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# Forging the Path to Meaningful Refugee Participation

Interdisciplinary Analysis of Power, Agency,  
and Participation

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## Executive Summary

Since the 2018 Global Compact on Refugees articulated the commitment to ensuring meaningful refugee participation, forced migration scholars have engaged considerably with the disparities in how meaningful participation is understood, the expected outcomes, and the standards for achieving this goal. Considering the complexities of the relationship between refugees and different power structures, as well as the diverse ways in which refugees enact agency, this paper engages with various case studies of refugee participation to explore the following research questions: how should meaningful refugee participation be understood and achieved? In what ways do marginalized refugee communities assert their agency within diverse contexts to challenge the dominant power structures that shape their participation? What best practices for meaningful participation emerge from these expressions of agency?

Engaging with the key insights on participation presented by women and gender studies, development studies, and decolonization studies, this paper argues that refugees employ diverse strategies for participation in different contexts. It analyzes how various forms of power, including structural, productive, institutional, and compulsory power, significantly impact the forms of participation in which refugees engage meaningfully. Using examples of refugee women-led protests in Liberia, subtle forms of resistance by refugee youth in Uganda, and the participation of the Network for Refugee Voices in Geneva, the paper examines how the meanings, scope, goals, and outcomes of meaningful participation differ depending on particular social, political, economic, and geographic contexts. The paper concludes with best practices to support the development of meaningful refugee participation, and calls for stakeholders to consider the role of power and agency when determining standards of best practices for meaningful refugee participation.

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## Introduction

The need for meaningful refugee participation is becoming increasingly recognized within the global refugee regime, whereby the involvement of refugees in policies that affect them is considered a necessary marker of their legitimacy (Bahram 2020; Milner 2021; Milner, Alio and Gardi 2022). This commitment is articulated most prominently in Paragraph 34 of the United Nation's (UN) 2018 Global Compact on Refugees (GCR), which identifies that: "responses are most effective when they actively and meaningfully engage those they are intended to protect and assist" (Milner 2021, 11). Since then, forced migration studies have engaged considerably with the question of what is meant by meaningful refugee participation. These inquiries have brought attention to the disparities in how meaningful participation is understood, the expected outcomes, and the standards for achieving meaningful participation. While a majority of forced migration scholars analyze participation and its relation to the forms of power in Geneva (where the UNHCR headquarters is located and where many inter-state discussions on refugee policy take place), a growing body of literature points to the need to broaden the scope of participation to include more bottom-up expressions of agency (Bradley, Milner and Peruniak 2019; Clark-Kazak 2014; Jacobsen 2019).

Some scholars who focus on bottom-up expressions of agency argue that political action requires tangible successes in order to be considered meaningful, while other scholars shift the attention away from the outcomes of participation (Clark-Kazak and Thomson 2019; Coffie 2019). Problematically, most of the literature focuses on developing a single standard for refugee participation, whether it be resistance from below or participation in high politics at the international level. This approach consequently ignores the complexities of the relationship between refugees and different power structures, as well as the diverse ways in which refugees

enact agency within their own local, political, and social realities and positionalities. Consequently, there are limited frameworks for best practices on meaningful refugee participation that provide a holistic analysis of power, agency, and participation.

To address this gap, this paper engages with various case studies of refugee participation to explore the following research questions: how should meaningful refugee participation be understood and achieved? In what ways do marginalized refugee communities assert their agency within diverse contexts to challenge the dominant power structures that shape their participation? What best practices for meaningful participation emerge from these expressions of agency? Marginalized refugees here refers to groups of refugees that are often excluded from opportunities for participation due to systemic barriers and oppressive structures, such as racialized refugees, refugee women, LGBTQ+ refugees, or refugees with disabilities. Given the considerable disparities between global policy formulation on meaningful refugee participation and its implementation in local contexts, this topic is of significant relevance in current discussions within the forced migration regime (Bahram 2020: 10-11; Milner, Alio and Gardi 2022: 576). This gap is consequential as the number of refugees in protracted situations continues to increase while the dominant mechanisms for them to shape their own futures remain inadequate. Accordingly, a prominent risk in making meaningful refugee participation a norm is that it is applied in an absolute manner that assumes blanket standards of meaningful participation (Milner, Alio and Gardi 2022: 577). As a result, there is a need to ensure that the norm of meaningful refugee participation adequately captures the different modes of participation between international and local contexts, the complexities of refugee agency, and its relationship with systemically oppressive structures and barriers. It is critical that the norm does not silence or dismiss expressions of agency that are considered subordinate by powerful actors, namely states and the UNHCR.

