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“WE ARE OUTSIDE NOT INSIDE”: REFUGEE WOMEN’S LIFE STORIES OF TRANSITION THROUGH LANGUAGE AND LITERACY

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ABSTRACT

Globally, nearly 120 million people are displaced, placing immense pressure on countries like South Africa to integrate refugees. Although the South African Constitution grants refugees’ rights similar to citizens excluding voting and holding office, many still face severe challenges. These include integration struggles, language barriers, xenophobia, sexual abuse, and isolation. Feminist scholarship emphasizes the gendered nature of displacement, with women often assuming new roles as primary caregivers and breadwinners. This paper explores how refugee women navigate social spaces in host communities through language and literacy practices, challenging negative stereotypes that portray them as either victims or threats. An interpretative study involving 35 women, with four detailed narratives, reveals the complexities of their experiences. By examining their life stories, the study uncovers their resilience and agency. These insights offer valuable understanding of how refugee women adapt, build lives, and become active participants in their new communities despite facing significant obstacles.

Keywords: *refugee women; language; literacy; agency; narrative*

INTRODUCTION

Refugees have the same rights as South Africans, except for the right to vote or hold office (Chapter 2). The South African Constitution (Act 108 of 1996) protects the rights of all people in South Africa, including those of non-nationals. Worldwide, displaced refugee women and children constitute approximately 75% of the global refugee population, mainly from Sub-Saharan Africa (Yacob-Haliso, 2021). Women are particularly challenged when fleeing their homes and transitioning to a new country. Women who have migrated between countries experience tension between multiple, competing, and gendered duties (Gissi, 2018; De Costa and Norton, 2016; Leymarie, 2014), given that they must take care of families and children in the foreign environment under grim circumstances. Being a refugee can also alter community patterns so that gender roles are redefined, and displacement can give women refugees opportunities to take on new roles, given that they may be the only breadwinners in their families (Krause, 2014; Bradley, Bahous and Albasha, 2022). They are also highly at risk and vulnerable after resettlement, likely stigmatized and may feel shame given the challenging journeys they undertook, and survival decisions they might have made along the

way (Bartolomei et al, 2018). To illustrate, one woman in the study said, “What happens there [meaning the home country] follows us here [the host country]” (Bartolomei et al, 2018: 49). So, if the women encountered challenges in the home country, these challenges may persist in the host country, establishing a vicious cycle. As Memela and Maharaj (2018) add, women refugees are affected by violence far more than any other female group in the world. Refugee women therefore potentially have less agency in the host country.

Notably, feminist scholarship explains that conflicts such as wars are gendered. This means that women and men experience conflict differently (Asaf, 2017, p. 1). Asaf’s work, which tracks the journeys and challenges facing Syrian women refugees challenges stereotypical images of women as “victims of war” (p. 2). The work, which portrays journeys riddled with sexual and physical harassment, exploitation, being threatened at every stage of the journey, asserts that we need to view women rather as potential peace builders, in their new gender roles as sole breadwinners. Bartolomei et al (2014) also present women’s journeys riddled with survival sex, rape, pregnancy. This work established that women are equally at risk and vulnerable after resettlement. Recent research reveals analyses of refugee studies around issues of femininity, masculinity and gender relations; where women refugees are still perceived as passive, vulnerable, disempowered victims of violence in need of support violence (Krause, 2014).

Socialization and language challenges: Perceptions

Increasing reports indicate these women have low literacy in their first language, limited English language abilities, and minimal formal schooling (Jenkinson, Silbert, De Maio and Edwards 2016; Milos 2011). Not being able to speak the dominant language in the host country gives rise to further challenges such as lack of effective communication with the local population, difficulty finding jobs, limited access to an effective health care service, lack of self-confidence, being unable to be involved in their children’s schooling, and poor social and economic integration into the host community. Language socialization is a multifaceted process that is influenced by the way communities perceive those who are being socialized (Garrett & Baquedano-López, 2024). Public perceptions of refugees sometimes include negative and subtractive discourses. Discourse is a social practice, and media representations provoke ideologies based on the positioning of people (Fairclough, 2003). These negative ideas that persist throughout society influence the daily lives of refugees (Horst, 2013). Refugees are therefore prone to many misperceptions held by local

communities. They might be presented as criminals or vulnerable victims (Horst, 2013) and portrayed as victims of xenophobic acts, who drain local resources, and take away opportunities from locals. Such positionings replicate negative discourses and contribute to our social realities (Van Dijk, 2005). Needless, such discourses further inhibit language socialization and integration into the local community.

