

Article

## Refugee Women’s Volunteering as Resistance Practices to Micro-Aggressions and Social Exclusion in the UK

Carolynn Low \* and Bindi V. Shah

Department of Sociology, Social Policy and Criminology, University of Southampton, UK

\* Corresponding author ([carolynn.low@soton.ac.uk](mailto:carolynn.low@soton.ac.uk))

Submitted: 21 October 2022 | Accepted: 23 January 2023 | Published: in press

### Abstract

In an increasingly hostile environment for refugees in the UK and the “everyday bordering” that creates exclusionary effects for refugees and migrants, this article examines how refugee women of diverse backgrounds enact resistance practices through volunteering to challenge everyday microaggressions and social exclusion. We draw on in-depth qualitative research with members of a support group for refugee women established by a local charity in England. We find that the support group not only allows the refugee women to foster a strong sense of solidarity in the face of everyday microaggressions; it also facilitates the women’s volunteering activities in the local community. Applying the concept of “differentiated embedding,” we argue that such activities enable these women to build wider social connections and skills for future employment and, crucially, develop emotional and linguistic resources to critique dominant exclusionary discourses and policies towards refugees through the idea of “contribution” and “giving back.” In so doing, we contribute to renewed interest in the concept of integration to highlight the agency of refugee women in creating differentiated embedding in a hostile environment.

### Keywords

critical incorporation; differentiated embedding; hostile environment; integration; microaggression; racism; refugees; resistance; volunteering

### Issue

This article is part of the issue “Post-Migration Stress: Racial Microaggressions and Everyday Discrimination” edited by Fabio Quassoli (Università degli Studi di Milano-Bicocca) and Monica Colombo (Università degli Studi di Milano-Bicocca).

© 2023 by the author(s); licensee Cogitatio (Lisbon, Portugal). This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY).

### 1. Introduction

In an increasingly hostile environment for refugees in the UK and the “everyday bordering” (Yuval-Davis et al., 2018) that creates exclusionary effects for refugees and migrants, this article examines how refugee women of diverse backgrounds (in terms of countries of origin, language, age, religion, immigration status) enact resistance practices through volunteering to challenge everyday microaggressions and perceptions of refugees as a threat. While recent data suggests a softening of anti-immigrant attitudes in the UK since Brexit (Blinder & Richards, 2020), the issue remains politically contentious (Ford & Lymperopoulou, 2017; Rutter & Carter, 2018). Analysis of a Twitter “conversation” about migration

among non-elite users, occurring in temporal proximity to the lifting of transitional controls on Romanian and Bulgarian migrants in the UK, highlighted concerns about immigrants’ moral worth and anxiety about the impact of immigration on national space and culture, confirming findings in scholarship that draws on survey data to investigate British attitudes to immigration (Shah & Ogden, 2021). However, this analysis also revealed pro-immigration attitudes amongst non-elite users that drew on multiple and sometimes contradictory values (Shah & Ogden, 2021). Within this contested terrain, anti-immigrant discourses remain dominant on Twitter (and elsewhere). Media images of large groups of refugees crossing a body of water or land have the effect of positioning refugees as an economic, security,

and cultural threat and generate moral panic among the public (Cooper et al., 2021; KhosraviNik, 2010). Further, the categories “refugees” and “asylum seekers” are frequently conflated with the categories “immigrants” and “migrants” in the media (Philo et al., 2013). In the last few years, UK newspaper headlines have been dominated with stories about the number of small boat crossings of the Channel by migrants, active plans to offshore asylum processing to Rwanda, and the general questioning of the legitimacy of asylum seekers. Moreover, explicit anti-refugee sentiments have been advanced by leading British politicians, shaping the tone of public debate. For example, Albanian asylum seekers have been singled out as illegitimate, even criminal. The current British Prime Minister, Rishi Sunak, highlighted the rate of rejection of Albanian asylum seekers as “just” 45%, saying “the vast majority of claims from Albania can simply be declared clearly unfounded” (Sunak, 2022). Similarly, current Home Secretary Suella Braverman referred to the arrival of asylum seekers as an “invasion on our southern coast,” and asserted that they are coming “illegally...taking advantage of our generosity, abusing our laws and being accommodated free of charge” (Braverman, 2022). Ongoing demonization and mediatisation of refugees and asylum seekers creates a “hostile environment,” which is compounded by the UK’s immigration policies and citizenship regimes.

Yuval-Davis et al. (2018) argue that successive immigration acts in the UK, and especially the 2014 and 2016 Immigration Acts, have extended “everyday bordering,” the practice of differentiating between “us” and “them,” by criminalising employees of banks, health services, and private landlords who fail to enforce existing immigration laws. This “everyday/everywhere bordering technology” creates a hostile environment not only for irregular migrants but also for other migrants and racialised minority groups, thus undermining social and political solidarity (Yuval-Davis et al., 2018). This has been further extended by the 2022 Immigration and Borders Act, which includes the introduction of a two-tier system for refugees that penalizes some of them by limiting their rights and the protection afforded to them on the basis of their mode of arrival in the UK. The ensuing hostile environment is linked to the growing “autochthonic populist politic of belonging in the UK and elsewhere” (Yuval-Davis et al., 2018, p. 241) and to a neoliberal construction of citizenship and access to social and political rights (Turner, 2014).