These questions have also been addressed in other disciplines, including women and gender studies, development studies, and decolonization studies. Each discipline offers key theoretical frameworks and principles for participation that are often underutilized within forced migration studies. For instance, women and gender studies analyzes how the normalization of hegemonic masculinity in the UN, national, and local contexts limits meaningful participation. By focusing on the links between masculinity, settler colonialism, and the neoliberal world order, this discipline brings attention to the unique barriers to participation that exist for women and gender diverse groups (Hyndman and Giles 2011; Dayal and Christien 2020; Dobson 2012; Zwingel 2019). These insights are valuable for forced migration studies as they encourage scholars to use a relational approach that addresses the entanglements between different oppressive structures and their impacts on refugee participation.

Furthermore, development studies problematize the neoliberal world order, specifically how state-centric institutions like the UN prioritize the interests of external actors when offering humanitarian aid (Bond 2006; Easton-Calabria 2017; Wise 2018). Scholars in development studies highlight the power imbalances between donors and beneficiaries through an examination of how the dominance of neoliberal capitalism portrays recipients as vulnerable, passive, and entirely dependent on aid, which stands in tension with the international commitment to promote self-resilience (Easton-Calabria 2017; Pincock, Betts and Easton-Calabria 2021). This focus on the barriers created by the nature of neoliberal capitalism and the subjectivities it prioritizes contributes to analyses of localization and refugee agency.

Moreover, decolonization studies critically assess how settler colonialism, particularly its relationship with neoliberal capitalism, produces hierarchies of knowledge and participation (Cambou 2018, 34; Coulthard 2016, 12-14; Ellermann and O’Heran 2021, 23; Watson and Venne

2012). The literature problematizes the power asymmetries between formerly colonized states and colonial powers. These findings help to recognize the colonial histories that continue to impact the global refugee regime. It reveals the hidden and naturalized legacies of settler colonialism that are embedded within the regime, which consequently limits the participation of marginalized refugees. Considering these distinct yet complementary disciplines, this paper addresses the above research questions using an interdisciplinary analysis in order to develop a more holistic account of power, agency, and refugee participation. Through an interdisciplinary analysis, this paper demonstrates how the meanings and standards for achieving meaningful refugee participation are dependent on the contexts within which that participation occurs. This context includes the power structures and refugees' position relative to those structures, as well as the accessible resources and opportunities to exercise agency. The paper ultimately argues that refugees employ diverse strategies for participation in different contexts. It calls for researchers and policymakers to consider the role of power, agency and participation when determining standards of best practices for meaningful refugee participation. The first section explains Barnett and Duvall's theoretical framework of power, which underpins this imperative for a holistic analysis of participation. The subsequent section examines the different forms of power present in global, urban, and local contexts which produce unique barriers to meaningful participation for refugees. This section is followed by an investigation into diverse examples in which refugees express agency depending on their context and location of participation, positionalities, and relationship with the structures of power present. The paper concludes with suggestions for best practices when approaching meaningful refugee participation, ending with implications of these findings that can be applied to future research inquiries in the global refugee regime and the study of forced migration.

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## 1. Theoretical Framework

This paper utilizes Barnett and Duvall's typology of power to explain how diverse manifestations of power impact refugee participation. Outlining four main types of power present in global governance, they argue that "power does not have a single expression or form" (Milner and Wojnarowicz 2017: 10). As explored below, these forms of power are expressed by state actors and the UNHCR to influence the scope, meanings, and outcomes of meaningful refugee participation. The choices that refugees make on how and when to participate, as well as with which actors to engage, do not emerge in a vacuum; rather, they are conditioned and influenced by these systemic power asymmetries.

