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'It would be better if you had a UK degree': exploring the experiences of highly-skilled refugee women in the UK

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the employment challenges faced by highly-skilled refugee women in the UK, a group often overlooked in research and policy. Despite their qualifications and experience, these women encounter significant personal and structural barriers. Here, we report on nine qualitative interviews with highly-skilled refugee women in the UK. Drawing on thematic analysis, we examine the personal and structural barriers encountered by these women throughout their displacement trajectories, including feelings of inadequacy and systemic inequalities. The lens of Critical Race Theory and Intersectionality allows us to unpack the multiple factors that can result in compounded disadvantages for displaced women.

Η παρούσα μελέτη διερευνά τις εργασιακές προκλήσεις των υψηλά ειδικευμένων γυναικών προσφύγων στο Ηνωμένο Βασίλειο, μια ομάδα συχνά παραμελημένη από την έρευνα και την πολιτική. Παρά τα προσόντα και την εμπειρία τους, οι γυναίκες αυτές αντιμετωπίζουν σημαντικά προσωπικά και θεσμικά εμπόδια. Εδώ παρουσιάζουμε εννιά ποιοτικές συνεντεύξεις με υψηλά ειδικευόμενες γυναίκες πρόσφυγες στο Ηνωμένο Βασίλειο. Χρησιμοποιώντας θεματική ανάλυση, εξετάζουμε τα προσωπικά και θεσμικά εμπόδια που αντιμετωπίζουν αυτές οι γυναίκες κατά τον εκτοπισμό τους, συμπεριλαμβανομένων των αισθημάτων ανεπάρκειας και των συστημικών ανισοτήτων. Η Κριτική Φυλετική Θεωρία και η Διαθεματικότητα αναδεικνύουν τους πολλαπλούς παράγοντες που βάζουν τις εκτοπισμένες γυναίκες σε σύνθετη μειονεκτική θέση.

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Highly-skilled refugee women; displacement; barriers; employment; migration

Introduction

The process of integration after displacement presents numerous challenges, including trauma, poverty, learning new languages, and social isolation (Salvo & Williams, 2017). Among displaced individuals, a small but significant group comprises highly-skilled professionals – defined as 'individuals with a university degree or extensive/equivalent experience in a given field' (Iredale, 2001, p. 8) – such as engineers, academics, and doctors (OECD, 2016). Many of these individuals find themselves either barred from seeking paid employment or compelled by their circumstances to accept low-skilled jobs for which they are overqualified (Bolzani et al., 2021; Ganassin & Young, 2020; Young et al., 2022).

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These challenges do not occur in a vacuum. Rather, they are shaped by broader political and social narratives, including dominant framings of displacement as a 'crisis'. The notion of a 'refugee crisis' in the UK is both politically charged and conceptually contested. While public discourse frequently frames refugee arrivals as a 'crisis' (Fassetta et al., 2020), this terminology often serves political and media agendas rather than reflecting actual numbers or systemic capacity. In the UK context, the number of forcibly displaced individuals remains relatively low compared to global trends. For example, in 2022, the UK hosted approximately 231,597 refugees, ranking 19th in Europe for asylum applications per capita (Willott, 2022). Despite this, the term 'refugee crisis' has gained traction in policy and media spaces, contributing to a climate of suspicion and hostility (Cooper et al., 2021; Gray & Franck, 2019). Our use of the term 'refugee crisis' in this paper aims to highlight how political framings of 'crisis' shape both public perceptions and refugee experiences in the labour market while also legitimising and reinforcing the gendered and racialised barriers that influence displaced individuals' labour market trajectories in the UK.

According to data from the UK Labour Force (2016), the employment rate for refugee women averages 45%, which is 17 points lower than that of refugee men and 6 points lower than other women born outside the EU. This disparity highlights the distinctive barriers faced by highly-skilled refugee women (HSRW), a group that has received limited scholarly and policy attention. This paper seeks to address that gap by exploring the barriers HSRW encounter in securing employment aligned with their skills and qualifications.

Our work contributes to the emerging interdisciplinary body of research exploring the employment trajectories of forcibly displaced professionals (Hebbani & Khawaja, 2019; Pajic et al., 2018), with a focus on the gendered and racialised barriers that shape these trajectories in the UK context. Drawing on Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) and Critical Race Theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017), we position HSRW not merely as migrants with unmet labour potential, but as individuals whose professional re-entry is shaped by intersecting structures of race, gender, migration status, and language. We also build on recent work in intercultural communication (Young et al., 2022), emphasising that the re-entry process is not just about linguistic competence, but about navigating unspoken cultural expectations, implicit bias, and racialised perceptions of legitimacy.

