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The "Long, Difficult, Terrifying, and Very Dangerous Road": Refugee Women in Germany Share Stories of Resilience[1]

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Abstract

Refugees are forced to flee their homes due to well-founded fear of persecution, war or conflict, or other threats to their lives. As established in International Human Rights Law, refugees are not allowed to be deported under the principle of non-refoulement. To overcome such hardships, many refugees display resilience—the ability to overcome significant adversity—that may be fostered internally, but often may depend on other external factors. Little research has been conducted on the capacity for refugee women to be resilient and the factors that contribute to that resilience. In this qualitative study, 10 refugees from three different countries (Afghanistan, Syria, and the Ivory Coast) were interviewed in southern Germany to gain a deeper understanding of the factors the women believed to contribute to their resilience. Three overarching themes, all with multiple sub-themes, emerged: 1) a difficult departure and journey was worth the risk, 2) despite the challenges, help came, and 3) finding strength to endure. Women drew strength from their children, and from their desire for a better future. In the end, much of the strength they cultivated came from a deep resolve to hold onto hope. Further research could explore the ability of women refugees to be resilient in countries that are less welcoming.

Key Words:

refugee women; resilience; Germany; forced migration; hope

1 Introduction

1.1 Resilience-Overcoming Challenges

Resilience refers to the "capabilities, processes, or outcomes denoted by desirable adaptation in the context of risk or adversities associated with dysfunction or adjustment problems" (Masten, 2018, p. 13). Sometimes the strength to overcome adversity comes from within, sometimes it comes from external protective factors, and sometimes it takes

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the combination of internal resolve together with a support system. Resilience takes place when someone successfully manages or adapts to the stress or trauma they are facing (Windle, 2011); the ability to be resilient in the face of traumatic events is indicative of a healthy adjustment over time (Gianesini, 2011).

1.2 Resilience in Refugees

Refugees, by nature of what makes them refugees (war, persecution, fleeing conflict, fear for their lives), have experienced significant stress and trauma before leaving their home countries. Some continue to experience traumatic events during their flight, and even once they arrive in a new country. Yet, despite all of this, refugees are often able to find the strength to start anew. In one study about Eritrean refugees living in Norway, refugees reported that they focus on the future, on fellowship with and support from other Eritrean refugees, and depend on their faith to bring them hope (Abraham et al., 2018). In another study, the researchers interviewed Palestinian refugee women living in camps in the West Bank (Darychuk & Jackson, 2015). They found that having a space that was safe for them to socialize helped the women support each other and build community strength (Darychuk & Jackson, 2015). Others had similar findings – that refugees' support systems, as well as their faith and religion may help in building their capacity for resilience (Ginesini, 2018; Hutchinson & Dorsett, 2012). Ginesini (2018), in her study on refugee women who had been trafficked, found that women who relied on their faith were more likely to display coping flexibility and were more likely to have a positive view of their life events. Their faith, as well as other resources they depended on before migrating, such as having a positive outlook, and family and community support, can serve as protective factors for women who are facing multiple levels of trauma (forced migration, trafficking, exploitation, etc.) in helping them overcome these life experiences (Ginesini, 2018).

In this study, we sought to understand the lived experiences of refugee women. Specifically, we wanted to understand how women refugees describe the factors that contribute to their resilience. The sub-questions included:

1 – How do participants describe how self-agency contributes to resilience?
2 – How do participants describe how religion contributes to resilience?
3 – How do participants describe how refugee communities contribute to resilience?
4 – How do participants describe how host communities contribute to resilience?

This manuscript is part of a larger study focused on understanding resilience in refugee women. The research team consists of three women faculty at three different universities in different parts of the United States with expertise in social work, cultural studies, and psychology.

1.3 Resilience in Refugee Women

Lenette et al. (2013: 1) noted that women refugees "contend with a highly gendered array of vulnerabilities", and as such are often seen as disempowered, needy victims. In fact, during their journey to safety, forcibly displaced women are at a higher risk of human trafficking, rape, forced marriage, and other forms of violence (Hawkes et al., 2020). According to Lenette et al. (2013), focusing on the resilience of refugee women can challenge these dynamics of disempowerment, provided that the resilience is seen as both a process involving the outside world, and a trait that comes from within a person. Especially for refugee women from collectivistic cultures, the notion of collective resilience

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further emphasizes that resilience is a process that involves both the refugee communities and host societies, which as a result "motivates and enables transformation" (Pulvirenti & Mason, 2011: 48). To overcome the Western, individualized notion of resilience, Atari-Khan et al. (2021) proposed an emic approach to understanding refugees' resilience from the context where it emerges.