Although all four forms of power operate simultaneously and often intersect, the two most important forms of power for the purposes of this paper are structural power and productive power. First, structural power refers to how the "ability for a given state to act in a particular way may be conditioned or constrained by structural factors" including structural inequalities and power asymmetries between the global North and global South states (Milner and Wojnarowicz 2017: 11). Structural power can be understood in terms of the effects of global capitalism, the political economy of the regime, or broader structures of international governance such as the Westphalian state sovereignty system (Milner and Wojnarowicz 2017). Structural power is observable in the social relations between refugees, nation-states, the UNHCR, non-governmental organizations, and other key stakeholders that affect refugee agency and participation (Milner and Wojnarowicz 2017). Second, productive power is "the production of subjects through diffuse social relations" or the ability of actors to "create and enforce new realities through the use of knowledge, discourse, and claims to legitimacy" (Milner and Wojnarowicz 2017: 11; Barnett 2011: 109). This form of power relates to the ability of states, institutions, and other norm entrepreneurs to create and



reinforce categories and labels (such as the refugee label). Within the global refugee regime, both the UNHCR and global North states hold considerable productive power over refugee identities and subjectivities. However, refugees are able to exert their agency, participate, and influence solutions by negotiating, reclaiming, and sharing their own narratives as empowered stakeholders.

The third form of power that Barnett and Duvall identify is compulsory power, which refers to the exercise of direct control of one actor over another's ability to "use material resources to advance its interest in direct opposition to the interests of another" (Milner and Wojnarowicz 2017, 10). This form of power is visible in the ability of donor states to exert influence over the UNHCR's activities by enforcing dependence on voluntary contributions, particularly from global North states who earmark this funding to restrict its use to specific purposes and populations (Milner and Wojnarowicz 2017: 10). The fourth form of power, institutional power, refers to states' ability to design international institutions that serve their interests, which in turn affect the behaviours of other actors (Milner and Wojnarowicz 2017). This power asymmetry is reflected in the state-led nature of the UNHCR, with its limited and apolitical mandate, as desired by states at its conception. Addressing this imbalance is critical when examining refugee participation, as the extent to which the UNHCR can operate autonomously determines its relationship with refugees on the ground.

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## 2. Power and Key Challenges to Meaningful Refugee Participation

This section analyzes how the aforementioned forms of power result in substantial barriers to meaningful refugee participation. It draws on the insights offered by decolonization studies, women and gender studies, and development studies to enhance understandings of these structural limitations. It places a particular focus on the effects of structural power through the implications of state sovereignty and norms of hegemonic masculinity, as well as the role of productive power

in reinforcing exclusionary and narrow definitions of both refugees and agency. Thus, the following questions guide this discussion: what forms of power create these unique barriers? Who can access different sites of power and whose voices are privileged? In what ways is refugee agency shaped by refugees' relationship to these power structures?

## **2.1. State Sovereignty**

One of the most prominent barriers to meaningful refugee participation emerges from the reproduction of the nation-state sovereignty norm, resulting in the exclusion of refugees from core decision-making sites within the United Nations system and other inter-state fora. By reinforcing power asymmetries between refugees, states, and the UNHCR, this norm reflects the colonial logics that are embedded within the global refugee regime (Krause and Schmidt 2020). With the rise of the nation-state system in early modern Europe, settler states sought to secure their own power and interests by creating international institutions that delegated decision-making authority only to state entities (Ellermann and O'Heran 2021). As decolonization studies posit, the rise of state sovereignty is tied to broader colonial goals of maintaining racialized, gendered, and capitalist hierarchies by strategically selecting whose knowledge, experiences, and voices are legitimized (Coulthard 2016; Krause and Schmidt 2020). Accordingly, borders became naturalized as "firm, exclusive, and permanent markers" that grant states the authority to exercise control and create policies that disenfranchise Indigenous peoples, racialized populations, refugees, and other forced migrants (Ellermann and O'Heran 2021, 22).

The state-centrism of the international system is deeply embedded in the global refugee regime, as evident in the history and structures of the UNHCR. Milner and Wojnarowicz identify the debates over the scope and functions of the UNHCR at its creation: while the United States sought a temporary agency with narrow authority, limited functions, and an apolitical mandate,