In line with the Special Issue theme, we explore how non-verbal dimensions, specifically institutional habitus, silences, and cultural fit, become sites where inequality is enacted. By attending to the stories of these women as counter-narratives, we aim to reframe dominant discourses about refugee employability and professional value.

The guiding research question is: What barriers do highly-skilled refugee women in the UK experience as they seek employment commensurate with their skills?

Refugee women's employment in the UK

The UN Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees (1967) expands on the 1951 Geneva Convention (UN General Assembly, 1951), defining refugees as individuals forcibly displaced from their home countries due to danger, without time or space limitations. An asylum seeker is defined as 'someone who has applied for asylum and is awaiting a decision on whether they will be granted refugee status' (Sturge, 2024, p. 7). Our paper focuses on refugees, as current UK legislation allows only them to work. While highly-skilled refugees share similarities with other displaced individuals, they are distinct in possessing often-overlooked socio-economic capital (Young et al., 2022). Although estimating the number of highly-skilled refugees is difficult, research indicates that many 'may be highly qualified and experienced professionals' (Willott, 2022, p. 4).

In the past decade, public awareness of migration to the UK has increased due to migration crisis discourses in the public sphere. However, the specific trajectories of displaced individuals are often overlooked or misunderstood. Few studies differentiate refugees and asylum seekers from other migrant groups, disregarding the additional layers of vulnerability faced by forcibly displaced

individuals, such as loss of social networks, trauma, and family separation, as well as their potential contributions to society (Beaton et al., 2018; Reitz, 2002).

As noted earlier, despite efforts by the UK Government to control the numbers of migrants and asylum seekers, the country hosts relatively few displaced individuals. While applicants can potentially be granted leave to remain in the UK for humanitarian reasons, not all asylum applications are successful. In 2023, 33% were refused at the initial decision stage, with the possibility to appeal (Sturge, 2024). The asylum application process can be lengthy, and applicants often face high levels of precarity, including the risk of deportation (Ganassin & Young, 2020). Although valuable scholarship exists on resettlement experiences (e.g. Reynolds, 2020, on UK refugee family reunion processes), our focus here is specifically on precarity concerning job-seeking and employment.

Compared to other European countries, the UK notably lacks a nationwide integration strategy for refugees (Young et al., 2022). Specific initiatives have been created to support individuals from particular nationalities following international emergencies, such as the Russia–Ukraine war. The Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (VPRS), initiated in 2014, allows safe entry to the UK (Government UK, 2021) for 'those in the greatest need, including people requiring urgent medical treatment, survivors of violence and torture, and women and children at risk'. This scheme has since been extended to Syrian nationals and residents. More recently, the UK Government established two schemes to support Ukrainian refugees: the Ukraine Family Scheme and the Ukraine Sponsorship Scheme. One of our participants, Jane, arrived in the UK through one of these schemes.

In the UK, asylum seekers are largely barred from the job market due to restrictive employment legislation (Young et al., 2022). Without the right to work, they rely on minimal welfare support and often find themselves among the poorest in the UK (Mayblin & Poppy James, 2017). Grassroots movements, charities, and NGOs have been vocal about the inadequacies of this support and the exclusion from the labour market (Fitzpatrick et al., 2015; Mayblin & Poppy James, 2017; Pettitt, 2013). The Lift the Ban Campaign (2024), established in 2018, aims to urge the UK Government to lift the ban preventing asylum seekers from working, but this effort has so far been unsuccessful, with the Government maintaining that current provisions sufficiently cover basic needs.

A study by Psoinos (2007) in the UK investigated the potential of highly-educated refugees to contribute actively to the economy and the barriers they face. Findings revealed vulnerabilities related to financial status, and key barriers included ethnicity, gender, and lack of recognised qualifications (Psoinos, 2007). Recent research in intercultural communication has categorised the barriers faced by highly-skilled refugees seeking to rebuild their careers into contextual (related to displacement contexts, such as immigration policies) and individual (related to personal backgrounds, such as language skills) factors (Ganassin & Young, 2020). Contextual factors largely hinder professionals from rebuilding their careers after displacement, while those who succeed often rely on their resilience and the support of personal and professional networks (Ganassin & Young, 2020).

Regarding the recognition of refugees' qualifications at equivalent levels in the host country, Bloch (2004) points out a strong correlation between job acquisition and educational qualifications obtained in the UK, as opposed to those gained in refugees' countries of origin. This reality complicates the ability of refugees to secure jobs based on their qualifications if those qualifications are not recognised in the UK. The OECD (2016) suggests that the recognition of prior learning can facilitate the effective participation of highly-educated migrants in the labour market. However, navigating the specific processes to obtain recognition without incurring additional financial costs often proves challenging.

