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# Evaluating and reframing vocational education and training for refugees: insights from five refugee groups across three cities of India

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## ABSTRACT

Contrary to common assumptions, the vast majority of the world's refugees reside in neighbouring countries in the Global South. This paper explores the complex interaction of global vocational education policies with the local realities of five communities within the under-researched yet highly relevant refugee context of India, across three major cities. It examines whether the stated policy purpose of VET addresses the practical requirements and aspirations of refugees. Drawing on interviews, focus groups, and participatory drawing with 66 respondents from Afghan, Rohingya, Somali, Chin, and Tibetan communities, and staff members from refugee organisations, this paper argues for a move away from the unidimensional goal of economic self-reliance for refugees. By bridging the capabilities approach with intersectionality, the paper calls attention to, and draws policy suggestions for, increment and diversification of VET opportunities to address multiple facets of refugees' lives, and their inclusion in national VET institutions.

## KEYWORDS

Refugees; vocational education; skills development; India; global south

## Introduction

Of the 26 million total refugees worldwide, 85% reside in developing countries (UNHCR 2021a). These host countries for refugees in the Global South often struggle with multiple development challenges of their own (Buscher 2011; Jacobsen and Fratzke 2016). Most refugees prefer cities to camps, and they spend an average of twenty years in exile (UNHCR 2019a). With increasingly protracted refugee crises, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has shifted its approach from care and maintenance to one of self-reliance through Vocational Education and Training (VET).

VET and skills development are considered an integral part of refugee education, particularly in developing countries. In recent years, there has been an increased focus on VET for refugee populations, as is evident in international policy documents on refugee education. The UNHCR's *Global Compact on Refugees* (2018) stresses strengthening the skills of refugees through vocational training, linking with its commitments to attaining refugee self-reliance and durable solutions. To fulfil this objective, its *Global Framework of Refugee Education* (2019b) calls for 'increased investment in refugee access to VET programmes' (25). Among the 2030

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*Refugee Education* (2019c) targets is to increase enrolment in tertiary education, raising the VET of refugees to 15% by 2030. Echoing a similar sentiment, UNESCO's *Global Monitoring Report* (2019) emphasises skills development and VET to advance refugees' employment opportunities and economic inclusion. Despite the policy attention on VET for refugees, several complexities persist in the implementation and success of such programmes globally, such as the right to employment, language barriers, and recognition of prior academic and vocational qualifications (Chadderton and Edmonds 2015; Hannah 2008; Wehrle et al. 2018).

Exploring whether these VET programmes meet the expectations and aspirations of refugees and enable them to create the life they desire is particularly relevant with the protracted situations of refugees in their first asylum countries in the Global South. India receives a large number of refugees from different regions of the world, despite being non-signatory to international refugee protection laws (Saxena 2007). This paper examines the complex interplay of global policies with local realities within this understudied refugee context of India, and analyses the VET programmes implemented for refugees in three cities: Delhi, Hyderabad, and Jaipur. It investigates whether the policy purpose of VET addresses the practical needs and requirements of different refugee individuals and groups. India is a highly relevant context, since intersections of race, religion, ethnicity, gender, and nationality intensify the struggles of numerous refugee groups living there. Drawing on qualitative methodology, this research employed semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and participatory drawings with 66 participants from five refugee groups and staff members of refugee organisations. The refugee participants came from Afghan, Rohingya, Somali, Tibetan, and Chin communities. This paper aims at bringing to the forefront the voices of refugees, who are often seen through the lens of marginalisation and reduced to voiceless victims (Rajaram 2002), regarding VET experiences. It also highlights the perspectives of policy stakeholders to gain a comprehensive understanding of the refugee training programmes offered in India.

The contributions of this study are threefold. First, it examines the often-overlooked compounded refugee situation in one of South Asia's largest countries, India, that lacks a domestic refugee framework, thus contributing to the empirical literature on refugees' VET (Chadderton and Edmonds 2015; Hilal 2012; Jabbar and Zaza 2016; Thorne 2020). Second, by combining the capabilities approach with intersectionality, the research foregrounds the effects of multiple and intertwined identities of refugees on their choice of, and access to, skills training, contrasting the diverse realities of these marginalised populations with the singular VET policy goal. Third, it adds to the evidence base on SDG 4, particularly targets 4.3 and 4.4, that aim to expand equitable access to quality VET and beyond work-specific skills.

The paper is organised as follows: the next section presents the literature review on VET programmes for refugees and the current debates in global VET discourse, then the theoretical framework combining the capabilities approach and intersectionality is introduced. The subsequent section explains the research design along with the context and methodology. Finally, I discuss the results, draw conclusions, give suggestions for further research, and provide policy recommendations.