non-European states, including major powers like India, called for the UNHCR to be a strong and permanent organization (2017: 10). The American vision ultimately won, thus creating an organization with minimal enforcement power and dependent on voluntary contributions by states. Although the UNHCR has evolved over the years, its power and functionality remain tied to state interests in many ways (Milner and Wojnarowicz 2017). A small number of states exercise a disproportionate influence on UNHCR's operations: "just 10 host countries host 60 percent of the world's refugees...just 10 donor states provide around 80% of the UNHCR's funding and over 80% of resettlement places" (Milner, Alio and Gardi 2022: 575). These twenty states alone have the greatest impact on the outcomes for refugees and, therefore, hold considerable compulsory and structural power to influence the priorities, solutions, and direction of refugee participation, especially given that the implementation of norms within the global refugee regime arguably depends on ratification and adoption by key states in the global North (Fresia 2014, 526; Milner, Alio and Gardi 2022; Ellermann and O'Heran 2021). Within this context, refugees hold limited power to resist and contest these structural barriers, as they rely on state support to ensure their views are implemented and heard in global fora (Bahram 2020: 9).

In addition, the norm of nation-state sovereignty in the regime means that refugees as non-state actors are not recognized as having legitimate authority in decision-making processes. Refugees participate in limited roles as observers, members of state delegations, or as part of non-governmental organizations (Milner 2021: 16). They are unable to access spaces such as the UNHCR Executive Committee, where many key decisions take place in informal "behind the door" discussions to which refugees are not privy (Fresia 2014: 518; Betts and Milner 2019). Despite being invited to these spaces, the extent to which refugee voices are actually heard and implemented depends on refugees' positionalities. As decolonization studies critically cautions,

for instance, the voices of Indigenous peoples and groups that nation-states exclude are systemically devalued in UN global governance forums, owing to the settler colonial nature of the regime (Rashidi and Lyons 2021; Zurba and Papadopoulus 2023). For instance, although Indigenous peoples often participate in global climate governance fora, Indigenous knowledges are largely neglected (Rashidi and Lyons 2021; Zurba and Papadopoulus 2023). This neglect reflects the structural subordination of Indigenous knowledge to Western-European epistemologies in many other areas of global governance, whereby the latter is considered superior, but is nonetheless tied to narratives of modernization, developmentalism, and colonization (Rashidi and Lyons 2021). Similar knowledge erasure can be observed for other racialized groups who are also constructed within the colonial project as the ‘Other’. Refugees, despite being invited participate in Geneva, engage in restricted forms of participation due to hierarchical categorization of whose voices are heard and valued in decision-making spaces.

Moreover, state sovereignty presents barriers to refugee participation in local contexts, as host countries retain ultimate control over policies toward refugees and forcefully displaced populations (Betts and Milner 2019). Refugees’ capacity to engage and participate depends on whether the host country provides basic safety and security, guarantees access to basic needs and social services, and allows for opportunities to form social connections within the community (Jacobsen 2019: 29-30). The UNHCR also exercises moral and institutional authority over who counts as a refugee and who is granted the associated legal status and protection within local contexts, which in turn influences what forms refugee agency takes (Barnett 2011; Krause and Schmidt 2020). For instance, Pincock, Betts and Easton-Calabria (2021) highlight that the opportunities for affected communities to engage in widespread political action are not always accessible as the UNHCR only funds certain refugee-led organizations (RLOs). Although many

local RLOs coordinate meaningful services without formal recognition or funding from the UN, the long-term functionality of these organizations is negatively impacted by their unstable source of funding (Pincock, Betts and Easton-Calabria 2021).

## **2.2. Hegemonic Masculinity**

Moreover, another key barrier to meaningful refugee participation is the prominence of hegemonic masculinity norms in spaces of participation. Dobson (2012) identifies that hegemonic masculinity can be understood as a “way of conducting global governance” in the sense that men are portrayed as authoritative figures who are “of reason and rationality, who possess agency” (435). Thus, women participating within these structures either operate within the hegemonic masculinity framework or are forced into feminized roles (Zwingel 2019; Dobson 2012). Dobson (2012) examines how the core decision-making spaces within the UN remain highly masculinized through her analysis of the institutional barriers for women participating in the G8 and G20 summits. Dobson finds that the G8/G20 leaders are self-appointed “great powers” and often meet informally for “fireside chats” to make decisions. Captured by the media, the public images of these interactions depict how “powerful men sat around a smoke-filled table doing deals behind the scenes” (Dobson 2021: 435). These images and practices at the summits create a norm where masculinized subjectivities are rewarded and viewed as more powerful. These interactions are important not only for accessing decision-making spaces but also for building relationships that ultimately affect alliances and consensus building, and whether other participants’ input will be accepted or denied (Dobson 2012). Therefore, the core decision-making spaces in the UN remain structured along a gender hierarchy, creating barriers for refugee women and gender diverse persons in having their voices heard and included.