Securing employment and appropriate labour market participation is central to the successful inclusion of refugees and the creation of positive relationships with host communities (Ager & Strang, 2008; Scheibelhofer & Täubig, 2019). Hong et al. (2022) examined employment barriers faced by jobseekers in the USA, aiming to unpack issues contributing to poverty and inequality. They categorised barriers as structural (e.g. racial and gender discrimination, childcare challenges,

and job availability) and individual (e.g. lack of motivation and limited social networks). Although their study does not focus on displaced individuals, this categorisation of barriers holds significance for marginalised communities, reflecting the interplay of individual circumstances and systemic inequalities. Notably, Hong et al. (2022) identify gender as a structural barrier related to childcare responsibilities but do not extensively focus on the experiences of women.

Gender plays a central role in studies of migrant women in Italy, especially those in STEMM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics, and medicine) fields. Bolzani et al. (2021) investigated employment barriers, and the resources women draw on to overcome them. Their findings revealed prevalent discrimination based on gender during job selection processes, with recruiters often perpetuating gender stereotypes related to marital status and family planning.

Overall, the literature indicates that displaced individuals, particularly women, face additional layers of discrimination in their efforts to secure employment. Our study contributes to this body of literature by examining the multiple levels of barriers that HSRW face in their journeys toward re-employment.

Theoretical underpinnings of the study

The lenses of Critical Race Theory (CRT henceforth) and Intersectionality (Gillborn, 2015) have been employed as the framework through which to consider how refugee women make sense of their post-displacement journeys. CRT was borne out of critical legal studies in the 1980s–1990s with the objective to centre race in strategising and theorising on ways to challenge institutional racism within the US legal system (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Goessling, 2018). CRT subsequently developed to theoretically draw from multiple disciplines, including history, sociology, and Black feminism (Solórzano and Yosso, 2002; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Since its inception, CRT continues to function as both an academic approach to the study of race/isms, as well as a social justice movement against the problematics of racism, often manifest in state policies. In CRT, racism is not merely an interpersonal prejudice against an 'other'; rather, racism is considered 'a material structure of inequality, involving the unequal distribution of societal resources across the racial hierarchy' (Meghji, 2020, p. 3).

Delgado and Stefancic (2017) posit the following five tenets in CRT as an approach/movement: (1) racism as an ordinary phenomenon, not aberrational; (2) interest convergence, where the support of White people towards the causes of racially minoritised communities is contingent upon the potential benefits to their (White) interests; (3) race as a social construct; (4) differential racialisation and its consequences – i.e. that peoples or communities are racially minoritised at differing intensities at different times, resulting in differential experiences and a 'shifting 'Other''; and (5) counter-storytelling as a mechanism to centre experiential knowledge of racially minoritised peoples as a form of counter-narratives against racism/racist discourse.

This study draws from CRT in its recognition of 'race' as a social construct, and subsequently that racism and related discriminations can thus unfold in different ways, at different intensities. CRT also acknowledges that the incidence of racism/discrimination is grounded in the fact that 'racial difference' as a process is one that is 'invented (…) and reinforced by society' (Gillborn, ibid, p. 279). This is particularly poignant with respect to the present study, as the majority of our participants are racially minoritised in a UK context as People of the Global Majority (PoGM). With that, while investigating the discrepancies in the experiences of Ukrainian refugees and other refugees of the Global Majority is beyond the scope of this paper, we acknowledge that these systemic inequalities and differential experiences have been consistently documented, and our participants will thus not have been immune to such differential treatment and subsequent discrimination (see Costello & Foster, 2022; Esposito, 2022; IGPP, 2022; Sinclair et al., 2023).

A further tenet we draw from is counter-storytelling, specifically through the lens of Solórzano and Yosso (2002) who posit that 'master narratives' or 'majoritarian stories' centre narratives that privilege 'Whites, men, the middle and/or upper class, and heterosexuals', treating them as the

'normative points of reference' (p. 28). Counter-storytelling works to dislodge the rudiments of majoritarian stories by recentring the voice and experiences of (racially) minoritised peoples (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017), thereby challenging dominant narratives, or so-called 'neutral' or 'objective' accounts often presented by structures of power – in this case being the media and state (through policy) – to thus expose how (racial) injustices structurally operate.

