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# A grounded theory exploration of wellbeing and liveable space for Uganda-based forced migrant women, forcibly displaced due to conflict

Helen Harrison and Elizabeth Berragan

## Abstract

**Purpose** – *The purpose of this study is to conduct a grounded theory exploration of wellbeing for women forcibly displaced by war, and focussing on the experiences of two groups of women living in settlement communities in Uganda. Original key questions included how the women experience and perceive wellbeing within their life context and what can be learnt from female displaced participants in the global south relating to gendered perspectives of wellbeing and liveable space. However, having adopted a grounded theory approach, the study findings were not fully synchronised with these questions, but instead represented the issues within this substantive area that were most important to the participants.*

**Design/methodology/approach** – *The methodology used is the constructive grounded theory combined with a feminist standpoint, using unstructured in-person interviews as the data collection technique. The participants are South Sudanese refugee women living in Palabek refugee settlement in northern Uganda and internally displaced Acholi women living in an informal settlement in Kampala.*

**Findings** – *The theoretical code is “reimagining liveable space over time”, with key categories of wellbeing, liveableness, temporariness and community. The final outcome is an emergent theory grounded in the data that gives a voice to women who represent those experiencing marginalisation and subjugation, both within their communities, and due to the positioning of those communities within the international hierarchy.*

**Originality/value** – *This research is an innovative and novel piece that weaves together feminist standpoint grounded theory with other key theoretical paradigms and demonstrates how the research can hold its own within a greater body of study. It also has its uniqueness in the way that it draws the four categories together and demonstrates their important relationship to each other in a relevant and pertinent way. Given the current global landscape of displacement, with record numbers of people being forcibly displaced worldwide, this work is particularly timely.*

**Keywords** Refugees, Forced migrants, Gendered displacement, Uganda, Reimagining liveable space, Grounded theory

**Paper type** Research paper

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## Introduction

The objective of this research was to explore the experiences of two groups of women, currently residing in Uganda, who have been displaced by war and are now creating new lives for themselves in refugee and displacement communities. The initial focus was to explore the experiences and perceptions of wellbeing, when set against the background context of displacement due to war. However, the outcome of the data collection led to a focus wider than wellbeing alone. Both groups of women are from communities who received trauma counselling services delivered by a Ugandan-registered non-profit-organisation with which the

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author has professional but non-fiscal connections. It was these pre-existing connections that influenced the choice of the two groups of women as research participants, as their previous positive interactions with that organisation resulted in mutually higher levels of participant-researcher trust. Whilst the two research groups are ethnically distinct, both were forcibly displaced from war, and both found refuge in Uganda-based communities that were, at the time, supported by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR). Although they were displaced at different times and because of different conflicts, both groups faced challenges with regard to integration into the wider community, as well as both experiencing the trauma of forced displacement due to war.

One group of women were South Sudanese refugees (SSR) who had fled from the civil war that has been ongoing since the creation of the nation in 2016 (Pinaud, 2021). A refugee, by definition, is “someone who has been forced to flee his or her country because of persecution, war or violence” (UNHCR, 2025) and refugees from South Sudan under the UNHCR mandate totalled 2,292,482 in 2023 (UNHCR, 2024a, 2024b). Of these, almost 1 million are hosted in refugee settlements in neighbouring Uganda, including Palabek refugee settlement in northern Uganda, which remains under the jurisdiction of UNHCR (UNHCR, 2023a, 2023b) and is where the South Sudanese women who participated in this study were living.

The other group of women were Acholi internally displaced people who, whilst not refugees, were also forcibly displaced as they fled from their tribal homeland in northern Uganda due to war in that region between the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and the Ugandan government army. The war, which covered two decades and ended in 2006, caused the internal displacement of almost 1.6 million people from affected parts of northern Uganda, approximately 90% of the Acholi population (Amone-P'Olak *et al.*, 2014). Between 300,000 and 600,000 IDPs fled to urban areas of Uganda, including the capital city Kampala (Mallett, 2010), where the strongest density of people from the Acholi ethnic group is found in the area colloquially known as Acholi Quarters. This is where the Acholi women who participated in this study are currently residing. In 2012, the UNHCR provision of humanitarian assistance to Uganda-based IDP communities ended, resulting in non-recognition of IDP status in Uganda and a lack of government support (Monteith and Lwasa, 2017). Challenges associated with poor and costly access to all basic necessities plus a lack of security regarding tenancy and land access continue to plight the Acholi Quarters residents (Mallett, 2010; Monteith and Lwasa, 2017).

## Justifying the research

### *Forcibly displaced women as the participant group*

According to the UNHCR, at mid-2024, 122.6 million people were living in a state of having been forcibly displaced because of conflict, violence, persecution, serious disturbance of public order or violation of human rights. Of these, 68.3 million were internally displaced and 37 million were refugees (UNHCR, 2024a, 2024b). Uganda, hosting 1.7 million people, was the fifth largest host of refugees after Islamic Republic of Iran, Turkiye, Colombia and Germany. These refugees are mainly from South Sudan, Democratic Republic of Congo and Burundi (UNHCR, 2024a, 2024b).

Within refugee-related academic discourse, the experiences and perspectives of refugees are often homogenised. The UNHCR definition of a refugee has no gendered reference, and whilst it is recognised that people of all genders suffer when fleeing from war, persecution and violence, the experiences of each gender should not be assumed to be the same. Certainly, shared experiences between the genders will exist, but there will also be differences in the violations that each gender experiences, or in the gender-based perception of those violations (Sood, 2020). The tendency towards a lack of gendered differentiation between the voices and needs of those at risk has resulted in the woman's

voice as being often forgotten ([Ghorashi, 2021](#)). Complicating this further is the propensity by many agencies to bracket women and children together into one set of statistics ([Freedman and Freedman, 2007](#)), with little differentiation between the two groups. This reduces the acknowledgement of the different needs and perspectives of the woman and the child forced migrants, and that each group should be given their own consideration. It is against this lack of female gendered voices that this study is positioned.

