

# Building sustainable and decent refugee livelihoods through adult education? Interplay between policies and realities of five refugee groups

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## Abstract

Most of the world's refugees live in Global South countries, where they struggle to find quality education and opportunities for decent livelihoods. This paper explores the underexamined yet highly relevant interlinkage between sustainable livelihoods and adult learning among urban refugees residing in three major cities in India. It speaks to the tight intersection of education, livelihoods and aspirations of five refugee communities: Afghan, Rohingya, Somali, Chin and Tibetan. Building on interviews, focus groups and participatory drawing sessions involving 66 refugee and staff respondents, the study highlights the refugees' extremely limited learning opportunities, which result in low skills and being forced to take discriminatory and undignified work in the informal sector. By integrating the capabilities approach with sustainable livelihoods, the paper argues for more diverse educational opportunities and a broader understanding of refugee livelihoods that goes beyond pure economics to encompass consideration of freedom and human dignity.

## KEYWORDS

adult education, aspirations, Global South, refugees, sustainable livelihoods

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## Key insights

### What is the main issue that the paper addresses?

This paper examines the under-researched but vital connection between adult learning and sustainable livelihoods for urban refugees to inform the education and livelihood policies and strategies targeted at these marginalised populations. It explores whether the learning opportunities available to refugees assist their educational capabilities and support them in building decent and sustainable livelihoods in their host country.

### What are the main insights that the paper provides?

The study highlights that while the available education opportunities strengthen the further education and livelihood aspirations of refugees, structural and practical barriers in the host countries limit their educational capabilities and opportunities to create sustainable and decent livelihoods. The paper advocates for increased and diverse educational opportunities for refugees in host countries and suggests that refugee education and livelihood policies should move beyond self-reliance, developing a broader understanding of refugees' lives, aspirations and livelihoods.

## INTRODUCTION

The world is currently experiencing some of the highest volumes of human displacement in modern history, with 26 million refugees worldwide (UNHCR, 2022). While it is assumed that the Global North is dealing with an influx of refugees, in fact developing countries host 86% of all displaced people worldwide (UNHCR, 2022). Most displacement crises persist for decades, and therefore the refugees involved in them often remain in exile for long periods of time. Considering the protractedness of refugee crises, the recent policies (UNHCR, 2014a, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c) of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) place emphasis on livelihood strategies designed to promote the self-reliance of refugees, often through adult education.

The UNHCR's livelihood strategies recommend the provision of vocational and skills training to refugees (as part of adult education) in order to help them find safe, sustainable and dignified employment, and support their local integration (UNHCR, 2006, 2014a, 2019a). The UNHCR's *Global strategy for livelihoods 2014–2018* aims to unleash 'human potential through education, training, livelihoods support and income generation' (p. 16). In a similar vein, the *Global framework of refugee education* (UNHCR, 2019b) and the United Nations (UN)'s *2030 refugee education* (UNHCR, 2019c) target the increased enrolment and investment in adult education programmes of refugees in host countries. Several other reports by international organisations (ILO, 2020; OECD, 2017; UNESCO, 2019) and studies exploring refugee livelihoods (Awidi & Quan-Baffour, 2021; Banki, 2006; Boateng & Hilton, 2011; Buscher, 2011) have similarly suggested the need to facilitate refugees' skills development to allow them to build their own livelihoods. However, the implementation of these programmes is inevitably complex, and refugees must overcome numerous hurdles to accessing education and building livelihoods in their host country, including limited learning opportunities (Morrice et al., 2020), exclusion from national institutions (Bonet, 2018), resistance from

local governments (Jacobsen & Nichols, 2011) and prejudice and exploitation in the labour market (Knappert et al., 2018).

The paper makes a unique contribution to the knowledge base by examining the under-researched relationship between adult learning and sustainable livelihoods among urban refugees in order to inform education and livelihood policies and strategies targeted at these marginalised populations. To this purpose, the study explores the skills programmes implemented in India and evaluates them against the aspirations of five different refugee communities. In conceptual terms, the paper combines sustainable livelihoods with a capabilities approach to develop a framework for urban refugee livelihoods. The research builds an evidence base for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 4 and 8, addressing quality education and decent work. It builds a bridge between these two SDGs and establishes the interconnectedness of their respective goals by examining the role of available educational opportunities in supporting decent and dignified work for refugees. Furthermore, the study foregrounds refugee voices and presents a comparative picture of refugee realities in India.

The Indian context is particularly compelling since the country receives a significant number of refugees from all over the world without being a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention or its 1967 Protocol (Dagar, 2023; Samaddar, 2003). The UNHCR (2021) recently estimated that there are 20,000 refugees in India. However, scholars have maintained that the numbers are much higher than estimated (Saxena, 2007; Zetter & Ruadel, 2016); for instance, one study reported that there might be 400,000 refugees in India (United States Committee for Refugees and Immigrants, 2009). The Indian government has not adopted any domestic refugee framework and is not compelled by international conventions to provide rights and opportunities to refugees in the country. Therefore, many refugees face safety and other risks and livelihood challenges, and in the absence of a national refugee framework, the options for durable solutions are limited (UNHCR, 2013, 2014b). Moreover, the intersection of ethnicity, race, gender and religion heightens livelihood challenges for different refugee groups in the country (Saxena, 2007). Drawing on a qualitative methodology with 66 participants from refugee groups and staff members of refugee organisations, this paper explores the educational and livelihood aspirations and experiences of five different refugee communities residing in India: Afghan, Somali, Rohingya, Chin and Tibetan. The study was conducted in three major Indian cities: Delhi, Hyderabad and Jaipur.