CRT and intersectionality are closely related frameworks that examine how systems of power and oppression intersect to create oppressive conditions for racially minoritised peoples. Intersectionality more specifically, as coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), considers the ways in which categories in addition to race, such as class, gender, sexuality (and more) intersect with each other to yield different forms of discrimination based on how these categories interact. It is pertinent to note that intersectionality is rooted in Black Feminism. Intersectionality, as per Crenshaw's (1989) coinage, sought out to re-contextualise and re-centre the 'multidimensionality of Black women's experience' (p. 139) vis-à-vis a feminism that otherwise imbues their lived realities with reductionism, and it does so by ensuring there is no separation between factors of minoritisation, and since its coinage has gained currency in gender studies more broadly with an increasing number of scholars engaging with the theory (Salem, 2013; Carastathis, 2014). CRT aligns with the concept in its recognition that racial discrimination does not occur in isolation, rather it interacts with other social inequalities, often resulting in compounded discriminations/oppressions.

As CRT and intersectionality are concerned with both contextualising discrimination and systemic oppressions in relation to the socio-political conditions in which they occur, as well as rejecting a single-axis view to locate the multiple axes of oppression at play, they cumulatively formulate the theoretical bricks on which this study is built on. The use of CRT and intersectionality as a lens allows for a deeper excavation of how discrimination vis-à-vis barriers to employment may manifest, with the former working to centre the voices and experiences of the HSRW, and the latter locating the intersecting vertices of marginality. This combined theoretical standpoint informs the lens through which we explore the differential experiences within the space of seeking employment as a displaced woman, thereby providing the scope for nuanced insights into the experiences of the participants. The application of CRT and intersectionality in this study therefore is not to specify a singular race and its subsequent experiences, rather to view the ways in which refugees from the Global Majority (predominantly) are subject to a process of minoritisation that is racialised and interacts with other categories such as gender, yielding barriers to (re-)employment within the UK.

The study

The study presented in this paper is part of a larger project that brought together researchers in Intercultural Communication and Education to conduct research on and to raise awareness about the barriers that HSRW face throughout their displacement trajectories. The project (September 2022–December 2023) included two phases: (1) interviews with nine 'highly-skilled refugee women' (e.g. engineers, architects, nurses, lecturers) who have not been able to make a successful transition back into their professional sphere; (2) a set of participatory workshops with over 20 women (i.e. volunteers and service users) part of a grassroot women's association based in the North of England. The research team worked collaboratively with participants to propose employment strategies that are gender sensitive and that value the backgrounds of refugee women. Here, we focus on the interviews collected during the first phase of the project.

The study is guided by social constructionism and its concern for human experiences in social interaction (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, 1991) to provide an understanding of how women participants make sense of their post-displacement journeys. A qualitative methodology enabled us to deal with the richness of participants' accounts in depth and to illustrate data sets that speak to the intersection of the multiple levels of discrimination these women face to their ways of re-employment.

Participants

Our interview participants consisted of nine HSRW who have not been able to make a successful transition back into their professional sphere. They were recruited through a call that we disseminated through our academic and professional networks (e.g. an online network for women-professionals in the UK). We also advertised our project through three local women centres (one in the Southwest and two located North of England) that we had previously collaborated with. Eligible participants had to meet all the following requirements: identify as a woman; be over 18 years old; have obtained refugee status in the UK for at least 6 months; have experience as a professional and/or professional training in their countries; have been actively searching for jobs related to their profession without success.

Table 1 presents an overview of their profiles, i.e. pseudonyms, countries of origin (Syria, USA, Ukraine, Iran, Iraq, and Pakistan), age, languages, jobs they held in their countries of origin, current jobs, previous countries of residence and family circumstances.

Participants' professional backgrounds ranged from medical professional, psychologist, teacher, and engineer. Their trajectories of displacement and length of permanence in the UK (from 6 months to 15 years) differed. However, all participants expressed their desire to find work as soon as possible. The majority of them have caring duties.

Data collection and analysis

Between November and December 2022, we collected data through audio-recorded individual semi-structured interviews. Depending on their location and preference, participants were

Table 1. Overview of participants.

Pseudonym	Country of origin	Age	Languages	Job in countries of origin	Current job	Previous countries of residence	Family circumstances
Zeina	Syria	Early 30s	Arabic (Syrian), English	University English language teacher	ESOL student	–	married – two children
Anna	Syria	Early 30s	Arabic (Syrian), English	Architectural engineer	Doing a professional placement	Kuwait (length undisclosed)	married – two children
Eli	Iran	Early 50s	Farsi, English, some Arabic, local Iranian language	Head nurse	Nursery assistant and community worker	–	married – two children
Tracey	USA	Early 40s	English	Software engineer	Restaurant waitress	–	single mother with one child
Jane	Ukraine	Early 40s	Ukrainian, English	English teacher	looking for a job as receptionist or case worker or in a charity	Poland (3 months)	married – one child
Safia	Syria	Early 40s	English, French, Arabic (Syrian)	French lecturer	Support worker in secondary education	Egypt (6 years)	single mother with two children
Leila	Iraq	Early 40s	Arabic (Iraqi), English	Assistant Lecturer in Veterinary sciences	Job searching	–	Single mother with two children
Stara	Pakistan	Early 40s	English, Urdu	Maths teacher	Job searching	Italy (length undisclosed)	Single mother of one
Natalia	Ukraine	Late 40s	Ukrainian, English	Business psychologist	Social media manager	–	Married with adult children

offered the choice to be interviewed either in person or on Zoom. Two participants chose to be interviewed in person at their local women's centres and the rest of them chose the online option.

