

Editorial

## Networks and Contested Identities in the Refugee Journey

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### Abstract

This thematic issue traverses refugee research that recognises the importance of networks in determining the paths that refugees undertake in their journeys to seek safety and protection. In recent years, scholars have increasingly pointed to the multifaceted nature of networks in the refugee journey. These articles demonstrate the importance of elucidating the distinct influences and factors that shape refugee networks, including the unequal power relations between refugees and refugee aid workers in transit countries, transnational family and community connections, the proliferation of technologies in strengthening refugees' networks, the role of the state in privileging certain refugee groups over others, and the role of refugees themselves in mobilising both past and existing networks to activate supports.

### Keywords

asylum seekers; contested identities; mobilization; network mobility; networks; refugee journey; refugees

### Issue

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### 1. Introduction

Although refugee studies have recognised the importance of networks in determining the paths refugees undertake in their journeys to seek safety and protection, in recent years scholars have increasingly pointed to the multifaceted nature of networks in the refugee journey. Unlike mainstream analysis of social networks, a growing body of refugee research outlines the distinct influences and factors that shape refugee networks, including the unequal power relations between refugees and refugee aid workers in transit countries, transnational family and community connections, the proliferation of technologies in strengthening refugees' networks, the role of the state in privileging certain refugee groups over others, and the role of refugees themselves in mobilising both past and existing networks to activate supports (D'Angelo, 2021; Hajj, 2021). As D'Angelo argues,

we need to reject any form of “network determinism” which may limit the understanding of refugees' networks to assume the presence of “diffuse, ethnic based and transnational ties” (D'Angelo, 2021, p. 489). While it is important to identify these networks and explain their emergence, it is equally important to recognise the capabilities and agency of refugees in activating those ties in mobilising supports both within the location of place and across the boundaries of national borders (Anthias, 2007; D'Angelo, 2021). The multifaceted nature of refugees' networks, as the articles in this thematic issue suggest, points to a new reality facing refugees: Connecting with people and systems is a necessary part of surviving as they depart from the homeland and enter spaces that are unfamiliar and often hostile to them.

Scholars interested in networks in the refugee journey have, in particular, demonstrated (re)constructed identities of refugees in these connections, including

through state policy and media representations, thereby expanding how networks are negotiated and circulate (un)equal power relations between refugees and the specific connections that they make (D'Angelo, 2015; Dağtaş, 2018; Nunn et al., 2016; Sharma, 2021). In addition to being treated differently due to the nature of their political circumstances of not being protected by the state, refugees are also subjected to legal and political regimes that differentiate them based on their race, ethnicity, and religion (Costello & Foster, 2022; Sow, 2022). This practice of racial differentiation and the treatment of refugees is historically rooted in the colonialism and ignorance embedded in the global refugee regime (Krause, 2021). As such, intersectional identities, that is identities that sit at the axis of, for example, race, gender, and class, delineate the further fracturing of refugees during their journey to safety and protection. Significantly, as illustrated in this set of articles, this has ramifications for the building of networks to both facilitate the journey of refugees and their successful resettlement in their new place of final settlement.

As documented in the set of articles in this thematic issue, scholars are required to move beyond viewing the refugee subject not just in terms of their involuntary migration, but as active subjects with intersectional identities within a complex field of interactions which includes, but is not confined to, class, gender, sexuality, race, disability, and age. Take, by way of example, the refugee protection crisis emerging from the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This crisis has highlighted the significance of race in constructing the ongoing outpouring of global support for refugees from European backgrounds compared to the neglect, ignorance, and hostility towards refugees from non-European backgrounds, as articulated in the research with refugees (see also Zawadzka-Paluetau, 2022). Racialisation as a dominant feature of refugee intersections affect the networks that refugees require to secure employment and a sense of financial well-being. Such is the case of male refugees from Yemen who face heightened levels of stigma and discrimination in resettlement in South Korea due to their race and gender compared to the arrival of Afghan refugees (Sheikh et al., 2022).