The language barrier is a key challenge for refugees since there are a number of aspects influencing lack of language and communication skills. In an ethnographic study with 67 refugee women in Australia (Watkins, Husna, and Richters 2012), the participants described language difficulties as the primary issue affecting their well-being, together with other factors such as gender, culture and socio-political factors. Majhanovich and Deyrich (2017) also address the issue of lack of working knowledge of official (European) languages with the large number of migrants from Africa and the Middle East to Europe. Consequently, language proficiency is suggested to be a priority since language is related to access to democratic processes and professional networks, and knowledge of certain languages will also enhance employment possibilities.

There is a connection between language skills and mental well-being with refugees as shown by Jabbar and Zaza (2016), where proficiency in English is an aspect that affects refugees' mental health. Those refugee women who had poor English skills were more distressed than those who did not (Jabbar and Zaza, 2016). Nasser-Eddin (2017), explored how life changed in the diaspora in terms of gender performance. Being exposed to a new society, in the UK, Syrian refugees wanted to preserve some of their cultural values but at the same time, the Syrian women felt that they were provided with more power in the host country (Bradley, Bahous & Albasha, 2022). For Choi and Najar (2017), while the learning of English alone cannot 'fix' problems such as race, culture and gender-based violence and victimization, English is connected to various facets of the struggles they face in rebuilding their lives. Greater competence in English is an important factor in rebuilding their lives particularly as English plays a major role in the shaping of their children's identities as they grow up in the host country. However, in relation to learning English, numerous studies have shown contextual, physical, emotional, historical and personal challenges make it difficult for the women to commit to learning activities in any regular and sustainable manner (Deng and Marlowe 2013, Fozdar and Hartley 2014, Hauck, Lo, Maxwell and Reynolds 2014).

While many women would like to work, given that they have little support with childcare, English is not high on their priority list (Choi and Najar, 2017).

Research aims and questions

The purpose of this study is to explore how four displaced refugee women in Johannesburg encounter their social spaces and socialize in host communities through their language and literacy practices. The aim of this investigation is ultimately to strengthen and challenge negative discourses that represent them as ‘vulnerable victims’ and ‘cunning crooks’ (Horst, 2013, pp. 228-9). Gaining insight through the women’s life stories has the potential to contribute to an understanding of what factors may contribute to their socialization and becoming agentive participants in the community (Ochs, 2000, p. 230; Leymarie, 2014).

It is against such a backdrop that this study addresses the questions:

- How do refugee women in Johannesburg, South Africa transition to life in the host country? How do they encounter their social spaces? What challenges do they encounter during this transition?
- What roles do language and literacy play in the lives of refugee women, and how do they perceive these?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND REVIEW OF LITERATURE

To provide a more profound understanding of the data gathered as well as provide a framework for data analysis, this research is located within theories of linguistic sustainability (Ochs, 2000 and others); agency (Butler, 2016; Kanal and Rottman, 2021; Groutsis et al, 2023), resilience (Gunnestad, 2006; Ager and Strang, 2008; Okoth, 2025), and funds of knowledge (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005).

Linguistic sustainability

Learning the host language is essential for refugees' integration and adaptation to a new culture. Language use in communities, schools, training centers, and workplaces plays a crucial role, especially as refugees often face economic, social, and political marginalization. Full participation in host societies would benefit both refugees and local communities, and language has the transformative power to facilitate this. Studies highlight language as a significant challenge in refugee resettlement (Dettlaff & Fong, 2016; Martin, 2004; McBrien, 2005). Understanding how refugees use language in social settings provides insight into

effective language socialization—how individuals become competent community participants (Ochs, 2000; Garrett & Baquedano-López, 2024).

