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Maureen Seguin, Ruth Lewis, Mariam Razmadze, Tinatin Amirejibi, Bayard Roberts

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Article title: Coping strategies of internally displaced women in Georgia: A qualitative study

Maureen Seguin[a*], Ruth Lewis[a], Mariam Razmadze[b], Tinatin Amirejibi[b], Bayard Roberts [a]

[a] *London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, United Kingdom*
[b] *Ilia State University, Georgia*

* 13-15 Tavistock Place, London, UK, WC1H 9SH, <u>maureen.seguin@lshtm.ac.uk</u>

1

2 Abstract

3 There is limited evidence on the coping strategies of conflict-affected civilians in low and

4 middle income countries. The aim of this paper is to explore the coping strategies used by

5 women internally displaced within the Republic of Georgia due to the Russo-Georgian war in

6 2008. We use a five-fold coping typology to examine coping strategies in the accounts of 42

7 Georgian women residing in internally-displaced persons settlements. Semi-structured

8 interviews were conducted during fieldwork in Georgia from December 2012 to February

9 2013. Problem solving and support seeking behaviours emerged as the most-commonly-used

10 strategies. The findings suggest interventions fostering sustainable livelihoods and robust

11 social networks are needed to utilise the coping strategies commonly used by internally

12 displaced women in Georgia.

13 **Keywords: Internally displaced persons, women's health, Georgia, conflict, coping,**

14 **mental health, migration**

15

16 # Introduction

17 Mental health is recognized as a key public health issue for populations affected by war

18 (Inter-Agency Standing Committee, 2007). As much of the existing literature on mental

19 health of conflict-affected populations focuses on a narrow definition of mental health using a

20 trauma-focused orientation (Steel et al., 2009), there is a comparatively small evidence base

21 on protective factors, including coping mechanisms, against poor mental health outcomes

22 among conflict-affected persons. Most of this small evidence base is focused on refugees in

23 high-income countries, even though most people forcibly displaced by conflict are internally

24 displaced persons (IDPs) within their own countries or refugees in low- and middle-income

25 countries (LMICs) (UNHCR, 2015). There is a particular paucity of research on how IDPs

26 and refugees in LMICs cope in response to exposure to conflict, forced displacement, trauma

27 and loss (Seguin & Roberts, 2015). This is despite coping being identified as a priority

28 research area for mental health and psychosocial support among conflict-affected populations

29 (Tol et al., 2011). The aim of this paper is to explore the coping strategies used by women

30 internally displaced within the Republic of Georgia due to the Russo-Georgian war in 2008.

31

32 Despite evidence suggesting that men and women cope differently with war and

33 displacement, there has been little focus specifically on either men or women to understand

34 their approaches to coping. A review of the existing evidence on coping among IDPs and

35 refugees in LMICs identified that women were more likely to engage in emotion-oriented and

36 support-seeking coping than men, who were more likely to engage in problem solving and

37 recreational activities (Seguin & Roberts, 2015). Conflict-affected women and men

38 experience war and displacement differently with women more likely to face structural

39 barriers resulting in economic, social, and physical insecurity. Conflict-affected females may

40 face sexual assault (Liebling & Kiziri-Mayengo, 2002), and/or the loss of spouse (and

2

41   associated increased responsibility of single-handedly managing homes and looking after

42   children) (Morina & Emmelkamp, 2012), while their male counterparts may face detention,

43   abduction, and combat (Somasundaram, 1994). The higher use of alcohol among men than

44   women among conflict-affected populations may create yet another stressor for women (Lo et

45   al., 2017). Miller et al. (2006) found that Afghani cultural characteristics which emphasizes

46   family honour (sometimes entailing damaging practices toward women including early

47   marriage, violence in the home, and barriers in women accessing legal and human rights)

48   block women's access to resources and may lead to elevated levels of poor mental health. In

49   their study on war-affected Pakistanis and Afghan refugees in Pakistan, Husain et al. (2007)

50   found that a greater proportion of women than men reported problems regarding housing,

51   neighbours, lack of money, relationships with friends and family, and illness or deaths in the

52   family.

53

54   To address the lack of research on coping strategies among female IDPs in LMICs, the aim of

55   this paper is to explore the coping strategies used by women internally displaced within the

56   Republic of Georgia due to the Russo-Georgian war in 2008. Below, we first situate our

57   study within the concepts of coping and resilience, and the socio-political research setting.

58

59   # Conceptual Approach

60   Coping is a contested concept, though numerous frameworks and assessment scales have

61   been developed over the past four decades that attempt to distinguish its key components.

62   Folkman and Lazarus (1980) defined coping as an attempt to master, tolerate, or reduce

63   internal or external stressors that an individual perceives as exceeding existing resources.

64 They suggested that coping types fell into two domains: problem-focused and emotion-

65 focused (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980, 1991). Coping assessment scales were based on this

66 typology (see Folkman & Lazarus, 1980, 1985), and spawned a proliferation of other coping

67 scales. Skinner et al. (2003) aimed to develop a coping taxonomy composed of "conceptually

68 clear, mutually exclusive and exhaustive categories" (p.217). From their analysis of

69 approximately 100 coping category systems proposed from the 1980s to 2000, five core

70 domains emerged: problem solving, support seeking, avoidance, distraction, and positive

71 cognitive restructuring. Table 1 below lists the definitions of these domains.

