

# Bread and roses: supporting refugee women in a multicultural group

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*This field report describes the support and reconciliation work in a weekly multicultural and multilingual therapeutic group of African refugee women in a shelter in Johannesburg, South Africa. The problems of the participants, the therapeutic approach (which includes: team building exercises, guided imaginations, story telling, drawing, modelling and discussion) as well as the impact on the participants, are all discussed.*

**Keywords:** reconciliation, support

## The support group

The 'new' South Africa opened its borders after 1994 to refugees from all over Africa. Thousands of refugees from the war torn countries such as: Rwanda, Burundi, Angola, Congo and Sudan entered South Africa to find a safe place of exile. This has placed increased burdens within the new society that has problems such as extremely high unemployment amongst their indigenous black people. Moreover, tensions and in-fighting between the refugee communities themselves, and between South Africans and refugees have increased these already existing tensions.

Working with refugee communities myself and my co-worker, a Swiss psychotherapist and a Philippine social worker, felt the low morale of the women so intensely that we started running a weekly psychological and morale support group in a women's refugee shelter<sup>1</sup>. The group is open to all women resident in the shelters coming from: Angola, Congo, Burundi, Rwanda and Sudan as

asylum-seekers and refugees within a compulsory context. Every week six to ten women attend the meeting. The group attendance is irregular because of the women's existing obligations: caring for the children, organising essential documents and looking for food, money and a way to earn a living after the first six to ten months in the shelter.

It is an ongoing project balanced on a knife-edge; the women describe and live out a suspended life between the danger from which they fled and the precarious safety of a life in exile. They express both their financial and food related needs as well as their needs of moral and psychological support. They continue to have all kind of experiences that continue to traumatise them daily in exile (criminality, lack of money, etc.) along with the stressful experience of loss (of the home country, of their home, work, and of family members) and a long-term sense of transience. Living peacefully together in the shelter and having to share food and space is not an easy task.

There are problems of language and culture. We have to struggle with several languages in the group (English, French, Swahili, Portuguese, Kirundi, Kinyarwanda, Lingala) with help of a Burundian male interpreter. The women feel comfortable and safe with him. He is the only male and his presence affects the group in a supportive way.

Our work with the group focused on 1) the practical requests made by the women to get access to education, health care, documents, a job (income) and a place to live

after the first year in the shelter, and 2) self-expression, communication, team-building and reconciliation work<sup>2</sup>.

### **The problems of the participants**

The core experiences of trauma are disempowerment and disconnection from others (Herman, J.L., 2001). Working with refugee women these experiences were reflected in many aspects in the group work. The discussions are often focused on us as facilitators and the women rarely interacted among themselves. They continue to live out their disempowerment and the disconnection from each other. They present themselves as passive, lost, tired, anxious and depressed, and are suffering from a lack of concentration. As trauma therapists we tell them that these are common and understandable reactions to the experienced events, and to a hard daily life as refugee.

Most of the women appear lost in a nostalgic view of the past, which they describe as a time in which everything was okay and intact. They present themselves as lost in a shapeless present without any other possible future other than going back to their home countries as soon as possible. This is often, in reality, virtually impossible because they come from countries that are still at war.

Their identity crisis is mirrored in the ever-changing make-up of the group. The women are always late in attending the group meetings. During meetings the door never remains closed, some are coming, others leaving, looking after the children, and often the children coming and going as well. Every week we have a different group because the women have a lot of other obligations. Women leave the shelter and the group, and then others join. We have continually attempted to create boundaries (punctual beginning, remaining in the group until the

end (90 minutes), keeping the older, non breast-fed children out of the room, announcing they are leaving the shelter to say good-bye, and to be present to welcome the newcomers). We have been unable to keep these boundaries because the group is inherently made-up of this ever-changing group. It is our challenge to be open and flexible, always keeping in mind that the goal of the group is providing moral support in a situation of ongoing stress and trauma for the refugee women (daily life problems, health problems, burglaries in the Shelter, etc.).

### **Our therapeutic approach**

We emphasise to the women that the group belongs to them - and not to us - and that they have to take the responsibility of expressing their needs. Given the instability of the group (in terms of attendance and in terms of the changes in the shelter where there is a permanent fluctuation) we as facilitators have to take more responsibility than initially envisioned keeping the group active and alive. We have to remind the participants at each meeting what happened during the last, and therefore to assist them in making suggestions for the following meeting.

Every three or four months, we also have to ask them if they really want to continue with the group. Yet, despite the lethargy and passivity of the women in the group, they always insist that we continue. As a result of the loss of familiar cultural backing, their ability to integrate new experiences is seemingly reduced (van der Veer, 1991). This is why they are often not able to participate more actively in the group.