## Wellbeing as the initial focus

The concept of wellbeing features in Goal 3 of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals ([SDGS, 2024](#)), and there are now multiple ways in which the term is used within academic research and literature. However, within this wealth of literature, data from the Global South is notably lacking ([Disabato, et al., 2016](#)). At a theorising level, Sen and Nussbaum, with their work on the capability approach ([Sen, 1993](#); [Nussbaum, 2011](#)), have highlighted the disparate realities of life for individuals and societies through taking account of human diversity in the range of dimensions included in the conceptualisation of wellbeing. Not all the dimensions are equally relevant for all groups, but by including dimensions that are more relevant for minority and marginalised groups, the capability approach becomes a much more inclusive and relevant framework as pertaining to both wellbeing that is achieved and to the freedom to experience wellbeing ([Robeyns and Byskov, 2023](#)). In this way, the experiences and perspectives of women, and those from less developed countries who have or are denied access to different options and capabilities, are just as relevant as those of the middle-class, white, Western male.

A literature search for wellbeing relating to women refugees shows a dominance of studies relating to women refugees who have been displaced to high-income countries (e.g. [DeSa et al., 2022](#); [Gower et al., 2022](#); [Hajak et al., 2021](#)), whilst studies relating to wellbeing for women refugees in lower-income countries are less prevalent. There is also a wealth of non-gendered studies relating to wellbeing amongst refugees, and it is acknowledged that the knowledge from these studies should not be deemed irrelevant. When exploring wellbeing in the context of displaced women living in Uganda, there are some studies exploring the theme as relating to SSR (e.g. [Adaku et al., 2016](#); [Augustinavicius et al., 2023](#); [Tol et al., 2020](#)). There are also some studies relating to displaced women living in informal settlements in Kampala, but these do not have a wellbeing focus ([Malama et al., 2023](#); [Logie et al., 2019](#)). However, most studies relating to wellbeing, refugees and Uganda show a variation on the theme that does not reflect the focus of this particular study. For example, some include Uganda in a multi-country study ([Purgato et al., 2022](#)), and others focus more on wellbeing of other demographic refugee groups in Uganda ([Logie et al., 2021](#); [Meyer et al., 2019](#)). It is into this gap that this study has been placed.

## Study design

The methodological paradigms that underpin this study are those of constructivist grounded theory (CGT) and feminist standpoint. The core of CGT lies in acknowledging the researcher's prior knowledge and experiences, using reflexivity and memoing to maintain transparency and emphasising the collaborative relationship between researcher and participant. This approach creates an open, non-directive space where participants can share what matters most to them, minimising researcher bias ([Charmaz and Thornberg, 2021](#)). Research with a feminist standpoint should create space and opportunity for female participants to express their own contextualised and diverse understandings of gendered power imbalances ([Jenkins, Narayanaswamy and Sweetman, 2019](#)). Together, therefore CGT and feminist standpoint create a space where lived experiences of gendered perspectives and power inequalities can be explored ([Tyagi, 2014](#)), and in a way that ensures the centralisation of the participants' voices rather than marginalisation ([Charmaz, 2014](#)). The data collection method was open, unstructured interviews with an interpreter

present to enable participants to give responses in their native tongue and not feel disadvantaged.

Permission to proceed with Ugandan-located research was obtained from the Ugandan National Council of Science and Technology (UNCST), registration number HS2148ES. The final study design met with ethical approval from both University of Gloucestershire research ethics committee (REC) and Gulu University REC, situated in northern Uganda. The approved study design included pre-interview information meetings for community leaders, and for community members, tri-lingual informed consent forms written in English, Acholi and Arabic, provision for thumbprint signatures, voluntary and confidential participation and a small financial recompense per participant for time donated to the interview process.

## Research in practice

Data collection and analysis run concurrently in the grounded theory method, accompanied by ongoing memo writing (Birks and Mills, 2023). In this study, initial interviews produced the initial codes. From these, further interviews led to the emergence of focussed codes, and lastly, the theoretical code from which the grounded theory emerged.

The participants for the initial individual interviews numbered six SSR women from Palabek refugee settlement and seven Acholi women from Acholi Quarters in Kampala, in compliance with numerical limitations set down by the Ugandan research committee. On the days of being allowed into Palabek settlement, there was also an unexpected whole-camp announcement by the World Food Programme that impacted the time available for interviews, and so imposed a further limit on the number of interviews with South Sudanese women that could be completed in the time allowed. Nine additional Acholi women participated in the subsequent two rounds of interviews because some of the original Acholi interviewees were not available on subsequent visits, and the overall pool of 16 women allowed for four group interviews of between four and five participants per group. No additional SSR women were included due to the single-visit nature of the permission granted by the OPM, which prevented subsequent camp visits. The three rounds of interviews took place on three different occasions, spread over a six-month period. The tribal heritage of the SSR women was either Sudanese Acholi, or Dinka, and all spoke the Acholi language. Arabic was also offered to the South Sudanese women as an alternative language for the interviews, but none of them chose this option. All the interviews for both the South Sudanese and Acholi groups were therefore carried out in Acholi and translated into English. The initial interviews were with individual participants, and the subsequent interviews were conducted as group interviews. During the individual interviews, the substantive area of study was outlined as pertaining to the exploration of how women who have been forced to flee from war understand the concept of wellbeing. The participants were then invited to share whatever knowledge, information and experience they felt was the most important, with no directing or leading from the interviewer. In this way, the participant's voice was guaranteed to be at the heart of the data, rather than a course of enquiry predetermined and controlled by the researcher. Group interviews were used to selectively explore the identified focused codes. The rationale for switching to the group interview approach was that it gave participants the opportunity for some discussion in their own language of the concepts being explored. However, it was ensured that each participant always had an opportunity to give their own views, rather than responses coming only from the more vocal participants. Ongoing comparative analysis ensured that the data from the SSRs was incorporated throughout and not just following the initial interviews. All interviews were interpreted between English and Acholi. For logistical reasons, the SSR interviews interpreter and the Acholi interviews interpreter were not the same person, but they were both female staff members from the facilitation organisation. The initial interviews were audio recorded and transcribed immediately afterwards.

