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African Human Mobility Review

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Contents

Editorial

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We are pleased to announce the publication of the African Human Mobility Review (AHMR), Volume 11, Number 3, December 2025. This issue presents up-to-date, high-quality, and original scholarship, including a book review and several articles that explore diverse dimensions of human mobility across Africa. We extend our sincere appreciation to all contributors, authors, the editorial board, the publisher, and the anonymous reviewers, whose support has been vital to the journal's development. This issue features six articles and a book review, each offering original research and policy-focused insights and collectively providing a robust platform for examining contemporary trends, migration dynamics, and key migration-related issues across Africa.

The first article by Edmond Agyeman, Joseph Kofi Teye, and Joseph Yaro is entitled "Rural-Urban Migration and Translocal Livelihoods in West Africa: Review of Literature." Using a review of the literature, the study explores migration and translocal livelihoods across the West African subregion. Translocal livelihoods refer to the networks of connections and interdependencies linking mobile and non-mobile populations. The paper concentrates on interactions between rural and urban populations and employs a non-systematic literature review approach. The findings suggest that migrant groups in urban areas — such as hometown associations, religious organizations, pressure groups, and social clubs, play key roles in driving development within their communities of origin. Some of these urban-based groups also possess significant political influence, shaping political activities, electoral processes, and voting behavior in rural areas. The study concludes that understanding the policy implications of their actions is therefore essential.

The second article by Rachel Chinyakata, Cletus Muluh Momasoh, Glynis Clacherty, and Filippo Ferraro is entitled "Gaps in the Implementation of the Non-*Prima Facie* Refugee Status Determination in Uganda." The study adopted a qualitative research design and engaged key informants from non-governmental organizations (NGOs), civil society or community-based organizations (CBOs), government departments, and international institutions that work directly with refugees. The findings show that Uganda's Refugee Status Determination (RSD) system is grounded in robust legislation, particularly the Refugees Act of 2006 and its 2010 Regulations. However, notable implementation gaps and barriers persist, including limited awareness, insufficient legal advice, and inadequate support for asylum seekers, alongside broader systemic and logistical challenges that restrict access to asylum.

The paper argues that closing these gaps requires a comprehensive, multi-pronged strategy. It demonstrates that diverse forms of intervention are necessary to ensure that the non-*prima facie* asylum system aligns with Uganda's legal framework as well as international human rights standards and best practices.

The third article by Paddington Mutekwe and Kenny Chiwarawara is entitled "Necropolitics and Slow Violence: Revisiting Migrants' Access to Healthcare During the COVID-19 Pandemic in South Africa." Methodologically, this study is grounded in qualitative research, drawing on data collected through in-depth interviews and document analysis in South Africa. Participants included local leaders of civil society organizations (CSOs) as well as foreign nationals from countries such as Zimbabwe, Malawi, Mozambique, Cameroon, and Kenya. The findings reveal that although the government introduced several interventions to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 across different population groups, foreign nationals struggled to access these measures. While administrative difficulties in registration may partly explain this exclusion, stronger evidence suggests that the relief efforts were fundamentally flawed in design, having overlooked some of the most vulnerable members of society. The study concludes that the government should provide greater financial support to these organizations and collaborate more closely with them to ensure the needs of all residents in South Africa are effectively addressed.

The fourth article by Yvonne Zama Sibaya is entitled "The Middling Citizenship Trap: Belonging Denied Through Neoliberal Exclusionary Inclusion in South Africa." This ethnographic study applies a critical citizenship framework to examine "middling citizenship," a concept describing the liminal space between legal inclusion and sociocultural exclusion, among 26 highly skilled naturalized immigrants in neoliberal South Africa. The research highlights the varied ways participants experience both acceptance and marginalization, demonstrating that national citizenship — though sought after — does not necessarily translate into full integration. The study exposes the neoliberal paradox of middling citizenship and the contradictions of the post-apartheid context: while the Rainbow Nation narrative promotes colorblind unity, it continues to reproduce colonial racial hierarchies in practice. The findings reveal that merit-based citizenship fosters conditional belonging by valuing economic contribution over sociocultural acceptance. The paper argues that postcolonial perspectives are essential for recognizing forms of genuine belonging that extend beyond economic legitimacy in transitional democracies.

The fifth article by Charity Mawire is entitled "Intersectionality of Gender, Culture, and Identity in Migrant Women's Integration in Africa." Methodologically, this study draws on secondary data, including reports, policy documents, books, journal articles, and other relevant sources. It examines how the integration of women in host communities is shaped by the complex interplay of gender, cultural norms, and identity. The findings show that overlapping challenges related to gender expectations, cultural practices, and identity heighten migrant women's vulnerability and complicate their integration trajectories. Nevertheless, despite these challenges,

migrant women demonstrate agency by creating opportunities for integration through community-led initiatives. These insights underscore the need for a gender-sensitive approach in designing and strengthening migrant integration frameworks, policies, and strategies to address the specific experiences of migrant women across the African continent.

The sixth article by Chalachew Desta, Gülcan Akkaya, and Samuel Alemu is entitled "Urban Refugee Protection and the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda in Ethiopia: Challenges and Missing Links." This study draws on secondary data analysis, key informant interviews, and in-depth interviews. It fills existing knowledge gaps by providing a comprehensive assessment of Ethiopia's urban refugee protection system, integrating policy and legal frameworks with empirical evidence from urban contexts. The findings indicate that while there have been partial achievements in economic inclusion, education, healthcare, documentation, and social participation, significant structural, administrative, and legal obstacles continue to limit refugees' access to livelihoods, housing, essential services, and social networks. Social capital plays a crucial role in helping refugees navigate these barriers, yet inequalities in documentation, language proficiency, and market access heighten their vulnerability. The study concludes that Ethiopia's urban refugee protection framework contains notable implementation gaps that hinder progress toward SDG-related outcomes and underscores the need for coordinated, inclusive, and context-specific policies that convert formal rights into genuine capabilities and equitable opportunities for integration.

This issue also consists of a Book Review made by Ayodeji Adesanya on a book entitled *African Perspectives on South–South Migration (1st ed.)* edited by Meron Zeleke and Lahra Smith. The reviewer offers a thorough and scholarly assessment of the book, noting that it presents a compelling perspective on a range of issues. The contributors draw on extensive experience and years of research to analyze migration as a multidimensional phenomenon shaped by history, geography, gender, knowledge networks, and resource flows. The edited volume not only challenges dominant Eurocentric frameworks but also provides a richly contextualized and grounded contribution to mobility theory in the African context. The reviewer concludes that this book is a significant addition to the literature on borders. Organized into various chapters, it effectively balances theory and empirical evidence through case studies that illuminate the lived experiences and structural conditions of African migrants moving not toward the Global North, but within the continent across the Global South.

Through effective academic writing and presentation, strong organization, and rigorous critical argumentation, the authors have produced exceptional research. I am confident that this edition of African Human Mobility Review once again offers a valuable resource for scholars, practitioners, and students.

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Book review

Zeleke, Meron and Smith, Lahra (eds.), 2024

African Perspectives on South–South Migration (1st ed.)

INTRODUCTION

Studies of international migration continue to be framed within the narrative of South–North movement, with academic and policy discourses largely focused on African migrants crossing into Europe or North America. Nonetheless, *African Perspectives on South–South Migration* (2024), edited by Meron Zeleke and Lahra Smith, is a timely and needed intervention that shifts thematic focus toward the much more common, yet under-researched phenomenon of South–South migration (SSM), especially in Africa. The book, published by Routledge as part of its Studies on African and Black Diaspora series, gathers a multidisciplinary team of researchers, with many from the Global South, to explain the agency, resilience, and underlying structural constraints driving intra-African migratory flows. The contributors draw from their diverse knowledge out of long years of research in the field to examine migration as a multidimensional process driven by history, geography, gender, networks of knowledge, and flow of resources. The editors and contributors do not see migration through the narrow prism of crisis or victimhood, but, more importantly, the focus is on lived experiences, decision-making agency, and the people's potential for migration. The edited volume also does not only challenge the dominant Eurocentric paradigm but also makes a highly contextual and grounded contribution to theorizing mobility in Africa.

The 217-page book, *African Perspectives on South–South Migration*, is laid out in three thematic sections, each of which develops a unified story about the intricacies and importance of intra-African migration. The book, organized into 11 chapters, balances theory and empirical analysis through case studies carried out to highlight the lived experiences and structural conditions of African migrants who are on the move, not to the Global North, but within the continent itself (the Global South).

PART I – INTRODUCTION

The volume begins with an introduction in which the editors, Meron Zeleke and Lahra Smith, outline the core argument of the book: South–South migration (SSM), especially the intra-African movement, is numerically preponderant and qualitatively diverse but has been less theorised and sidelined in the international migration scholarship. The editors criticize the prevalent Eurocentric migration discourse and problematize the forced or voluntary migration dualities. They suggest re-framing SSM as a multi-motivational phenomenon that includes economic, social, historical, and cultural phenomena. They suggest the re-conceptualization of transit and destination spaces in the African context.

PART II – AGENCY IN SOUTH–SOUTH MIGRATION

The second section (Part II) of the book is an exploration of how migrants in Africa are engaged in the negotiation of their movements in ways that do not depict them simply as victims of circumstance. The chapter by Joseph Mujere on informal settlements in Rustenburg, South Africa, reveals how the platinum mine workers in Southern Africa, especially from countries such as Lesotho, Swaziland, and Mozambique, tend to align politically and socially. Besides employment, these migrants also engage with the local administration systems and establish community leadership with the aim of attaining stability and rights. Fana Gebresenbet draws on the Ethiopian setting to deploy the hidden realities of the SSMs that are quite pronounced in the country. In his chapter, he stresses that poverty and conflict are not the only factors that influence Ethiopian migrants, but there are good and strategic decisions that are made under the influence of available information, the democratic experiences of destinations, and the sociocultural expectations. Another example of migration agency is the article by Leander Kandilige, Joseph Awetori Yaro, and Joseph Mensah discussing the Ghana–China migration channel. In their article, they elaborate on the creative ways in which Ghanaian students in China overcome the limiting labor laws and establish informal labor arrangements, like tutoring and leveraging social networks to overcome bureaucratic and financial challenges.

The final contribution to this section by Tirsit Sahldengil is a critique of the ongoing tendency to frame refugees as helpless. Based on ethnographic studies conducted in the Sherkole refugee camp in Ethiopia, Sahldengil foregrounds how the Congolese refugees assertively create the avenues of social integration by invoking the historical connections with the host communities, thus defeating their marginalization and establishing purposeful intercultural relationships.

PART III – THE FLOWS OF RESOURCES IN SOUTH–SOUTH MIGRATION

Part III reinforces a shift in the analytical gaze from the focus on mobility itself to the movement of resources, both tangible and intangible, that follows and occurs as a result of intra-African migration. Focusing on Ethiopian and Somali aid workers who move

around East Africa, Lauren Carruth explores the practice of humanitarian labor as an example of South–South mobility. She constructs the concept of such individuals as humanitarian nomads who migrate because of professional opportunity, institutional gaps, and the flexible citizenship smartly applied to their activity.

Relatedly, Tebkieta Alexandra Tapsoba and Bonayi Hubert Dabiré explore the transfer of skills in agriculture between Côte d'Ivoire and Burkina Faso. Their study highlights that the migrants return home with critical experience that contributes to the sustainable development of rural areas by making rural productivity more effective, thereby complicating the problems associated with simplistic theories of migration built around the concept of brain drain or indirect flows. In the chapter by Dereje Feyissa, ideational and political remittances are examined based on the experience of returning Ethiopians from South Africa. These immigrants import liberal ideals and criticisms of state-led development. They translate those experiences into local activism and small-scale reform efforts back at home. This illustrates that migration may stimulate ideological diffusion and sociopolitical change. The chapter by Johara Berriane points to how migration is related to religion and spatial identity. She employs her analysis of Muslim and Christian migrant groups in Morocco to demonstrate how migrants use religious institutions and symbols to construct a sense of belonging and permanence, establishing so-called transit spaces as spiritual and social destinations. Amina Saïd Chiré and Géraldine Pinauldt criticize the traditional perception of Djibouti as a transit country. They find that the migrants tend to stay in Djibouti voluntarily or are driven by opportunities and engage in its labor economy, social circles, as well as informal economies, making Djibouti a long-term settlement center.

Lastly, Mohamed A.G. Bakhit discusses the shifting identities of the South Sudanese who are migrants and move between internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees. His chapter demonstrates how these people navigate across stratified legal and political landscapes both in Sudan and South Sudan to create hybrid identities that resist the fixed categories of states and humanitarian organizations.

CRITICAL EVALUATION

African Perspectives on South–South Migration is a substantial addition to the migration literature as it moves the analytical center of attention, reversing the analytical fixation on African emigration toward the Global North that has long been long-dominant. Among the strengths of this book certainly regards its stern criticism of the Eurocentrism of paradigms that have dominated both academic and political discourse. Instead of perpetuating the stereotypical views of African migrants as victims of either poverty or war, the book prioritizes their agency, rationality, and thoughtfulness about decision-making. Such a shift is not just theoretically bold but ethically urgent, considering the context of, as well as the temper of the rhetoric of migration around the world. The organization of the volume into sections on agency, resource flows, and destination/transit dynamics is quite effective in creating an

internally coherent but topically varied argument. The chapters themselves provide standalone empirical cases to reinforce the greater conceptual trajectory of the book. Interestingly, the editors manage to balance theoretical recognition and the ethnographic research anchoring. Most of the authors are African researchers or those rooted in African research settings, which enhances authenticity, local responsiveness, and epistemic soundness of the analyses. This is particularly relevant in a discipline where the external analysis has been traditionally relied on. Another strength of the book lies in its theoretical basis. Relying on such frameworks as the Aspirations–Capabilities Framework developed by Hein de Haas, and critical reflection on such notions as transit migration, social remittances, and South–South mobility, the volume shifts away from basic binary approaches (war and poverty) and integrates intersectional, multidimensional analysis. The chapters draw on theory not in an abstracted fashion but as a way of making sense of complex social realities, whether in labor migration, in mining towns, ideational flows among returnees, labor mobility in humanitarian labor or the place-making of the religiously-minded.

However, the volume does have its limitations. The main weakness is the uneven depth in the theoretical intensity across chapters. Although a few chapters, like those by Feyissa or Carruth, contain thick conceptual reflections, others are based more on empirical description. Such an approach does not, perhaps, diminish the value of the work as a whole, but does result in an uneven analytical perception and can leave theory-minded readers wishing for a more critical synthesis. Additionally, the political economy of SSM would have been better engaged. Although resource flows and development connections are mentioned, little attention is paid to state-level migration governance, trade regimes, or labor market segments, which are knowable facets of international political economy (IPE) studies. A more thorough examination of the method and means by which African states regulate or encourage migration would have probably added more analytical significance. The other area of criticism is that the book can be considered relatively self-sufficient in its treatment of migration corridors despite its rich empirical domain. More cross-chapter comparison would have shed more light on general patterns, especially of gender, class, or informal economies across geography. As an example, although gendered experiences are noted in several chapters, few of them take them on an in-depth discussion. This, therefore, results to some extent, in a missed opportunity to draw intersectional conclusions across the volume.

Nevertheless, these shortcomings are small relative to what the book achieves as a whole. The fact that it addresses the decolonization of migration knowledge, gives voice to the Global South, and decenters hegemonic discourses is very timely and needed. The book is useful to scholars and practitioners in many fields of study, particularly migration studies, African studies, anthropology, political science, and international development.

THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

The intellectual worth of *African Perspectives on South–South Migration* is that it makes one of the most significant contributions to the theoretical reorientation of migration studies. The volume questions the decades-long intellectual disposition of viewing migration as unidirectional (Global South to the Global North), typically via deterministic economic push and pull theoretical frameworks. Rather, the editors and contributors focus on SSM as an empirical phenomenon as well as a conceptual lens to reimagine mobility, agency, and development in Africa.

One of the main theoretical developments of this book is that it draws directly on the Aspirations–Capabilities Framework by Hein de Haas. A number of chapters are informed by this pattern, in that it can show how migration decisions are not simply a response to structural deprivation but an issue enmeshed within individual aspirations, cultural values, group strategies, and access to the enabling resources. As exemplified in the chapters authored by Gebresenbet and Sahldengil, African migrants will make rational decisions depending on social networks, information at their disposal, as well as their future mobility schemes. The framework enables a more complex analysis and integrates mobility and immobility as a form of agency, a necessary correction to standard models that tend to assume that movement is associated with freedom or success. The volume also has a powerful theoretical intervention in questioning the utility and meaning of the Global South. The editors and contributors approach the term dynamically rather than as a fixed geopolitical category, as one that is contested along lines of shared colonial experiences, uneven development, and intra-continental relations. This is reflected in the manner in which the book locates African migration corridors as not only places of economic interactions, but spaces in which ideological, religious, and epistemic resources are traded. By doing so, the volume adds to a series of scholarly texts that discuss the problems of homogenizing North/South binaries in the global context.

The other notable theoretical advancement in the book includes expanding the concept of remittances outside the scope of financial transactions to what Peggy Levitt (1998) terms social remittances that entail the transmission of skills, values, ideas, and institutional practices. Levitt frames remittances into two categories, financial and social, in which financial remittances relate to flows of cash sent by migrants to their countries of origin. This form of remittance is also called monetary remittance. On the other hand, social remittances involve transactional flows of ideas, identities, behaviors, and social capital. The chapters by Feyissa, Carruth, and Tapsoba and Dabiré portray how the transfer of knowledge, norms, and ideational capital that migrants bring back to their communities of origin realigns development and governance in ways that are minor yet influential. It is this multidimensional perspective of resource flows that enhances an in-depth appreciation of migration as a mechanism of social change. In addition, the contributors criticize what Crawley and Skleparis (2018) call a categorical fetishism, a strict divide between the forced and voluntary migrants or even refugees and economic migrants. The volume has

a more intersectional and flexible definition of migrants that reflects reality. Such a strategy increases the analytical sensitivity of migration theory by taking into account overlapping motives, changing legal statuses, and adaptive strategies to uncertain environments.

In sum, those theoretical interventions make the book a landmark contribution to decolonial migration theory. It is not only about fitting African cases into the preexisting frames, but changes the way migration is theorized internationally. The outcome is an empirical, pluralistic, highly contextual framework with the potential to inform future research not only in Africa but also in other Global South contexts.

The book is a must-read for scholars, practitioners, and policymakers who need to understand African migration in more profound, locally situated ways than traditional portrayals.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Ayodeji Peter Adesanya is a researcher with an academic background in Political Science. His current research interest spans trade policy, development assistance, multilateralism, development policy, regional integration and migration issues, with a particular focus on political economy dimensions of global and regional governance. ✉ ayopeteradesanya@gmail.com; ⓘ https://orcid.org/0009-0002-5284-9631

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Rural-Urban Migration and Translocal Livelihoods in West Africa: Review of Literature

Edmond Akwasi Agyeman,[1] Joseph Kofi Teye,[2] and Joseph Yaro[3]

Abstract

In this paper we review literature examining migration and translocal livelihoods across the West African subregion. Translocal livelihood is defined as the networks of interlinkages and interdependence that exist between mobile and non-mobile populations in the region. The paper focuses on translocal livelihoods between rural and urban populations. It adopted a non-systematic literature review approach. The literature indicates that rural-urban migration across West Africa has created various degrees of interdependence between migrants and their household members in the places of origin. Translocal networks diminish the dichotomies between urban and rural spaces. During translocal relations, the movement of resources between migrants and their household members living in the places of origin is bidirectional. Moreover, translocal ties are sustained by the extended family system. However, there is limited understanding about how translocality leads to the sustenance of origin society cultural values such as language, beliefs, and family system among migrants and their children.

Keywords: Rural-urban migration, West Africa, translocal livelihoods, literature review

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INTRODUCTION

Rural-urban migration is one of the defining features of the West African migration system (Agyeman and Setrana, 2014) and one of the legacies of colonialism. While some recent studies indicate that this phenomenon has slowed or is stagnating in some African states and that urban to rural migration flows have increased (Beauchemin, 2011; Potts, 2013; ISSER, 2023), rural-urban migration remains one of the principal patterns of internal and cross-border movement within the subregion (Dick and Schraven, 2021). The phenomenon involves individuals of all professions, levels of education, and skilled and unskilled men, women, children, teenagers, and adults.

Much of the driving force of this phenomenon includes push factors such as climate change, population growth, pressure on agricultural lands, spatial inequalities exemplified in the unequal distribution of wealth and amenities between the cities and the countryside, and the dearth of wage employment opportunities in the countryside (Beauchemin, 1999; Steel et al., 2018; Jarawura et al., 2024), as well as conflict and insecurity in the countryside (Ayuba et al., 2023). Spatial inequalities and urbanization trends in West Africa have generated more livelihood opportunities in the cities than the countryside. This situation has generated several pull factors that cause people to migrate from rural to urban areas to seek livelihood opportunities. These opportunities include jobs, business, markets, educational facilities, and acquisition of skills, such as learning a trade (apprenticeship). In fact, due to the concentration of higher educational institutions and white-collar jobs in the major cities across West Africa, most youth tend to move to these places to seek higher education and stay on to work after schooling (Agyeman et al., 2021). In sum, the vibrant urban economies, coupled with the concentration of waged employment, salaried jobs, higher educational institutions and markets constitute factors that attract rural dwellers to the urban settlements (Todaro, 1997; Schürmann et al., 2022).

Income opportunities are, therefore, among the key drivers of rural-urban migration in West Africa (Østby, 2016). Consequently, the development of translocal livelihoods is the result of structural inequalities between rural and urban spaces in sub-Saharan Africa. The translocal networks between rural and urban localities help to bridge the inequalities between these two spaces. However, Greiner (2010) argues that in the case of Namibia, translocal networks between urban and rural dwellers had the potential to exacerbate socio-economic inequalities among people in rural localities. This is because households and individuals that benefit from translocal networks can have an advantage over other households during the process of economic development. On the other hand, Steinbrink and Niedenführ (2020) argue that translocal networks constitute a significant medium to bridge the rural-urban inequality gap within sub-Saharan Africa due to the exchange of tangible and intangible resources between the rural and urban spaces as a result of migrant activities.

Within the West African context, the rural-urban flows of persons have created systems of interdependencies between the two spaces. Some studies have shown that migrants in urban settlements contribute immensely to rural economies

and to the welfare of households and family members in the countryside (Ajaero and Onokala, 2013; Awudu et al., 2019; Teye et al., 2019). However, there is still a paucity of knowledge about the extent of such contribution and how it helps to improve the well-being of households and families in the communities of origin. In addition, there is little knowledge about the degree of interconnection between individuals, families, households, and communities in urban and rural spaces as a result of migrant agency. The purpose of this paper is to review existing literature on migration and translocal livelihoods in West Africa to understand the state of knowledge in the field, establish gaps, and tease out the policy implications of the phenomenon of translocal migration in the subregion. We argue for a deeper understanding of the relations of interdependence that are developed between household members in different locations separated by distance but are actively involved in the socio-economic and other aspects of well-being of the entire family.

METHODOLOGY

This paper forms part of the Migration and Translocality in West Africa (MiTraWA) project, whose goal is to examine the networks and linkages that migrants establish between rural and urban spaces across West Africa. The project adopted an in-depth non-systematic literature review approach with the goal of evaluating existing literature and understanding the current state of research on the topic under study (Kraus et al., 2022). This approach appeared more appropriate due to the limited literature available on translocality in migration research across West Africa. The literature review was undertaken in three stages – literature search, reading, and analysis and writing. We relied on online repositories during the literature search. We used citation indices such as Google Scholar and Scopus as well as academic platforms such as ResearchGate and academia.edu for relevant literature including: books, journal articles, dissertations, conference proceedings, and unpublished sources. The research team used keywords such as rural-urban migration, West Africa, translocality, and translocal livelihoods during the search. Additionally, we used the Boolean operators such as "translocality and West Africa," "migration and translocality," "rural-urban migration and translocality" during the literature search. We paid attention to author and geographical relevance during the literature search. Kraus et al. (2022: 2582) show that a non-systematic literature review allows researchers to "weave together relevant literature based on the critical evaluation and (subjective) choice of the author(s) through a process of discovery and critique." It enables researchers to undertake a critical review of the existing literature. We organized the literature in themes and sub-themes and undertook thematic analysis in accordance with the objective of the research.

WHAT IS TRANSLOCALITY?

In migration research, one of the key issues that scholars encounter has to do with deciphering the relationship between *mobility* and *locality* (Greiner and Sakdapolrak, 2013). In this regard, research on transnationalism, whose main focus is to explain the linkages that migrants develop between states has gained traction in the last three decades (Basch et al., 1994). Transnationalism scholars argue that even as people migrate to new places, they develop a relationship between their current locality of residence and that of origin. It is within this context that the concept of translocality developed in migration research. According to Greiner and Sakdapolrak (2013: 380), the concept "builds on insights from the longer established research tradition of transnationalism, but seeks to overcome the latter's limited focus on the nation state." Lohnert and Steinbrink (2005) argue that translocality is a situation where an individual or a group share their social and economic life across two or more geographical spaces as a result of migration; in order words, living in more than one place at the same time. These places or geographical spaces are not limited by state boundaries, which is the subject of transnationalism. Translocality research, therefore, focuses on the "the embeddedness of people in more than one place or society" (Peth and Birtel, 2014: 16), whether or not these places or societies are embedded in one or more state boundaries. Research focusing on translocal livelihoods examines the interlocking relationships, attachments, and interdependencies that migrants establish between their host and origin societies that cut across physical geographical boundaries (Peth et al., 2018). These relationships are established between the migrant and their family or household of origin, between the migrant and the community of origin, and between a migrant's host community and their community of origin (Steinbrink, 2009).

In the context of rural-urban migration, translocality or translocal livelihoods hinge on the relations that are developed between the village and the town and between rural and urban dwellers as a result of the agency and activities of migrants. It suppresses the dichotomy between the town and the village or the "here" and the "there" (Greiner and Sakdapolrak, 2013). Translocality creates linkages and networks of interrelations between the mobile and immobile populations.

Lohnert and Steinbrink (2005) argue that within the rural-urban migration context, translocality deals with the relations of interdependence that are developed between household members who have migrated to urban locations and those who have remained in the rural localities. These relations of interdependence are translocal livelihoods. In a recent work, Steinbrink and Niedenführ (2020: 19) assert that the concept "offers an action-centered approach for analyzing various space-spanning forms of economic, migratory, and social interactions related to development issues, as well as a means to understand the significance of these translocal interactions for the livelihoods of movers and stayers." For these authors, rural-urban migration does not lead to underdevelopment or retardation of rural progress, as dependency

theories have claimed, but to mutual exchange and the progress of rural societies (Lohnert and Steinbrink, 2005; Steinbrink and Niedenführ, 2020).

Within the spheres of translocality, rural-urban migration, rather than creating dichotomies between urban and rural spaces, contributes to bridge the development gap between the two spaces by generating interlocking translocal families, households, communities, and livelihoods. Therefore, translocal networks ensure that households and communities are not "locally bounded" (Lohnert and Steinbrink, 2005: 97) but expand and interact across wider and different geographical spaces. The substance of translocality is characterized by various forms and degrees of exchanges, reciprocal support systems, communication nets, and interweaving networks. These exchanges take the form of material and immaterial resources, including remittances, social support, communication, mutual visits, and hospitality (Lohnert and Steinbrink, 2005). These relations work to close the inequality gap between rural and urban settlers.

West African migration research and translocality

In West Africa, the concept of translocality was not employed in migration research until recently. Grillo and Riccio (2004) were among the first to employ the concept to study the local development cooperation activities of Senegalese migrants living in Italy. In that study, the authors explored how Senegalese migrants' independent individual or collective efforts (through hometown associations) were integrated with those of local, national, and nongovernmental agencies to promote development in the local communities of origin. Unlike most research on translocality, whose attention is usually on internal migrants, Grillo and Riccio's (2004) work focuses on international migrants and their investment activities in the communities of origin. In the context of internal migration, the research by Romankiewicz (2019) – which was part of the *Migration, Climate and Environmental Changes in the Sahel* (MICLE) project that started around 2010 – was among the earliest attempts to employ the concept to analyze West African migration dynamics. However, there are studies that employ the terms *multi-locality* or *multi-local livelihoods* to analyze rural-urban linkages in West Africa (Yaro, 2004). The research by Agergaard et al. (2009) examined the multi-local linkages between cocoa farming communities in Ghana and frontier urban spaces. Similarly, Steel et al. (2018) analyzed the multi-local linkages between households in farming communities around some villages in Western Ghana and neighboring urban communities.

Despite not operating within well-defined theoretical contours of translocalism, some earlier studies in West Africa, starting from the 1970s alluded to the concept. Research by Mabogunje (1970, 1972) on rural-urban migration in West Africa emphasized the translocal dimension of the phenomenon, even though he did not use the term directly. The *systems theory* of rural-urban migration, which he developed, encompassed the translocal concept. Referring to the systems theory, he states:

One of the major attractions of this approach is that it enables a consideration of rural-urban migration no longer as a linear, unidirectional, push-and-pull, cause-effect movement but as a circular, interdependent, progressively complex, and self-modifying system in which the effect of changes in one part can be traced through the whole system (Mabogunje, 1970: 16).

