, for you were aliens in Egypt. I am the LORD your God (Leviticus 19:33-34, cf. Exodus 23:9).

Later, after Israel had settled in the Promised Land, the two kingdoms of Israel were taken into exile in Assyria and Babylon where they lived as aliens. They were told by the prophet Jeremiah to be proactive even in a foreign land (Jeremiah 29). The New Testament opens with the new-born Jesus finding refuge in Egypt with his family. Herod wanted to kill the new-born king of Israel and, in order to save Jesus' life Joseph and Mary fled to Egypt (Matthew 2:13-18). Several biblical accounts show that seeking asylum in order to save one's life is normal under some circumstances. Many members of the early Church were scattered all over the world and became refugees when persecution broke out in Jerusalem (Acts 8:1). The book of Acts reports extensive persecution in the Roman Empire leading to the displacement of the believers (Acts 18: 2). The whole Church of Christ is told to behave as strangers on earth (John 17:16).

On the other hand, the Bible teaches that the fact of being foreigner does not hinder one from prosperous and participating in the development of the country of his or her asylum. Think of the biblical stories of Joseph, Daniel and his companions and Queen Esther. These are examples of foreigners who found fulfilment in a foreign country. The advice of the prophet Jeremiah can be used to illustrate God's will for refugees.

This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: 'Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.' (Jeremiah 29:4-7).

The Church has, therefore, solid biblical ground to take up the case of refugees everywhere, including defending Congolese women in Pietermaritzburg.



Educational role

The Church can make a significant contribution in sharing with refugees a message of hope and positive thinking. Refugees need to be taught that it is possible to change their condition from being passive receivers of relief to active and responsible self-reliant persons. Quoting Freire, Gutierrez speaks of a process of conscientisation in which:

The oppressed person rejects the oppressive consciousness which dwells in him [sic], becomes aware of his situation and finds his own language. He becomes, by himself, less dependent and freer, as he commits himself to the transformation and building up of society (Gutierrez, 1981:91).

The Church should use its teachings to formulate a theology of liberation and implement it for both the refugee and the host society, as expressed by Gutierrez:

This is a theology which does not stop with reflecting on the world, but rather tries to be part of the process through which the world is transformed. It is a theology which is open – in the protest against trampled human dignity, in the struggle against the plunder of the vast majority of people, in liberating love, and in the building of a new, just, and fraternal society – to the gift of the kingdom of God (Gutierrez, 1981:15).

The Church must teach a message of transformation, which brings people to reject anything that oppresses or tarnishes their dignity. We are born equal in the sight of the creator. This just and fraternal society to be sought must be grounded in the love of God, which embraces both refugees and host nations. The Church can convey this message of liberation by drawing resources from its theological reflections. Refugees need to be accepted and valued as human beings created in God's image. Heirs of the kingdom of God are people to whom Jesus would say, 'I was a stranger and you invited me (Matthew 25: 31-40) when you did it to the least of my brethren'. People have to be reminded from biblical teaching that true love that the Holy Spirit pours into our heart should enable us to embrace foreigners and the oppressed without discrimination. Refugees on their side should be willing to mingle and interact with their hosts without suspicion and hostility. The flow of understanding between the two groups will make a change in the way the situation of refugees is handled today by our governments.

The Church has the responsibility to proclaim the message which can liberate people from their degrading situation. Refugees in general and women in particular experience all kinds of vices, discrimination, cultural and political marginalisation and poverty. The word of God has the power to transform the human condition as expressed in the following statement:

Thus the word mediates not only what was heard but what appeared and was seen, and the goal of preaching is not mere profession of faith in the message, but rather a communion of life and love (Dulles, 1985:79).

According to Dulles, the preaching of the word should be practical, aiming at changing lives through love. The message of the Church should advocate for a better life and acceptance of one another as people created in God's image. This is the theology of incarnation in the context of African people, especially refugees, who are in need of Jesus to identify with them and free them from their plight as advocated by Rosini Gibellini:



In the debate between Africa and the Gospel, what is at issue is not only 'Western Christianity' which has been imposed by the mission of previous days, it is the Christianity of a society which is structured in poverty and oppression. There is a need to pass from a theology of adaptation to a theology of incarnation, but at the same to inquire in depth into the incarnation of Christianity in the perspective of the forgotten of the earth. In this perspective, the theology which is needed is that which is committed to respond to the cry of the African man [sic] (Gibellini, 1987:67).

Creation of jobs

In order to respond to the cry of African refugees, our theology should shift from theory to practice. The practical side of the Church's theology would lead to the creation of small projects for the development and empowerment of refugees as a response to poverty and oppression. The Church as a credible organisation in South Africa could play a significant role in the realisation of such projects under its supervision. This will allow refugees to break several barriers that they encounter such as communication, the process of fundraising, acquisition of legal papers and recognition by the government and the provision of a market for selling goods. The authority of the Church behind these projects may also give credibility to people who would like to use skills and knowledge that some refugees have. I concur with Oladipo as he remarks:

The Church has great strengths in promoting the formation of self-help groups and in enhancing their capacity for self-actualization. The development ministry organs of the Church should expand into formation and facilitation of cooperatives and associations built around the objectives of marketing and input supply (Oladipo, 2001:219–236).

Oladipo acknowledges that the Church has great potency to create ministries which address physical and material needs of people in a holistic way.

Conclusion

This paper is a celebration of courageous women who are able to challenge their plight in order to survive under difficult situations. I have evoked the plight of refugees from the DRC in South Africa and put an emphasis on the case of women refugees and their children, as the most vulnerable among the immigrants.

This paper advocates that refugees are not necessarily a burden to the host community, but rather an asset to the development of the society if they are integrated and empowered. To change the negative connotation attached to the situation of refugees, the Church of Christ should provide theological insights that would help both immigrants and host communities to accept one another and work hand in hand for social transformation. I have suggested some theological reflections that should motivate the Church to present a positive image of what it means to be a foreigner. Foreignness is neither a curse nor a state of irresponsibility, but a stimulus towards being useful to and hard workers in society.

The theology of liberation and incarnation should compel the Church to move from giving handouts to rendering refugees self-reliant. I find the words of Shao appropriate for the conclusion of this paper, that the challenge to African Churches is to empower Africans to realise the full potential of their talents and creativity and mobilise their contribution to the



development and progress of their community. These challenges, and others not mentioned here, are formidable. Yet they must be faced and met in order to begin the alleviation of poverty in Africa (Shao, 2001: 19–30).

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