## Global landscape of vocational education and training for refugees

The policy-facing literature on refugees and VET reveals three important reasons for the promotion of skills development of refugees in host countries: economic integration, self-reliance through income generation, and skills development for repatriation (Ahmed 2019;

Boateng and Hilton 2011; UNESCO 2019). The primary reason for advancing VET for refugees is that such programmes assist the labour market inclusion of refugees in host countries (CEDEFOP 2017; UNESCO 2019). Second, the research indicates that refugees who have completed VET have higher incomes (Ahmed 2019; Jabbar and Zaza 2016), which connects to the UNHCR's and other international non-governmental organisations' (INGOs) focus on self-reliance. However, the idea of self-reliance has been critiqued for its neoliberal associations and usage as an exit strategy by donor organisations (Easton-Calabria and Omata 2018; Skran and Easton-Calabria 2020). Third, some studies report that refugees gaining skills in their host countries are better prepared to return home and earn livelihoods, representing a durable solution for refugees (Boateng and Hilton 2011; Eidelson and Horn 2008).

However, within liberal and critical traditions, there are arguments that VET's purposes are not simply so instrumental. Whilst economic rationales are important, authors such as McGrath (2012); Billett (2014) and Powell and McGrath (2019) argue for more humanistic purposes for VET. Applying the capabilities approach, Moodie, Wheelahan, and Lavigne (2019) argue that the role of VET is to develop each participant 'as a person, as a citizen and as a worker' (7). Indeed, the capabilities turn in VET research has become increasingly widespread in the past decade (e.g. McGrath 2012; Tikly 2013; Bonvin 2019; Powell and McGrath 2019; McGrath et al. 2020). More recently, the approach has been applied to the experiences of refugees and internally displaced people (Hilal 2019; Thorne 2020).

Regardless of growing advocacy and interest in refugee VET, the programmes face multiple challenges and limitations which affect refugees' access and participation and successful utilisation of the skills gained. Hilal (2012) reported the limitations of skills training in reducing marginalisation and poverty and enhancing well-being in the Palestinian context. The research has recorded numerous challenges faced by refugees, such as restrictions on study hours and the right to work (Chadderton and Edmonds 2015), discrimination and exploitation in the job market (Knappert, Kornau, and Figengül 2018), the language of the host country (Hannah 2008), lack of recognition of their previous knowledge and credentials (Wehrle et al. 2018), limited work domains (Bloch 2002), and contextual impediments related to the social, political, and economic environments of the host countries (Hilal 2012; Thorne 2020). Some studies (Aerne and Bonoli 2021; Jorgensen, Hautz and Li 2012), mainly from Europe, that reported the successful integration of refugees in VET systems emphasised the importance of governmental support structures in such successes.

While some studies have explored VET for refugees, they have not fully explained whether the purpose of training programmes aligns with the requirements and aspirations of refugees. Furthermore, studies comparing the engagement and impact of these courses on different refugee groups are scarce. Hence, this comparative study attempts to identify and record patterns of similarity and variation within and across different refugee communities. A more nuanced understanding of refugee skills development can be achieved when different intersecting dimensions of refugee identities and realities are taken into consideration.

Previous studies conducted in India with urban refugee populations have largely been limited to socio-economic conditions and livelihoods (Buscher 2011; Field, Tiwari, and Mookherjee 2020; Jops, Lenette, and Breckenridge 2016). Moreover, they have generally been concentrated in the capital city, Delhi, despite significant numbers of refugees living

in other Indian cities such as Hyderabad and Jaipur (UNHCR 2014a). Research has not yet explored the expectations, experiences, and aspirations of different refugee groups in relation to VET programmes implemented by UNHCR, INGOs, local NGOs, and faith-based organisations in India. To close this gap in the literature, my study analyses the VET and skills programmes for refugees and explores the requirements and aspirations of different refugee individuals and groups in relation to VET programmes, and how, if at all, these programmes and policies assist refugees in creating their desired life in their host country, India.

### **Integrating the capabilities approach and an intersectional lens in relation to the vocational education and training of refugees**

In theoretically grounding this work, I bridge an intersectional framework with the capabilities approach (CA) to analyse refugees' experiences with VET and skills development programmes. By bringing forth the intricacies of refugees' experiences, I examine the purpose of VET within global policies and its linkage with the multiple and complex realities of the different refugee groups residing in India.

As is now well established, CA conceptualises development as individual freedom (Sen 1999). Sen distinguishes between the 'process aspect' of freedom related to agency and freedom of action, and the 'opportunity aspect' related to opportunities available. Sen (1985) deploys two concepts in measuring the well-being of an individual: capabilities and functionings. Functionings are the achieved 'being and doing' that a person has reason to value, while capabilities relate to the 'substantial freedom' and opportunities needed to reach the desired functioning. Capability refers to potential rather than achieved functioning (Walker 2006). Capabilities and functioning can be distinguished by placing achievements on one side, and freedom and valuable options to choose from on the other (Robeyns 2006). Nussbaum maintains that the central questions are, 'What are people actually able to do and to be? What real opportunities are available to them?' (Nussbaum 2011, X). This approach, therefore, provides a lens to analyse development and well-being as a combination of freedoms (social, political, and economic) and the real opportunities people have to achieve the outcomes they value. It also assists in identifying inequality of opportunities and advancing arguments for social justice and social inclusion.