The research aims to answer the following research questions: What kind of livelihood pathways are created by adult education programmes for refugees in India? And, how, if at all, do these livelihoods align with refugees' life aspirations? By including the perspectives of both refugees and the organisers of adult education programmes, the paper provides a holistic picture of refugee training and livelihoods in India.

The paper is structured in the following way: the next section gives an overview of the refugee communities and their skills development in India. Then, the literature review section summarises the studies on refugee education, livelihoods and aspirations, both worldwide and in the Indian context. The subsequent section develops the refugee livelihoods framework by bridging the capabilities approach and sustainable livelihoods. The following section describes the methodology of the research. Finally, the findings are interpreted and discussed, and conclusions and policy recommendations are set out.

## INDIAN CONTEXT: REFUGEES AND ADULT EDUCATION

Despite being a non-signatory to the international refugee conventions, India is host to large numbers of refugees from near neighbours such as Afghanistan, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Somalia, Tibet and Bangladesh, as well as more distant countries like Iran, Sudan, Syria and many others (UNHCR, 2016a, 2016b). While the UNHCR (2021) reports the

total refugee figure as 20,000, researchers (Field et al., 2020; Sanderson, 2015; Zetter & Ruaudel, 2016) have often claimed that the actual numbers of refugees within India's borders are probably far higher. Indeed, the last world refugee survey in 2009 noted that more than 400,000 refugees were residing in India (United States Committee for Refugees and Immigrants, 2009). The number will have increased since that survey because of the Rohingya conflict in Myanmar and the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan. The large discrepancy in figures exists because a significant number of refugees prefer to remain under the radar rather than formally register, fearing deportation and discrimination should they do so (Jacobsen, 2002; Jacobsen & Nichols, 2011). For example, in 2018, the Indian government deported seven Rohingya refugees to Myanmar, spreading fears of mass deportation among the estimated 40,000 Rohingya refugees living in India; only 16,500 had registered with the UNHCR (Human Rights Law Network, 2007). Researchers claim that the Indian government has unequal policies for these groups based on their ethnicity, religion and country of origin (Maneesh & Muniyandi, 2016; Samaddar, 2003). Hence, refugees' educational and livelihood struggles are intensified by their intersecting identities of race, religion, ethnicity, gender and nationality. Therefore, the Indian context becomes even more pertinent for this study.

Refugees in India are scattered around different states and cities. While many refugees registered with the UNHCR live in Delhi, an increasing number live outside the capital city (UNHCR, 2014b). Therefore, this study included refugees from three cities, two in the north and one in the south: Delhi, Jaipur and Hyderabad. The refugees included in this study are Rohingya, Afghan, Tibetan, Somali and Chin. These groups make up some of the highest refugee populations in India (UNHCR, 2021). Approximately 40,000 Rohingyas are in the country, while only 16,500 are registered with UNHCR. The official figure for Afghans is 15,127, which is also disputed (see Bentz, 2013). An estimated 700 Somali refugees are in different cities (UNHCR, 2021). However, again the actual figures are likely to be higher. In addition, India has the highest Tibetan exile population worldwide; one figure is 94,203 (CTA, 2021). Finally, for Chin refugees, another ethnic minority from Myanmar, the reported figure by two studies (HRW, 2009; Zetter & Ruaudel, 2016) is 100,000, while the registered refugees only number 8000. Since 2012, the Indian government has permitted mandated refugees to apply for long-term visas and work permits (Zetter & Ruaudel, 2016). Legally, refugees also have access to health care and education (Morand & Crisp, 2013). However, in reality, they have limited access to essential services and the formal economy. When refugees wish to access services, such as admission to universities or applying for a job in the formal sector, their UNHCR-issued refugee cards are not recognised or accepted (Akcapar, 2019). Refugees are often asked to show Indian national identity cards, which are only available to citizens and are denied to refugees as stateless subjects (Saxena, 2007). With the increasing number of asylum applications in recent years, providing education, livelihoods and other opportunities for refugees remains challenging for the UNHCR and other humanitarian organisations working in the country.

The UNHCR office in India provides educational, livelihood and protection programmes for refugees through its implementing partners (UNHCR, 2019d). The Central Tibetan Administration (CTA), also known as the Tibetan government in exile, based in India's northern city, Dharamshala, also organises educational and skills training programmes and livelihood initiatives for Tibetan refugees, supported by the Indian government (CTA, 2021). The UNHCR's work in India is guided by its *Global strategy of livelihoods 2014–2018* (UNHCR, 2014a). The UNHCR advocates for vocational, entrepreneurial and technical skills and language training as part of its livelihood strategy for refugees. In India, promoting livelihood and self-reliance for refugees is the UNHCR and its implementing partners' core priority. However, there is insufficient evidence on whether such programmes actually lead to long-term, dignified livelihood opportunities for different refugee groups.

## NAVIGATING THE INTERSECTION OF THE EDUCATION, LIVELIHOODS AND ASPIRATIONS OF REFUGEES

Refugees and their families have high aspirations regarding education (Bonet, 2018; Dryden-Peterson, 2017; Kanu, 2008). They approach education and training as ways to build an anti-conflict strategy that can shape their future and pave the way for their integration into host societies (Banki, 2006; Dryden-Peterson et al., 2019). Low socio-economic status in the host country is considered temporary until social mobility is gained through their children's education and subsequent livelihoods (Salikutluk et al., 2016).