In a subsequent work, Mabogunje (1972) details how intra-regional migration has led to exchange and spread of vital resources, including knowledge and new technologies across the subregion that have affected livelihoods in both origin and destination societies. He argues that migration across West Africa contributed to regional economic development due to transfers of innovative techniques between host and origin societies through a process of diffusion that contributed to the stimulation of local economies.

Rural-urban migration and translocal livelihoods in West Africa

Research in West African economies has shown that the dynamics of markets, livelihoods, and mobilities have created a situation where the dichotomies between rural and urban spaces are becoming blurred (Agergaard et al., 2009). In particular, Steel et al. (2018) contend that global economic dynamics and the need to secure alternative livelihood opportunities have created the situation whereby rural communities adopt multi-local and translocal livelihood strategies to gain access to rural and urban resources simultaneously. In light of this, the rural and urban spaces have become complementary, from where rural and urban dwellers draw resources for their livelihoods.

Generally, most rural economies within the subregion are based on agriculture. However, this sector has suffered sustained challenges due to a variety of factors ranging from climate change, changing and unreliable rainfall patterns, increasing incidents of droughts, land degradation, poor roads and communication networks, and conflicts and social unrest. In addition, the agricultural sector faces the challenge of land scarcity, unfavorable land tenure systems, urban sprawl, land grabs, and land fragmentation (Cobbinah and Amoako, 2012; Steel et al., 2018; Romankiewicz, 2019). In some instances, poor road networks, outmoded and non-existing storage facilities, and lack of access to markets contribute to annual losses in the agricultural sector, making rural living unsustainable. This has compelled households and families in rural communities to diversify their livelihood chances through the dispersal of family members across multiple geographical spaces. As a result, multi-spatial livelihoods have become a defining feature of African migration systems (Romankiewicz, 2019).

Some studies consider the migration from rural to urban areas within West Africa as a strategy by rural households and families to diversify their livelihood opportunities to deal with unpredictable and harsh climatic changes, unequal socio-economic realities, and insecurity (Romankiewicz and Doevenspeck, 2014; Teye et

al., 2019; Tweneboah and Agyeman, 2021; Dauda et al., 2023; Jarawura et al., 2024). Other studies argue that rural farming communities adopt migration as a strategy to manage seasonality, unreliable rainfall patterns and harsh climatic conditions (Findley and Sow, 1998; Romankiewicz and Doevenspeck, 2014). In their research among farming communities around the Senegal River Valley, Findley and Sow (1998) observed that a section of family and household members migrated to the cities to seek employment when the farming season was over and returned when the farming season started. Awudu et al. (2019) point out that during the period of migration, strong linkages and interaction are maintained between the mobile and immobile household and family members. Those who remain in rural communities depend on the support of the migrants to sustain their livelihoods, while those in urban localities draw on various degrees of social and economic support from family members in the rural communities.

During their study in Nigeria, Ajaero and Onokala (2013) showed that rural-urban migrants in Nigeria made significant contributions to the economies of the communities of origin through remittances and participation in community development projects. In her study in Ghana, Pickbourn (2018) argues that rural-urban migration contributes to women's empowerment by providing them with opportunities and resources for independent income generation to support family members back home. Moreover, researchers observe that migrants' remittances that they send back while they are in the cities, constitute a vital source of income to sustain the families back home and to beef up crop and animal farming when the farming season starts (Findley and Sow, 1998; Romankiewicz, 2019). These translocal activities go a long way to improve incomes, consumption, savings, and stimulate the economic activities of households and family members in the rural communities of origin.

Furthermore, a growing number of studies indicate that migrants in urban settlements play significant roles as breadwinners of their households in rural communities of origin. This category of migrants was the focus of the "migration out of poverty" study undertaken between 2010 and 2020 in Africa and Asia. The study led by Teye et al. (2019) in Ghana found that migrant-sending families in rural communities gained more than non-migrant-sending families in terms of household income and welfare. The literature indicates that the remittances that migrants send home are used to support family expenses, the upkeep of spouses and children left behind, education expenses of younger siblings, nieces and nephews, and to support aged parents and grandparents. Some of the remittances are invested in home construction, renovation of family homes, or for family events such as funerals, naming ceremonies, as well as public donations and other social, cultural, and religious events. Awumbila et al. (2014) found that even migrants who end up living in slums in the cities and working in low-paid jobs in the informal economy are still able to contribute to the well-being of their family members back in the rural communities.

These resource flows and support systems are, however, not unidirectional. There is evidence that in some situations, there is a reverse flow of remittances from

family members in rural communities to migrants in urban settlements. This was the subject of study by Awudu et al. (2019) in Ghana. In their study, they found that households from rural communities of Tizza, Kojokpere, Issa, Kaleo, and Jang in the Upper West region of Ghana sent remittances to urban migrants in the mining city of Obuasi in the Ashanti region of Ghana. These remittances took the form of financial, social, and alimentary support. The purpose, according to these authors, was to sustain the livelihoods of the migrant family members and to also maintain effective social ties (Awudu et al., 2019).

Extant literature indicates that social relations within African extended family systems contribute to maintaining and sustaining rural-urban linkages and translocal networks (Awudu et al., 2019; Kanu, 2019). In fact, due to the influence of the extended family system practised in Africa, migrants continue to maintain various forms of linkages with family and household members who are still in their rural communities of origin (Agyeman, 2021). Thus, migrants in the urban areas continue to hold different degrees of obligations toward family members in the rural areas of origin. Hence, in times of difficulty, they draw on social and economic support from family and household members in the origin communities. The incidence of translocal practices between West African migrants and their kin in places of origin points to the sustenance of the extended family system in spite of being physically dispersed as a result of migration.

Patterns and agents of translocal linkages

Localities, people, identities, resources, and information constitute the key variables of translocal livelihood relationships. Usually, when dealing with rural-urban migration and translocality, the localities involved are rural and urban spaces. However, the interaction between these two spaces takes place on different levels based on the position and resources of localities involved in the relationship. In other words, what we rank as urban or rural in this relationship can determine the scale of the relationship. This scale also plays a very important role in determining the quality of the relationship. The spaces, agents, and patterns of translocal relations are graphically depicted in Figure 1.

Rural-urban migration in West Africa is characterized by large numbers of low-skilled and less-educated rural inhabitants who migrate to the cities to seek wage employment or to start their own businesses (Awumbila et al., 2016a). While male migrants are often concentrated in the transport, construction, and industry sectors as laborers, many of the female migrants are concentrated in the service sector (Awumbila et al., 2016a, 2016b). Female traders who move to the urban areas are attracted by the markets there. Some of them may move from the villages and hamlets to settle either in the service centers or small towns to start a business in the production value chain. Because of the poor markets for farm produce and seasonality in the rural areas, some of these women seize the opportunities offered by the markets in the small towns or urban areas to market the farm produce that are

brought to them from the rural areas. Locally known as market women, they are able to establish formidable business enterprises in these localities through innovative approaches and systems of networks that they maintain with the farmers in the places of origin (Agergaard et al., 2009). Besides trading in foodstuff, some also start grocery or provision stores, enter the restaurant business or other areas in the service sector. In most cases, they leverage resources from the rural communities to run their business. For example, a local restaurant operator may leverage foodstuff and bush meat supplied through networks with rural farmers and hunters. Migrants who are artisans, such as seamstresses and hairdressers may also move to the cities to establish their businesses, or they may acquire the skills in the urban area and return to the village to start the business there while still maintaining ties with migrants in the urban communities for the supply of goods and other materials necessary for the running of their business.

Figure 1: Rural-urban linkage and translocality
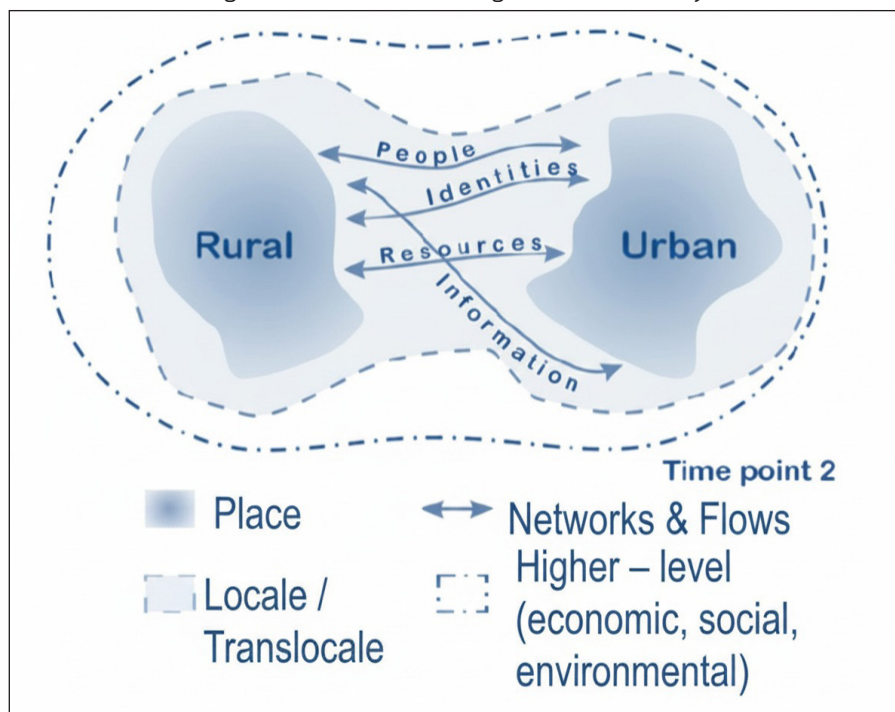
Source: Adapted from Steinbrink (2020)

The locale/translocale in the diagram (Figure 1) refers to the space within which the translocal transactions operate. The space constitutes the social field within which translocal activities take place (Greiner, 2010). This social field is made up of rural

and urban spaces. Following Owusu (2008), Steel et al. (2018) identify five categories of rural-urban spaces: regional/district towns, secondary towns, small towns, rural service centers/emerging towns, and villages/hamlets. Each of these localities form part of a chain of relationships that connect rural and urban localities. They play roles in the production and supply value chain within the region. These roles include serving as nodes for market centers, mining communities, educational facilities, hospitals, banking, and ICT services for rural folks and connecting rural households to the major urban spaces within the region or country (see Owusu, 2008; Steel et al., 2018). As shown in the diagram (Figure 1), the relations between an urban and a rural locality is dynamic and not static during translocal relations (Steinbrink, 2009). The networks enable bi- or multi-directional flows of persons, information, and resources. They also lead to the construction of translocal identities, whereby individuals define themselves in relation to a multi-local space.

It is important to note that the people who are involved in the translocal relations could be individuals, households, communities, or organized groups such as associations or churches whose members are either migrants or non-migrants. Thus, to effectively measure the quality and impact of the translocal relations that are generated between urban and rural spaces, it is paramount to understand the type of human agents that are involved and the nature of the systems, networks, and structures that they establish to sustain the relationships between them and their origin family and household members as well as between the origin rural community and the destination urban community. These human agents can be stratified by age, sex, education, and social position or by the purpose for which they migrate.

In some cases, household members who migrate to the urban areas consist of individuals seeking employment in the formal and informal economy, who are categorized as labor migrants. These migrants, upon reaching the urban destination, are integrated into various sectors of the urban labor market based on their educational qualifications, skills, and social networks. Because of the concentration of white-collar jobs in the urban areas in most West African countries, many rural dwellers who have received higher education often end up settling and working in an urban space (Agyeman and Fernandez, 2016). Within West Africa, translocal labor migrants include youth migrants (usually unmarried persons and teenagers) who travel from the rural areas to urban settlements to seek employment in the informal and formal economic sectors (Assan, 2014). They also often move to nearby small towns or service centers, or to the regional and national level towns, depending on the quality of their networks. Those who are able to travel to the larger urban spaces seek waged employment within the private sector as messengers, day or night security staff, cleaners, and other related jobs in the service sector. Others go into the informal economy and work as head porters (popularly known as *kayayo* in Ghana) at the market centers, or as cobblers, and street vendors. Some of these migrants are self-employed. Many within this grouping are also integrated into the transport sector as drivers or driver's mates and motorbike riders, particularly within the francophone

countries such as Burkina Faso or Togo. Others also enter the construction sector as laborers. Additionally, some are absorbed by the various artisanal activities in the cities, such as basketry, weaving, sewing, carpentry, welding, and other forms of foundry operations.

In West Africa, the rural-urban linkages also play a huge role in the apprenticeship training of rural youth. For example, in Nigeria, the Igbo apprenticeship system known as *Igba-boi* has played a key role in creating many of Nigeria's big entrepreneurs. This is a traditional Igbo cultural practice whereby young people are sent from the villages to kinsmen in the cities who are successful businessmen to learn a trade. A master-servant relationship is developed between the young migrant and his host (Yaro et al., 2015; Kanu, 2019, 2020). After years of serving his master and learning the trade, the master then sets him up by providing him with capital to start his own business and independent life. Kanu (2019, 2020) maintains that many successful businessmen currently in Nigeria are products of this cultural practice. The practice is community focused and it builds strong ties between kinsmen, the rural community, urban space, wealth generation, and development.

Another category of translocal migrants consists mostly of female youth migrants who travel to the small, secondary towns and cities to work as domestic workers and house-helps for upper- and middle-class families (Asante, 2014; Awumbila et al., 2016b). In some cases, their work contract is arranged between the youth migrant's family and the employer. When such is the case, then the family in the origin country may also become a direct beneficiary of their employee's income. However, further research is required to understand how the remittances sent by the various categories of youth migrants constitute an important support net to household members in the rural communities. Within this context therefore, when examining how translocal and multi-local livelihoods aid rural households, it is very important to find out how it also helps communities to develop. More importantly, it is salient to find out how migrant groups, including associations, professional bodies, and religious groups play a role in this process.

There are also cases where rural households send their children to urban areas for education, leading to the establishment of translocal relations between household members in rural and urban areas. Very often also, parents in urban settlements leave their young children in foster care with a family member in the rural areas (Cotton, 2025). This kind of arrangement creates conditions that foster translocal relations between migrants and their relatives in the village. Foster parenting is also common on the transnational level between West African migrant parents in Europe and their relatives in the country of origin (Yount-André, 2022). In cases where the children are sent to urban settlements for educational purposes, their parents living in the village may build a house or rent an apartment in the urban area for the children to live in. In situations of polygamous families, the husband may station one of the wives in the urban home to cater for the children. In such arrangements, there is a reverse flow of remittances from the rural area to the urban area to support the

children. Once the children complete school and gain employment, it is their turn to send remittances to their rural homes to support their parents, siblings, and other household members residing there. Greiner (2010) observed this phenomenon during his research in Namibia. However, in the case of West Africa, further research is required to uncover the role of these educated persons in their translocal relations with relatives in the rural communities.

In more recent times, migrants' social networks, translocal relations, and exchanges have been aided a great deal by advances in communication and transportation systems (Dekker and Engbersen, 2014). It is therefore necessary to verify the extent to which technology has improved translocal networks and relations between rural and urban spaces. In fact, household and family members in rural and urban communities are able to communicate and exchange resources through the use of social media (Facebook, WhatsApp, SMS, etc.), mobile banking, and advanced transportation and delivery systems. Door-to-door deliveries enable families in rural communities to send foodstuff to their family members in urban areas and also receive goods from the urban areas. These advances have a greater likelihood to improve the extent of translocal relations between rural and urban households.

Rural-urban migration also leads to the construction of new identities and lifestyles. During his research in Namibia, Greiner (2010: 149) observed: "The translocal movement of people between town and country brings with it a profound change in rural lifestyle." He argued that because translocal migrants maintain their roots in the rural communities of origin, they are able to introduce an urban lifestyle that includes things such as modern furniture, new home construction techniques, and modern farming methods in the village. Some studies also show that translocal livelihoods lead to the development of multilingual identities and multicultural values among migrants (Greiner, 2010; Vukosav and Vukosav, 2021). However, there is also evidence that some migrants abandon their cultures and ties to their places of origin once they settle in the city (Agyeman, 2021). Extant literature on West African migration has focused on the economic rather that the socio-cultural dimension. This, therefore, constitutes an important gap that needs further research.

Our search for literature on intergenerational transfer of translocal activities in West Africa did not yield any results. This situation therefore presents a significant knowledge gap in West African migration research compared to other regions. For example, during Petrou's (2018) research among migrants in the Oceanian archipelago of Vanuatu, she found that there was a strong remittance culture among first- and second-generation migrants living in urban settlements to their rural communities of origin. She observed that whereas first-generation migrants remitted to a wider range of persons, the second generation limited their remittances to close kin, and they remitted more frequently and reliably. In another study, Petrou and Connell (2017) observed that second-generation Paamese migrants maintained their Paamese identity through participation in translocal community activities. Studying Eritrean migrants in Switzerland, Graf and Thieme (2016) noted that translocal

encounters between second-generation Eritrean migrants and newly arrived Eritrean refugees influenced the identity formation of the former. In the case of West Africa, future studies will be needed to cast light on the translocal activities between migrants' children and their relatives in the places of origin. Such research will help to understand how translocality leads to the sustenance of origin society cultural values such as language, beliefs, and family systems among the children of migrants who have left their rural communities of origin to settle in urban areas.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The literature reviewed in this paper points to an interconnection between rural and urban inhabitants within a migration landscape. People who migrate from rural to urban settlements across West Africa maintain various degrees of interconnection with their rural households in places of origin. This space of interconnection and interdependence is what we have described as translocal livelihood. Within a translocal livelihood framework, there is a bidirectional exchange of resources between rural and urban dwellers in the form of goods, services, knowledge, and technological innovation. Migrants in urban settlements maintain communication networks with rural households. They send remittances to support households in origin rural communities and maintain relations through periodic visits and investments, particularly in housing and agricultural sectors. At the same time, they receive support and reverse remittances from family members who have remained in the rural communities in times of difficulty. The literature further shows that while translocal livelihoods can improve the well-being of migrant-sending households in rural communities, this can rather exacerbate inequalities between migrant-sending and non-migrant-sending households in these localities.

The literature further shows that translocal networks and livelihoods are gaining importance in West African societies within the rural-urban migration framework. Yet research on translocal livelihoods still remains scant. For example, little is known about cultural exchange and social change caused by the phenomenon of translocal livelihoods. Additionally, there is little knowledge about how translocality contributes to rural economic development across West Africa. Further, the intergenerational aspect of translocality is understudied. As more linkages and interdependencies are created between households in urban and rural settings, it is important to gain a deeper understanding of how research and policy interventions can enhance migrants' contribution to social and economic transformation across West African societies. A deeper understanding of the mechanisms, challenges, and transformational roles of translocal livelihoods is necessary for the design of strategies and policies to increase the relevance of translocality in the migration–livelihood equation.

The present literature review provides an opportunity to critically examine the policy implications of the migration and translocal livelihoods that are increasingly being forged by rural households and urban settlers across the West African

subregion. Such policies include devising ways to leverage remittances for climate resilience in the rural economic sector, supporting trading and other business activities of women that help to connect rural and urban economies, providing support systems for the extended family system within the context of translocal relations, as well as providing support to township associations to promote their role in rural economic transformation.

Within the dynamics of translocality, urban households invest in the rural economic sector such as farming and other agricultural activities by sending remittances. These remittances sometimes constitute the capital base and go a long way to support the agricultural and other economic activities of rural households. However, due to adverse climatic conditions, most often migrants who send these remittances experience no return on their investment in the agricultural sector. Nonetheless, to ensure the continuous flow of remittances to support these economic sectors in the rural economies, there is a need for policy interventions. This situation requires policies that will lead to the building of irrigation facilities, provision of agricultural extension services to farmers, provision of regular climate information to farmers (for example, when farmers should expect rainfall), regulation of the land tenure system, construction of high-quality roads, and provision of access to markets. These policy interventions will go a long way to ensure that urban settlers generate a greater interest in investing in their rural communities of origin. Such policies will strengthen the translocal livelihoods between rural and urban households.

Additionally, the literature shows that women who migrated to urban settlements play an important role in creating market opportunities for farm produce and goods from rural communities of origin. However, these women face many challenges ranging from lack of capital, poor transport systems, and lack of security against robbery, especially on the roads. It is evident that there is a need for properly designed policies to support such business activities by women, which will help to link the village and the town.

The extended family system was identified as the defining feature of African traditional family structure (Nukunya, 2016). However, Agyeman (2021) laments that this system upon which all African social institutions are anchored has declined due to migration, family fragmentation, and adoption of Western individualistic values and norms. However, it appears that translocal livelihoods are playing an important role to sustain extended family networks in West Africa. This has important implications for policy. For example, how can policymakers leverage the resources of translocal living to sustain and safeguard the extended family structure in West Africa? Further, it is important to understand how translocal livelihoods affect the cultural identity such as language, religious life, family, and moral values in rural and urban spaces that fall within the translocal social space of migrants. Also, how these identities and values are sustained or not among second-generation migrants is important in future research on translocality.

Finally, migrant groups in urban settlements such as township associations, religious groups, pressure groups, and clubs have a role in spearheading development

in migrant communities of origin. Some of these groups of urban dwellers also wield political power and are able to control political activities, electoral politics, and voting behavior in rural communities. It is therefore important to understand the policy implications of their activities.

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Gaps in the Implementation of the Non-*Prima Facie* Refugee Status Determination in Uganda

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Abstract

Refugee status determination is an important initial step in protecting people seeking asylum and in determining who is entitled to international and national protection under refugee law. Refugee status determination gives access to the individuals/groups seeking asylum protection under international or national laws, grants legal certainty, protects them from refoulement and provides a pathway to integration—not just as a humanitarian act but as a human right. Uganda offers refugee protection to millions of refugees, most arriving in large numbers having fled conflict in neighboring countries. The majority of these asylum seekers are assisted at reception sites along the borders through a *prima facie* process. This process is accessible and largely efficient. Although much smaller in number, there are also a significant number of refugees whose applications are processed through a non-*prima facie* status determination. Such asylum seekers arrive as individuals or small family groups and often in urban contexts. Despite legal frameworks that provide for individual applications, the non-*prima facie* process faces significant barriers or gaps in its implementation. This is further exacerbated by the fact that the non-*prima facie* process is mostly invisible in both national and international research and in the government agenda. This article explores the barriers and the gaps in the non-*prima facie* refugee status determination process in Uganda.

Keywords: Non-*prima facie*, legal frameworks, protection, refugee status determination (RSD), Uganda

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INTRODUCTION

Uganda has a long history of hosting refugees that dates back to the Second World War where the country became a host to many Europeans who had been displaced by the war mainly from Poland, Germany, Austria and Romania (Ahimbisibwe, 2018). During the mid-1990s, the country hosted large numbers of refugees from its neighboring countries mainly as a result of the conflicts generated by various struggles for independence (Lomo et al., 2001; Ahimbisibwe, 2018). Dating back to historical periods, Uganda continues to host refugees and has been applauded for being one of the most refugee-friendly countries in the world. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Uganda hosts an estimated 1.8 million refugees with the majority coming from South Sudan (54.2%) and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (32.3%) (UNHCR, 2025). The refugees live in different districts across the country, mostly in settlements due to the country's refugee approach that mainly favors hosting refugees in settlements (UNHCR, 2025).

Guided by the 2006 Uganda Refugees Act (Refworld, 2025a) and the 2010 Regulations (Refworld, 2025b) and informed by the international and regional frameworks, the reception and protection of refugees in Uganda meets the highest standards in refugee protection (Ahimbisibwe and Belloni, 2020). According to Generis Legal Services (2024), Uganda adheres to international and regional instruments in protecting refugees and commits to a comprehensive refugee policy in a bid to uphold human rights and integrate refugees. Strong legal frameworks give refugees freedom of movement, the right to work, establish a business, access to land and access to services, including education and healthcare (UNHCR, 2023a; Landinfo, 2025). The self-reliance approach allocates refugees to settlements where they are given small plots of land, which gives them the freedom to be self-reliant through agriculture (Ahimbisibwe, 2018). The strong legal frameworks reflect not only Uganda's commitment to the protection of refugees but also its adherence to fundamental human rights principles. Although the self-reliance approach is impactful in integrating refugees, it faces some practical challenges including increase in refugee population, which affects the ability of refugees to be sustained, limited land, poor demand and supply for produce, poor road networks, limited electricity supply, bad network, limited water supply, and lack of amenities (Tshimba, 2022; Wamara et al., 2022). A study in Nakivale settlement indicated that with the rise in population of the settlement and considering the land distribution, realizing self-reliance and economic inclusion was a far-fetched goal (Omata, 2022).

Ugandan legal frameworks (2006 Uganda Refugees Act and the 2010 Regulations) define a refugee, outline processes for refugee status determination (RSD), designate key institutions to implement, enforce and monitor refugee rights, enable self-reliance through the settlement approach and guarantee access to social services (Refworld, 2025a, 2025b). The Refugees Act of 2006 also affirms the principle of non-refoulement and non-penalization of irregular entry or the presence of anyone in the country. According to the Refugees Act of 2006, Section 3, refugee

status determination is regarded as a peaceful and humanitarian act extended to any person as part of their human rights (Refworld, 2025a).

Refugee Status Determination

RSD (refugee status determination) is an important aspect of ensuring that people seeking asylum get the protection of the state in which they are seeking asylum. According to the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR, 2025: 1), "refugee status determination (RSD) is the legal or administrative process by which governments or UNHCR determine whether a person seeking international protection is considered a refugee under international, regional or national law." For a person to be deemed a refugee they must meet the requirements set up by the 1951 UN Convention on Refugees, regional refugee instruments and national asylum legislation. During the RSD process, the UNHCR and the responsible state decide whether a person falls within the protections of the above-mentioned legislation.

Status determination is done through two main approaches: *prima facie*[5] and non-*prima facie*. Internationally, *prima facie* determination typically involves refugees from countries with an established history of persecution, violence, or human rights abuses, which may involve membership of a particular group, ethnicity, or nationality targeted for persecution (UNHCR, 2023b). Within the *prima facie* process (UNHCR, 2023b) refugee status is based on readily apparent, objective circumstances in the country of origin, for example, persecution, conflict, violence, or events that seriously disturb the public order, as opposed to an individual's specific circumstances. This approach is normally implemented in groups or large-scale displacements in which individual status determination is impractical, impossible or unnecessary. Countries issue a declaration defining the profile to which the *prima facie* approach will apply and the procedures that are implemented at registration, and refugee status is granted immediately thereafter (UNHCR, 2023b).

Conversely, the non-*prima facie* approach is normally used in contexts whereby the *prima facie* approach is not feasible because claims must be comprehensively examined on an individual basis in accordance with the UNHCR RSD Procedural Standards (UNHCR, 2025; UNHCR, 2017). This approach is mainly used in situations where the country of origin is not universally dangerous, there is no mass influx and where the host country wants more control over asylum procedures. The non-*prima facie* RSD requires the applicant to prove that they meet the definition of a refugee, in other words, the burden of proof lies on the individual who is seeking asylum. In some cases, the RSD officer needs to use information at their disposal to produce necessary evidence in support of the application, but this independent research might not always be successful, and some statements might not be verifiable. In such cases, the applicant should be given the benefit of doubt if the account appears credible, unless there are good reasons to the contrary (UNHCR, 2019).

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[5] *Prima facie* is a Latin term meaning "at first sight."

Uganda refugee status determination process

RSD in Uganda falls under the mandate of the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM) Department of Refugees, which grants legal recognition of people seeking asylum and ensures protection under national and international refugee law free of charge (NRC and JRS, 2025). Established under Section 7 and 8 of the Refuge Act of 2006, the Department of Refugees under the OPM receives documents and settles refugees and also coordinates stakeholders on refugee matters. This department manages the Refugee Eligibility Committee (REC) and the Refugees Appeal Board (OPM, 2025). The REC is responsible for determining refugee status at first instance as guided by international, regional and national legal frameworks including the 1951 UN Convention on Refugee; 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees; 1969 OAU Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of the Refugee Problem in Africa and the Uganda Refugees Act of 2006 and Refugee Regulations 2010 (Wamara et al., 2022; NRC and JRS, 2025).

In admitting refugees to the country, Uganda also uses the *prima facie* and non-*prima facie* process. The *prima facie* status determination process is applied in Uganda due to the large-scale displacements and emergencies experienced in its neighboring countries and other countries in the region. It is mainly applied to large numbers of people crossing into Uganda at designated points on the borders of Uganda. The Ugandan Refugees Act of 2006 makes provision for *prima facie* group status determination under Section 24(4), where the Minister makes a declaration allowing certain groups to reside in the country without requiring their status to be determined under Section 4, which stipulates the qualifications for refugee status. Section 19 of the Uganda Refugees Act of 2006 states that asylum seekers who arrive from neighboring countries with long histories of violence (e.g. South Sudan, Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and Sudan) fall under a *prima facie* legal procedure. Section 19 requires an application to the eligibility committee within 30 days of their arrival in Uganda, and Section 20 states that the eligibility committee is required to make a decision on the application (grant or reject) within 90 days.

Asylum seekers from eastern DRC, South Sudan and Sudan qualify for *prima facie* refugee status upon arrival at the border. They are not permitted to apply for refugee status anywhere but in a refugee settlement or at a refugee border entry point (Landinfo, 2025). Asylum seekers of any other nationality not included as *prima facie* must apply for asylum and refugee status through the non-*prima facie* process at the OPM in Kampala. For example, asylum seekers from Ethiopia, Eritrea, Somalia, Rwanda, Burundi, and other parts of DRC must apply in Kampala (Landinfo, 2025; NRC and JRS, 2025).

