

Fighting Back, Moving Forward: Refugee Women's Agency in Stories of Resistance and Resilience

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Abstract

This article introduces a novel framework for understanding refugee agency, exemplified through the experiences of refugee women across three stages and (geographical and symbolic) places: in countries of asylum, in forced migration, and in asylum. Based on 24 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with refugee women residing in Portugal, the article challenges prevailing approaches that primarily focus on refugees' efforts to change their circumstances. Instead, it advocates for conceptualizing refugee women's agency as both an emancipatory resistance against oppressive structures (resistance) and an adaptive ability to act within these constraints (resilience). In understanding resistance, the article prompts researchers to investigate how refugee women actively confront and challenge oppressive structures, advocating for an emancipatory approach that goes beyond conventional analyses of refugees seeking to change their circumstances. Conversely, the adaptive dimension of agency, framed as resilience, invites scholars to explore the resourcefulness and creative strategies employed by refugee women within the confines of these oppressive structures. This enriched perspective not only contributes to academic discourse but also provides practical insights for policymakers and humanitarian practitioners aiming to better support and empower refugee women in their daily lives.

Keywords: asylum; refugee women; agency; resistance; resilience

Introduction

Until recently, refugee women's agency was generally ignored (Le Bellec, 2021; Jasso, 2021), as they were often portrayed as dependent, passive, and victimized (Reilly et al., 2021; Tastsoglou et al., 2021). When acknowledged, agency in relation to refugee women is typically viewed as unidimensional, i.e., an individual tool used by a single person to struggle against the cultural, social, and religious traditions that limit their agency (Paret & Gleeson, 2016; Sigona, 2014). However, the notion that refugee women's agency depends on deviating from social norms should be taken carefully. This is a testament to the Western approach to the subaltern's position and agency (Mahmood, 2005; 2001). In addition to refugee women's willingness to change their circumstances, *"agency can also be observed by examining how refugees rebuild their lives in the face of the many changes and challenges they have experienced"* (Kanal & Rottmann, 2021, pp. 1). This recent portrayal of agency in relation to refugee women reflects the growing consciousness of otherness among refugee men and women while criticizing suppressive perspectives and theories of agency and violence (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2014). As emphasized by Fraser (1990), there is a

pressing need to embrace a cohesive, integrated, and balanced understanding of agency. This conceptual framework should adeptly navigate the interplay between the formidable influence of social constraints and the inherent capacity for action situated in opposition to these constraints.

Given that the current state of measuring the agency of refugee women is fragmented and insufficient (Canning, 2020; 2017; Freedman et al., 2020; Freedman, 2019; Sapia, 2018), this article aims to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of agency in gender and migration studies. The primary objective is to highlight and examine refugee women's utilization of agency in their ordinary lives. This endeavor is critical in addressing the limitations identified in the existing literature (Canning, 2020; 2017; Freedman et al., 2020; Freedman, 2019; Sapia, 2018). This article emphasizes the importance of validating refugee women's narratives as a crucial source of knowledge in migration research. Recognizing the value of these narratives is essential for a nuanced understanding of the experiences and challenges faced by refugee women, informing the development of tailored gender-sensitive policies. The insights from this research are invaluable for

migration scholars, enhancing the inclusivity and relevance of studies focused on refugee women and fostering a deeper appreciation for their diverse perspectives and agency in academic discourse and beyond.

Background

Agency can be conceptualized as an embodied capacity to act, as noted by Jahan (2011), a capacity intricately woven into specific social structures such as states, institutions, groups, cultures, and norms at given times and places. This capacity is not confined to individual human actors but is distributed among a variety of elements, including people, objects, and discourses, emphasizing the interconnectedness of agency with its socio-cultural context. The interplay between structure and agency has long been a focal point for social theorists, with some emphasizing the potential of social actors to transcend oppressive structures (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Marx & Engels, 1978; Mead, 1967) and others underscoring the influence of social structures on individual behavior (Bourdieu, 1977; Durkheim, 1982; Marx & Engels, 1978). Similar to the definition of agency, the concept of structure entails the possibilities and constraints that surround and influence behavior (Hunt, 2008).

Bourdieu (1996) delves into the gendered nature of these structures, outlining how elite and masculine thought, rooted in rationality and control, perpetuates the exclusion of female subjects. This exclusion is reinforced through repeated norms, normalization processes, and subjective cognitive categories. The acceptance of such social structures leads individuals to perceive male domination as inherent, invisible, and unquestioned (Bourdieu, 1996).

Foucault's (1977) conceptualization of power as a relational phenomenon further enriches the discussion, emphasizing its pervasive presence in discourses, objects, and desires. Structures, according to Foucault (1980), can simultaneously constrain and enable individuals. Subjectification, the process by which subjects observe, analyze, interpret, and recognize possible knowledge realms, plays a crucial role in shaping instances of relational power (Foucault, 1980). Mahmood (2011; 2005) extends this by highlighting the potential for both subordination and agency in the face of these power dynamics.

