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## THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF DISPLACED AFRICAN SINGLE MOTHERS IN THE AFTERMATH OF FLOODS IN KWAZULU-NATAL

Santham Ajodhia<sup>1</sup> and Thembelihle Brenda Makhanya<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> University of Fort Hare, Department of Social Work and Social Development, East London, South Africa

 <http://orcid.org/000-0001-5304-0776>  [Sajodhia@ufh.ac.za](mailto:Sajodhia@ufh.ac.za)

<sup>2</sup> University of Mpumalanga, School of Social Science, Nelspruit, South Africa

 <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9855-6039>  [Thembelihle.Makanya@ump.ac.za](mailto:Thembelihle.Makanya@ump.ac.za)

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### ABSTRACT

In April 2022, heavy rainfall and flooding took place in most areas of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. The floods left a trail of destruction, grief and displacement for the most vulnerable social groups. The condition of African single mothers was of particular concern because of the multiple disadvantages they already face. Based on a qualitative study conducted with 30 displaced single mothers who were purposively selected, the article explores the lived experiences of displaced African single mothers in the aftermath of the KwaZulu-Natal floods. The findings revealed that although temporary shelters were provided for their safety, African single mothers were subjected to various forms of secondary trauma, which aggravated their vulnerability. This suggested a need for psychosocial interventions and a comprehensive emergency plan for single mothers during natural disasters. Based on the strengths perspective, the article recommends intensive social work interventions and strategic resource management amongst community stakeholders and political leaders to ensure the effectiveness and sustainability of support.

**Keywords:** displaced; floods; KwaZulu-Natal; natural disasters; single mothers; social work practice

### INTRODUCTION

On 18 April 2022, President Cyril Ramaphosa (South African Government, 2022) declared a state of disaster in South Africa as the country grappled with devastating floods that hit the KwaZulu-Natal province particularly hard; it was one of the deadliest floods in the country since 1987 (United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund [UNICEF], 2022). The several days of heavy rainfall and landslides wreaked havoc and triggered fear and anxiety among many habitants in the coastal province, particularly those residing in and around

Durban. During the heavy flooding about 13 500 households were affected, 3 927 housing structures were completely destroyed, another 8 097 were partly destroyed (Bouchard *et al.*, 2022). The floods resulted in 435 confirmed deaths (Bouchard *et al.*, 2022) and an estimated 88 people were still missing in 2022 (Naidoo, 2022). Severe damage to critical infrastructure created major challenges for those in need of emergency services and support, especially those residing in vulnerable communities.

Internationally, the literature on women and disasters fully documents the unequal impacts of natural disasters on vulnerable groups (Peek & Loomis, 2010; Sohrabizadeh, Tourani & Khankeh, 2016). A vulnerability approach to disasters suggests that “inequalities in access to resources, capabilities, and opportunities systematically disadvantage certain groups of people, rendering them more vulnerable to the impact of natural disasters” (Neumayer & Plumper, 2007:551). Such arguments confirm that the impact of disasters on the lives of women is different from their effect on other social groups (Sohrabizadeh *et al.*, 2016).

Globally women and girls are highly impacted by disruptive events in several ways. One of the main indicators of vulnerability to disasters is poverty, and the poorest people in the world are disproportionately women and children (Peek & Loomis, 2010). Following a disaster, when economic stability becomes extremely important, women’s financial constraints are magnified. A common explanation of disaster is that its impact causes human, material, economic and environmental losses in such a way that it exceeds the ability of the affected communities to cope using their own resources (Madzivhandila & Maserumule, 2022). In South Africa, the Disaster Management Act No. 57 of 2002 aims to provide integrated and co-ordinated disaster management support, focusing on preventing or reducing the risk of disasters, mitigating the severity of disasters, enhancing emergency preparedness, promoting rapid and effective responses to disasters and post-disaster recovery. The Act also establishes national, provincial and municipal disaster management centres, with disaster management volunteers and matters incidental thereto (Van Niekerk, 2014). Despite this Act and other policies that aim to mitigate the impact of disasters, Lowen, Pinchoff, Ngo and Hindin (2021:12) argue that “disaster risk management policies and systems are not often designed with a gender-sensitive lens”, and hence women are disproportionately harmed or unable to access resources, information or support. Research has shown that among women with children, particularly those who have no supportive partners, the impact of disasters is more severe, because of their intensive work loads, the need for production of food and to care for loved ones, than it is for their counterparts with supportive partners (Udo & Naidu, 2022).

Therefore, there is a need for stakeholders to direct their undivided attention to dealing with the impact of disasters on African single mothers. Poor African single mothers struggle to achieve emotional stability and secure decent housing, employment, public and private recovery funds, and other vital resources in the aftermath of disasters (Peek & Loomis, 2010). Consequently, there is a need for research that aims to explore and advance strategies that enhance resilience among African single mothers in responding to disasters.