Non-*prima facie* access to documentation under the Department of Refugees at the OPM is as follows: registration and basic information captured at the port of entry, reception center, or at what is commonly known as the "Old Kampala Police Station." The registration is forwarded to the OPM where a Refugee Status Reviewing Officer conducts an interview with the applicant and submits a summary of the claim

to the REC to make a determination to grant or reject a refugee claim. If accepted, a refugee family attestation and refugee ID (identity document) are issued. If the claim is rejected, the applicant can appeal to the Refugee Appeal Board (RAB). If the RAB arrives at a different decision from the REC, it sends the claim back to the REC for reconsideration. If the claim is rejected again by the REC, the applicant recourse is for the applicant to apply to the court for judicial review. As we discuss later, the RAB can only affirm or remit the decision of REC; the final decision is made by REC (SIHMA, 2025).

Gaps in the non-prima facie refugee status determination

Evidence reveals that there are gaps and challenges in the implementation of the non-*prima facie* procedure (Human Rights Watch, n.d.). For example, a study by Alison (2018) notes challenges in the RSD processes. There are often delays in waiting periods of over a year for some before they receive their initial decision in the RSD process. This is in spite of the fact that in law refugees using a non-*prima facie* approach should receive the same benefits as those who move through the *prima facie* process (Alison, 2018). The lack of uniform implementation procedures for the application of the non-*prima facie* procedures therefore impacts on the protection offered by effective and efficient RSD (Human Rights Watch, n.d.; UNHCR, 2019). Although there is growing awareness of the issues, there is scant evidence examining these implementation challenges and gaps in the non-*prima facie* RSD in Uganda. Given that most refugees who arrive in Uganda are dealt with under a *prima facie* procedure, the non-*prima facie* procedure, which is less common, is largely invisible in both public education and academic research. There is some evidence suggesting that this procedure has several inefficiencies and legal gaps that lead to the violation of evidence of rights for refugees (Human Rights Watch, n.d.; Alison, 2018; UNHCR, 2019).

Furthermore, recently the OPM blocked refugee registration of individuals from specific countries. While the factors contributing to the halt in registrations remain unclear, some reports attribute the blockage to the reductions in aid or donor support which resulted in the government stopping registration of asylum seekers from countries that are deemed peaceful or with no conflict (Sultan, 2024; Monitor, 2025; Zongo, 2025). Coupled to this, the halt in registration for Eritreans in Uganda was also linked to reports of asylum seekers being part of smuggling, trafficking and money laundering networks. Hence, to maintain security in the country, the country blocked their influx (Zongo, 2025). The restrictions in the registration of certain nationals is a drastic change to Uganda's approach of welcoming people who seek refuge (Sultan, 2024). These restrictions illustrate how migration has increasingly been securitized in numerous countries across the continent.

With the above background in mind, this article explores the barriers to accessing the non-*prima facie* refugee system and the effects for people seeking asylum. The article is based on a study conducted to inform the Africa–EU (European Union) Migration and Mobility Dialogue (MMD III): Enhancing

Protection and Asylum (EPA). The article utilizes the human rights-based approach, which is a human development-based framework normatively based on human rights standards directed for the protection and promotion of human rights (United Nations Sustainable Development Group, 2025). The human rights-based approach emphasizes that all processes for refugees need to be guided by human rights principles. Participation and inclusion, accountability, non-discrimination and equality, legality and the rule of law, transparency and access to information are key to providing protection. Policies and programs should be formulated and implemented with the main objective of fulfilling human rights (Social Protection and Human Rights, 2015). Through the lens of the human rights-based approach, the article examines the non-prima-facie status determination process as a human right and as an important step in protecting asylum seekers. With the use of the approach, the article comprehensively examines gaps in the law and implementation in the status determination processes.

RESEARCH APPROACH

The study was undertaken as part of a bigger project by a consortium of organizations[6] in Uganda and South Africa in 2025 that sought to document the legal framework of non-*prima facie* RSD and its impact on people applying for refugee status. The legal framework relating to non-*prima facie* applications was documented through a desk review of policy (SIHMA, 2025). Data on the impact of this framework on the rights of people seeking asylum were collected through qualitative research—principally semi-structured interviews with key informants. A qualitative approach was selected to allow the complexity of the everyday application of the law to people's lives to emerge (Butina et al., 2015).

Key informants were selected purposively (Nyimbili and Nyimbili, 2024) from individuals in non-governmental organizations (NGOs), civil society or community-based organizations (CBOs), government departments, and international institutions who dealt directly with refugees applying for RSD. These included government officials, legal experts, legal practitioners, and social practitioners working directly with refugees and the asylum processes. Participants were collectively identified by the consortium EPA project partners working in Uganda, purposefully identifying stakeholders who directly work with asylum seekers applying for RSD or those who work with the RSD processes. This ensured that the right stakeholders were chosen to understand the gaps in laws and processes of RSD. Keeping in mind the principle of "data saturation"[7] (Rahimi and Khatooni, 2024) and the range of sectors listed above, the decision was made to interview 10 stakeholders in Uganda, comprising government or UN officials (2); legal experts (1); legal practitioners (2); social practitioners (2); and members of refugee-led organizations (3).

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[6] Scalabrini Centre of Cape Town (SCCT), Scalabrini Institute for Human Mobility in Africa (SIHMA), Consortium for Refugees and Migrants in South Africa (CoRMSA), Jesuit Refugee Service, Uganda and The Catholic Centre for Legal Aid Services, Uganda.
[7] Data saturation is achieved when no additional themes or insights emerge from the data collection.

After the usual processes of consent, interviews were conducted online and recorded. The recordings were transcribed and then uploaded to NVivo5. Using NVivo the data were organized around a set of deductive codes based on the aims and objectives of the MMD III program. These were then analyzed, creating a set of themes and sub-themes which were then further analyzed for patterns and comparisons.

The study received ethical clearance from Makerere University in Uganda. All participants signed consent forms approved by these institutions and all ethics for research with human participants were adhered to.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As a country hosting millions of refugees and continuing numbers seeking refuge in the country, Uganda is faced with several challenges in receiving and protecting refugees. This section describes the themes and sub-themes that emerged from the interviews with stakeholders working directly with refugees and the asylum processes around the non-*prima facie* process.

Challenges within the non-prima facie procedure

The issues relating to the non-*prima facie* process emerged from interviews with NGO and CBO service providers, legal experts, legal and social practitioners and government officials. Firstly, the article describes the challenges with the general asylum cycle, the implementation gap and the effects of the challenges and the gaps in protecting refugees.

Requirement to register at reception centers

Uganda's legislation mandates timely application and decision making for all refugees. According to Section 19 of the Refugees Act, asylum seekers must submit an application to the REC within 30 days of their arrival in the country. Section 20 requires that a decision, either to grant or reject refugee status, be made within 90 days of the application.

Section 19 of the Uganda Refugees Act of 2006 states that asylum seekers who arrive from neighboring countries with long histories of violence (e.g. DRC) should be registered at the reception centers. One of the barriers described by stakeholders interviewed was the strict application of this law, for example, refugees from eastern DRC, South Sudan, and Sudan (Landinfo, 2025) who may find themselves in Kampala because there was no nearby reception center where they had crossed the border were not allowed to register as asylum seekers in Kampala, but at a reception point on the border. The quotes below describe this situation.

> There was an influx of people from DRC, but they were being registered from the border points. So those who found their way into Kampala were being asked to first go get registered [at a border point] and then come back. But you

might have just run across the border to get away from the war, which is what people do. People take different routes and may cross far from a reception point and make their way to Kampala as the capital city. So that was a very big challenge. So, they would arrive, they don't have transport, and then they're being told, go to a particular place and they can't, they don't have money.

[Officials in Kampala] insist that registration for particular nationalities … [must happen[ing] in a particular place, at a particular time.

These registration procedures, which require people fleeing crisis-affected communities to present themselves at a designated port of entry, assume that they possess prior knowledge of the legal requirement governing registration. This is often not the case. In practice, instructing them to return to a port of entry is both burdensome and financially demanding, revealing a key limitation of the bureaucratic system. As a result, it affects the timely registration required by Section 19 of the Refugees Act.

Scrutiny of refugees arriving as individuals

Individuals or small groups who do not enter Uganda at a formal border point with reception centers are required to register at the Old Kampala Police Station. Their applications are then forwarded to the OPM where a Refugee Status Determination Officer (RSDO) conducts an interview with the applicant. Section 4(a)(b) and (d) of the Refugees Act of 2006 stipulates that within the non-*prima facie* process, the burden of proof that an individual qualifies for asylum lies on the individual applicant (Alison, 2018).

Some of the stakeholders described intense scrutiny from RSDO around their right to claim refugee status.

I think, to me, I see more challenges to the individual applicants … they (official) … really ask you questions. Why are you coming here? Why do you think you're being persecuted? It becomes quite lengthy.

So, what is important is proof of what we call the "reasonable fear" from your home country; there are certain requirements and conditions that must exist in your country of origin … So, there is a high level of scrutiny by UNHCR, in conjunction with the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM).

The assessment may not really need a lot of nitty gritties to examine, but if you come individually, they need to really ask you questions. Yeah. Why are you coming here? … why do you think you're being persecuted? Yeah. It becomes quite lengthy. And also, some people may come in, and they don't know where to start. Information on the right processes.

Arrivals from some countries are exposed to particularly intense scrutiny.

> There are some groups, Ethiopians, who might actually have to prove a lot to gain asylum.

Legal service providers described how negotiating the RSD interview and process was complex and how important it was for applicants to have legal assistance to navigate the system as the interview process can be complex.

> Generally, there is just not enough legal representation. This can lead to denial of status because of a simple lack of knowledge of the law.

The stakeholders also cited the need for public information campaigns to encourage asylum seekers to seek out NGOs that offer legal assistance to access refugee status applications. In some cases, the asylum seeker is unable to demonstrate credible evidence of fear of persecution or that their life is in danger and, without the necessary knowledge about the proofs required to obtain refugee status and lack of legal advice before the interview, some non-*prima facie* applicants struggle during the process. This is notwithstanding the fact that the Refugees Act of 2006 gives right to legal representation at the applicant's own expense.

> It's not that everyone who goes will be registered; they have to do interviews, they give them appointments. But the other silver lining is that when the person has been verified, even if they have not been issued the real attestation, they can be given the asylum seeker certificate, which is good enough.

If the applicant manages to navigate the various checks and scrutiny, they are issued with an asylum seeker certificate, as they wait for refugee status. The asylum seeker certificate allows them to access services within the country.

Issues with status determination and appeal process

Once an interview has been conducted by the Refugee Status Reviewing Officer, the application is referred to the REC for determination of refugee status. The refugee status is either granted or rejected. If rejected, the applicant has a right to appeal to the RAB (Refugee Appeal Board) for a review. Participants in this study saw this step as particularly difficult and requiring legal representation. Even though legal representation is allowed during the review process according to Section 24(3) of the Refugees Act, access to legal representation was difficult due to the costs associated (Alison, 2018). Additionally, NRC revealed that the applicant does not receive information (notes) that were taken during the initial interview prior to the appeal interview. These were only shared with lawyers representing the applicant.

Lawyers are not permitted to attend the review interview but can only advise another impeding factor (Alison, 2018).

Another gap identified was related to the RAB. The Board's functions are provided for under the Refugees Act, clearly spelt out under Section 16 (2) of the Refugees Act 2006 (Chapter 312 of the Laws of Uganda) and Regulation 37 (2) of the Refugees Regulations, 2010. According to the UNHCR, the Appeal Board lacks the authority of an appeals body; they cannot grant refugee status as the final decision must be made by the Eligibility Committee. The Refugees Act of 2006 explicitly makes it clear that the Appeal Board does not have power to grant refugees status, thus making its role impotent (UNHCR, 2016).

The Appeal Board can agree that the decision of the Eligibility Committee is wrong, but they have to refer the case back to the Eligibility Committee for further consideration and decision or order the Eligibility Committee to rehear the application. The lack of their ability to make a final decision means that the final decision goes back to the very committee that denied access previously.

> I think what happens is that if you apply [to the Appeal Board] and you succeed "well and good." If you apply and they don't grant you status, you have no recourse.

Violations of right to asylum

The rights of refugees to protection through an asylum system is enshrined in the 1951 UN Convention on Refugee; 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees; 1969 OAU Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of the Refugee Problem in Africa and the Refugees Act of 2006 and the Refugee Regulations 2010. The denial of entry into the asylum system violates a person's right to asylum as it opens room for arrest, detention and deportation, inhibits access to services and leaves an individual with no pathways to refugee status in the country (Addaney, 2017; VisaVerge, 2025).

Denied access to registration constitutes a form of refoulement, which goes against Section 42 of the 2006 Refugees Act that alludes to the principle of non-refoulement by stating that no person shall be expelled or extradited to any other country if the person is going to be persecuted on account of his/her race, religion, sex, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion; or if his/her person or liberty would be threatened by external aggression, occupation, foreign domination, or events seriously disturbing public order. Furthermore, the Act also, in Section 38, upholds the principle of non-penalization and provides that no legal proceedings shall be initiated or continued against any person for unlawful entry or presence in Uganda if they intend to apply for refugee status or have already been granted refugee status.

Despite the legal framework described above, stakeholders described how the government of Uganda (OPM) can selectively restrict the registration of specific nationalities. For example, in March 2023, Uganda suspended the registration

of Somali nationals and in January 2025 the registration of citizens from Eritrea, without any legal basis.

> And then also, like for example, there is a time OPM declared that they're not registering any new applicants [from Somalia], so if there was any at that time who had come, they were not going to be registered, irrespective of whether in the city or wherever. It was a government order … I think they wanted to take time to investigate the influx … they [people from Somalia] were coming so much.

According to reports, the halt in registrations was attributed to the reductions in aid and support that affects the integration and sustenance of the refugee population which continues to increase. Therefore, in order to absorb the shock, the Government of Uganda stopped registering asylum seekers from countries that were "not in conflict" (Monitor, 2025). The announcement to stop registering some nationals was not made public; it was internal to the OPM's Refugee Desk which meant information was not relayed to the asylum seekers. This led to many asylum seekers being turned back upon arrival at the refugee reception offices (Zongo, 2025).

Restriction of access to the asylum system means individuals are left in legal limbo, denied access to services and left vulnerable to abuse and exploitation.

> … if you are not registered, you do not enjoy all the rights, all the services or the rights that any other person would receive. If you got caught by security forces and you don't even have [documentation], they would definitely incarcerate [you] because you can't identify yourself. And then there are places you go … if you don't show your identification … The impacts of not having asylum while being a refugee is an exacerbating factor to the already present challenges.

> Of course, these people are really impacted, because when you don't have documentation that means you can't receive support. You cannot access social services, bank services at times, even health services. Some health centers require you to bring documents.

As the above quotes point out, documentation (asylum or refugee status document) is policed and is usually followed by deportation. To avoid this, some of the asylum seekers decide not to present their claims. Individuals do have the right to a court case if they are arrested because of non-documentation but most individuals have no access to legal representation, because of financial constraints, so they face deportation. This violates the principle of non-refoulement that is provided for under Section 42 of Refugees Act, 2006, which alludes to the principle of non-refoulement. Section 42 states that no person shall be expelled or extradited to any other country if the person is going to be persecuted on account of his/her race, religion, sex,

nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion; or if his/her person or liberty would be threatened by external aggression, occupation, foreign domination, or events seriously disturbing public order.

> The police can arrest you. So, after arresting you, then they can charge you and the court decides what happens to you. The court could decide for you but in most cases the court will tell you, you are here against the law. It is the law that says you can be deported. So, deportation is one of the key things which can happen.

The above quote highlights that, although formal legal procedures exist for deportation, there is a strong likelihood that individuals arrested for not having documentation would not have their protection claims properly assessed. Instead, they are prosecuted for unlawful entry. This practice violates the principle of non-penalization, which prohibits punishing asylum seekers for irregular entry.

Lack of information

The Ugandan Refugees Act of 2006 and the Refugee Regulations 2010 enact many of the fundamentals required for fair and efficient procedures for the determination of refugees, including the right to be informed about the application process by a reception officer (Section 16 of the Regulations) (Alison, 2018). Similarly, the UNHCR also emphasizes access to information for people seeking refuge as indicated in its Refugee Status Determination Handbook (UNHCR, 2019). However, there are limited or no procedures that are in place to ensure that non-*prima facie* refugees have access to information on the status determination procedures. As a result, many refugees in Uganda are poorly informed about the asylum determination process, including evidence that should be presented, what the interview involves, laws that apply and the role of each office involved. This contributes to fear and confusion in some asylum applicants (Human Rights Watch, n.d.). For example, during the first step of registering at the police station in Kampala, refugees from Somalia were afraid to register because they did not really understand the role of the police in the process (Human Rights Watch, n.d.).

> I think what I'd look at is trying to open up and improve the registration services in the city because this is where we are seeing a lot of issues. Some people say, I don't know where to go, where do I go?

> There are some refugees who go to live in small towns or in the country; they come in where there are no reception centers. We have seen them when we do our work and they say they're refugees, but they say we are not yet registered. They are seeking information. How should we register?

… also, some people may come in, and they don't know where to start to even get information on the right processes.

Access to information is essential to the principle of procedural fairness as it gives asylum seekers comprehensive knowledge of their rights. Without adequate information, applicants (asylum seekers) often face "procedural disadvantage" and are unable to lodge an application, prepare for interviews, or appeal.

Limited capacity

The UNHCR (2024) reported that an average of 2500 people seeking asylum arrive in Kampala every week to apply for refugee status and, as a result, there are lengthy registration delays due to lack of human resources, necessary materials and equipment. In another study, asylum seekers complained of extended delays of over a year to receive their initial decision in the RSD process (Alison, 2018). One of the stakeholders in this study also highlighted the issue, describing how the center was often overwhelmed by the number of asylum seekers.

> It's the time [to queue] … [You will see] from the entrance … there's always an influx of people.

This was an issue for those applying for asylum, but it also affected service providers because waiting time, unnecessary repeat visits and inefficiency reduced the number of cases they were able to deal with. The process of application requires several visits with people spending hours queuing each time they visit. Social service providers spoke about the fact that many applicants either came from the edges of the city or outside Kampala and this meant high transport costs, which many simply could not cover.

> There is the process it takes to verify … it's not that everyone who goes will be registered; they have to do interviews, they have to give them other appointments.
> It is time-consuming for service providers and for refugees who do not always have the money for transport to return.

The impact of this is that Section 20 of the Refugees Act stipulates that a decision to grant or reject refugee status needs to be made within 90 days, and this cannot be met because of logistical challenges. To cope with the numbers, the OPM office often allocates certain days for people from different countries but without advertising the fact. This results in many applicants having to return repeatedly. According to the data from NRC (2024), in 2023 some non-*prima facie* refugees, especially from DRC, Eritrea and Somalia, were unable to register their claims due to long

queues and lack of capacity as the facilities are under resourced and lack the means to process high volumes.

Voluntary repatriation

A few participants working in legal aid raised the issue of voluntary repatriation as a misunderstood and relatively underutilized option for refugees who wished to return to their countries of origin. Even though the Refugees Act of 2006 states that the country should promote and participate in inter-state and regional initiatives for voluntary repatriation of refugees, the stakeholders indicated that not much effort is being put into that.

> I think if you look at the Ugandan context, the policy is really comprehensive. What needs to be added or to be made clearer I think should be voluntary repatriation. I think if someone sees that there is peace in my country or the region of my country and they have a feeling I can go back and make ends meet, I think this can be supported. There needs to be more effort to make awareness, publicity that it is an opportunity, a possibility.

Linked to this was the lack of clarity in the law about repeat movement back and forth across the Ugandan border. The back-and-forth movement without declaration serves as one way to circumvent the tedious process of reapplying for refugee status and is an understandable tactic in the context of ongoing conflict in many countries that wanes and then flares time and again.

CONCLUSION

RSD (refugee status determination) in Uganda is underpinned by strong legislation, specifically the Refugees Act of 2006 and the 2010 Regulations. Although similar in importance to the prima-facie approach, the non-prima-facie approach is undermined by implementation gaps and barriers. Limited knowledge, legal advice and support for asylum seekers alongside other systemic and logistical barriers hinder access to asylum. Unlike group status determination, individual status determination requires a high level of evidence or proof of flight from persecution. This disadvantages asylum seekers and can lead to genuine fear of refoulement, which undermines the protective purpose of the asylum systems and the rights of asylum seekers. The fact that the RAB has no power to overturn decisions but only refer cases back to the REC leaves asylum seekers with few options if their application is rejected again. Taking the case to court, the final recourse would need legal support, which many refugees cannot access. These and other factors, including suspension of refugee registrations for specific nationalities and limited institutional capacity, contravene the principle of non-refoulement as set in the Ugandan Refugees Act of 2006. These challenges in the asylum process compromise the country's international obligations under the

1951 Refugee Convention and the 1967 protocol. Unless these gaps are addressed, thousands of refugees seeking protection in Uganda remain in legal uncertainty and are denied access to the full rights, protections and services they are entitled to.

Addressing the gaps in the asylum processes requires a multifaceted approach. Key reforms include setting clear procedures for non-*prima facie* RSD and providing information or sensitization in all languages on the RSD processes for refugees at reception centers and registration centers, both in the settlements and in the urban areas. There is a need for enactment of domestic legislation to empower the RAB to make decisions (grant or reject refugee status). Investment in free or affordable legal aid for refugees and a commitment by the government to creating capacity for timely procedures are also important.

What the article illustrates is that multiple types of action are needed so that the non-*prima facie* asylum system aligns with the stipulations of the Ugandan legal framework and international human rights standards and best practices. This article was based on research that involved stakeholders directly working with the asylum processes in Uganda, a methodological approach that is meaningful toward practical change and that informs pathways for intentional and informed actions and dialogues toward enhancing asylum and protection.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Necropolitics and Slow Violence: Revisiting Migrants' Access to Healthcare During the COVID-19 Pandemic in South Africa

Paddington Mutekwe[1] and Kenny Chiwarawara[2]

Abstract

Migrants constitute a vulnerable group of individuals. Such vulnerability is pronounced during times of crises such as a pandemic. South Africa recorded its first COVID-19 case on 5 March 2020, and the cases kept on surging, prompting the government to announce a nationwide lockdown on 23 March 2020. The COVID-19 lockdown engendered socio-economic, protection, and health challenges to the entire population but with a unique effect on vulnerable groups such as foreign nationals. This paper examines the health challenges foreign nationals faced in South Africa during the COVID-19 pandemic. Theoretically, the paper uses Achille Mbembe's notion of necropolitics to argue that the exclusion of migrants from accessing healthcare resulted in the manufacture of a population who lived at the margins of society, where living meant continually standing up to face death in their everyday lives (slow violence). Methodologically, the paper draws on a qualitative study conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, where data were generated through in-depth interviews and document analysis. The paper's key findings are that foreigners faced medical exclusion in accessing healthcare and COVID-19 vaccines, and they also faced a lack of information and language barriers, which negatively impacted their access to healthcare services. The paper concludes that these challenges stem from a lack of political will to adequately include foreigners in health initiatives. The insights of this paper may prove helpful in considering inclusive health initiatives.

Keywords: Migrants, COVID-19, South Africa, necropolitics, slow death, healthcare, medical xenophobia

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INTRODUCTION

This paper considers the challenges faced by foreign nationals trying to access healthcare in South Africa during the COVID-19 pandemic. For a long time, South Africa has been described as a highly xenophobic society that does not place value on non-nationals' human rights (Landau et al., 2005; Landau, 2011; Crush and Tawodzera, 2014). Non-South Africans, particularly Black Africans who live or work in South Africa, endure discrimination from, among others, government officials, citizens, and the police. Such discrimination extends to healthcare, prompting Crush and Tawodzera (2014: 1) to characterize the "negative attitudes and practices of health professionals and employees toward migrants and refugees" as "medical xenophobia." That said, attitudes toward non-nationals vary, and it is worth noting the contribution South Africa, in general, and South African public healthcare in particular, have made to migrants from neighboring countries. Notwithstanding this support, migrants experience medical xenophobia that is "experienced in prejudice evident in ethnic slurs, unwelcome and insensitive comments and discriminatory practices, including denial of treatment" (Zihindula et al., 2017: 458). Several studies reveal the low appetite and limited effort from the South African government to curb xenophobia (Landau, 2011; Vearey, 2013; Crush and Tawodzera, 2014; ISS, 2014). In light of the above, the COVID-19 pandemic arguably laid bare long-standing medical xenophobia and, as we argue, cranked up an already deadly, necropolitical machine.

The pandemic occurred during a time of widespread migration, with over 40 million people globally displaced (Chowdhury and Chakraborty, 2021). South Africa has been a popular destination for many African migrants, especially from Southern African Development Community (SADC) countries (ACMS, 2020). South Africa recorded its first COVID-19 case on 5 March 2020, and 18 days later, cases increased to 402 (Modisenyane et al., 2022). This prompted President Cyril Ramaphosa to announce a national lockdown on 23 March 2020 to help control the spread of the virus and enable the health systems to prepare for the increasing COVID-19 cases (Mukumbang et al., 2020). The lockdown came with measures that negatively affected everyone living in South Africa; however, migrants may have been severely affected due to pre-existing vulnerabilities affecting them (Mukumbang et al., 2020).

At the peak of the pandemic, an estimated 4.2 million foreign migrants were living in South Africa (Garba, 2020). Migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers were especially vulnerable because they often lacked resources to protect themselves, including access to healthcare (Jobson et al., 2021). The pandemic's rapid spread and existing global inequalities made the COVID-19 impact particularly severe (Jobson et al., 2021; Mutekwe, 2022). Existing literature on COVID-19 and access to healthcare in South Africa focused on global health security and immigration governance (Vearey et al., 2020), neglect of African migrants (Ndebele and Sikuza, 2020), migrants and limited access to vaccines (Mushomi et al., 2022), and experiences of migrants during COVID-19 (Jobson et al., 2021; Mutekwe, 2022). This paper aims to contribute to this body of literature by focusing on migrants' experiences of accessing healthcare in

South Africa during the COVID-19 pandemic. To achieve this, this paper is guided by the following objective: to analyze the experiences of foreign nationals in accessing healthcare services during the COVID-19 lockdown in South Africa.

Theoretically, this paper draws on Achille Mbembe's (2003) notion of necropolitics to understand the South African government's management of the COVID-19 pandemic. Drawing on migrants' experiences of accessing healthcare that were characterized by medical exclusion and limited access to information, the paper argues that the limited access to healthcare resulted in the manufacture of a population that lived at the margins of society, where living meant continually being subjected to slow violence in their everyday lives. This was necessitated by the South African government's management of the COVID-19 pandemic, which was marked by a categorization of nationals and non-nationals, and among non-nationals, a further categorization existed of documented and undocumented migrants. These categorizations shaped migrants' access to healthcare and created lives that mattered and those that were disposable. As a result, migrants, especially undocumented ones, had limited access to healthcare, which, we argue, equates to conditions of slow death.

The paper commences with a literature review focusing on the global experiences of migrants in accessing healthcare during COVID-19 and an explanation of the theoretical framework that underpins this paper. Next, the paper unpacks the qualitative methodology that was used to generate data, followed by a presentation, analysis, and discussion of the paper's findings before concluding the paper.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Migrant access to healthcare during COVID-19: A global overview

The literature shows that in some contexts, migrants faced limited access to healthcare services, while in others, they were offered full access to healthcare during the COVID-19 pandemic. In South Korea, undocumented migrants were excluded from government face-mask distribution programs (Santillana, 2021). Similarly, Santillana (2021) observes that many countries in the Middle East region excluded migrants from their COVID-19 health schemes and had either differentiated treatment or refused treatment based on nationality. However, in countries such as Jordan (Santillana, 2021), Saudi Arabia (AlFattani et al., 2021), Portugal (Meer and Villegas, 2020), and the United Kingdom (UK) (Doctors of the World, 2020; Meer and Villegas, 2020), migrants and asylum seekers were provided with full access to public services for the duration of the state of emergency.

Many countries excluded undocumented migrants from vaccination drives in policy or practice, and deep distrust of authorities among some migrant populations caused complications for more inclusive vaccination campaigns. For instance, in Hungary, it was challenging to register for vaccination without proof of legal residence (Parker, 2021). Even though Greece began vaccinating refugees living in camps in early June 2021, after what critics called a slow start, undocumented migrants still

could not access the vaccine registration platform (Parker, 2021). While coronavirus vaccines were free and available to undocumented migrants in the UK, booking an appointment required registration with a general practitioner (GP). However, some GPs refused to register migrants who could not provide proof of address or an identity document (ID) (Parker, 2021). In Italy, undocumented migrants were excluded from its vaccination drive because it used an online platform to register for vaccination; the platform needed people to provide a tax code, which undocumented migrants did not have (Panara, 2021). Malaysia's vaccine program excluded migrants, refugees, stateless people, and those in immigration detention centers until June 2021 (Santillana, 2021).