Kabeer (1999) introduces a nuanced understanding of agency within the context of power, distinguishing between the positive sense of 'power to'—the ability to make independent decisions—and the negative sense of 'power over,' which involves the capacity to override others through coercion. Power dynamics can operate implicitly, predetermined by societal norms and laws, leading to outcomes seemingly devoid of agency (Kabeer, 1999). The agency of refugee women has often been overlooked in academic research and policy, relegating them to passive statistics and reinforcing stereotypes of victimhood (Canning, 2017). Mohanty (2003) critiques the portrayal of Third World women as victims, highlighting the historical construction of a narrow, disempowering image. This perspective diminishes the resilience and agency of refugee women, perpetuating a one-dimensional view that portrays them primarily as dependents following their husbands. A critical concern raised by emancipatory feminists, anti-colonialists, and antiracist groups is the exclusionary nature of agency (Cabezas et al., 2007). Despite exceptions acknowledging agency (Kanal & Rottmann, 2021; Jahan, 2011), refugee women are often depicted as vulnerable victims, reinforcing power imbalances within displaced families (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2014).

This portrayal, coupled with the conflation of women and children in research and policy, as noted by Enloe (1998) as "womenandchildren", contributes to the infantilization of refugee women in the media, presenting an image of "pure" victimhood and vulnerability (Sigona, 2014). To transcend the constrained perspective on the agency of refugee women, it is imperative to delve into women's emancipatory engagement with oppressive structures whether political, social, cultural, or economic—that aim to curtail the space within which women can assert themselves (resistance). Equally crucial is an exploration of women's capacity not only to resist these limitations but also to adapt and act within the confines of these structures, showcasing resilience. This article will underscore the significance of both dimensions in understanding the nuanced dynamics of refugee women's agency.

Methodology

Sampling

The research encompassed a cohort of 24 refugee women, comprising 11 from Syria, 3 from Iraq, 3

from Angola, 2 from Congo, and 1 each from Togo, Sudan, Somalia, Gambia, and Morocco. The age spectrum among the women spanned from 21 to 48 years. Marital status distribution revealed that 66.66% were married, 20.83% were single, and 12.5% were divorced. The number of children per woman varied from zero to 6. A significant majority (79.16%) had limited education, while five had attained a college degree.

Upon their arrival in Portugal, 70.83% of the women fell under the category of asylum seekers as per EU resettlement and relocation initiatives, with the remaining 29.16% being spontaneous asylum seekers¹. Their average duration of stay ranged from two to four years. Notably, one woman, who arrived at the end of 2014, had the lengthiest stay and was the sole spontaneous asylum seeker granted refugee status at the time of data collection.

Data Collection and Analysis

The study selected refugee women in Portugal using a purposive sampling approach with guidance from professionals in relevant institutions (Patton, 2015; Ritchie et al., 2014). Criteria for selection encompassed age, asylum protection status, arrival during the European refugee crisis (2014 till present), and language proficiency (Portuguese or English) or an agreement to involve a translator. The data collection employed semi-structured interviews, adopting a narrative criminology approach (Davies & Francis, 2018; Presser & Sandberg, 2019; Pemberton and Aarten, 2018). The collection spanned from January 2020 to April 2021, incorporating thirteen interviews facilitated by two translators. Owing to the COVID-19 pandemic, the majority of interviews occurred online, with only five conducted face-to-face due to containment measures. Interviews delved into the women's lives pre, during, and post-asylum application, reflecting a shared willingness to impart their experiences of agency, believing it could aid others in similar predicaments.

The author transcribed all interviews, orally translating Arabic and French interviews into English before transcription. Field notes capturing non-verbal cues and environmental details were integrated into the transcripts. The study employed a constructivist grounded theory approach, emphasizing participant-driven meaning construction (Charmaz &

Thornberg, 2021; Charmaz et al., 2017). The abduction approach augmented the process, facilitating the discovery of novel concepts (Kennedy & Thornberg, 2018). The coding process involved identifying recurring themes, selecting subthemes, and employing focused coding with distinct colors (Charmaz et al., 2017). Three overarching phases were delineated: violence experiences in countries of origin, during flight, and in the country of asylum. Categories evolved through concurrent data generation and analysis, incorporating intermediate coding. The qualitative data analysis software QDA Miner was utilized for managing extensive datasets.

Reflexivity

Approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Law, University of Porto (Portugal), this study surpasses mere committee approval in its commitment to ethical research. Embracing a reflective stance (Cowburn et al., 2017), the researcher navigates guiding principles, acknowledging micro-dimensions, managing tensions, and safeguarding participants (Borges & Faria, 2023). Reflexivity explores translator use, emotional impact, researcher-participant relationships, data collection during a pandemic (see Borges & Faria, 2023), and gatekeepers' impact on recruitment (see Borges et al., 2023). Participants were fully informed and provided consent, with audio recordings made. Most interviews, facilitated via Zoom, involved pre-interview sessions to address technical aspects and ensure participant comfort. Stringent data protection measures were implemented, with data deleted after transcription. Participants retained the right to withdraw, and their images and sounds were promptly deleted upon request. While encouraged to be alone during interviews for safety, the decision was left to them to avoid coercion and prevent revictimization (Surmiak, 2018). Safety measures, including a "safe word", protected against potential danger from third parties. Real-time video monitoring ensured participant comfort, with no incidents reported. Participants had the option of using Zoom backgrounds for added privacy.