Life stories offer valuable perspectives on factors supporting language socialization and active community participation. While past research has examined refugee education, identity, and literacy (Hopkins, 2010; McBrien, 2005; Oikonomidou, 2009, 2014), few studies focus specifically on refugee women's language and literacy practices. This study addresses that gap.

Agency

The concept of agency is complex and often oversimplified. Dominant views celebrate agency as the ability to act independently to improve one's situation, rooted in Western liberal ideals. Feminist and postcolonial scholars initially adopted this concept to explore how marginalized people resist subjugation. However, more recent critiques highlight that this binary view—passive victim versus autonomous agent—is limited and culturally biased.

Refugees display varied forms of agency. For instance, Syrian women in Turkey draw on religious frameworks to cope, reflecting what Kanal and Rottman (2021) call the "wrangling dualism of agency." This challenges the notion that refugee women are either helpless victims or rebels against patriarchy. Judith Butler (2016) similarly rejects essentialist gender norms and argues that vulnerability doesn't equate to passivity.

In migration studies, agency is often framed as resistance against cultural oppression, overlooking quieter, everyday forms of agency. Interdependent agency—where individuals act in consideration of others' expectations—is more relevant for many refugees. Groutsis et al. (2023) highlight this through the story of Bella, a skilled migrant who actively navigates her career, challenging the view of refugees as helpless. Their work reframes refugees as diverse, capable individuals with agency, pushing back against homogenizing narratives.

Resilience

Resilience offers an alternative to viewing refugees solely as vulnerable victims, providing a stronger framework for understanding their experiences. Lenette et al. (2013) highlight how women from refugee backgrounds face gendered vulnerabilities, making a resilience lens valuable. Their ethnographic study of four single refugee women in Brisbane, Australia used participant observation, interviews, and visual ethnography to explore the women's lives. This approach revealed the complex, dynamic nature of resilience. The

“everydayness” of their lives became a form of resilience and symbolic capital used to access resources.

Gunnestad’s (2006) three-dimensional model of resilience adds further depth: existential (values and faith), external (support from others), and internal (personal abilities). His work with Sudanese students shows resilience rooted in cultural practices like problem-solving.

Resilience also intersects with integration. Ager and Strang (2008) (in Okoth, 2025) outline three key indicators: markers and means (housing, education, employment), facilitators (language and cultural knowledge), and social connections (bonds with kin and community). These foster belonging and emotional support.

Funds of knowledge

The concept ‘funds of knowledge’ (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005 in Llopart & Esteban-Guitart, 2023) lends itself to understanding the transitional practices of refugee women in Johannesburg. Funds of knowledge as a construct provides a deep, meaningful method for researchers to observe and investigate daily practices of marginalized people. Simply defined, funds of knowledge (FoK) are people’s daily practices. The FoK conceptualization facilitates “a systematic and powerful way to represent communities in terms of resources, the wherewithal they possess and how to harness these resources [...]” (González et al., 2005, p. x). In essence, FoK help to bridge the gap in knowledge and understanding between people and their communities at large.

FoK includes literacy practices, social relationships, strategies, and bodies of knowledge essential to people’s coherent functioning and well-being. For example, understanding ways in which refugees interact within their community can inform important activities that contribute to their integration into their community, for example, learning the new language. The FoK approach allows for theorizing based on “the lives of ordinary people, their everyday activities, and what has led them to the place they find themselves” (Gonzalez et al, 2006, p. 1). The FoK research model aims to discredit the view that culturally and linguistically diverse minorities lack knowledge or have a deficit for learning.

METHODOLOGY

Site and Participants

The site is an old church hall in central Johannesburg that serves to provide space for English classes for refugee children most afternoons. On Saturday mornings, many parents

are tutored. The hall is scantily furnished with essentials, such as a table and some chairs. A makeshift board is put up.