The work on VET and CA has its origins in authors trying to move beyond a political economy account of skills. Some have pointed out the overwhelming emphasis of 'skills' and a lack of theoretical knowledge in VET curriculums (Bathmaker 2013; Wheelahan 2015). As a result, it strongly emphasises the need to address agency and structure, often employing CA alongside major sociological accounts such as the work of Bourdieu or Archer (McGrath et al. 2020). In this approach, learners are not seen as simply actors with no history or biography, but as agents operating in a complex landscape. Crucially, Powell and McGrath (2019) stress the need to understand learners' experiences of multidimensional poverty. Whether in the context of post-apartheid South Africa (Powell and McGrath 2019), occupied Palestine (Hilal 2019) or the refugee experience in Jordan (Thorne 2020), they must navigate an often-hostile climate. However, whilst the literature to date addresses multidimensional poverty, key authors acknowledge that it needs to develop further in its analysis of intersectionality (McGrath et al. 2020).

This study, therefore, adds a new perspective to this discourse by combining CA with the intersectionality framework that focuses on how intersecting and complex refugee identities impact on their freedom in relation to VET opportunities, aspirations, and outcomes.

Intersectionality theory is based on the premise that people live multifaceted and complex lives. Collins, Bilge, and Ebooks Corporation Limited (2016) mention that ‘intersectionality as an analytical tool gives people better access to the complexities of the world and themselves’ (11). The core belief of the approach is that the systems of power that govern people’s lives cannot be comprehended in isolation. These systems comprise the perceptions, practices, cultural norms, and institutional structures that shape individual lives. While these structures determine the disadvantages and advantages people have within a social system, they also intersect and coproduce each other, resulting in different social realities (Collins et al. 2013).

Intersectionality theory originally stemmed from Black women’s experiences, and suggests that gender is only one form of oppression that marginalises these women. Crenshaw (1989, 1991) and Collins (2019) argued that race, gender, and class act together as axes of oppression for women. Intersectionality challenges the idea that different forms of oppression can be addressed separately, because doing so disregards the compound effect of multiple oppressions (Pittaway and Bartolomei 2001). There is increasing literature on the application of intersectionality to understand the lived realities of refugee women (Pittaway and Bartolomei 2001; Unangst and Crea 2020). However, it is more widely used to analyse health inequalities, and less frequently to examine educational inequity. In this research, I apply it along with the CA to explore the VET experiences of refugees.

Refugee women encounter multiple layers of discrimination simultaneously. The gender, race, nationality, religion, ethnicity, class, and socio-legal status of an individual refugee intersect and intensify the oppression they face via discrimination against these socio-political identities. A refugee woman may be vulnerable because of her gender, and may also encounter bias based on her race and religion. Her experiences and challenges are different from those of refugee men from the same social group. While refugee women have the same basic necessities of food, accommodation, water, and security as men, they have different needs and face additional challenges in securing them (Freedman 2015; Martin 2004). The *Global Compact on Refugees* (2018) acknowledges that refugee women ‘may experience particular gender-related barriers’ (28) in access to education, health, and livelihoods. Therefore, even when all refugees are disadvantaged, the intersectionality of multiple identities enhances the disadvantages faced by refugee women. However, not all refugee women face the same type of disadvantages, as they are not a homogenous category; there is great diversity amongst them and their lived experiences. These two concepts complement each other by acknowledging the effects of the multiple social and political realities of an individual on their freedoms (social, political, educational and so on) and quality of life.

## Research design

### *The context of VET for refugees in India*

The Indian case is particularly interesting because the country receives a significant number of refugees and asylum seekers not only from neighbouring countries, including Afghanistan, Myanmar, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Tibet, but also from more



distant countries such as Somalia, Syria, Sudan, and Uganda (Zetter and Ruaudel 2016). According to UNHCR (2021b), India has granted asylum and support to around 200,000 refugees. However, others have often claimed that the actual figures are much higher (Saxena 2007; Zetter and Ruaudel 2016) since many refugees are unregistered and undocumented as they fear deportation and unjust treatment by the Indian government. The last world refugee survey, in 2009, recorded more than 400,000 refugees as residing in India (USCRI 2009). Refugees in India are scattered around different states and cities. While many refugees registered with UNHCR live in the capital city, Delhi, an increasing number of refugee populations exist elsewhere (UNHCR 2014a).