72 [insert Table 1 about here]

73 We use the Skinner et al. (2003) taxonomy to organize and interpret the coping strategies

74 because the domains are well-supported in the literature on coping, covering a wide variety of

75 thoughts and behaviours.

76

77 *Coping and resilience*

78 Research on coping strategies amongst IDPs and other conflict-affected populations is rooted

79 within a broader scope of work focused on resiliency among humanitarian crisis-affected

80 populations. Like the concept of coping, the concept of resilience is contested (Southwick et

81 al., 2014), defined as a process of harnessing resources (including biological, psychosocial,

82 structural, and cultural) to sustain wellbeing (Panter-Brick, 2014; Panter-Brick & Leckman,

83 2013), a personal ability to successfully adapt to or recover from stress and trauma

84 (Siriwardhana et al., 2014), and a stable trajectory of functioning after a clearly defined,

85 highly adverse event (Bonanno, 2004, 2012).

86

87 This range of definitions present resilience as normatively positive; resilience is an entity that

88 individuals are either blessed to possess or would do well to strive toward. This normative

89 aspect to resiliency marks a point of departure from coping, as coping includes reactions to

90 adversity widely perceived as normatively 'negative.' Destructive emotions, avoidance of

91 people and contexts, and distraction via illicit and/or illegal activities do not sit comfortably

92 within most resilience concepts, with the possible exception of 'perverse resilience' (see

93 Panter-Brick, 2014). Thus, coping encompasses a wider set of responses than resilience.

94 However, coping is simultaneously narrower than resilience as some coping strategies may

95 facilitate resilience to develop. For instance, Eggerman and Panter-Brick (2010) found that a

96 sentiment of hope amongst Afghan families imparted a sense of order to their lives, making

97 them more resilient to traumas experienced. Thus, one can become resilient through 'coping

98 well.' As we sought to explore both the normatively positive and negative responses to war

99 and displacement, the concept of coping was deemed a better fit for our study objectives.

100 Nonetheless, we recognise the interlinked and fluid nature of both resilience and coping, and

101 the crucial importance of the cultural context in exploring responses to conflict (Panter-Brick,

102 2014).

103

104 *Coping and loss in Georgia*

105 Forcibly displaced persons such as IDPs and refugees suffer losses of tangible materials

106 including property and personal belongings, along with intangible assets such as social

107 support networks, socio-cultural practices, and identities connected to the social and physical

108 spaces they have left behind (Davis, 1992). Our earlier work, focused on resource loss

109 experienced by IDP women in Georgia, found that war-related trauma led to the loss of

110 property, which caused the loss of livelihood and subsequent losses in the areas of social

111   networks and mental and physical health (Seguin et al., 2016). As observed in other settings

112   (Eggerman & Panter-Brick, 2010; Miller & Rasmussen, 2010; Panter-Brick & Eggerman,

113   2012; Panter-Brick et al., 2008), ongoing, everyday stressors unrelated directly to war feature

114   prominently in the stressors reported by internally-displaced Georgian women. Whilst

115   respecting the impact of these losses, it is important to acknowledge that pain, suffering,

116   conflict, poverty, and disorder is a routine part of many lives (Vigh, 2008). If crisis is

117   chronic, conflict, violence, and poverty become embedded in the social fabric, leading to a

118   'normalisation of crisis' (Das, 2006).

119

120   The disintegration of the Soviet Union in the late 1980s ushered in a new 'normal' in many

121   former constituent states. The vision of a steady progression toward a communist future was

122   replaced with an era of instability in Georgia which became the norm (Frederiksen, 2008).

123   Most Georgians enjoyed a modest but secure lifestyle during the Soviet era (Pelkmans,

124   2006), with many experiencing a drastic decline in their living standards in the post-Soviet

125   era (Dudwick, 2003). Those in rural areas experienced a particularly drastic decline, suffering

126   from poor infrastructure and a lack of economic opportunities (Mekhuzla & Roche, 2009),

127   leading to a large proportion of the populace coping with economic hardship through

128   subsistence farming, reducing expenditure, forgoing social and recreational activities, and

129   selling assets, such as personal property, furniture, cars, and homes (Manning & Uplisashvili,

130   2007). Though many Georgians suffered due to the end of the Soviet era, displaced

131   Georgians suffered further through displacement off their land which could have provided at

132   least subsistence farming opportunities (Dudwick, 2003).

133

6

Research setting

The study took place in the Republic of Georgia which has experienced armed conflict at various points since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. A war between Georgia and Russia in August 2008 broke out over tensions between Georgia and the separatist region of South Ossetia, leading to the displacement of over 100,000 ethnic Georgians from South Ossetia into the rest of Georgia. Most IDPs live in purpose-built settlements next to established communities. While many of those displaced from edge of South Ossetia have returned to their homes, approximately 27,000 persons originally from deep within the disputed territory remain displaced (The Government of Georgia, 2015). Many Georgian IDPs face poverty, poor living conditions and infrastructure, and a lack of access to land, markets, employment opportunities, and financial services (The World Bank, 2013). High levels of mental disorders, functional disability, somatic distress, stress-factors, and limited access to mental health services have also been recorded among IDPs in Georgia (Chikovani et al., 2015; Makhashvili et al., 2014; Moreno et al., 2015). A quantitative study on coping amongst Georgian IDPs revealed an association between specific coping strategies and mental health outcomes, with mental disengagement, denial, venting emotions, substance abuse and gambling significantly associated with poor mental health outcomes, and use of humour, emotional support, active coping, acceptance and religion significantly associated with better mental health outcomes (Saxon et al., 2016).