In their qualitative systematic review of factors contributing to refugee women resilience, Hawkes et al. (2020) identified religion/spirituality as the most commonly endorsed factor, followed by protection of and connection to the culture of origin, raising children, social support, family, personal characteristics, and formalized support. In particular, in the face of violence and the complex traumatic experiences related to human trafficking of refugee women, researchers often find faith in God and religion as the salient factor of resilience, for participants endorsing both Christian and Muslim backgrounds (Pertek, 2022). Among Muslim refugee women from Syria, trust in God has also been defined as a facilitation of hope for the future (El-Khani et al., 2017).

1.4 Overview of Current Refugee Crisis

Since 2012, the number of forcibly displaced people worldwide has continued to climb (UNHCR, 2023b). Refugees are people that have been forcibly displaced from their country due to conflict or persecution; their lives were threatened at home, therefore, International Human Rights Law protects them under the principle of *non-refoulment*, meaning countries are not allowed to force them to return to their homeland or to deport them (*Convention relating to the Status of Refugees,* 1951; *Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees*, 1967; UNHCR, 2023a). Along with non-refoulement, non-discrimination and non-penalization are the core principles that undergird the Convention and Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees. Yet, discrimination and persecution can impact refugees at every stage of their displacement – at home before fleeing, in transit countries, and in the country where they ultimately seek asylum (United Nations, n.d.). At the time of writing, the UNHCR is reporting the number of displaced people across the globe to be 108.4 million (2023b). This is the highest level of forced displacement in modern history. Of these, about 40% are children. More than half of the world's refugees currently are from Syria (6.8 million), Ukraine (5.7 million), and Afghanistan (5.7 million) (UNHCR, 2023b). Over half of the world's refugees are women and girls (UNHCR, 2023b).

1.5 The Route to Germany

Typically, refugees flee to countries that neighbor the country that they left, in hopes that they might be able to return to their homes once the conditions that make life in their home country unsafe discontinue. In the last several years, however, more and more refugees from the Middle East are making their way to Europe to seek asylum, as the dangerous conditions in their home countries continue to drag on (Volk & Inhorn, 2021).

1.6 Political Reasons for Fleeing to Germany

In 2015, German Chancellor Angela Merkel found herself making what many thought was an extreme decision – opening Germany's borders and welcoming refugees from Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan. The result was that Germany took in more than one million refugees (de la Baume, 2017). Other European countries, such as Poland and Hungary, responded in the opposite way, refusing to open their borders to these Middle Eastern refugees (de la Baume, 2017). In light of the country's welcoming stance, many refugees found

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themselves en route to Germany. In addition, refugees reported that they chose to resettle in Germany because they perceived Germans to respect human rights (73%), they liked Germany's educational system (43%), and they felt welcome (42%) (Brücker et al., 2016). While Germany's social service system was not expecting such an influx of refugees, they quickly mobilized social workers across the country, who were, with great empathy and humility, able to effectively respond to a host of refugee needs, including needs for housing, education, German language, and community (Hagues et al., 2019). The UNHCR Global Trend report published in 2023 claimed Germany was still the European country receiving the most refugees, though this number may have changed with the current Ukrainian crisis (UNHCR, 2023b).

1.7 Geographical Considerations

The physical route to Germany is not easy. Refugees from the Middle East and Africa frequently travel first through Türkiye (often on foot or by car), then by sea (usually an inflatable raft) to Greece. Then, they continue by foot through the Balkan countries (Conner, 2016). If they are fortunate, they may be able to ride a train for part of that time. Many refugees that were evacuated from Afghanistan in August 2021 when the Taliban took over first fled to Pakistan on foot or by car (Khan et al., 2023) and then flew to Germany; some were privileged enough to evacuate Afghanistan by plane, and then were flown directly to Germany (BBC News, 2021).