Refugees from five communities are included in this research: Rohingya, Tibetan, Afghan, Chin, and Somali. There are an estimated 40,000 Rohingyas in India, of whom at most 16,500 are registered with the UNHCR (HRW 2018). According to the last Central Tibetan Administration (CTA) survey in 2010, there are 94,203 Tibetans in India, the largest Tibetan refugee population globally. However, other sources have estimated their numbers to be higher (see Routray 2007). The UNHCR (2021c) reported 15,217 Afghans as registered with them in India, a figure which is contested (Bentz 2013). Similar to other groups, there are no accurate figures for Chin (an ethnic group from Myanmar) refugees; two studies by Human Rights Watch (HRW 2009) and the World Bank (Zetter and Ruaudel 2016) estimated their number to be around 100,000. However, only 8000 are registered in Delhi (Fleming and Zahau 2014). Lastly, while the official figure for Somalis is 700 (UNHCR 2021c), the actual number is likely to be higher.

India is not a signatory of the 1951 UN Refugee Convention or its 1967 Protocol, and the Indian government has not adopted any domestic legislation governing refugee issues (Field, Tiwari, and Mookherjee 2020). This lack of a sound policy framework has led to diverse practices and uneven treatment of refugee groups across India based on ethnicity, religion, country of origin, and arrival date (Buscher 2011; HRW 2009). For example, the government has granted more legal rights to Tibetan refugees than to any others because of India's cultural affinity with Buddhist Tibetans (Routray 2007). A recent example of this selective hospitality is the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), passed by India's parliament in December 2019. It proposed an amendment to the citizenship law allowing non-Muslim minorities, such as Hindu, Christian, and Sikh refugees from Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Bangladesh to apply for Indian citizenship (HRW 2020). Muslim refugees were excluded, putting Rohingyas and Muslim Afghans at a greater risk of detention and deportation. This Citizenship Amendment Act has not, however, been implemented yet (Mandhani 2021). Most of the data for this research was collected before the law was passed, and therefore, its effect on refugee communities is not documented here. However, future research on refugee education should consider the effects of this law (if it comes into effect) on the various refugee communities in India.

Several INGOs, the UNHCR, local NGOs and faith-based charities arrange VET and skills training programmes for refugees in India. The programmes organised by the UNHCR's implementing partners are linked to its *Global Strategy of Livelihoods* (2014–2018) with a central priority of self-reliance, which focuses on training for employment, including income generation activities, computer classes, language courses, and job placement support (UNHCR 2013, 2014b). However, there is insufficient evidence of whether such programmes are designed and implemented based on the actual aspirations of refugee populations.

The Indian government launched a *National Policy on Skills Development and Entrepreneurship 2015* to provide an umbrella for skilling activities in the country (GOI 2015). However, this policy makes no mention of refugees' training, or inclusion in the training courses offered by different state VET institutes. Therefore, most refugee groups remained dependent on the parallel systems of vocational education and skills training operated by the UNHCR, INGOs, and other organisations. Such VET programmes were specifically targeted at refugees in the country.

All Afghans, Rohingya, Somali, and Chin participants attended courses through these parallel systems managed by international and local refugee organisations. In contrast to the other refugee groups, Tibetans have separate education and training structures in India, with the Tibetan government in exile (CTA) providing educational and skills development opportunities to Tibetans across the country. These training institutes are affiliated with the Indian Ministry of Skills Development and Entrepreneurship and the National Council of Vocational Training in India.

### Methodology

A qualitative approach was employed to gather data using semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and participatory drawing sessions with 66 participants to record their experiences and expectations of the available VET and skills programmes. This included 58 refugee participants from Afghan, Rohingya, Somali, Chin, and Tibetan communities and eight official and volunteer staff working with international and national refugee organisations. All the refugee participants had previously attended some skills training or were currently enrolled in a VET programme. The staff and volunteers who participated had been associated with the design and implementation of VET courses for refugees in some form.

The study compared five refugee groups and their engagement with VET and skills programmes in three Indian cities: Delhi, Hyderabad, and Jaipur. These cities were chosen due to hosting some of the largest refugee populations in the country (UNHCR 2013, 2016). The participants were recruited through snowball sampling because refugee groups are closed, 'hard to reach' marginalised populations (Volz and Heckathorn 2008) that do not always openly reveal their identity for fear of legal troubles. The data was collected between July 2019 and January 2020. In total, 48 individual interviews, four focus groups, and 14 one-on-one participatory drawing sessions were conducted.

The interviews were completed with two sets of participants, refugees and staff members of refugee organisations, to compare and contrast the perspectives of different stakeholders regarding the VET programmes in India. The staff members included directors, employees, and volunteers working with national, international, and local refugee organisations. Most of the participants understood either Hindi, Urdu, or English, the languages in which the researcher was communicating. In Hyderabad, I employed a Rohingya community member as a translator during the field visit because although many female participants understood Hindi, they could not reply in it. In addition to interviews, four focus group discussions were conducted with a total of twenty-six participants in Delhi and Hyderabad. In Delhi, a focus group discussion with eight Rohingya men was organised, and another three focus groups were held in Hyderabad, two with female Rohingya participants and one with male Rohingyas.