Within this hostile environment and the prevalence of citizenship regimes that require displays of cultural competencies such as language and knowledge of British values, as well as a self-reliant entrepreneurial self (Turner, 2014), how do refugee women foster belonging and attachment in their new homes? Integration is the concept most commonly applied to the consideration of migrants’ adaptation and incorporation into the receiving societies in which they reside. It assumes that migrants constitute an alien element

(Grzymala-Kazłowska & Phillimore, 2018, p. 186) that will require the adoption of practices to move towards structural and cultural similarity with the host society over time. Although comprehensive multidimensional frameworks for integration have been advanced (most notably by Ager & Strang, 2008), in policy and practice the emphasis has been on more structural and functional aspects such as employment, education, language, housing, and health—which are seen to signify successful integration rather than more experiential notions of welcome and attachment (Phillimore & Goodson, 2008). Furthermore, conceptions of integration have been contested for being too linear and unidirectional, suggesting an achieved endpoint and permanent settlement in one country, as well as assuming a homogenous, monocultural receiving society in which to integrate (Grzymala-Kazłowska & Phillimore, 2018). Following these arguments then, we draw on the concept of “differentiated embedding” (Mulholland & Ryan, 2022; Ryan & Mulholland, 2015) that highlights a more nuanced, processual account of migrants’ attachments and participation in the receiving society. Mulholland and Ryan (2022, p. 5) define embedding “as dynamic and contingent social practices through which migrants develop, maintain or withdraw relations and attachments both in and across time and space.” The differentiated aspect recognises that “migrants negotiate attachments and belonging to varied degrees in different social and structural settings” (Ryan, 2018, p. 235).

By applying the framework of differentiated embedding, we demonstrate how for refugee women, despite experiencing the exclusionary effects of microaggressions in everyday life and thus lack of embedding at the local level, participation in a support group enables them to foster a strong sense of solidarity and establish relational embedding. This relational embedding facilitates the women’s volunteering activities in the local community and, therefore, civic embedding, and also a degree of economic embedding and wider relational embedding. Embedding in these domains enables the women to demonstrate that they are “good immigrants” (Hackl, 2022): prepared to become entrepreneurial selves who will eventually contribute economically through employment, thereby meeting the requirements of neoliberal citizenship regimes, and being civic-minded and publicly engaged, thereby contributing to the public good (Yap et al., 2011). But they also acquire the emotional and linguistic resources to resist dominant exclusionary discourses about refugees through the idea of “contribution” and “giving back,” and critique the state’s failure to provide a conducive environment for processes of embedding for refugees.

Literature on the volunteering experiences of refugees and migrants is limited; primarily focused on the functional benefits for integration, and often considered in its role for progression to employment, particularly in the context of the labour market barriers refugees face (de Jong, 2019; Khvorostianov & Remennick, 2017;

Tomlinson, 2010; Yap et al., 2011). Only a few studies focus on refugees' volunteering in the context of politics and civic life (Vickers, 2016; Yap et al., 2011). We view refugee women's volunteering as practices of negotiation, adaptation, and/or resistance that both accommodate neoliberal citizenship regimes and contest the hostile environment. We argue that such practices lead to a "critical incorporation" (Shah, 2012) rather than an uncritical emphasis on adaptation and integration into their new home. By highlighting the agency of refugee women in creating opportunities for embedding that leads to critical incorporation in a hostile environment, we contribute to renewed interest in rethinking the concept of integration (Grzymala-Kazłowska & Phillimore, 2018).

In the following sections, we first expand on Mulholland and Ryan's (2022) concept of "differentiated embedding." This is followed by a discussion of our methodology and findings that explore different aspects of the women's embedding practices. We end with a conclusion that draws out the implications of these findings in terms of viewing volunteering as a resistance practice to fight microaggression and exclusion, and the contribution differentiated embedding can offer to further our understanding of processes of integration for refugees.

## 2. Theoretical Framing

A number of concepts have been developed to capture processes of migrants' adaptation and building attachment, such as integration (Ager & Strang, 2008), social anchoring (Grzymala-Kazłowska, 2016), and belonging or feeling "at home" (Yuval-Davis, 2006). We draw on the concept of embedding (Ryan & Mulholland, 2015), and particularly differentiated embedding (Mulholland & Ryan, 2022; Ryan, 2018), to examine refugee women's experiences of microaggressions and the strategies and responses they adopt to negotiate and resist the ensuing exclusionary effects. The concept of differentiated embedding enables us to explore the circularity of the process: A lack of embedding resulting from discriminatory and exclusionary encounters in everyday public interactions propels the refugee women into new localized spaces of inclusion, attachment, and participation from where they can challenge this hostility and potentially cultivate a wider sense of belonging. Ryan and Mulholland (2015) use the term "embedding" rather than embeddedness (Granovetter, 1985) to emphasize dynamic, ongoing, and multidimensional processes in migrant belonging and attachment over time and space. They define embedding as "a means of explaining the process through which social actors connect to and interact with a multiplicity of social, economic and political structures through various social relationships/social networks" (Ryan & Mulholland, 2015, p. 142). While social relations are important in processes of embedding, so is the "socio-economic, cultural and physical particularities of the local areas in which [migrants] live

and work" (Ryan & Mulholland, 2015, p. 139), which structure the opportunities and resources migrants can draw on to create new ties and belonging. Embedding focuses on the subjective perceptions of the migrants themselves through their accounts of their lived experiences, rather than being assessed externally by a set of supposedly measurable outcomes, as has been a critique of the application of the concept of integration in practice (Grzymala-Kazłowska & Phillimore, 2018).