Methods

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 42 Georgian women. The age range was 20 to 73 years, with an average age of 43. Interviewees were residing in one of three selected IDP settlements in Georgia near the border with South Ossetia: Shavshvebi (n=13), Skra

158 (n=13), and Karaleti (n=16). Descriptions of these settlements are available elsewhere

159 (Seguin et al., 2016).

160

161 This study was conducted in collaboration with the Global Initiative on Psychiatry–Tbilisi

162 (GIP-T), an organisation which provides psychosocial support services to IDP populations in

163 Georgia. Staff from GIP-T introduced the lead author to one 'key woman' from each

164 settlement, who was purposively selected based on her status as an informal community

165 leader. Key women were briefed on the study and then interviewed by one of two locally-

166 recruited research assistants. After the interview, they were asked to suggest additional

167 women to interview. As we sought to include a range of experiences and perspectives, the

168 sampling was directed according to criteria regarding age, occupation, and marital status.

169

170 Fieldwork took place between December 2012 and February 2013. Georgian-language

171 interviews took place in participants' homes and were audio recorded. A professional

172 transcriptionist and translator produced an English-language transcript from the Georgian

173 audio recording. Translation errors were mitigated by back-checking English transcripts

174 against Georgian audio recording of early interviews and prioritizing substantive over literal

175 meaning. The interview topic guide focused on the strategies used by women to cope with the

176 hardships and losses due to the war and displacement (see online Annex). On average

177 interviews were 50 minutes in duration, ranging from 30 to 90 minutes.

178

179 English-language transcripts were entered into Nvivo software to assist in coding and

180 analysis. Coding occurred concurrent to data gathering and followed an iterative process

181 which enabled on-going reflection on the use and application of the coping taxonomy. Data

8

182   on coping was categorised into the following categories: problem solving, support seeking,

183   escape-avoidance, distraction, and cognitive restructuring. Excerpts of transcripts were

184   frequently assigned to two or more domains if they signified more than one coping type. Our

185   purpose in applying the taxonomy developed by Skinner et al. (2003) was to provide a

186   vantage point from which to interpret the data, and also to further theoretical development in

187   the area of coping research.

188

189   *Ethics*

190   Ethical approval was granted by the Georgian National Council on Bioethics and by the

191   Ethics Committee of the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. The research

192   assistants provided information sheets and verbal explanations to participants, and answered

193   queries and/or concerns regarding the research prior to each interview. All participants

194   provided written informed consent and received a monetary reimbursement for their time

195   equivalent to approximately 10 USD. Referral information for mental health and

196   psychosocial support services was accessible for interviewees in case of distress (none

197   became distressed during the interview). The names reported here are pseudonyms.

198   # Results

199   Problem solving strategies were the most commonly reported strategies, reported by almost

200   all women. This type was followed in frequency by support seeking, escape-avoidance,

201   distraction, and cognitive restructuring. Most women used multiple strategies.

202   *Problem solving*

203   Problem solving coping strategies primarily included seeking employment, attending training

204   sessions, and budgeting. Many women reported taking any and all jobs they could in order to

205   cope with the financial losses. Growing and selling excess fruit and vegetables grown in

9

206 allotments to provide much-needed income was a widely-reported activity. Many women also

207 worked occasionally at temporary agricultural jobs involving heavy manual labour in fields

208 and gardens. Marina noted:

209   In general, people living in our settlement are unemployed and the population of the [village
210   of Skra next to Skra IDP settlement] hires them sometimes. They have cherry gardens and
211   they call people from our settlement when they need to harvest them. Usually women do it.
212   There are some seasonal jobs in the village sometimes and women from our settlement take
213   them.

214 Besides agricultural jobs, some women were able to find employment at the non-

215 governmental organisations (NGOs) to which they had formerly turned for help.

216

217 Quite frequently women reported attending training sessions to help improve their job

218 prospects. Lali noted: "I've […] attended sewing training because I thought that it would give

219 me the opportunity to get a job. I've attended every possible training." Women reported a

220 wide variety of budgeting techniques to cope with the loss of livelihoods. Virtually all

221 women reported relying on home-grown food in order to avoid buying food, thus coping with

222 financial woes. Natia reflected, "Thank God, we have these small land lots to grow our

223 vegetables. So, we don't have to buy them. It could have been worse." Some women raised

224 animals to avoid buying products such as eggs, meat, and dairy items. Nana reflected how "it

225 helps me a bit. Otherwise, we would be in a very miserable situation." Many women aspired

226 to own animals such as cows and chickens, but not all could afford to buy or feed animals, or

227 raise them in the limited space in the settlements.

228

229 Patriarchal gender relations presented a barrier for some women in seeking employment. For

230 instance, Marta explains how her husband's patriarchal attitude had constrained her job

231 opportunities in the settlement: "My husband, for example, won't let me wander the streets

232   looking for a job. Even if there were jobs. He won't let me work in night shifts. Neither as a

233   cleaner." However, the degree to which women's employment opportunities were obstructed

234   by men is unclear in the data. Marta felt that many other women were not similarly

235   constrained:

236   Some women, on the other hand, won't even seek their husband's permission. They do what
237   is best for their families. […] It's not a problem for new generations. They live the way they
238   want. My generation of women can't live otherwise, we still depend on our husbands.