The third method of data collection was participatory drawing sessions. I embedded the drawing component to provide multiple and complementary modes of expression for the participants (Cole and Knowles 2011; Pauwels 2010). I invited the participants to draw two pictures on white paper: one depicting life before attending VET and skills programmes, and the second depicting their imagined lives (and hopes) after completing the programmes. They were also asked to describe their drawings. This task proved to be an ice-breaker activity and led to further discussion and semi-structured interviews with these participants.

All data, including semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and the refugees' own interpretations of their drawings, were audio-recorded (with consent) and transcribed. The data were coded using NVivo software, and an inductive, interpretive approach (Blaxter, Hughes, and Tight 2010) was employed in which themes and patterns of meaning were identified across a dataset in relation to the research questions (Patton 2002). First, I formulated codes reflecting the voices and interpretations of the participants, without imposing my own interpretations on them. These voices are represented through direct verbatims in this paper with pseudonyms. As a second step, the cross-group analyses allowed identification of similarities and differences across refugee communities. This helped to capture the themes emerging from most groups (such as 'limited and predetermined courses' and 'structural factors'), and themes only coming from a particular group (such as 'racial and religious discrimination' for Somalis). At this point, theoretical saturation of the data was reached as similar themes and ideas appeared repeatedly. Finally, I summarised the codes and divided them into three abstract themes: the purpose of training, differences in requirements and aspirations, and intersecting factors affecting refugees' choices and abilities.

## Findings

### *Training for what? The purpose of vocational education*

In all three cities, the participants of this research mentioned similar VET and skills programmes being offered to refugees. In Delhi, most training courses were English language classes, introductory computer courses, baking, embroidery, candle making, tailoring, stitching, and entrepreneurship. In Hyderabad, the majority of courses aimed to teach women how to make toiletries such as soap, facewash, henna, shampoo, and also bangles. In addition were short-term training courses in solar lamp manufacturing and mobile phone repair. In Jaipur, almost all training related to life skills and low wage sector skills, such as hygiene classes and sewing courses for women.

Most of the refugee respondents mentioned that they were not asked what they wanted to learn, or for what purpose. Instead, they were encouraged to join the training programmes arranged in the training centre nearest their neighbourhoods. In particular, refugees from four groups (Afghan, Tibetan, Somali, and Chin) expressed concerns with the monetary focus of such predetermined programmes and the nature of the jobs available to them after such training. An Afghan woman, Fatemah, commented:

Many organisations focus only on two things, tailoring or beauty product making. Even if someone has studied business, they will put them in a tailoring group and tell them: 'this is what you have to do if you want to earn'. They don't even ask us what we want to learn.

She further added:

(If) all Afghan women are just going to be tailors? And what are they going to do if there will be too many tailors in the same neighbourhood?

Maya, a refugee volunteer who had worked with Rohingya and Afghan refugees in Delhi, mentioned that ‘they [organisations] don’t expect much of refugees’. She shared her experience of working with a group of Afghan women in Delhi, where a gynaecologist had to attend an embroidery course because it was the only course available for her. She said:

The criteria were that if you fall below an income line, if you don’t have any income coming in, you have to go for this training. Money was their main focus.

The interviews with the staff members of refugee organisations corresponded with the findings from the refugee participants. Six out of seven staff members and a volunteer working with the refugee organisations all mentioned that the primary purpose of training programmes was to help refugees to generate income after learning a particular skill. Most staff respondents said that such courses were essential to tackle the immediate poverty situation of some refugee groups, especially the Rohingya, who are the most economically and educationally disadvantaged refugee community in India.

### ***What kind of training from whom? Differences in the requirements and aspirations of refugees***

Gaffer, a 21-year-old Rohingya refugee living in Delhi, had left Myanmar in 2013. He attended the participatory drawing and sketched his life in three countries: Myanmar, Bangladesh, and India. Gaffer stated that he went to Bangladesh but found it quite challenging to stay in the refugee camp there. He explained that: ‘a friend of mine was in India at that time. He said there are opportunities not just for refugees, but for everyone. So I came to India’. Gaffer worked as a waiter in Punjab (a northern state) and daily wage labourer in a cement factory in Jammu (another northern state) then moved to Delhi, where he got the chance to complete his tenth grade through distance learning. He was attending computer classes organised by a refugee NGO near his neighbourhood, and wanted to learn software and graphic design. He remarked:

I have so many hopes for the future. There are several organisations here, but the problem is that these organisations don’t believe in us; they think that we can only do rag-picking, construction work, or work as daily wage labourers. I believe everyone can do something, but we need opportunities.

Gaffer’s testimony was similar to Maya’s, who stressed that the training providers’ expectations of refugees were low. However, several respondents in all three cities who had completed primary and secondary education expressed the desire to attend skills training in the fields of graphic design, software, hardware, and on electrician courses. However, in Delhi and Jaipur, no refugee mentioned that such classes were available. Compared to these two cities, in Hyderabad, two male Rohingya refugees, Abul and Amanant Shah, talked about having attended a mobile repair course; Abul remarked that ‘only we two were able to participate in this training out of nearly 8,000 refugees in the city’.