Research on refugee education and aspirations has grown in recent decades. While most studies have focused on the higher education aspirations of refugees (Schneider, 2018; Shakya et al., 2010), some have explored their adult education and training aspirations. Several studies have reported that these further education and vocational aspirations are determined by the goal of economic independence to support their family (McWilliams & Bonet, 2016; Oppedal et al., 2017; Shakya et al., 2010). Refugees are motivated to attend training to get a job, improve career prospects, enhance social interaction and build self-esteem (Phillimore et al., 2003). However, a few studies have revealed that educational aspirations are also driven by altruism, a desire to contribute to the new country (Shakya et al., 2010) and to help people back home (McWilliams & Bonet, 2016; Oppedal et al., 2017).

Alongside these different aspirations, a few scholars (Bellino, 2021; Morrice et al., 2020) have highlighted the gap between aspirations and available educational opportunities. For instance, while many refugees would be interested in learning IT and business skills (Kofman et al., 2007; Sargeant & Forna, 2001), studies (Nawyn, 2010; Shiferaw & Hagos, 2001) have found that training opportunities were only available in language skills, retail, catering, crafts, hairdressing, and so on, limiting refugees to low-skilled work (Dagar, 2023; Knappert et al., 2018). Morrice et al. (2020) reported that only language courses were available for adult refugees, and their educational opportunities were limited. Bellino's (2021) study in the Kakuma camp revealed that while refugees consider education as a path towards upward social mobility, they were increasingly becoming aware of the unequal distribution of educational opportunities, which would create further challenges for them in actualising their aspirations. Bonet (2018) and Dryden-Peterson et al. (2019) have also drawn attention towards the exclusion of refugees from national education institutions.

Education is the most-sought asset for better livelihoods, integration and enhancing future job prospects (Bloch, 2002; Kofman et al., 2007). Horst (2006) suggests that investing in education and skills development is the chief livelihood strategy. Awidi and Quan-Baffour's (2021) study in Uganda concludes that adult education provides relevant skill sets that can be used to build livelihoods. Education and adult skills are essential for refugee household livelihoods and can assist in knowledge acquisition and be used in reconstructing lives and livelihoods in host spaces (Jacobsen & Nichols, 2011).

However, refugees face several structural and social challenges when trying to build their livelihoods, particularly in host countries in the Global South. Refugees are not granted the right to work by governments in 50% of asylum countries (UNHCR, 2019a), as governments often fear the competition of refugees in the labour market (Hovil, 2007; Kritikos, 2000). Even when the legal right to work is provided, several political, legal and economic barriers still hinder de facto access to work (Carpi et al., 2021). Campbell (2006) identified further social and geographical challenges for refugee livelihoods in Kenya, such as xenophobia and the location of the refugee population. These barriers mean that refugees often resort to the informal economy, where they face discrimination and risk exploitation, arrest and sexual or physical abuse (Alexander, 2008; Jacobsen, 2002; Knappert et al., 2018; Omata, 2021; Zetter & Ruadel, 2018). Further constraints include a lack of credential recognition, certification

and financial support (Chadderton & Edmonds, 2015), poor social protection and difficult linguistic environments (Wehrle et al., 2018).

Despite the substantial academic interest in refugee education and the UNHCR's focus on livelihood strategy, some scholars (Jacobsen & Fratzke, 2016; Mallett & Slater, 2016) have pointed to the lack of monitoring data related to the livelihood strategy and educational opportunities that could determine the success (or otherwise) of refugee skills and livelihood programmes in protracted refugee situations.

While various refugee studies have been performed in the Indian context (Buscher, 2011; Field et al., 2020; Jops et al., 2016; WRC, 2011), the literature linking education and livelihoods remains limited, in two important ways. First, almost all prior studies have investigated the livelihoods of urban refugees in India (Buscher, 2011; Field et al., 2020; Jops et al., 2016; WRC, 2011) without focusing on their education and training. Second, the extant research is concentrated in Delhi, a single location, even though many refugee populations live across India in other cities such as Hyderabad, Jammu and Jaipur (UNHCR, 2014b), leaving a gap in data on the educational and livelihood experiences of refugees in these locations. To resolve this gap in the literature, the present study explores whether or not the adult education opportunities available to refugees align with their education and livelihood aspirations and assist them in creating their desired lives in the host country, India. Moreover, this research investigates how, if at all, the opportunities for skills development link up with sustainable and decent livelihoods for the refugee population.

## **REFUGEE LIVELIHOODS: BRIDGING CAPABILITIES APPROACH AND SUSTAINABLE LIVELIHOODS**

This section combines the capabilities approach (CA) and sustainable livelihoods (SL) with a decent work concept in order to reconceptualise understanding of refugee livelihoods. The capabilities approach is well established; as Sen (1999) argues, the primary and the end means of development is extending freedom to individuals for the objective of both justice and poverty reduction. He further argues that the relationship between different kinds of freedom is empirical and causal, and therefore freedom in one area can promote freedom in other areas. Nussbaum (2011) stressed that the main questions are: 'What are people actually able to do and to be? What real opportunities are available to them?' (p. X). Capabilities imply potential, and functioning is what people actually do. Capabilities are 'the various combinations of functioning (being and doing) that the person can achieve' (Sen, 1999, p. 39). A person's achievements are reflected through the combinations of their functioning.