Unlike the cases above, where migrants were excluded from vaccine drives, some countries, like the United States, the Netherlands, Belgium, and Portugal, made notable strides to include migrants in their vaccine drives. For instance, migrants in Belgium were eligible to get the vaccine, and the Belgian government specified that data collected during the vaccination process would be used for health purposes only (Parker, 2021). In addition, the government deployed mobile vaccination teams and worked with local authorities and civil society groups to reach migrant populations. In Brussels, public transportation to vaccination centers was free (Parker, 2021), thereby facilitating easy movement to vaccination sites.

Migrants also faced challenges related to a lack of access to information and language barriers in accessing healthcare during the COVID-19 crisis. This negatively affected their ability to access information on how to protect themselves from the virus, which in turn affected their health. Solidar (2020) notes that governments did not translate COVID-19 safety measures messages into languages understood by non-nationals, prompting civil society organizations (CSOs) to fill this vacuum. For example, Volunteering Matters in the UK deployed volunteers from its European Union (EU) VOICE project to translate the national safety guidelines into 20 languages for all non-English-speaking UK residents (Solidar, 2020). The UK government and National Health Service (NHS) guidance was published primarily in English, which was inaccessible to non-English-speaking migrants. Doctors of the World (2020) observe that even though some translations of the guidance had been published, the number of languages was limited, and updates to these translations were behind the English guidance. To fill this lacuna, Doctors of the World, the British Red Cross, and several other partners translated the NHS guidance into 60 languages, including some audio versions.

The literature also shows that access to vaccines was a huge challenge for migrants in the Global South. Walker et al. (2021a) argue that a few vaccine programs across Africa clarified whether or how migrants fitted into the rollouts. Zimbabwe had vaccine tourism, which started in March 2021, after President Emmerson Mnangagwa said visitors could be vaccinated if they were willing to pay (Mazingaizo, 2021). While Mauritius managed to vaccinate 55% of its population by July 2021, concerns were raised about including migrants in the rollout plans (Walker et al., 2021b). To access the vaccine in Mauritania, people were required to present a national identity card,

and migrants could use the "Mauritian Premium Visa" program to access the vaccine. However, there was no clarity on access for those with unclear status. In Tunisia, documented migrants technically had access to free emergency care, which included vaccinations, but migrants reported being excluded from healthcare services (Walker et al., 2021b). Libya blocked nearly one million migrants from accessing healthcare due to discrimination, lack of documentation, and growing insecurity in the country (Groupe URD, 2020). This prompted human rights activists to call for healthcare to be made accessible to all people in Libya.

However, some countries in the Global South included foreign migrants in their vaccine plans from the onset. For instance, in Egypt, the national COVID-19 vaccination plans included refugees and asylum seekers registered with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) (Walker et al., 2021b). Rwanda was one of the first 20 countries worldwide to begin vaccinating refugees and asylum seekers alongside citizens as part of the national response plan. In Senegal, refugees were included in the vaccination campaign from the outset. In the Central African Republic, UNHCR succeeded in advocating for the inclusion of refugees in the state's vaccine rollout plans (Walker et al., 2021b). This study seeks to analyze the experiences of migrants in accessing healthcare facilities in South Africa and how necropolitics shaped these experiences.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: NECROPOLITICS AND SLOW VIOLENCE

In understanding the health challenges foreigners faced during the COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa, this paper employs Mbembe's notion of necropolitics. Mbembe (2003) introduced this concept in the context of bio- and necropower that illuminate the insufficiencies of Foucault's (1979) biopolitics in examining current forms of subjugation of life to the power of death. Mbembe built upon Foucault's conception of "biopolitics" but argued that in eliding histories of colonialism, the concept of biopolitics is impoverished (Mayblin et al., 2019). For Mbembe (2003), necropolitics includes the authority to impose social and civil death, and the right to enslave others in other forms of violence. Necropolitics rationalizes death and violence as a way for the sovereign state to sustain its survival. Thus, the exclusion of migrants from accessing healthcare in South Africa is justified through this framework, implying that the sovereign state's exclusion of migrants was clean, quick, rational, and necessary (Masoumi, 2016: 28). Necropolitics concerns itself with social and political power to dictate who and how populations should live or die. Necropolitics is more than the sovereign's power to kill, but to expose other people to death. The exertion of power can take actual control over biological existence or social death, which involves exile or systematic exclusion from opportunities (Torres, 2022).

Mbembe (2003) accounts for seven ways that necropolitics are localized within the state. This study resonates with four of these ways. The first is state terror, where the state exerts power, persecutes, and eliminates certain populations for the sake of reducing political and social contentions toward the state. The second is

the common use of violence, where the state has no willfully shared monopoly on violence but shares it with other actors like policymakers, military, police, criminal justice system, and private and public investments. The third is the "link of enmity," which normalizes the idea that power can be acquired and exercised at the price of another's life with the use of legal and political tools to expand and exert power and punishment over others, through rationalizations of nationalism (Puar, 2007) and assimilation into neoliberal practices that result in violence. The fourth is the differential killing modes like mass killing, drone strikes, and denial of asylum seekers' entry, the invalidation of, and lack of effort put behind supporting those on the margins. This is what Mbembe (2003) calls "small doses" and the exposure to death in daily interactions many marginalized individuals have with "unbounded social, economic, and symbolic violence" that destroys their bodies and social existence. Daily humiliations perpetrated by public forces on certain populations are the strategy of "small massacres" (Mbembe, 2003: 38–39) inflicted day by day, and the absence of basic social goods like housing, money, food, education, and validation of existence. Necropolitics thus persists in the power to manufacture an entire crowd of people who live at the margins of society, where people for whom living means continually standing up to face death in their everyday lived realities (Torres, 2022).

In the context of colonialism, "sovereignty means the capacity to define who matters and who does not, who is disposable and who is not" (Mbembe, 2003: 27), and ultimately, necropower works toward "the creation of death-worlds, new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of living dead" (2003: 40). Therefore, necropolitics aptly applies to migrants' experiences of accessing healthcare during the COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa. This paper considers how these logics of human hierarchy extend not only to those physically and politically marginalized and subject to very real bodily violence, but also how the state seems to have deployed these same definitions of who matters and who does not in its response to COVID-19. The South African government fulfilled its legal obligations toward migrants to an absolute bare minimum, to the point where migrants, especially undocumented ones, were only prevented from physically dying, though with long-lasting consequences. They were "kept alive but in a state of injury" (Mbembe, 2003: 21). The outcome is a form of slow violence (Nixon, 2011), that is, "violence that occurs gradually and out of sight – an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (Davies and Isakjee, 2019: 214). If necropolitics is, in its most visible form, governing through death, slow violence is both its mode of operation and its effect at the level of the everyday. This paper foregrounds the concept of slow violence to make sense of the extent of the state's harm of migrants, while still meeting its basic human rights commitments.

METHODOLOGY

This paper employed a qualitative methodology through which data were collected from in-depth interviews and document analysis in South Africa, covering the period

between March 2020 and March 2022. The study participants comprised locals who were leaders of CSOs and foreign nationals from countries such as Zimbabwe, Malawi, Mozambique, Cameroon, and Kenya. A total of 16 participants were interviewed — eight females and eight males. In addition, six of these participants were members of either CSOs, 10 were individual foreigners, and four were students. The study employed purposive sampling to locate participants who were either foreign nationals or leaders of CSOs who helped migrants. The sample size was increased through snowball sampling by asking participants to refer the researchers to other potential participants.

Participants were asked to choose the interview medium that best suited them. Eight participants chose Zoom, three chose telephone calls because they did not have either a stable internet connection or a proper information communication technology device, and five preferred WhatsApp audio calls. All interviews ranged from 30 minutes to an hour, and they were conducted in English. An experienced transcriber who signed a confidentiality agreement with the researchers transcribed the interviews. Data were also collected through document analysis of media, CSO or government reports, and academic literature. These various documents were located through a Google search using keywords such as foreigners in South Africa and the COVID-19 pandemic; foreigners in South Africa; and access to the vaccine. Some of the documents used in the study came from participants, especially leaders of CSOs who shared documents that their organizations had developed during the pandemic.

The analysis and collection of data were not separate processes, because interview and document analysis involved endless critical work that pointed to new questions and gaps that were explored through any of the two data collection methods. This was done in a way that, as interviews unfolded, the researchers identified similarities and patterns in participants' storylines and coded them into different themes. Some of these themes presented gaps rather than answers, and the researchers tried to fill these gaps through document analysis and further interviews.

Ethical clearance to conduct the study was granted by the University of Johannesburg, Faculty of Humanities Research Ethics Committee. All participants were informed about the details of the study before they agreed to schedule an interview. The anonymity of participants was guaranteed by using pseudonyms. Before every interview, the researchers solicited participants' consent verbally, and since all interviews were done on Zoom, WhatsApp, or a normal call, voluntary withdrawal could be easily accomplished by simply disconnecting (Lobe, 2017).

PRESENTATION, ANALYSIS, AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Medical xenophobia during COVID-19 in South Africa

The findings of this paper show that medical exclusion was one of the challenges faced by migrants before the pandemic, and COVID-19 worsened this. Tawodzera (2011: 1) states that "medical xenophobia refers to negative attitudes and practices of

health sector professionals and employees toward migrants and refugees on the job." Medical xenophobia often manifests through the denial of healthcare to migrants. Ndlela (pseudonym), an attorney with SECTION 27 — a South African public interest law center — testified that their organization was overwhelmed with requests from non-nationals who were denied access to healthcare services (Mehlwana, 2021). In a webinar hosted by Maverick Citizen on 17 July 2020, the national chairperson of the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC) — a South African HIV/AIDS activist organization — noted "medical xenophobia" as one of the issues faced by foreigners during the pandemic. She unpacked medical xenophobia as a situation where African foreigners are discriminated against and not assisted at hospitals because they are not South Africans. She added that nurses often vow that, "I would give oxygen to a South African, but not to a non-South African" (Huisman, 2020). Medical xenophobia is not a phenomenon that started during the COVID-19 lockdown, as there is a rich body of literature on it (see, for example, Tawodzera, 2011; Crush and Tawodzera, 2014; Makandwa and Vearey, 2017; Munyaneza and Mhlongo, 2019; Vanyoro, 2019; Mvundura, 2024). This shows that the pandemic exacerbated the phenomenon of medical xenophobia, which resulted in medical practitioners regarding the lives of migrants as disposable and unfit to be cared for, which subjected migrants to slow violence. In this regard, medical xenophobia is an exercise of sovereign power, as nursing personnel exercise the power to choose who will live and who will die; and migrants are often the living dead.

The findings of this paper show that while the South African government's official discourse stated that everyone had access to healthcare, there were administrative barriers that hindered migrants' access. This was evident in the initial COVID-19 testing form, which needed an ID number. In this regard, Mel, a female participant and member of the Lawyers for Human Rights, said they had to lobby against it because it was exclusionary. Similarly, Troy, a community organizer from the Western Cape, narrated that people without South African IDs were denied healthcare services because healthcare workers treated people with IDs better than those without. Troy also narrated an incident where a Cameroonian man had COVID-19 symptoms and called an ambulance, but because of his accent, healthcare workers could tell that he was not a local South African, and the ambulance did not come to his aid. This all points to many forms through which medical xenophobia manifested itself to deny healthcare services to non-nationals through the need for IDs and selective rendering of healthcare services during the pandemic.

However, in some cases, non-nationals did not face challenges in accessing healthcare facilities. For instance, Tariro, a female community organizer on the rural farms of the Western Cape, pointed out that non-nationals were getting help at their local clinic without any problems. This is different from the experiences of medical xenophobia captured above, and this might be because health institutions in rural areas are less bureaucratic compared to those in the city. Tariro also spoke about the use of traditional medicines among non-nationals in her community. She attributed

the use of traditional medicines to cultural beliefs and their strength, compared to the medication that one gets in clinics. She also added that some people resorted to traditional medicines because of the fear of going to a hospital, since many people who went to hospitals contracted COVID-19. Moreover, since medical xenophobia has always been in existence, it might have been their previous experiences of medical xenophobia that prompted the use of traditional medicine among foreign nationals.

Many foreign nationals, both documented and undocumented, who participated in this study accessed healthcare through private healthcare facilities, even though they did not have medical aid. Thus, they paid for their consultations each time they visited a healthcare facility. Their preference for private medical facilities was informed by fear of bad treatment (medical xenophobia) from public hospitals. Eddy, a married man from Malawi who had lost his medical aid after being retrenched during the pandemic, explained that he resorted to private healthcare facilities because public hospitals offer poor service, particularly toward non-nationals. The extract below best captures the poor treatment of non-nationals in public hospitals:

> I do not know if you are aware of it, but we are told that you will not get the best treatment if you are a foreigner and go to government hospitals because you will be the last one to be treated. So, I am not a fan of government hospitals. I would instead take my last money and go to a private doctor (Eddy, interview 2021).

This quote shows that the previous experiences of medical xenophobia had an impact on migrants' decisions to use or avoid public hospitals. This shows that necropolitics has always been in place before the pandemic, which, arguably, means some South African health practitioners have always imposed both social and civil death (Mbembe, 2003) on foreign nationals by denying them access to healthcare. The quotation below adds to the issue of medical xenophobia and the preference for private hospitals captured above:

> There is a former chairperson of the Cameroonian community in the Western Cape who was sick and … went to a public hospital. Though he got an ID, the treatment he received was bad, and he couldn't cope, but luckily, he got some money, and he had to go to a private hospital. He told us we should be very careful. We lost a lot of our people who died because of the situation. So, accessing public health, if you were not a local or did not have the money to go to a private hospital, then you just died. It was scary when somebody said they didn't want to go to the hospital because the treatment was cruel. That is why when I break it down, I would say that is institutional xenophobia, where you call it Afrophobia (Troy, interview 2020).

Terry is among those who accessed healthcare using private healthcare facilities through his medical aid. Terry explained that he once tested positive for COVID-19 in 2020, and he had to use his student medical aid to be tested at the Lancet laboratories. Mary, a leader of an organization called "Zimbabweans in South Africa," reported that she had never seen anyone who had tested positive for COVID-19 in her community. She attributed this to the fact that people in her community were supposed to get tested at a cost, but they did not have the money to do this in the townships, since most people had lost their jobs. For her, this lack of money resulted in Black Africans staying in their homes and not going to hospitals. She added that the ill-treatment of migrants in public hospitals and clinics demotivated them from seeking any form of treatment. The extract below captures her views on bad access to medical facilities:

> For example, when you are a pregnant woman and you get to the hospital while you are in labor, you are expected to pump around R5,000. They don't even consider that there is a child's life that is at stake, and now you are telling me I must pump out that R5,000 before my child is delivered by the doctors. What about hospital bedding? I must pay for all those. Now I'm also at risk of getting COVID, which they're also going to discriminate against me when it comes to the vaccines and all this stuff (Mary, interview 2021).

The findings in this section show that medical xenophobia is not a new phenomenon in South Africa, because it has existed for years (see Munyaneza and Mhlongo, 2019; Vanyoro, 2019; Mvundura, 2024). Moreover, these findings resonate with experiences in Libya (Groupe URD, 2020), South Korea, and Malaysia (Santillana, 2021), where migrants were denied access to healthcare. However, these findings do not align with the experiences of migrants in countries like Jordan (Santillana, 2021), Saudi Arabia (AlFattani et al., 2021), Portugal, and England (Meer and Villegas, 2020), where migrants were given full access to public services during the COVID-19 crisis.

Vaccine rollout and non-nationals

The findings of this paper show that foreign nationals, especially undocumented ones, struggled to access COVID-19 vaccines in South Africa. The South African government began its vaccine rollout program on 17 February 2021 (Walker et al., 2021b). In South Africa, all eligible adults were expected to register on the national Electronic Vaccination Data System (EVDS) that created a national register for COVID-19 vaccinations to assist with the timing, procurement, and rollout of vaccines (Walker et al., 2021b). At the onset of the vaccine rollout, which was when data for this study were collected, the EVDS required either an ID number, passport number, or permit number. Thus, as Vearey et al. (2021) argue, the EVDS had become a barrier for undocumented people living in South Africa to be vaccinated. This resonates with Parker's (2021) observation that in countries where everyone was included in

government programs, administrative barriers blocked migrants from fully enjoying the benefits. This was so because countries that officially included migrants failed to make COVID-19 support accessible, whether through cost, transportation, or language barriers (Balakrishnan, 2021). In the case of South Africa, it failed to devise a means to timeously register undocumented foreigners on the EVDS.

Furthermore, the findings of this paper show that there were contradictory messages from the South African government on the issue of vaccinating undocumented foreigners. The former health minister, Dr Zweli Mkhize, on 30 January 2021 stated that the government had no vaccine plan for undocumented non-nationals. However, on 1 February 2021, President Cyril Ramaphosa announced the inclusion of non-nationals in the vaccine rollout. In addition, on 23 July 2021, the then-acting Health Minister Kubayi stated:

> We have to get guidance in terms of the unregistered [persons] because we are dealing with the government systems and the provision of services. We follow the laws of the country. So, you have to be a documented person in the country. If you are undocumented, it means you are illegal in the country. So, it's a different case. We have a responsibility to those who are known to the state, by the state (cited in Vearey et al., 2021).

Vearey et al. (2021) criticized the minister, asserting that her public statement encouraged negative feelings toward foreigners and went against international public health standards. They also pointed out that it contradicted advice from the African Union Commission (AUC), the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the UNHCR, and the International Labour Organization (ILO), which emphasized the need to include everyone in effective pandemic responses.

On 7 August 2021, the *Saturday Star* cited a Cabinet spokesperson saying that the issue of vaccination for undocumented foreigners had not been discussed before Cabinet, and she was not sure when it would be addressed. In addition, the Department of Health said it was waiting for guidance from the Cabinet on the issue of undocumented migrants (Cloete, 2021). As a result of the delays by the government in devising and implementing a way to register foreign nationals on the EVDS, undocumented people were only able to be vaccinated from October 2021 (*News24*, 2021).

However, the Western Cape Department of Health circular on 29 July 2021 spelled out the procedure for vaccinating undocumented people (Heywood, 2021). Importantly, undocumented persons could register for vaccination using a paper registration form. Additionally, they could respond to the section requiring an ID or passport number with "Undocumented," and provide the rest of the required information in the remaining sections of the form. In Gauteng, undocumented migrants were vaccinated in late 2021 following the partnership between the Gauteng Department of Health, the University of Pretoria, the Johannesburg District Office,

the Anova Health Institute, Médecins Sans Frontières, and the Wits Reproductive Health and HIV Institute (Wits RHI) (Africa News, 2021).

The failure to include foreign nationals in the vaccine rollout plan resonates with experiences from several Latin American countries like Brazil, Mexico, Colombia, and Peru (Bojorquez-Chapela et al., 2024). This has resulted in Bojorquez-Chapela et al. (2024) stating that the COVID-19 pandemic was a test for the policies of inclusion and healthcare for foreigners in most countries. This validates one of Mbembe's (2003) stated ways through which necropolitics is localized within the state through differential killing modes. This act broadly involves mass killing, drone strikes, denial of asylum seekers' entry, invalidation of and lack of effort behind supporting those living on the margins. In this instance, the South African government invested inadequate effort to include foreign nationals in its vaccine drive.

The IOM (2022) notes that some countries avoided publicizing their intentions to include foreign nationals in their vaccination campaigns for various reasons, such as preventing xenophobic reactions. In South Africa, a country that has had several episodes of xenophobic reactions, necropolitics, which rationalizes death and violence as a way for the sovereign state to sustain its survival (Mbembe, 2003), may have been used to avoid xenophobia. The exclusion of migrants from accessing healthcare in South Africa is justified through this framework as rational and necessary for managing populations and ensuring the survival of the state (Masoumi, 2016: 28). This paper's findings on the failure to include migrants in the South African vaccine plan show that this was not unique to South Africa, but that it was a trend in most SADC countries. In this regard, the IOM's (2021) analysis of 15 SADC countries revealed that only three included refugees and asylum seekers in their vaccination strategies, two explicitly excluded them, and the policies of nine countries were ambiguous. Furthermore, six nations incorporated migrants in regular situations into their plans, four excluded them, and five had unclear data. For irregular migrants, four countries excluded them, while data for eight countries remained unclear.

Information, language, and non-nationals during the pandemic

One of the challenges that non-nationals encountered when seeking healthcare services in South Africa was the lack of proper information. Mehlwana (2021) notes that during the first days of the prevalence of COVID-19 in South Africa, there was no form of communication with non-nationals on whether they would be permitted to get tested in government testing centers or not. Such a lack of accurate information may have deterred migrants from accessing healthcare services, assuming that testing centers were meant for locals only. One participant, Mel, stated that CSOs managed to promote access to information on COVID-19 for non-nationals through the Right to Know campaign. CSOs developed information sheets, which were translated into different languages with the help of the Africa Diaspora Forum. Reflecting on this development, Mel remarked that CSOs had done an excellent job that the government

had failed to do. Titoh, a leader of the Makause Community Development Forum, added the following to how his community responded to the pandemic:

> The rise of COVID-19 put us as an organization in a very awkward position, since there was no response or assistance from the government's side or any institution that had to assist; so, we were on our own. So, we established the Makause COVID-19 Campaign on 5 March 2020, before the lockdown was declared, and that is when we were trying to come up with strategies on how we help one another in the fight against this pandemic and what we were facing. We started by creating our leaflet to raise awareness about the pandemic, and then realized that there is more than an awareness-raising campaign needed in the community (Titoh, interview 2021).

Titoh further explained that their leaflet and the awareness campaign were not only about COVID-19 but also about the need for assistance, which was not forthcoming from the state. Zamani, a foreign national from Mozambique, explained that his source of information during the pandemic was mostly the internet. He noted that, besides the videos that circulated of people alleging that vaccines were meant to kill people, he relied on what he was told at work — to always sanitize, wear a mask, and stay at home. He added that some of the information circulating on social media was factual and some was based on opinions, and that it was up to him to choose what to listen to and to do introspection and take whatever was right for him. The information that was circulating was scary, and the quotation below captures how scared Zamani was:

> At one point, I was scared, not knowing which was which, what is it to take, or what is it not to take. I mean, there was a time when I was supposed to go to work, and they said we must stay away from taxis, you know. So, when I was in a taxi and I had someone cough and I thought, "Oh God, here we die." It's based on the mentality and how you take things. But my source of information is primarily from work, because they used to communicate through emails and messages (Zamani, interview 2021).

This finding on the government's failure to ensure access to information corresponds with experiences in various parts of the world. In addition, the issue of CSOs bridging the gap also resonates with the efforts of CSOs in other countries where governments were reluctant to provide information in languages spoken by foreigners. This prompted CSOs like Volunteering Matters in the UK to translate the national safety guidelines into 20 languages for non-English-speaking foreigners (Solidar, 2020).

CONCLUSION

This paper focused on the experiences of foreign nationals in South Africa during the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings indicate that even though the government ultimately devised several measures to ameliorate the effects of COVID-19 on various populations in South Africa, foreign nationals faced challenges in accessing these measures. While one could reason that this was due to the administrative challenges that they faced in registering, the more convincing evidence points to a break in the very design of relief efforts, which were designed without some of the most vulnerable members of society in mind. The paper noted that the tardiness in the state's efforts to include migrants in its COVID-19 health programs can be best understood through Mbembe's (2003) concept of necropolitics, which helps to understand how the South African government rationalized death and violence to sustain its survival. The paper demonstrated that the South African government exerted its power through social death, which involved a systematic exclusion of foreign migrants from healthcare. The paper also found that many of the challenges experienced during the pandemic were not new but had been seriously worsened by the pandemic. For instance, medical xenophobia is an issue that has existed for decades, but the pandemic exacerbated it to the extent that some foreign nationals had to avoid public healthcare facilities during the pandemic, as they feared for their lives and livelihoods. CSOs were found to have played a vital role during the pandemic with little help from the government. This necessitated the need for the government to support and capacitate these organizations financially and to work closely with them in addressing the needs of all who live in South Africa. These lessons could guide smarter, fairer health responses the next time a crisis hits, ensuring that no one gets left behind. Beyond the anticipation of the next pandemic, these insights could guide how the government considers a fairer approach to medical care that helps reverse medical xenophobia before, during, and after a pandemic. This is key, given the rise of anti-immigrant groups-cum-political parties such as Operation Dudula, which block migrants from accessing public health facilities. To turn this tide, the South African government needs political will to address the health needs of both South Africans and non-South Africans resident in the country and to counter the xenophobic tendencies evident in both communities and the government.

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The Middling Citizenship Trap: Belonging Denied Through Neoliberal Exclusionary Inclusion in South Africa

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Abstract

This ethnographic study examines 26 first-generation professional middle-class naturalized South African citizens, using purposive sampling from 2019 to 2022. These citizens experience racial violence and sociocultural exclusion despite legal inclusion. The research investigates "middling citizenship," which has become a liminal space where naturalized professionals navigate between legal legitimacy and cultural foreignization in post-apartheid neoliberal governance. Despite state naturalization granting legal belonging, participants struggle with integration, as racialized boundaries sustain exclusion, while economic capital permits only partial inclusion. The findings show how naturalized citizens use their economic power to resist marginalization. They do this by performing belonging through economic visibility while remaining culturally invisible. The study unmasks the neoliberal paradox of middling citizenship, exposing post-apartheid contradictions. Rainbow Nation rhetoric promises colorblind integration, but in practice, it perpetuates colonial racial hierarchies. The results show that merit-based citizenship creates conditional belonging, privileging economic performance over cultural acceptance. Postcolonial frameworks are needed to acknowledge authentic belonging beyond economic legitimacy in transitional democracies.

Keywords: Middling citizenship, neoliberalism, invisibility, naturalization, middle class, integration

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INTRODUCTION

South Africa's strategic quest for "exceptional talent" invites a new cohort of global citizens into a neoliberal paradox of its own making. This pursuit of economic inclusion entrenches their permanent social otherness, systematically undermining the nation-building goals it claims to serve (Klotz, 2024). The recruitment of a highly skilled premium stock of immigrant professionals has become a cornerstone of national policy in aging societies and competitive economies worldwide (Nowicka, 2024: 1758–1759). Joppke (2024) refers to this logic as "neoliberal nationalism," whereby states grant citizenship to "market-ready" professionals who can contribute to the economy. This privilege signifies complete membership and confers a set of rights and responsibilities (Birkvad, 2019: 798; Bertocchi et al., 2025: 45–46). The process reaches its zenith with naturalization, which represents the ultimate state control over access to membership (Badenhoop, 2021: 565). This paradox challenges the very goals these policies intend to achieve, as they undermine the cohesiveness of national identity and community (Winter, 2024). This paper exposes how neoliberal South Africa creates "middling" citizens trapped between economic inclusion and cultural exclusion. It then reveals how merit-based integration perpetuates colonial hierarchies beneath Rainbow Nation rhetoric. Finally, it maps how naturalized professionals creatively navigate this paradox, demanding recognition that economic legitimacy without cultural belonging fundamentally undermines post-apartheid citizenship.

LIMINAL BELONGING: BETWEEN LEGAL RECOGNITION AND CULTURAL OTHERING

Middling migration is not new and can be pegged to transnational migration echoing parallel typologies of global middle-class migrants (Jaskulowski and Pawlak, 2022: 2057), including nouveau bourgeois, elites (Ong, 2022; Mogiani, 2024; Winter, 2024), subaltern othered citizens/subjects (Du Bois and Marable, 2015), and "New Argonauts" (Saxenian, 2006), defined by governmentality and self-formation technologies (Ong, 2022; Laruffa, 2023; Fourie, 2024). I interrogate the (in)visibility of naturalized citizens in South Africa as a typology of a new middle-class citizen identity beyond legal and normative ethnic boundaries, within resurging neoliberal state processes of positive and negative integration (Bloemraad et al., 2023; Abu-Laban, 2024; Joppke, 2024; Winter, 2024).

Ong (2022) theorizes a neoliberal mutation of citizenship whereby states commodify membership through investment visas, such as "entrepreneur, immigrant investor, and start-up visas," rendering citizenship a "fungible" good. Ong argues that this system produces interchangeable "pied-à-terre subjects"; in crisis, citizenship becomes "biological" and "thinned out," reduced to a struggle for the "right to mere survival" (2022: 2–3). This reveals a fundamental shift where market logic undermines liberal democracy, creating a polarizing divide between "elite globalists"

and "besieged post-citizens" (2022: 6–7). However, for the naturalized professional in South Africa, the meritocratic bargain is a myth, resulting in a status that is both changeable and unfinished. Middling citizenship in neoliberal South Africa represents a layer of negotiated identities at the margins of society. It connects the range of civic belonging, as well as the neoliberal inclusions and cultural exclusions, experienced by naturalized professionals. This study argues that concepts of civic belonging require equitable middling and civic agency for all people who identify as citizens, regardless of status (Bates, 2024; Winter, 2024). As Favell (2022: 4,11) argues, the "national order of things" and the "liberal nationalist" compromise create a system of "conditional belonging" (De Waal, 2020), whereby even those who are formally included can remain socially and politically distant. This creates a class of "good immigrants" and "permitted outsiders" (Hackl, 2022) who are in a perpetually conditional status.