Many young refugees from Tibetan and Afghan communities demonstrated a desire for training that would prepare them to work in civil society. Several aspired to work for the betterment of their communities instead of in market-oriented jobs. Tashi, a young Tibetan refugee woman enrolled in a bachelor's course at a Delhi university, had attended English language and computing courses offered by NGOs. While explaining her sketch during the participatory drawing session, she exclaimed:

I want to be a social worker to work in NGOs. Since my childhood, different Tibetan organisations in India have looked after me; they supported my education as well. So, I want to do the same and help others.

Tashi's aspirations were similar to those of several other young refugees, particularly from the Tibetan and Afghan communities. However, it is important to highlight that Tashi's situation as a Tibetan refugee differed from other participants as she enjoys more legal rights in India than individuals from other groups. She had also been able to pursue a VET course in a Tibetan institution.

In contrast to these opinions, most Rohingya refugees in Hyderabad and Jaipur, both male and female, showed contentment with the training courses available to them. These courses, such as shera (a flower headgear worn by grooms) making in Hyderabad, helped Rohingya women to earn some money. Therefore, they expressed willingness to take any course which would help them to earn some income for their survival. It is noteworthy that Rohingya refugees in these two cities were living in slums on the outskirts of towns, and struggling for basic resources. However, the Afghan and Tibetan refugees included in this research resided in better neighbourhoods in Delhi with easier access to basic amenities compared to Rohingyas in Delhi, Hyderabad, and Jaipur. Therefore, it would seem that the socio-economic conditions of these groups influenced their expectations of the skills programmes.

Similarly, the educational attainment of refugees varied amongst different refugee groups, also shaping their learning aspirations. Many Afghan and Tibetan, and some Somali respondents had completed graduate studies. All four Afghan participants and a Somali man in Delhi shared that they did not feel inclined to join any specific skills courses because these only offered low skills that do not lead to good jobs. Sadiq, an Afghan male, said the courses were 'fine for survival, but not for long term livelihoods'. These participants had better educational qualifications than most Rohingyas in Hyderabad and Jaipur. Hence, they showed less interest in attending courses offering low skills. Some of these respondents mentioned that they would like to attend specific skills courses in national VET institutions; however, they were aware that their refugee status limited their access to such national educational bodies.

Most of the staff respondents highlighted that a large number of refugees, particularly Rohingyas, had low literacy, so skills training providers struggled with the organisation of skills courses. In addition, Chaitan, who was responsible for designing and implementing skills and vocational courses in an NGO in Hyderabad, stressed the lack of funding for programmes for refugees in their city. Two other staff members in Delhi and Jaipur also stated that they had small budgets with which to arrange services for refugees.

### *Intersecting factors affecting refugees' choices and abilities*

In this study, three staff members from across the cities and a volunteer all highlighted the strong patriarchal systems among some refugee groups, specifically the Rohingya, restricting learning opportunities for women refugees. Staff participants talked about their experiences in convincing male members of this community to allow their women to join skills classes. Namrata worked with an organisation arranging programmes for the Rohingya community in Delhi and Jaipur. She described her experiences as follows:

Conducting one workshop after another, we can now see women come out for meetings or classes. Earlier, we had to ask the men: 'tomorrow we have arranged a workshop can you please send your women?' Even when we organise classes for women, we have to consult male community leaders.

These findings from the staff members were similar to results from the refugee participants. In one of the focus groups of Rohingya females in Hyderabad, Noor Kiyas shared that: 'We are Muslims, we have to follow the rules. We will not come to the (VET) centre if the husband doesn't allow it. This is what we have seen from our childhood'. Some of them mentioned the conflict in Myanmar, where women could not go out for fear of sexual violence, influencing their actions in their host country. For these socio-cultural and historical reasons, many refugee women felt unable to attend the skills courses organised for them. A few would only participate in life skills classes, such as hygiene classes, since these were short term, while others who attended the skills programmes were unsure if they would go outside their neighbourhood to work, as that depended on their husbands' permissions and their own perceptions about women's work and earning money.

Parallel testimonies of various male and female refugee participants were recorded in this study. Compared to the Rohingya community, fewer Chin, Somali, or Afghan community members expressed such strong sentiments about needing permission to attend skills classes. Indeed, none of the four Tibetan women participants talked about any such restriction being put on their learning or work. Tosmo, a Tibetan female completing a bachelor's degree in Delhi, stressed that 'my family never stopped me from studying. I think Tibetans are more open. We don't have such rules'.

In addition to patriarchal, socio-cultural, and historical constraints, religious values in some communities limited women's mobility. Osman, a Rohingya male in Hyderabad, communicated his desire for his daughters to learn some skills and find proper work. However, he mentioned facing a rebuke from his community in the city:

Because of my daughter, I have immense pressure from my community. She learnt to make a solar lamp in the (learning) centre, and she teaches other women, but they (community members) think it is against religion . . . I do not want to limit her learning.