The content of the group interviews was recorded through field notes, and “sticky notes” were used to capture responses in a visual and real-time way. These interviews were also written up immediately afterwards. Memos were written throughout, capturing reflections about each participant, including body language, use of pauses, oral intonation and volume changes. The informed consent forms were explained before the interviews and signed after the interviews, in order that the participants knew the interview contents that they were consenting to the use of.

### Managing ethical requirements in real time

Some deviations from the original plan occurred for real-time ethical reasons. The first of these was to cancel the pre-interview community information meetings on the advice of senior camp and community leaders. The ethical reasons given included lowering the profile of the interviews to avoid drawing potentially harmful attention to the participants who might otherwise be detrimentally identified as having links to rich “mzungu” westerners. Cancelling the community meeting would also avoid the potential for manipulative behaviour by local leaders, husbands or other male relatives either in coercing unwilling women to participate, or conversely, in pressuring willing women to not participate. This ethical decision also had implications on the relationship between camp and community leaders, and the facilitation organisation. Ignoring the leaders request in pursuance of the original plan could have harmed that relationship, resulting in rescinded access to provide trauma counselling services. This would have negatively impacted many more people than just those involved in the research study, and therefore was an unethical route to take.

Another deviation from the original plan related to the interview schedule. In the approved plan, the submitted interview schedule stated that participants would be able to choose the location of their interview. In reality, to enable easier logistical communication with the participants, the interview locations were pre-determined by the interpreters who knew the communities well. At the refugee settlement, the chosen location was an accessible but quiet space away from well-used paths. At Acholi Quarters, the chosen location was a community-based office, which afforded a good level of confidentiality. Participants were given the opportunity to choose an alternative location, but all declined. The interview timings were based on participant availability rather than following the schedule. This ensured that interviews avoided food collection times or primary hours for carrying out casual labour (at Acholi Quarters).

Other real-time ethical decisions included offering to stop an interview to enable a participant to seek medical help for her sick child, and holding some Acholi group interviews in a more visible space, at their request, despite reduced confidentiality.

### Analysis and findings

Despite the different iterations of grounded theory, there are some key elements that are universal to all. These include codes and category production, the use of constant comparative analysis, implementation of theoretical saturation and sensitivity and memo writing throughout (Birks and Mills, 2023). Constant comparative analysis of data uses a continuous comparative approach that occurs concurrently alongside data collection. Therefore, the findings of each interview are compared to the others, and the findings from the group interviews are also compared back to the individual interviews. This iterative and constant comparative form of analysis is continued until theoretical saturation is reached and, in this way, triangulation of the data can be shown to have been carried out. The comparisons take place at all analysis levels, from coding of incidents through to identification of the final concepts. Thus, the initial analysis informs subsequent data collection, and subsequent analysis indicates the concepts and categories that are within the emerging theory (Bryant and Charmaz, 2007).

In this study, the initial codes that emerged from the individual interviews and the three categories into which they were grouped are as shown in [Table 1](#).

The three categories were visually encapsulated in a conceptual model, as shown in [Figure 1](#).

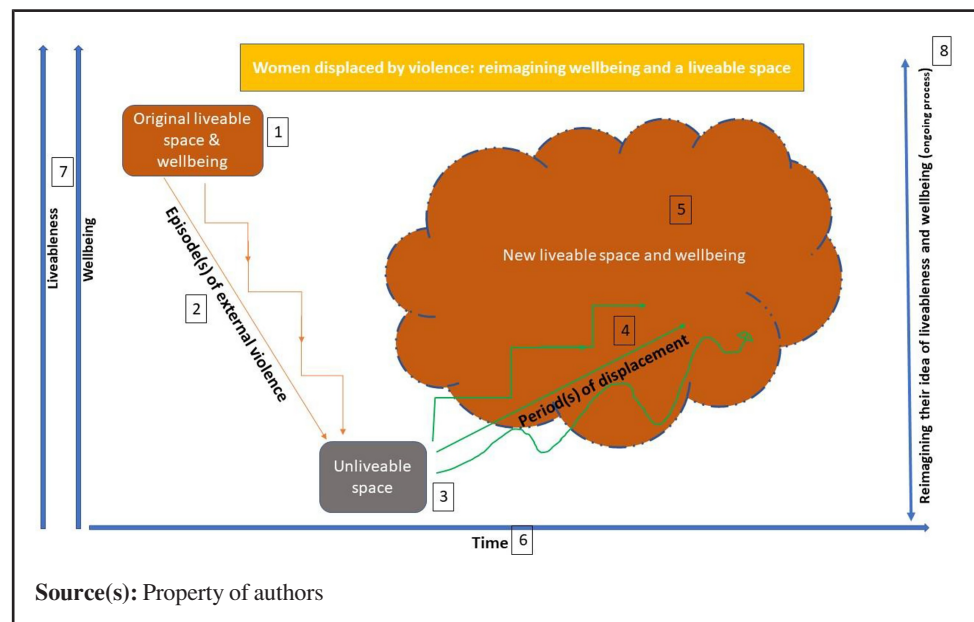
[Figure 1](#) represents the conceptual journey from a liveable pre-conflict life with an accepted level of wellbeing: (1), to the impact of external violence (2) resulting in a life deemed unliveable (3). The subsequent experience of forced displacement (4) resulted in the participant starting a new life in a space considered more liveable than Position 3 (5). The passage of time (6) relating to the different stages in the conceptual journey varied between participants, hence a unit-free time scale. The transitions from liveable to unliveable (2), and from unliveable to liveable via the experience of displacement (4) also varied between participants. For some, it was a single experience (straight arrow), whilst for others, it took multiple stages (stepped and looped arrows). The perception of the new liveable space had many variations, including the criteria that individual participants used to determine if it was liveable or not. These criteria, which included wellbeing and liveableness (7), were seen to change and be reimagined over time (8), represented as a shape with softer, less specific boundaries.