All interviews were conducted in English as a shared lingua franca between researchers and participants. In the interviews, we covered the following areas: (i) participants' journeys to applying for jobs aligned with their qualifications and experiences; (ii) barriers that they encountered when they were displaced to the UK; (iii) hopes and fears about their future; (iv) advice they would offer to others in a similar position.

Interviews were chosen as a tool that allows for meaning to be negotiated between the interviewer and the interviewee (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009) and this process enabled us to gain rich insights into what the participants experience during their re-employment journey.

Each team member collected three interviews (nine in total) which we manually transcribed verbatim making sure that participants' confidentiality was protected. A research assistant who was not directly involved in the interviews conducted a further check on the transcripts. For the analysis, we used Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2012) thematic analysis approach with the aim of interpreting our participants' realities. We initially worked independently to generate codes, and to search for themes that we compared and combined through a joint thematic map.

Ethics

Our project team consisted of women-researchers with extensive experience of work with displaced and vulnerable communities and with expertise in multilingual research practice and theory that enabled us to engage with the linguistic complexities of the study (Georgiou, 2022; Holmes et al., 2022). Given that the entire research team was made up of migrant women who are second-language speakers of English, the broader sentiments and experiences of dislocation and a lack of sense of belonging is something we are cognisant of. This does not imply an equivalence, but rather a reflection of how we sought to acknowledge the vulnerabilities of our participants. Although as researchers we hold a position of privilege, there were, however, some vertices of shared positionalities based on linguistic identity, and religious and racial identities for part of the team that helped us build a rapport with our participants.

The project received ethical approval from the Ethics Committee of the lead institution. We created participant information sheets, consent forms and debriefing sheets in English and we hired two research assistants who translated them into Arabic and Farsi, which we anticipated were going to be the main languages of our potential participants. We note that all participants chose to use the English version of the forms, stating that they could confidently understand the contents.

Barriers to re-employment

Drawing on Hong et al. (2022) categorisation discussed in the literature review, we analyse HSRW's barriers to meaningful re-employment in terms of personal and structural. Delgado and Stefancic's perspective of CRT (2017) informs the lens through which we consider how systemic and structural inequalities shape our participants' trajectories. This involves centring the narratives of refugee women as counter-storytelling, as well as grounding dynamics of racial minoritisation, power, class, and marginalisation vis-à-vis how they intersect with issues of migration, gender, and professional identity.

Personal barriers

Fear of not 'being good enough'

All participants, regardless of qualifications, professional experience, and language proficiency expressed fears around not 'being good enough' to find a job. For example, the fears and struggles voiced by Zeina – feeling self-conscious about her English proficiency in professional settings and

being concerned about her age and career gap – speak to the intersectionality of race, gender, migration status, and professional identity.

> I am not comfortable [about speaking English in professional settings]. I am conscious of my mistake while speaking. I feel like I need to work more on my speaking skills in order to be able to teach. I feel embarrassed sometimes, especially in the micro teaching sessions that we have now. And my peers? I think they will be judging me like 'Okay, you're not good speaker, how you will be a teacher?'

Zeina's anxiety about being judged by her peers for her language skills is not entirely unfounded given that language can become a tool for racialised exclusion in the form of linguicism and native speakerism (Holliday, 2006; Kiczkowiak & Lowe, 2024; Nguyen & Hajek, 2022). Further, research in both education settings and recruitment processes also showcase that language can serve as a gatekeeper, with second-language speakers often being seen as either less competent or less preferable to first language speakers (Zhang-Wu, 2022; Daoud & Kasztalska, 2022; Cho, 2023).

Zeina's circumstances of displacement had a negative impact on her professional goals: still in her early 30s, she was concerned about 'being late' and less employable than her friends:

> All my friends have finished their PhD by now. I'm so late. Students used to study masters directly after finishing the bachelor's degree. But you know I'm too late, because there is this gap of twelve years, no ten years.

From an intersectional perspective, there is a clear convergence of multiple axes of identity (being a woman, a refugee, a second-language English speaker, etc.) that create compounded disadvantages. For Zeina, the pressures of displacement, language, and professional retraining are entangled with societal expectations of women, including ageism and career advancement.