The language of instruction was another challenging area for refugees and training providers alike, especially considering the multilingual characteristic of the cities and the diversity of the refugee groups involved. During my fieldwork in Hyderabad, I had the opportunity to observe the feminine hygiene class organised for Rohingya women. The class started by showing a video in the Kannada language by an English-speaking instructor to a group of women who spoke Burmese. These women understood a little Hindi and were living in a Telugu speaking city. The video was followed by a detailed

discussion about female health and hygiene by the teacher in English. Although most of the women were unable to understand this discussion, they waited patiently until the end of class to collect the packed lunch promised to them. I interviewed Shahidah immediately after this session and noted that she could not understand the language of the teacher or the video instructions. Shahidah acknowledged that she was only able to grasp the purpose of the session through the visual medium. Many other refugee participants said that they chose not to attend the courses, or dropped out when they realised they could not comprehend the instructors' language.

While several intersecting factors restricted most refugee women's learning opportunities, not all refugee women were in the same situation. A few refugee women from particular refugee groups mentioned facing far more significant impediments than women from other refugee communities. Sagal, a Somali black Muslim woman who wears a hijab, had lived in Delhi for five years. She had attended baking and cooking courses in the past at an organisation near her neighbourhood, and aspired to start a small restaurant selling Somali food. Sagal was eager to participate in other programmes in future; however, she had to travel far from her house, which led to safety concerns. Sagal further mentioned that she and her children had faced racial abuse on the streets of Delhi, and that the people in her neighbourhood do not like to mix with them. Sagal believed she was more susceptible to discrimination as a black Muslim refugee.

Intersectionality of gender, refugee status, ethnicity, race, and nationality all created further barriers for Sagal to access skills training. Sagal doubted that she would ever be able to find a good job or start her own restaurant in the city because of the discrimination against her, which further deterred her from pursuing VET courses. The challenges in Sagal's life are exacerbated as she cannot communicate well in Hindi or English. Consequently, she reported feeling excluded and cut off from Indian society.

## **Reframing vocational education and training for refugees and policy implications**

Sen (1999) argues that the advancement of freedom should be the focus of development. Combining CA with intersectionality, this paper demonstrates the effects of multiple and intersecting identities of refugees (based on their gender, race, religion, language, age and socio-economic status) on their freedom related to VET opportunities and aspirations. By bridging forth the specific intricacies of the refugee experiences, I ask if training enhances the freedom and valued choices of refugees to assist them in building the life they desire in their host country. Due to the focus on the economic outcome of training, refugees are denied opportunities to decide what they want to learn and why. In other words, the freedom of self-realisation and self-determination through VET and skills courses was not available to refugees. The study recorded different expectations and aspirations held by refugee participants relating to VET programmes. Educational attainment, socio-economic status, and age influenced these expectations. While Rohingya refugees in Hyderabad and Jaipur appeared content with the training courses, the participants from the other four groups (Afghan, Tibetan, Somali, and Chin) and Rohingyas in Delhi were all critical of the types of training available to them. A limited number of predetermined training programmes were available to most refugees in all three cities, homogenising the refugees and their vocational education and skills needs.

Refugees are thus reduced to voiceless subjects, disregarding any differences between them along the axes of gender, class, religion, ethnicity, or race. These differences between refugees are also grounded in political, historical, cultural, and religious contexts, an example being the effects of these factors on the distinct lived realities of Rohingya women and Tibetan women as demonstrated in the findings. Regardless of these distinctive refugee identities, their prime need is assumed to be self-reliance, which then becomes the central focus of VET. However, self-reliance has an economic imperative since multilateral organisations and governments often face funding shortfalls and want to reduce refugees' future dependency on humanitarian assistance (Jacobsen and Fratzke 2016; Skran and Easton-Calabria 2020). This unidimensional goal of training programmes denies refugees any say in the programmes and policies that impact their lives in host countries.

Building on the findings of this research, I suggest VET should address various facets of refugees' lives, considering the multiple deprivations of refugee populations and the multidimensionality of refugee poverty. Refugees, with their manifold identities, live compounded lives in India. When a majority of VET programmes follow a unidimensional income generation approach, they (advertently or inadvertently) ignore multiple essential aspects of refugees' lives. Furthermore, the courses available to refugees in Indian cities were operating on the assumption that all refugee participants only wanted to gain economic benefits from training programmes, neglecting the differences amongst refugee groups and refugee individuals. This economic focus of training accords with UNHCR's livelihoods policies and its self-reliance objective. There is a need to consider a holistic approach towards refugees' lives and livelihoods.