In the process of developing the conceptual diagram, the integration of the categories with their properties was determined as per [Table 2](#).

**Table 1** Initial categories and related codes

| Categories                         |                       |                                 |                              |
|------------------------------------|-----------------------|---------------------------------|------------------------------|
| Unliveableness                     | Forced displacement   | Reimagining of liveable space   |                              |
| Codes                              |                       |                                 |                              |
| Experiencing gender-based violence | Flee home             | Provision of physical resources | Increased physical wellbeing |
| Female disempowerment              | Struggling mentally   | Provision of trauma counselling | Increased mental wellbeing   |
| Experiencing violence of war       | Lack of resources     | Connect with community          | Interpersonal benefits       |
|                                    | Inter-tribal tensions |                                 | Hopes and dreams             |
| Source(s): Property of authors     |                       |                                 |                              |

**Figure 1** Conceptual model of the initial categories identified

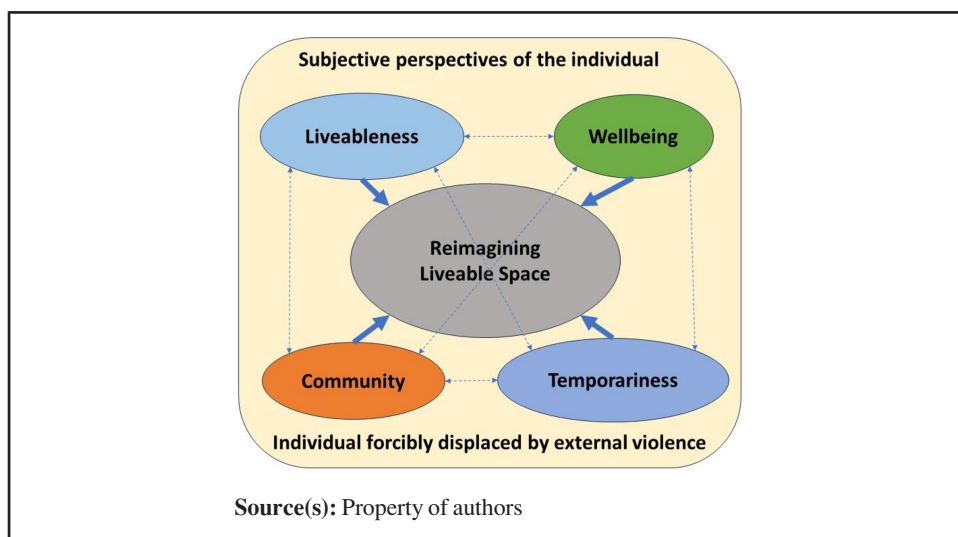


**Table 2** Updated categories and their properties

| <i>Unliveableness</i>                                                                                         | <i>Categories</i><br><i>Forced displacement</i>                          | <i>Reimagining liveable space</i>      |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|
| <i>Properties</i><br>External and gender-based violence<br>Gender-based disempowerment<br>Inner peacelessness | Gender-based disempowerment<br>Access to resources<br>Mental instability | Liveableness<br>Wellbeing<br>Community |
| Source(s): Property of authors                                                                                |                                                                          |                                        |

In this study, consideration of the conceptual model developed following the initial interviews, which resulted in questions relating to the category “reimagining liveable space” with the associated properties of liveableness, wellbeing and community. These questions included reference to further information about each property, as well as the nature of the interconnectedness of the properties, and the role that interconnectedness played in the reimagining of liveable space over time. There was also less literature available relating to this aspect of the model, and the potential for a theory to emerge in this substantive area had been noted. It was therefore decided to focus on the reimagining of liveable space for subsequent data collection and analysis, and the category of reimagining liveable space was confirmed as the theoretical code from which a theory might emerge. Subsequent interviews allowed the categories of that code, i.e. the concepts of liveableness, wellbeing and community, to be explored until theoretical saturation was reached. During those interviews, a further conceptual category, temporariness, was identified relating to the theoretical code of reimagining liveable space, and this was also explored until theoretical saturation was reached. The constant comparative analysis process was repeatedly carried out with each new set of data, as well as reviewing previous data. This allowed comparison of incidents across the interviews and saturation of the categories.

By the end of the analysis stage, an updated conceptual model (Figure 2) had been developed. This shows the relationship between the theoretical code of reimagining liveable space and its four categories of wellbeing, liveableness, community and temporariness. It also highlights the subjective element to the perspectives of the individuals, and that the data has come from individuals forcibly displaced by external violence.