This article explores the lived experiences of African single mothers in the aftermath of the devastating floods in KwaZulu-Natal. It provides a platform for these vulnerable women to share their experiences and experiential knowledge. The data collection was conducted in

eThekwini municipality, which is reported to have been affected most extensively by the floods (Udo & Naidu, 2022).

## LITERATURE REVIEW

In South Africa, Africans<sup>1</sup> in urban areas live mainly in large informal settlements on the outskirts of cities and in urban hostels (Bouchard *et al.*, 2022). Several factors including the migrant labour system, the Natives Land Act of 1913 and industrialisation contributed to such settlements during colonialism and apartheid (Smith, 2014). In the new democratic dispensation, a disproportionate number of Africans reside in rural areas with limited infrastructure and services. Despite South Africa's 30 years of democracy, the apartheid legacy of segregation continues to disproportionately affect citizens' access to water, sanitation and hygiene services vital to public health and socioeconomic development, particularly in previously disadvantaged and marginalised communities (Makhanya, 2021). Thus, the migration of people from rural to urban areas in search of improved livelihoods (Olanrewaju & Reddy, 2022) leads to urban expansion, consolidation and construction of houses on locations that are not designated for settlement. such as flood plains. Flood risk increases threefold as a result of urbanisation, thereby leading to greater vulnerability in densely populated areas (Rafiq, Ahmed, Ahmad & Khan, 2016). These changes in demographics within flood plains increase the exposure of the community to flood risks. For instance, Durban is prone to floods because it is a coastal and densely populated area (Zuma, Luyt, Chirenda & Tandlich, 2012). According to Olanrewaju and Reddy (2022), floods are exacerbated by overpopulation, increased density of settlements, poor waste management, blocked drains and the occupation of flood-prone areas, causing devastating effects on people and the environment. Certain developments exacerbate climate change, which leads to extreme rainfall, sea level rises, floods and other impacts (Olanrewaju & Reddy, 2022). Similarly, Predo (2010) explains that climate-related disasters as well as climate change induced by humans have been precursors of massive destruction.

Moreover, poor people are the ones mostly affected by climate change disasters. Bouchard *et al.* (2022) state that rich communities have greater resources at hand to mitigate and adapt to climate shocks. While Section 26 of the Constitution of South Africa recognises the right "to have access to adequate housing" and that the State "must take reasonable legislative and other measures, within its available resources to achieve the progressive realisation of this right" for many South Africans, this right remains unmet. As a result of such socio-political and cultural factors that impact on the vulnerable, the effects of disasters are worsened for women in local communities, particularly African women in rural and informal settlements across the country (Udo & Naidu, 2022).

Globally, extreme and frequent rainfall is one of the major causes of flood disasters. Floods are a major form of natural disaster, causing catastrophic and devastating damage (Olanrewaju &

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<sup>1</sup> The term 'African' is not used to refer to any scientific racial categorisation, but it is used as a social construct to classify South Africans of African ancestry (Zibane, 2017). Here, the researchers are referring to those who were previously referred to as 'Black' South Africans under apartheid laws, and who were colonially exploited and dominated because of their racial group (Biko, 1987).

Reddy, 2022). The major factors that cause floods include extreme rainfall and anthropogenic activities such as deforestation (Kasiviswanathan, He & Tay, 2017). Major flood disasters have occurred in urban areas around the world due to heavy rains, which are projected to become more frequent with increasing intensity as a result of the impact of climate change (Fatti & Patel, 2013). Deadly tornadoes, earthquakes, hurricanes and other large-scale natural disasters are becoming regular occurrences, and climate change is likely to increase their severity and unpredictability (Van Aalst, 2006 ).

Flood risks and their time of occurrence are usually difficult to monitor and predict without appropriate tools for continuous monitoring (Olanrewaju & Reddy, 2022). According to Madzivhandila and Maserumule, (2022:191), “the continuous distraction of rural livelihood activities, loss of lives and the displacement of large numbers of populations” have raised the question of “the applicability of risk and disaster mitigation and management” in Southern Africa. In KwaZulu-Natal, floods are a yearly phenomenon, with significant social and economic impacts (Okunola, 2022). In 2019, approximately 60 people were killed and over 1 000 people were displaced as a result of flooding in eThekweni (Okunola, 2022). The frequency and intensity of similar flood occurrences along the eastern African coastline over the past 30 years has created several development challenges. For instance, from 1970 to 1979 the number of floods in the coastal cities of sub-Saharan African countries rose nearly tenfold (Okunola, 2022). The flash floods that hit eThekweni municipality during the Easter weekend of April 2019 were even more severe than the ones experienced in previous years and caused severe damage (Olanrewaju & Reddy, 2022).