Participants shared concerns about the system casting doubt over their qualifications even though these were legally recognised in the UK. In the words of Anna:

> Maybe because they are looking for British people, because they know that these people that are graduated from [name of British University] as architectural engineers have this level of information and people who are graduated from [name of British University] they have this level of information, but for us [refugees] we are coming from overseas. Maybe they don't know how much knowledge or information we gained during our studies.

Anna's observation that British employers may favour local graduates reflects the systemic scepticism directed at qualifications from other countries. From a CRT perspective, this scepticism could imply broader racialised dynamics where 'Britishness' is privileged over other backgrounds, devaluating the education and expertise of refugees, reinforcing their marginalisation.

All participants feel they are less employable than local candidates for reasons that include lack of local or recognised qualifications (Ganassin & Young, 2020), but also the feeling of lagging behind people with more linear life trajectories. This brings the concept of interest convergence to the fore, specifically in terms of progress for racially minoritised or marginalised groups only occurring where it aligns with the interests of systems of dominance (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Namely, the perception that employers prefer British graduates suggests that refugee women may only be considered employable when their skills align with the economic interests or labour needs of the host society – in this case, the interests being localised qualifications.

Structural barriers

Caring duties

In their study, Hong et al. (2022) claim that childcare responsibilities cannot be seen in isolation from labour market structures. Caring duties may represent or be perceived as a barrier to employment as women either cannot rely on anyone else to care for their children or they worry that, if they choose not work full time, they will be less employable or will be discriminated by potential employers. Jane came to the UK as a single mother from Ukraine, and she explained that:

> I want to say that my difficulties have to do with childcare. I need a job from 9:30 am to 3:00 pm because I should take my daughter to school and pick her up, I need childcare. I need someone to help me from the Council or Job Centre […]. It's very difficult to find job, I need part time job […] and some employers or majority of employers need full time.

Some participants felt that their husbands are supportive although they mostly admitted having to prioritise their husband careers. For example, Zeina who had fled from Syria with her husband and two children explained that:

> Women have more caring duties than their husbands because they said this notion that even though they [women] do, they don't have work. Even if the man and the women are staying at home the caring responsibilities of the woman should take care of the children, so I think they don't have the time they men have to improve themselves.

It is arguable that childcare is largely inaccessible in the UK given the high costs and often limited availability, which in turns impact the most vulnerable families more intensively.[1]

Block's work on social class and migration identity (2017) highlights how migration often results in downward social mobility. Cederberg (2017) explored more specifically how female migrants perceive and experience social mobility in their new host countries highlighting the challenges that they face in translating their skills and qualifications into equivalent status in the new context. Our study confirms that HSRW experience a mismatch between their skills and the jobs available to them, a phenomenon that is exacerbated by class-based discrimination. In the case of Jane and Zeina, despite being highly-skilled, they are forced to settle for less stable or part-time work, often incompatible with their caregiving responsibilities. It is arguable that the labour market structures do not accommodate their childcare needs, which further exacerbates their downward social mobility.

Jane's difficulty in finding work that aligns with school hours illustrates how structural issues in the labour market disproportionately affect those in lower socio-economic positions. The inaccessibility of affordable childcare leaves refugee families, especially mothers, in a precarious position.

Recognition of legal status and qualifications

HSRW in the UK face systemic challenges in both the recognition of their qualifications and securing employment, despite their legal right to work. Leila, a former lecturer from Iraq, experienced job rejections based on her refugee status, highlighting the built-in discrimination during recruitment, with employers avoiding candidates who disclose their status:

> I applied for two or three times, and I getting refused, because I'm asylum seeker[2] [refugee], and even if I have right to work, they don't accept it. So, I just put my CV in some in websites[examples], someone contacted me and ask me: 'we have this job and have a look about it'. And they said, 'Okay. can you tell us about your immigration status?' And when I told them, they don't respond again.

Leyla's experience represents: (1) how barriers to employment are often built-in within application processes where the option to declare refugee status is not even made available in online forms; (2) how recruitment processes allow for discrimination.

Existing research shows that the recognition of previous qualifications might be challenging for refugees (Martín et al., 2016). Jane, an English teacher from Ukraine, shared the difficulties she encountered when she tried to convert her qualifications:

> I need to change my diplomas compatibility because there is an award qualification in Ukraine but there is another rule and I need maybe to prove my qualification and it is sometimes difficult in such case now I'm not sure how to do it and my case worker in Job Centre sent me some information so I will try to phone and to do such things to compare my diploma with English qualification and I need also national certificate Celta or Delta or something like this but I don't have them.