*Conflicts in the shelter.* For us as therapists, it is a continuous struggle to handle the manifest and latent squabbles and fights among the women; about food, which is scarce in the shelter, and about their position and work

sharing in the shelter group. We have to talk to them about very material needs (getting more food) without the possibility of giving this material help. We must show them, again and again, the possibilities of moral and psychological support work. Often, one or more of the women approach us after meetings asking us to provide them with money for food, transport, or the needs of their children. Or, for example, at each meeting we arrive with a bag of biscuits. Given the different possibilities of eating them, such as during the group session or taking them to their rooms to eat later in the evening (e.g. during *Ramadan*) we have observed that the women even have disagreements over this. These disagreements, which extend to struggling for daily food and, as mentioned previously, for positions in the group, never occur during the meetings, but after. So then we discuss the issue of sharing for one or two weeks afterwards when we have been informed of such disputes by either women in the group, or by the shelter management. Despite our intention to discuss such problems immediately, we rarely reach this objective. Most of the women are scared to bring up problems as they occur and prefer to gossip around the issues after the meetings. As therapists, we feel often helpless and exhausted by the demands of the women to resolve their problems around the scarcity of food. 'Scarce food' can also be metaphor to describe their basic emotional needs.

*Group-building.* We offer team-building exercises as an antidote to the squabbling amongst the women in the shelter. In one exercise, the women have to form four squares from an amount of scrap paper and discuss the process and their feelings after accomplishing the task. Or, we put a large piece of paper on the table and ask them together to draw a village, the shelter, a garden, or another common space. We request they continuously

discuss the parts they have drawn themselves: houses, flowers, trees, spatial objects, etc. During the construction of a communal garden or village we ask them to contribute goods to be used by all, e.g. an irrigation system, roads, and community buildings. We encourage the women to interact and to share the process with the group each time we do this exercise. Given the necessity of interpretation, these interactions often proceed very slowly, and sometimes laboriously. Nonetheless, the women like to do these communal tasks and we all feel a certain group cohesion as a result of such a meeting, at least while the meeting is happening. However, by the next week we have a different group again and have to start at the beginning to build a group. This is easier during the time periods we have a stable core of 2-3 women in the group. The ability to do something and no longer feeling helpless is a very important experience for these women who overwhelmingly experience powerlessness and helplessness. It is very satisfying for them. We also try to give encourage other possibilities, for example assisting them in comforting themselves within an inner world of positive images. After guiding them through relaxation exercises we offer guided visions about an inner garden, a safe inner place, a tree, or a flower (Reddemann, 2001). Every woman creates her own inner picture. After these visualisations, or day dreams, we invite the women to tell us about their experiences and to share their inner pictures with the group. Some women tell us that they have the opportunity to see and feel a safe inner place, an inner garden, to rest a good moment in this place, and to enjoy rest and peace. Others can not enjoy this opportunity to dream while the terrible circumstances they have to live in, and the amount of problems they have to resolve, still exist. Some prefer a Christian or Muslim prayer as a pathway

to inner peace, to build their strength, and to move on.

We also use storytelling to promote group-building. Storytelling in a group provides the group participants with opportunities to bond with others who have had similar experiences, and to share these experiences. We work in an intuitive way and look for stories that we think would be close to the world of these women. Sometimes we begin to tell a story and then ask the women to complete it. We use stories of the leopard and the tortoise, of the lion and the rabbit, mostly African stories about a problem to solve between a physically strong and a physically weak, but cunning animal. Most of the women identify with the cunning animal fighting to save his/her life. After completing such a story, they often exchange their own experiences of solving their own survival, during flight, and now as a refugee.

*Reconciliation work.* Reconciliation in a country like South Africa is an essential survival tool to deal with the heritage of the past. The pertinent question is *how* to move towards who-and-what-you-can-become. For refugees, it is a working through victimhood status to gain another identity as a refugee. Reconciliation work is based on dialogue, mutual acceptance, trust, and the acceptance of diversity. In our group work we have a broad understanding of reconciliation. Dealing with the trauma is already a part of this work to reconcile what happened and continues to happen. Eventually, we learned that women in their life situation, which contains ongoing distress, need the building of resources (speaking together about daily problems, listening, drawing, dreaming and modelling their situations) to find comfort etc. One day the women asked if they could rename the group; not 'trauma group' – but 'furahā', which means joy in Swahili. In this way they expressed their need

to celebrate one of the rare good moments in their difficult life - our group sessions.

*Counter-transference.* As therapists, we have to deal with strong counter-transference (limbo, loss, depression, low energy levels, coming and going during the sessions). Trauma is contagious and in the role of witness we are at times overwhelmed (Herman, J.L., 2001). Our mutual debriefing after the group meetings is a highly important work instrument.