Middling citizenship is a strategy of "negotiated integration" employed by middle-class, naturalized professionals (Ong, 1999; Beaman, 2017, 2023). This concept captures the liminal posture of South African professionals who, despite racial or xenophobic marginalization (Monson, 2015; Morifi and Mahlatsi, 2021), leverage economic capital and neoliberal self-fashioning to negotiate inclusion. Although South Africa's naturalization strategy portrays professional migrants as stable members of society (Mokofe, 2023; Fourie, 2024), this class-based integration creates socio-economic differentiation at the expense of meaningful social inclusion (Birkvad, 2019; Donnaloja and McAvay, 2022). Despite institutional efforts to distinguish affluent naturalized citizens, they are still subject to processes of "othering" that mark them as outsiders to the national community (Jansen van Rensburg, 2024; Klotz, 2024; Sereke and Drzewiecka, 2024). This reflects broader racialized class inequalities and insufficient postcolonial restitution. Neoliberalism operates as a bridging habitus (Nowicka, 2015, 2024), facilitating economic establishment while rendering naturalized citizens invisible through limited inclusion mechanisms (Levitt and Schiller, 2004). Their "negotiated identities" (Owen et al., 2024) and strategic adaptations (Mokofe, 2023; Netshivhambe, 2025) therefore occur within structural constraints that enable economic mobility while restricting full civic belonging.

Meritocratic belonging and South Africa's neoliberal contradictions

South Africa's nation-building project is taking place in the "confounding socio-political climate of a state that is still in transition" (Owen et al., 2024: 2156). The constitutional commitment to dismantling the divided state has collided with neoliberal governance, which blends a resurgent politics of exclusion (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2021) and redefines belonging based on economic performance and cultural otherness. The state's approach to immigration has become a key source of contradiction, torn between a neoliberal logic that values migrants as human capital and a populist impulse that frames them as a threat (Nshimbi, 2022). This fuels a discourse that excludes immigrants from "national time" (Misago and Landau, 2023:

1615), thereby reinforcing the symbolic boundaries of otherness. This domestic reality of "middle-class nation-building" (Winter, 2024) means that inclusion is conditional rather than an inherent right (De Waal, 2020; Ndlovu and Ferim, 2025). I term this the "middling trap," whereby immigrant-origin citizens recruited for economic success find their sense of belonging is constantly under scrutiny (Badenhoop, 2021; Nyamnjoh, 2021).

This reflects a global shift toward "earned citizenship" (Joppke, 2022: 138), a "prize for performance," which is sustained by neoliberal nationalism (Joppke, 2024). Political actors exploit this ideology through a populist repertoire that pits a "virtuous and homogenous people" against "others" (Peker and Winter, 2024: 1700). The result is a form of "social closure" (Winter, 2024: 1645) that establishes durable hierarchies of "categorical inequality" (Bloemraad et al., 2024: 236). For the naturalized professional, this is the core mechanism of the "middling trap": they are recruited for their economic performance, yet their "national capital" is constantly devalued (Winter, 2024: 1645). Karim (2025: 2) shows that naturalization transforms citizenship into a "tiered system" where individuals are continuously evaluated and required to demonstrate their "suitability," in contrast to those who are citizens by birth. Yet, within this trap, new forms of agency emerge. They develop "techniques" to earn respect (Sereke and Drzewiecka, 2024) and build convivial relationships that "challenge the political categorization of African others" (Owen et al., 2024: 2156). Through these daily acts, they challenge the narrow chronotope of nationalism (Misago and Landau, 2023). Their success redefines conditional belonging within the ambiguous counter-movements of the (post)neoliberal order (Laruffa, 2023), rendering them highly visible targets for the very populist discourse they transcend economically (Machinya, 2022). Their achievement necessitates an ongoing display of behavior that is "worthy of imitation" (Nyamnjoh, 2021: 251), but this can never fully resolve their probationary status.

Third-spaces othering and reworlding

Middle-class neoliberals inhabit a hybrid space which, as Bhabha (1994) describes, is a "third space" of conflict, resistance, and compromise. This third space is an area where identity is actively negotiated (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2023) by naturalized professionals who interpret cultural meanings in different ways to avoid being dominated. This negotiation occurs within a "postcolonial realism," as framed by Sorensen (2021), confronting the political realities of power. In South Africa, this is evident in the ongoing struggles over language, identity, and belonging (Vandeyar and Catalano, 2020). Third-space liminality traps postcolonial, Third World, middle-class, marginalized cultural identities within (South Africa's) neocolonial power cycles. This reveals how localized cultures differentiate themselves while exercising collective classed agency against rented belonging. Ndlovu-Gatsheni's (2023) reworlding framework positions this resistance as a revolt against Euro-American power structures where systemic disparities perpetuate hierarchical oppression

through "insufficient postcolonial restitution" (Nyamnjoh, 2021) and "racialized class inequalities" (Nshimbi, 2022; Misago and Landau, 2023). For middle-class, naturalized citizens, this liminal space generates ambiguous membership and class agency that subvert nationalist exclusion (Owen et al., 2024). This manifests as strategic invisibility through limited inclusion, achieving economic integration through social imperceptibility (De Waal, 2020; Mogiani, 2024; Nowicka, 2024).

Neoliberal paradox, governmentality and the "middling trap"

Applying Foucault's (2008) framework of neoliberal governmentality to South Africa, Fourie (2024) reveals how states produce self-managing "worker-citizens" (Joppke, 2024). The legal legitimacy of these citizens, derived from their economic performance (2024), creates a paradox where inclusion requires perpetual self-reinvention as "entrepreneurs of the self" amid racialized exclusion. This meritocratic "contract" (2024), which demands ethnically anonymous subjects, establishes a middle class that is trapped in "categorical inequalities" (Bloemraad et al., 2024). This fractures the Aristotelian ideal of a stabilizing middle class (Smith, 2012; Turner, 2020; Bates, 2024), essential to South Africa's middle-class nation-building project (Winter, 2024) and collides with systemic "politics of exclusion" (Ndlovu and Ferim, 2025). This traps naturalized professionals in conditional belonging. Post-apartheid, non-racialism, a "colorblind" neoliberalist approach masked the racialized capitalism of the Growth, Employment, and Redistribution (GEAR) macroeconomic strategy, embedding white supremacy in economic structures (Ruiters, 2020; Swilling, 2020). Although neoliberalism promotes borderless markets, it relies on nationalist immigration policies to produce "middling" citizens. For example, policies like GEAR exacerbated precarity by depoliticizing race and attributing failure to the individual (Narsiah, 2002; Ruiters, 2020; Fourie, 2024). This "policy paradox" subverts transformative goals, creating tension between the attraction of skills and nativist discourse (Nshimbi, 2022; Mokofe, 2023). Consequently, the state formally promises inclusion while materially delivering exclusion (Ong, 2022; Laruffa, 2023). Integration thus becomes a "managerial mirage" (Favell, 2022), operationalized through "spatiotemporal exclusion" (Misago and Landau, 2023). Mokofe's (2023) finding of a missing labor market premium is evidence of the "zone of exclusion" (Morifi and Mahlatsi, 2021), where formal citizenship becomes meaningless.

This systemic design is engineered to thwart substantive belonging. Institutional failures make these citizens highly visible to crime yet invisible to justice, while policies create hierarchies that undermine constitutional equality (Netshivhambe, 2025). Thus, the "middling trap" emerges from this neoliberal contradiction: although these citizens are hailed for their economic potential, they become visible targets for the state's own policy failures and are forever suspended in probationary belonging (Badenhoop, 2021; Nyamnjoh, 2021).

Theorizing neoliberal paradox, governmentality, and middle-class identities

Shifting beyond frameworks of transnational elites (Ong, 1999; Beaman, 2023) and cultural rights (Rosaldo, 2008), this study advances middling citizenship as a "negotiated integration" strategy. Here, middle-class, naturalized South African professionals use economic capital to navigate conditional belonging amid sociocultural marginalization. By definition, middling citizenship is a strategy of negotiated integration adopted by middle-class naturalized citizens who, despite being marginalized on sociocultural grounds, use economic capital and neoliberal self-fashioning to navigate a liminal space of conditional belonging. This condition is produced by a specific political context. The state's nation-building project through immigration (Winter, 2024: 1627) aims to create a class-based national identity and is underpinned by "neoliberal nationalism" (Joppke, 2024: 1657). This ideology fuses market logic with national identity, creating a system of categorical inequality (Bloemraad et al., 2024). The state's own racialized categories produce a resilient hierarchy here, resulting in immigrant exclusions from democratic rights (Ndlovu and Ferim, 2025), which provide meritocratic economic advantages while enforcing cultural exclusion. The result is the middling trap, a paradoxical state of unfinished incorporation where economic inclusion is guaranteed, but full civic belonging is withheld. I examine middle-class, naturalized South African citizens who are caught in this "middling trap" between economic inclusion and cultural exclusion to analyze the interaction between class and race in the neoliberal regime, which ultimately results in limited inclusion. These citizens face categorical inequality (Bloemraad et al., 2024) due to the effects of neoliberal governance, resulting in conditional belonging and civic invisibility (De Waal, 2020; Mogiani, 2024; Nowicka, 2024). This empirically supports the idea that middling citizenship is linked to meritocratic economic benefits (Winter, 2024), but these overlook the wider consequences of marginalizing activities (Ruiters, 2020; Swilling, 2020; Fourie, 2022). These issues are exacerbated in the current ambiguous "(post)neoliberal" era (Laruffa, 2023: 586). This trap manifests as civic invisibility and conditional belonging, dynamics that are exacerbated within the current neoliberal climate. Consequently, middling citizenship is not a failure of the system but rather a deliberate design feature, revealing the interaction between class and race within a neoliberal regime that prioritizes market utility over universal inclusion.

METHODOLOGY

This ethnographic study employed a critical citizenship framework to investigate "middling citizenship," which is defined as the liminal space between legal inclusion and sociocultural exclusion, among 26 highly skilled naturalized immigrants in neoliberal South Africa. Drawing on the work of Winter (2024), Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2023), and Harvey (2005), this approach facilitates investigation into the dual nature of citizenship as both inclusive and exclusive. The study examines how middling

citizenship functions as a neoliberal governance mechanism producing conditional belonging and how individuals resist or adapt to these constraints through self-governance and identity work.

Prior to fieldwork, I conducted the research in strict accordance with formal approval granted by the Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (protocol number HSSREC/00001208/2020). A central and reflexive component was the negotiation of my own positionality. As a South African-born native citizen, I was engaged in a dynamic process where I could be, and was perceived to be, both an insider and an outsider. This liminal status mirrored the "middling" subjectivities under investigation. My proximity to and distance from the participants' experiences required continuous critical reflection to guide my interactions and methodological decisions, ensuring sensitivity to participant well-being. Following xenophobic surges, naturalization was negotiated privately, with professionals reluctant to reveal their status. Recruitment involved multiple phases: initial connections were made through professional networks using snowball sampling via intermediaries, and then referrals were contacted via digital channels for consent. During the 2020 COVID-19 restriction lifting, I spent over three months recruiting by visiting racially specific residential and business establishments owned by ethnic minority communities, targeting naturalized individuals of Southeast European, Palestinian, African, Chinese, and South-Asian descent. The 26 participants, who ranged in age from 25 to 70, were a purposive sample of dual citizens from African, Asian, European, and Middle Eastern countries. Two of the participants were born in South Africa to naturalized parents. The sample size was determined by theoretical saturation; however, the final group was predominantly male (19 out of 26) and middle-aged (average age 50), reflecting gendered migration patterns.

To safeguard autonomy and welfare, informed consent was obtained through a two-step process: initial verbal consent was followed by formal, recorded consent at each interview. Stringent protocols ensured confidentiality and anonymity through the use of pseudonyms, secure data storage, and the right to withdraw. Between 2020 and 2021, semi-structured interviews lasting 50–60 minutes were conducted using digital platforms (Pink et al., 2015; Góralska, 2020), with some requiring multiple meetings. The focus of the study on the post-naturalization phase is a constraint that potentially impacts generalizability; richer data would have been provided by a longitudinal design. This is especially pertinent when considering the multifarious and gendered experiences of middling citizenship, which necessitate further exploration.

FINDINGS

The Bourdieusian habitus of professionals performing middling belonging

Naturalized middle-class citizens with diverse networks live in private, gated neighborhoods and have access to postgraduate or private education. This demonstrates the relationship between identity, economic capital, and cultural

integration (see Table 1). Their Bourdieuan middle-class disposition (Nowicka, 2024) enables them to be visible within their class while also ensuring the exclusive protection of an invisible presence, ultimately facilitating their integration into a neutral cultural segment. Conversely, some South African communities that oppose full multiculturalism revitalize ethnic customs in restored postcolonial identities (Nyamnjoh, 2021; Klotz, 2024; Gordon, 2025). From this perspective, naturalized citizens appear culturally distinct and threatening to modernity, where race lacks economic significance (Machinya, 2022; Mokofe, 2023). Nevertheless, South Africa's immigration policies legitimize intercultural mobility and family reunification, establishing permanent homes that promote domestic and international mobility (Badenhoop, 2021).

Table 1: The pillars of middling citizenship

Mechanism	Study extracted data source
Legal Status (Naturalization, Refugee status)	• Policy creates a pathway to multifaceted inclusion (work, healthcare, education, residential choice). • Naturalization is seen as the final stage of a legal incorporation journey. • Refugee status provides protection and a route from long-term to permanent stay. • The birthright of children in South Africa (e.g., Anastasiya) acts as a "hook" to remain and claim lineage.
Economic (Employment, Capital)	• Access to high-paying jobs and capital defines middle-class status. • Some participants are business owners with transnational business ties. • Ownership of assets enables affluent, middle-class lifestyles. • Ease in navigating financial institutions (e.g., Benya's unlimited bank access).
Sociocultural (Identity, Education)	• Identity: Participants hold a disruptive, deconstructed identity that privileges multicultural, merit-based membership over race-based ethnocentric limits, which they reject. • Cultural capital: They are de facto multilingual and express openness to learning new languages and cultures. • Education: A priority is securing quality education, with children enrolled in private schools. • They reject/resist race-based ethnocentric limits.
Agency/Choice	• The combination of infrastructure and economic health benefits encourages a conscious choice to stay in South Africa as a priority.

Source: Author's own compilation

Bloemraad and Sheares (2018: 825) argue that democratic nationality becomes irrelevant due to exclusion based on class, gender, or ethno-racial inequalities, and demonstrate in their synthesis that citizenship is actively claimed by both citizens and non-citizens through cultural, flexible, everyday, performative, and semi-citizenship (see Table 2). Since the migration boom of the 1970s, all participants and their South Africa-born children have lived in the country as students, employees, and entrepreneurs (Manby, 2021; Klotz, 2024). Their origins vary: some are descended from apartheid-era migrants; some were born in South Africa; and some, like Thalia, arrived with families seeking economic opportunity, only to stay after civil war necessitated refugee status. Most transitioned from residency with employment to formal naturalization.

Table 2: Participant strategies of belonging

Theme	Evidence extracted data source
Legal Pathways	• Historical immigration (1970s entrepreneurs, 1980s teacher recruitment) • Corporate skills migration • Family settlement to escape conflict
Economic Integration	• "Banks don't care …" (Benya) — financial access • Professional employment/business ownership (all) • "I'm just South African" (common claim)
Identity Negotiation	• "True Jo'burger … this is my home" (Alain) • "I view myself as an African" (Aristaeus) • Rejection of racial categories: "No Black, no white, no Colored" (Alain)
Cultural Positioning	• Ethnic enclaves (Greek community, Thalia) • Sports affiliation (Springboks — children / All Blacks — parent) • Multinational environment … integrated cultures (Sophia) • Critique of "ancestral worship" (Aristaeus)
Intergenerational Dynamics	• Children refusing naturalization despite residence (Benya) • "Kids are so obviously African" (Anastasiya) • Boundary maintenance: "Illegal immigrants are a huge problem" (Solaris)

Source: Author's own compilation

Ghanaian-born Charles moved to South Africa in the peak apartheid townships to teach. When apartheid inequalities began to crumble in the early 1990s, Solaris, Aristaeus, and Alain assumed business leadership positions and pushed for the inclusion of Black professional employment and advancement. While some younger generations are still enrolled in school, others started entering the professional public/

private marketplace in the early 2000s as working professionals after completing their tertiary education. Belonging is asserted through an Arendtian "right to rights" (Joppke, 2024) by these naturalized citizens, with state protection and access being claimed while their foreign heritage is sustained or eroded (children's invisibility tactic to preserve South Africanness instigated by parents). Despite experiencing exclusion, they remain strategically engaged in integration structures to secure their economic future. "I would say it has been excellent overall as a naturalized South African" (Charles) and that of their children, "it only seems sensible that we stay and work together … because the kids are so obviously South African" (Anastasiya). These perspectives illustrate the primary incentives of naturalizing strategies based on long-term residence, prosperity, family preservation, and birthright as an unrestricted identity/home resistance (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2023).

Economic legibility

> When I used a bank to purchase my first home, I didn't even have an ID [passport holder]. Banks don't care, as long as you have the necessary paperwork and can demonstrate that you are earning. On other opportunities, all that matters is whether you have the necessary funds (Benya).

Naturalized citizens retain dual citizenship, revealing the global connections between local communities and nation-states (Deckard and Heslin, 2016: 1145; Favell, 2022). However, despite affluence, the hierarchical structure of citizenship creates categorical inequalities and selective political inclusion for citizens of immigrant origin (Hackl, 2022; Bloemraad et al., 2024). South Africa's pluralistic character and open-door policies foster a multicultural society that attracts global talent (Nyamnjoh, 2021; Nshimbi, 2022; Nowicka, 2024). Benya exemplifies this trajectory, having left her homeland for education and professional advancement (Ong, 1996: 754; Bloemraad and Ueda, 2006: 2). Here, middling citizenship is manifested through her visible financial status, which paradoxically enables economic permanence (Nowicka, 2015), while cultural prejudice prevents her from engaging fully in civic life (Joppke, 2024).

Everyday invisibility

The racialization of cultural difference operates as a core mechanism of neoliberal nationalism (Joppke, 2024), marking racialized minorities as inherently different from the national community regardless of economic standing. This logic sustains the fragile belonging of middling citizens, legitimizing their conditional inclusion (De Waal, 2020; Badenhoop, 2021; Winter, 2024). Consequently, their cultural visibility becomes a persistent site of prejudice, decoupled from economic capital, thereby trapping them in civic peril (Ong, 2022; Abu-Laban, 2024). Alain laments:

> Feeling excluded usually happens plenty of times when I'm surrounded by diverse ethnicities. Relationships are viewed from a cultural perspective; therefore, there are many small things that they say that contribute to this feeling.

While migration literature provides incentives based on poor states as reasons to migrate, this study discovered the histories of highly qualified individuals who had a better likelihood of success when transferring from rich markets to become economic actors (Badenhoop, 2021; Nowicka, 2024). Aristaeus navigates local and geographical biases in South Africa, contrasting this with non-racialized Kenya, where he believes racial differences are less consequential:

> Within the South African context, I view myself as an African who is inside Africa, not as a Kenyan, and I do struggle with the distinction of race because I was brought up in a very privileged way where race was never an issue.

This illustrates dual citizens' expectations of inclusion because they originate from non-racialized states, and it highlights contrasts between pluralist inclusive states without racial segregation and those that discriminate based on ethnicity and origin (Ndlovu and Ferim, 2025).

Joppke (2024: 6) observes a paradox in the liberal state: neoliberalism, while theoretically hostile to nationalism, fosters a fluid boundary where immigration policy directly shapes citizenship. In this framework, conduct rules equalize natives and foreign-origin citizens, transforming territorial admission into membership. Consequently, naturalized citizens under corporate globalization are valued exclusively for their economic contribution and capacity for self-sufficiency (Foucault, 2008; Ong, 2022):

> I work for a multinational where we do not adhere to any local preferential treatment because we work out in parts of Africa, Central Europe, and South America. We just don't believe in associating people within groups: no Black, no white, no Colored. There are just people who work with qualifications, which is how I'd like to see my world (Alain).

Joppke, Ong, and Favell assert that neoliberal nationalist immigration policy prioritizes land access over a predetermined political identity, centering the "worker citizen" to create a non-ethnic community that includes immigrants while excluding non-contributors. Problematically, this system is vulnerable to populist co-option, which strategically "marries neoliberalism and ethnic nationalism" (Machinya, 2022; Misago and Landau, 2023; Klotz, 2024; Peker and Winter, 2024: 1700).

Aristaeus showcases South Africans' distinct cultural and religious traditions as in flux and how they are merged with global influence:

South Africans still, surprisingly, despite the level of education and exposure, still believe a lot in ancestral worship. In South Africa, it's easy to find a "sangoma" who goes to church; that doesn't happen in Kenya; the two never meet [yet]. In South Africa, you often have guys going home, and they slaughter a goat. They have a slice of the skin of the goat tied around the wrist. They believe in traditional rituals, which, for a lot of Kenyans, disappeared a long time ago when the missionaries came; they convinced us quite thoroughly you are a Christian, and you are Christian.

Aristaeus linked middle-class ideals of cosmopolitan lifestyles and the cultural shift of ukupucuka, ukuthuthuka, or ukuhlanzeka, which in South Africa refers to middle-class affluence or upward mobility in which someone is elevated from a position of overcoming poverty and hardship to one of a refined status shaped by social and economic capital in society (Sigenu, 2022).

Previous theories of nationhood emphasized ethnic and racial distinctiveness (Levitt and Schiller, 2004). In contrast, Joppke (2022: 13) argues that neoliberal nationalism promotes a new homogeneity by replacing ethnic boundaries with a "community of value," accelerating assimilation into a merit-based identity for those who can contribute. Despite this shift, cultural symbols persistently shape hegemonic social spaces. This tension echoes Johannesburg's apartheid history, where ethnic identification functioned as a shallow metaphor for roots within rigid racial geographies, obscuring the city's complex topography (Klotz, 2024). Alain explained:

Going home, as people would say, they are, no matter where they are in South Africa, people have family in other places and engage in different activities at various moments. I don't have that; I'm someone from Johannesburg, you know. I always joke and say I'm a true Jo'burger, a native Johannesburgian; since I don't have to travel elsewhere, this place is my home.

Alain's perspective contrasts with those of native South Africans, whose identity is rooted in ethnic heritage, place, and tradition. They cultivate cultural capital through ancestral rituals like emakhaya visits, sustaining an authentic sense of belonging (Plaatjie, 2020; Moyo and Laine, 2021). The perception of urban foreigners as placeless is structurally produced, not a natural fact. State-generated categorical inequalities (Bloemraad et al., 2024) reinforce this by marking naturalized citizens as perpetually "other" (Sereke and Drzewiecka, 2024). This bias stems from a colonial epistemology that demands singular, fixed identities for legitimate belonging (Mamdani, 1996; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). A reworlding lens (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2023) reveals this as a form of epistemic injustice, invalidating the flexible, transnational identities that are characteristic of Global Southern experience.

Soft power and symbolic inclusion

This study reveals how naturalization empowers dual citizens' self-identification as competitive global agents, transcending ethnic and statist limitations through civic integration (Ong, 1999, 2006; Aptekar, 2016; Joppke, 2024):

> I feel South African; I don't really have a specific Chinese identity. I am South African; that is where I am from. Why should there be another level? Ja (Alexander).

This paper examines the transactional nature of family in immigration law for highly skilled workers, analyzing the "economization of everything" as a core neoliberal practice (Fourcade, 2016 in Joppke, 2024: 9). South Africa's soft power (Nye, 2021: 6), manifested through constitutional values, multicultural settlement, and open immigration policies has cultivated its reputation as a land of milk and honey. For naturalized dual citizens, this translates into a sense of global citizenship that transcends ethnic and national constraints. Immigration policies privilege affluent, skilled groups, as South Africa's "race for talent" shows (Shachar, 2006). This neoliberal nationalism puts "market-ready" immigrants first (Joppke, 2024; Winter, 2024), creating a hierarchy where they become good immigrants (Hackl, 2022) and are granted conditional inclusion. This fosters a cosmopolitan "bridging habitus" (Nowicka, 2015) and global citizen identity (Nye, 2021), but it also reveals a fundamental tension in their belonging, as it clashes with the persistent national order of things (Favell, 2022).

The experiential trajectories of citizenship are where integration and belonging are most closely related, and it is in these encounters that people achieve a sense of completeness and a profound sense of identity and belonging (Bloemraad, 2013; Beaman, 2023; Winter, 2023, 2024; Joppke, 2024).

> We were never included in anything, so we had to create our own sort of community within other Greeks that had immigrated as well … a family of people that were not blood (Thalia).

This study's participants, living with families who emigrated with them or were born post-migration, demonstrate complex belonging patterns. Intermarriage and multiethnic children reflect performed South African colorblindness, while workplace relationships with multiethnic counterparts appear uncomplicated, even though viewed as unconventional by Indigenous South Africans. Professionals like Alain, Solaris, and Aristaeus leverage perceived credibility and work ethic as merits of inclusion. Entrepreneurs Elista and her husband mediate cross-cultural workplace disputes effectively, while Thalia's affectionate public friendship with her non-white patrons disrupts expected racial boundaries (Nowicka, 2020). Through a postcolonial realist lens (Sorensen, 2021; Nshimbi, 2022), these practices reveal

middling citizenship not as liberatory hybridity but as a precarious condition shaped by persistent coloniality within neoliberalism, where Joppke's (2024: 9) emphasis on economic self-reliance frames eligibility through spousal income and employment.

DISCUSSION

The paradox of neoliberal multiculturalism

Visibility and invisibility are forms of social agency (Brighenti, 2010). Mogiani (2024: 191, 196) frames migrant struggles for recognition on a spectrum from visible "acts of citizenship" to the "imperceptible politics" of evading formal rights, arguing their "complex and ever-changing interplay ... blurs the boundaries" between these political forms (2024: 190, 196). This theoretical framework examines the tactical negotiations of naturalized citizens within the scope of this study. Their experience is defined by a collision between the unwanted visibility of economic success, which incites xenophobic tension, and the imperceptible politics they employ through strategic integration (Mokofe, 2023; Mogiani, 2024: 186, 191; Owen et al., 2024). I assert that this dynamic exposes a significant social divide in South Africa, where legal citizenship is undermined by a lack of substantive social integration.

This study's findings show a shift from multicultural models of inclusion (Bloemraad et al., 2023) to neoliberal nationalism (Joppke, 2024), where even celebrated elite professionals remain "market-ready" actors in a transactional citizenship, rather than citizens embraced based on shared humanity. This creates the central neoliberal paradox of securing economic legitimacy while maintaining a conditional sense of civic belonging. The state values the productive migrant-worker relationship, creating "bio-legitimacy" (Deckard and Heslin, 2016), but stops short of granting full rights, resulting in a status that is fragile and uncertain (Ong, 2022; Joppke, 2024). Consequently, the persistence of ethnic identity should not be misread as successful multiculturalism (De Waal, 2020). Instead, it functions as a strategic adaptation to a hegemonic culture that offers only provisional acceptance, thereby reinforcing the categorical inequalities (Bloemraad et al., 2024) of the national modus (Favell, 2022). Ultimately, middle-class success does not resolve this standing but reframes it, leaving naturalized professionals as "post-citizens" (Ong, 2022) who are formally included yet fundamentally estranged in their own home. Participants like Sophia and Alain reveal that their "success" is a precarious performance within a system that grants economic legitimacy while withholding unconditional civic belonging.

In a private-sector workplace, Sophia emphasizes that cross-cultural collaboration builds employability, credibility, and transactional capital within a neoliberal framework. This aligns with the argument of Bloemraad et al. (2023: 10–11) for multicultural strategies that value bicultural or multicultural lives through state affirmation and cultural exemptions. In such an environment, where naturalized citizens integrate into diverse middle-class communities, the reciprocity

required in global cities is fostered. However, this occurs within a system of neoliberal citizenship (Goodman, 2023; Joppke, 2024) that prioritizes merit-based identity and labor functions. Sophia's call for accommodating pluralistic cultural manifestations is vital. But its success depends on Bloemraad et al.'s (2023) optimal conditions for intergroup contact. These are equal status, cooperation, common goals, and institutional support. These conditions are often structurally absent in neoliberal contexts. My analysis suggests that the optimal conditions of Bloemraad et al. remain structurally absent for South Africa's middling citizens. Their equal status is dependent on economic performance, while the requisite "institutionally supportive context" is undermined by systematic exclusion (Ruiters, 2020; Ndlovu and Ferim, 2025: 403). This creates a system of categorical inequality that fundamentally limits any prospect of genuine integration (Bloemraad et al., 2024; Fourie, 2024).

Toward a postcolonial citizenship framework: Decolonizing middling citizenship

This analysis shows that middling citizenship is a particular kind of negotiated integration. Here, economic capital creates provisional visibility within a system designed to maintain otherness. Unlike the transnational mobility of "flexible citizenship" (Ong, 1999), these professionals are rooted in South Africa and are trapped within its shifting neoliberal middle-class policies (Winter, 2024: 1627). The fundamental issue with immigration is its failure to decolonize structures of belonging. Their successful adoption of a bridging habitus (Nowicka, 2015) secures economic inclusion and builds the economy, but neoliberal nationalist logic (Olofinbiyi, 2022; Joppke, 2024; Ndlovu and Ferim, 2025) systematically questions their cultural belonging. This politics of exclusion amid economic incorporation (Ndlovu and Ferim, 2025) indicates the state's "insufficient postcolonial restitution" (Nyamnjoh, 2021). Consequently, a fundamental reworlding of citizenship is required to transcend the coloniality of market-based inclusion, which undermines true multiculturalism while maintaining racial hierarchies (Brown, 2019; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2023; Fourie, 2024; Peker and Winter, 2024).