239

240   *Support seeking*

241   Women reported turning to others for advice on specific problems and for instrumental help

242   (such as money or goods). Others, such as Eteri, shared sorrow and 'heartache' with others in

243   order to gain emotional support. Neighbours and family members were most-commonly cited

244   as sources for support. Nutsa explained that the formation of relationships between

245   neighbours in Shavshvebi had been key to helping the community cope with the

246   displacement. She stated, "By taking care, supporting each other we have managed, and still

247   manage to overcome these terrible times." The beneficial impact of close proximity to pre-

248   displacement neighbours emerged as a salient theme. Irma explained how she drew strength

249   from her previous neighbours who had settled in the same IDP settlement as her:

250   Some of them are my friends and relatives… I even share my last name with some of them.
251   Well, my spouse's last name. […] We help and support one another. It's one of the good
252   things about living here. […] We were friends in the village and we still are […] Whenever
253   we are out, we feel that we are surrounded by 'our' people. Every person is good, of course,
254   we all are from the same gorge but seeing people from our village every day makes us
255   stronger. We know that we are not alone and we support each other.

256   Living in close proximity to old neighbours imparted feelings of security and stability,

257   through recognition that older age neighbours had survived the war and displacement, and

258   that communities, though displaced, were largely intact. The quote above emphasizes the

259   *emotional* support imparted through these established relationships. *Instrumental* support, in

260   the form of money, assistance on tasks, and goods, was not commonly mentioned.

11

261

262   Many interviewees also sought support from 'new neighbours'; those neighbours whom they

263   did not know prior to displacement. Such support took the form of emotional and

264   instrumental support. Women shared many instances of helping and receiving help from

265   neighbours. For instance, residents in Shavshvebi settlement helped Irina cultivate her

266   garden, build a chicken coop, and pay for her son's funeral. Women sometimes minded each

267   other's children to allow mothers to concentrate on other tasks. Vardo describes how her

268   neighbours cope by helping each other with laborious tasks:

269   In spring, we need tools. Others provided them for us. Well, they were a bit unfit but still. So,
270   neighbours helped us with tools and moreover, they offered us their help. We used to help
271   each other. No one has tilled the ground here in 20 years and one-pass tillage wasn't enough.
272   The soil requires two-three years of work to get it into shape, so to speak. My spouse and I
273   worked there alone and it was hard. Our neighbours offered us help. Later, we helped them.

274   Besides neighbours, family represented a resource to which women could turn for help.

275   Natalia reports seeking and receiving support from her adult son and husband, both

276   'optimists' in her view:

277   I'm a pessimist. My spouse is an optimist. My son is an optimist too. I tell him he's my
278   therapist because they help me overcome many things. Especially my son. He is very helpful.
279   I often ask him for an advice; I always want to know his opinion about things. He's my son
280   but talking with him calms me down. […] Despite everything, I'm still pessimistic about
281   things, and I often feel depressed. And whenever I feel depressed, my spouse and son help me
282   feel better.

283

284   Beyond emotional support, women sought instrumental support from family members,

285   especially extended family members who were not as negatively affected by the 2008 war.

286   Izolda's parents, who had returned to their home near the buffer zone between South Ossetia

287   and Georgia, assisted Izolda by giving her food and seeds. Children proved to be an

288   extremely strong resource for respondents, by providing motivation for carrying on and

289   adding meaning to life. For instance, Elisabed shared "After the war, I felt so bad, I felt

290   empty. My only reason for being alive was my kids."

12

291

292 Though family and neighbours represented the largest sources from which women sought

293 support, they also turned to friends beyond their settlements, co-workers, and to priests. Eliso

294 was from the city of Gori originally, which meant that she had an already-existing network of

295 friends prior to settling in Karaleti settlement (located on the outskirts of Gori). She reflected

296 on how this network helped her cope:

297   I have many friends in both Gori and this region because I was raised here and… Well, I think
298   that they helped me cope with this everything. They help me, they understand what I feel, and
299   they try to calm me down… Often, I don't even want to leave home but they keep inviting me
300   and it helps me not to think about many things. […] It's important to have friends who
301   support you.

302 Perhaps because the sample included so few employed women (reflecting the high

303 unemployment in the settlements), only a few stated that they sought support from co-

304 workers.

305

306 *Escape-avoidance*

307 Escape-avoidance coping strategies followed support seeking and problem solving strategies

308 in terms of frequency reported by the women. The most commonly-reported types of escape-

309 avoidance were resignation, physical and emotional isolation, physical escape, crying, and

310 wishful thinking. Several women reported coping via an attitude of resignation; conceding

311 that hardship could not be overcome. For instance, Lali spoke about how she coped with the

312 loss of her livelihood, which prior to the war had consisted of growing and selling apples.

313 Now, realizing that this way of life was over, she simply 'followed the flow of life:'

314   There, we had boxes full of apples and we used to sell them. Russians and others were buying
315   them. It was our source of income that was helping us move forward and be happy in this life.
316   Now I have given up on everything and I follow the flow of life.