The participants are four refugee women, sampled through a snowball sampling technique. Some of my international students connected me with refugee women who showed interest in participating in the study. All four women were slightly proficient in English and had been in South Africa for at least two years. Ana came from Rwanda, Rafia was from Ethiopia, Sylvia from Zimbabwe, and Amena was from Somalia. Pseudonyms are used for all participants to maintain anonymity for ethical reasons.

Table 1. Participants

	Name (pseudonym)	Age	Home country	Current means of earning a living	Main language
1	Ana	34	Rwanda	Hawker	French, Swahili, Kinrwanda
2	Rafia	42	Ethiopia	Works in a clothing store	Amahric, Somali, Arabic
3	Sylvia	42	Zimbabwe	Domestic worker and child minder	Shona, Sotho, Kalanga
4	Amena	40	Somalia	Home maker	Somali, Arabic

Method

This interpretive study draws on the use of story circles and life story narratives. Life stories (eg Gissi, 2018; Linde, 2005) are discourse units that consist of stories and histories told by participants. While these stories could be told over the course of a lifetime, they do not need to be chronological. In the case of this study, I worked with the women over a period of six months. For Linde (2005), two criteria that characterise life stories are that they are about the speaker, and they are ‘tellable’ or able to be told and retold.

These life stories also overlapped with narratives. According to Clough (2002, 8 in Bell & Waters, 2018) the narrative is useful to the extent that it opens up (to its audiences) a deeper view of life in familiar contexts. He continues that narratives are a means by which truths may be uncovered, providing an element of anonymity without stripping away “the rawness of real happenings”. Labov and Waletzsky’s (1967) and Labov’s (1972) work in personal experience narrative (PEN) (in Johnstone 2004), informs us when people narrate stories or experiences about themselves, these are embedded in its interactional context.

Rosen (1988, in Johnstone 2004) says the urge to make our lives coherent by talking about them involves narrative. Personal narrative is how we make sense of ourselves as individuals and as members of groups. To exist in the social world with a comfortable sense of being a socially proper, and stable person, an individual needs to have a coherent, acceptable, and constantly revised life story (Linde 1993, in Johnstone 2004, 640). Shared stories make groups coherent. “But storytelling is not only a way of creating community, it is also a resource for domination, solidarity, resistance and conflict – in the continuing negotiation through which humans create language and society and self as they talk and act” (Johnstone 2004, p. 644). In this case study, the women narrated their socialization experiences. The narratives were recorded and transcribed. I was assisted by translators during the process. Story circles and story boards (Bartolomei et al, 2014; Parks, 2023) aim to capture stories from participants about their life experiences. I designed a framework consisting of broad categories and formulated questions around these. The questions were formulated to encourage the women to provide a narratives or anecdotes, for instance, “Can you tell me about a time when...”.

Analytical framework

The data were analysed using Braun and Clarke’s (2006) model for thematic analysis, where patterns, codes and categories were identified in the data transcripts of the women’s narratives. The emergent themes focused on in this article are socialization, language and literacy, and agency, resilience and coping strategies.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

First, I briefly introduce the women in the form of pen portraits.

Ana

Ana, aged 34, is a Christian woman, whose home country is Rwanda. She arrived in South Africa in 2020, having fled her home country because of political unrest. Although the Rwandan genocide occurred some 30 years ago, she says she still did not find it safe for her family. South Africa offered better opportunities. She is married to Daved, and has two children, a boy (Pauly) aged 6, and a girl (Hana) aged 9. Her home languages include French, Swahili, Kirwanda. Since arriving in South Africa, she has acquired some English. She works as a street hawker, selling fruit, vegetable, and some snacks. This job means she also has to communicate with her customers in some of the South African languages.

Rafia

Rafia is a 42-year-old woman from Ethiopia, who entered South Africa in 2019. She speaks Amahric, Somali and Arabic. She speaks a little English and fragments of the South African languages. She works as a sales assistant in a clothing store. Rafia is a single mother to two teenage sons. She follows the Islamic faith and plays an active role in women's programs at the mosque. Her family lives in an Ethiopian neighbourhood in inner-city Johannesburg, known as "Little Addis". The area is populated with Ethiopian stores and food stalls.