South Africa's strategy for naturalization promotes the integration of working foreigners into the social fabric, yet class functions as a conduit (Narsiah, 2002) that establishes socio-economic disparities rather than fostering comprehensive integration. Thus, middling citizenship is a negotiated integration strategy for professionals who, despite being marginalized on sociocultural grounds (Adedeji et al., 2023; Owen et al., 2024), use their economic capital to gain inclusion. This fundamentally disrupts the Aristotelian ideal (Turner, 2020) of a stabilizing middle class to work even harder from instability. Rather than being fully integrated, the South African middling class is characterized by conditional belonging (De Waal, 2020) and its status as a consistently othered group (Sereke and Drzewiecka, 2024). Their position is not one of stable mediation but of fragile uncertainty (Ong, 2022) within a neoliberal nationalist order (Joppke, 2024). Consequently, they cannot serve

as the state's bulwark; rather, their existence highlights the state's failure to achieve an integrated polity. They embody the profound instability of the neoliberal moment (Laruffa, 2023; Misago and Landau, 2023).

Ndlovu-Gatsheni's (2023) call for epistemic transformation highlights the key tension that, while identity transcends borders, naturalized citizens are caught up in a web of unequal belonging. Participants such as Aristaeus and Sophia navigate this through imperceptible politics (Mogiani, 2024), leveraging their economic status as worker-citizens (Joppke, 2024) to establish a presence in the nation (Winter, 2024). However, this performance of "invisibility" (Nowicka, 2015) is fragile, and their membership is framed by the state as a matter of choice, responsibility, and performance (Aptekar, 2016; Fourie, 2024; Joppke, 2024). This creates an assertive habitus of simultaneous subjugation and self-assertion. However, this does not guarantee protection. As Hannah Arendt foresaw, they risk forfeiting fundamental rights, not due to a lack of legal status, but because the law itself fails to fully constitute them as rights-bearing subjects through state-generated categorical inequalities (Bloemraad et al., 2024). This void is emblematic of the (post)neoliberal moment (Laruffa, 2023). Therefore, although interventions such as intergroup contact (Bloemraad et al., 2023) aim to build trust, they cannot resolve the structural issue of belonging being rented rather than owned.

The central contribution of this study is its theorization of middling citizenship as a hybrid category that fundamentally challenges the prevailing frameworks of citizenship. It occupies a liminal space between the transnationalism of flexible citizenship, favored by the elite (Ong, 1999), and the subaltern position of cultural citizenship, which is negotiated entirely within a neoliberal governance framework (Fourie, 2024; Joppke, 2024). This position highlights the ongoing challenges of the "national order of things" (Favell, 2022), where economic power enables only limited inclusion while colonial and racial ideas continue to play a role, resulting in a system of "conditional belonging" (De Waal, 2020; Badenhoop, 2021) and "categorical inequality" (Bloemraad et al., 2024). The tension is embodied by the participants: Alexander's assertion of being "simply South African" is met with ongoing othering (Sereke and Drzewiecka, 2024), while Aristaeus's broader African identity is narrowed down to his Kenyan identity. Middling citizenship is defined as a fragile condition in neoliberal South Africa (Ong, 2022), fundamentally a status both granted and challenged continuously.

South Africa has created the perfect paradox: it is the neoliberal middle-class trap. The middling citizen is prized for their economic utility yet rejected for their cultural identity. Their sense of belonging is transactional and fragile, perpetually shattered by xenoracism (De Waal, 2020; Ong, 2022), and their skills are commodified (Joppke, 2024). The critical question is no longer about managing multiculturalism through intergroup contact (Bloemraad et al., 2023), but whether a reimagining of the world from the Global South could dismantle this trap entirely (Ndlovu-Gatsheni,

2023). However, if market value continues to take precedence over belonging and human dignity, the concept of unified South African citizenship is destined to fail.

CONCLUSION

The visibility and invisibility of the experiences and immigrant identification of middle-class naturalized citizens reveal a multidimensional identity. The study emphasizes their diverse experiences of inclusion and exclusion, implying that national identification does not guarantee full integration, despite being desired. Although citizenship status conveys legal membership, the concept of "middling citizenship" advocates for more inclusive forms of incorporation. These include neoliberal procedures that promote a middle-class society in which members strive to create an economic nation for the benefit of the country. Focusing on South African voices, it engages with global debates through the experiences of naturalized citizens, emphasizing their connections to interlocal integration, ethnic heritage, and historical differences. Furthermore, it asks whether corporate diversity initiatives effectively encourage genuine inclusion and fair opportunity for naturalized citizens. The aim is to develop a more nuanced understanding of the challenges and opportunities faced by naturalized citizens and to inform the creation of integrative policies that promote genuine and equitable inclusion. This would ensure that all members of society are valued and empowered, rather than being assessed superficially in terms of their integration. Unfortunately, neoliberalism is a double-edged sword, enabling middle-class professionals to escape structural and social marginalization and gain a sense of middle-class belonging that allows them to participate in the broader economic and global community. Beyond the goal of naturalization, "middling citizenship" reveals how neoliberal language actively undermines integration. This framework promotes illiberal processes and illegal labor practices while obscuring the state's historical responsibility to provide redress. By prioritizing capitalist obligations over societal repair, the system sustains the irregularities it is supposed to combat.

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DECLARATION OF INTEREST

The author reports that there are no competing interests to declare.

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Intersectionality of Gender, Culture, and Identity in Migrant Women's Integration in Africa

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Abstract

Migration in Africa is a complex, multifaceted issue shaped by diverse factors such as conflict, economic challenges, environmental change, and political instability. The International Organization for Migration and African Union's *World Migration Report* indicates that the latest available data shows that approximately 21 million Africans were living in another African country, and about 47.1% of these migrants were female. The intensity of migration flows in African countries has given rise to anti-immigrant populism, increased anti-migrant hostility manifesting through anti-migrant attitudes, violent xenophobic attacks, migrant discrimination and marginalization as witnessed in various countries around the world. All these, in one way or another, are indications of a lack of or hindrances to migrant integration in host communities. This study explored how the integration of women in host communities is shaped by complex interacting influences of gender, cultural norms, and identity. Issues of gender, migration status, ethnicity, and socio-economic factors intersect to influence migrant women's experiences of inclusion and exclusion in host communities. Drawing on intersectionality theory and existing academic research and policy documents, this study explored how identity influences public perceptions, legal rights, and social belonging among migrant women. It also analyses the role of cultural norms in either facilitating or hindering integration, particularly in relation to gender roles, community expectations, and institutional barriers. Findings show that intersecting challenges of gender roles and expectations, cultural norms, and identity increase the vulnerability of migrant women, complicating their integration pathways. However, despite these vulnerabilities, migrant women actively exercise agency, creating opportunities for their integration in the host communities through community-led initiatives. These insights call for a gender perspective in developing and improving migrant integration frameworks, policies and strategies to address specific realities of migrant women across the African continent.

Keywords: Migrant women, intersectionality, gender, culture, identity

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INTRODUCTION

Migration in Africa is a complex and multifaceted issue shaped by diverse factors including conflict, economic challenges, environmental change, and political instability. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) and African Union (AU) 2023 *World Migration Report* records that the latest available data of the year 2020 shows that around 21 million Africans were living in another African country, and about 47.1% of these migrants were female (IOM and AU, 2023). Cultural norms, gender norms and identity significantly impact many aspects of daily life; likewise, they influence migration experiences, making migration a gendered phenomenon (Piper cited in IOM, 2024). Gender norms and gendered expectations, along with cultural norms of the country of origin and the destination, influence both the opportunities and risks of migration. Gender norms influence various issues of migration, such as motivation for the move, legal status granted in the destination country, and sector of employment. Despite this, there remains a limited understanding of how gender norms, cultural expectations, and identity simultaneously shape migrant women's ability to integrate into African host societies, which constitutes the central research problem of this article.

Given the gender-related challenges associated with migration, women often face more challenges in integrating into their host communities. Therefore, against this background, this study sought to explore the intersection of identity, gender and cultural norms in the integration of migrant women by investigating how identity, gender and cultural norms shape public perceptions, legal rights, and social belonging for migrant women. The article seeks to identify the challenges and opportunities for women's integration tied to gender roles, community expectations, and institutional barriers. To guide this inquiry, the article addresses the following research question: How do gender norms, cultural expectations, and identity intersect to influence the integration experiences of migrant women in Africa?

The article begins by outlining the theoretical and methodological approach, which is followed by a contextual background on women's migration in Africa, highlighting the gendered nature of migration. This is followed by a review of literature on issues such as identity and migrant integration, cultural norms and gendered expectations, intersectional challenges and opportunities, and women's acts of agency. Lastly, the article presents implications for policy and practice. In doing so, the article provides a structured analysis that moves from context to literature to intersectional analysis and finally to policy implications, thereby offering a coherent understanding of migrant women's integration in Africa.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The analysis draws on intersectionality theory. Intersectionality theory is a framework that examines how various forms of social identity, such as gender, race, class, sexuality, ability, religion, nationality, and migration status, interact to create unique

and compounded experiences of discrimination, privilege, and marginalization. "Intersectionality" was coined by Crenshaw (1989) to elucidate the shortcomings of legal frameworks in addressing inequality and discrimination arising from the combined impact of race and gender on the employment experiences of Black women. The intersectionality theory explains how the multiplicity of identities, relationality, contextual dynamics, power, and structures shape and perpetuate social inequalities (Collins and Bilge, 2020). This intersectionality theory is crucial to unpacking how gender, cultural norms, and identity intersect with migration status to shape lived experiences of inclusion or exclusion.

Figure 1: Depiction of Intersectionality in Migrant Integration
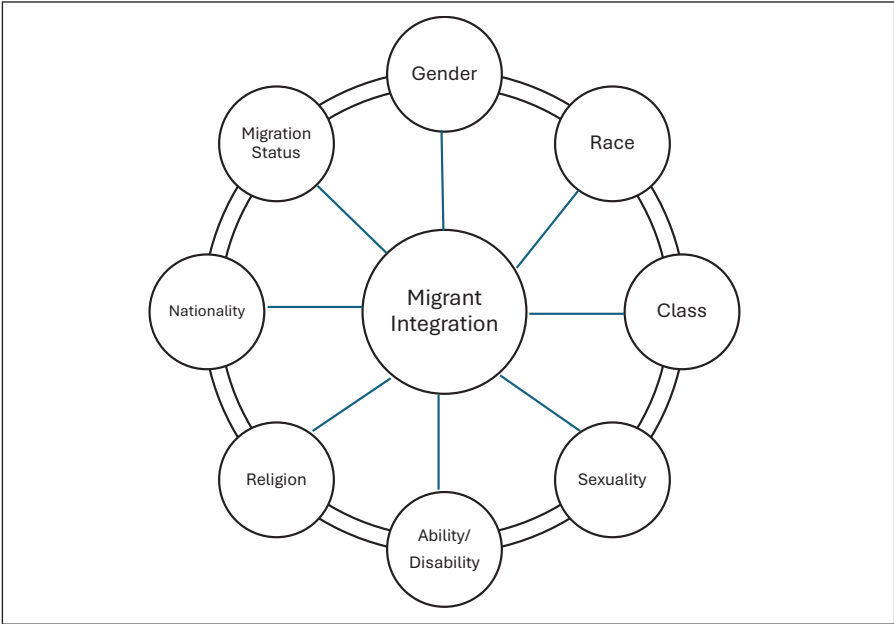
Source: Authors' own construction based on intersectionality theory

METHODOLOGY

In terms of methodology, this study relied on secondary data sources in the form of reports, policy documents, books, journal articles and other sources. Key considerations were made to ensure that the utilized secondary data sources and materials were credible, including the use of peer-reviewed academic literature, official policy documents, and reports produced by recognized organizations with expertise in migration, gender, migrant integration, and migration governance.

The criteria for selecting literature and policy documents were specific: sources needed to be relevant to the experiences of migrant women in Africa, focusing on

gender-related migration issues, integration challenges or policies, and published within the last decade to maintain contemporary relevance. Identifying these sources was conducted through systematic searches in academic databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar, as well as institutional repositories such as IOM, United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), and African Union (AU). Gray literature, specifically policy reports, was included if they were produced by trustworthy international or regional organizations.

The approach to analysis was thematic synthesis. Key themes identified from the selected materials, including gender norms, identity, cultural expectations, and integration policies, were compared and integrated across the sources. The study was intentionally designed to encompass the entire continent of Africa, rather than focusing on specific subregions. This comprehensive scope offers an overview of migration trends, integration policies, and gendered experiences across Africa. It enables the identification of both commonalities and disparities in the experiences of migrant women, and it highlights gaps in policy and research that affect several African contexts.

WOMEN'S MIGRATION IN AFRICA: CONTEXT AND TRENDS

Historical patterns

International migration in Africa is shaped by diverse factors such as colonial history, political conflicts, economic disparities, globalization and climate change. Historically, international migration was dominated by men, with women being "tied movers" migrating for family reunification as spouses and daughters (Mincer, 1978). Although the mere figures indicating more male migrants than female migrants do not necessarily point to the "tied movers" concept, reasons including family reunion, for migrant women, support the tied movers concept.

Current trends

However, the context and trends have changed over the past decades; more women are migrating independently or as lead movers (Anthias and Lazaridis, 2020). The presence of women as lead movers in migration led to the introduction of the concept of feminization of migration (Donato and Gabaccia, 2015). In recent years, the number of women migrating to European countries, independently or as lead movers, has increased due to care work (Shahd, 2024; WHO, 2024). Even though the number of women migrating independently or as lead movers is increasing, a reasonable number of females are still migrating as associational migrants, and this has an adverse effect on their legal status in the host community, inclusion in the labor market and eventually their inclusion and belonging in the host communities (Krieger, 2020; Zinatsa and Saurombe, 2022).

Regional and continental patterns

In Africa, the IOM in collaboration with the AU (IOM and AU, 2023) reports that female migrants constitute about 47.1% of the total population of African migrants within Africa. An overview of statistics from the IOM data shows that female migrants constitute a significant portion of the migrant population, depending on the region. In the East and Horn of Africa, the IOM reports that in 2022 (Itzigsohn, 2023), women and girls constituted 50.4% of the total migrant population. According to the report, this was a unique phenomenon, as in other regions, male migrants always formed the majority population. Statistics from UNDESA show that the proportion of female migrants in sub-Saharan Africa had risen from 46.4% in 2005 to 47.5% in 2019 (UNDESA, 2019). South Africa, as the migration hub of Southern Africa, hosts about 2,4 million migrants, with just over one million (42.2%) female migrants (Stats SA, 2023). In West and Central Africa, the IOM, through its program of assisting voluntary returns, found out that about 20% of returning migrants were female. Although the challenge of documenting migrants in Africa exists due to the nature of migration, which is characterized by irregular migration, the available statistics indicate that female migrants constitute a significant proportion and have been increasing over the past decades.

While these statistics demonstrate the numerical significance of women in migration, they reveal little about the qualitative nature of women's experiences, leaving gaps in understanding how gender, culture, and identity shape their agency and integration. Existing studies remain largely descriptive, focusing on migration flows rather than interrogating the deeper structural dynamics that shape migrant women's lived realities. This underscores the need for a more critical, intersectional reading of these trends, which this article seeks to address.

MIGRANT INTEGRATION IN AFRICA: A GENERAL OVERVIEW AND A GENDERED LENS

In migration, gender becomes an influential aspect. Migration is gendered, implying that gender shapes every part of the migration process (Morokvašić, 2014). This gendered nature of migration implies that in the process of migration, motivations, opportunities, risks, and experiences differ for men and women. Migrant integration is one of the processes of the migration journey. Migrant integration involves the inclusion of migrants into the economic, political and social fabric of the destination country. However, in the face of such a gendered migration, women experience the integration process differently, as the gender norms and expectations, identity, and cultural norms also shape their integration trajectory. Some of the gendered realities of women's migration are that women migrate under more vulnerable conditions, and they lack access to formal employment, thus most of them are in invisible sectors (Kofman, 2019; Gilodi et al., 2024). Consequently, these gendered realities and vulnerabilities compromise their integration experiences.

In general, migrant integration involves migrants engaging in the host community's economic, political, and social life. For economic integration, migrants should have fair access to jobs, entrepreneurship opportunities, equal pay and protection, and recognition of their skills and qualifications (Portes and Zhou, 1993; Heath and Schneider, 2021). With social integration, migrants should have a sense of belonging in the host community's social life and culture, be able to build friendships and social networks, and have access to healthcare, education, housing and social services (Heckmann, 2005; Bosswick and Heckmann, 2007; Bauloz et al., 2019; IOM, 2024). Migrants are politically integrated when they have opportunities to participate in the political processes and in decision making, which implies that they have access to permanent residency or citizenship, the right to vote or stand in an election and the right to participate in community organizations and advocacy groups (Penninx, 2005). The gendered nature of migration implies that female and male migrants experience this integration process differently.

However, these dominant integration frameworks often adopt a gender-neutral or Eurocentric lens, overlooking the relational, cultural, and identity-based dynamics that shape integration in African contexts. African feminist scholars argue that women's integration cannot be understood without acknowledging patriarchal norms, kinship structures, and socio-cultural expectations that regulate women's mobility and belonging (Mama, 2019; Hussein, 2024). Similarly, decolonial migration scholarship critiques the focus on Western integration models that ignore colonial legacies, informal economies and indigenous social relations that significantly influence migrant experiences on the continent (Kihato, 2007; Schinkel, 2018; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh et al., 2024). Positioning this article within these debates highlights the need for context-specific, gender-conscious analyses of integration in Africa.

Most African countries follow laissez-faire integration policies, leaving the integration of migrants to the market, the migrants themselves or the private organizations and institutions (Shpaizman, 2018). However, in Africa, there are some migration policy frameworks that touch issues of migrant integration, although not specifically as one of the main mandates. The AU adopted the Migration Policy Framework for Africa (MPFA) in 2006, updated to the Migration Policy Framework for Africa and Plan of Action (2018–2030), which covers critical issues in migration, such as labor migration, border management, irregular migration, forced displacement, internal migration, migration data, migration and development, and inter-state and inter-regional cooperation on migration issues (AU, 2006). Although the MPFA does not list migrant integration as one of its key issues, it points out that "successful integration of migrants in host communities and re-integration in home communities contribute to social stability and cohesion, mutual respect, and cultural acceptance" (AU, 2018: 63). It also recommends strategies to member states for their consideration of policy formulation and implementation for successful integration of migrants. The suggested strategies include ensuring equal treatment between migrants and nationals, providing education, training and economic opportunities

to children of long-term migrants to encourage their integration, facilitating naturalization and encouraging mutual cultural and social acceptance.

The African Common Position on Migration and Development also touches on the issue of migrant social integration by listing migrants' human rights as one of its policy priorities, where member states should "ensure effective protection of economic, social and cultural rights of migrants" (AU, 2006: 6). With regard to migrant women, Principle 10 of the African Guiding Principles on the Human Rights of All Migrants, Refugees and Asylum Seekers (ACHPR, 2023) obliges states to promote the development and advancement of women migrants on an equal basis with men, without discrimination, and with due consideration for their migrant status through a gender-sensitive approach. Part IV, article 16 and 17 of the Protocol to the Treaty Establishing the African Economic Community Relating to Free Movement of Persons, Right of Residence and Right of Establishment (AU, 2018), obliges member states to grant nationals of other member states the right to residency and the right to establishment in accordance with the laws and policies of the member states.

It is evident that migrant integration is not treated as a central policy objective on the continent. Instead, most African countries adopt a laissez-faire approach, often leaving the responsibility for integration to markets, civil society, or migrants themselves. Furthermore, although some provisions highlight the importance of human rights and social inclusion, these are typically broad and lack detailed implementation mechanisms. Critically, very few of these frameworks incorporate a gendered perspective on migration in a substantive way. Gender considerations, when present, are often peripheral rather than mainstreamed, suggesting that the specific integration needs and vulnerabilities of migrant women remain under-addressed in African migration governance.

Even when it comes to refugee policy, some African countries such as Kenya, Tanzania, and Zimbabwe pursue refugee encampment policy, where refugees are confined in refugee camps, which limits the movement of refugees across the country. Through the refugee encampment policy, refugees are denied the right to work or pursue businesses for their livelihoods, and this indirectly hinders their social integration (Chikanda and Crush, 2016). Recently, Ethiopia and Kenya have started exploring the possibility of easing their encampment policies. Both nations have committed to implementing the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF) (Muhumad and Jaji, 2023). However, in terms of implementation, no significant achievements have been met; for instance, refugees in Kenya are yet to be granted work permits (Binkert et al., 2021).

Other countries such as South Africa, Botswana, and Uganda follow a non-camp refugee policy where migrants can move freely and are given the right to work, education and establish businesses for their livelihoods. However, these African countries still follow a self-settlement refugee regime where refugees are left to incorporate themselves into the labor market and the social system of the host nation (Masuku and Rama, 2020). Although Uganda follows a self-settlement approach, its

approach has been regarded as generous and progressive in hosting refugees. On top of giving refugees the right to access work, education, healthcare, social services and freedom of movement, through its Self-reliance Strategy, refugees are also given farmland so that they can earn a living rather than rely on humanitarian aid (Bohnet and Schmitz- Pranghe, 2019; Wamara et al., 2021).

Like other African countries, "South Africa has not adopted a clear and coherent integration policy for integrating foreign nationals into the country's value system and population". (DHA, 2017: 65). Even though immigration in South Africa is characterized by unskilled, low-skilled asylum seekers as well as undocumented migrants, the policy of integration is only applicable to holders of permanent residence visas, refugees and naturalized citizens. The Immigration Act No. 13 of 2002 (RSA, 2002) specifies, under sections 25 to 27, the conditions under which a person can get permanent residency and citizenship in South Africa. The sections specify that for foreigners to get citizenship in South Africa, they have to be holders of work permits for five years and have a permanent employment offer, be a spouse of a citizen or resident, be a child of a citizen or resident under 21 years, intend to establish businesses, be refugees, be retired with a prescribed minimum payment for the rest of their life, or have a minimum prescribed net worth (RSA, 2002).

For those considered applicable to integration, the burden is left on their shoulders, and the state only takes care of the legal aspect of integration by granting residence permits. For instance, the Refugees Act provides that a refugee "is entitled to seek employment and have access to the same basic health services and basic education which the inhabitants of the Republic receive from time to time" (RSA, 1998). The Refugees Act and Article 22 of the UN Refugee Convention (to which South Africa is a signatory) provide that "The Contracting States shall accord to refugees the same treatment as is accorded to nationals concerning elementary education." However, it is still challenging for refugees to access employment and education in South Africa, mainly because there is no clear and coherent migrant integration policy with programs in place to facilitate integration and also because of the challenge of xenophobia in South Africa.

With this apparent lack of integration framework in Africa, both at the continental and national levels, women often face more challenges in integrating into the host communities due to gender-specific barriers, which include issues of gender norms and expectations, cultural norms, and identity, thus intersectionality in migrant women's integration.

Despite these policy frameworks, the literature reveals three key gaps that this article seeks to address: first, there is a lack of gender-sensitive migration and integration policies across African states; second, scholarship remains limited in its engagement with migrant women's agency, resilience strategies, and everyday acts of negotiation within host societies; and third, existing studies insufficiently incorporate African feminist and decolonial perspectives in analyzing how identity and cultural norms shape migrant women's sense of belonging. By identifying and

addressing these gaps, this article contributes to a more contextually grounded and gender-responsive understanding of migrant women's integration in Africa.

INTERSECTIONAL CHALLENGES IN MIGRANT WOMEN'S INTEGRATION: IDENTITY , CULTURAL NORMS, AND GENDERED EXPECTATIONS

Gender

In most African societies, patriarchal attitudes within the societies create gendered expectations, assigning women to more private, domestic roles while positioning men in public, societal roles. The gendered nature of migration implies that the migration experiences of women are influenced first by being a migrant and second by being a woman. The vulnerability of women migrants in the migration trajectory, including integration, is exacerbated by the fact that most migrant policies and frameworks are gender-neutral, ignoring the specific needs of vulnerable migrant women.

Culture

In addition, deep-rooted patriarchal norms of both the country of origin and the destination continue to shape local attitudes toward women, thus influencing their integration experiences. Cultural norms, that is, the shared beliefs, values, and practices that govern behavior in a society, are influential in shaping gender roles, community expectations, and institutional responses (Neculaesei, 2015; Zia, 2023). Migrant women face cultural norms that confine them at home, limiting their interaction with the broader society and often creating feelings of alienation (Oucho and Williams, 2019). These cultural norms intersect with gendered expectations to compound barriers for migrant women, highlighting the multi-level effects of intersectionality on integration outcomes.

Identity

Patriarchal gender hierarchies force women to navigate culturally defined roles by adhering to expected behaviors in exchange for security or social acceptance, termed by Kandiyoti (1988) as "patriarchal bargain". Cultural norms also shape how communities perceive appropriate behavior for women, and women are also seen as "bearers of culture" (Dove, 1998). Therefore, these cultural norms shape gendered roles, community expectations and, in some cases, institutional responses. In the face of these cultural norms, migrant women negotiate their belonging and inclusion in host communities, navigating through gendered roles and expectations.

These examples illustrate how the intersection of gender, culture, and identity produces layered vulnerabilities that shape migrant women's integration experiences across social, economic, and civic spheres. Zinatsa and Saurombe's (2022) study on sub-Saharan tied female migrants in South Africa exposes how the intersection of gender identity and legal status in South Africa influences labor market integration of female tied migrants. Due to immigration laws and regulations, spouses

accompanying migrants to South Africa under family reunification are legally classified as dependents, prohibiting them from working, studying, or engaging in business activities (DHA, 2017). Zinatsa and Saurombe's (2022) study explains intersectionality and migrant women, and labor market integration, detailing how issues of ethnicized ascriptions, migrant status, gendered ascriptions, and racialized ascriptions intersect to influence migrant women's experiences integrating into the South African labor market. In the same argument, Mbiyozo (2018) found that most migrant women in South Africa have increased vulnerability to exploitation and exclusion from the labor market due to the intersection of factors such as gender norms and labor rights.

The gendered labor opportunities also influence where migrant men and women work. The gender segregation of labor results in men being employed in mining, industry, transport, trade and construction sectors, whereas most migrant women are found in domestic work, care work and other less-visible jobs (O'Neil et al., 2016). Consequently, this has a negative impact on migrant women's integration in destination societies, because most domestic and care work takes place in private homes, and these women are deprived of the opportunity to interact and form networks with members of the broader community.

The challenge of migrant women's integration due to gender norms is not only an African problem. Fortin (2015) examines how gender-role attitudes influence women's labor market outcomes across OECD (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development) countries, revealing that traditional gender norms are significantly and negatively linked to female employment rates. Since beliefs and attitudes are often formed early in life and passed down through generations, the cultural background of female migrants becomes a key factor in shaping their labor market participation in host countries. Among other reasons such as low level of education and experience, lack of language skills and information, experiences of trauma and physical abuse before and during refugee flight, Albrecht et al. (2021) found that men's perceptions of working women also significantly influenced women's participation in the labor market as the decision to be active in the labor market does not sorely depend on the women but also their husbands if married. This clearly shows how gendered expectations disadvantage the integration of women in the labor market of the host country.

Issues of gender norms and gendered expectations also compromise migrant women's participation in programs aimed at socially integrating migrants into local communities. Uganda is globally recognized for its progressive open-door integration policy toward refugees (Agaba, 2024). However, girls and women often face intersectional barriers to participating in inclusion programs and activities. Kagan and Nakatudde's (2024) study, which explored the intersectional barriers faced by urban Somali refugee girls in Uganda, found that Somali girls were deprived of the opportunity for integration due to factors such as time constraints related to gender-role expectations—girls are expected to help much more with domestic

responsibilities, and they thus have diminished time for education and social involvement beyond the home. In addition to time constraints, the same study also found that Somali girls experienced mobility restrictions that confined their access to specific learning, socializing, and recreation spaces. Although refugee families tend to restrict children's movements in general, cultural norms and societal expectations impose even stricter limitations on Somali girls. Their movements are closely monitored, with an expectation that they remain within their home compounds. As a result, many girls are excluded from public schooling and instead receive education through home-based tutors or attend religious schools.

Sport is among the activities done in an effort to integrate migrants. Sport is often described as an open and inclusive activity where youths can develop a network of friends with similar interests. According to Bourdieu's (1986) concept of social capital, social capital is built from social connections and interactions with others and group memberships. Thus, sports clubs offer people opportunities to interact and participate in community associations to build social capital. Community soccer participation offers migrants the opportunity to build social bonds with other migrants and to bridge capital with the local members (Spaaij, 2012; Verhagen and Boonstra, 2014). However, when it comes to integrating migrant women in Africa, issues of gender roles and gendered expectations are a hindrance. Women and girls often have limited time for leisure as they are expected to be in their homes carrying out domestic responsibilities such as cooking, cleaning, and childcare. As community sporting activities are done during free time, girls and women are denied this opportunity due to their gender roles (Ekholm et al., 2022). In addition, in most African societies, sports such as soccer are perceived as not suitable for women (Mayeza, 2017; Burnett, 2018). Therefore, in the face of such cultural norms, opportunities for migrant women's social integration are compromised. Women are challenged to negotiate the intersections of gender, culture, and sometimes religion to participate in sporting activities such as soccer that are aimed at promoting social integration into local communities (Mohammadi, 2022; Truskewycz et al., 2023).