This is not to say that income generation should not be a part of VET – simply that it should not be the only purpose of the training. Non-economic factors such as well-being, freedom and human dignity (including decent work opportunities) should also be supported by VET courses. Moreover, sustainable refugee livelihoods should be viewed as work opportunities that contribute to freedoms, dignity, self-esteem, and respectability. In addition, they should promote self-determination in life choices and social inclusion in host countries. Increased and diversified VET, through policies and implementation, should seek to support such sustainable livelihoods for refugees.

The well-being, livelihoods, and development of refugees are instead defined by experts or policymakers. Hence, policy stakeholders should seek to move away from conventional assumptions regarding the needs and requirements of individuals and communities, particularly vulnerable groups. Diverse refugee groups and individuals cannot simply be put into a single category. Training programmes should address the particular skills requirements and aspirations of refugees through a variety of programmes, and also address different aspects of their multidimensional and complex realities.

The importance of freedom in refugees' lives can also be understood by distinguishing what they do and what they *can* do, functioning and capabilities. Gaffer (a Rohingya male) and Sagal (a Somali female) might gain the same outcome from an introductory computer course, but we have to ask: what VET courses were available to them? Did both of them select the course out of interest? Additionally, we have to consider if Sagal had the social and economic freedom to make that choice. If patriarchal, religious, racial, and



cultural factors assisted or restricted her decision to attend the course, then VET and skills training for refugees cannot entirely be analysed through the lens of income generation and economic self-reliance.

In addition to the multiple disadvantages faced by refugee women, they also lack access to the decision-making process in skills development. This study has demonstrated that refugee women are not asked about the skills they wanted to access, or the kind of jobs they wanted to pursue; instead, these decisions are taken by and between humanitarian agencies and their patriarchal heads of families. Furthermore, legal and structural barriers, including the host country's refugee laws and skills policies, determine what kind of VET refugee women can access regardless of their skills preferences. Similarly, a country's labour laws decide the employment sectors in which refugee women (and men) can work. Even when refugee leaders are involved in decision making, rarely are these leaders women. This lack of freedom and agency in skills training, livelihoods, and other aspects of life are bound to affect the overall well-being and quality of life of refugee women, as they do not get equal opportunities to create a life they have reason to value.

Further comparative research is needed to navigate the skills requirements and aspirations of refugees from different groups residing in diverse contexts, which would help to shape VET policies based on the valued skills and capabilities of refugee groups instead of a catch-all, unidimensional policy objective of economic self-reliance. Individuals should have the freedom to decide what kind of change they want to bring to their own lives through VET opportunities, and these courses should help refugees build a life they desire. Sen maintains that 'If freedom is what development advances, then there is a major argument for concentrating on the overarching objectives, rather than in a particular means, or some chosen list of instruments' (1993, 3). He stresses that while economics are obviously an important part of development, they are not an adequate means to achieve it. Skills training should thus not only prepare refugees to earn an income, but should also address their well-being and social inclusion needs. Accordingly, education and training opportunities for refugees should be based on the four pillars of learning: to know, to do, to be, and to live together, as mentioned in the well-known and influential UNESCO report, *Learning: The Treasure Within* (Delors 1996).

The findings of this paper have three key policy implications for refugee VET. First, in order to address the diverse needs of different refugee groups, UNHCR, INGOs and local organisations should seek ways to provide increased and diversified opportunities for skills development linked to various facets of refugees' lives. This will also enhance job opportunities, self-fulfilment, and well-being possibilities for refugees. More avenues of VET will help refugees to reach their potential and expand their competencies, which are not fully developed and utilised by limited VET programmes. Second, refugees should be included in national VET institutions and skills policies. Structural barriers currently restrict refugees' ability to fulfil their educational and life aspirations. Dryden-Peterson et al. (2019) argue that including refugees in the national educational framework is the 'pragmatic mechanism' of achieving policy goals of education. Furthermore, inclusion in local skills training systems will expand VET choices open to refugees, increase interaction opportunities for local people and refugees, and make these programmes more cost-effective. Third, in India and other multilingual countries, training courses in local languages will be beneficial for urban refugees, further promoting their social inclusion.

Additionally, some refugee groups in India would benefit from literacy and numeracy courses, which should be offered together with skills development programmes. There is, of course, a need for border structural changes in host countries, such as ensuring refugees' right to work and access to higher education in order to truly create equal opportunities for these marginalised populations.

This paper makes a notable contribution to knowledge in the field by offering policy-makers suggestions for adopting multifaceted approaches to VET for refugees that consider intersectional identities, the institutional and social disparities, and the varied realities of these refugee communities in host countries, in this case India. Such an approach will boost refugees' freedoms, well-being, and individual agency. Conceptually, the paper emphasises the relevance of integrating a capabilities lens with intersectionality in order to gain a more nuanced understanding of the intertwined social, cultural, and institutional factors shaping the aspirations and requirements of refugees in relation to VET programmes. In laying out these lived realities and their relevance, I call for policy attention towards equitable, diversified, inclusive, and higher-quality VET for refugees.

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