Further, Ryan and Mulholland (2015, p. 150) note that migrants can be embedded in different domains, can be embedded in one domain but not others, and that there can be different depths of embeddedness across various domains. More recently, Ryan (2018) and Mulholland and Ryan (2022) have developed the concept of "differentiated embedding" to acknowledge that embedding trajectories are not only shaped by opportunities and resources in a given material context, but also by the intersections of ethnicity, class, gender or religion, which "influence motivations, opportunities and obstacles for embedding" (Mulholland & Ryan, 2022, p. 5). Other scholars have applied the concept of embedding to understand the experiences of single-nationality refugee groups in the UK, e.g., considering the influence of varying immigration entry routes and positionality shaping co-national relational embedding for Syrians (Speed et al., 2021) and differential labour market experiences and fragmented community organisation formation for Vietnamese (Barber, 2021). We extend this application to a multi-national collective of refugee women which fosters solidarity and a shared experience of deep relational embedding, enabling further relational, economic, and civic embedding through the practice of volunteering. Therefore, we demonstrate how the dynamism of embedding trajectories in different domains are linked.

## 3. Methodology

This article draws on research carried out by the first author in 2019 with members of a women's support group based at a charity providing services for refugees, asylum seekers, and vulnerable migrants, in a city in the south of England. The study looked at how support groups affect the way refugees experience belonging in the UK.

The support group was founded almost 20 years ago by a refugee woman to build social connections and offer other women like her opportunities to get involved in varied activities. These include: weekly English and exercise classes; workshops and courses on topics such as health, domestic abuse, female genital mutilation, legal rights, food hygiene, employability; cultural sharing sessions; skill development such as art and cooking; volunteer opportunities; and participation in community events and projects with external organisations. They can also access advice and advocacy and counselling support from the charity staff.

The support group, which meets several times a week, had an overall membership of 56 women in 2019 (although not all attend every week), who originate from a range of countries and ethnic groups. The group is also diverse in terms of age (22–65 years), length of time resident in the UK, religion (the largest proportion are Muslim), immigration status, support needs, and length of membership of the group.

Access to the group was achieved through the first author's previous professional relations established through working in the refugee sector. This gave her familiarity with the research setting, but she recognizes her distance as a British (since birth) white woman with the advantages afforded by her privilege and secure citizenship status. Whilst being wary of the resultant power asymmetries, social difference may also offer the prospect of generating rich insight into experiences because participants may articulate more clearly their perspectives when the researcher is assumed to have less knowledge as an "outsider" (Miller & Glassner, 2004, p. 132).

Ten women were involved in the study, and all volunteered to participate following an initial information session about the research. There were no incentives for participation. They came from Afghanistan, Iraq, Turkey, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sudan, Bangladesh, Algeria, and the Caribbean. All the study participants were regular attendees and long-standing members of the group (membership ranging from two to 14 years), and all were able to speak sufficient English to conduct an interview without an interpreter. Seven of the women took part in in-depth semi-structured interviews, and five of the women took part in a focus group (two of the women were involved in both). Additionally, two staff members, the group coordinator and her manager, were interviewed to gain their perspectives and triangulate the women's accounts.

Interviews lasted between 47–76 minutes and were conducted at a location selected by the participant. The focus group lasted one hour and took place at the same time as the normal group meeting to enable accessibility. The interviews and focus group followed similar questioning; participants were asked about their general experience of life in the UK and in the city in which they live (sense of welcome, or not, as migrants), their social networks in the UK, their experiences of the women's support group, and any voluntary or paid work they are involved with. All the interviews and the focus group were transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

## 4. Findings

### 4.1. *Everyday Microaggressions and Social Exclusion*

All the women described experiences of social isolation in the UK, particularly when they first arrived, due to unfamiliarity with the country, language barriers, not

knowing where to go for support, cultural differences in neighbourhood interactions, and very limited social and familial networks. Many lacked the confidence to venture out, staying in the house often for years, as Tehmina describes: "First time when I came here everything is strange for me. And you know I was feeling scared, and I was crying all the time." A couple of the women mentioned how hard it is in British culture to meet people. Aliyah infers the contrast to practices of socialising in her country of origin, where people know each other in their neighbourhoods through frequent interactions. Whereas in the UK, she explains, "I can't find space from the street [meet people in the local area through interactions on the street], they don't [know] me, and I don't know them. It is really, err, scary." This highlights the acute psychological and emotional challenges faced by these women in establishing local social connections through everyday interactions.

Most of the women remembered experiences of everyday microaggression in the public sphere at some point (at school, at work, on buses and trains, or in the street), which added to their feelings of social isolation and exclusion. For example, Salma recalled having apples thrown at her in the street in a rural town where she lived when she first arrived (on account of being black), and Farida described being racially abused on a train (on account of being Asian). Prominent in these hostile encounters were perceptions of refugees and migrants as inferior, a burden, or a threat. Farida recounted comments people made to her:

All this people came from other country, and so now we don't have a job, they are taking our housing....If someone have more than two child, they say: "Oh that person is having a child to get more benefit" ....Every single day somebody will show you—you are not us, you are not one of us.

Annabel, the manager at the charity, noted that many people have felt increasingly anxious following Brexit and the escalation in hate crimes. Furthermore, she observed that clients are frequently reluctant to identify as refugees, and will quickly reject the label once they have been granted British nationality.

Muslim participants, particularly those wearing the hijab, experienced microaggression based on their religion, for example being called terrorists. During the focus group, Zania narrated how a white British man on a bus touched her hijab and asked very publicly why she was wearing this and that she should take it off to be more beautiful. He demanded to know where she was from and why she was in the UK. This left her and her companion feeling very scared, particularly as no one on the bus intervened to support them. The other women agreed that these experiences create an ongoing sense of anxiety about leaving the house alone due to fears of being attacked because they are Muslims. Masira commented: "Some people, for me—no good. Sometimes when I go

outside people look at me very angry. Sometimes I am scared, I don't go outside, just with my husband."