Refugee journeys embody a range of specificities, including as a result of the relationship between the host state and the former refugee homeland, and simultaneously in different socio-political contexts within society. The question of networking is thereby inherently linked to the negotiated, politicised, and changing dynamics of the circulation, and indeed, contestation, of intersectional refugee identities at any given time and context. However, to date, there are gaps in the scholarship, specifically relating to the diverse contexts and methodologies that can help to understand the significance of networks and identities in refugee journeys.

It is the multifaceted nature of networks in the refugee journey that this thematic issue examines through a collection of methodologically and empiri-

cally rich case studies from across the globe. The thematic issue challenges the overly simplistic view of the refugee journey as linear mobility from the country of origin to a resettlement destination. While this linear movement certainly applies to some refugees, it does not take into account the complex spatial and temporal fluidities of the refugee journey, which is “constant, fluid and inherently transnational, and which has in the continuous deconstruction and reconstruction of social-ties as one of its key features” (D'Angelo, 2021, p. 490). As articulated throughout the articles in this thematic issue, we argue further that the networks refugees encounter in their journeys are marked by (contested) identities imposed on them by the states in which they seek to resettle and the local societies where they are able to finally resettle, and that the meanings of these identities are at times reinforced and, other times, resisted by refugees as they traverse structural barriers and social norms in different contexts and over time. The articles in this thematic issue provide case studies for understanding networks and contested identities in the refugee journey: Syrian and Afghan refugees in Europe (Belabbas et al., 2022), Syrian refugees in Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon (Chang, 2022), Yemeni and Afghan refugees in South Korea (Sheikh et al., 2022), Central American refugees in Tapachula and Mexico City (Willers, 2022), Tamil refugees in Australia (Mehta et al., 2022), and the construction of social identity of refugees and recently settled migrants in Portugal (Sales et al., 2022). The articles illustrate the importance of complex identities and refugee networks across four core areas, as outlined below.

## 2. Ambiguities and Uncertainties in Refugee Networks

Based on an extensive ethnographic study of Syrian and Afghan refugees crossing multiple borders to reach European destinations, Belabbas et al. (2022) examine the plurality of decision-making that contributes to the networking that refugees undertake—whether by themselves, collectively as a family or community, or imposed onto them by external forces outside of their control. The authors distil different types of networks and social capital that influence refugee journeys, what they term the “locus of control” that helps to understand the decision-making processes undertaken by refugees. For one Syrian refugee family, social, economic, and embodied cultural capital became crucial to their successful approval for resettlement in the UK. While refugees with established social networks experienced greater success in their resettlement, much of the journey was subjected to pure chance. For many of the refugee subjects in the study, the involuntary changes and unexpected turns in their refugee journeys had left their locus of control determined by external factors largely beyond their influence. Yet, refugee women, in particular, recognised the importance of social networks and invested time and energy into them.

For example, Afghan women who were denied schooling in their homeland and continued to be treated poorly in Iran were motivated to study and write letters about their plight to the UNHCR, the UN, and other refugee aid organisations to gain support to leave the transit country. It becomes apparent how important the gendered dimension became in influencing how and why refugee women made certain conscious decisions during their refugee journey. In the case of one Afghan family's journey, access to information through transnational ties with friends, family, and international organisations strengthened their chances of finding suitable accommodation and employment in resettlement. But these networks emerged only after a certain point in their journeys; the limited initial networks available to them made their journey subjected to more risk and complications, and further exposed them to chance. The interplay between capital, social networks, information, pure chance, and identities thereby facilitates the process and outcomes of refugee journeys, from the departure point to the first transit country, resettlement, and their "potential" final destinations.