Empirical evidence

Results

The findings are divided into three sections: Refugee women's agency in countries of asylum, in forced migration, and in asylum. Before analyzing the results, it's crucial to clarify that the displayed agency in this section is not diminishing or naïve regarding the violence experienced by these women throughout their life-course. Frazer (1992) points out the challenge of portraying women's agency without neglecting it due to gender constraints or overly positive depictions that might obscure power dynamics. Kanal and Rottmann (2021) emphasize the need to describe the everyday agency of refugee women without excessive celebration, recognizing the impact of oppressive social structures. This article acknowledges these arguments and does not ignore the experiences of violence that may limit their scope for action (For a more comprehensive analysis of the violence experienced by refugee women, see Borges, 2023). Nonetheless, the narratives of the interviewed refugee women depict them not merely as individuals facing challenges but as active decision-makers, safeguarding others, and efficiently managing their households. For that reason, the results presented in this article will focus on displays of refugee women's agency. It is also important to mention that, in the subsequent results sections, the actual names of the interviewed refugee women have been replaced with fictitious names.

Refugee women's agency Across countries of origin

The women interviewed in this study challenge the oversimplified depiction of themselves as passive victims confined within patriarchal traditions. Drawing on the insights of Ibrahim and Alkire (2007), who define agency as the capacity to act based on one's values, the study illuminates how cultural traditions significantly shape the behaviors of these women. Hilal (Syria), one of the interviewees, underscores the impact of cultural traditions, highlighting the norm in Muslim culture where “men traditionally make family decisions”, while women are primarily responsible for caregiving and managing the household and children. This observation aligns with Ibrahim and Alkire's (2007) notion of agency, as the women actively navigate within the cultural framework to ensure their well-being. Rather than embracing a victimhood narrative, they showcase a

nuanced understanding of their cultural contexts, engaging in negotiations that prioritize their interests. Mariam (Syria) further elaborates on the cultural expectations, emphasizing that, according to their traditions, men bear the responsibility of supporting their families not only economically but also in terms of relationships and family dynamics. She notes that, in their culture, “men are perceived to know better than women what is in the family's best interest”. This dynamic reflects the women's active participation in negotiations within the cultural norms, aligning with the concept of agency as defined as having the freedom to act in line with one's values and pursue goals. Acknowledging family choices made with women's well-interests in mind reveals pragmatic acceptance rooted in recognizing familial intentions. Within patriarchal traditions, a complex interplay of familial dynamics and concern for individual welfare exists (Helie & Hoodfar, 2012). However, the women interviewed navigate these dynamics with a practical mindset, understanding decisions within their cultural framework are driven by a desire to protect and provide, as seen in Darya's (Syria) case: “My family's choices were made with my well-comfort and happiness in mind”.

Rather than passively conforming to societal expectations, these women strategically negotiate their positions, aligning their choices with personal goals and aspirations, showcasing remarkable resilience in the face of established norms (Gray & Dagg, 2019). In exploring their marital experiences, women provided nuanced perspectives that shed light on the complexities within cultural traditions. They often justified practices like underage marriages by emphasizing the significant role elders play in decision-making. Shaimma (Iraq), for instance, shared her experience of a traditional wedding with her cousin, framing it as an arranged marriage rooted in cultural norms. She explained, “It was a traditional ceremony, and our elders played a vital role in bringing us together. It's a practice we accept as part of our cultural traditions”. Besides, the women drawn parallels between their engagements and the concept of “dating” in Western cultures. Hilal (Syria) perspective reflects this sentiment: “We don't complain about marrying young. It's like our version of dating, and our cultural norms guide these choices”. Women acknowledged the trial nature of engagements, highlighting the ability to cancel if they chose not to proceed with marriage. This perspective highlights their ability to make informed decisions,

adeptly adapting to and leveraging their circumstances, and employing resilience to their advantage (Freedman et al., 2020; Pio & Singh, 2015). As Rana (Syria) notes, “Engagements for us are like a trial period. If we feel it's not right, we have the option to cancel. It's a demonstration of our strength and strategic decision-making, not passivity.”

Many women in the study embraced motherhood shortly after marrying young, challenging the assumption that early motherhood impairs agency. Contrary to expectations, these women did not express negative sentiments about becoming young mothers or having multiple children. Instead, their narratives underscored motherhood as integral to their identity—a source of strength and a prideful role (Kanal & Rottmann, 2021; Sleijpen et al., 2017). Functioning primarily as caregivers, they found purpose and self-esteem in raising their children. Far from seeing it as a burden, they celebrated their role as mothers and emphasized the importance of collective family contributions to children's upbringing. Hanan (Syria) eloquently expressed this sentiment, stating, Children benefit from time with older men for cultural teachings, but the predominant role lies with us. We ensure the baby's needs, instill good values, provide love and care, and wield the greatest influence in shaping their personality. Furthermore, resilience, as illustrated in narratives like Madalena's (Angola), is rooted in personal qualities such as optimism and adaptability, as suggested by Shakespeare-Finch and Wickham (2009): I started working in my family's business at a young age. This allowed me to contribute not only to their well-being but also to mine. By actively participating in the growth of the business, I inevitably improved my social status.

Across various cultural contexts, women actively resist oppressive cultural or social discourses that aim to curtail their rights and hinder the attainment of agency (Hélie & Hoodfar, 2012). The women interviewed, facing societal constraints, transformed vulnerability into agency, fighting their poor economic circumstances with fortitude (Abraham, M.2005). Resistance manifests vividly in Maara's (Syria) testimony, where she defied her brothers' opinions to pursue enrollment in college: I chose to challenge traditional norms, asserting my autonomy in the pursuit of my educational aspirations. Going against their expectations was a testament to my determination and a declaration of my right to shape my own destiny. Like Maara (Syria), women's

narrative often underscores the transformative power of individual agency through resistance in confronting familial expectations and forging one's path against established opinions.