Those that are forced to flee on foot are exposed to difficulties along their way. Often this is because asylum seekers are traveling through clandestine routes exposing them to greater risks of violence or unsafe transportation, such as shipwrecks or sinking rafts (Lorenz & Etzold, 2022). For example, Arsenijevic et al. (2017) found that of 992 migrants/refugees, 383 had experienced traumatic events, as they journeyed through the Balkan route to Europe. The most common traumatic event experienced was physical violence. While most of the violence was carried out by State authorities. Other common violent experiences included: being treated poorly by smugglers, incarceration or kidnapping, and physical violence by the local community. Refugees also suffered as they experienced discrimination, were witnesses to violence or killings, or even saw dead bodies along the way (Arsenijevic et al., 2017). Others found that refugees that had access to financial means, or social connections were more likely to face fraud, robbery, or blackmail but avoid violent attacks, while those with less access to financial resources were more likely to be imprisoned or face physical or sexual violence (Lorenz & Etzold, 2022). By the time migrants arrive in Germany, they have likely experienced multiple levels of trauma – from the trauma they experienced in their home country which they fled, to potentially traumatic forms of violence, or exploitation on their journey (Arsenijevic et al., 2017; Lorenz & Etzold, 2022), to facing discrimination upon resettling in Germany (Glorius & Nienaber, 2022). Of course, not all refugees undergo such traumatic experiences.

2 Methods

Since we wanted to understand refugee women's lived experiences as much as possible from their perspective, we designed a qualitative research study. Qualitative research is used when the researcher is trying to gain a deeper understanding of human experiences, processes, relationships, situations, or systems and uses thick descriptions to help in this discovery (Peshkin, 1993; Ponterotto, 2006). In design and analysis, we took the perception of Charmaz (2007), that "we begin inquiry with sensitizing concepts that alert

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us to look at what occurs" (p. 80). In this case, we wanted to deepen our understanding of resilience in refugee women. Our goal was to understand how women refugees are, in the face of much adversity, able to overcome and persevere.

In-depth interviews were conducted by the lead author in July 2023 at refugee community centers, a refugee reception center, the home of an interpreter, and a local university. About half of the interviews were conducted with the help of an interpreter, while the other interviews were conducted in English. Five of the participants spoke fluent English, and did not require any help from an interpreter. The shortest interview lasted only twenty-seven minutes, while the longest was one hour and twelve minutes. The longest interview was also conducted completely in English so none of the time was spent on translation.

2.1 Participants

Ten refugee women (N=10) were recruited by local refugee social workers who the lead author knew from collaborating with some of their professors at a local university. The women were told that the researcher was from the United States, and was interested in hearing their stories, particularly around why they left their home country, their journey to Germany, and how they have found strength to continue. As the research was introduced, the informed consent process was reviewed. The researcher made it clear to participants that they could stop the interview at any time. Participants consented at the beginning of each interview, both to be interviewed and to allow the interview to be audio recorded. One participant asked that the interview not be recorded, but was still willing to be interviewed, so the researcher simply took notes during that interview. All participants were adults with the youngest being 23, and the oldest 63 (mean age was 37.8). Eight were from Afghanistan, one from Syria, and one from the Ivory Coast. Participants arrival in Germany ranged from 2015 to April 2023.

2.2 Data Analysis

Data were transcribed verbatim by the lead author and several graduate students. Before transcription began, pseudonyms were assigned to the participants to protect their confidentiality. Graduate students were not privy to the names of the participants, unless the participant stated their name during the recorded interview. If they did, the student was instructed to replace the name with the pseudonym.

Data were then analyzed thematically utilizing Atlas.Ti software, both from a deductive and inductive approach using a constant comparative method (Charmaz, 2014). The inductive analysis began during the interview and transcription process, as emerging themes began to be identified and memos were written (Patton, 2002); an analysis process known as a "course-grained phase" (Butler-Kisber, 2010). Through the process of transcribing new data, initial codes continually evolved and were collapsed into new, more cemented themes. These themes were crosschecked across all transcripts, and the over-arching themes became clear during this more deductive analysis phase. To ensure credible and trustworthy findings, triangulation was used as the co-researchers read through the data and confirmed the overarching themes (Olson et al., 2016). The three overarching themes, all which had multiple sub-themes, were: 1) a difficult departure and journey was worth the risk, 2) despite the challenges, help came, and 3) finding strength to endure.

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3 Findings

3.1 A Difficult Departure and Journey was Worth the Risk

Each of the women who participated in this study described a long, complicated, and difficult journey, proceeded by a heart-wrenching (and in some cases, terrifying) departure that they had to make to save their lives and their family. Despite the deep love they described for their country and the family members they left behind, women made the choice to leave because their lives and/or the lives of their husbands or children were at risk.