An individual's capabilities can be converted into functioning through education, skills and training opportunities. Sen (1999) regards education as a capability that assists in expanding other capabilities since it leads to further social and political participation and employment skills. The CA insists that the development of educational capabilities can result in enhanced well-being, freedom, economic production and social change in society (Robeyns, 2006). Applying this concept to adult education for refugees, I explore whether training enhances their freedom and valued choices to assist them in building the life they desire in their host country. Do refugees have the freedom to decide which course to take and what to learn? Do they have the freedom to choose where to work? CA has been employed as a conceptual framework in educational research (Aikman & Unterhalter, 2013; Gale & Molla, 2015; Robeyns, 2006; Unterhalter, 2017; Walker, 2006), although only a few studies have applied CA in analysing adult education programmes with refugees (Dagar, 2022; Thorne, 2020). To the best of the present author's knowledge, CA has never been used alongside SL before in analysing refugee adult education programmes.

The concept of sustainable livelihood focuses on the multiplicity of resources, assets and capabilities that affect an individual's ability to make a living (Ashley & Carney, 1999; Asian Development Bank, 2008; Food and Agriculture Organization, 2000; Krantz, 2001). In one of the early studies of SL, Chambers and Conway (1992) mentioned that a livelihood is sustainable 'which can cope with and recover from stress and shocks, maintain or enhance its capabilities and assets, and provide sustainable livelihood opportunities for the next generation; and which contributes net benefits to other livelihoods at the local and global levels and in the short and long term' (p. 9). On a global policy level, it has been acknowledged that more attention should be paid to the various resources, assets, factors and processes that affect an individual's ability to establish their livelihood (Krantz, 2001, p. 1). In this research I will focus on the human capital of refugees, with a particular focus on the education, skills and competencies that influence their livelihood building in the host country. The study inevitably touches upon other types of capital, but will specifically examine the linkage between refugees' adult skills development and livelihoods. By limiting the present investigation to within these parameters, I address the criticism of sustainable livelihood research that 'it often does too little because it tries to do too much' (Levine, 2014, p. 15).

Through this lens, the study aims to examine if the educational opportunities available to refugees enhance their capabilities and human capital, and if these peripheral subjects are able to create sustainable livelihoods for themselves in their host country. In this paper, the concept of sustainable livelihoods encompasses decent work. Non-dignified work opportunities that do not enable human dignity, equity and agency cannot address multidimensional poverty (beyond economic gain) or the well-being of refugees. Decent work is considered a part of sustainable development, growth and livelihoods (ILO, 2019), and is a significant aspect of the UNHCR's livelihoods policies (UNHCR, 2014a). In the 2030 Agenda of the UN, decent work was adopted as an integral part of SDG 8, which aims to 'promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all' (UN DESA, 2023). The International Labour Office (ILO) defines decent work as 'productive work for women and men in conditions of freedom, equity, security and human dignity' (p. 3). A growing body of scholarly (Jacobsen, 2002; Jacobsen & Fratzke, 2016) and empirical (Jops et al., 2016; Porter et al., 2008) literature explores various aspects of refugee livelihoods. Some have employed a sustainable livelihood framework (Teye & Yebleh, 2015; Wake & Barbelet, 2020). However, not enough of these prior studies directly link sustainable livelihoods with refugee education, particularly in India.

In this paper, I combine the freedom aspect of CA with the SL framework. SL complements the CA that considers the freedoms (social, political, economic, legal and others) and opportunities individuals may have which will assist them in, or (in their absence) block them from, converting their educational capabilities (what they can do) into livelihoods functioning (what they actually do). Human agency is fundamental to both approaches from a distributive justice and development viewpoint. Finally, both approaches view livelihood generation and poverty reduction from an unconventional viewpoint that goes beyond purely economic aspects to include factors such as vulnerability, institutional policies (e.g., education and labour policies), capital, social environment and others.

By bridging these two approaches, I explore how refugees' educational and livelihood possibilities and choices are shaped by the broader structures of societies, comprising their educational institutions, culture, political policies, and so on. At the centre of this intersection lies the aim of expansion of the human capability and freedom of refugees that would result in dignified work opportunities and sustainable well-being of these marginalised communities without compromising the abilities of future generations to enhance their substantive freedoms (and fulfil their aspirations). By combining these two frameworks, the paper further examines if the capabilities developed through adult education lead to long-term dignified

livelihoods in the host country and enhance the sustainable well-being of these peripheral groups in their country of asylum.

## METHODOLOGY

Based on a qualitative research design, this study applied three methods of data collection: interviews, focus groups and participatory drawing sessions. In total, 66 participants were recruited to gain a deeper insight into the skills development and livelihood experiences of refugees. These participants were recruited through snowball sampling because refugees are peripheral members of society and hard-to-reach populations. The study was conducted in three major Indian cities: Delhi (26 participants); Hyderabad (15 participants); and Jaipur (7 participants), in a country with some of the highest populations of refugees in the world (UNHCR, 2016a). The research included 58 refugee participants from Afghan, Rohingya, Somali, Chin and Tibetan communities and eight staff members (including directors (2), regional heads of international organisations (1), adult educators (3) and volunteers (2)) of multilateral and local refugee organisations. All the refugee participants had taken some adult education courses, and the staff respondents were involved in the design and implementation of these training sessions.

Recognising the role of reflexivity in research (Clegg & Stevenson, 2013), I acknowledge that my own socio-cultural positioning might have affected the methodology, fieldwork and data analysis. I am not a member of a refugee community myself, and I recognise that my experiences as an Indian woman are quite different from those of someone belonging to a refugee group in India. However, my gender identity influenced my fieldwork in a positive way because many refugee women, particularly from the Rohingya community, felt more comfortable talking to me rather than a male researcher. Additionally, I could understand the socio-political context and attitudes of people towards refugees as a citizen of the host country.