Many women, like Adilah (Morocco) and Amal (Iraq), contributed to family income through low-skilled jobs such as hairdressing. In contrast, others, such as Amélia (Angola) in public administration and Hanan (Syria) in a law firm, pursued skilled professions. The engagement of women in various professions underscores the multifaceted nature of refugee women's agency, dispelling stereotypes and showcasing their ability to challenge and overcome cultural norms that may limit their opportunities (Mayer, 2018). This resistance signifies women's potential to “rewrite” gender ideologies by destabilizing dominant cultural or religious discourses through the mobilization of alternative or counter-narratives, allowing them to position themselves in more agentic ways (Day et al., 2010). This expanded perspective on agency transcends inherent qualities; it represents a deliberate resistance to imposed limitations, concurrently reflecting a profound level of resilience in the face of adversity. Contrary to the prevailing norms, women like Amal (Iraq) boldly defied familial expectations in their marriage decisions, “Despite their disapproval, I stood firm in my decision to marry the person I loved, asserting my right to make choices about my own life.” Adilah (Morocco) went against her family's disapproval to marry a Catholic man, emphasizing her determination by saying, “Marrying outside our community was frowned upon, but I followed my heart and married the person I chose”. In each of these instances, women articulate their agency through resistance in navigating familial expectations and societal norms, choosing paths that align with their personal convictions and desires (Oliver-Smith, 2001).

These women assert their agency by resisting societal norms, and their choices and lifestyles have not resulted in increased victimization in their countries of origin (Hawkins et al., 2021). Women who challenge familial involvement in marriage redefine their identities as liberated from oppressive social systems (Hawkey et al., 2019).

The unwavering commitment of these women to nurture and protect their children, even in the face of challenging circumstances such as the absence of a father or separation, as illuminated in some narratives, emerges as a potent expression of

resistance. Amélia's (Angola) heartfelt declaration exemplifies this profound connection to resistance: "My children have always stayed with me, even after the divorce. I would not have it any other way. They belong to me. They need me as much as I need them. We are a team". In the face of life's complexities, these women not only embrace motherhood as a vital aspect of their identity (Kannal & Rottmann, 2021) but also actively resist societal expectations and challenges that may seek to diminish their roles as caregivers (Hawkey et al., 2019), transforming their unwavering commitment into a powerful form of resistance. Through this commitment, these women actively challenge societal norms, asserting the significance of their agency within familial structures. Their dedication becomes a poignant statement, defying external pressures and highlighting the resilience inherent in their gender roles.

In forced migration

The narratives of the women interviewed underscore the multifaceted nature of their decisions to leave their countries of origin. To elucidate the complexity of these choices, it is crucial to consider the historical context of violence that often serves as a catalyst for such decisions (see Borges, 2023). For these women, leaving everything familiar behind was not merely a choice; it was a stark matter of life or death. However, the gravity of the decision to escape should not be underestimated (Sapia, 2018; Canning, 2017). These women's migrations emerge not merely as flights from danger but as adaptive strategies to navigate the repercussions of traumatic events (Hawkins et al, 2021). As these women grapple with the harsh realities of their circumstances, the intersectionality of oppression and opportunity becomes evident. Their decisions to flee are deeply entwined with their positions in social networks and their access to resources. Each woman's journey is a unique manifestation of the interplay between personal agency and external constraints, highlighting the dynamic resilient nature of their decision-making process (Pio & Singh, 2015).

Furthermore, the stories of the women interviewed illustrate that leaving one's country is a nuanced exercise of agency through resilience, influenced by fluid structures and unforeseen opportunities (Freedman et al, 2020). Alice's (Angola) experience fleeing exemplifies this intricate dance between personal agency and external factors. Faced with the threat of violence in her homeland, Alice seized the chance to escape when her aunt extended an

invitation to join her in Germany: "I was very sorry to leave my mother and siblings behind" but viewed the migration as a means "to break free from the cycle of violence and create a more promising future". Within this context, the concept of agency takes on a nuanced meaning, providing avenues for subversion and the transformative reshaping of identity within patriarchal frameworks, as noted by McNay (2000). The women who fled their countries of origin exhibited remarkable resilience, enduring the heart-wrenching separation from loved ones in pursuit of a brighter future. This is evident in the case of Yaya (Gambia), a victim of domestic violence, who explained, "I had no option but to leave my children behind due to the imminent danger to my life." Darya (Syria) encapsulates the spirit with her collective decision to flee alongside her family, challenging traditional norms. As she reflects, "Leaving our home was a tough choice, but we knew it was necessary for our safety and future. It wasn't just my decision; we all discussed and agreed on it." Darya's narrative aligns seamlessly with existing research on shared decision-making among women migrants (Kosmarskaya, 1999). Similarly, Maara's (Syria) dynamic journey offers a vivid illustration of swift decision-making within evolving circumstances. In her own words, she recounts, "Every step was a choice for our safety. When the situation changed, we adapted. It was a constant evaluation of risks and opportunities." Maara's account serves as a testament to the agility and conscious decision-making that characterize the narratives of refugee women.