Research has shown that decades of fossil-fuel burning and deforestation, as well as poor drainage systems and badly constructed housing in low-lying areas, increase the risk of flooding in African coastal cities (Okunola, 2022). Such areas in Africa, like elsewhere in the world, tend to be more densely populated with a high concentration of residential, industrial and commercial facilities, which exposes them to a variety of natural and potentially damaging events. For instance, a report indicated that the damage from recent floods in KwaZulu-Natal was exacerbated by the government’s failure to maintain drainage infrastructure, control population growth and prepare sufficiently for such extreme events (Okunola, 2022). Informal settlements in eThekweni municipality, particularly those in the city of Durban, were the worst-hit areas. In KwaZulu-Natal, most of those exposed to flooding were residing in peri-urban areas or informal settlements located in environmentally vulnerable settings on the outskirts of major cities. These areas are typically characterised by overcrowding, insufficient access to safe water, sanitation and inadequate drainage, solid-waste collection, as well as difficulties in access to health care and emergency services (Bouchard *et al.*, 2022). Residents of these areas are among the most impoverished citizens in the country and they rely on informal jobs to generate income. They also have a lower capacity to prepare for and cope with flooding events (Bouchard *et al.*, 2022).

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The current study is informed by the strengths perspective as the theoretical framework. The “strengths-based approach is an ecological perspective that stresses the importance of examining people’s characteristics, the type of environment they live in, and the multiple

contexts that influence their lives” (Jacques, Turcotte & Pouliot, 2009:454). The strengths perspective postulates that interventions must be focused on clients’ competencies and the resources in their milieu. Clients are considered as the experts in their situation, and practitioners as partners whose theoretical and technical knowledge must be used to help them, particularly by empowering clients rather than labelling them (Jacques, Turcotte & Pouliot, 2009:454). Saleebey (1996:297) states:

*the strengths perspective demands a unique way of looking at individuals, families, and communities. All must be seen in the light of their capacities, talents, competencies, possibilities, visions, values, and hopes, however dashed and distorted these may have become through circumstance, oppression, and trauma.*

The strengths perspective requires an awareness and understanding of what people know and what they can do (Saleebey, 2013). Grant and Cadwell (2009) linked the strengths perspective to social work practice by valuing the empowerment of individuals seeking services and advocating for a relationship of collaboration as opposed to one of authority. Saleebey (1996) wrote that it took courage and diligence on the part of social workers to regard professional work through this alternative lens and that such a "re-vision" demands that social workers suspend their initial disbelief in clients. Guided by and practising from a strengths perspective, the researchers did not overlook the everyday difficulties that overwhelmed African single mothers affected by floods. Instead, the researchers listened to and acknowledged what African single mothers told them about their experiences during floods. Researchers felt that it was important to “rediscover the wholeness of clients aiding the process of recognising that the system, the bureaucracies, and organisations of helping are often completely opposed to a strengths orientation” (Saleebey, 1996).

The research process reflected on the resilience of African single mothers during a period of flooding and the potential of believing in all humans was clearly recognised. By reflecting on such resilience and potential, discussions with African single mothers changed from focusing on their limits to concentrating on their agency, building on their strengths, interests, abilities, knowledge and capacities (Grant & Cadwell, 2009). Saleebey (1996) highlighted the skill of enhancing empowerment as one that should not be taken lightly nor overlooked when working from a strengths perspective. The empowerment imperative also requires that social work researchers help people become aware of the tensions and conflicts that oppress and limit them, and help them to free themselves from these restraints (Pinderhughes, 1995). Through the strengths perspective, African single mothers were given a platform to speak out against the victimisation and unjust practices that they faced during disasters and at the temporary shelters. Their opinions and feelings regarding resources and access to basic human rights were heard. African single mothers took a stand against the oppressive structures, thereby finding the strength to pave a way forward for themselves. Their resilience and potential were rediscovered as the single mother participants decided that they would not rely indefinitely on temporary shelters, but rather they would seek employment and use their skills to rebuild their lives and homes.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Drawing from an interpretative research paradigm a qualitative phenomenological research approach was adopted to conduct the current study. Phenomenology is often considered central to the interpretive paradigm (Clark, 1998) and aims at gaining a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of a person's everyday experiences from their own perspective (Patton, 2002). Purposive sampling was adopted to recruit study participants in Durban, KwaZulu-Natal. This was the location most affected during the April 2022 floods.

Non-probability purposive sampling (Andrade, 2021) was used to conduct three debriefing focus groups with 30 African single mothers. The single mothers who participated were 25 to 45 years old. Most of the single mothers were unemployed and relied on government social security grants to meet their basic needs. Each group had 10 participants. Purposive sampling required the selection of participants who met the inclusion criteria (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011), i.e. single mothers, residing in temporary shelters after being affected by floods in KwaZulu-Natal. Such participants were able to provide information relevant to the study's objectives (Arkert & Jacobs, 2023). The participants hailed from three areas in Durban (Inanda, Pinetown and KwaNdengezi) that were heavily affected by floods. All 30 research participants that engaged in the debriefing focus group discussions had young children to care, for ranging from 6 months to 18 years old. Whilst the single mothers were engaged with the focus group discussions, the research team arranged for their children to be cared for by other volunteers at the research site. Volunteers entertained the young children with fun-filled activities such as drawing, singing and outdoor activities. The participants had some time to themselves and a space where they could focus on their needs and debrief with no distractions. Based on such arrangements, the data-collection process also served as an intervention (Fraser, Richman, Galinsky & Day, 2009; Rothman & Thomas, 1994).