3.2 Our Lives Were Being Threatened

Taara, a 23-year-old Afghan woman explained that she had to leave her family in 2022 because she worked with different international non-governmental organizations (NGOs). "…All my siblings are in Afghanistan, just I left. Because I was working with different NGOs, and I show my face, and my father is afraid that the Taliban will come." *Farzaneh* had a similar story. In 2015, when she was still a teenager, her family had to flee Afghanistan as well, because her father was an engineer and did different projects with foreign companies. "You know if you work with foreigners, foreign governments in Afghanistan, there is a higher chance of you getting killed by the Taliban because they don't like it," Farzaneh explained. "So, my dad was getting these threats and stuff, so he was scared. He said, 'we are going to leave Afghanistan as soon as possible.'" One woman, *Paksima,* aged 49, shared that her son was kidnapped by the Taliban when he was 18. This was in 2015 and he is still missing. Other women from Afghanistan shared similar stories – fear of the Taliban, personally knowing others that had died because of their work with NGOs, or on behalf of women's rights, and legitimate death threats.

Salimata, who is 40 and from the Ivory Coast had a different experience. She left the Ivory Coast due to religious persecution. She had been Muslim and left her Muslim faith to go to the Catholic church, to the disapproval of her parents. She eventually married a Christian man, who her parents never accepted. "My parents rejected me…I met my husband and told him to present himself to my family. They didn't accept him because he is not Muslim." She elaborated, "when you are a Muslim and become a Christian, your own father, his property, you don't have a right for it…you cannot get anything from your parents."

3.3 Getting Here was Complicated

Many of the women experienced some form of discrimination, exploitation, or harassment after leaving their home country, whether through their journey on the way to Germany, or in a different country before making it to Germany. For example, *Salimata* first tried to resettle her family in Ghana after leaving the Ivory Coast. *Salimata* explained,

> "I got a small job, and I started to come as a vendor to sell things…I was using that money to feed my family…and my husband started selling things too like me. And when we got some money we opened a shop and started selling bags, shoes…[but] this December my worker, the woman working with me…started stealing, taking money from me. And I [went to] the police in Ghana…but no, because I'm a foreigner, 'You have to do this. You have to bring this…' What is the proof? I showed them all the proof."

This situation was enough to compel *Salimata* to take her family to Germany.

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Hajira, aged 59, shared that she and her husband hired a smuggler to get them from Greece to Hungary, then another smuggler from Hungary to Germany. Once they arrived in Europe, the smuggler demanded twenty-thousand U.S. dollars for three people (*Hajira,* her husband, and her son). *Jamila* had a similar experience. She explained,

> "some people told me that this group of people would bring documents, European documents for 10 thousand and 12 thousand euros. I know this is illegal, but I was forced, I mean, the condition forced me to do that…that's why my father paid…and they bring me European documents, passport, yeah."

Other women also explained their journey by boat, sometimes by train, and in a few cases by plane, but mostly by foot. Several of the women traveled by foot across multiple countries with small children, and some were even pregnant. The route they took was complex and they often did not even know where they were. The desperate measures these women and their families took – spending their life savings, paying smugglers, using false identification, taking unsafe boats, and walking thousands of miles by foot – demonstrates the risks they took to get themselves and for some, their families, to a place of security.

3.4 Fled More than One Country

Many of the women who participated in this study fled their home country more than once, and some fled multiple other countries. For example, *Kaamisha,* a 35-year-old mother, explained through an interpreter,

> "They left [Afghanistan] when she was 7, then they went to Iran. In Iran, she married and had children (she was 15 when she got married and had her first child the next year). In 2013 she went back to Afghanistan with her family and lived there for a year, then she saw that the security was very bad in Afghanistan. Everyday there was an explosion, so they decided to go back to Iran. So, in 2015 her husband got caught twice in Iran because his visa was not extended, so it was impossible for them to stay in Iran. The children were unable to go to school. Then they left Iran and went to Turkey. So, in 2015 they wanted to come to Europe, but…they didn't have enough money, so they stayed in Turkey. They stayed in Turkey for 1.5 years to work, then they slowly made their way to Germany."

> "They departed at night from Turkey on a small boat to Greece and landed on the island of Mitilini [Lesvos]. From there they went to Athens where they hired smugglers. Then traveled to Serbia, the Balkans, Croatia, and finally to Germany…all by foot."

Noor, who is 63, reported that she left Afghanistan in 2001 after her parents were killed in the war. They then went to Iran and stayed there until 2015, when they were forced to leave because her children were not allowed to work. They had many financial struggles, she was sick, and could not get treatment, and her husband was kidnapped. Through translation, *Noor* explained that her husband disappeared for 2 years, and then was found in Sweden during the Coronavirus outbreak. He has since been reunited with their family.

The amount of violence, trauma, and fear many of these women experienced before getting safely to Germany is unfathomable. Yet, along the way, help came, and they were able to find the courage to continue.