Tracey, who had qualified as a software engineer in the USA, specifically claims that it was made obvious to her that her qualifications are not so worthy in the UK:

> So, the companies said that it would be better if you had a UK degree.

In her interview Safia, who was a French language Lecturer in Syria, discussed how she is planned her route back into teaching now that she has resettled in Scotland:

> You cannot apply to be a teacher without being a member of something called GTCS Scottish teaching, like a membership and you cannot be there until the job gives you the link like social services.

The GTCS (General Teaching Council for Scotland) is an independent professional and regulatory body for teaching. Not only did Safia need to complete her registration with the GTCS, but she also needed to attend an eight-month course at the university or to study for a postgraduate degree for which she needs an English language certification, for her qualifications to be recognised.

Displaced individuals face an extra layer of marginalisation when it comes to securing a job in their host country. Bolzani et al. (2021) highlight that migrant women with STEMM backgrounds in Italy struggle with the non-recognition of their qualifications, compounded by bureaucratic challenges and language barriers.

With a lack of recognition of qualifications two issues come in: financial costs and need to retrain (cost in time). Retraining can significantly strain the finances of asylum seekers and refugees, who often live in economic deprivation (Hebbani & Khawaja, 2019; Scheibelhofer & Täubig, 2019) and are not in a position to prioritise training and education (Phillimore et al., 2022). Retraining also implies a cost in time and it is arguable that for women a cost in time is essentially a cost that in turns impact their family unit.

Lack of adequate tailored provisions for professionals

Consistently with the findings from Ganassin and Young (2020) participants lamented the lack of tailored support for professionals citing, for example, their poor experience at colleges providing adult education where there are no specific classes for highly-skilled people. Anna was an architectural engineer in Syria and, at the time of the study, was doing a professional placement in a British firm:

> In 2018, when I arrived to the UK I couldn't speak very well, I tried to attend college, but it was rubbish. It doesn't help me. It just wasting time. Because we are educated before coming to the UK, we studied English and at secondary school and the university. At college, the same thing happened. They didn't give us the correct information that help professional people or educated people, how they can get back to their career.

Research demonstrated that language classes offered to displaced people are not designed according to age and literacy levels (Hynie et al., 2018; Morrice et al., 2020). Anna eventually resorted to learn English online independently and she turned to a charity that helps highly-skilled migrants to support her to cater her CV to British employers.

All participants, regardless of how long they had been in the UK, expressed frustration over the lack of guidance on the qualifications and language requirements needed to re-enter their professions. Eli, a former head nurse in Iran, has worked as a nursery assistant and community worker since arriving in the UK 15 years ago. She sought advice from the NHS Career Service about retraining as a nurse but found that not having two UK references prevented her from accessing even unpaid volunteer opportunities.

> They said that I had to pass the IELTS exam. The first time I came in the UK, I did some search, and at that time they told me that for foreigners 5 or 5.5 is enough. But when I came to live here, and I searched more they said 'no you need to have 7 and it is not overall just everything like speaking and reading everything should be 7.

A lack of dedicated timely support, and more generally a lack of understanding of the needs and potential of displaced professionals resulted into some of our participants being almost forced to take unskilled jobs. Anna discussed her experience with the Jobcentre Plus, a government-funded

employment agency and social security office that provides benefits and income support and employment assistance:

> They [Job Centre Plus] almost forced me to get a job that is not related to my experience. They discussed with me to change the road, and I applied with them to apply for administration any employment but the same thing. It's not successful.

A recent report on refugee resettlement shows that 'refugees take longer to access the labour market and tend to receive lower levels of remuneration than other categories of migrants' (Phillimore et al. 2022, p. 37). Anna and Eli's experiences resonate with Khosravi's (2019, 2020) work on temporality and migration. Not only is time shaped by uncertainty and by the conditions of their displacement, but temporal insecurity and 'loss of time' become central to the refugee experience. Despite her extensive professional experience, Anna was eventually only offered a placement with an architecture firm and had to restart her career at the entry level and Eli was never able to retrain as a nurse.

Racial discrimination

The analysis of interview data revealed that, despite having the right to work in the UK, participants faced racial discrimination in their job searches. Tracey, an African–American software engineer currently working as a waitress, shared her experiences of searching for a job in the UK:

> My friend recommended me to a company, but I noticed that they were probably expecting for a white and so my qualification was being turned down and I felt I was discriminated as well and because of my cultural differences … . I tried other companies and it was still the same thing till I ended up in my restaurant I am working in because during one of the interviews that I had, a white colleague that was looking for the same job at the same time and I happened to check her qualifications and then I noticed I was more qualified but at the end of the day she called me that she has gotten the job and so I felt very frustrated about the whole stuff.