These examples challenge the outdated notion that refugee movements are solely determined by structural factors beyond individual control (Hayden, 2006). Instead, they showcase that refugee women actively and conscientiously took steps to ensure not only their survival but also that of their loved ones, thereby challenging oversimplified narratives and emphasizing the deliberate agency embedded in their journey (Kanal & Rottmann, 2021). In unraveling these narratives, the intricate nature of the decision to leave one's country unfolds, revealing a deeply personal and nuanced process shaped by the delicate interplay of individual resistance and external circumstances (Mayer, 2018). Each woman's journey, articulated in her own words, stands as a testament to her resistance in the face of adversity. It's crucial to recognize that forced migration, particularly stemming from violence (Borges, 2023), necessitates an acknowledgment of the pivotal role individual

choice plays in the decision to embark on this challenging path. Fatima's (Iraq) account of internal displacement epitomizes the resistance that some of the interviewees demonstrated before seeking refuge elsewhere: Initially, my family and I sought refuge in northern Iraq, where we stayed in a church with other families for the first few days. Subsequently, we moved to a park where they provided us with a place to stay. However, amidst the ongoing conflict with no signs of peace, we made the decision to journey to Turkey. Fatima's narrative encapsulates the resistance displayed in the face of prolonged conflict, culminating in the poignant choice to seek safety in Turkey—a pivotal moment in her quest for refuge. For women navigating the tumultuous journey of fleeing, the opportunities to escape symbolize more than a mere physical departure. Instead, they mark a transformative shift, empowering these individuals to actively reshape their circumstances and shield themselves from the clutches of violence (Canning, 2020). The story of Alia (Sudan) underscores her defiance of gendered restrictions on solo travel, achieved through resourceful means such as “bribing airport police officers”, showcases a keen awareness of the malleability of enforcement structures and highlights strategic agency against limiting systems. Despite facing formidable challenges, women's narratives serve as powerful testaments to resistance, characterized by proactive approaches and a tenacious pursuit of assistance (Abraham, 2005).

The women's decisions to flee resonate with the profound personal sacrifices and unwavering determination to carve a path toward safety and empowerment. Their expressions of agency, whether manifested through well-planned departures or spontaneous flights, are intricately intertwined with gendered approaches shaped by factors such as social status, economic resources, or family background (Freedman, 2019; Sapia, 2018). This perspective positions the act of flight as an individual, fluid process, emphasizing its role as an active resistance rooted in conscious decisions rather than mere reactive responses to external pressures (Sleijpen et al., 2017). For many women, the pursuit of international protection wasn't their initial choice; rather, their aspirations were rooted in the desire to establish new lives in the countries they fled to. However, they encountered formidable challenges, such as profound limitations on housing, work, medical care, and schooling for her children (for a comprehensive exploration of the challenges endured by these

women (see Borges, 2023). Mariam (Syria) reflects on these challenges, saying, “We hoped for a fresh start, but the reality in Turkey was tough. Finding suitable housing and adequate resources for our children's education was an ongoing struggle”, Ammar's (Syria) account sheds light on the additional layers of adversity faced by these women, particularly concerning discrimination, segregation, and social exclusion in transit countries. Ammar expresses her family's struggle, stating, “We faced discrimination at every turn. It was disheartening to experience social exclusion, making us question our decision to seek refuge here.”

Despite grappling with these challenges, the resilience of these women shone through as they not only adapted to their environment but also crafted ingenious strategies aligned with their personal strengths and convictions (Le Bellec, 2021; Jasso, 2021). Their resilience became a powerful tool, not just for adaptation, but for to be strong in the face of the demanding conditions in transit countries (Reilly et al., 2021). In the face of adversity, these women demonstrated a remarkable ability to carve out new spaces for action (Tastsoglou et al., 2021). This transformation wasn't merely a survival mechanism; it was a deliberate effort to reclaim visibility, assert their rights, and shape their own destinies (Abraham, 2005). The decision to apply for international protection with the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), became a pivotal manifestation of this agency. Dina (Somalia), encapsulates this sentiment, expressing, Applying for international protection was a proactive step to secure my rights and ensure a more stable and dignified life for myself. It wasn't just about survival; it was about taking control of my future. Their pursuit of international protection was more than a bureaucratic process; it symbolized a conscientious choice to resist the limitations imposed upon them and actively shape their destinies (McKenzie-Mohr & Lafrance, 2014). The act of applying for protection was not a passive response to adversity but a proactive assertion of their rights and a commitment to building a future defined by stability and dignity (Day et al., 2010).

In asylum

Within the diverse tapestry of the lives of asylum-seeking women in asylum, a poignant narrative emerges—a narrative woven with threads of resilience and resistance. As participants navigate the intricate challenges of asylum-seeking, their stories reflect not only endurance but also a determined agency that

transcends adversity (Lau & Rodgers, 2021). Maara (Syria) encountered abuse of power in a detention center, responding with an unwavering determination to assert her rights. In her own words, she recounts, I asked the director, 'If I want, I can take a lawyer, for whatever reason, right? For example, if I feel threatened here, right?' He looked very scared and just answered, 'Yes.' And I said, 'Good because I think I am going to need one!' Maara's resolute stance in the face of abuse exemplifies a powerful act of resistance, challenging the imbalances of power within the system. Similarly, Promesse (Congo) stood firm, insisting on her legal entitlements when confronted with the prospect of separation from her newborn daughter. She declared, "I told them [referring to the police officers] that I want the legal assistance to which I am entitled because they cannot just take away my newborn daughter." Promesse's unwavering insistence on her rights demonstrates a courageous act of resistance against an unjust situation (Lau & Rodgers, 2021), emphasizing her commitment to the well-being of her child.