In total, 48 semi-structured interviews, four focus groups (26 participants) and 14 one-to-one participatory drawing sessions were conducted. The drawings complemented the semi-structured interviews by providing an alternative method for participants to open up about their learning and livelihood generation experiences (Gauntlett, 2007; Thorne, 2020). Furthermore, that method worked as an ice breaker and led to further in-depth discussions of the education and livelihood aspirations of the respondents. The interviews and focus group guides were designed to explore the refugees' livelihood engagement and aspirations linked to the available skills development programmes. The focus groups included 26 participants and were conducted in Delhi and Hyderabad. Participants were given a plain language statement in their preferred language to explain the research. I also verbally explained the study and their rights to all participants. Verbal consent (see Obijiofor et al., 2018) was obtained from the refugee participants, which was an ongoing process recorded using a digital recorder. The participants were informed that their views would remain anonymous, and that they could choose to withdraw from the study at any point. The researcher communicated in Hindi, Urdu and English, which were the languages used in most of the interviews, focus groups and drawing sessions. A translator from the Rohingya community was employed (this was also a way of giving back to the research community) in Hyderabad for two focus groups with Rohingya females who could understand Hindi and Urdu but felt unable to reply properly in these languages. The research was conducted from July 2019 to January 2020 after obtaining ethical approval from the relevant bodies.

This study was limited to exploring adult education and livelihood opportunities for urban refugees in three cities. Its findings should be considered in relation to the contextual characteristics of the country, cities and refugee groups involved. Methodologically, it included



66 participants from particular refugee groups, and the representativeness of the sample and findings are bounded.

The interviews, the self-interpretations of drawings and focus groups were transcribed and coded for analysis using NVivo software. An inductive, interpretive approach (Blaxter et al., 2010) was employed in which themes and patterns of meaning were identified across a dataset to build themes. The process included the correlation of theoretical patterns with observed empirical patterns (Dannemark et al., 2002). I linked the findings of this study to the theoretical framework, in particular to key concepts such as freedom, educational capabilities and decent and sustainable livelihood functioning. I thematically coded the transcribed data. For instance, some codes were multidimensional, covering refugee poverty, discrimination in the labour market and exclusion from educational institutions. The codes formed broader themes, and the three main themes are presented in this paper: educational attainment influencing refugee livelihoods, education opportunities linked to decent and sustainable employment, and aspirations for further education and better livelihoods. Refugee voices are highlighted in the paper through pseudonyms.

## FINDINGS

### Educational attainment influencing refugee livelihoods

The study found that most courses offered to refugees were low-skilled training programmes focused on income generation to help them to sustain themselves. However, the study noted a difference in the needs and requirements of refugees depending on their educational level and socio-economic conditions. In Hyderabad and Jaipur, most courses were organised for women to teach them tailoring, stitching, embroidery, how to produce toiletries and life skills training. While similar programmes were available in Delhi, some refugees also talked about attending basic English and computing classes. Most of these programmes were short-term, running for a few days or weeks to a few months. Refugees in all three cities were encouraged to attend these programmes since they were considered to be quick ways of learning skills that could lead to earning a living. Some participants, mainly women, attended multiple courses. For instance, Zahi, a Somali woman in Delhi, attended stitching, tailoring, cooking, baking and some life skills classes. A staff member in Hyderabad explained that they provided food to the women and their children to attract them to the training centres.

However, several respondents pointed out that they had wished to participate in specific vocational courses which were not available to them. Most of the programmes were aligned with the purpose of making the refugees economically self-reliant. Parveen, an Afghan refugee woman, shared her experience of attending a course in Delhi:

*There was a gynaecologist in that group; she had great spoken English as well. She had no other choice but to come to this embroidery group. I thought that was ridiculous... They did not actually ask us what we wanted to learn. Earning basic money was more important.*

A large number of the Afghan, Tibetan, Somali and some Rohingya community members in Delhi had completed their schooling and obtained bachelor's degrees. It seemed that these participants' livelihood preferences were aligned with their qualifications as they were looking for work as interpreters, receptionists, language teachers and for business opportunities such as small shops and restaurants. Additionally, these groups resided in better neighbourhoods in comparison to the Rohingyas in Hyderabad and Jaipur, who were living in slums. Therefore,

most members of these communities registered their dissatisfaction with the available adult education courses and the livelihood opportunities associated with them.

In contrast to these participants, most of the Rohingya community members in Jaipur and Hyderabad were illiterate or semi-literate and worked as rag pickers or construction site workers. Hence, many participants from the Rohingya groups in these cities said that they were willing to learn anything that would provide them with better jobs than those they had.

Most staff (six out of seven staff members and a volunteer working with the refugee organisations) stated that their focus was on alleviating the immediate poverty of the refugee population in India. Kumar, director of a refugee organisation in Delhi, said:

*For most Rohingya in these cities, the situation is grim. So, they need to start earning as soon as possible. Stitching and tailoring are the major courses. For any other work, basic literacy is required, but refugees don't have that.*

However, the study revealed differences in educational attainment across and within the different refugee communities, which were not taken into account. Such disparities in the educational attainment of these refugees, in turn, influence their employment options. As was revealed by the findings, the refugees in Delhi from four communities (the exception being the Rohingya) wanted to attend better adult education courses that would lead to respectable jobs. Of course, other intersecting factors such as gender, class, ethnicity, religion and nationality influenced the perception of different individual refugees and groups about adult education courses and livelihood choices. I have discussed these elsewhere (Author, 2022). Despite those differences, similar adult education classes, often low-skilled ones, were organised for all refugees, focusing on earning to make them self-reliant quickly, and disregarding refugees' agency, dignity and aspirations. While attendees were able to generate some income after completing these courses, the training was unable to support them in building and sustaining decent and dignified livelihoods.