3.5 Despite the Challenges, Help Came

Despite the many challenges the women faced in getting to Germany, they did find help along the way and once they arrived. Sometimes this help came from other refugees,

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sometimes it came from citizens of the countries they passed through, and some of them found help upon their arrival in Germany. Some women reported that the majority of their help came from God alone.

3.6 Refugees Helping Refugees

Farzaneh, who's family came at the beginning of a wave of refugees arriving from Afghanistan in 2015, explained how other refugees tried to help her family upon their arrival in Germany. Due to them coming at different times, their experience of resettling had been different. She said,

> "I would say most of the time other refugees from my own country came years before us. I know one family who came and told us how it went for them so we would have an overview of how it was going to go for us and how it was going to work out for us…but it was like completely different. What they told us, it was completely different from our story. They had to wait like years to find a house, for us it was months. So yeah, there were people who liked to help you, but…because it's too different as they are different situations, so they handle it differently for each person or family."

Through an interpreter, *Alma,* explained that on her journey to Germany from Syria, two young men traveling with them practically carried her over a mountain in Greece. She was not sure where the men were from but thought perhaps Iran; these men were also fleeing to Germany. *Alma* was pregnant and struggled to climb. They also helped her nephew. *Alma* explained that she and her brother-in-law also helped other refugees in the camp by translating for them.

Refugees who were stranded in the same camps or attending outreach programs at the same NGOs found themselves helping others, receiving others' help, and maintaining long-term relationships. *Paksima* shared,

> "When I first came in 2015 the group of refugees I came with is still together – Afghans, Syrians, and Iraqis. We meet in the intercultural center. We are not neighbors, but we are friends."

There may not be many other things they have in common, but these refugee women all know what it is like to have their lives be at risk, to flee to a country that is very different than their own, and to start their lives again. This common bond gave them the ability to receive help and to give support to others as well.

3.7 Found Help in Germany

3.7.1 Help from Religious Communities/NGOs

Farzaneh explained that local Germans were very helpful, especially some older women.

> "I would say yeah, they really helped us. There were also other older women who came, say 70s and 80s. They came to that refugee place and they picked families with children usually and they were helping them find housing so they could settle as quick as possible…they were local Germans and probably they worked for a church or for Caritas. Or maybe the German Red Cross. So probably they were from there or they were also volunteering because they were like [in their] 70s and 80s."

Alma also shared that the Red Cross was particularly helpful, along with other volunteers and other NGOs like Caritas. They provided them with counseling and helped them with basic needs. She also shared that a local woman who was working for the church helped her learn German, and the church graciously helped provide everything for their apartment

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when they moved. Similarly, *Paksima* explained that they received help from churches, the *Diakonie*, and a German family:

> "[T]hose families are still helping us. For example, they helped register our children at school. The Diakonie helped. I gave the asylum interview, and we were accepted 20 days later. We are still living in the same place. A woman from the Diakonie, Stephanie, helps all the refugees with letters and documents, also with Germany [German] courses, etc."

The local Intercultural Center also helped them tremendously. *Hajira* explained that the German government helped her and her husband, but that it was a local church that helped her adult son. She said the church was supporting her son until his case got cleared by providing food, clothes, and other needs that he had.

3.7.2 Hospitality of Others

Several women talked about the hospitality they experienced either on the way to Germany or once they arrived. Some felt they were warmly welcomed, while others felt like the hospitality they experienced was minimal at best. For example, *Noor* explained that she did not have much help. But once she and her family were more settled in Germany, a Turkish woman reached out to help her. She showed her how to make a doctor's appointment and get to the doctor, helped her figure out how to get to the *Jobcenter* (office responsible for labor market integration and social subsistence) and even helped her figure out how to manage her finances.

Alma shared that when she arrived with her family to Greece, there was an old man that helped them. She said he found a hotel for them during tourist season when most of the hotels were booked. He also gave them his phone number in case they needed help on their way to Germany. *Alma* said he was "just kind" and wanted to help them because she was pregnant. *Kaamisha* also had a good experience with Greek citizens. She explained through an interpreter that they were giving them food and put bread and other things in the packages along the route where refugees were crossing. The interpreter explained, "So the people of Greece helped them. The island of Mitilini [Lesvos]. The people of…Mitilini. They really had a good experience from Greece. They even want to go back!"