317

13

318 Some women coped by isolating themselves, physically and/or emotionally. For instance,

319 Elisabed rarely ventured outside. She stated that after arriving in Karaleti, "I stopped going

320 out and became more introverted. […] I feel better when I'm alone. I don't feel comfortable

321 when I'm out." Besides physical isolation, some women coped with their problems via

322 emotional isolation. This consisted of concealing emotions and consciously not reaching out

323 to others for help, as demonstrated by Jana's statement: "I do not leave home. […] I don't go

324 out, and let other people know about my emotions, or let other people see my gloomy face."

325 Some women were motivated to conceal their anger, vulnerabilities, and needs in order to not

326 'bother' others with their problems.

327

328 Crying was occasionally listed as a coping strategy by the women. For instance, Izolda

329 explained that crying helped her cope with negative feelings: "My nerves are so bad,

330 whenever my nerves tense me up I feel very bad if I don't cry. […] Whenever I stay alone I

331 cry a lot. It helps me feel relieved." Some women engaged in wishful thinking during the

332 interview, which commonly consisted of comments about hoping to return to their villages of

333 origin. Medea stated,

334   I live in hope. I'm still hopeful. Some people say that they are not but I hope to return home. I
335   still believe, I don't know why. I believe we will return home. I don't know. […] I have a
336   feeling we are going to leave soon.

337 Latavri explained that she thinks about the possibility of return to her origin village in order

338 to 'not give into sorrow.' She ponders, "What if they let us return? We all dream about going

339 back home."

14

340

Distraction

342 The women reported a wide variety of distraction techniques in order to cope with their

343 circumstances, including seeking employment and working, gardening, doing housework,

344 reading and watching TV, and visiting others. Seeking employment, working, and gardening

345 overlapped with the problem solving coping domain discussed above, and visiting others

346 overlapped with seeking support.

347

348 Besides the obvious economic benefit of working, some women described how working

349 helped them divert their attention from problems and combat feelings of depression. Though

350 unemployed at the time of the interview, Vardo had previously worked as a 'village chief' in

351 Skra. She remarked that the position helped her not only financially but by providing a

352 welcome distraction:

353   [S]taying in and doing the same all the time can make you feel depressed. When you have a
354   job, you meet new people, people from NGOs, many of them visited us… There were training
355   courses, retraining groups… I had to pay attention to students. And it all was different, active
356   engagement helps you divert your attention to these things and forget about your everyday
357   problems in your family for some time. I almost never felt depressed. […] I was less irritated
358   by things, so to speak.

359 Sofiko had found employment with an NGO focused on women's rights. She reflected on

360 how her job has impacted her well-being: "Things are relatively better now. I have a job and

361 I'm very happy. Being out of work and waking up to nothing was terrible."

362

363 Besides the value imparted by training sessions in the form of potential projects and

364 employment opportunities (as discussed above), women appreciated the diversion of such

365 sessions. Besides learning something new, Izolda found that attending training sessions

15

366 reduced her stress level. She shared, "Whenever I attended training, my soul was relaxing

367 while listening to those discussions."

368

369 In addition to the financial benefit to growing fruits and vegetables discussed in the problem

370 solving section above, several women, such as Marta, felt that the activity also provided an

371 opportunity to divert attention away from other problems. She shared, "I can't wait to plant

372 onions and garlic, hoe the land, and watch seeds grow. I'm so excited. Going out and doing

373 something would add meaning to my life. Physical work is our vital force."

374

375 Quite a few women reported that they tried to find tasks to do around the house as a

376 distraction technique. Eka explained, "Being idle is very difficult, [a] lot of thoughts come to

377 your head when you have nothing to do, you start to remember everything [...] When you

378 clean your house, you switch your attention." Jana stated that she distracted herself from

379 stress with a combination of reading and housework: "I entertain myself, distract myself by

380 doing housework. I also love reading and this is how I handle it. I may put off doing some

381 housework and start reading." When asked how she coped with her problems, Eka reported

382 that she liked to visit neighbours; "going here and there." Vardo stated that people in the

383 settlement gathered and talked to each other in order to entertain themselves, especially in the

384 summer when the weather was good.

385

386 *Cognitive restructuring*

387 Interviewees spoke of invoking religious beliefs, focusing on mental strength, and

388 downplaying losses and focusing on positive aspects of life as instances of cognitive

16

389 restructuring. Some respondents reported their faith allowed them to reconceptualise their

390 circumstances in a positive way, and that church attendance and faith in God had a calming

391 effect, reducing stress. Tamar noted how "many IDPs go to the church and it helps us a lot.

392 When I come out from there I feel so spiritually calm… It's very good." Nana concurred,

393 stating "Going to church and seeing a priest makes me feel peaceful and disburdened. When I

394 return home, I feel like I was on a holiday, I'm so relaxed."

395

396 Women also reported that faith helped them make sense of and interpret past events, by

397 viewing such events as 'God's plan.' For instance, Natia drew meaning from religion and this

398 'helped her live.' She stated, "Faith in God gives the biggest, strongest meaning to my life."

399 The fact that they had survived the war was viewed as strong evidence of God' protection,

400 and as an omen that God would continue to protect them. Marta attributed the relatively few

401 civilian deaths to intercession by God and the Virgin Mary because the road which formed

402 the escape route from the war was covered in fog in the day that many fled.