In sum, the integration of migrant women in African contexts is deeply influenced by intersecting structures of identity, cultural expectations, and gender norms. These intersections create multiple and compounding forms of disadvantage that hinder women's access to social, economic, and civic opportunities in host societies. While community-based mechanisms such as sport and education have the potential to facilitate social integration, gendered expectations around domestic roles, mobility, and appropriateness of activities continue to marginalize women and girls from these spaces. Despite the growing recognition of migration's gendered dimensions, most African migration policies remain gender neutral and fail to explicitly address the unique integration barriers faced by women. Migrant integration is not currently a core policy objective across the continent, and when it does appear within broader migration frameworks, it rarely incorporates a gender-sensitive lens. As a result, migrant women are often left to navigate integration

processes within systems that do not adequately recognize or respond to their specific vulnerabilities and needs. Addressing these gaps requires a deliberate shift toward gender-responsive migration governance that challenges entrenched patriarchal norms and promotes inclusive integration pathways.

OPPORTUNITIES AND ACTS OF AGENCY

Despite their vulnerability due to the intersection of gender, culture, and identity in their integration experiences, migrant women, through networks, resilience, activism, community-based initiatives and assistance from non-governmental organizations (NGOs), navigate these vulnerabilities to create opportunities for integration into local communities.

Social networks play a crucial role in the entire migration process, from decision making to the journey to and integration in the destination country. It is through these social networks that migrants acquire social capital. Social capital emerged from the concept of human social capital, and it explains how social capital facilitates migration (Massey, 1985). The central proposition of the social capital theory is that valuable resources are embedded in social relations. Therefore, access to and use of those resources lead to positive outcomes (Lin, 2002). In migration, social capital refers to the tangible or intangible benefits acquired by international migrants through having contacts at the place of origin or the place of destination. Social networks are established through social ties that migrants form with both members of the receiving country and members of their group, either in the receiving country or back home in the country of origin. In the face of restrictions that women experience, depriving them of opportunities to interact with local communities through work or participating in leisure activities, women use their networks with friends and family to assist in taking responsibilities such as childcare, which allows them to go to work. Looking at how women, including migrant women in the gig economy (short-term, flexible, and often freelance or contract-based employment where workers are typically hired for specific tasks or "gigs" rather than for long-term or permanent jobs) in South Africa and Kenya manage paid work, care and other domestic responsibilities, Hunt et al. (2019) found that these women used strategies such as getting childcare services from friends and family, church or community groups. Through these social networks, migrant women can assign their expected gender roles to others, allowing them to engage in economic activities that provide both a means for survival and opportunities to interact with the broader local community.

Refugee and migrant women are also establishing groups or organizations aimed at empowering migrant women and girls, advocating for equal rights and recognition, and also creating opportunities for integration. For instance, in countries such as Uganda, Kenya and Ethiopia, which host a large number of refugees, there are various community groups and NGOs specifically focusing on refugee women and groups (for example, Association of Refugee Women Uganda (AORW-U) and RefuSHE, Kenya). Some integration initiatives by these groups and organizations

include community kitchens where migrant women meet with local women, share recipes and food, and establish friendships and bonds.

In Kenya, Thrive for Change is a sisterhood group that runs a Women's Well-being and Empowerment for Leadership and Community Development program among Somali refugee women in Eastleigh, Nairobi. Thrive for Change advocates comprehensive social well-being among migrant women by cultivating communal care systems where group members serve as social safety nets, providing support during instances of abuse, crisis, or financial difficulties, thus enhancing trust and social capital. By emphasizing economic agency, the program empowers women to create collective income-generating ventures, such as tie-dye businesses, backed by group savings strategies that promote financial independence and resilience. Cultural identity is strengthened through the incorporation of Somali oral traditions, including poetry circles, alongside community events such as Refugee Day and Women's Day celebrations that foster a sense of belonging and cultural continuity. The program also promotes digital inclusion by providing women with mobile-based digital literacy skills, allowing them to utilize phones and social media to sustain social support networks, reconnect with family members, and access market opportunities (Thrive for Change, n.d.). Overall, Thrive for Change exemplifies how migrant women use internal community networks to capitalize on economic opportunities, share caregiving responsibilities, develop leadership skills, and negotiate their sense of belonging in urban host environments. This highlights the intersectional dynamics of gender and migrant identity.

Refugee and internally displaced women in Ethiopia have revitalized traditional saving and mutual-aid systems that are culturally ingrained, such as Iddir and Equb, as methods for enhancing resilience and promoting integration into host communities. Iddir, which has historically served as a mutual-aid organization aimed at assisting families during times of loss, has been modified by migrant women to offer a wider range of social protection, including support during weddings, funerals, and various life events, while also providing essential financial and emotional assistance. Simultaneously, Equb operates as an informal rotating savings-and-credit scheme where women contribute their savings and take turns receiving lump-sum distributions, relying solely on trust instead of formal collateral (Abadi, 2020). These organizations are led entirely by women, enabling refugee and internally displaced women to collaboratively mobilize resources, bolster social cohesion, enhance self-sufficiency, and establish significant connections with local host structures. Importantly, these associations have persisted even during periods when the presence of NGOs has decreased, such as during the COVID-19 pandemic. This highlights their sustainability and deep-rootedness within migrant communities. In summary, these traditional systems illustrate how migrant women utilize enduring cultural practices to create social capital that alleviates economic and social vulnerability while facilitating their integration into local communities.

Ncube et al. (2019) investigated the ways in which sub-Saharan African migrant women in South Africa navigated socio-economic difficulties following migration. They employed the Sustainable Livelihood Framework (SLF) to assess the different types of capital—social, human, cultural, financial, and political—that these women utilize to endure, adapt, and assimilate into their new surroundings. Their research revealed that social capital is pivotal in influencing the resilience of these women, as numerous participants depended significantly on family networks, church organizations, compatriot groups, and ethnic community frameworks for emotional, material, and informational support. Furthermore, the study emphasized the agency of migrant women, demonstrating that they do not solely depend on external aid but proactively pursue job opportunities, create micro-enterprises, and strategically leverage their networks to achieve long-term stability. In summary, the research illustrates how the intersecting factors of gender, migration status, and socio-economic marginalization are navigated through the women's utilization of social and cultural resources, highlighting the critical role of social capital in their coping mechanisms and integration efforts.

Although migrant women put effort into navigating their marginalization in host communities, their efforts are limited due to lack of funding to support NGOs, community initiatives and activism work.

In sum, the convergence of gender, culture, and identity both limits and influences the integration experiences of migrant women throughout Africa. Although structural obstacles, such as gender norms, cultural expectations, and institutional policies, create complex disadvantages, migrant women demonstrate agency through social networks, community initiatives, and advocacy, revealing both the challenges and opportunities present in integration processes. This summary emphasizes the necessity for gender-responsive, intersectional strategies in policy and practice, which is discussed in greater detail in the subsequent section.

POLICY AND PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS

Despite Africa having a broad range of continental, regional, and national level commitments to women's rights, gender equality, and empowerment, such as the Maputo Protocol (2003), AU Gender Policy (2009, revised 2022), Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want (2015), AU Strategy for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment (GEWE) (2018–2028), ECOWAS Gender Policy (2005, revised 2020), EAC Gender Equality and Development Bill (drafted 2017), and the SADC Protocol on Gender and Development (2008, revised 2015), most migrant policies are gender-neutral, and the gender-based considerations are yet to be adequately integrated into migration legislation (Farley, 2019). For instance, South Africa has various gender-based national commitments such as the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa 1996, the Employment Equity Act 1995, Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act 2000, and South Africa's National Policy Framework for Women's Empowerment and Gender Equality 2002. However, the 2017 White Paper

on International Migration to South Africa makes no reference to the intersection between gender and migration (Farley, 2019).

Although the trends of women migration in Africa indicate that the number of women migrating independently or as lead movers has been increasing, there are still a great number of women who migrate as tied movers. In sub-Saharan Africa, specifically South Africa, migration laws and regulations impose limitations on tied movers in terms of the right to employment in South Africa. For instance, the South African Immigration Act 13 of 2002 (RSA, 2002), under section 18, issues a relative permit to a spouse of a permanent resident or a foreigner on a general work visa, but this does not give them the right to work in South Africa (RSA, 2002). With such immigration laws and regulations, female tied movers are denied the opportunity to economic integration through employment, and also social integration through networks and connections that might be established through work. In some cases, women are left with the option of working in less-regulated and less-visible sectors such as domestic and care work, hair braiding, or craftwork (O'Neil et al., 2016).

The above insights on women's vulnerabilities in integrating into host societies call for a gendered approach to migration policies and practices and warn against restrictive policies and practices that increase vulnerability for migrant women. It is therefore essential that AU member states and regional bodies move beyond gender-neutral migration policies and explicitly integrate gender-sensitive provisions into migration legislation and policy frameworks. Existing gender commitments and national gender policies should be operationalized within migration governance by embedding intersectional gender analyses into policy formulation, implementation, and evaluation. Specifically, migration policies should acknowledge and address the unique vulnerabilities and experiences of migrant women, including those related to legal status, labor market participation, healthcare access, and social integration. Furthermore, capacity-building programs for policymakers, border officials, and service providers should be established to foster gender-responsive approaches to migration. Aligning migration policy with existing gender equality commitments will not only advance the rights of migrant women but also contribute to broader goals of social inclusion and sustainable development across the continent.

To enhance the social integration of migrant women, particularly in culturally diverse and gender-sensitive contexts, NGOs and community organizations designing integration activities should incorporate intercultural and gender-responsive perspectives in their programs. Community-based sporting initiatives, such as soccer, should be intentionally adapted to include intercultural provisions that acknowledge and respect the diverse cultural backgrounds, religious practices, and gender norms of migrant participants. This includes creating women-only sports spaces, offering flexible scheduling to accommodate domestic responsibilities, and engaging cultural and religious leaders to promote broader acceptance of women's participation in recreational activities. Additionally, integration programs should incorporate intercultural dialogue components within sporting activities to foster

mutual understanding between migrants and host communities. By embedding intercultural sensitivity and inclusivity into integration strategies, such programs can become powerful tools for building social capital, challenging exclusionary norms, and promoting meaningful inclusion of migrant women in community life.

Grassroots initiatives for migrant integration are effective if recognized and financially and structurally supported. Initiatives such as community kitchens play a pivotal role in cultural exchange, empowerment and social inclusion. To enhance the impact of these self-organized groups, such as community kitchens, governments and NGOs should provide targeted funding and offer capacity-building programs to support these community-driven initiatives. In addition, when designing integration programs, NGOs should consult women, both migrant and local, to ensure the development and implementation of more sustainable and context-sensitive programs.

CONCLUSION

This research has demonstrated that the integration of migrant women in Africa is influenced by the convergence of gender, culture, and identity, resulting in various and compounding obstacles that restrict access to economic, social, and civic opportunities. Patriarchal norms, culturally defined roles, and gender-neutral legal frameworks exacerbate vulnerabilities; however, migrant women assert their agency through social networks, community initiatives, and advocacy, maneuvering through these limitations to forge opportunities for inclusion. Theoretically, the study contributes to intersectionality and migration scholarship by demonstrating how gender, culture, and identity intersect to shape integration experiences in African contexts, which highlights the importance of multi-level analyses in understanding the vulnerabilities and strategies of migrant women. The distinctive contribution of this article lies in its intersectional analysis across Africa, addressing deficiencies in the current literature that frequently neglect women's experiences, agency, and the interplay of structural and cultural elements. These results underscore the need for gender-responsive, culturally attuned policies that recognize women's unique vulnerabilities and strengths, foster inclusive integration pathways and enhance social cohesion, economic participation, and migrant well-being across the continent. Future studies should investigate the experiences of migrant women in less-represented areas, analyze the long-term effects of integration strategies, and evaluate the efficacy of gender-sensitive migration policies in promoting social, economic, and civic inclusion.

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Urban Refugee Protection and the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda in Ethiopia: Challenges and Missing Links

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Abstract

Urban refugees in Ethiopia face persistent challenges despite progressive legal and policy reforms, including the 2019 Refugee Proclamation, the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework, and some alignment with the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals. This study examined the gaps between policy commitments and lived realities by integrating desk reviews, key informant interviews with government and humanitarian actors, and in-depth interviews with 21 refugees from diverse nationalities in Addis Ababa. Findings reveal partial successes in economic inclusion, education, healthcare, documentation, and social participation, yet structural, administrative, and legal barriers constrain meaningful access to livelihoods, housing, services, and social networks. Social capital mediates refugees' ability to navigate these challenges, while disparities in documentation, language, and market access exacerbate vulnerability. The study concludes that Ethiopia's urban refugee protection system exhibits implementation gaps that undermine Sustainable Development Goal-aligned outcomes and emphasizes the need for coordinated, inclusive, and context-sensitive policies that translate formal rights into substantive capabilities and equitable integration opportunities.

Keywords: Urban refugees, refugee protection, challenges facing refugees, sustainable development goals (SDGs), access to services, Ethiopia

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INTRODUCTION

Forced displacement has emerged as one of the defining global challenges of the 21st century, with urban areas increasingly becoming primary destinations for refugees seeking safety, services, and livelihood opportunities. Although global frameworks such as the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) call for inclusive approaches that integrate refugees into national development systems, the practical realization of these commitments remains slow and uneven (UNHCR, 2018b; UNDP, 2019). Ethiopia, one of Africa's largest refugee-hosting countries, has undertaken significant legal and policy reforms over the past decade to align its refugee response with international standards and development-oriented principles, including the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF) and the revised 2019 Refugee Proclamation. These developments represent a shift from predominantly humanitarian assistance toward a more holistic, rights-based, and developmental approach to protection.

Despite these advances, the governance of urban refugee protection in Ethiopia remains complex. Urban refugees occupy a unique position: they benefit from expanded rights relative to camp-based refugees yet face heightened vulnerabilities due to the cost of living, limited service access, and inconsistent implementation of legal provisions (Kobia and Cranfield, 2009; UNHCR, 2009; Easton-Calabria, 2020). At the same time, national development planning and Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) implementation processes do not consistently or systematically integrate refugee needs, creating "missing links" between national policy commitments and the global imperative to ensure that displaced persons are not left behind (UNHCR, 2020c).

The central argument of this article is that Ethiopia's current urban refugee protection system contains critical policy and implementation gaps that undermine alignment with the 2030 SDGs, particularly in areas of social protection, inclusion, and equitable access to services. The research problem addressed in this manuscript concerns the misalignment between international commitments, national refugee reforms, and the lived realities of urban refugees in Ethiopia. Although Ethiopia's policy architecture, through the GCR, CRRF, and the 2019 Refugee Proclamation, promotes inclusion and self-reliance, evidence suggests that implementation has lagged behind ambition. Urban refugees continue to face legal, socioeconomic, and administrative barriers that impede their well-being and prevent meaningful realization of SDG-aligned protection standards.

A review of existing scholarship highlights several clear research gaps. Much of the work on urban refugees in Ethiopia consists of organizational reports rather than peer-reviewed studies and tends to address discrete themes such as livelihoods, skills, education, legal recognition, or administrative procedures (Betts et al., 2017; Pape et al., 2018b; UNHCR, 2024). Few studies adopt a comprehensive perspective that integrates these dimensions with analyses of the national policy and legal frameworks, including the GCR, CRRF, and the 2019 Refugee Proclamation, and

how they interact with implementation realities in urban settings. In particular, evidence on the effectiveness, reach, and enforcement of key instruments, such as work permits, residence outside camps, civil documentation directives, and sectoral policies affecting education, health, and social protection, remains limited (UNHCR, 2018c; Watol and Assefa, 2019; Carver, 2020; RRS and UNHCR, 2021; UNHCR, 2021b).

Critically, existing studies seldom analyze urban refugee protection through the lens of the SDGs, despite international calls to mainstream displacement into development monitoring and planning (UNDP, 2019; UNHCR, 2020a). As a result, important dimensions of refugee well-being, including legal, socioeconomic, and administrative barriers, risk being overlooked in national development metrics and policy debates. Moreover, there is limited empirical evidence on how these gaps affect the day-to-day experiences of urban refugees, including their access to livelihoods, education, financial services, and civil rights, which constrains the ability of policymakers to design interventions that are both inclusive and SDG aligned.

This study addresses these gaps by offering a holistic analysis of Ethiopia's urban refugee protection landscape, integrating the policy and legal frameworks with empirical insights from urban settings. By situating Ethiopia's evolving refugee governance within the broader global protection agenda and the 2030 SDGs, the article identifies where progress has been made, where persistent barriers remain, and what policy and programmatic adjustments are required to ensure that urban refugees are meaningfully included in the country's sustainable development trajectory.

BACKGROUND: POLICY AND LEGAL FRAMEWORK

Ethiopia's refugee protection regime is anchored in a progressive set of international, regional, and national instruments. At the international level, the country is a signatory to key legal instruments, including the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, its 1967 Protocol, and the 1969 OAU Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa (Watol and Assefa, 2019). Although Ethiopia enacted its first national refugee law in 2004, responses remained predominantly humanitarian until more recent years (Betts, 2006).

A major policy shift emerged in 2016 at the Leaders' Summit on Refugees in New York, where Ethiopia made nine pledges to enhance refugee inclusion and self-reliance. These commitments addressed education access across all levels, expanded healthcare services, issued work permits, provided civil documentation, and allocated irrigable land for refugee and host-community households. Additional measures included expanding the Out-of-Camp Policy (OCP), promoting local integration for refugees residing over 20 years, developing industrial parks with employment quotas for refugees, and enabling access to banking services and birth registration (UNHCR, 2018c; UNHCR, 2021b).

In 2017, Ethiopia became one of seven African pilot countries for the CRRF, the main vehicle for implementing these pledges. The CRRF operationalizes the GCR, adopted in 2018, by embedding refugee responses within broader development strategies and strengthening service delivery for both refugees and host communities (UNHCR, 2018c; Carver, 2020; European Council on Refugees and Exiles, 2020; UNHCR, 2021b).

To facilitate implementation, Ethiopia adopted the Roadmap for the Implementation of the Ethiopian Government Pledges (RIEGP), established a CRRF Steering Committee, and launched a National Coordination Office (NCO), followed by the National Comprehensive Refugee Response Strategy (NCRRS) in 2018 (Carver, 2020). A revised refugee law was introduced in 2019, formally expanding refugees' rights to employment, education, civil registration, driving licenses, and banking services. It also strengthened the OCP's reach (UNHCR, 2021b). To provide legal guidance and operationalize the proclamation, three directives were issued on December 30, 2019: Directive No. 01/2019 outlined procedures for mobility and residence outside camps, Directive No. 02/2019 clarified refugees' right to work, and Directive No. 03/2019 established a framework for grievance and appeals handling (Refugee and Returnee Services and UNHCR, 2021).

The GCR and CRRF aim to address long-standing barriers to durable solutions, including declining global resettlement opportunities, protracted displacement crises, and the political sensitivity of local integration. By reframing refugee assistance within development discourse, Ethiopia's evolving legal and policy architecture reflects a commitment to building resilience and fostering inclusive integration (Carver, 2020).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical literature

To frame the analysis of urban refugee protection and integration in Ethiopia, several theoretical lenses are particularly instructive: social capital theory, self-reliance theory, rights-based approaches, the capability approach, and integration/social inclusion frameworks.

Social capital theory

Bourdieu's (1986) theory of social capital emphasizes the value of networks, trust, and social relationships in accessing resources and opportunities. In the context of urban refugees, social capital enables access to housing, employment, information, and emotional support, often compensating for gaps in formal legal protections or state services. Studies in refugee contexts highlight that both strong ties (family and close community networks) and weak ties (broader civil society connections) are crucial for successful integration (Olsson et al., 2023).

Self-reliance framework

The principle of self-reliance has emerged as a central theoretical lens in refugee studies, emphasizing the capacity of individuals, households, and communities to sustainably meet their own needs rather than remain dependent on humanitarian aid (UNHCR, 2005). Within the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and CRRF frameworks, self-reliance is framed as both a policy objective and a conceptual paradigm for refugee inclusion. Scholars highlight its dual role: promoting economic and social autonomy while raising critical questions about structural barriers, market access, and the shifting of responsibility from states to refugees themselves (Betts et al., 2019; Betts et al., 2020). In Ethiopia, self-reliance is embedded in the CRRF and the 2019 Refugee Proclamation that formally expand refugees' rights to work, education, and participation in local economies. Critiques caution that self-reliance discourse can obscure structural barriers, such as restricted labor markets, legal restrictions, and limited institutional support, and can place disproportionate responsibility on refugees to achieve economic independence (Betts, 2022; World Food Programme, 2023). However, when analyzed alongside social capital theory, self-reliance provides a nuanced lens for understanding how refugees mobilize networks and resources to achieve sustainable livelihoods, while also revealing the constraints imposed by institutional and socioeconomic contexts (McAteer and Leeson, 2021).

Rights-based frameworks

A rights-based framework reconceptualizes refugees as rights-holders rather than passive recipients of aid. This perspective emphasizes that legal protections such as the right to work, documentation, and access to education are necessary but not sufficient; their realization depends on effective implementation, power dynamics, and institutional accountability (Hathaway, 2010; UNHCR, 2018a). Scholars employing this lens investigate how legal frameworks are operationalized, who enforces rights, and whether marginalized subgroups defined by gender, ethnicity, or legal status can meaningfully claim and exercise these protections (Ballard, 2018).

Capability approach

Sen's (2011) capability approach emphasizes what individuals are actually able to do and to be, which is their substantive capabilities rather than simply the formal rights or resources they possess. Within refugee studies, this framework shifts attention to whether legal entitlements such as education, employment, and freedom of movement can be translated into meaningful capabilities and well-being (Crisp and Long, 2016; Clark et al., 2019). Research using this lens assesses whether policies foster genuine empowerment that enables sustainable livelihoods and agency rather than mere survival (Al-Husban and Adams, 2016). By foregrounding substantive freedoms, the capability approach aligns closely with SDG-driven discourse on inclusion, dignity, and human development (Sen, 2011; UNDP, 2019).

Integration/ social inclusion framework

Ager and Strang's (2008) work provides one of the most widely recognized conceptual frameworks for understanding refugee integration. Their model identifies key domains, including markers and means (employment, housing, education), social connections (bonds, bridges, and links), facilitators (language, safety, rights), and foundations (citizenship and rights), all of which are critical for successful integration. Strang and Ager (2010) further emphasize that integration is a multi-way process involving refugees, host communities, and institutions. This framework is particularly relevant for analyzing urban refugees in Ethiopia, as it enables assessment not only of formal access to services but also of the social, cultural, and relational dimensions of inclusion.

Empirical literature

Empirical studies on urban refugees across sub-Saharan Africa show recurring patterns that align closely with the theoretical lenses adopted above.

Social capital, networks, and survival strategies

Empirical studies consistently demonstrate that social networks, both strong ties (family and co-national groups) and weak ties (host-community contacts, non-governmental organizations (NGOs)) are central to how urban refugees navigate daily life, secure livelihoods, and access essential services. In Addis Ababa, refugees mobilize bonding, bridging, and linking forms of social capital to obtain housing, information, informal employment, and small loans, particularly where formal assistance is limited (Betts et al., 2017). Comparable dynamics are observed in South Africa, where African migrants and refugees rely on inter-household cooperation and community networks as informal safety nets, which underscores the compensatory role of social capital when state support is weak (Choudry and Hlatshwayo, 2016; Hlatshwayo, 2016; Mlambo, et al., 2023). Comparative analyses also highlight how networks shape aspirations, livelihood opportunities, and vulnerability levels across refugee groups (Pape et al., 2018c; Easton-Calabria, 2020; Omata, 2021). Collectively, this body of literature illustrates that social capital not only supports survival in precarious urban environments but also mediates access to formal entitlements and influences integration trajectories.

Self-reliance, livelihoods, and structural constraints

Across sub-Saharan Africa, empirical research shows that self-reliance remains both an aspirational policy goal and a constrained reality for urban refugees. In Uganda, often cited as a global model due to refugees' rights to work and move freely, studies reveal that legal permission alone is insufficient; outcomes depend on market access, capital, credential recognition, institutional capacity, and gender norms (Betts et al., 2019; Omata, 2022). In Ethiopia, refugee self-reliance remains constrained by legal ambiguities, limited formal employment, and reliance on

informal livelihoods and remittances, with outcomes varying significantly across refugee groups (Nigusie and Carver, 2019). Gendered disparities further restrict participation, with women encountering acute obstacles to employment and financial autonomy (Admasu, 2021). In South Africa, sustained migrant livelihood businesses and self-reliance are undermined by prejudice and violent attacks (Tawodzera and Crush, 2023). Additional studies highlight how limited capital, reliance on informal work, and weak institutional environments undermine the durability of self-reliance efforts (Easton-Calabria, 2020; IRC, 2022).

Rights, legal protections, and implementation gaps

Empirical research consistently shows that formal legal rights often fail to translate into meaningful protections for urban refugees in sub-Saharan Africa. In Ethiopia, while the 2019 Refugees Proclamation expanded entitlements, UNHCR and Refugee and Returnee Service reviews show that documentation delays, work permit bottlenecks, and inconsistent enforcement of the OCP still limit refugees' access to jobs, services, and mobility (RRS and UNHCR, 2021; 2023; UNHCR, 2024). These gaps reflect broader institutional capacity limitations and fragmented governance under the CRRF, with persistent challenges in coordination, monitoring, and enforcement (UNHCR, 2021a). Similar obstacles are reported in Kenya and Uganda, where unresolved documentation, status recognition problems, and opaque administrative procedures restrict refugees' access to services and legal employment (Koizumi and Hoffstaedter, 2015). In South Africa, strong legal protections exist in principle, but xenophobic hostility, bureaucratic hurdles, and uneven law enforcement undermine their realization (Choudry and Hlatshwayo, 2016; Hlatshwayo, 2016; Mlambo et al., 2023). Global studies of urban refugee contexts likewise highlight barriers such as discrimination, inadequate documentation, and weak administrative responsiveness (UNHCR, 2009; Thomas et al., 2011). Collectively, this literature underscores a central insight of rights-based analysis: statutory entitlements alone are insufficient unless supported by effective, accessible, and accountable implementation systems.

Capabilities, education, and conversion of rights into freedoms

Empirical studies in Ethiopia, Kenya, and Uganda show that refugees' formal entitlements often fail to translate into substantive freedoms. In Ethiopia, despite the 2019 Refugees Proclamation, documentation delays, work permit bottlenecks, and weak enforcement of the OCP limit refugees' ability to convert rights into livelihoods (World Bank and UNHCR, 2024). In Kenya, socioeconomic surveys reveal that even highly educated refugees face discrimination, credential recognition challenges, and limited access to capital (World Bank, 2024). In Uganda, studies of the self-reliance strategy show that rights to work and cultivate land are undermined by resource scarcity and weak institutional support (Omata, 2022; Mastrorillo et al., 2024). Together, this literature underscores the capability approach insight: rights alone do not guarantee freedoms unless supported by enabling institutional, social, and economic conditions (Phillimore, 2024).

Integration, social inclusion, and host–refugee relations

Empirical findings reflect the multidimensional integration domains outlined by Ager and Strang (2008). In Addis Ababa, refugees face barriers to housing, employment, education, and social participation, with limited opportunities to connect with host communities (UNHCR, 2009; Pape et al., 2018a; Betts et al., 2019). In Nairobi, municipal governance and local politics shape access to services and inclusion (Campbell, 2006; Mixed Migration Centre, 2022), while in Uganda and Kenya, weak institutional facilitation and constrained legal implementation hinder participation despite formal entitlements (Koizumi and Hoffstaedter, 2015). South African studies highlight more severe exclusion, where restrictive policies, xenophobic hostility, and episodic violence undermine belonging and economic participation (Choudry and Hlatshwayo, 2016; Hlatshwayo, 2016; Mlambo et al., 2023). Local initiatives, including community organizations, faith groups, and grassroots networks, offer partial inclusion, though such efforts remain uneven and fragile.

In sum, three gaps persist in the literature. First, evidence is fragmented, with much research programmatic rather than peer-reviewed comparative analysis (Kindie et al., 2023). Second, the interaction between social capital and institutional frameworks is underexplored, as studies often treat networks and policy separately (Hlatshwayo, 2016; Betts et al., 2019). Third, refugee inclusion is rarely assessed within SDG monitoring and national planning (UNHCR, 2020a). This study addresses these gaps through an integrated, multi-theoretical lens, linking rights, capabilities, self-reliance, social capital, and integration domains in urban Ethiopia and comparative sub-Saharan contexts.

Conceptual framework

Figure 1 situates urban refugee protection within Ethiopia's policy landscape and the global commitments of the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda. Global and national frameworks including the GCR, SDGs, CRRF, and the 2019 Refugee Proclamation establish the legal and normative basis for refugee protection and articulate principles of inclusion and "Leave No One Behind."

The framework then outlines the contextual conditions that shape how these commitments unfold. Structural factors such as urban poverty, inflation, and housing and labor market constraints define the socioeconomic environment. Institutional conditions reflect the capacity of the Refugees and Returnees Service (RRS), the alignment of sectoral policies, municipal service capacity, and inter-agency coordination. Administrative and operational conditions include documentation processes, work-permit and licensing procedures, and access to health, education, and social protection systems. Together, these determine whether formal commitments translate into practical access.