Being resilient and fighting for one's psychological well-being often meant not taking no for an answer, like Jassim (Syria), who refused to give up her right to psychological support even though she "has asked for psychological help many times, and the professionals at the facility kept postponing it. But I persisted, and finally, the facility got me a psychologist". Jassim's ability to draw strength from her purpose amidst adversity signifies a form of resistance, as she actively shapes her narrative in the face of challenges. In these instances, the asylum-seeking women not only endured but actively resisted injustices, showcasing a powerful blend of defiance and boldness in the pursuit of a more just and dignified future in Portugal. These compelling illustrations highlight how resistance serve as potent tools in overcoming the myriad challenges of seeking asylum, ultimately paving the way toward stability and success (Lau & Rodgers, 2021). Furthermore, their narratives challenge the notion that vulnerability and agency are diametrically opposed on a continuum (Canning, 2017). Instead, these aspects coexist within the lives of these women, underscoring the complexity of their experiences. Additionally, they exemplified resilience by actively shaping their integration processes. Adilah (Morocco) displayed resilience when she "sought assistance from the Santa Casa de Misericordia for essential goods", demonstrating a proactive approach to meeting her basic needs despite the challenges of

navigating a new environment. Her ability to seek assistance reflects a resilience rooted in self-advocacy and resourcefulness (Hawkins et al., 2021).

Similarly, Ama (Togo) exemplified resilience by engaging with the Lisbon Project to secure Portuguese courses for herself and her daughters. In her words, I had to take matters into my own hands and scour for an organization that would offer Portuguese classes for myself and my daughters, all because the host institution couldn't bother to provide them. The sheer incompetence and negligence made me to go the extra mile to fill the void they left. Ama's determination to actively engage with resources available in her new community showcases a resilient spirit that transcends language barriers and cultural adjustments (Lau & Rodgers, 2021). Personal skills and perseverance proved instrumental in Gloria's (Congo) strategic approach to renting a house. She recounted, "It was very difficult to rent a house because landlords were prejudiced against me because I was a refugee until I stopped saying I was a refugee." Gloria's ability to adapt her approach in the face of discrimination highlights a resilience that confronts adversity with a strategic and persistent mindset (Paret & Gleeson, 2016). Amid the Portuguese landscape, these women articulate their short- and long-term aspirations, illustrating their steadfast determination to overcome the hardships associated with displacement. Amélia (Angola), drawing upon her accounting degree, aspires to "study business law in Portugal at a university and then find a job". Her vision reflects a commitment to academic advancement and professional growth, indicating a resilience that seeks not only personal fulfillment but also a contribution to the societal fabric of her new home (Pio & Singh, 2015). Yaya (Gambia), on the other hand, envisions a transformative journey of mastering the Portuguese language and obtaining a university degree "to make a lasting impact on the world stage". Yaya's aspirations extend beyond personal development, symbolizing a commitment to educational achievement as a means to effect positive change, transcending her own narrative to contribute meaningfully to the broader community (Sleijpen, 2017).

In the pursuit of proper integration, meaningful inclusion translates into active participation in the Portuguese labor market, representing a pathway to improved economic status. Hilal (Syria) exemplifies this notion: "So, I worked on a project to make homemade soap and also made Syrian sweets and sold

them". Her entrepreneurial endeavor showcases not only economic initiative but also a proactive approach to integration. These narratives echo McPherson's (2015) findings on how refugee women view education as a tool for self-development, affirming their proactive approach in utilizing education for personal and collective advancement. Furthermore, it underscores a profound sense of agency among these women, reflecting their determination to be integral contributors to their new community and to foster their own space for action, through resilience. It echoes the idea that for these women, inclusion goes beyond mere participation; it embodies a broader approach where spaces are created to recognize the presence and valuable contributions of minorities (Ghorashi, 2021). Moreover, the desire for meaningful inclusion extends beyond individual economic improvement to a collective perspective on the contribution of refugees to Portuguese society, as expressed by Hanan (Syria): "We refugees have a lot to offer Portugal and the Portuguese. We just need the right support so we can prove it". This sentiment emphasizes the importance of recognizing and valuing the diverse skills and talents that refugees bring to their new home.

Drawing on Day's et al., (2010) framework for empowerment, it becomes evident that these women are actively engaging with the components of knowledge, belief, and change. Their pursuit of knowledge spans practical skills, self-awareness, and understanding the contextual dynamics of their adopted society. This conscious desire to act, referred to as conviction, aligns with transformative learning and symbolizes a pathway to emancipation for individuals historically oppressed. Likewise, recognizing the agency of refugee women becomes paramount in articulating their plans and confronting the ingrained prejudices normalized within the institutional framework of the asylum system.