403

404 Quite a few women drew confidence from the fact they had been able to meet the demanding

405 challenges that life had presented to them so far. Natia explained how her inner strength,

406 which developed through the challenges related to the war and displacement, helped her

407 overcome the wounds of the past:

408   Personally, I feel that I have more strength now. […] I feel inner strength. You need strength
409   to overcome what we've been through. It came to me naturally and helped me overcome and
410   forget everything that happened four years ago. […] The fact that you are able to analyse,
411   overcome and keep quiet about all these things is what makes you strong […] Probably, the
412   only positive thing that happened to us is that we feel this inner strength. We are more self-
413   confident after all that we've been through.

414 This comment also demonstrated the overlap between different coping styles; there are

415 elements to emotional isolation ('keeping quiet,' not seeking support) in this statement.

17

416 Guranda as well thought she had become a stronger person since being tested by the

417 hardships of displacement. She shared,

418 After the war because I managed to overcome all difficulties. I didn't become withdrawn,
419 aggressive, or evil. On the contrary, I looked at all this from a totally different perspective and
420 I realized that I am strong. If you don't face difficulties, you will never understand how much
421 you are able to do. All the bad things that happen in our lives are a test. I've already been in
422 this situation many times. Through the difficulties and it made me realize that I am strong.

423 Maia felt her sense of strength increased after becoming displaced as a necessary adaptation

424 to having to protect her family. Similarly, Lali reflected how "I still think that I will achieve

425 something. I'm not going to give up because I want a better future for my kids. I really want

426 it."

427

428 Coping through downplaying one's losses was frequently implied by the respondents.

429 Positioning others' troubles as truly insurmountable diminished the scale of their own

430 problems. For instance, Medea downplayed problems faced by her family by discussing the

431 needs of elderly people. She queried, "What about elderly people who can't work? Nobody's

432 helping them. What should they do? They can't even pay their bills with their pension. […] I

433 feel pity for these people."

434

435 Women also considered that circumstances could have been even worse for them. Many

436 stated the most important thing to consider was that they were alive. Irma's statement was

437 typical: "The most important thing is that everyone is alive and healthy" Frequently, women

438 compared their fate to the fate of others who had lost family members, thereby minimizing

439 their own losses. For instance, Natia stated,

440 [P]eople who lost their children… How can you talk about the things you left there and riches
441 after that? Personally, I have this feeling and sometimes I feel ashamed to say that I left this,
442 that there or that I miss someone or something. What should people who lost their children
443 do? How are they going to live their lives? It makes me feel ashamed to talk about my things.

18

444

Discussion

446 The aim of this paper is to better understand the coping strategies used by IDP women in

447 Georgia in response to the resource losses suffered as a result of the war and

448 displacement(Seguin et al., 2016). We were prompted by gaps in the evidence on coping

449 approaches among conflict-affected persons in LMICs (Seguin & Roberts, 2015), and

450 gender-specific explorations of coping approaches.

451

452 Coping strategies were interpreted via a coping typology put forth by Skinner et al. (2003).

453 Part of our rationale for choosing this conceptual approach was the proposed clarity and

454 mutual exclusivity of the coping domains. Despite these anticipated benefits, some of the

455 coping strategies used by our respondents overlap as represented in Figure 1. A specific

456 coping activity or mind-set can serve one or more purposes. For instance, gardening

457 represented both a problem-solving and a distraction activity for the respondents. Distraction

458 techniques reported by the women in this study included visiting others (which overlaps with

459 support-seeking strategies), and seeking employment and working, and gardening (both

460 which overlap the problem solving domain). We chose to detail these overlaps to demonstrate

461 the complex nature of coping. The classification of coping strategies is nuanced and

462 researchers should adopt a critical approach as this field develops.

463

464 *[Insert Figure 1 about here]*

465

19

466 As noted by Panter-Brick et al. (2009), the challenges faced by conflict-affected persons are

467 wider than war-related trauma. They may encounter forms of suffering and adversity

468 extending into the years following conflict (Seguin et al., 2016). The coping strategies chosen

469 by conflict-affected persons reflect their day-to-day challenges, which revolve not around the

470 mental health impacts of war trauma, but the material deprivation resulting from the war and

471 displacement. Much of the semi-structured interviews focused on how women addressed their

472 difficult socioeconomic circumstances related to being displaced, rather than on mental health

473 problems attributable to the conflict.

474

475 The strategies outlined in the results section reflect the importance of the cultural context for

476 coping; the women in this study most frequently reported striving to re-establish the

477 economic opportunities in which they engaged prior to displacement as their main way of

478 coping with the difficult material circumstances in the IDP settlements. This is shown in their

479 careful planting, tending, and harvesting of produce, careful budgeting, and selling excess

480 foodstuffs in local markets. These coping strategies represent an attempt to return to

481 'normality,' entailing subsistence farming and small-scale market activity which had become

482 the norm in rural Georgia in the early 1990s (Manning & Uplisashvili, 2007). Engaging in

483 such activities generally yielded a sense of hope and relief amongst respondents. Coping

484 through repairing a 'broken economy'(Eggerman & Panter-Brick, 2010) has been observed

485 elsewhere in other studies on war-affected adults residing in LMICs (Bennet et al., 1995;

486 Eggerman & Panter-Brick, 2010; Hardgrove, 2009).

487

488 Seeking social support was a common coping strategy, reflecting the embeddedness of

489 kinship networks and collective well-being within Georgian culture (Makhashvili et al.,

20

490 2010) and more widely across the former Soviet Union (Oushakine, 2006). Among the

491 Georgian IDPs in this study, relationships with cherished family members were sometimes

492 held as the only worthwhile thing left in life, consistent with importance Georgians typically

493 place on children (Makhashvili et al., 2010).