### 3. Class and Economic Networks

Chang (2022) draws our attention to the crucial impacts that networks tied to economic capital and social status can have on the refugee journey. Drawing on rich interview materials Chang examines the role of class in Syrian business people's resettlement experiences in Turkey, Egypt, and Jordan. As business professionals, this particular class of Syrian refugees was more resilient compared to other refugees in their refugee journey, since their class and economic status equipped them with pre-existing networks, which acted as "pull" factors to certain destinations. In line with their business interests, this class of Syrian refugees applied for investment residential permits rather than other types of refugee residential permits, which re-stabilised their class status even after being displaced from the homeland during the protracted Syrian civil conflict. In fact, their decisions to resettle in certain countries were also driven by sustaining their own longstanding socio-economic class interests, such as requirements of tax payments that made Jordan more favourable as a destination country compared to Turkey or Egypt. The benefits of having pre-existing networks tied to their social class and economic status, however, did not prevent this class of Syrian refugees from being subjected to the politics of their displacement from their homeland, that is, the politics of being a refugee. Ultimately, as Chang notes, the success of this class of Syrian business people in the new land was tied to their status as refugees. In Turkey, Chang shows that Syrian business people faced additional discrimination because of their inability to speak the local language, which had consequences for the local success of their business. The hostile attitudes of locals had also resulted in them refusing to rent houses to Syrians, in

turn making it extremely difficult to find accommodation while rebuilding their business as part of their resettlement process. It became apparent that this local community hostility was driven by political developments in the home country.

### 4. Gender, Race, and Discrimination in Refugee Networks

Underpinning the hostile attitudes of the host community is the issue of how host states have differently responded to the arrival of refugees fleeing different wars. Refugee studies have implicitly compared resettlement responses of different refugee groups that determine their social and cultural capital, and therefore belongingness in the new land through the processing of othering and exclusion or sameness and inclusion via engagement with racist discourse (Bourdieu, 1986; Cederberg, 2012, 2013). However, as Sheikh et al. (2022) argue, the diverse ways in which intersectional identities of gender and race are used by the host state and society to reject certain refugees and accept others have not been examined in enough depth in diverse contexts. Adopting an ethnographic approach and using a range of sources including policy and legal documents, political speeches, surveys, and observation analyses, the study advances theoretical approaches for understanding competing identities. These approaches shape social perceptions, legal instruments, and political agendas that can explain the different outcomes of refugees fleeing different wars and who need the same protection. By comparing the treatment of Yemeni refugees and Afghan refugees arriving in South Korea, Sheikh et al. (2022) assess the varied impacts that contested intersectional identities have on the success of support structures that are differently available to the refugee groups. At the core of the analysis is the intersectional analysis of Muslim masculinities: Gendered and Islamophobic stereotypes circulated by the media, far-right groups, and the government had constructed the majority-male Yemeni refugee group who arrived in South Korea as "rapists," "anti-women," and "terrorists." Thus, permanent protection was rejected in favour of temporary visas that restricted them from securing employment in labour industries including fishing and farming, leaving them impoverished and unable to rebuild their lives in the new land. By contrast, the government's construction of Afghan refugees as "special contributors" following the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan in 2021 marked a significant turn in South Korean international relations—it was the government's first mass evacuation on humanitarian grounds when it airlifted almost four-hundred Afghan refugees. By constructing Afghan refugees as *teugbyeolgiyeoja* (people of merit to the country), the government had effectively underplayed the Muslim identities of Afghan refugees. Moreover, the political responses that favoured Afghan refugees emphasised the historical relationship with its US ally,

therefore, the Muslim part of their identities did not come into question.

The construction of Muslim masculinities by the host state and society through policy, stereotypes, and circulation through media compete with the success of networks that refugees must build in order to survive in the new land. The global “war on terror” has resulted in refugees from certain backgrounds subjected to further discrimination. Refugees labelled “terrorists” by the state and society have been denied protection, languished in detention centres, and separated from their families (Sajjad, 2018). Overall, as this article illustrates, networks are predicated on the intersection of *certain* identities which permit only *certain* refugees as worthy of protection and belonging in the new land.