Discussion

Recent research has emphasized the complex relationship among forced migration, gender dynamics, and agency (Le Bellec, 2021; Hawkey, Ussher & Perz, 2019; Jasso, 2021; Reilly et al., 2021; Tastsoglou et al., 2021; Kanal & Rottmann, 2021). However, conventional definitions and measurements often neglect the psychological and social aspects of agency and the personal decision-making processes valued by refugee women (Kanal &

Rottmann, 2021). Additionally, they overlook changes in women's goals over time and in different contexts (Freedman, 2019; Ibrahim & Alkire, 2007). Recognizing instances of agency, whether individual or collective, among marginalized women provides valuable insights into social change (Paret & Gleeson, 2016). This article highlights the vital need to recognize the agency of refugee women and their impressive ability to create new opportunities in challenging circumstances. The narratives take on a gendered dimension as women identify with roles like mothers, sisters, and daughters, rather than solely as national subjects. Identity standards, which define the character of identity, play a crucial role in shaping behaviors. Understanding Desmond and Emirbayer's (2009) concept of "identity formation through belonging" helps grasp the intricate expressions of women influenced by racial, social, and family dynamics, historical context, gender roles, and power-political factors.

Using counter-storytelling, as proposed by McKenzie-Mohr and Lafrance (2014), proves crucial for understanding and challenging dominant narratives that contribute to social inequalities. This method empowers individuals, especially women, to redefine their identities and craft narratives that capture the intricate nuances of their lives, emphasizing storytelling as an empowering tool (Freedman, 2019; Sapia, 2018; Canning, 2017). Building on this approach, the stories of refugee women in this study move beyond theoretical frameworks to portray their diverse roles. These roles are reframed not as obstacles but as wellsprings of strength and fulfillment, examining instances where these women actively exercised their agency in their countries of asylum, during forced migration, and in asylum countries. The focus on resilience highlighted the unwavering commitment of these women to shaping their identities and futures despite significant challenges (Sleijpen et al., 2017). Their resilience goes beyond merely "bouncing back" from adversity; instead, it emphasizes "moving on", showcasing their ability to navigate and actively engage in complex social contexts (Gorman, Brough & Ramirez, 2003). Additionally, the narratives demonstrate a strategic use of vulnerability as a platform for agency. By turning potential negatives into opportunities, these women exhibit a keen ability to resist constraining social structures, challenge norms, and demonstrate their capacity to assert agency within societal expectations (McKenzie-Mohr & Lafrance, 2014).

In their countries of origin, these women emerge as influential agents of change, actively challenging and reshaping societal narratives imposed upon them (Hawkey et al., 2019). Their impact extends beyond their households as they defy preconceived notions, contributing to empowerment and inspiring the broader community (Lau & Rodgers, 2021). For instance, their focus on addressing children's needs is not a sign of passivity or victimhood; rather, it reflects a resilient expression of agency within their cultural context (Kanal & Rottmann, 2021). Moreover, the employment choices made by refugee women transcend mere financial considerations. These choices bear witness to their strength, adaptability, and determination to resist conventional gender roles and cultural expectations (Mayer, 2018). This emphasis on resistance and resilience is not confined to individual acts but becomes a thread woven into the fabric of these women's intentional choices, leaving a lasting impact on both their immediate communities and the larger societal landscape. Paret and Shannon's (2016) insight underscores that a fundamental aspect to consider when delving into forms of agency among refugee women is the pivotal decision to migrate. In examining the narratives gathered, this decision reveals a profound and empowered comprehension of women's roles. It extends beyond a mere physical relocation; rather, it becomes a narrative of strength, adaptability, and determination in the face of adversity (Assaad, Ghazouani, & Krafft, 2017; Hendy, 2015). Their resilience and resistance are not passive reactions to challenging circumstances but proactive stances, reflecting a strategic and empowered approach to shaping their destinies (Tremayne, 2006).

These deliberate choices become not only a means of personal empowerment but also powerful instruments for challenging societal norms and expectations. Through their actions and decisions, these women exemplify a transformative agency that not only influences their own trajectories but contributes to reshaping the broader discourse on the roles and capabilities of refugee women in society. Transit country challenges significantly influence individuals to seek international protection through the UNHCR (Borges, 2023). Banki's (2013) concept of the "precarity of place" adds depth to our understanding of challenges faced by migrants in their residence. It illuminates multifaceted difficulties individuals encounter in their temporary or permanent habitats, emphasizing the precarious

nature of living conditions, citizenship rights, and integration into the host society. This term underscores the insecurity and instability migrants face, highlighting their vulnerability to various challenges. These challenges, as outlined by Banki (2013), resonate in narratives from interviewed women who actively resist oppressive structures limiting their agency in transit countries. Their resistance is evident in navigating and transcending the precarious aspects of their physical residence. These women grapple with constraints on citizenship rights, leading to issues like inadequate housing, limited access to amenities and legal employment opportunities, discriminatory attitudes, and overall instability. Additionally, refugee women actively resist border controls through enduring bureaucratic procedures related to international protection applications (Hawkins et al., 2021).

Brun's (2015) concept of "agency-in-waiting" deepens our understanding of the migrant experience, emphasizing a unique form of agency in those who have experienced displacement. It highlights their ability to take present action while actively considering future possibilities, showcasing resilience amid challenges and uncertainties. Examining challenges, choices, and agency among refugee women in transit, their decisions to seek international protection are embedded in a complex web of actions characterized by resilience. Recognizing that individuals actively draw upon their experiences amid displacement, it underscores the dynamic nature of resilience, emphasizing an ongoing process of decision-making and adaptation (Gray & Dagg, 2019). Instead of adopting a passive victim stance, they actively engage in conversations, make decisions, exercise their rights as refugees, and pursue relocation to start anew, providing evidence of their resilience (Collyer, 2012; Banki, 2013). This reveals the proactive nature of individuals engaging in purposeful actions that contribute to their well-being and future prospects.