Sylvia

Forty-two-year-old domestic worker and child minder, Sylvia, is from Zimbabwe. She arrived in South Africa in 2019 with her husband Mkhulu for better life opportunities. Being in South Africa means that she does not live with her six children. They live in Zimbabwe, where they attend school, and the eldest is a social work student at university in Zimbabwe. It is too expensive for the children to live with their parents. The youngest, six-year-old Aya was born in South Africa but was sent to school in Zimbabwe when he was five. She goes home for six- week stints during December-January, and a two-week stint mid-year. This is when she connects with her family. Her home languages include Shona, Sotho and Kalanga. Since arriving in South Africa, her job as a domestic worker and child-minder enabled her to acquire a good grasp of English, as well as confidence. She has also attended a child-minder course that was conducted in English. This has enabled her to speak, read and write English. She reads in English to the child in her care daily. She works in the Southern suburbs of Johannesburg.

Amena

Amena is a 40-year-old woman from Somalia, who entered South Africa in 2018. She is a homemaker. Although she would like to work, her husband prefers her to be at home to do chores and look after the children. Amena spends most of her time at home, and her husband usually accompanies her when she needs to do some shopping. She sometimes chats with neighborhood women, but she does not like to do too much of this. She speaks Somali and Arabic. She understands a little English because her children learn English at school. She has three children: boys aged 10 and 12, and an 11-year-old daughter. The family lives in an outbuilding Mayfair.

Themes:

Socialization, language and literacy: *"They make us feel small"*

In this section I focus on how Ana and Rafia discuss their socialization practices. I present extracts from the narratives of the women individually because these are their personal stories. Ana and Rafia both went to school in their home countries. For Ana, schooling remained incomplete and fragmented because of the genocide that occurred in the 1980s-1990s in Rwanda. For much of the time, she says that parents were afraid to send their children to school for fear of violence and kidnapping of young girls. This encouraged her determination that her own children would be educated. Her husband, however, made the decision to leave their village in Rwanda and make the journey to South Africa. He journeyed first, then sent for Ana and the children to join him. She says that Daved's was not an easy journey. Daved paid someone to assist him to enter South Africa illegally but the individual took his money without assisting him. When he eventually arrived in the country, he had to rely on the kindness of friends who were already here, as well as the church. It took him three years of part-time work before his family could join him.

Ana: *"This country is for them not for us"*

For Ana being in South Africa is an uncomfortable feeling that she cannot quite describe. Since being in the country, she first lived with other families in a shared apartment. This was overcrowded and unpleasant for her. Now they live in a flat in Yeoville, a busy, noisy area populated by many refugee and immigrant families.

Extract 1:

R: How do you find being in SA?

A: SA is a better country...but for me it is not so good. It is not so safe....for me, women ...for the children. I will not leave them alone. We [Rwanda] had genocide, here there is crime...so much crime. There are gangs..... We can't work where we want. Gangs control and we must pay them even. We can work where they say. The local will not buy from us...they say we steal their jobs, they make us feel small. I can only sell to other foreigners. Then my prices are also very low. How can I feed my children? Daved and I work so hard for the children. This country is for them not for us.

R: How do you mix with the SA community?

A: No, no mixing, it is culture and language...it is a problem big problem. We do not mix much. Even if we are all African, we are different. I speak mostly French, Swahili, here not much Kirwanda. Some English, some Sotho. A few words of SA languages, I can get by more now than before when I came here. Now I am better I can understand more. So mostly we mix with other people like us through the church, we sing, we eat, we pray. When I hear my language, I am happy. This is our people. Locals do not want us. They call us bad names. We will mix only when we have to. Even in school. The children go to school here. Everything is English... how can I help. I can only help a little. At least Hana (older daughter) can help Pauly (younger son). She can read the homework and show him how to do it. He is better off. He has help. Teacher says the children are struggling...but they have been in SA now for a long time, why struggle. They have SA friends in schools, better than us. If you have English, it is ok but in SA it is important to have SA languages. We must have African languages in SA. People look at us like we are not good if we have another language.