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Human and Social Science Research Ethics Committee of the University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa (HSSREC/00003198/2021). Gatekeeper permission to conduct the study was obtained from the MA'AT Institute. As an Institute based at the University of KwaZulu-Natal focusing on community emancipation, MA'AT received ethical clearance not only to conduct research, but also to offer outreach programmes for affected individuals during the April and June 2022 floods in KwaZulu-Natal. However, for participation in this research, participants had to give their consent after being briefed on the research objectives. The facilitators were social workers and thus social work skills were also adopted to minimise any harm to the participants. Participants had a right not to participate in the study. The participants were provided with space and privacy when choosing not to participate in debriefing and focus group discussions, and they were not labelled or judged for their non-participation nor on their contribution during the discussions. Thus, confidentiality and safety of all the participants was ensured throughout the research process. Debriefing focus group discussions were not recorded, allowing the participants to feel safe and comfortable. Note taking was conducted to support the lack of audio recording. Permission to conduct the debriefing focus groups with participants was also obtained from gatekeepers such as the community ward councillors, the Department of Social Development, and shelter site managers. An arrangement was made with gatekeepers for them

also to act as a referral site, if the research discussions provoked troubling emotions. This would help to avoid post-traumatic stress. But during discussions, although some emotions were expressed, the researchers used their social work skills to provide psychological first aid (PFA) by giving these participants space and comfort and allowing freedom of expression. The participants also expressed no need for referral after the discussions. PFA aims to provide psychosocial support to individuals and families after a crisis or disaster (Mental Health Academy, 2020). During the research process, the purpose of PFA was to make participants feel safe, calm and empowered. All the arrangements to meet with research participants were made in advance through the gatekeepers. Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis. Various themes were generated from the qualitative data.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS**

The participants mostly reflected on their negative experiences of floods and associated anxieties. Although temporary residential sites were appreciated, participants lamented the failure of different community stakeholders to mitigate the impact of climate change on vulnerable individuals. Prevention and mitigation are central to achieving the goal of disaster risk reduction in which vulnerabilities and disaster risks are reduced, and opportunities for sustainable development are created (Madzivhandila & Maserumule, 2022). Participants highlighted trauma experiences issues of adjustment, losing loved ones, grief environments not conducive to relief, mismanagement by gatekeepers, and the lack of access to resources as their central experiences as floods victims. They also expressed how some of these experiences highlighted re-victimisation and the re-living of the traumatic events.

### **Trauma: Fear and hopelessness**

The experiences of trauma varied. Participants shared the trauma of experiencing not only the actual floods, but also the fear of having to start over, yet they also expressed a need to be strong for family and children. According to Bouchard *et al.*, (2022) socio-economic vulnerability in poor, marginalised and vulnerable social groups in South Africa make it difficult for these groups to cope with disasters, water insecurity and the economic losses that arise from climate shocks. The findings indicated that all participants were deeply traumatised by their experiences of the floods. Experiences of trauma such as water gushing into their homes, watching their belongings being destroyed, and mostly the fear of death. They were haunted by the events that continuously played on their minds whilst they were at the shelters. Participants relived their experiences through sleepless nights. Some participants shared the following accounts.

*There was water everywhere... the walls were crumbling...all I could think of was 'I was going to die...'. I just kept praying to God to save me and my family.*

*All I could see was my furniture moving and water coming into the house... [shaking her head] ... everything was covered, all I could think about was saving my family.*

*I just grabbed my baby... I did not know where my other family members were.... the water was so high, I had to hold my baby over my neck and swim to safety.*

*I try so hard to carry on every day, but I think about the floods all the time and it all comes back... [starts to cry].*

The above comments demonstrate that the participants were haunted by the traumatic fears of death and losing loved ones. Some reflected on the trauma of seeing their walls collapsing, which increased their fear of losing their lives. Others were overwhelmed by the fast-moving water rushing into their houses; however, the main concern was losing their loved ones. This suggests the main causes of trauma as death or the danger of dying. Moving flood water is strongly associated with deaths and injuries (Penning-Rowse, Floyd, Ramsbottom & Surendran, 2005). An increase in the number of floods deaths was recorded (Yari *et al.*, 2020).