**Figure 2** Updated conceptual model

## Findings

Despite the initial substantive area being that of wellbeing as experienced by women who had been forcibly displaced due to war, the main findings from the data reflected the issues and concepts that the participants felt were most important to be considered. These were not fully in sync with the key questions and instead revolved around the theoretical code of reimagining liveable space and its four categories of wellbeing, liveableness, temporariness and community. The findings relating to each of these concepts will now be considered in turn, including some quotes from the women that help to represent their voices within the research, before drawing the concepts together in line with the process that culminated in the emergence of the grounded theory.

## Wellbeing

Wellbeing is a term with no single, universally agreed definition (Dodge, *et al.*, 2012) and has a wide range of contextual uses. These include subjective (including Lui and Fernando, 2018; Proctor, 2024), psychological (including Kubzansky *et al.*, 2023; Ostic *et al.*, 2021), physical (including Randall *et al.*, 2021; Lee *et al.*, 2021) and workplace wellbeing (including Rani *et al.*, 2022; Omer *et al.*, 2024). It can be used qualitatively, or as part of a quantitative human development metric to measure wellbeing within and between nations (Jorm and Ryan, 2014). There are also strong links between the concept of wellbeing and the capability approach (Robeyns, 2017), both with regard to wellbeing that is achieved through the notion of functioning and also through the freedom to experience wellbeing as a result of the capabilities that an individual can access, a distinction that is very relevant to. When used synonymously with personal happiness, wellbeing can demonstrate hedonistic tendencies (Diener *et al.*, 2009). At other times, a more eudaimonic nature is demonstrated, whereby the focus is on finding wellbeing through achieving natural potential and meaning of life (Fowers, 2016).

In this study, a description of wellbeing was constructed from the data shared by the participants, and as such represents their perspective regarding the essence of wellbeing. It is thus:

Achieving inner peace and wellbeing of an individual, following significant traumatic experiences, is significantly dependent on the safety, stability and wellbeing of the community in which that individual is located. Good neighbourly and community relationships, that offer mutual respect, gender equality and support, are key in enabling the individual to find wellbeing through gaining mental healing and stability, and through developing a sense of hope for the future.

From this description can be seen different dimensions of wellbeing that were highlighted by the participants as being important to the experience of wellbeing following forced displacement. These include community wellbeing as a key part of individual wellbeing. If the community is not well, then the individual cannot fully achieve wellbeing: “If you have good, happy and healthy neighbours (and ideally community) then wellbeing will be good” (Aholi woman). This resonates with the African ethos of Ubuntu (Murithi, 2006) and contrasts with the more individualistic nature of wellbeing as is prevalent in many Western societies.

Psychosocial wellbeing was another identified dimension. Phrases used to describe the lack of mental wellbeing following displacement included over-thinking, sadness, lack of peace, inability to sleep and a troubled mind. Finding a location and psychosocial support to enable these to settle was very important to the participants, and they all described their improved state of mind as a major component in the journey to wellbeing. Descriptors of this included happiness, peace, peaceful sleep, settled mind, healed mind and strong mind. This improvement in wellbeing on escaping the war is described thus by a South Sudanese participant: “In South Sudan, wellbeing was not there. Because every time you are hearing

guns shots, every time people are killed, every time you have to sleep in the bush, every time you are cooking and you are not eating food as the rebels are coming [...]. but coming to Uganda she was safe from the rebels, from the gunshots, her wellbeing was OK". Having hope for the future was identified as important regarding the psychosocial dimension of wellbeing, and the negative impact of mental ill-health on daily living, productivity and wellbeing was noted.

Gendered dimensions of wellbeing were inferred from references made by the women to gender-based deprivations that they perceived as preventing them from finding wellbeing. Examples of this were lack of access to land, lack of autonomy in decision-making, expectations relating to prioritising children and other dependents, expectations relating to domestic chores and productivity, deprivations relating to family-related opportunities and general lack of gender parity. The following quote from one of the South Sudanese women exemplifies this: "As a woman who has gone through war, her wellbeing is something that has been denied. Why? First, she lost her parents. Each time she looks at those graves where the parents were buried, it disturbs her mind. On top of that, the brothers at home – they did not care for her when her parents died. That one brings trauma, cos she thinks 'if my parents were alive, my wellbeing would be catered for'. Then, looking at the war in South Sudan, where people have run for refuge, have run for food, you see there is no happiness. So, for her, as a woman who has gone through war, it has not been easy on her side". These findings are further reflected in a statement produced by the United Nations following a meeting of the Commission of the Status of Women, and whilst the UN commission was reviewing wellbeing from the entry point of poverty, the findings very much highlighted the gendered dimension to wellbeing and the profound impact of gendered deprivations (UN Secretary General, 2024).

The maternal and carer dimension of wellbeing was particularly highlighted through the opportunities and accomplishments of their children and dependents. The ability to access the best opportunities for their children was a factor by which the participants gauged their own level of wellbeing. This was equally relevant for women caring for their own children, or those caring for siblings, foster children or children from their extended family. A particular aspect of this related to women who had not been able to attend school themselves or complete their education but were now able to live out that dream through being able to give their children that opportunity: "For me I didn't go to school, but I am looking forward that my children get a better education" (South Sudanese woman).

## Liveableness

In this study, the term "liveableness" was described as "the opposite to a life that is so unliveable that you need to flee". The subsequent conversations focused on subjective perceptions of the term, in recognition that each person would have their own individual threshold at which life is no longer considered unliveable but has crossed into the realms of liveableness. In general, the tendency was for liveableness to be a concept that related more to the physical and tangible aspects of how life was perceived for the individual. Again, there were parallels between liveableness and the capability approach regarding access to capabilities and the freedoms and opportunities to translate them into functioning. Thus, it is not just a case of recognising the needs that the individual perceives to be important for liveableness, but it is also important to set those needs against the context of opportunities, agency and capabilities.