Rafia: *"We are foreign, we are outside, not inside"*

Rafia had similar experiences to Ana regarding socialization. However, as a single mother, things are more difficult for her. Her teenage sons, Ebrahim and Yusuf are 14 and 16 years old. They go to school, play soccer and work part-time during weekends and school holidays.

Extract 2

R: Do you feel comfortable in SA?

Rafia: I am happy and comfortable because I have a place to stay, I have a job, and my sons are in school. School is the main thing for us...them. They even have SA friends – the soccer boys. They are all the same... no matter where you are from...soccer is the same. As a Muslim woman, people have asked why I am not married. My husband was not good...he liked to fight. Now I do not want a husband. My husband did not provide for us. My sons must look after me when I am old. But I am also not happy because I do not know South African people too well. Only one or two neighbours, and people who work in the shops near me. This is about who we are. In the shop I am selling clothing, prices are cheap. People come and we talk. So here I get a chance to use language, not only Swahili, also English, and SA languages...Sotho, Zulu. At home we use Arabic mostly, and Somali. The sons must

not forget where we are from. Even cooking is Ethiopian mostly. They can speak English at school, but home is home. In the mosque I am most comfortable. Here there are people like us, we have programmes, Eid, Ramadan. Here is best to be comfortable. If you live in another country you must be careful – you are not inside. No – we are foreign, we are outside, not inside.

Negative and subtractive discourses referred to by Fairclough (2003) and Horst (2013) persist in the lives of Ana and Rafia. This hampers socialization in the community, and as Ana says, “They make us feel small”, “We are bad”. As a hawker Ana encounters this daily, where South African locals do not support her little business. She is marginalized by gangs who prevent her from selling her wares where she would like. She also has to pay bribes to sell her goods. For her language socialization is a “big problem”. She says “We do not mix much. Even if we are all African, we are different”. Both women’s socialization patterns are somewhat inhibited because of language issues they experience. Although their English is limited, the African languages have more capital in their worlds, where they are considered African but “not like us”. The women are therefore prone to negative perceptions from the SA communities they find themselves in.

For Rafia, the prices of the goods she sells encourages local and foreign clientele. However, she is most comfortable in her religious groups, with people like herself. Her participation in mosque activities gives her a feeling on inclusion, even though this is with people “like me”. She is comfortable hearing her own home language spoken: “At home we use Arabic mostly, and Somali. The sons must not forget where we are from. Even cooking is Ethiopian mostly. They can speak English at school, but home is home”. She adds “If you live in another country, you must be careful – you are not inside. No – we are foreign, we are outside, not inside”.

For both women too, lack of fluency in SA languages is partly responsible for the lack of socialization. This is reinforced by studies such as those by Leymarie (2014); Watkins et al (2012) and Majhanovich and Deyrich (2017) and others.

The children are exposed to more English at school. Ana’s older daughter is able to help her younger son, and even though Ana and Daved make sacrifices, she believes this is worth it if her children have a better life. In Rafia’s case her sons are teenagers, and sport seems to enable them to fit in with South Africans “soccer is the same”. The family speaks

Arabic at home, because she believes this is important for them to remember their roots. She considers that as foreigners, they are still “outside” or excluded.

Agency, resilience and coping strategies: “*They say foreigner, kwerekwere*”

In my interactions with Sylvia, I noted her quiet demeanor. Sylvia discussed her early years in the country when she felt she lacked confidence. It was difficult for her to communicate with English first language (L1) speakers, and this proved challenging when she was looking for jobs. She found a housekeeping job with an English-speaking family, and says she used all opportunities to practice her English with them. She explained that she did not feel like she was being made fun of, and they were happy for her to practice. She provided some background:

Extract 3:

Sylvia: You know I went to school. My parents made me go to school. It was important for them that the kids finished school, education – but I could not finish. I had to stop so my brother could go. But I would read my brother’s books. This helped me. As I grew up you know, I used more English, but mostly I was doing housework, farm work. Then I got married, it was the same thing again. And kids. To get to SA was not easy. For me for the family, for my parents, they are old, they are not so well now, but in Zim was very bad – no food, politics (she refers to the unrest in Zimbabwe). I can grow things, but it is not enough. So, we came (to SA). I was so sad because the kids were at Zim with my mother and aunty. Now I must work to keep them.