Taara shared that her interpreter helped her feel calm after she was interrogated by police. She said,

> "There was a translator. I didn't know her name. She was from Iran. And she helped me. Believe me, I was in a situation that I felt that I needed something to help me to clear my tears, to feel me. And that woman…when she [saw] my face, she [felt] me. That's how she was looking like. And directly she hugged me. And I was just crying and crying. And she was like 'Don't worry. Everything will be okay. We're with you. Government is with you. If you are right, they will not bring you back to Afghanistan.' And I told her that 'I had very very, so [many] bad days. How can I go back to Afghanistan…She hugged me, kissed me. And she really gave me so [much] energy. And I didn't know her name, but she was very kind."

After a difficult experience with police, *Taara* indicated that the comfort and encouragement she received from this interpreter made all the difference. Others, however, felt like human help either did not exist or was inadequate.

3.8 Only God Will Help Me

Several of the women shared that more than anything, it was God that helped them endure. *Nahal* said,

> "In every way my faith helped me. Like when I am alone, I rely on Allah. I pray. I pray too much. Because of my family. Even though I was not happy to come was not happy to leave my family the situation in Afghanistan was not good I decided to come here."

Alma also shared that God helped her survive. "On the way, I thought many times that we were going to die, and that my nerves were over. But with supplication to God, and prayers, we were able to overcome that." When asked if she could provide examples of how other refugees were helpful for her on her journey, *Noor* shared, "No. Just God." She further explained,

> "[it is] because of my faith that I'm here. And it was my strong faith and belief and a lot that I came to, that I came with it here in this country. Yeah. It was that I have a God that I crossed the ocean unless I would have been sunk in the ocean."

She explained that she had to ride in a plastic boat. "If there wasn't God for me, I would have been dead." *Hajira* had a similar experience with a boat. She said, "it was God who saved us from the sinking." For some of these refugee women, survival of such traumatic events could only be because of the provision of God. They had no other way to explain how they were able to endure.

3.9 Finding Strength to Endure

When they felt like all was lost, women found strength from various sources. Sometimes they drew from personal relationships with family and friends and sometimes they were able to find strength within themselves. Those that had children drew much of their strength from the desire to save their children and keep them safe. Others found that they were able to cultivate hope that helped them keep going.

3.10 Strong Relationships with Family and Friends

When asked what was helpful for them throughout their refugee journey and experience, both *Alma* and *Nahal* said, "my husband." *Salimata* shared that after her family rejected her due to her converting to Christianity, she was able to maintain a good relationship with her aunt. She said,

> "she took care of me. She's like my good friend…she's always there for me. She gives me hope…she helped me by always telling me, 'Well, be strong. Always try…You suffered, but now you are strong.'"

Jamila shared that if it was not for her parents, specifically her father, she may still be in Afghanistan.

> "Fortunately, I was born in a very open-minded family. My father was an engineer. My mother was a teacher in Afghanistan. And I myself, I graduated in economic faculty in business department and financial department. And after I graduated from university, my university offered me to teach in our university because I graduated in first degree…I was also a teacher, a women activist. So that's why my father always told me that 'Jamila, I see in you lots of abilities. Lots of talents. If you have opportunities, you will be someone in the future. Please go and do something to yourself.' And my father [sold] everything because of me. And I had some jewelry. I [sold] my jewelry. My father [sold] all of their worth that he [had] and [brought] about 10,000, maybe 11,000 euros, and this much cost made me come here."

Such relationships motivated these women and helped them to remain strong and gave them reasons to persevere.

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3.11 Power Within

Other women found strength within themselves. For example, *Nahal* reported "I have a personality to never give up." *Paksima* said, "I am happy here. I have had a good experience. It strengthened me and I feel more powerful here than in my own country. I have rights." These women were able to dig deep within themselves to find the perseverance to keep going, despite the challenges they faced.

3.12 My Strength is My Children

Women who were mothers talked in depth about how they were able to muster up strength because of their children. For example, *Salimata* explained,

> "I can say my strength is my children. And there's God. God first, secondly my children. …When you have children, as a mom, you're supposed to be, I think, strong for them. If I allow myself to become weak, if I'm weak, who will take care of them? That's the way I think. Mommy and Daddy are different. Different. Daddy maybe can provide, but mommy, if you don't sleep, she cannot sleep. If you're sick, she's the one there. Daddy will be sleeping…My life is centered around my children…Everything I do, everything I did in this life, because of my children. I don't want them to suffer the way I suffered. "

Noor explained through an interpreter that it was her sons that helped her find strength to continue her journey. "Her sons only have their mother," the interpreter explained. *Noor* went on to say, "First, I have nobody in my life. I don't have any brother and mom, father. And also, because the only thing I have was my children. So yeah, I have to be brave." Similarly, *Kaamisha* reported that she did not want her children's future to be like hers. She wanted her husband to be in her children's life, which is why she left Afghanistan for the second time. The interpreter explained, "

> "So she did not believe in herself that she can come from Turkey to Europe. But when she saw her children, that they were happy, they were walking, that made her spirit able to walk also with them. It gave her strength. Her children's happiness and hope gave her strength."