Such experiences show a multifaceted interplay of microaggression and isolation on the basis of intersecting immigration status, nationality and ethnicity, culture, gender, and religion, set in the wider political context of the hostile environment towards refugees and migrants. These experiences demonstrate the sense of insecurity and threat/fear that many of the women felt, which can severely curtail the opportunities for refugee women to engage in processes of relational embedding at a local level, as they do not know where to go to meet people and the public sphere is often not experienced as a space of welcome. It is in this context that the women used their agency to find alternative spaces for relational embedding, such as the support group for refugee women.

#### 4.2. *Fostering Solidarity and Confidence*

Participation in the support group enabled these women to foster a strong sense of solidarity and mutual support:

If there are some people I can meet they are rude or whatever, I don't know, I don't care, because I have my best people, who like me, and we like each other...[This] is my family...the women's group, this is my home, my second one, because I meet people, sharing experience, talking, helping each other.... Because when you are coming in, the first time, you are feeling lonely. And when you come to the group, you are laughing now, you see the happiness. (Amara)

Here Amara describes how the group enables her to overcome social isolation and microaggression experienced at the local level. This echoes a point Tomlinson (2010, p. 294) makes; exclusion and rejection on account of perceived difference as refugees in one domain can reinforce attachment in another, where this becomes a criteria for inclusion. In the group, being a refugee/migrant woman permits entry and becomes a point of shared experience and togetherness. Almost all participants described other group members as family, who provide support and an emotional sense of belonging, particularly in the context of lacking familial networks in the UK. Group members relied on each other when they experienced problems: They shared advice on parenting in a different culture, supported those who had difficult relationships with their husbands, interpreted for those struggling with English, donated household items to each other, and looked after each other when pregnant, ill, or depressed. Relationships between the women were characterised by high levels of trust and reciprocity, and frequent and intense interactions (Ryan, 2018; Ryan & Mulholland, 2015), and reveals the highly gendered dimension of their deep relational embedding.

Further, their relational embedding was generated across a diversity of positionalities (ethnicity, language, religion, culture, age, immigration status). The partici-

pants valued diversity, seeing it as a way to learn from each other and to share their different ideas, cultures and experiences in the UK:

This mixed [in the group] is really nice, mixed religion, mixed—because, okay, I see this thing in my country, but now I live here, many things is wrong. So many people is reading news, or looking in paper or TV, and after you speak...properly [with] people...sometimes is 50% wrong what you [were] listening before this. Is making you "doctrinage." (Nura)

Nura proposes that being exposed to different ideas and ways of doing things through the group has expanded her outlook and ability to question dominant doctrines and discourses that are disseminated. Salma also mentioned how the group avoids the insular stance of other co-ethnic community groups she has encountered. Khadija, the group coordinator, suggested that the women fostered solidarity as refugee women despite their difference; they understood their situation as "a global issue" affecting refugees of all national/ethnic groups. As Vickers (2016) suggests, this collective awareness and solidarity may enable the formation of a collective identity, which may perhaps be seen to contribute to their confidence and drive to resist microaggressions and negative discourses, as is discussed later.

Certainly, involvement in the different activities through the group nurtured confidence among the women and provided them with the resources and opportunities to engage in volunteering. The women related how the group helped build their self-confidence and a sense of agency, and, as Aliyah explains, staff and group members encouraged each other to volunteer:

They keep push me: "No, Aliyah, you are strong, you need to do this, you need to do that"....We need somebody to show us the right thing, especially we are struggle with the language....This is my time, my freedom, to relax, calm down. And I give and I work [volunteer].

The charity facilitates volunteering opportunities both within the group and with external organisations. Within the group, the women helped coordinate group activities, acted as unofficial outreach workers identifying new women needing support in the community, and were involved in voluntary projects such as "pop-up" cafés and cooking for different groups of people across the city. Many of the women also volunteered with external organisations; in local charity shops, other community groups, schools, and a local museum. Mostly these opportunities were initially arranged through the group coordinator, but a few women found other volunteering positions independently. Such volunteering activities facilitated relational embedding in the wider community, as well as economic and civic embedding, as we explore next.

#### 4.3. Wider Relational Embedding Through Volunteering

Through some volunteering activities the refugee women's "difference" was not only accepted but promoted and shared. The women described their joy in being able to share aspects of their cultures, most particularly their cuisine through the "pop-up" cafés. Some women were involved in a volunteer project with a different organisation offering classes to non-migrant locals in Arabic, cooking and needlework. Others volunteered with a museum sharing their knowledge about traditional dress and artifacts from their countries of origin. Aliyah described being "excited" by how many people from other places were interested in her culture. These experiences clearly contrast with the hostile encounters participants faced in other contexts, as previously discussed. It implicitly challenges racism that positions difference as problematic and unable to belong (Anthias, 2016), because arguably difference here was instrumentalised as an aid to wider relational embedding. Thus, such activities facilitated a degree of relational embedding in the local community, and although to a lesser extent than in the protected space of the support group, the women were able to achieve a sense of belonging in local public spaces. Khadija, the group coordinator, observes:

You can already see the difference, they feel part of the community, because you go to events and the ones who are already volunteering in other [organisations], they know so many people and they are very recognised, they go and chat to people, or they'll say: "Oh, we work together"...and you can already see that sense of belonging there, like, "this is where I do volunteering," you know they were very proud to be able to be part of that community and to be able to even do something with non-immigrants....It is an enhanced status for them.

Additionally, the women facilitated relational embedding for other refugee and migrant women through their volunteering practices, such as unofficial/informal outreach work:

[I] let everyone learn there is a group, and this what you can do, and if you ever need help, to contact them....It's good to let people know who are new to [the city]...and when they find a group, they feel welcome, a sense of ease, they can talk to somebody. (Salma)

Though initial relational embedding for new group members will occur in the localised space of the support group, Salma and other women explicitly identified this as a measure to counter the social exclusion they know many refugee women experience.