Participants were highly anxious about how to pick up the pieces and begin restoring their lives. Many of them were unemployed and relied on their monthly South African Social Security Agency (SASSA) grants to cope with daily living expenses. Their anxiety was compounded by not knowing where to begin and how. A sense of hopelessness had taken over and they felt very lost. For instance, participants expressed their anxiety as follows:

*I have lost everything [crying... shaking her head] ... what do I do now...? where am I going to live now?*

*I am not sure about what to do [hands folded] ... I come here daily to get some food...but I go back to check what is left at my house.... I don't know what to do and where to start.*

*We are just sitting here every day, and we are not told anything...all I have is my grant for now... [shaking her head] .... how do I start to rebuild...no one is giving us building material.... we need the councillors to come and tell us what they can do for us.*

It was not only the trauma of losing belongings that affected participants, but the anxiety of rebuilding. Since the research had an intervention dimension, the researchers worked with participants by acknowledging their feelings of anxiety and responded with empathy. The researchers facilitated a strengths-based perspective in assisting participants to draw on their lives and goods that were not lost in floods, the structures that were in place and the future. Thus, for the current study, the strength-based perspective (Saleebey, 1996) allowed for an alternative approach, rather than focusing on deficits and problems. This approach also focused on maximising the participants' opportunities to make decisions and enhance the quality of their lives.

The findings showed that most single mothers remained strong, as they felt they could not let their children and loved ones see that they were struggling to cope. Participants explained that they were compelled by circumstances not to break down, as they were the sole providers for their children.

*I have no choice... [looking down] ... I have to be strong for my child.... she has no one else...I still have to see how to provide for her...there is no time for me to break down...but I have been remembering the floods all the time... [starts to cry and is very emotional].*



*I must carry on...I go to work daily and come to the shelter in the afternoon... [shrugging her shoulders] .... I have to work for my child and grandchild.... I have to be strong for my family.*

The views of the above participants revealed how single mothers deal with their fears and sense of hopelessness to give hope for their children. Indeed, this is in line with the writing of Tobin (2023), who found that during disasters single mothers faced many pressing issues and unmet needs. During group debriefing discussions, conversations focused on participants' feelings related to the traumatic experiences and struggles, allowing them to feel a sense of comfort and support. The debriefing enabled the participants who had survived a traumatic experience to have more control over their lives and to have a voice in the institutions, services and situations which affect them (Shardlow & Doel 1998).

### **Adjustments: Routines, privacy, and overcrowding**

Issues of adapting to new routines and the lack of privacy in overcrowded shelters were some of the adjustments concerns that participants had to deal with. The participants found it challenging to share a living space with so many other people. Space sharing invaded privacy, especially taking into account that gender differences were not considered. Some participants were concerned about the lack of privacy in overcrowded shelters, which limited possibilities for other activities such as bathing and studying. For some, access to food was an urgent concern. During and after natural disasters, normal daily routines are severely compromised, while attachment bonds to homes, personal possessions and social relationships are disrupted. Participants expressed their adjustment frustrations in this study as follows:

*I am so used to my own house and doing things in my own way... [shaking her head] ...I just can't live like this...we cannot even use the bathroom in private here. I appreciate that I am safe...but I am so used to doing things my own way.*

*Here, there are men and women all living together...we are women, and we cannot even take a bath privately.*

Participants were concerned that men, women and children were all residing together at the shelters. Despite gatekeepers establishing rules that men should be staying on their own, participants pointed out that this rule was not always enforced. This was because some were married couples, while others were in relationships, which is contrary to the rules of the shelters. This resulted in some participants feeling uncomfortable. Discussions with the participants reflected on safety measures and routine alternatives to create a sense of balance while they were residing at the shelters. Bouchard *et al.* (2022) found that displacement to temporary accommodation can lead to feelings of helplessness, heightened distress and anxiety. But for some, the distress was caused by issues of access to resources and to spaces for school children conducive to their study routines:

*My daughter is in Grade 12 and she needs a quiet environment to study...here she cannot do that...I had no choice but to send her to stay with her grandmother so she can study.*

*There are so many of us here ... there are more people that keep coming... the food is not enough, and we only have one stove here .... we do not know how to manage things.*

*There are so many of us staying here at the shelter...some of us don't get food; if we are out, then we miss breakfast...we only eat supper because there are so many of us here.*

The above concerns were also exacerbated by the lack of resources in the shelters. Participants reported not having adequate food, clothes, toiletries, baby nappies, school wear, blankets, mattresses and appliances such as stoves. Such experiences aggravated single mothers' feelings of being overwhelmed, since they are the sole providers for their children and families. Participants referred to issues ranging from access to resources to neglect from community authorities such as local councillors and government stakeholders.