Escape triggers shifts in gender roles, and narratives in Portugal intricately interlace themes of resistance and resilience, creating a compelling agency description. Ghorashi's (2021) emphasis on agency resonates, highlighting the fluid and dynamic nature of agency in navigating challenges. The women interviewed showcased their resistance against challenges imposed by the asylum system, focusing on gaining access to fundamental rights, services, and resources in the host society. This narrative unveils the strength and

tenacity defining these women's pursuit of a brighter future in their adopted homeland. Hunt's (2008, pp. 282) underscores that *“people seek opportunities as ‘creative’ actors, and their actions can change the context for future arrivals”* (Hunt, 2008, pp. 282). Personal qualities like optimism, adaptability, perseverance, and acceptance, coupled with a focus on the present and future, showcased these women's resilience, enabling them to cope and survive (Luster et al., 2009; Shakespeare-Finch & Wickham, 2009).

This article aligns with Canning's (2017) caution against labeling refugee women as a “monolithic group” emphasizing the need to move beyond one-dimensional victim narratives to reveal the rich tapestry of their agency. It goes beyond portraying refugee women merely as survivors, positioning them as dynamic contributors to the evolving political, social, and cultural dynamics of their societies. Dispelling this unidimensional perspective becomes indispensable in accurately depicting refugee women as individuals endowed with distinctive identities, strengths, and agency. Within the realm of refugee women negotiating their agency, the findings highlight the intricate complexities and potential conflicts intertwined with prevailing gender discourses. Nevertheless, the resilience and resistance demonstrated by these women underscore their adept navigation of these challenges, showcasing a diversity of strategies to assert their rights. The act of resistance and resilience becomes a powerful means for women to assert their agency, ultimately contributing to a broader narrative of empowerment. The article highlights the potential for refugee women to actively rewrite prevailing gender ideologies through alternative or counter-narratives, challenging oppressive structures. It underscored the imperative to delve into and comprehend women's emancipatory engagement with and against oppressive structures. It aims to move beyond simplistic victim narratives, emphasizing the nuanced ways in which refugee women exercise their agency by actively demonstrating resilience and resistance in the face of challenging circumstances.

In essence, this study provides valuable insights into the agency of refugee women, emphasizing the significance of acknowledging and amplifying their narratives of empowerment forged through acts of resistance and resilience. This nuanced perspective aims to contribute to a more accurate and empowering portrayal of refugee women, acknowledging their capacity for agency and

adaptation within complex cultural and sociopolitical landscapes.

Conclusion

This article explored refugee women's narratives on the impact of gender, class, religion, socioeconomic factors, cultural background, political circumstances, and mobility on their agency. It validates their agency by considering their narratives as a direct source of knowledge, recognizing intersections of social identities (Barsigian et al., 2020; Chan & Erby, 2018; Moradi & Grzanka, 2017). Furthermore, the article proposed a model for research design based on women's narratives, challenging outdated perspectives of them as passive victims and aiming for a more accurate representation. The goal was to inform gender-sensitive policies and practices supporting refugee women in their daily lives. The findings highlighted the importance of considering both emancipatory confrontations with oppressive structures (resistance) and the ability to adapt and act within those structures (resilience) when defining and measuring refugee women's agency. Advocating for a fluid conceptualization in migration studies, the article underscored the need to recognize obstacles women face and their capacity for intervention (Barsigian et al., 2020; Chan & Erby, 2018; Moradi & Grzanka, 2017). This transition from a rigid to a more flexible conceptualization seeks to transcend oversimplified depictions, recognizing and honoring the resilience and the resistance demonstrated by refugee women in exercising their agency. Similarly, the article plays a pivotal role in fostering a paradigm shift within academic discourse and policy frameworks concerning the agency of refugee women, championing a nuanced and empowering comprehension of their experiences.

Limitations

While the study's reliance on refugee women's narratives provides valuable insights into their experiences, the limitations stemming from a small and homogeneous sample underscore the challenge of generalizing findings. The descriptive nature of the research further emphasizes the need for caution in drawing absolute conclusions about the women's journeys. Nevertheless, the use of qualitative methods, renowned for fostering empathy, particularly in the context of non-native English speakers (Wincup, 2017), enhances our

understanding of the complex nuances within their stories. Additionally, the employed feminist and criminological methodology aims to delve into gender differences, the intricate relationship between gender and agency, and the influences of gender bias on variations in agency (Sprague, 2016; Hesse-Bier, 2014), thereby enriching the depth of analysis and interpretation in the study.

Moreover, the interviews conducted years after the events may have influenced participants' perceptions and memories, as memories are shaped by beliefs, emotions, and experiences (Boyle, 2021; Van Bergen & Sutton, 2019). The construction of memories is influenced by cultural background, social support, and personal involvement (Wyer, Hollins & Pahl, 2022; Liberman & Trope, 2014), impacting the way refugee women recall agency events due to their personal involvement. Despite these acknowledged limitations, the study offers an insightful reflection on the agency experiences of refugee women, enriching our comprehension of their position within the refugee regime. It also serves as a valuable model for research design and contributes to the development of policies supporting refugee women.

Declarations

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