For Sylvia, she was disappointed she could not continue with her education. It was important for the family that the male child be educated. It was too expensive for both children to go to school because of travel costs, as well as the cost of clothing and books. School fees added to the family burden. To circumvent this absence of formal education, she would read her brother’s books, demonstrating her keenness to continue her literacy journey. Her reference to the unrest in Zimbabwe refers to the political unrest, which resulted in financial, food and other serious shortages in the country, which left citizens looking for alternate countries to in which to live and earn a living.

And when Sylvia got to the host country:

Extract 4:

First Mkhulu (husband) came, he found work, he can do electrical (work). Then I came after there was a place to stay. In the beginning, was hard to get a job, so hard, you know. I started cleaning houses. Also, the South Africans, they don't like us. They think we are wanting their jobs. Too much problems – the fighting where I stay. They say foreigner, *kwerekwere*....I was so scared. What can we do...we went to stay with my cousin in another area...but we can't go home, how can we go home? Now it is more quiet, but if it happens.... (shrugs). Also, jobs want papers. We were applying so long, but now it came. Home affairs...it is not good to us. But I went every time. Sometimes...I have to miss work, but the employers they don't like this, and I look for another job.

First, when I get jobs, it was for housework only. It was piece jobs. Few days, few days. So, you don't know the family...they think we are cheap pay....so it is not for long. Then I was looking after the baby in one job full-time. There were other small kids too...two kids. I tried to speak English only with them. Sing songs with the kids. If I made mistakes it was fine. I did not feel bad because they did not make me feel bad at all. It was for learning. Then I could even read the baby's books and make actions. But the best thing when I started, the lady she send me for a child care course. She is good to me. For childcare it is every week for three months. It is English, and there are other nannies. I feel so good like I got a qualification. I learn to look after the baby nice. I learn how to do safety, how to sing songs, what to play. You think I am a mother, but how we do it is different. The mothers now they want everything, they want English. But what it gave me was a course, I even get a certificate. We had a party. I feel like I can go somewhere now.

Sylvia's reference to "piece jobs" refers to part-time work for different families. Initially she said she worked seven days a week in order to earn enough to send money home to support her family. This is a tenuous position to be in, given that she also refers to "cheap pay" because some employers do not pay part-time employees a sustainable wage, which is demeaning and exploitative. Her salvation came in the form of child-care for a family. Here she thrived and was able to attend certificated courses, which represented capital to her. This gave her a sense of agency. She was able to practice her English which improved. This also demonstrates hope for her future, as she says, "they want everything". Her persistence and resilience in learning English, such as practicing the language with the children, as well as

her resilience in going to Home Affairs to submit paperwork for residency in the country, even at the cost of her job provides some evidence of her tenacity. As she says, “jobs want papers”. At present, she works on weekdays and goes to church over the weekend. “Kwereke” is a derogatory slur against foreign nationals, usually of African origin. This she refers to with fear and helplessness. She demonstrates her inability to do anything about the situation by shrugging to indicate that she does not know what to do if incidents aimed at foreign nationals recur.

Agency, resilience and religion: “*At home I am meaning something*”

Much of Amena’s agency may be ascribed to her religion. Amena is a 40-year-old Muslim woman. She wears a long sweeping abaya (cloak) in accordance with her culture. She is guided by her religion in all that she does.

Extract 5:

Amena: For me religion it is everything...Islam. This I was worried for when I came here (SA)...are there muslims...my husband said ok...many Somalis are in South Africa. We live here where there are Muslims...and a *musjid* (mosque) is near. I feel good. I see other people like me. For me it means a lot. Islam makes me strong. I can talk to the other ladies about quran...(holy book) and other things.

For Amena, she did not feel that she needed to work, because these were her husband’s wishes. She preferred being at home and looking after her family.

