

West African migrant women in Australia: Stories of resilience and strength

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“There is a kind of strength that is almost frightening in black women. It’s as if a steel rod runs right through the head down to the feet” – Maya Angelou

“I am the master of my destiny. I define my own future. I am not a victim. I am a conqueror” - Dr Tererai Trent

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Certificate of original Authorship

I, Olutoyin Sowole, declare that this thesis is submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy, in the Faculty of Health at the University of Technology Sydney.

This thesis is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis. This piece of work has not previously been submitted for a degree at any other academic institution.

This research is supported by an Australian Government Research Training Program Scholarship.

Signature of Student

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Glorious God, wonderful God,
Miracle worker, King of kings,
Omnipotent One, I worship You,
Your Majesty is forevermore!

Dedication

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Outputs to date

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Conference presentations and posters

Babatunde-Sowole, O. O., Power, T., Jackson, D., Davidson, P. & DiGiacomo, M. 2016, '[West] African women migrants in Australia: implications for health care', *39th Annual International Conference African Studies Association of Australasia and the Pacific (AFSAAP)*, Perth, Australia. (Oral presentation), December 5-7.

Babatunde-Sowole O. O., Power, T., Davidson, P., Jackson, D. & DiGiacomo, M. 2016. 'Overcoming trauma: West African women's experiences of healing in Australia', *International Council of Women Health's Issues Conference*, Baltimore, USA. (Poster presentation), November 6-9.

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List of abbreviations used in this thesis

| | |
|----------|---|
| ABS | Australian Bureau of Statistics |
| CALD | Culturally and linguistically diverse |
| IPV | intimate partner violence |
| NHMR | National Health and Medical Research |
| NSW | New South Wales |
| UK | United Kingdom |
| UN | United Nations |
| UN-DESA | United Nations Department of Economics and Social Affairs |
| UNHCR | United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees |
| USA | United States of America |
| UTS | University of Technology Sydney |
| UTS HREC | Human Research Ethics Committee |

Glossary of terms

Adversity

Adversity is the state of hardship resulting from life challenges or suffering in relation to misfortune, trauma, difficulty or loss.

Asylum-seekers

An asylum-seeker is an individual seeking protection in a country other than their home country and is awaiting the grant of legal refugee status.

Attachment theory

Attachment theory is an enduring healthy physical and psychological connection that people form with significant others. The attachment instils a sense of self-esteem, value and self-confidence, which then provides appropriate support during stressful times even while far away from their significant others. Attachment theory is critical to human resilience as it provides a cushion effect in adapting during adversity and separation from the familiar.

Centrelink

Centrelink is a section of Australian Government operated by the Department of Human Services. The duty of this department is to provide social security payments and services for eligible Australian people.

Department of Community Services

The Department of Community Services protects vulnerable members of society, inclusive of children and young people. The department is responsible for the safety and wellbeing of children and young people with the aim of ensuring that they are protected from any form of abuse, harm and neglect. The department's protection includes providing shelter for the homeless, and to protect victims of domestic violence and sexual assault.

Immigrants

Immigrants are people who voluntarily leave their country of birth in search of education, employment opportunities and improved living conditions, for example, in another country.

Medicare

Medicare is the government scheme that provides Australian residents access to healthcare.

Migrants

Migrants are people that were born overseas and are living in another country, with the exception of diplomats and their families. 'Migrant' is the encompassing term under which asylum-seekers, immigrants, and refugees sit.

Refugees

A refugee is a person who has fled due to confirmed persecution in their home country and cannot return due to life-threatening situations.

Resilience

Resilience is the capacity to feel competence in the face of precarious adverse conditions and maintain equilibrium to achieve good outcomes rather than a later recovery.

Ubuntu

Ubuntu is the African philosophy and way of living. Ubuntu represents the communalism connectedness and community living in Africa and within African people.