The effect of living in limbo and the daily realities of refugee life are replayed in the therapy group through absences, disappearances, and unresolved conclusions. Rarely do we get the chance to say goodbye to a woman who leaves the shelter. It remains unclear to what extent the women's practical needs, such as looking for a job and childcare, influence their attendance in the group. Some members may have seen joining the group as a means to receive further practical help, and having received it or not, saw no further reason to stay in the group (Callaghan, K., 1998). In such situations it is difficult to give the group a sense of continuity and value.

*Mutual influence.* In the group we have observed a 'fellow traveller' phenomenon. Every meeting begins with an introductory session during which each woman speaks about how she feels that day and what happened during the week. Frequently the first statement given sets the tone, and the women who come after her will follow in a similar tone. So the statements mostly reflect a group feeling. We have asked ourselves if it is a kind of shyness that also reflects the pattern of their former life, the flight and the actual struggle in exile? Additionally, could it be an uneasiness to talk about personal matters with someone outside of the family (van der Veer, G., 1991). It has happened that individual women get known in the shelter for being responsible for certain

tasks (kitchen duties, sewing group, childcare, etc.) and that subsequently rumours of witchcraft come up. Women in the shelter that are in relative positions of power affect the group dynamics in a way that the other women (not being in special positions) boost themselves (alleviating their jealousy) with rumours of witchcraft. It seems that a discussion about this issue can bring some relief.

*Flexibility.* We had to be flexible and open to the needs of the women. One day we had to do a debriefing after a burglary took place in the shelter the night before, another day a child died in a car accident. The women told us afterwards that they experienced the debriefings as very helpful because they could share their fears and anxieties. The process demands people from outside to help facilitate this process. In this way, their actual life problems demand our capacity to adjust every meeting to the changing needs of the women, and to maintain the transitional position necessary to address psychodynamic and very practical issues.

### **The impact on the participants**

*Roses.* We use the expression 'Roses' to describe events that signify an inner opening of the women towards reconciliation. As unpredictable as we experience the attendance at a group session, and the openness and atmosphere of the work, so surprising are the smooth and even happy moments in the group. Often it comes from contributions about their home culture, when the women speak about how they lived at home, describe their cultures, and how they celebrated feasts. Or, a Christmas party where some women told a story from home and another recited her own poem. It happens sometimes when they speak about their religion and about the importance of prayers, when one woman spontaneously said a prayer for the whole group. In a way, it reflects the sharing and

celebrating of their origins in a new, not chosen, group where the women feel for a short moment that they belong together in the here and now of their refugee limbo. It is the kind of 'breakthrough' we strive for.

Following a discussion about resilience and how they find courage, each woman formed in clay a symbol of their capacity to overcome: a heart (twice), a casserole, a rabbit, a tree, a horseshoe, a star and a sun. They insisted on putting the symbols together into a group picture of love, life and hope. They are stronger in the non-verbal expression than in words given the frequently poor education of the majority of the group members. Putting the drawings or clay figures together and arranging them on the table in the group room becomes an exciting experience of creativity and diversity. In this sense, healing is also a discovery of inner wisdom. It happens when we come to the unexplored territory of imagination and body, and take a step into the unknown of a creative act, a clay figure, a drawing. These are the moments when we all experience the group as being a gift to all of us and where we find a way to answer the questions of loss, and individual and cultural bereavement.

*Reconciliation.* We notice that the members of this multicultural group have a strong interest in learning about the cultural background of the therapists: they ask questions about lifestyles, education, rituals, feasts, and even witchcraft. In a way, we are their role models. There is a strong feeling among them too about their different origins, cultures and languages intertwined with the consciousness about the actual differences. The women are, in fact, different - culturally, socially and personally. To honour the differences and the communalities is in fact a form of reconciliation.

In all of Africa the means for healing are embedded in the fibre of the diverse cultures

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that inhabit the continent. This means that we need a variety of expressive forms in a support group like ours; speaking together and giving meaning to our lives through plays, art and symbols, creating an inner movement through imagination and facilitating links between the internal and external worlds. We found that the women have an impressive potential to symbolise their culture, their feelings and their trauma in a non-verbal manner, in imagination, drawings and clay forming. The work we do together makes a difference in their lives. So we assume equating the capacity to express the practical needs and the imagination and to 'play' in a broad sense as a capacity for resilience and healing - in the process of 'making whole', accepting what happened, and moving on in a reconciling way.

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<sup>1</sup> This shelter in Johannesburg is part of the refugee project at the Trauma Clinic of the CSVR (Centre of the Study of Violence and Reconciliation), a NGO building capacities and assisting victim empowerment and reconciliation work through research, courses and therapy.

<sup>2</sup> We consider our work to be reconciliation work. We consider trauma work as a beginning of reconciliation within their own life reality and with the ongoing trauma.

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## Uncited references

Ley (2005), Ley and Karrer (2004), Ley and Garcia (2003), Van der Veer (1998), Woodcock (1997).

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