These women, through the love of their children, were able to find the strength to persevere the many trials they faced.

3.13 She Held on to Hope

Some of the women talked in-depth about the hope that they had. Hope for their children, hope for their future, hope for change in the world. For example, *Hajira* was asked about personal strengths that helped sustain her, the interpreter shared, "She has hope. Like she was very strongly hopeful that she was going to come to Germany. That was her strength…It was her faith which made her hope strong." That hope for the future shone through *Jamila,* as she intentionally worked to focus on the positive and give herself to others. She shared,

> "Besides those negative things, I want to tell you some positive things. Yeah. I just want to tell you that I want to serve the community and the girls, especially the young women, young girls, who have abilities and talents, maybe like me or more than like me. And I ask the government here Germany that please help me to earn my ambition. And one day I promise, I promise to you and to all the people who will help me that one day, maybe not soon, but one day, they will see me in here…As much as we can, we serve others. So, this is only the thing that every day, every day, every time that I face to the mirror. I look myself as a super stronger woman."

Similarly, *Taara* talked about how she was able to find hope within herself. She shared,

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> "In Afghanistan I was a strong girl but beside my family, my family supported me [so that I could] do everything, and they [went] everywhere with me. Just I study and do a job. Now I know alone. If a person lives alone, they can be their best version. They can know how to drive their life. I want to study different books and go everywhere I want. This is like a hope, new challenges, new language, new culture. Everything is new and when a person learns new thing, this is like a hope. Like a light."

Once away from her family, *Taara* found that much of the strength she had was due to her family's support. Now that she was alone, she had to look within herself to find strength to be the person she wanted to be. Rather than despairing about what she had left behind, *Taara* chose to focus on who she was becoming.

Noor put it simply. When asked if there was anything else that has been helpful for her through her refugee journey, she stated, "Yeah. I have hope."

4 Discussion

All the women that participated in this research have spent a significant portion of their lives either fleeing conflict, living in fear because of war or conflict occurring around them, or experiencing persecution because of their faith (as did the participant from the Ivory Coast). Despite the many traumatic and ongoing distressing events they faced before fleeing and throughout their journey, they were able to be resilient. Either due to their faith in God, their love for their children, or their desire for a better life. In many cases, it was the combination of these things that kept them going. Sim et al. (2023) found similar things when researching refugee parents' resettlement – that "parents' conceptualization of God and fate appeared instrumental to their ability to understand, accept, and persevere despite overwhelming and unrelenting hardships" (p. 9) and that their family was an important source of resilience and strength.

All the participants who were mothers drew strength from their children and/or chose to flee so that their children could survive and have a better life. They were motivated to endure hardship and change for the future good of their children.

The three young single women (age 23, 23, and 25) were focused on their own education and their concern for women's rights. But they also indicated that they were only able to flee Afghanistan because of supportive, more privileged parents. Each of them reported that their parents were educated, were proud of them as women, and all three of them escaped because their parents could afford to pay their way; the 25-year old's family all escaped together, while both 23-year-olds had to leave their parents and siblings behind.

Some of the participants recounted participating in "illegal" methods in an effort to flee their country of origin (paying smugglers, purchasing false identification in order to leave their country or pass through other countries, or using clandestine means to cross boarders). At the time of the interview, each of these women had successfully entered Germany's asylum process and had either already been granted asylum or were already in the process of applying through the legal process. Their participation in clandestine or "illegal" activities in order to reach Germany's borders may seem by some as something worth reporting to police or border patrol. However, as a social work researcher from the United States, the Code of Ethics acts as a guide for how to handle ethical dilemmas. Usually, confidentiality would only be broken if the client (or in this case, research participant) was planning to harm themselves or harm others (National Association of

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Social Workers, 2021, Section 1.07). In each situation recounted during interviews, the women instead were seeking to save their lives or the lives of others, not to harm them.