*We have been here for two days and have not eaten anything...we are starving...we don't know what to feed the children on. No one is coming to help us.*

*You see here, there are many of us.... sometimes we don't eat all day long...we just wait...if we do not get something like sandwiches in the morning, because sometimes it's not enough, we must wait until the evening because here we don't eat during lunch time.*

*There are so many of us living here...the food is not enough for all of us and the babies need milk and diapers...I had to borrow money from a loan shark to buy milk and diapers... when the SASSA grant is paid, I must pay back; I don't know what I will do for the whole month...but I have to see to my daughter.*

Food insecurity and difficulties in arranging housing reconstruction have also been associated with increased psychological distress. The literature also attests to the fact that individuals who must relocate their homes as a result of disasters are more than twice as likely to experience post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety and depression (Yari *et al.*, 2020; Bouchard *et al.*, 2022; Tobin, 2023). Significant associations have been found between displacement because of flooding and adverse psychological sequelae, including depression and anxiety (Bouchard *et al.*, 2022).

### **Loss: Loved ones, belongings and resources**

During the debriefing discussions, all the participants highlighted the impact of multiple losses such as property, personal belongings and loved ones. Participants were deeply saddened and could not imagine how they would rebuild their property. They reported how hard they had to work over the years to invest in their homes and how everything was destroyed overnight. Below participants expressed their loss as follows:

*Everything is gone... it's all destroyed...I don't know how I am going to start over...and we are just staying here waiting for the councillors to help us. They came here once....and till today we have not heard anything.*

*Our home is destroyed...we have nothing left...we need help...even if it is building stuff to help us...Since the flood we have not even been home... we don't know what is even there now.*

Loss of property and homes or the disruption of residential spaces, which cause trauma and frustration for some participants, were central to participants' lamentations. Bouchard *et al.* (2022) argued that the personal experience of injury, damage to property and forced relocation as well as the fear of death and injury to oneself and significant others all increase the likelihood of adverse psychological reactions after a disaster. Exposure to post-disaster stressors has an impact on mental health and includes stressors such as the lack of housing, water, electricity and sanitation (Bouchard *et al.*, 2022). Although loss of property and resources was frustrating, participants lamented and shared deep sorrow for the loss of their loved ones. Those participants who had lost their loved ones during the floods shared painful memories and they were deeply saddened. In despair, they described how they had witnessed the death of their loved ones during the devastating floods. Some felt guilty for having survived and blamed themselves for not doing more to save their loved ones.

*By the time I had heard the rain, it was already in the house...I tried to wake everyone up...I tried my best.... I tried to scream, and I ran out to tell my neighbours... but it was too late...I really tried to save them... I tried... [sobbing hysterically].*

In addition to losing loved ones, participants complained about the lack of an environment that was conducive to dealing with grief. Some participants reported not being able to grieve as they were residing in overcrowded shelters, and so there was no time or space to grieve. A participant commented:

*You see this woman here; she lost her child in the floods...but here it's hard for her to even think about her child... she just buried her child but here no one cares...the people in charge don't care.*

Participants reported that they were living in crisis mode, where their focus was on their immediate survival needs rather than the loss of loved ones. It was thus fundamental for researchers to manage cases related to loss and death with a high level of sensitivity and provide psychological debriefing where necessary. After the research interviews, follow-up services and referrals were arranged for participants to receive ongoing trauma debriefing services to help them alleviate mental health issues. The mental health consequences for victims of floods are not fully addressed by those in the field of disaster preparedness or management, or service delivery, although it is generally accepted that natural disasters take a heavy toll on the mental health of the people involved, most of whom live in developing countries, where the capacity to deal with these problems is extremely limited (World Health Organization, 2014). In the current study, stress coping mechanisms were applied during interviews. Some participants shared that, amidst all the loss and trauma, there was a recognition of personal strengths, such as compassion and optimism, a strengthened ability to deal with future stress, use of positive language, and acknowledgement of survival. Norman (2000) found that listening for something positive that came from the event and fostering client description of strengths and competence develops an important coping mechanism.

## Secondary trauma

Research participants reported suffering from secondary trauma through victimisation by gatekeepers and volunteers at the shelters. Among several other issues, participants complained about the lack of respect, that they were harshly ordered to complete chores, and misuse of power by shelter gatekeepers. Such experiences precipitate a revictimization or furthered trauma, yet the purpose of the shelters was to create a safe and conducive place. Some participants explained that:

*We came here to be safe but the way we are treated is so bad...they don't respect us, and they shout at us as if we are children.*

*They act like they are doing us a favour; they don't respect us at all...they just tell us what to do all the time. I don't want to stay here at all, but I don't have anywhere else to go.*

*They treat us badly...but if we say anything they will make our lives even more difficult, so we just keep quiet.*

The above concerns suggest a need for more considerate protection of vulnerable groups during disasters, especially African single women. African women in various flood-prone informal settlements are arguably the most vulnerable in floods and other climate-related disasters (Udo & Naidu, 2022). An effective, equitable and gender-sensitive development in these contexts is necessary to address the adaptation needs of African women. Such governance should consider women's location, including the various contextual socio-economic and socio-political factors that influence their vulnerability to climate-related disasters (Udo & Naidu, 2022). This is important because women experience multilayer effects during disasters. For example, some participants reported incidents of gender-based violence, which made the participants and those residing in the shelter feel unsafe and vulnerable.