These results link to those of Newcomer et al. (2021), who found that adults were only offered particular classes and were told no further educational opportunities were available. Prior research has also highlighted that low-skilled training for refugees (Nawyn, 2010; Shiferaw & Hagos, 2001) leads them into unskilled and low-skilled jobs in the informal economy (Knappert et al., 2018). By adding to this evidence base, the current study stresses that these marginalised subjects are particularly vulnerable to limited educational opportunities, which set them on a path into a low-wage world of precarity and poverty.

Notwithstanding their narrow educational opportunities, the livelihood aspirations of refugees were shaped by various motives. Rigniz, a Tibetan woman who was completing her graduation studies at a university in Delhi, drew a United Nations building and said she wanted to work there to help other refugees like herself. Her livelihood aspiration was entangled with her desire to enhance the lives of other marginalised people. Contrary to most prior findings in the literature, indicating that refugees' educational requirements were mostly influenced by economic desires (McWilliams & Bonet, 2016; Shakya et al., 2010), this study adds to a small body of scholarship (Shakya et al., 2010) that highlights the influence of altruism, and a desire to help others in the host country, in the educational aspirations of refugees.

It seems that the educational capabilities and (socio-economic) capital of refugee groups and individuals influenced their participation in educational courses and their subsequent livelihood aspirations. However, the limited and pre-decided training options constrained the educational scope of refugees. These restricted opportunities for developing their educational capabilities further narrowed the livelihood choices open to the refugees, which denied them self-determination in building the life they desire in their host country.

## Education opportunities linked to decent and sustainable livelihoods?

The study further revealed that after attending the training, refugees were finding work in factories or small enterprises (making biscuits, brooms, clothes and other similar items), where they frequently faced discrimination. Zahi, a black Muslim Somali woman who resided in Delhi, completed a training programme in tailoring and stitching, after which she found work in a cloth factory far away from her neighbourhood. She secured this employment with the help of the training providers. Zubair, a staff member in Delhi, exclaimed that courses were considered successful if some beneficiaries could be linked to jobs after completing them. Although Zahi could earn some money for her family's survival through her job, she mentioned that she faced exploitation and discrimination at work and racism in the city because of her ethnicity, religion and way of life (she wears the hijab):

*My physical features indicate that I am a foreigner or a refugee. The contractors and other factory workers are aware that I will not go to the police to file a complaint. So, they have misbehaved with me several times in the past. What can I do?*

Similar to Zahi's account, many other refugees from the Chin, Rohingya, Somali and Afghan refugees talked about significant educational and livelihood barriers resulting from their cross-cutting identities as a refugee, comprising their gender, race and religion.

Zahi said that she considered leaving her job *'but that would push me into extreme poverty'*. In addition, she feared that political and legal restrictions would make it difficult for her children to access higher education and gain better employment in future. So, she added: *'We are just surviving, we have no hope, no future'*.

Many other refugees reported similar experiences at their workplace, particularly refugee women from all refugee groups except the Tibetans. The vulnerability of these refugee women is intensified by their legal-political status, in that employers and fellow workers are aware of the women's refugee status and know they will not complain to the authorities against their harassment. Although in theory refugee women can access the justice system and law enforcement, in reality they do not do so; perhaps their legal status as refugees in the host country has prevented them from doing so. The apparent socio-political differences between 'refugees' and 'citizens' give immunity to those who exploit refugees, knowing that they will not be reported. Paradoxically, while these occupations help refugee women to survive in the cities, they also put them at high risk of harassment and exploitation. This work lacks dignity and will hinder the short- and long-term well-being of these refugee women in their host country.

Adding to the prior literature (Alexander, 2008; Knappert et al., 2018; Omata, 2021), the present study provides evidence of exploitation and discrimination against refugees in the informal economies of Indian cities. Moreover, the testimonies of the participants highlighted that the constrained political-legal environment of the host country exacerbates the inhumane conditions which refugees endure. The livelihoods linked to adult training in informal spheres are neither decent nor sustainable.

It is important to note that Zahi's poverty is not only one of income but also of education, poor quality work, disempowerment, and so on—as such, it is a multidimensional poverty. She also hinted at the lack of higher education and livelihood opportunities for her children, which implies that her family is likely to be stuck in a perpetual cycle of limited educational capabilities (low human capital), low skills, inhumane jobs and multidimensional poverty.

In contrast with other refugee communities, the Tibetans had markedly better educational opportunities and were more successful in converting their education into decent livelihoods. Their livelihood success in India is based on three factors: greater educational opportunities,

better political-legal rights and strong social connections. Firstly and most importantly, the CTA provides education and training opportunities for Tibetans residing in India, and does so separately from the Indian national system. These educational opportunities target and are reserved for Indian Tibetans. Second, the Indian government has conferred more rights to Tibetans than other refugee groups in the country. For example, Tibetans have been granted rights to engage in employment, own property (including shops in markets) and travel abroad with documents issued by the Indian government (Bentz, 2013). Finally, Tibetan refugees have been established in India since the 1950s, which means they have had sufficient time to establish wide and productive social networks—and so when new refugees come, they readily plug into those networks.