The discussions relating to liveableness had a strong gendered dimension, particularly for the South Sudanese women who had come from a strongly patriarchal tradition and were now living in a country that practised less extreme gender inequality and demonstrated more opportunities for women. Through observing more gender-equitable practices in the local community, having access to education for both boys and girls and through the

presence of female community and camp leaders, the South Sudanese women started to reimagine their opportunities and hopes for the future, for themselves and their dependents.

Other components of liveableness that were identified by the participants included access to education and employment opportunities for their children and themselves: “here is access to education for my children that they should study. Because for me I did not go to school, because the parents didn’t send me, and so I don’t want to see my children go through the same life”, (South Sudanese woman). Food security was initially achieved through provision of food parcels by external agencies, but in the longer term, was expressed through a desire for access to land to grow food crops. Access to land had a significant gendered component to it, due in part to the traditional lines of inheritance for land ownership and further complicated by the impact of being forcibly displaced from their traditional home during the war and therefore losing the opportunity to claim land rightfully theirs. This is demonstrated by the following quotes: “when I went back to the village, the lands were all grabbed and so there is a lot of issues. All I want is to find a plot of land in the village but that doesn’t feel possible at the moment” (Acholi woman), and “I found life was hard, so I went back. When I went back to South Sudan, again the brothers chased me away. Then I came back. Now I am thinking never to go back to South Sudan” (South Sudanese woman). Access to shelter, and the safety and security associated with it, was an important liveableness component. Initially, a simple shelter in a safe location was sufficient for the displaced women. But, over time, the criteria for acceptable shelter transitioned to include access to cultivable land and space to build a structure large enough to accommodate all of the family.

### Temporariness

Temporariness was used to refer to the state or sentiment of being not permanent, or living in a temporary place that the individual does not identify as home. Whilst it can be relevant for people who have undergone voluntary displacement as part of a migration process, it is perhaps particularly relevant for people who have experienced involuntary, forcible displacement. The degree of temporariness experienced by an individual is affected by many factors, including their relationship with the place that they call “home”, and with the place in which they reside.

Regarding the relationship with “home”, it was found that if the individual had a positive relationship with the location and people that they identify with as being “home”, then the sense of temporariness was less intrusive on their current liveable space, because they knew that they could return home as and when they wished. However, if the relationship with the place that they call home had irreparably broken down for reasons beyond their control, then the sense of temporariness was greater, because the individual ultimately wanted to go home, but knew that this option was being denied them. Thus, the sense of temporariness was affected by whether the state of living in a temporary place was voluntary, resulting in the individual having a sense of control over their destiny, or enforced, due to being denied any possibility of returning home. Regarding the reasons for the breakdown in the relationship with home, or being denied the opportunity to ever return home, a strong gendered dimension was evidenced, as illustrated by this quote from an Acholi woman: “I can’t go home because I have nowhere to go. The land I was entitled to has been grabbed by others, and the relationship with my family back in the village is broken as a result of that. So I have no choice but to stay here, although it all feels very temporary and not what I really want”.

The relationship with the current place of residence also had a bearing on the degree of perceived temporariness. If the individual felt settled in the new place of residence, then a lower sense of temporariness was demonstrated, as these Acholi women demonstrate: “when I’m living in this community, sometimes I feel like I belong. I have my things, I have my friends and I feel comfortable”, and “I built my own house here. So that helps me feel like

I belong". But those with a precarious and unsettled relationship to their place of residence, or a sense of uncertainty and powerlessness about any opportunities to progress to a more settled and sustainable lifestyle, showed a greater sense of temporariness. It was also noted that the level of welcome and desire for interaction shown by the host community had an impact on how temporary, or not, the individual felt, as articulated by this South Sudanese woman: "even when there is peace, there is nowhere to cultivate. We cannot get land from the host community. The plot we are given is only for a hut. So we cannot do cultivation".

The inverse link between sense of temporariness and home was, in part, affected by personal access to land to cultivate food crops and construct a home. If the woman had such access, either through inheritance or through purchase or provision of title deeds in some other formalised route, temporariness was less. Where access to land was not available, either due to land grabbing or gendered deprivations associated with land ownership traditions, the sense of temporariness increased. This was due in part to the inherent and visceral link between the place one calls home and the place where one has access to land. Also, a lack of access and ownership to land led to an increased sense of temporariness through their vulnerability to being turned off the land at any time, as explained by this Acholi woman: "We don't have any documents to show that we have any legal rights to live here. so, it makes us feel like living here is temporary and that we could be removed at any time".

The passage of time also played a role in the perception of temporariness, although there was not a direct correlation between the passing of time and a reduction in how temporary the individual felt. For some, the presence of ambiguous loss type 1 (Boss, 2002) was visible whereby their real home was physically absent to them, but psychologically it was still very real and present, and the result of this loss was experienced as an unresolved grieving process.