Vulnerability

Vulnerability connotes susceptibility to some form of harm. For the purposes of this study, it is the degree to which the migrant woman is susceptible to the effects of migration adversity.

West Africa

Also referred to as Western Africa, this sub-region of the African continent is made up of the following countries: Benin, Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Cote D'Ivoire, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Togo.

Womanism

African womanism is the African continental version of feminism, which according to its proponents, accommodates the African woman's sense of equality. The framework recognises 'family-hood' and consequently incorporates the African men in their understanding of solving African women inferiority status as bestowed upon them by the patriarchal society. In this thesis, African womanism denotes the voice of African women in presenting their experiences of migration and resettlement tenacities during the various adversities they might have encountered.

ABSTRACT

Background and rationale

African migrants are increasing in number in high-income countries, including in Australia. Currently, there is limited research around the experiences of West African migrant women living in Australia, especially in New South Wales, and none using a strengths-based approach. As the number of African migrant women in Australia continues to increase, it is imperative that we understand these women's experiences of successful settlement and re-establishment in Australia. Consequently, the broad aim of this thesis is to understand the strength and resilience strategies that West African-born women drew upon in their early years of settlement and re-establishing themselves in Australia. This research also documents the strength strategies that West African migrant women utilised in preparing their children for life adversities and challenges as they resettled in Australia.

Methods

A systematic review of the literature helped generate a conceptual framework using the Bronfenbrenner ecological model (1979). As a positive approach to studying the population, Smith's strengths-based conceptual framework (2006), was applied and feminism principles were also incorporated to explore the intersection of race, gender and minority variables in the women's stories.

The study design and data collection process were qualitative storytelling. Stories from 22 West African women living in New South Wales, Australia, who voluntarily participated in the study, were thematically analysed. Ethics approval (Appendix D) was received for the study from the University of Technology Sydney Human Research Ethics Committee as well as written permission (Appendix A) to utilise the Migrant Resource Centre's facilities for study brochures and flyers (Appendix C).

Findings

The concept of resilience adapted in this study is defined as the capacity to feel competence in the face of precarious adverse migration living conditions and maintain equilibrium to achieve good outcomes. Themes and sub-themes that emerged from the women's stories generated data that supported the above definition. Past personal life and events were pivotal to the women's experiences and were portrayed in the first main theme: *connecting past life to the future*. Two additional main themes, *embracing the new reality* and *forming connections to build support*, underscored the socio-ecological factors that influenced the women's resilience and strength strategies.

All of the women experienced culture shock in relocating to a new country. Experiences of racism, discrimination and xenophobic attitudes were among women's negative experiences. Women's optimism and motivation were linked to securing a better life and future opportunities for themselves and their families, especially their children, and being able to support their families back in West Africa. The women's resilience and strengths were related to their religious beliefs and spirituality, communalism, optimism and hardiness.

Through insights from the women's stories, this study documents an often-neglected strength perspective of African people, thereby contrasting the vast negative discourse in the literature. An original and unique contribution to knowledge from the study includes the women's resilience legacy for incoming women migrants. This piece of work gave women a voice, which was achieved through the storytelling methodology and feminism framework adapted for this study.

Conclusions

Resilience has a significant impact for the resettlement, health and wellbeing of migrants. Findings from this study have implications for policy, practice and future research. Research findings identify healthcare workers' vital roles. The study outcomes indicate that healthcare and allied professionals are capable of supporting the improvement of African women migrants' health status and behaviours by capitalising on their resilience and strength, and utilising it for

their care. Health workers at the hospital and community level can make referrals to culturally appropriate resources and support for new migrants since health workers are, in most cases, the first point of contact. Findings also suggest the need for awareness and greater sensitivity to women's past experiences, and how that might shape their choices in accessing healthcare. The findings are useful for health and allied care workers in their care of both current and future African migrants, especially women. The thesis contributes a highly needed feminist study around African women migrants in Australia and, by extension, to other developed countries throughout the world.