*We were all sleeping and then one of the men who was drunk came, and he started to fight with his girlfriend...he wanted to stab her...it was very scary. The pastor who runs the shelter had to remove the man from here...now we can sleep peacefully.*

Another participant revealed that as residents of the temporary shelters, they felt unsafe as certain men and women abused substances such as drugs and alcohol. Participants protested, arguing that once a person was under the influence of alcohol, their behaviour disrupted the functioning of the shelter, made the elderly and children afraid, and posed a risk to those who were against such behaviour. Participants reported that the abuse of alcohol was especially disruptive on the day that residents collected the social security grants, since most of them misused the grant to purchase alcohol, a phenomenon that rendered shelters risky and unsafe.

*I had to leave that other shelter and come to this one. It was not safe for me to stay there anymore. I almost got stabbed by one of the men. He was drunk and they did not want me to talk about how things are there.*

According to Rezwana and Pain (2021:741-742)

*experience of several disasters triggered by natural hazards and humanitarian events over the past two decades revealed that various forms of gender-based violence intensify in post-disaster periods, becoming a second disaster for the largely female victims.*

The evidence that exists strongly suggests that gender-based violence escalates during and after disasters worldwide (Rezwana & Pain, 2021). In such contexts, gender-based violence is likely to have a highly significant bearing on a range of health and social outcomes. It poses a major challenge to both residents of shelters and to the service providers.

### **Lack of support and misappropriation of resources**

Participants suffered from the lack of support from their partners and local authorities. The majority of participants felt heavily burdened by the needs of their children as single parents. They reported feeling alone and not supported by their children's fathers. Participants shouldered a double burden of having to cope with their own trauma and having to care for their children, which became overwhelming. It caused much distress for the African single mothers. Participants explained that:

*The father of my child is out there...he does not work...so I have to see to my daughter. I have to make sure she gets something to eat...She is little, and I have to do something.*

*I live here with my children... I am the only one who is seeing to them...their father is not doing anything...we stay here together, and I have to look after them.*

The literature clearly indicates that the challenge of absent fathers is prevalent in South Africa and has been singled out as a huge social challenge both in public and policy debates (Makhanya & Mathias, 2018; Mavunga, 2013). The absence of a father can exacerbate household poverty and

*can also have significant psychological implications for the cognitive, physiological, and socio-emotional development of the children, although such effects are not uniformly found and are certainly conditioned by a variety of characteristics of the child and family unit" (Mott, 1990:499).*

The impact of absent fathers during floods was deeply felt, given the lack of support from local authorities.

Participants reported that they felt neglected, unsupported and forgotten by local councillors and political leaders. They explained that they were not informed of the developments regarding their houses and life after the floods. Some participants felt that they had been roped into the conflict between political parties. They also reported that some shelter leaders threatened that they would be evacuated from shelters should they fail to adhere to their demands. Participants thought that some of the abuses were prompted by municipal utility bills not paid and the facilities being overcrowded. They expressed this as follows:

*The councillor came here once and since then we have not heard anything...why are they not telling us anything...we need to know what is going to happen to us...how long are we going to be living like this?*

*The councillor came here and promised that we would be moved...but when...we have heard nothing since, and we have not seen the councillor back here...we don't know what is happening to our houses.*

*Someone from the EFF came here the other day and gave us blankets.... but then because we took the blankets some people from the ANC came and said they cannot help us anymore...sadly...we are not worried about politics right now... we will accept anything given to us right now because of our problems.*

*The pastor has said that we have to leave here...he is upset because the lights and water bill are very high...he wants us out of here...we are not sure where they will send us.*

Most concerning for some participants was the misappropriation of resources. Participants reported that donations were mismanaged by gatekeepers and volunteers. Participants expressed the view that all the donations were meant for flood victims. However, the donations were not given to the designated recipients.

*You see me, I am not scared to talk...we can see everything that is happening in terms of the donations...donors come here to give us things, but we never get them. We are told they are not for us. Only the volunteers take the donations to the kitchen... they are the only ones allowed to access the kitchen... why? [looking very angry] ...we must do all the work around the centre, but we are never allowed to go into the kitchen.*

*We are not stupid...we are not afraid...we can see what they are doing, when the donors leave, we see vans come here and take the stuff away, we are told that we must not question them, the donations have to go to other centres...Ay... [angrily]... we are not stupid...we know they are giving it to their people. The donations are for us, we stay here, and they are brought for us.*

Participants expressed concerns about how donations were handled by caretakers. Most of them felt that volunteers and gatekeepers were using the victim's losses for their personal gains. None of the participants was allowed to participate in the distribution of donations and there was no accountability for the resources that were taken away from them. Bissett, Steenkamp and Aslett (2023) also argued that, although shelters and non-profit organisations are important and offer an important support structure during and after disasters, such systems function not without an abuse of the resources. This is even more prevalent in South Africa, where economic vulnerabilities are pervasive (Bissett *et al.*, 2023).