## Community

Like wellbeing, the concept of community has no single definition. Tonnies (Bond, 2013) distinguished between a location-based community (*gesellschaft*) and a community based on shared interests, values or intellect (*gemeinschaft*). Another key contributor to the discourse was Emile Durkheim who introduced the concept of mechanic and organic solidarity as a related pair of lenses through which to view society and how it can be held together (Thilakarathna, 2019). Within one location, there can be multiple communities, each defined by their shared interests or other aspects of identity. Similarly, an individual can belong to several communities whilst residing in the one location, based on shared interests, as well as shared geography (Bradshaw, 2008). Community membership enhances a sense of belonging for the individual, which can enhance the sense of wellbeing for that person, improve their sense of liveableness within the community and lead to a lesser sense of temporariness. Cantle's "Layers of Separation" model (Cantle, 2018) identifies eight layers in which people can feel separated from others in the community if that layer provides no similarity between individuals. Conversely, if that layer facilitates similarity between individuals, then there will be an increased sense of community and belonging (Boyd and Nowell, 2014).

In the context of this study, references to community were primarily location-based as a concept that allowed for face-to-face interactions. A description of community was constructed from the data thus: "*Community describes a group of people who are united through the location that they live in, through points of mutual experiential and cultural reference, and who share a desire for a safe, secure, family-focused, and healthy lifestyle*".

Within the discussion about community, the dimension of diversity was given both positive and negative considerations. It was concluded that diversity within a community is

beneficial if it happens naturally and organically as it allows for a broadening of perspectives and opportunities to interact with people from other traditions and backgrounds; “people can’t stay alone and be OK. People need people. Staying with other people helps you get knowledge, make memories and connections. In this community I’ve met new people, and made new connections that I’d not have made in the village” (Acholi woman). However, if diversity is forced on a community before they are ready to receive the incoming people, there can be negative implications due to incompatible values and practices leading to conflict and disharmony, as exemplified by the following quote from one of the South Sudanese women “right now, is the threats, the threatening violence that the other tribes are coming with”. This resonates with Durkheim’s theory of solidarity and the success, or not, of a community’s evolution from mechanical solidarity, based on shared values, to organic solidarity, based on divisions in services and meeting the needs of others. Durkheim claimed that, by distorting evolution of divisions through forced input of resources, an inequality of resources and access to opportunities will occur leading to a lack of community solidarity (Herzog, 2018). Instead, resentment, disharmony and unrest could develop between those on either side of the inequality divide. Both positive and negative examples of this were articulated within the exploration of community, demonstrating the presence of a willingness by some and resistance by others to embracing diversity. An additional element to the diversity aspect of community related particularly to the South Sudanese women, two of whom cited occasions of insecurity and vulnerability caused by the presence of rival tribal groups within the refugee settlement. This was not such an issue for the Acholi women, who live in an Acholi-dominant community that is predominantly without tribal tensions, but even so, reference by them was made to the impact on the liveable space from the occasions when Ugandans from other tribes have been relocated to Acholi Quarters due to the bulldozing of other informal settlements. Another oft-cited dimension of community was the strong correlation between the wellbeing of an individual and their community. This is a two-way association, with community wellbeing impacting personal wellbeing, and vice versa. As referenced earlier, this resonates strongly with the African ethos of Ubuntu, which is considered to be the backbone of African philosophy. Ewuoso and Hall (2019) describe it as being a relational ethos that “prizes relationships of interdependence, fellowship, reconciliation, relationality, community friendliness, harmonious relationships” (p. 93), and that Ubuntu-related actions seek to “honour the capacity to relate communally, reduce discord or promote friendly relationships with others”. With this insight, and within the context of their experiences of displacement, the important value that the participants placed on the relational attributes of community is understandable.

### Reimagining liveable space

Having considered the four concepts identified as the categories of the theoretical code of reimagining liveable space, attention will now be given to this central concept. The term “liveable space” was used to describe a place that someone reaches where they feel safe enough to stop fleeing, after having been forced to leave the place that had become so unliveable that they had no choice but to embark on a state of displacement. This could be a refugee settlement, an internal displacement camp, a safe house or even the home of an acquaintance. It is not necessarily the ideal place to live, or the place where the displaced person would ultimately choose to live, but it is safe enough to provide a resting point for the displaced person and any dependents with whom she is travelling.

The process of reimagining liveable space showed a dynamic aspect as the displaced person demonstrated a reimagining of individual, subjective perceptions of wellbeing, liveableness, temporariness and community over time. With the passing of time since the violence that led to initial displacement, the displaced person’s priorities were seen to change. For example, regarding liveableness, safety was initially the top priority.

However, once safety was guaranteed, the individual demonstrated a reimagining of their liveable space priorities to include access to better education and employment opportunities, or more space for creating a home. Regarding food security, initially, the simple receipt of guaranteed food was sufficient, but over time, this was reimagined to include a desire for the capabilities and opportunities to obtain their own food, through cultivation, or employment and financial independence.

All the women bar one had received psychosocial support at some stage during the time since displacement, and this was an oft-cited factor that they claimed had led to improved wellbeing. A positive outcome from this was the increased capacity that the women felt that they had regarding the ability to make longer-term decisions on life choices. Subsequently, the individual was seen to revise their aspirations regarding achievements for themselves and their dependents. Thus, as their perception of wellbeing was amended, so they were seen to be reimagining their liveable space. From a temporariness perspective, some of the displaced individuals reflected on experiencing an increased sense of belonging in the community over time, resulting in a reduced and reimagined sense of temporariness. However, for others, their inherent desire to go “home” contributed to them always feeling somewhat temporary in their displacement community. For some, as the reason for their initial displacement dissipated over time, the yearning to return home increased. Whether that was a pursuable desire, or something that was unattainable for reasons beyond their control, again impacted their reimagining of liveable space. From the perspective of community, initially, the displaced person tended to seek out a community that resembled the one from which she was forced to flee regarding ethnicity, traditions, language and religion. However, over time, there were examples of a reimagining of the important criteria regarding community, including a desire to seek out a community for reasons of better services and opportunities, rather than just having similarities to their past life.