Many of the women talked about the help they found along their journey and once arriving in Germany and through the resettlement process. Recent research has found that acceptance in the new community along with lower perceived discrimination predicted resilience among resettled refugees (O'Donnell et al., 2023). Thus, in countries where refugees feel like they are not welcome, or are isolated from the rest of society, they may be less likely to be resilient. At the time of writing, while the number of refugees has only grown in Germany (1,063,835 registered refugees in 2018 compared to 2,509,506 in 2023) (UNHCR, 2023c), public opinion has become more divided on whether Germany should remain as open (Marsh & Alkousaa, 2023). If refugee women begin to experience more discrimination, their resilience may begin to dwindle.

Additionally, refugees found community with other refugees and in many cases, received advice, encouragement, and support from them. This includes receipt of help from those in the same process of flight and resettlement, but also from those who were ahead of them in the resettlement process. One implication of this finding is that refugee resettlement agencies could recruit refugees that have already successfully resettled to mentor newly arrived refugees and asylum seekers. This may be one important way to help new arrivals feel welcome and less isolated.

Finally, although it emerged as a sub-theme, the idea of holding on to "hope" was consistently discussed as a way the participants found the strength to endure. Using a basic, accessible definition, hope is defined as something that "implies little certainty but suggests confidence or assurance in the possibility that what one desires or longs for will happen" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). That understanding of hope – confidence in the possibility of something better, despite uncertainty – was evident across the women that participated in this study. There was something greater and deeper – hope – sustaining them.

5 Limitations

This study looked only at women who had resettled to Germany, a country that was known for its welcoming stance towards refugees (de la Baume, 2017). Along with their welcoming stance, Germany was quickly able to prepare to receive many refugees efficiently and effectively help them resettle and integrate into society (Hagues et al., 2019). Furthermore, eight out of the ten participants had fled Afghanistan, which also could skew some of the attitudes and experiences of the women. Therefore, findings should not be generalized to women who may have resettled in other countries, in particular countries such as Lebanon, or the Republic of Türkiye where the reception of refugees is much less organized at the national level and women may be experiencing continued instability.

In addition, this research may have yielded richer data if the interview questions had been developed through the lens of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989). Such an approach could have further uncovered whether some of the participants' experiences could be more deeply understood through the intersectional interaction of their gender, ethnicities, socioeconomic status, country of origin, education level, or manner of flight to Germany.

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6 Conclusion

One thing that was not explored in-depth is whether some people are more inclined to be resilient than others, meaning – is resilience something that is more intrinsic to some people over others? Is resilience an inherent trait or is it something that is cultivated? To explore such a concept with refugees, a longitudinal study that follows refugees overtime would be able to reach greater understanding of factors that impact resilience long-term.

Future research could also examine the resilience of refugee women in countries that are less welcoming. In particular, it would be helpful to investigate resilience of refugee women who seek refuge in countries that violate International Human Rights laws by threatening to deport them (which violates the principle of non-refoulement), discriminates against particular groups of refugees, or penalized refugees for "illegal" entry in their quest to seek asylum. It would be helpful to understand if in such contexts, perhaps some people are more motivated to cultivate resilience than others. If so, what factors contribute to their resilience? Perhaps it is more likely for these refugees to work to overcome their situations by creating deeper community with other refugees, rather than trying to integrate into the host society.

As previously mentioned, this research was part of a larger study that sought to understand resilience in refugee women. While this research took place in Germany and primarily included refugees from Afghanistan, data for the larger project was also collected in Poland and the Czech Republic with all participants in these other countries from Ukraine (Dryjanska et al., 2024). In a future paper, the authors plan to compare the experiences of these Afghan and Ukrainian women who have fled very different countries and conflicts.

Finally, much of the strength cultivated by the women who participated in this study came from a deep resolve to hold onto hope.

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Appendix: Interview Guide

1. Name:
   - Age
   - Country of origin:
   - Country of residence:
   - When did you leave your country of origin?
   - When did you arrive in your country of residence?
2. Tell me the story of why you left your country of origin.
3. Tell me about your journey to where you now live.
   a. Who was with you?
   b. Where was the rest of your family or community?
   c. Did you travel with others?
4. Tell me about a story of when someone helped you along the way.
   a. Who were they?
   b. How did they help you?
5. Tell me a story of someone who helped you when you arrived here?
   a. Who were they?
   b. How did they help you?
6. Tell me how other refugees have been helpful for you.
7. Tell me how community groups have been helpful for you. For example, any religious institutions, schools, community groups.
8. Tell me about any religious practices that have been helpful for you in your refugee experience.
9. Tell me about the personal strengths you have that have helped you in this journey.
10. What else has been helpful for you in your refugee experience?