494

495 Similar to Eggerman and Panter-Brick (2010), we observed that culture is a double-edged

496 sword vis-à-vis coping. Whilst relying on kinship ties is sanctioned by Georgian cultural

497 mores, the respondents were well aware of the cultural expectation of the reciprocal giving of

498 goods or services, and social consequences if the requirement was unfulfilled. Perhaps the

499 inability to provide *material* support to others led women to seek and receive *moral* support

500 rather than *material* support. The widespread material deprivation in rural areas of Georgia

501 (in which the settlements included in this study were situated) also presented a barrier to

502 women requesting material support from others; many stated that their neighbours (both in

503 and outside the IDP settlements) were struggling financially as well. Moral support sought

504 and received by displaced Georgian women was found to be broadly protective for mental

505 health amongst Georgian IDPs in a quantitative study (Saxon et al., 2016) and other war-

506 affected populations in LMICs (Seguin & Roberts, 2015).

507

508 Only a small minority of women mentioned accessing counsellors, psychologists, or

509 psychiatrists to deal with their problems, reflecting the limited access to mental health

510 services among IDPs in Georgia (Chikovani et al., 2015). Georgian cultural mores which

511 favour the concealment of traumatic events rather than disclosure (Makhashvili et al., 2010),

512 as well as a tendency of some war-affected persons in LMICs to appeal to friends, family,

513   neighbours, and community members rather than to specialized services (Ruwanpura et al.,

514   2006) likely also impact this trend.

515

516   Coping through engagement with faith and religion was commonly reported by the

517   respondents, attesting to the importance and prominence of the Georgian Orthodox church in

518   Georgia since the fall of the Soviet Union. The perceived positive impacts of faith-based

519   coping were two-fold; enabling women to assign meaning to hardships, and to interact with

520   others and potentially receive support from others during religious services. Viewing the war

521   and displacement as 'God's plan' assigned an inevitability to the events and aftermath which

522   conferred comfort. The meaning-making function of faith-based coping has been reported

523   elsewhere amongst other war-affected groups (Eggerman & Panter-Brick, 2010; Hardgrove,

524   2009)

525

526   As seeking employment and support seeking emerged as the most-commonly-used coping

527   strategies, future interventions to foster employment opportunities and maintain and

528   strengthen social bonds may be effective in supporting internally-displaced Georgian women

529   to function. Due to the importance of kinship ties and collective well-being, complementary

530   interventions which integrate individually-focused trauma treatment and community-based

531   psychosocial assistance are needed to improve mental health and well-being in the Georgian

532   cultural context. These approaches acknowledge the need to foster 'structural resilience,'

533   building robust structures which allow individuals to succeed in employment, education, and

534   relationship domains and thereby facilitating trajectories of resilience (Ager et al., 2013;

535   Panter-Brick & Eggerman, 2012). As the coping strategies presented here differ from the

536   strategies of conflict-affected Georgians who have returned to their home areas in South

22

537   Ossetia (Saxon et al., 2016), disparities in mental health outcomes and coping amongst

538   conflict-affected groups (including IDPs, refugees, returnees, and entrapped populations)

539   require greater research focus.

540   Limitations

541   The results presented in this paper are based on one-time interviews which may have reduced

542   the depth of discussion compared to repeat interviews. The high degree of saturation in the

543   findings may indicate that key points were well-covered. Interviews occurred during the day

544   rather than evenings and so we may have excluded employed women. However, the high

545   proportion of unemployed women in the study reflects the widespread unemployment in

546   Georgian IDP settlements. Our rather limited sample size precludes meaningful comparisons

547   of coping strategies by demographic characteristics. Intended meanings may have been lost in

548   translation from Georgian to English but we followed best practice procedures including

549   double translating and transcribing a sample of pilot interviews, and having Georgian-

550   speaking research associates independently check for errors between the recording and

551   transcripts. Though the coping findings presented here are highly context-specific, our

552   observations on the application of the typology may have broader relevancy since the

553   typology used was derived from research in other settings. Finally, the exclusive focus on

554   women in the sample precludes generalisation of these coping strategies to internally

555   displaced Georgian men.

556   Conclusion

557   This paper aimed to increase the evidence base on coping strategies used by female IDPs by

558   exploring the coping approaches of IDP women in Georgia. A range of coping strategies

559   were reported to offset the losses reported in Seguin et al. (2016), which were interpreted by a

560   coping typology suggested by Skinner et al. (2003). Problem solving (in the form of seeking

561   employment and using financial resources carefully) and support seeking behaviours emerged

562   as the most-commonly-used strategies.