At the center are refugee needs, including education, health, social protection, and livelihoods alongside the challenges that mediate access, including socioeconomic vulnerabilities, documentation barriers, and language and cultural

obstacles. Presenting these together underscores that protection depends both on service availability and on overcoming systemic barriers.

The interaction of commitments, contextual conditions, and refugee needs and challenges shapes protection and development outcomes, such as improved capabilities, social participation, equitable service access, and progress toward "Leave No One Behind." The framework thus identifies where gaps emerge between Ethiopia's formal commitments and the lived realities of urban refugees.

Figure 1: Conceptual framework of the study
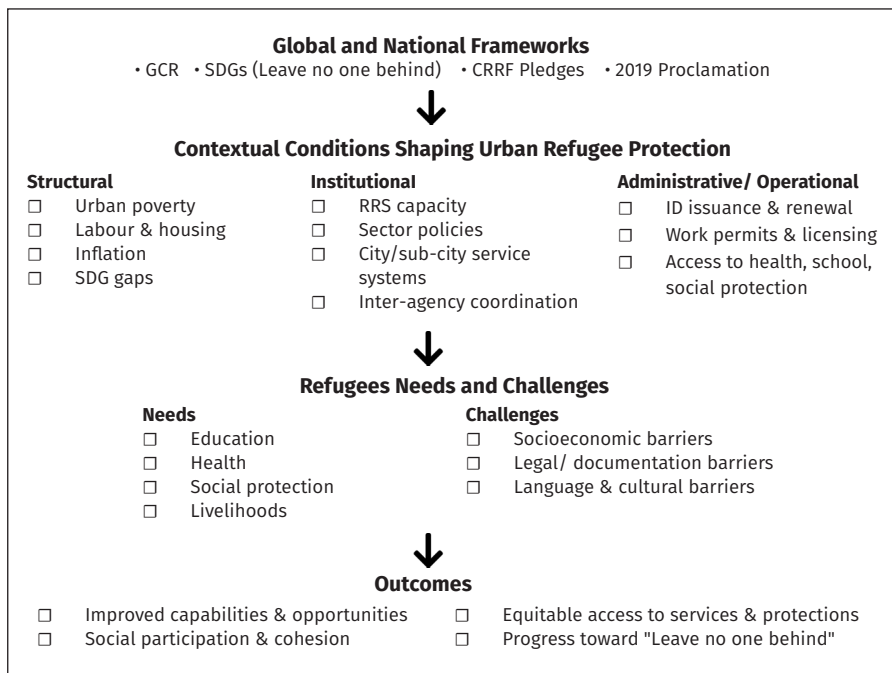
Source: Authors' construction based on the literature review

METHODOLOGY

Our research methods encompassed desk reviews, key informant interviews, and in-depth interviews. Desk research, also known as secondary research, involves analyzing and synthesizing existing data sources such as books, articles, and reports (Bryman, 2016). This method is cost effective and time efficient. It provides a comprehensive understanding of a topic without the need for primary data collection (Bryman, 2016). We reviewed relevant qualitative and quantitative works on the needs and various socioeconomic, legal, and cultural challenges facing urban refugees. However, a significant limitation of our desk review was

the reliance on reports due to the scarcity of peer-reviewed publications on this empirically under-researched topic. Additionally, we analyzed data from the Welcoming Neighbourhoods: Sustainable Migration in North and West Africa Cities (WelCit) Project.[4]

Key informant interviews involve interviewing individuals with expert knowledge or experience in the research topic to gain insights and information not available through other sources (Akhter, 2022). We used purposive sampling to select individuals actively engaged with urban refugees, ensuring valuable insights from knowledgeable and experienced informants. We interviewed five experts from three organizations: the Refugee and Returnee Service of Ethiopia (RRS), Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church-Development and Inter-Church Aid Commission (EOTC-DICAC), and the International Organization for Migration (IOM).

In-depth interviews, another qualitative research method, aim to build a deep understanding rather than gather factual or abstract information (Osborne and Grant-Smith, 2021). Due to the challenges of accessibility and location, we employed a snowball sampling technique, where initial participants recruited new ones (Nikolopoulou, 2023). This method is particularly useful for researching hard-to-reach populations. Interviews were conducted in Amharic, English, Somali, and Arabic. Eritrean refugees, proficient in Amharic, sometimes used translators who were also our focal points. The collected information was transcribed, categorized, and analyzed thematically, with case studies supporting the arguments presented in the results section.

While in-depth interviews are typically unstructured, we used semi-structured interviews to follow a set of questions, allowing flexibility for clarifying and follow-up questions. This approach helped us to explore refugees' personal experiences, which provided rich information to understand the complex issues they face in accessing basic services and protection needs. The method employed in the research helped capture the lived experiences, coping mechanisms, and nuanced social changes and continuities. It provided an in-depth context to our understanding of the refugee communities involved in the research. The data used in the study complement existing literature by grounding theoretical frameworks that explain social capital and networks, as well as forced migration and marginality, in real-world contexts. By doing so, it validates and challenges earlier contributions and fills knowledge gaps in the existing literature. The insights from the data are expected to inform broader context-sensitive and inclusive refugee interventions while shaping policy, programs, and practices that emphasize humanity, respect, agency, and continuous integration. This will ultimately foster policies that are both data-driven and responsive to

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[4] The project is an interdisciplinary research project that aims to understand the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion among mobile people in specific neighborhoods characterized by diversity in terms of life histories and mobility experiences of people who live there. The project is a collaborative initiative between the University of Geneva, University of Applied Science of Social Work in Ticino and University of Applied Science of Social Work in Lucerne, Universite SidiMohamed Ben Abdallah, Universite Pelforo.

the demands of refugees and the complexities of the challenges refugees face. We conducted in-depth interviews with 21 refugees (10 female and 11 male) from various countries of origin (Table 1). Although our sample size did not achieve saturation in the strict methodological sense, recruitment was constrained by the challenges of accessing urban refugee populations, including mobility, fear of exposure, and limited formal registration. Nevertheless, the sample was purposively diverse, and recurring themes across participants indicated thematic sufficiency. In line with qualitative research standards (Guest et al., 2006; Mason, 2010), the modest sample size provided rich, varied insights into protection challenges, while also reflecting the empirical reality that urban refugees are a hard-to-reach population.

Table 1: Composition of the refugees interviewed

No	Coded Name*	Country of origin	Gender	Age
1.	UR-ER1	Eritrea	F	40
2.	UR-ER2	Eritrea	M	37
3.	UR-ER3	Eritrea	M	34
4.	UR-ER4	Eritrea	M	42
5.	UR-ER5	Eritrea	F	35
6.	UR-ER6	Eritrea	M	40
7.	UR-ER7	Eritrea	F	26
8.	UR-ER8	Eritrea	M	35
9.	UR-SO1	Somalia	M	45
10.	UR-SO2	Somalia	F	35
11.	UR-SO3	Somalia	M	42
12.	UR-SO4	Somalia	M	32
13.	UR-SO5	Somalia	M	29
14.	UR-SO6	Somalia	F	22
15.	UR-SY1	Syria	F	53
16.	UR-SY2	Syria	F	57
17.	UR-SY3	Syria	F	49
18.	UR-SY4	Syria	F	48
19.	UR-SY5	Syria	F	38
20.	UR-YE1	Yemen	M	39
21.	UR-YE2	Yemen	M	42

*Urban refugee (UR)-country initial, then serial number.
Source: Authors' own work

Research participants were sampled through focal persons who served as gatekeepers in all our engagements with the refugees. The gatekeepers helped ensure gender, nationality, and age representativeness across the samples.

Before conducting the interviews, the interviewer provided participants with all necessary information. The data collection followed the Helsinki Declaration to ethically safeguard the rights of the refugees. Participants were informed of their right to terminate the interview at any time and to decline answering specific questions. To ensure confidentiality, they were assured that their names would not be used and pseudonyms would be employed instead. Participants gave oral consent to participate in the study. We opted for oral consent to create a safe environment for participants to share their experiences freely. Data protection requirements were strictly followed by securely storing the recorded tapes. All data collected from participants were treated as anonymous. Data were analyzed thematically by organizing codes into themes through an iterative comparison and were triangulated across researchers, data sources, methods and participant feedback.

RESULTS

Economic inclusion and decent work (SDG 8, SDG 10)

Ethiopia has made concerted efforts to enhance economic inclusion for both refugees and host communities. The 2019 revised refugee law and the Ethiopia Job Compact, part of the CRRF, aimed to create 100,000 jobs, of which 30,000 were for refugees and 70,000 for host communities, and were supplemented by European Union (EU)-supported projects integrating refugees into urban safety net programs and fostering small and medium enterprise-based economic opportunities (UNHCR, 2019; European Council on Refugees and Exiles, 2020). By 2023, 38,621 refugees and 90,828 host-community members had benefited from economic initiatives in agriculture and livestock value chains, while skills training programs provided labor-market-linked qualifications to 7,756 refugees and 6,773 host members (RRS and UNHCR, 2021; 2023). Despite these achievements, challenges such as insufficient coordination, limited private sector engagement, short-term employment, and reliance on humanitarian aid constrained broader impacts.

Interviews reveal how these policy efforts are experienced on the ground. Refugees' labor market access is diverse: some work formally, others are self-employed, and many engage in informal work. Entrepreneurial ventures include fast-food businesses, tailoring, and traditional Yemeni honey trade. One participant described the following:

> I rent the house for a fast-food service business, pay 15000 birr monthly, and have five workers in the business too. The trade license permission came through my father's family because my father is Ethiopian. (UR11-ER)

Some other participants reported being enrolled in the government's urban Safety Net Program, and employed as janitors. As one of the beneficiaries of government support explained:

> I am registered for the Safety Net Program, so they chose the poorest of the poor from the society and registered me based on the number of my family members, and I am receiving assistance from the program. They provide me with training and a job as a cleaner. And I work as a janitor (cleaning service) and make a living from it. (UR-ER1)

However, formal employment is often inaccessible due to legal and documentation gaps. A key informant interview from government agencies noted this:

> The biggest obstacle appears to be a lack of regulations and directives that would make it easier to apply the revised proclamation. Consequently, urban refugees have restricted access to the labor market. The gaps in the legal framework have also generated substantial impediments for urban refugees, which range from problems with documentation to opportunities for work in the labor market. (RRS-1)

Despite their diverse labor market access experiences in common, refugees face challenges. Participants from Eritrea working in the tailoring sector mention lack of the required documents forcing them to work informally and increasing their vulnerability. An Eritrean stated:

> I am a traditional clothing tailor by profession, yet I cannot operate here due to a lack of a license, working space, and passport (National ID). The business owner pays me a low wage because it is a form of favoritism, given that I have no other option but to work there. (UR-ER2)

Overall, while policy initiatives have produced measurable outcomes, structural barriers and reliance on informal employment constrain meaningful and equitable economic inclusion.

Housing and the urban development (SDG 11)

The desk review indicated lack of urban housing options and insufficient infrastructure support for refugee-hosting areas, compounded by high inflation and urban redevelopment projects in Addis Ababa (RRS and UNHCR, 2021; 2023).

Interviews showed that refugees often rent collectively or rely on family abroad, reflecting both economic constraints and limited formal support. Participants described the strain of high rents and the challenge of meeting basic needs as follows:

> Every day is a struggle for me since I don't have a place to live, I don't have any income, and I can't afford the rent on a house. I don't know what I'll do. (UR-SY9)

> We used to receive 2,000 to 3,000 Birr monthly from the Refugee Commission, but they stopped providing aid five months ago. Due to this we have serious concerns. (UR-SY8)

High housing costs often compel children to work or families to rely on begging, while temporary accommodations such as small hotels are unaffordable or lack privacy. The shortage of affordable housing has heightened tensions with host communities, particularly regarding rising rental prices and security concerns, further complicated by urban corridor development projects that have removed housing units in large parts of the city.

Health and healthcare access (SDG 3)

Desk review findings show notable progress in refugee registration, ID issuance, and social protection enrolment, including 905,388 refugees enrolled in the Biometric Identity Management System (BIMS) by 2023 (RRS and UNHCR, 2023). Yet, healthcare access remains uneven, particularly for unregistered urban refugees who lack proper documentation.

Interviews reveal a strong preference for private healthcare due to perceived gaps in public hospitals, documentation barriers, and quality concerns. Refugees highlighted the high cost of private services, but often had no alternative. A Syrian refugee stated the following:

> I went to the public hospital first, but they were unwelcome for me and did not get the service. Then, I use a private hospital named Amin Hospital with my family because my son requires follow-up care there, and I spend 5,000 Birr per week to do so. (UR-SY7)

An Eritrean refugee linked the choice of a private health provider to documentation issues, saying:

> I am well [now], but if a problem arises, I will go to a private hospital. I wish to visit the public hospital but lack a kebele identification card. (UR-ER2)

The desk review also highlighted that inadequate energy and infrastructure support indirectly affect health outcomes, showing the interconnectedness of environmental and social determinants of well-being (RRS and UNHCR, 2021; 2023).

Education, skills, and language (SDG 4)

Desk review evidence shows that by 2023, 7,756 refugees had accessed skills training, yet educational opportunities remain uneven, particularly for higher education (RRS and UNHCR, 2021; 2023). Interviewees emphasized the importance of education for employment and integration but highlighted multiple barriers including financial constraints, language difficulties, and the prioritization of immediate survival. One of refugee students in higher education stated this:

> I am currently enrolled as a student pursuing a degree in nursing at the African College, a reputable institution of higher learning situated in the bustling city of Addis Ababa. My academic pursuits are focused on acquiring the necessary knowledge and skills to become a competent nursing professional. (UR-SO10)

Some refugees reported having access to education thanks to various interventions, such as the government's Safety Net Program. One participant noted the following:

> Although I did not pursue any form of education for myself, I did put my son through public school. In terms of training, I already participate in training under the Safety Net Program, and because of family members, they pay me every month. (UR-ER1)

Some refugees also reported receiving education through the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS), which offers training in music, computers, languages, and hairdressing. Many others reported no access at all, as a participant said:

> I did not receive any education or training. My children did not attend school either. (UR-SY7)

An Eritrean said this:

> I did not get any education or training in Addis because I didn't have the chance. Due to a lack of opportunities, I could not participate in any educational or training programs in Addis. (UR-ER2)

The desk review corroborates that while training programs exist, limited scale, language barriers, and financial constraints continue to hinder educational participation.

Legal and political frameworks, documentation, and access to justice (SDG 16, SDG 1.4)

Desk review shows that by 2023, 484,179 refugees had ID cards, and 179,196 asylum seekers were processed (RRS and UNHCR, 2021; 2023). However, interviews revealed persistent barriers in practice, particularly regarding employment, business

licensing, and access to financial services. An Eritrean participant explained the challenge as follows:

> I used to make a living by peddling potato chips (chips) on the street, but I'm not allowed to do that anymore because I don't have a business license. (UR-ER1)

The participant added:

> Forget all accesses, ID card is vital to me because without it I can't receive any kind of financial credit. (UR-ER1)

While many participants reported difficulties accessing identification documents and work permits, some informants stated they had bypassed these obstacles using various strategies. These included utilizing social networks, relying on assistance from family members, marrying local community members, or seeking help from other trusted community members. One of the participants explained how they managed to get around the barriers as follows:

> The trade license permission was accomplished through my father's family because my father is Ethiopian. [Though], no micro-credit service received yet. (UR11-ER)

Documentation challenges vary by nationality, with Eritrean refugees particularly affected, often compelled to work in informal businesses that lack protections.

Social participation, networks, and social cohesion (SDG 10.2, SDG 11.3, SDG 16.7)

Desk review depicted the importance of social capital for refugee adaptation, and aligned with theoretical frameworks on social integration and inclusion. Interviews underscored how social networks provide access to employment, safety, and social adaptation. Co-ethnic and host-community networks facilitate information exchange, referrals, and client acquisition. Somalian refugees relied heavily on their previous social networks, such as friends and family, established with their co-ethnic host communities. An Eritrean refugee explained this networking in the following manner:

> When I came here, I rented the home of an Ethiopian owner. We had family relationships. Currently, I live in Jemo, where many Eritreans reside. As a result, we communicate every day, regardless of how serious the problem is. But language difficulty sometimes restricted my interest and communication [with those host communities that are not co-ethnic]. (UR-ER4)

Many participants stated that having a social network made them feel more protected and secure when facing the challenges of living in a new and unfamiliar environment. This was especially true for those lacking local language proficiency or official documentation. Some even used their social network to obtain clients for their businesses, as word-of-mouth recommendations were considered sufficient for promoting their services. As the participants elaborated on the value of networking, they stated:

> People come to me on referrals from others to make a variety of traditional garments; effective communication is essential to both my job and my business. (UR4-ER)

Refugees underscored the role of social networks and participation:

> It is essential to have a network since it helps other people get familiar with my work, either Eritrean or Ethiopian. (UR5-ER)

> I have good social networks here with different customers; even my previous social networks helped me settle here in Addis. (UR11-ER)

However, the benefits of social networks are not uniformly distributed; Eritrean and Somali refugees rely more heavily on co-ethnic networks to navigate linguistic and cultural barriers, while social participation for others is constrained by language, limited documentation, and uneven access to formal community activities.

DISCUSSION

This study examined how protection challenges and resource constraints shape the lived experiences of urban refugees in Ethiopia, drawing on social capital theory, self-reliance theory, rights-based approaches, the capability approach, and integration/social inclusion frameworks. Organizing the findings around the SDG-aligned thematic clusters suggested by reviewers helped clarify how refugees' needs, institutional responses, and structural barriers intersect. Across all domains, the results revealed significant gaps between policy commitments, especially under the 2019 Refugee Proclamation, the CRRF, and Ethiopia's alignment with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and the realities of implementation.

Economic inclusion and decent work (SDG 8; SDG 10)

Findings underscore deep constraints on refugees' ability to achieve economic self-reliance. Participants repeatedly described their efforts to secure livelihoods, reflecting a structural environment where formal labor markets remain largely inaccessible despite legal reforms. This echoes empirical research showing that urban refugees in sub-Saharan Africa remain concentrated in precarious informal

work with limited protections (Betts et al., 2017, 2019). Interpreted through the self-reliance and capability frameworks, these constraints demonstrate that formal rights alone are insufficient to expand refugees' real freedoms. While Ethiopia's refugee policies promise access to employment and financial services, desk reviews reveal gaps in administrative implementation, employer resistance, sector-specific restrictions, and documentation barriers that limit the conversion of rights into capabilities (UNHCR, 2023; World Bank and UNHCR, 2024). The social capital lens is also revealing. Refugees who lacked supportive networks faced greater economic insecurity, consistent with studies showing that bonding and bridging social capital can be decisive for job access, training, and credit in urban contexts (Campbell, 2006). Yet the same networks may trap refugees in saturated and low-return sectors, reinforcing the low-income equilibrium described in the self-reliance literature. Overall, this result highlights a persistent tension between Ethiopia's rights-oriented policy reforms and the structural exclusion that continues to hinder the realization of SDG 8 and SDG 10.

Housing and urban development (SDG 11)

Housing emerged as a defining challenge, with respondents identifying overcrowding, unaffordable rents, unsafe neighborhoods, and lack of tenure security. These experiences mirror evidence across African cities where urban refugees shoulder disproportionate housing burdens (Pavanello et al., 2010; Brown et al., 2018; Nigusie, 2024). Desk review findings show that government regulations limiting refugees' access to subsidized housing maintain unequal access to urban space. From a rights-based perspective, inadequate housing signals shortcomings in fulfilling the right to adequate shelter for non-citizens. Social inclusion frameworks further emphasize that spatial marginalization contributes to exclusion from employment, services, and community participation. Housing insecurity also undermines refugees' capabilities, particularly safety, health, and mobility. These findings reinforce calls in the literature for urban planning and social protection systems that explicitly integrate refugee populations (Zetter and Ruaudel, 2016).

Health and healthcare access (SDG 3)

Findings reveal systemic and intersectional vulnerabilities. Respondents cited language barriers, discrimination, unaffordable services, and administrative hurdles despite Ethiopia's formal commitment to integrate refugees into national health systems. Desk review evidence corroborated this, highlighting fragmentation between policy and implementation, particularly around health insurance eligibility and fee waivers (UNHCR, 2020; World Bank and UNHCR, 2024). Viewed through the capability approach, health access is foundational for human development; its denial constrains all other capabilities. The rights-based perspective similarly frames equitable healthcare as a core entitlement under international and domestic law. Yet

empirical studies show that urban refugees often encounter parallel systems, weak referral pathways, and limited cultural mediation (Pavanello et al., 2010). These structural and administrative barriers indicate that progress toward SDG 3 remains uneven and highly dependent on social capital, personal networks, and individual resilience rather than rights guarantees.

Education, skills, and language (SDG 4)

Education, skills and language development emerged as both aspirations and areas of persistent exclusion. Refugees described being unable to enroll in higher education, vocational training, or language programs due to documentation problems, tuition fees, and quota systems. These narratives complement desk review findings which showed that although Ethiopia's policies allow refugee access to public education, administrative practices, resource shortages, and discrimination continue to produce disparities (UNICEF, 2020; World Bank and UNHCR, 2024). The capability approach is particularly useful here: education enhances refugees' capabilities for economic participation, social inclusion, and long-term well-being. Empirical studies in the region similarly note that language barriers and interrupted schooling diminish refugees' competitiveness in urban labor markets (Dryden-Peterson, 2011). Education is a key pathway for long-term inclusion; however, the findings suggest that Ethiopian urban settings provide limited institutional support for such pathways. As one participant noted, "Without language and training, we remain stuck." These constraints undermine progress toward SDG 4, reinforcing intergenerational exclusion.

Legal and political frameworks, documentation, and access to justice (SDG 16; SDG 1.4)

Ethiopia's 2019 Refugee Proclamation is widely recognized as progressive, yet refugees continue to face delays, expired IDs, and fragmented administrative procedures that block access to jobs, banking, and services. Such gaps between reform and practice echo findings from Nairobi and Kampala, where documentation difficulties perpetuate exclusion from housing, work, and justice systems (Pavanello et al., 2010; Easton-Calabria et al., 2022). From a rights-based perspective, these barriers undermine both procedural and substantive rights, while integration theories emphasize that legal identity is a prerequisite for civic and economic participation (Zetter and Ruaudel, 2016). The cascading effects across multiple SDGs confirm that documentation functions as a gatekeeper: without it, rights remain aspirational. Comparative studies of urban refugee governance show this is systemic across African cities, not unique to Ethiopia (Campbell, 2006; UNHCR, 2023; World Bank and UNHCR, 2024).

Social participation, networks, and social cohesion (SDG 10.2; SDG 11.3; SDG 16.7)

The findings revealed uneven social participation, constrained by discrimination, language barriers, and limited interaction with Ethiopian communities. While

some refugees reported support from neighbors or religious groups, others described exclusionary attitudes that reinforced outsider status. These dynamics align with integration frameworks which emphasize that social cohesion depends not only on refugees' agency but also on institutional facilitation and host-community attitudes (Ager and Strang, 2008). Competition over scarce housing, jobs, and services further exacerbates tensions, as documented in Nairobi and Kampala (Pavanello et al., 2010; Easton-Calabria et al., 2022). Empirical studies across African cities similarly show that refugees struggle to build bridging capital with host communities due to structural inequalities and limited platforms for interaction (Landau and Duponchel, 2011; Dryden-Peterson, 2015). These patterns suggest that without deliberate policies to foster inclusion, social cohesion remains fragile and uneven, undermining progress toward SDGs on equality, inclusive urban development, and participatory governance.

Taken together, the discussion underscores a persistent disjuncture between Ethiopia's progressive refugee policy commitments and the lived realities of urban refugees. Across economic inclusion, housing, health, education, legal identity, and social participation, the findings reveal that rights are often undermined by administrative fragmentation, resource shortages, and exclusionary social dynamics. Comparative evidence from other African cities reinforces that these challenges are systemic rather than isolated, pointing to the need for deliberate institutional reforms and inclusive urban planning that bridge the gap between policy and practice. Ultimately, the study shows that achieving the SDG targets for refugees in Ethiopia requires not only legislative innovation but sustained implementation, accountability, and host-community engagement to transform rights into real opportunities for social and economic participation.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

This study shows that Ethiopia's evolving refugee policy environment reflects some normative alignment with the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda, yet significant gaps remain between these commitments and the lived experiences of urban refugees in Addis Ababa. Across the domains of economic opportunity, housing, health, education, documentation, and social participation, refugees display resilience, initiative, and an ability to mobilize social networks to compensate for systemic constraints. However, these strategies operate within structural, institutional, and socioeconomic conditions that limit the translation of legal rights into meaningful capabilities.

The discussion demonstrates that the principal challenges facing urban refugees do not stem from an absence of legal reforms, but from uneven implementation, administrative bottlenecks, and the inadequacy of urban systems to absorb and support displaced populations. As a result, refugees remain concentrated in informal

work, precarious housing, and under-resourced services, despite policy frameworks that, in principle, enable broader access and participation. These findings echo wider regional evidence indicating that the effectiveness of refugee protection depends largely on governance capacity, local-level coordination, and the responsiveness of service delivery systems.

At the same time, the analysis highlights opportunities for strengthening protection outcomes. Social networks play a crucial bridging role in employment, housing, and access to information, while existing training and education initiatives, though uneven, demonstrate the potential of inclusive programming when institutional commitments and resources align. The experiences identified in this study thus point to the importance of consolidating gains from recent policy reforms while addressing persistent implementation gaps.

Overall, the study concludes that achieving meaningful alignment with the SDGs requires sustained investment in administrative capacity, clearer and more predictable documentation processes, and more inclusive urban planning and service delivery systems. Enhancing refugees' access to decent work, affordable housing, quality healthcare, and education and enabling their participation in social and civic life is essential not only for the realization of their rights but also for strengthening social cohesion and advancing Ethiopia's commitments under the GCR.

Recommendations

The findings point to three foundational reforms that determine the effectiveness of protection measures for urban refugees in Ethiopia: (1) strengthening implementation of the 2019 Refugee Proclamation, (2) streamlining documentation and access systems, and (3) institutionalizing multi-level coordination and CRRF–city linkages. In each case, we propose both short-term and long-term interventions along with key actors and linked SDGs/GCR.

1. Strengthen implementation of the 2019 refugee proclamation

Although Ethiopia has put in place a progressive refugee legal framework with three operational directives issued, enforcement and uptake remain uneven across urban contexts. Strengthening implementation requires better dissemination, monitoring, and capacity-building.

> Short-term interventions:
> - Disseminate directives widely to all sub-city bureaus and frontline service providers;
> - Train health, education, social protection, and municipal staff on refugee rights and procedures;
> - Strengthen monitoring mechanisms to track compliance and resolve gaps in service delivery.

Long-term interventions:

- Expand RRS urban oversight and capacity for implementing Proclamation provisions;
- Institutionalize accountability frameworks to ensure consistent enforcement;
- Review and update directives as needed to respond to emerging urban challenges.

Lead actors: RRS; Ministry of Justice; Addis Ababa City Administration; Ministry of Women and Social Affairs (MoWSA); Parliament.

SDG/GCR links: SDG 16 (strong institutions); SDG 10.3 (reduce inequality); GCR Objective 2 (enhance refugee self-reliance by strengthening opportunities to access education, employment, and livelihoods).

2. Streamline documentation, identity management, and access systems

Documentation is the functional gateway to healthcare, education, livelihoods, and social protection. The study identified bottlenecks including delayed ID issuance, inconsistent renewal practices, and fragmented data systems that limit refugee access.

Short-term interventions:

- Digitize and standardize ID issuance and renewal workflows;
- Establish one-stop documentation and referral centers in high-density sub-cities;
- Deploy mobile documentation teams to reach vulnerable groups.

Long-term interventions:

- Integrate refugee identity data with sectoral management systems—Health Management Information System (HMIS), Education Management Information System (EMIS), Social Protection Management Information System (SPMIS), and so forth;
- Align refugee documentation with national digital ID reforms;
- Implement interoperable citywide verification and referral protocols.

Lead actors: RRS; UNHCR; Addis Ababa sub-city bureaus; MoWSA; Ministry of Education; Ministry of Health.

SDG/GCR links: SDG 16.9 (legal identity); SDG 3.8 (universal health coverage); SDG 4.1 (inclusive education); GCR Objective 2.

3. Institutionalize multi-level coordination and CRRF–city linkages

Fragmented governance between federal, city, and sub-city authorities has been a persistent challenge. Effective coordination ensures coherent policy implementation and sustainable service delivery.

Short-term interventions:

- Establish structured referral pathways between RRS and sub-city service providers;

   • Strengthen CRRF focal points and integrate refugee affairs into city social sector teams.

Long-term interventions:

   • Embed refugee considerations into city development plans, budgets, and performance frameworks;
   • Institutionalize joint monitoring systems and data-sharing agreements across sectors;
   • Integrate refugees into national and municipal housing, social protection, and livelihood schemes.

Lead actors: CRRF Steering Committee; RRS; Addis Ababa City Administration; MoWSA; Ministry of Finance; UNHCR; and other relevant line ministries.

SDG/GCR links: SDG 17 (partnerships and policy coherence); SDG 11.1 (adequate housing); SDG 8.5 (decent work); GCR Objective 4 (ensure that the needs and priorities of host communities are addressed).

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