Extract 6:

Amena: He (her husband) provides everything...the food, the house, the clothing. I am respecting. At home I am meaning something. Just to come here to SA was a big move, but (God) guided us. And my husband is strong. The children they, also help me a lot. They can talk to the teachers even at school. They are South African. I am shy to talk English. But they help if they bring papers from school. They can tell me it is about this or that, then I know what to say. Even in the shops, my husband can talk for me, or the children. And the ladies in the musjid they say go here for cheap, go there. We are helping each other.

Amena demonstrated an absence of formal literacy practices in reading and writing English. However, she demonstrated various other literacies. There are many literacies that occur within varying social contexts. Barton, Hamilton and Ivanic (2000:1) say “Literacy is situated. All uses of written language can be seen as located in particular times and places.

Equally, all literate activity is indicative of broader social practices”. Different literacies associated with different domains in life. Amena’s home literacies are valuable: she demonstrated multiple daily interactions in her own languages, and religious literacy gave her agency. For her it was important to read the Quran daily. This gave her meaning in life. Her children also acted as translators and language brokers for her when necessary. Therefore, she has access to resources in the form of her husband, children, and ladies at the masjid who help her figure out what to do. These people constitute her community of practice. Much of her community consists of Muslim Somali women at the masjid. This is also her sense of support. She tries to rely on traditional Somali mores, and do not socialize much with people from the host country, as Amena says “We are helping each other”. What gives her identity she explains is that “At home I am meaning something”.

Discussion

The women demonstrate agency and resilience, as they attempt to advance their circumstances in different ways. Rather than being passive victims, or as subordinate members of society, they focus on educating their children to improve their circumstances in the host country. Amena’s case must not be seen in western liberal conceptualisations of individuality, which may regard her family as patriarchal (Kanal and Rottman, 2021). Amena is strongly rooted in her Somali culture, and that does not change in the host country. Just attempting to survive in the host country is agentic. As Kanal and Rottman (2021) observe, agency can be observed by examining how refugees rebuild their lives given the changes and challenges they encounter. The women also represent Butler’s (2016) stance that although they are vulnerable, they are not passive victims. Their experiences and trauma stories (Lenette et al 2013:7) represent symbolic capital.

Their experiences also reflect Gunnestad’s (2006) three-dimensional model of resilience where resilience is considered through three viewpoints: existential, external and internal. The existential perspective involves participants’ values, faith, and meanings. The external level involves support received from family, friends and/ or significant others such as teachers. The internal support arises from their own abilities and skills. Their adverse life conditions further provoke the development of coping mechanisms such as resilience.

The women’s acts of resilience contradict the image of refugees as needy victims. This resilience may be observed as the women go about their daily lives. However, we must also refrain from contemplating refugees as a homogenous group. Alongside resilience we

may also examine how the women integrate (Ager and Strang, 2008; Okoth, 2025). Some of the indicators of integration demonstrated include finding places to in which to live, jobs, and educating their children. The women have developed coping mechanisms to help them cope in the host country, despite their histories of hardship and suffering.

CONCLUSION

Language, or the lack of competency in South African languages, appears to hamper socialization processes of both women. In the case of Choi and Najar's (2017) work, if the women were to work hard on acquiring English, they would be better able to rebuild their lives, given that this plays an important role in their and the children's identities in the host country. In this work, greater competence in SA languages would give the women better chances at socialization, although English is valued by their children. Greater competence in English is an important factor in rebuilding their lives particularly as English plays a major role in the shaping of their children's identities as they grow up in the host country. However, numerous studies have also shown that contextual, physical, emotional, historical and personal challenges make it difficult for the women to commit to sustainable learning.

While women are often regarded as disempowered victims facing structural, physical, and cultural violence (Krause, 2014), the women in this study demonstrate agency and resilience by drawing on their funds of knowledge. Despite (in the case of Amena) not being fluent in English, she is able to mediate her children's education and look after her family. Sylvia has made inroads into integrating into the host country by learning the language to a greater extent and working to support her family.

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