#### 4.4. Economic Embedding Through Volunteering

In line with findings from other studies (de Jong, 2019; Tomlinson, 2010; Vickers, 2016; Yap et al., 2011), volunteering was seen as a (potential) route to future paid employment in the context of the considerable labour market barriers refugees face. Having an income was noted as a necessity in being able to live sustainably by several of the women, and volunteering was understood as a way to gain UK-based work experience and references that will increase their employability.

However, several of the women explained that working was not, or could not be, their ultimate goal. For Nura working was an impossibility due to her legal status as an asylum seeker. For several other women, paid employment was unattainable due to caring responsibilities, for children and husbands with health problems. Aliyah explains: "I work volunteer because I can't work, because my husband is disabled. I look after him, I look, and no time to find job, I am so busy. But I am really happy, I work volunteer everywhere."

Aliyah was a university graduate and had worked in a bank prior to becoming a refugee. Her current family circumstances, as well as her previous lack of adequate English language skills, prevented her from seeking paid employment. Volunteering allowed her to use her skills and "energy," which provided a sense of fulfilment. As Khvorostianov and Remennick (2017, p. 345) found, volunteering can provide meaningful activity, in some ways compensating "for the loss of professional self." Volunteering may provide an alternative (or even only) way to allow a degree of economic embedding in the context of labour market exclusion. Hence, for Aliyah, Zania, and other women, volunteering enabled them to resist both their complete economic exclusion as a result of not engaging in paid employment and the dominant discourses that paint refugees as scroungers or a burden on society (Yap et al., 2011), prominent in occurrences of everyday racism. Zania explains:

We look after ourselves, and now we want to look after somebody else, we're helping....Someone ask: "Why you working voluntary?" Like, seven years I work full time [volunteering], you know I work full time. I'm saying: "Because it makes me happy like that."

Being able to contribute by helping others through volunteering enabled these women to feel valued and connected to the community.

#### 4.5. Volunteering as Resistance to Discourses of Unbelonging and Civic Embedding

The literature on volunteering experiences of refugees and migrants focuses on its benefits related to employability, and the achievement of functional markers of integration more generally (such as language, training/skills, and knowledge of the UK). While this was certainly a

desired outcome for some of the study participants, others also perceived volunteering as an opportunity to “give back” to the UK, emphasizing the contribution they make to society. For example, through a series of pop-up community cafés, the women cooked for local people living with homelessness, dementia, caring responsibilities, and for other migrants. They cooked food from their home countries and produced and sold a recipe book to raise funds for the charity.

The scale of volunteering was of particular note. All of the women were involved in multiple volunteering roles, and Salma and Zania worked with three or four different organisations across the week. Volunteering held an intrinsic value for the women, evidencing their “citizenship” through civic-mindedness:

If I take money, myself not happy, I want to make myself happy....Voluntary makes me very happy....And I love this country as well....For all my life I want to do this one, I want to more help, I want to improve my English a bit, to give more help, to do mentor for refugee, I want to do something more. (Zania)

For Zania the ultimate goal was not securing employment, but, perhaps even more virtuously, a vocation of volunteering. Giving back was seen in terms of recognising the support they received when they first arrived and returning this favour to other new arrivals—thus refugees looking after themselves, and also giving back to the wider local community and British society which had offered them sanctuary. In this, there was a definite element of being grateful, which Yap et al. (2011, p. 168) argue could position volunteering as repayment to the state for its (financial) support welcoming “burdensome” refugees. Volunteering also positions refugees as “good citizens” in the wider society, demonstrating them as motivated, concerned about the welfare of others, contributing to public good, loyal to the country, and even being “good value” in working for free (Hackl, 2022; Yap et al., 2011).

However, additionally, we find volunteering provides refugee women with the emotional and linguistic resources to actively resist experiences of microaggressions and undesirable stereotypes. Referring back to the incident on the bus with the white British man, Zania pointed out that the aggressor didn’t know her because she was actually on her way to her voluntary job, to “look after their country as well.” She continued:

I think they are racist because they look in our faces, they think we are from different country, we are beggar, we are come to take their benefits. But they don’t know....I work voluntary for full time, they don’t know me, because I want to give back....I am sure all refugees the same, they are very kind. Someone, see my group, they can’t speak [English], they reading the book, they writing the book, we make recipe book, we

selling, we make money, to look after refugees and look after the homeless people, we do “pop up” café.

Zania refutes the racist stereotyping of refugees by evidence of her volunteering and her civic embedding, and she further imputes her desire to give back to all refugees. The emphasis here and elsewhere is that all refugees are good; they are self-reliant and civic-minded. Indeed, Zania, Aliyah, and some of the other women assumed the role of quasi-spokesperson for refugee women, continually emphasising the contribution all refugees make, despite language barriers or other obstacles. Thus they ascribed to the notion of deservingness, suggesting that conditional belonging may be earned through “goodness” (Hackl, 2022). However, in this, they resisted the idea of a hierarchy of refugees: the good volunteering refugee versus the lazy non-working one, which Yap et al. (2011) found. Indeed, Farida went as far as to place deserving and hard-working refugees and migrants above undeserving British people, inverting the dominant discourse:

One of my neighbour, she’s all, her daughter, her son, everybody is on benefit, you know. And I say to her once: “Why don’t you guys’ work?” And she is like: “Where can I get a job, because all these people come from other country and they taking our job, they’re messing, and they taking everything from our country.” And I said: “That’s not true, you know, I do job in a care home, would you like to—we have got jobs?” She’s like: “No, I don’t want to do this kind of job”....You know the care home I worked, there wasn’t a single, single, single English person!