The discussions in this article suggest a need for disaster preparedness and sustainable solutions in the community. Madzivhandila and Maserumule (2022) suggest that risk and disaster mitigation and management should focus on how communities can be prepared to cope independently during and after a natural calamity. This calls for more initiatives directed

towards disaster prevention and mitigation, and greater preparedness in disaster risk reduction measures. These are important because they lessen the likelihood of harmful losses and reduce vulnerability. Prevention and mitigation are central to achieving the goal of disaster risk reduction, since vulnerabilities and disaster risks are reduced, and sustainable development opportunities are strengthened (Madzivhandila & Maserumule, 2022). Governments should strive to lean towards greater prevention and mitigation measures rather than on relief and response. Unfortunately, most countries, including South Africa, are struggling to prepare for the prevention and sometimes mitigation of disaster. Instead of providing for solid disaster management, which includes early warnings and evacuation procedures, proper infrastructure, adequate spatial planning, and a socio-economic environment for most of its population conducive to ensuring safety and security, what is evident is the development of processes implemented to try and manage disasters that have occurred rather than preventing a hazardous situation from becoming disastrous (Madzivhandila & Maserumule, 2022; Olanrewaju & Reddy, 2022).

The absence of effective flood risk management increases the level of flood disaster impacts on people, property and economic circumstances (Olanrewaju & Reddy, 2022). Furthermore, the historical context of South Africa aggravates the situation. In South Africa, apartheid spatial planning and inequality have impacted significantly on the incidence of flooding. Bouchard *et al.* (2022) highlighted the point that institutionalised colonial and apartheid systems created an architecture of inequity embedded in societal, legislative, socio-economic and racially segregated services, which continue to manifest in South Africa today. Inequities in South Africa are reflected along racial lines (Makhanya, 2021), compounded by intergenerational poverty, barriers to accessing education, skills, and productive land (Bouchard *et al.*, 2022).

South Africa is one of the progressive countries to first legislate disaster (risk) management comprehensively (Vermaak & van Niekerk, 2004). Van Niekerk (2014:859) adds,

Yet, a review of the implementation of the Disaster Management Act No. 57 of 2022 and Framework within the South African public sector reveals that some significant discrepancies exist between the ideals espoused in the legislation and the realities within government.

As van Niekerk (2014) rightfully states, the ideals of disaster risk management cannot be achieved without the relevant structures to support the various actions involved.

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Climate-related disasters are increasing in frequency and magnitude, resulting in severe suffering and mental health challenges for the vulnerable social groups affected. The discussions in this article focused on understanding the lived experiences of displaced African single mothers in the aftermath of floods in KwaZulu-Natal. Shelter dwellers experienced various traumas related to pre- and post-flood disasters. Despite the varying degrees of suffering, the traumas presented many commonalities amongst African single mothers. Through the research process women found a safe space to express their feelings, needs and challenges related to the floods. Although the participants were vulnerable, their resilience was evident. This initiative was also made possible by group discussions during the research, which also

served as an intervention. Social work practitioners utilised psychological first aid to assist flood survivors to work through their traumatic experiences. This therapeutic approach served as an effective supportive intervention, designed to reduce the initial distress caused by floods and traumatic events. The psycho-social interventions rendered by helping professionals is crucial to providing support to survivors of floods. Participants expressed a need for greater support and planning, not only in dealing with the current disaster, but also for future calamities. Clearly flood risk assessment in cities and communities is required to provide appropriate and efficient flood risk management plans that inform policy makers on developing integrated flood risk management plans. Furthermore, communities and stakeholders may benefit from intensifying research on the impact of floods by creating greater awareness, leading to greater flood preparedness and effective recovery programmes. Hence, greater collaboration is recommended between government, stakeholders, community leaders and community members to build strong networks. Finally, research on the vulnerability of single mothers during disasters must be conducted more intensively.

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## **AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY**

**Santham Ajodhia** is a PhD candidate at the University of KwaZulu-Natal and is a lecturer at the University of Fort Hare, Eastern Cape, South Africa. Her research interests include mental health, gender-based violence, child protection and climate change/disaster management. The article resulted from her position as a mentor at the MA'AT Institute, conducted during the KZN floods from April-June 2022. She conceptualised the study, conducted the field work, interpreted the findings and wrote the draft article.

**Thembelihle B Makhanya** (PhD) is a senior lecturer and programme leader in Social Work at the University of Mpumalanga. Her research interests are decolonisation and higher education, fatherhood, ubuntu, climate change and green social work. She contributed to the conceptualisation, development and draft editing of the article.