### 5. Building Refugee Networks: Reinforcing and Challenging Social Norms

Gendered networks in the refugee journeys of women are not only performative on the basis of what social and political implications demand that they adhere to for their survival but also the extent to which they themselves are willing to challenge those norms. The articles in this thematic issue entangle the refugee identity with other identities in order to distil diverse refugee networks and the ways that refugee circumstances and decisions might reinforce or subvert social norms, individually or collectively. Distilling the diverse experiences of refugees offers new insights into the multifaceted journeys that refugees endure on their path to safety and permanent protection. Gendered performativity is a well-documented element of refugee women’s survival in transit countries. In this thematic issue, Susanne Willers examines the complications that arise in the absence of networks that prevent refugee women from seeking shelter, albeit temporarily, outside of hostile refugee transit camps. The article focuses on Central American refugee women applying for refugee protection in Mexico to resettle in the US, where family and friends await to support them. Before they can use these networks awaiting them at the destination countries, however, the women must survive the reception contexts in transit, which re-victimise and exclude women. Examining the reception contexts in Tapachula and Mexico City, Willers (2022) finds that women participate in daily routines and social engagement activities in the shelter in order to be constructed as being in the shelter not because of laziness, but because of “bad luck.” These perceptions impact the length of stay of the women in the shelters. Performing gendered roles in the shelter, then, contributes to the refugee women’s survival as they come to terms with their new reality: that they must sooner or later “build new networks” outside of the shelter while they await outcomes of their refugee applications to resettle in the US where they have pre-existing networks. In turn, Willers’s study of women in transit cities shows that women, who

are mostly single parents with children, must contend with racial and gendered identities imposed on them by the host society that intensify their exclusion, identities that reinforce their state of need to prove that they deserve protection.

In contrast, Mehta et al. (2022) show that refugee women who have resettled in destination countries have challenged social norms by building community networks with other refugee women. Using focus group discussions with elderly Tamil refugee women in Australia, they examine women’s abilities to establish social networks that increased their access to information, decreased feelings of loneliness, improved mental and physical health, alleviated stress, and contributed to a stronger sense of self. The women’s interactions with each other also highlight their resistance to structural barriers, including difficulties accessing care facilities, social security provision, and navigating the health care system. These challenges are exacerbated by their gender and age, with the average age of the women in the study above seventy-five years. Building networks is vital for refugee women to survive in the new land, whether in transit or destination countries, as observed, for instance, by Willers in the case of central American refugee women in transit countries. By connecting with other elderly Tamil refugee women, the group harnessed a collective sense of agency that transcended their socially prescribed identities as mothers, grandmothers, and caregivers, while challenging ageist and gendered norms. By pursuing a politics of inclusion through social networks, these refugee women contribute to rebuilding new processes of belonging/becoming through networked forms of survival.

### 6. Practices of Mobility and Refugee Identity Reconfiguration

A final short note is offered from refugee scholars Catarina Sales, Ivan Novais, and Derisicleia Gomes. This piece is presented as a critical reflection on the Portuguese situation to expand existing theoretical discussions about the networked mobility practices of refugees within the European Union. Importantly, as a conceptual piece, the authors signify the interrelationship of personal networks, patterns of mobility, and structures of territorial boundaries in refugee journeys and how, combined, these factors shape the agency of refugees through the process of leaving their homelands and journeying to a new home—a place of resettlement. Sales et al. (2022) encourage our thinking around the interplay of these factors in shaping our engagement with the research literature to think through frames of justice within the refugee resettlement process.

### 7. Conclusion

By examining the multifaceted nature of networks and contested identities in the refugee journey, this thematic

issue has highlighted the diverse experiences of refugees together with the political implications of being displaced from the homeland. Centring the refugee subject in each of the studies has opened new avenues for conducting refugee research and, in particular, we argue that adopting a critical focus on the different stages of the refugee journey as well as a breadth of case studies from across the globe has demonstrated a more nuanced analysis of how refugee survival evolves over time and space. The political responses of states to the arrival of refugees, whether supportive or restrictive, are also crucial to the refugee journey. What each of the articles shows is that the refugee journey is inflected by contested identities. By drawing attention to these concerns, we hope that the thematic issue will contribute to further discussion of networks as a crucial aspect of refugee journeys.

### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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