Here Farida uses evidence of her own economic embedding, and her neighbour’s lack of, to defy the microaggression she experienced.

Feelings of solidarity and belonging in the support group, and confidence developed through volunteering activities, allowed study participants to critically assess the precarity of their positioning as refugees in wider society. During focus group discussions, Zania in particular articulated the feelings of other participants, stating that they cannot feel fully safe and free in the UK—despite coming to this country for safety and freedom—when they are fearful of racist aggression and attack:

In my opinion, to have some course, have some news, or something. They have to talk, the government talk, about refugee people, they are very kind, they are very good, they not make more problem. Because they have to learn we are not beggars...we are not come to this country to take their money. Because we want to give back, everyone give back, they didn’t see.

Here, Zania points to the general public’s ignorance about refugees. She asserts that it is the government’s

responsibility to change the negative and inaccurate narrative and to educate the public. The women recognised that refugees cannot embed in a hostile environment where public discourse paints them as a burden and threat to society. Farida and Khadija critiqued the media for ignoring positive stories about refugee volunteering such as the community cafés. Indeed, Aliyah explained how she uses her position as a volunteer, and the social connections it affords her, as an opportunity to educate people about the situation of refugees:

And we talk about our country [countries in the Middle East], to tell the people what happened to us. If we be quiet they think we are fine. No, there is something here, hurt [points to her heart], that upset us. We need to keep a smile, to be strong, to family, to myself, to everybody here.

Aliyah draws on opportunities for fostering support and solidarity, created by her and other women through the support group and their volunteering practices, to critique the state's failure to provide spaces for relational embedding that refugees can access, especially given the immense scale of isolation that refugees and migrants initially face in a new country:

Everybody welcome [talking about community groups]....We can do something for this country, no just sit down. If nobody took my hand, how can I continue? Because everybody shy, scared, especially language, the language is really hard for people. And this is the first step...to do activity, to know each other, to different culture welcome, to help each other. If no open door like that, how can contact people?...And I now my time volunteer, if I see a new family in the school in my area, straight away I tell them: "Come [to the refugee charities] there"....There is women's group. How can I, because community closed from the government? Just this, thanks God, open door, [the refugee charities], to let them come.

Salma also talked about two different community groups for migrant women that she helped set up, in response to community need. Thus, through its inaction, the state encourages the social exclusion of refugees, and it is left to the voluntary sector and the refugees themselves to use their own agency to help others access spaces of welcome, or to even create these spaces.

Therefore, we have shown how volunteering is used by these women as a way to counter everyday experiences of microaggression and negative discourses about refugees and to create spaces for relational, civic, and economic embedding. Furthermore, volunteering was also instrumentalised to critique government (and some media) irresponsibility in both allowing these discourses to perpetuate and in failing to support the embedding of refugees in the UK.

## 5. Conclusion

Autochthonic populist politics of belonging in the UK and the "everyday/everywhere bordering technology" that has emerged through a succession of recent British Immigration Acts create a hostile environment not only for irregular migrants but also recognised refugees, asylum seekers, other migrants, and even racialised minority citizens (Yuval-Davis et al., 2018). In such an environment, everyday microaggressions and exclusion in the public sphere compound the social isolation and lack of confidence refugees already experience in their new home, and curtail opportunities to engage in processes of differentiated embedding. We have demonstrated how, within this context, some refugee women use their agency to find alternative spaces for relational embedding. The support group for refugee women in this study offers a safe and supportive local space to develop solidarity around shared experiences of refugeeness/migrancy among women of diverse ethnic, language, religious and age positionalities. The support group facilitates deep, trusting relationships among the women, enabling the establishment of gendered relational embedding.

Additionally, involvement in different activities through the group nurtures confidence amongst the women and provides them with the resources and opportunities to engage in volunteering activities, both to facilitate the work of the support group, and to contribute to the wider community. We found volunteering practices lead to a degree of relational embedding in the wider local community, creating a space of acceptance in the public sphere where previously they had felt excluded. Here their cultural difference was used as a means to engage in relational embedding. However, on this point, we caution that this may also risk reinforcing refugees' position as "other," or at least limit recognition of their contribution to that which promotes "cultural diversity" in local spaces but not beyond this (Tomlinson, 2010).

Volunteering was also a way to engage in a (limited) degree of economic embedding, both as a route to future employment (and fuller economic embedding) and as a means to resist current economic exclusion and narratives of refugees as an economic burden. Volunteering enabled these women to develop cultural competencies such as language and to demonstrate a self-reliant entrepreneurial self who is worthy of being included in the nation (Yap et al., 2011). However, we also note that volunteering as a long-term practice, where there is the desire to progress to fuller economic embedding through paid labour, may risk creating a sense of exploitation and exclusion, as the partiality of the process becomes increasingly emphasised over time when volunteering does not translate into employment. As other studies have found, progression from volunteering into employment is far from guaranteed, and, where successful, may limit opportunities to certain types of work and certain sectors (usually the

poorly remunerated voluntary/community sector with few options for progression; Tomlinson, 2010; Vickers, 2016), where “refugeeness” can be a recognizable competence (de Jong, 2019). Furthermore, as Vickers (2016, p. 449) argues, organisations, and by extension the state, receive substantial benefits through the unpaid labour of refugees in maintaining services and support systems for refugees. This raises ethical concerns in the further marginalisation (through unpaid labour) of an already economically disadvantaged group. It highlights the state’s evasion of its own responsibility to provide these services and spaces (along with fostering inclusive narratives) to enable refugees’ relational, civic and economic embedding.