These findings foreground the difference in educational opportunities of various refugee groups and the challenges they face in accessing further and higher education. For instance, all the refugee communities in this study were dependent on the parallel skills system maintained by the UNHCR and other local non-governmental organisations for their adult education needs. However, as mentioned above, the Tibetans had their own educational institutions in the country. In addition, as was revealed in Zahi's narrative, accessing higher education was difficult for young refugees because of India's restrictive policies and her lack of documents. Therefore, the access of refugees to limited education courses (or rather, their exclusion from national education systems) affected both their short-term and long-term job opportunities.

## Refugee aspirations: Further education and better livelihoods

The findings highlighted that the available educational programmes strengthened aspirations for further education. Several of the respondents wanted to pursue additional vocational training. Nazir, a Rohingya male from Delhi who attended an introductory computing course, said:

*I want to learn more about repairing computers. In the organisation, they teach how to use a computer, but there are no computer repair courses. I want to learn that. After that, I want to open a shop for computer repairs.*

Aspirations to receive further vocational training were also expressed by refugees who had had opportunities to attend specific vocational training. In Hyderabad, most of the courses were organised for women, either teaching them how to make items for sale, such as soap, shampoo and toiletries, or life skills classes. However, two Rohingya males said that they had the opportunity to attend a mobile phone repair course. These two men hoped to participate in other vocational training courses in computer hardware and software and asked the local organisation to help them join these courses. Abul remarked: *'We requested that we want another training [course], for hardware and software'*.

Many other respondents in Delhi and Hyderabad mentioned specific vocational training courses that they wanted to attend. It is noteworthy that only two staff members from the refugee organisations in Hyderabad and Jaipur said that they were aware of the further vocational aspirations of refugees. These two respondents commented that the vocational aspirations of refugees were, in fact, achievable. One notable aspect of these educational aspirations is the desire of refugees to be engaged in decent and respectable work. Neelam, who works with an organisation in Jaipur, said:

*I know refugee youths do not want to do rag picking and work in factories. They told me that the police officers mistreat them and perceive them as thieves,*

*which hurts their dignity... I am aware that some of them want to learn more things which they can do with their hands, something like mechanics or carpentry work. I think those are possible work options for them here [in India].*

While some respondents across all three cities wanted to pursue further vocational training, the findings revealed that the majority of the Rohingya refugees in Hyderabad and Jaipur simply hoped for better living conditions. In these two cities, Rohingya refugees were residing in slum areas and struggling to access essential resources such as potable water, electricity and primary education for their children. Consequently, most of the refugee respondents in these cities, males and females alike, hoped for improved living conditions. However, many of them also expressed a desire for their children to go to college, which was a notable theme in one of the focus groups with Rohingya women in Hyderabad. Hasina, a Rohingya female who had taken some of the toiletries-making classes, said:

*I want to go to a bigger city, eat good food and live in a concrete house... I want my children to be an engineer or doctor... When they grow up, they should have a better life, that is what I want.*

These findings strengthen the argument expressed in prior studies (Hilal, 2012; Matsumoto, 2018; Powell, 2012) that the educational opportunities available to refugees positively influence their further learning and livelihood aspirations. Many of the participants wanted to pursue specific vocational training, which the skills training providers considered an achievable aspiration. Despite these aspirations, the unavailability of further education options and the exclusion of refugees from national institutions implied that the refugees are likely to be engaged in low-skilled livelihoods for the foreseeable future.

Hasina's testimony highlighted the modest aspirations of the Rohingya refugees residing in Hyderabad and Jaipur. Their more ambitious aspirations were for their children to be educated and have better lives. Several of the respondents talked about the importance of learning for future generations and expressed the hope that their children would attend college. Somali and Chin participants in Delhi registered similar hopes for their children's future. In addition to these aspirations, some participants mentioned hopes related to political rights both in their home and host country (India)—going abroad, gaining respect in society and many more. Therefore, refugees' aspirations were multifaceted in nature and related to various aspects of their lives.

## DISCUSSION

By highlighting the complex lived realities of refugees in India and looking at them through the integrated prism of the capability approach and sustainable livelihoods, this paper underlines the mismatches between refugees' educational and livelihood aspirations, policy objectives and on-the-ground realities. Sen (1999) argued that development should be the extension of political and civil freedom for people. In addition, CA maintains that economic prosperity does not necessarily result in better education, health and well-being of individuals. Complementing this aspect of CA, the sustainable livelihoods approach moves beyond the conventional viewpoint of poverty (which is limited to income generation), drawing attention to the processes, institutions and policies that affect people's livelihood opportunities. Combining CA with a sustainable livelihoods framework, the paper assesses whether adult education courses enhanced refugees' capabilities to develop and sustain decent work opportunities. The study highlighted that while the available education opportunities strengthened the further education and livelihood aspirations of refugees, the structural and practical

barriers in the host countries limited their educational capabilities and opportunities to create sustainable and decent livelihoods. Mirroring the literature (Alexander, 2008; Knappert et al., 2018), the findings also revealed that most refugees were employed in low-skilled jobs, which addressed their economic poverty but not their right to freedom and human dignity. Additionally, limited training opportunities were available for refugees, denying them the freedom to choose education and linked employment opportunities. For instance, Nazir, who did not have a chance to attend specific vocational skills, or Zahi's children, who could not secure admission into higher education, are unlikely to be connected to highly skilled decent livelihood opportunities in the labour market of the host country.