The process of reimagining was seen to take place at different speeds for different individuals. This was based on many factors, including the degree of traumatisation experienced, time needed for recovery and the current personal circumstances of the individual and her dependents. It could also depend on the location of the community to which the individual had been displaced. Where the new liveable space provided access to a perceived acceptable level of opportunities and resources, then any reimagining might be a slower process. Conversely, if the new liveable space was perceived to be lacking in opportunities desired by the individual, then reimagining might occur quicker as the aspiration for a better life surfaced sooner.

## **Solidification of the theory**

The initial version of the grounded theory that emerged from the data was:

South Sudanese refugee women and Acholi internally displaced women, living in Uganda, all of whom have been forcibly displaced because of gender-based violence and oppression exacerbated by war, will demonstrate a reimagining of liveable space with the passing of time and based on their perceptions of wellbeing, liveableness, community and temporariness.

Whilst this theory stood true to the specific context of the research and its participants, it was constricted from wider application by virtue of reference to location and ethnic-based references. The initial version of the theory therefore went through a process of solidification and refinement to remove contextual references and reduce it to its underlying uniformity (Glaser, 1992). Location and ethnicity-specific references were removed, along with the contextual constraint implied by referencing war as the displacement causative factor. This was replaced with reference to the displacement being due to violent external episodes. Further refinements included reference to the uniquely personal experience of the violent episodes, and recognition that the interconnectedness of the four named categories also

influences the reimagining of liveable space. The final amendment recognised the individual and subjective nature of the perceptions of the categories.

To further test the robustness of the theory as part of the solidification process, it was assessed against the grounded theory pre-requisite that an emergent theory should fulfil the requirements of fit, work and relevance and modifiability (Lomborg and Kirkevold, 2003). Each of these conditions was satisfactorily met, and the theory was also shown to address deviant cases that provided further evidence of the robustness of theory (Haning, 2021).

### **The emergent grounded theory**

The final version of the grounded theory that emerged from this study was:

Women who have undergone forced displacement due to profound, personal experience of gender-based violation and abuse through violent external episodes will demonstrate a reimagining of what constitutes a liveable space with the passing of time and as influenced by the interconnectedness of their individual, subjective perceptions of wellbeing, liveableness, community, and temporariness.

### **Importance of the findings for future use/contribution and value-add**

The findings from this study, and the emergent grounded theory, provide a platform from which to draw a number of learning points pertinent to the practices of service providers working with forcibly displaced people.

One learning point is that none of the named concepts of wellbeing, liveableness, temporariness and community is an isolated concept within the context of women who have experienced trauma due to violent external episodes but is closely intertwined with the other three concepts. Further, these concepts are non-hierarchical and can all vary and be reimagined over time. Each concept can variously influence the perception of the other concepts in both positive and negative ways, and the same situation can be perceived very differently by separate individuals. Thus, there is a strong subjective element both to the perception of each concept and to the reality of the interconnections, depending on many factors and the variabilities of those factors. The four categories and their interconnectedness are therefore a useful lens through which to consider the aims and objectives of the service provider's activities, as well as when developing tools to measure outcomes.

Regarding the practices of service providers, the knowledge that a process of reimagining liveable space takes place over time can provide a useful insight for trauma counselling practitioners. If, due to reimagining, the client is altering their perceived end goal during the course of the counselling process, then the route to achieving that end goal should be reviewed. However, current programmes often provide relatively short-term interventions, and there is not always support available for those who might later experience a reimagining of any of the categories and require further intervention. A recommendation from these insights is that trauma counselling agencies avoid providing trauma counselling as a one-time intervention and instead explore ways to journey with people for the longer-term to help them build resilience.

Regarding the four categories identified in the grounded theory, each of them has a range of properties associated with it. For example, liveableness includes safety, gender, education, access to resources and land rights. Wellbeing includes physical, mental, spiritual and community aspects. Temporariness includes whether chosen or imposed, and the options available to the individual to transition to a state of chosen permanence. Community includes mutuality, diversity and safety. Together, these categories and their properties demonstrate the breadth of areas that can impact the client and their response to

the healing process. The organisation might therefore consider reviewing its practices to ensure that practitioners are providing sufficient space and opportunities for the client to explore these different areas as appropriate.

Due to the subjective nature of responses to trauma, it is important that the women be treated as individuals and their own personal and unique viewpoints heard. This is particularly relevant for organisations that use group therapy as part of their portfolio of interventions. Group therapy can be useful for imparting general information, enhancing social contacts and improving coping skills (Nakimuli-Mpungu, *et al.*, 2015). However, there should be no assumptions made about homogeneity of experiences, either by the practitioner or by the other clients in the group.

One final learning point from this research relates to the host community into which the displaced people are being relocated. The needs of the host community must be considered alongside the needs of the displaced community to ensure that the proposed host community is willing to welcome displaced individuals. Through being educated, equipped and assured of the tangible benefits for their community, peaceful co-existence is more likely. Without this, displaced people entering the community might sense rejection and resentment from the host community, and consequently, struggle to recover from their existing trauma, or potentially experience further trauma.

The outcome of this research is a study that does not just focus on wellbeing for displaced women, or liveableness, or temporariness, or community. Instead, it has its uniqueness and originality in the way in which it weaves those four components of liveable space together and demonstrates their important relationship to each other. Many studies tend to focus on just one of these categories, or at best two. To draw all four together in a relevant and pertinent way, based on the information that has been shared by the participants is an innovative approach that has resulted in some valuable contributions and practical applications for the area of support provision to traumatised and forcibly displaced people. This novel research study and its findings offer significant potential for policy development and further research, which will have global impact and reach.

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