Nonetheless, our study participants framed volunteering as a means of civic embedding, found in the idea of giving back, to support refugees and the wider local community. Therefore, through volunteering the refugee women in our study invoked qualities of “goodness” (being self-reliant entrepreneurial selves as well as contributing to the public good) to meet the criteria for conditional inclusion in the UK (Hackl, 2022; Yap et al., 2011); thus volunteering represents an accommodating response. But the capacity to volunteer and experiences of volunteering also provided them with the linguistic and emotional resources to resist everyday microaggressions and social exclusion. Some of the participants not only critiqued the state’s failure to provide a conducive environment for embedding; they also challenged the autochthonic conceptions of inclusion by inverting the classed and racialised hierarchy of the “good citizen” (Shilliam, 2018). They deemed hard working refugees and migrants as those more deserving than British people preferring welfare over low-status/low pay jobs.

Drawing on the concept of “differentiated embedding” (Ryan, 2018), we have contributed to scholarship on refugees and volunteering by exploring how it may be instrumentalised as a resistance practice in a hostile environment. We have demonstrated the variable degrees of embedding within and across domains, that is, for refugees, always effortful and reflexive (Mulholland & Ryan, 2022). On this point we wish to engage with Mulholland and Ryan (2022)’s idea of an axis of reflexive-tacit embedding. They argue that attachment formation may be purposive and agentic (reflexive), or unconscious and/or taken-for-granted (tacit) by way of privileged access to rights and entitlements or formed unawares over time. For the French migrants in their study, tacit embedding, particularly political, had been possible by virtue of their taken-for-granted EU membership rights, which were suddenly disrupted by the tumultuous event of Brexit (Mulholland & Ryan, 2022). In contrast, we suggest that for refugees embedding can only be reflexive, as their starting point is always as interloper, revealed in the culture of disbelief and severely curtailed rights they endure through the asylum process. Once they have struggled to overcome the initial hurdle to gain even the right to start embedding by being recognised as

refugees, they have to actively work to overcome considerable obstacles to processes of embedding, as we have demonstrated, such as social isolation, everyday racism and discrimination, and substantial labour market barriers (amongst others). Moreover, in the highly politicised climate of ever-increasing restrictions, hostility, and everyday bordering practices in the UK, refugees are continuously positioned as outsiders and reminded that they do not belong—such that tacit embedding is an impossibility. Thus, we have shown the agentic strategies the refugee women in this study have employed to overcome these barriers and resist exclusion through the means available to them, to enable embedding in (and in spite of) a hostile environment.

Further, we have shown how embedding trajectories in different domains are linked. Lack of relational embedding in everyday local arenas can provide the impetus for establishing gendered relational embedding in a support group. This, in turn, facilitated civic embedding through volunteering practices, including a degree of relational embedding beyond the support group and a limited form of economic embedding. Civic embedding can potentially facilitate further future economic embedding through employment, but significantly, it may provide the seeds for a degree of political embedding in the form of active, critical citizenship. Volunteering becomes a practice of resistance to experiences of microaggressions and discourses of unbelonging in the UK. While civic and economic embedding may reinforce dominant constructions of conditional citizenship (Hackl, 2022), the participants’ volunteering practices also offer refugees ways of resisting the persistence of race in constructions of an ethnic conception of the nation. We suggest that this represents a form of political embedding, in the sense of having the confidence to resist dominant narratives about refugees and migrants. In viewing refugee women’s volunteering as practices of negotiation, adaptation, and/or resistance that both accommodate neoliberal citizenship regimes and contest the hostile environment, we argue that such practices lead to a “critical incorporation” (Shah, 2012), rather than uncritical emphasis on adaptation and integration into their new home. At the same time, we acknowledge that whilst embedding practices undertaken by refugees, such as these women, may have some positive impact in changing perceptions, reducing microaggressions and fostering a sense of belonging at a local level, the recent ratcheting up of hostility towards asylum seekers (particularly those arriving through irregular routes) in the wider political-legal environment in the UK, makes it difficult to imagine a dismantling of hostile border regimes at a national level in the near future. These limits to resisting national narratives of social exclusion further underscore the purposive and reflexive nature of embedding processes for refugees. But it does also indicate hope that the potential for change may be located at the local level, in foregrounding the voices of those with lived experiences.

## Acknowledgments

We would like to thank all the participants who shared their experiences as part of this research. We would also like to thank the two anonymous reviewers and the editors for their insightful suggestions in refining this article. This work was supported by the ESRC SCSTP (grant number ES/P000673/1), as part of the first author's MSc and subsequent doctoral research. Due to ethical concerns, supporting data cannot be made openly available.

## Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

## References

- Ager, A., & Strang, A. (2008). Understanding integration: A conceptual framework. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 21(2), 166–191.
- Anthias, F. (2016). Interconnecting boundaries of identity and belonging and hierarchy-making within transnational mobility studies: Framing inequalities. *Current Sociology Monograph*, 64(2), 172–190.
- Barber, T. (2021). Differentiated embedding among the Vietnamese refugees in London and the UK: fragmentation, complexity, and “in/visibility.” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 47(21), 4835–4852.
- Blinder, S., & Richards, L. (2020). *UK public opinion toward immigration: Overall attitudes and level of concern*. The Migration Observatory. <https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/uk-public-opinion-toward-immigration-overall-attitudes-and-level-of-concern>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2013). *Successful qualitative research: A practical guide for beginners*. SAGE.
- Braverman, S. (2022). *Western jet foil and Manston asylum processing centres* [Speech transcript]. UK Parliament Hansard. <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2022-10-31/debates/F189CA88-FDF3-4018-905C-1CC8A1B76E28/WesternJetFoilAndManstonAsylumProcessingCentres>
- Cooper, G., Blumell, L., & Bunce, M. (2021). Beyond the “refugee crisis”: How the UK news media represent asylum seekers across national boundaries. *The International Communication Gazette*, 83(3), 195–216.
- de Jong, S. (2019). A window of opportunity? Refugee staff's employment in migrant support and advocacy organizations. *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power*, 26(3), 321–338.
- Ford, R., & Lymperopoulou, K. (2017). *Immigration: How attitudes in the UK compare with Europe* (British Social Attitudes Report No. 34). NatCen Social Research. [https://www.bsa.natcen.ac.uk/media/39148/bsa34\\_immigration\\_final.pdf](https://www.bsa.natcen.ac.uk/media/39148/bsa34_immigration_final.pdf)
- Granovetter, M. (1985). Economic action and social structure: The problem of embeddedness. *American Journal of Sociology*, 91(3), 481–510.
- Grzymala-Kazłowska, A. (2016). Social anchoring: Immigrant identity, security and integration reconnected. *Sociology*, 50(6), 1123–1139.
- Grzymala-Kazłowska, A., & Phillimore, J. (2018). Introduction: Rethinking integration. New perspectives on adaptation and settlement in the era of super-diversity. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 44(2), 179–196.
- Hackl, A. (2022). Good immigrants, permitted outsiders: Conditional inclusion and citizenship in comparison. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 45(6), 989–1010.
- KhosraviNik, M. (2010). The representation of refugees, asylum seekers and immigrants in British newspapers: A critical discourse analysis. *Journal of Language and Politics*, 9(1), 1–28.
- Khvorostianov, N., & Remennick, L. (2017). “By helping others, we helped ourselves”: Volunteering and social integration of ex-Soviet immigrants in Israel. *Voluntas*, 28(1), 335–357.
- Miller, J., & Glassner, B. (2004). The “inside” and the “outside”: Finding realities in interviews. In D. Silverman (Ed.), *Qualitative research: Theory, method and practice* (2nd ed., pp. 125–139). SAGE.
- Mulholland, J., & Ryan, L. (2022). Advancing the embedding framework: Using longitudinal methods to revisit French highly skilled migrants in the context of Brexit. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 49(3). <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2022.2057282>
- Phillimore, J., & Goodson, L. (2008). Making a place in the global city: The relevance of indicators of integration. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 21(3), 305–325.
- Philo, G., Bryant, E., & Donald, P. (2013). *Bad news for refugees*. Pluto Press.
- Rutter, J., & Carter R. (2018). *National conversation on immigration: Final report*. British Future & HOPE not hate. <https://www.britishfuture.org/publication/national-conversation-immigration-final-report>
- Ryan, L. (2018). Differentiated embedding: Polish migrants in London negotiating belonging over time. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 44(2), 295–312.
- Ryan, L., & Mulholland, J. (2015). Embedding in motion: Analysing relational, spatial and temporal dynamics among highly skills migrants. In L. Ryan, U. Erel, & A. D'Angelo (Eds.), *Migrant capital: Migration, diasporas and citizenship* (pp. 135–153). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Shah, B. V. (2012). *Laotian daughters: Working toward community, belonging, and environmental justice*. Temple University Press.
- Shah, B. V., & Ogden, J. (2021). Immigration, race, and nation in the UK: The politics of belonging on Twitter. *Sociological Research Online*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13607804211029968>
- Shilliam, R. (2018). *Race and the undeserving poor: From abolition to Brexit*. Agenda Publishing.
- Speed, F., Scurry, T., Edward, P., & Moufahim, M. (2021). Networks amongst Syrians: Situated migrant

- positionalities and the impact on relational embedding. *Social Inclusion*, 9(4), 243–253. <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.v9i4.4521>
- Sunak, R. (2022). *Illegal immigration* [Speech transcript]. UK Parliament Hansard. <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2022-12-13/debates/DB61C374-16B5-411C-9A29-CC3DCA119EB3/IllegalImmigration>
- Tomlinson, F. (2010). Marking difference and negotiating belonging: Refugee women, volunteering and employment. *Gender, Work and Organization*, 17(3), 278–296.
- Turner, J. (2014). Testing the liberal subject: (In)security, responsibility and “self-improvement” in the UK citizenship test. *Citizenship Studies*, 18(3/4), 332–348.
- Vickers, T. (2016). Opportunities and limitations for collective resistance arising from volunteering by asylum seekers and refugees in Northern England. *Critical Sociology*, 42(3), 437–454.
- Yap, S. Y., Byrne, A., & Davidson, S. (2011). From refugee to good citizen: A discourse analysis of volunteering. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 24(1), 157–170.
- Yuval-Davis, N. (2006). Belonging and the politics of belonging. *Patterns of Prejudice*, 40(3), 197–214.
- Yuval-Davis, N., Wemyss, G., & Cassidy, K. (2018). Everyday bordering, belonging and the reorientation of british immigration legislation. *Sociology*, 52(2), 228–244.

### About the Authors



**Carolynn Low** is a post-graduate researcher in the Department of Sociology, Social Policy and Criminology at the University of Southampton. Her background is in practice, having worked for over 15 years in the refugee sector in the UK. Her PhD research focuses on how entrepreneurship may contribute to processes of social and economic inclusion for refugees and migrants in the UK, and the role of local support organisations.



**Bindi V. Shah** is an associate professor in sociology at the University of Southampton, UK. She is a specialist in migration and religion, and has published extensively on Asian immigrants in the UK and the USA. She has examined the role of social capital in second-generation educational achievements; how ethnicity/race, class, gender, and religion shape their identities and belonging; how to construct citizenship through activism; and migrant faith spaces in London. Currently, she is developing research on the cultural politics of belonging in social media conversations on migration.