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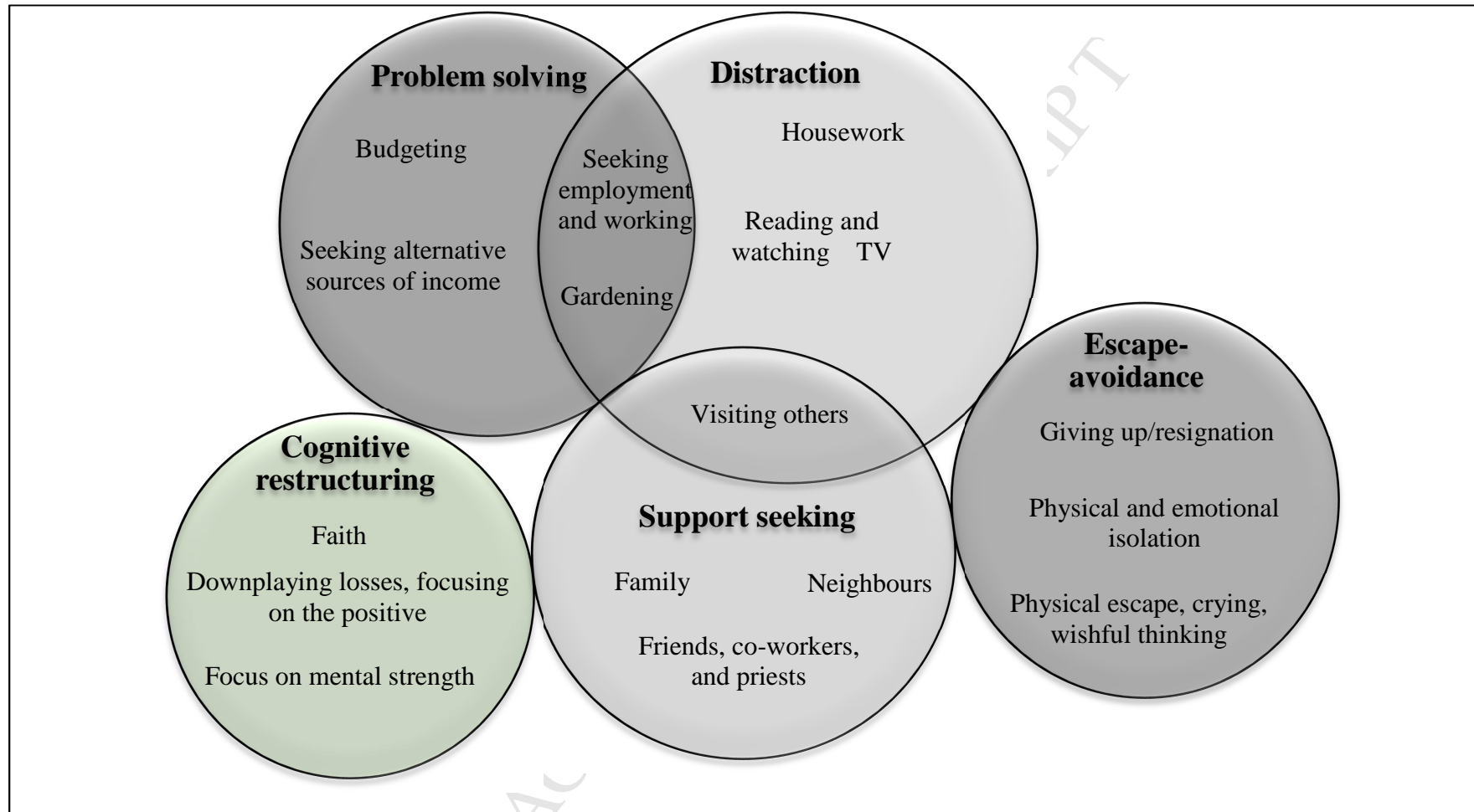638   applications. *Annual Review of Anthropology, 43*, 431-448.

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697

Table 1. Coping domains according to Skinner et al. (2003)

Coping domain	Definition
Problem solving	Instrumental action toward a problem. Planning, logical analysis of a problem, effort, persistence, and determination.
Seeking social support	Targeting family, friends, professionals, religious figures, and/or others to solicit comfort, advice, and/or instrumental help such as money or goods.
Avoidance	Efforts to stay away (physically or mentally) from a stressful situation. Includes cognitive avoidance (avoid thinking about a problem), taking action to avoid a potentially stressful situation, denying that a stressor exists, and engaging in wishful thinking.
Distraction	Engaging in pleasurable activities, such as hobbies, exercising, watching television, reading, and substance use.
Positive cognitive restructuring	Changing one's perspective of a stressful situation in order to see it in a more positive light, such as focusing on the positive rather than the negative, adopting an optimistic viewpoint, and/or downplaying levels of distress.

Figure 1: Coping strategies of Georgian IDP women

Problem solving

Budgeting

Seeking alternative sources of income

Seeking employment and working

Gardening

Distraction

Housework

Reading and watching TV

Visiting others

Cognitive restructuring

Faith

Downplaying losses, focusing on the positive

Focus on mental strength

Support seeking

Family   Neighbours

Friends, co-workers, and priests

Escape-avoidance

Giving up/resignation

Physical and emotional isolation

Physical escape, crying, wishful thinking

- A five-fold coping typology is applied to interpret the coping strategies of internally displaced women in Georgia.
- Internally displaced women in Georgia typically used problem-solving and support-seeking coping strategies.
- Interventions to support coping among internally displaced women include promoting sustainable careers and social networks.