Tracey's phrase regarding the employer *expecting for a white* indicates an acute awareness of the attitudes towards racially minoritised people and attributed her unsuccessful interview to the employer's preference for a white colleague, even if they come with lesser qualifications.

Tracey's sentiments are not entirely unfounded, as discrimination in recruitment process in the UK has been well documented (Ugiagbe-Green, 2023). Racially minoritised people in the UK and in Europe are statistically less likely to gain employment as compared to their white counterparts, or to receive positive responses to their job applications (Lancee et al., 2019; Zwysen et al, 2021). This corroborates Tracey's experience, and in turn points to the structural and systemic nature of racism that permeates through the labour market, even at the point of completing applications.

Discussion and conclusion

This paper has explored the structural and personal barriers faced by highly-skilled refugee women (HSRW) in the UK, highlighting how intersecting factors of gender, race, and migration status shape their experiences. Our findings show how institutional structures – including qualification recognition systems, job centre practices, and expectations of full-time availability – routinely fail to accommodate the lived realities of HSRW. These operate not only through verbal exclusions but also through silences, institutional inaction, and embodied perceptions of 'cultural fit' and credibility.

This paper contributes to *rethinking intercultural communication beyond verbal language* by showing how power operates through what is said, left unsaid, and implied. Participants' narratives reveal that navigating employment is as much about interpreting unspoken cultural codes as it is about formal credentials.

Drawing on Critical Race Theory and intersectionality, we frame these stories as counter-narratives that challenge the myth of meritocracy in UK employment contexts (Jones et al., 2017; Cooper et al., 2021). Racism manifests not only as overt prejudice but also through structural mechanisms, such as forms that exclude refugee status or informal interviews shaped by 'Britishness' as an unspoken norm (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). These counter-stories resist such silencing and foreground HSRW's desire and determination to work.

Participants described exclusionary practices, such as application systems that render their legal status invisible, limited access to tailored professional training, and inflexible job expectations. Caring duties further compounded inequality, as participants felt penalised for disclosing parental responsibilities, pointing to how gender and migration status intersect to shape labour market vulnerability.

Unlike prior research where gender was not foregrounded (e.g. Psoinos, 2007; Scheibelhofer & Täubig, 2019; Young et al., 2022), our study finds that HSRW often internalise systemic exclusion as personal inadequacy. These layered barriers exacerbate a sense of precarity and identity loss (Phipps, 2014).

The devaluation of qualifications added financial and temporal burdens, especially due to the need for retraining, often unaffordable and incompatible with family duties. Bureaucratic systems thus function as gatekeepers that prevent re-entry into professional roles, reinforcing a cycle of exclusion. The resulting marginalisation aligns with findings that displaced women often struggle to navigate host–country institutions (Bolzani et al., 2021).

Our research draws on empirical work in intercultural communication and refugee studies, using intersectionality to illuminate the complexities of refugee women's trajectories. Each participant's experience was shaped by context-specific factors, and recognising these nuances is essential to understanding the varied barriers they face. Notably, at the time of our study, policies for Ukrainian refugees were prioritised over support for other groups, underscoring systemic inequalities.

Finally, consistent with Khosravi's (2019, 2020) work, our findings highlight the temporal dimension of migration: refugees experience uncertain futures influenced by bureaucratic delays, precarious status, and shifting policies. Addressing these issues requires more than short-term fixes – it calls for long-term, context-sensitive support grounded in justice and inclusion.

Limitations and directions for further research

The use of English as a shared lingua franca may have limited some participants' ability to fully express themselves, particularly those whose dominant languages were Arabic, Farsi, or Ukrainian. While our research team is multilingual, our language repertoires did not fully align with those of our participants.[3] We chose not to use interpreters due to funding constraints and, more importantly, to foster a direct relationship with participants. We were concerned that involving a third party might restrict participants' voices (Georgiou, 2022).

The study presented here was small in size and solely focused on the UK context and further transnational research in needed that compares the experiences of HSRW in other European countries. Such comparative studies are essential for shaping effective policies that support professional integration. Further research on state-funded and grassroots organisations is also needed to guide strategic support for HSRW. Finally, a deeper interrogation into the connection between negative media discourse and punitive government policies is necessary to work towards dismantling the structural discriminations that displaced people more broadly face.

Notes

1. According to a report published by the charity Coram in 2023, the average annual cost of a full-time nursery place for a child under two in Great Britain is nearly £15,000 although costs vary from area to area.

2. Leyla refers to herself as an 'asylum seeker' but, like all the participants, she was a refugee with right to work in the UK.
3. One of the researchers offered to conduct the interview in Urdu, the first language of one of the participants, however, the participant refused.

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