The findings revealed that the adult education courses implemented for refugees had a certain neo-liberal, economic understanding of refugee livelihoods, which neglected various aspects of refugees' lives and livelihoods. The UNHCR's strategies of economic self-reliance and poverty reduction dominated the adult education courses. However, the self-reliance agenda has been critiqued for its neoliberal underpinning and way-out strategy to reduce refugees' economic dependency on refugee organisations (Jacobsen & Fratzke, 2016; Skran & Easton-Calabria, 2020). While such skills training helped refugees like Zahi to find work in an Indian city, it did not address the challenges and hardships in other domains of her life, which affect her overall well-being. Various social, financial, legal and political unfreedoms in the lives of these refugees continue to limit their opportunities to build the lives they desire. Their job placements assist them in escaping abject poverty, but cannot be considered to secure their long-term sustainable livelihood.

Within refugee education and livelihood strategies, an increased focus on creating and supporting decent and dignified work opportunities is needed. As these findings have shown, many refugees were subjected to exploitative working conditions in India, particularly in Delhi, as they worked in the informal economy. Therefore, it is essential to examine whether paid work linked to educational courses helps them to build their desired life or creates more problems. Neither refugees nor any other individual should be forced to take up unethical or degrading work for survival. Nussbaum (2011), a proponent of the capabilities approach, argues that employment opportunities should be examined based on workplace relationships and whether they help an individual to live a dignified life. This also connects to SDG 8 and the ILO's decent work agenda. The ILO (1999) report maintains that the objective is not only to create jobs but also the 'creation of jobs of acceptable quality' (p. 4). In the capabilities approach, precarious work conditions are considered an infringement on freedom, well-being and quality of life. Decent work forms part of the UNHCR's livelihood policies for refugees and is aligned with the self-reliance approach taken by the agency. For instance, in the UNHCR's *Global strategy of livelihoods* (2014a), decent work is set out as a goal (p. 16). Therefore, to achieve that objective, it is vital to consider the employment and workplace challenges of refugees during the design and implementation of the educational and skills training which are to be offered to them.

Education is the pathway towards livelihood development. The present findings revealed that the education and livelihood requirements of refugees varied across refugee groups based on their socio-economic status and educational background. Although limited and pre-determined adult training was available to all refugees, the courses on offer disregarded differences within and between refugee groups. Restricting refugees' educational choices limits their other life opportunities too. When refugees have few skills training options, they are strictly limited to certain work domains in their host countries (Bloch, 2002; Knappert et al., 2018). Sen maintains that unfreedoms do not exist in isolation, but instead intersect and exacerbate each other (Sen, 1999). Therefore, restricting agency in one aspect of life can have the effect of perpetuating a cycle of unfulfilled desires and poverty for refugees. This poverty is not only income-related, but also comprises lack of education, poor quality work, disempowerment, and so on—it is a multidimensional poverty.

Based on the data analysis, I argue that the challenges refugees face in building a sustainable livelihood and their desired life in India are not just about jobs but also about limited educational capability, freedoms (social, economic, political, and so on), decent work and human dignity. Therefore, adult education policies and programmes should consider these factors associated with refugee livelihoods in the design of programmes that are gender- and risk-sensitive. Looking at the data through an integrated lens, I suggest that refugees should have more diverse educational opportunities and the freedom to choose what kind of education they want to attain, along with the form of employment they want to pursue. These decisions should not be limited by political, economic and social structural barriers. Refugees require agency and self-determination in selecting and maintaining skills and livelihoods. Training providers should therefore develop a nuanced understanding of refugee education, aspiration and livelihoods.

The paper makes three significant policy recommendations regarding adult education policies and strategies for refugees. First, despite the availability of adult education programmes for urban refugees in India, the findings revealed a lack of good-quality adult learning opportunities that could lead to sustainable and decent livelihoods. Therefore, the UNHCR and other organisations concerned with refugee education, particularly refugee adult education, should focus on providing diverse and high-quality opportunities for training and employment. Refugees require better opportunities for adult learning and the agency to choose from a range of different courses to build their desired lives and livelihoods in their country of asylum. Second, the findings revealed that livelihood aspirations and realities were not the same for all refugee groups. While most refugees struggled with the legal and political structures that constrained their livelihood opportunities, Tibetans successfully obtained jobs and started small businesses. Based on these findings, I recommend that the legal work rights provided to the Tibetan community should be actualised for all refugee groups. This would not only increase work opportunities, but also facilitate greater social and economic integration. Third, structural changes are required, such as the inclusion of refugees in national vocational education and training and higher education institutions, so that refugee communities have greater opportunities to acquire education and build the futures they desire. Such provision would help refugees to convert their capabilities into real-life functioning. Increased skills development and higher education options would further promote the social inclusion of refugees in host countries.

By bringing to the forefront of consideration the interplay between educational opportunities, global livelihood policies and the local realities of five refugee groups residing in India, I propose that adult education programmes should also address non-economic aspects of refugees' lives, such as well-being, freedoms and human dignity. Furthermore, this research highlights that the limited provision of further education and refugee exclusion from the higher education system in the country mean that the avenues open to refugees and their future generations to build sustainable livelihoods are constrained. Theoretically, the paper advances sustainable livelihoods by combining them with decent work and the capability approach to develop a deeper understanding of refugee livelihoods. Finally, the paper advocates for increased and more diverse educational opportunities for refugees in host countries and suggests that refugee education and livelihood policies should move beyond self-reliance, thus developing a broader understanding of refugee lives, aspirations and livelihoods.

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### **CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT**

There is no conflict of interest in this work.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

## ETHICS APPROVAL STATEMENT

The data for this research was collected after getting ethical approval from the ethics committee at the College of Social Sciences, University of Glasgow.

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