Similar dynamics also constrain women's participation in refugee camp settings, showing an intersection of both structural and productive power. Hegemonic masculinity is reinforced by exclusionary discourses and understandings of refugee agency that are reproduced by powerful states and the UNHCR. (Olivius 2013; Hyndman and Giles 2011). Refugees who stay in camps are heavily feminized in dominant discourses, which portray them as "passive, helpless, static" (Hyndman and Giles 2011: 363). This gendered construction occurs across geographic divides, whereby refugees on the move are viewed as a threat to territorial integrity and nationhood, creating a binary of the "feminine, domestic space of home" and the "masculine, public space of the battlefield" (Hyndman and Giles 2011: 367). Refugees and women in camps are therefore considered 'governable' as they are presented as "unselfish, family-oriented" and "compliant" (Olivius 2013: 50-52). Accordingly, the UN and state actors construct the realities of participation for refugees depending on their geography and location. These images are consequential as they affect the securitization of refugees in host countries, particularly for the global North countries who continue to impose restrictive refugee policies.

Importantly, structures of hegemonic masculinity are interconnected with structures of settler colonialism and neoliberal capitalism. Following the advent of privatization and marketization, states began to increasingly focus on their economy's global competitiveness, to which social welfare concerns such as non-discriminatory working conditions and wage equality were subordinated (Zwingel 2019; Yacob-Haliso 2016). These economic shifts exacerbated gendered labour practices, which consequently reinforce barriers for women's participation. More specifically, female refugees' invitations to participate in consultation spaces are already scarce, but many face additional obstacles such as arranging affordable childcare so they can attend (Zwingel 2019). This was exemplified through Lennet et al.'s study of youth who were invited to

participate in the Global Youth Refugee Forum by the United Nations, in which one of the female participants cited difficulties to attend and to stay for the whole conference due to childcare responsibilities (2020: 402). Therefore, it is important to consider how the interconnection between hegemonic masculinity and the neoliberal economic order privileges masculinity and constrains the agency of refugee women.

### **2.3. Refugee Labels**

Finally, productive power affects the expression of agency by refugees and the scope of their participation, resulting in another key barrier. As mentioned above, an essential feature of productive power is actors' ability to construct and reinforce categories and labels, which enables certain refugees to be viewed as legitimate actors whose expression of agency is recognized and acknowledged, while silencing expressions of agency of other refugees (Barnett 2011). Based on this understanding, the UNHCR and host governments exercise productive power to limit refugee agency by depoliticizing refugeehood and constructing a narrative of 'legitimate' apolitical refugees (Omata 2017: 112). This category of refugees is strictly juxtaposed with refugees who engage in political action and are therefore perceived as a threat to state sovereignty and a danger to national safety (Omata 2017). The UNHCR and host governments thus influence how refugees express their agency by naturalizing a dichotomy between 'good' and 'bad' expressions of agency (Krause and Schmidt 2020: 26). Moreover, this dichotomy relates to the hierarchy of knowledge favoring the West that was produced in the development of the refugee regime (Krause 2020). Analyzing the development of the 1951 Convention, Krause (2020) details how former colonial leaders dominated the discussions, strategically subordinated refugees they labelled as the 'Other' and sought to reinforce distinct hierarchies of power. These 'Other' refugees were primarily refugees from regions beyond Europe or colonized countries, Situating the analysis in a historical

context is thus important as these “colonial-ignorant” discussions have had a lasting effect on the regime’s functioning, particularly in the biased terminology that still privileges the West (Krause 2020: 618-622).

This dichotomy further reproduces the Westphalian state sovereignty principle. As Omata mentions, at a conceptual level, refugees represent a “deviation from the ‘normal’ model of state-citizenship relations, existing as misfits in the global order of established nation states” (2017: 113; Krause and Schmidt 2020: 29). As such, states expect refugees to be passive, willing subjects in order to avoid threatening ‘normal’ citizenship in the host country. Importantly, this construction of refugees as apolitical also reproduces narratives of refugees as vulnerable and helpless, which is viewed as a necessary justification for the provision of international support and protection to refugees (Omata 2017; Krause and Schmidt 2020). These narratives not only produce a pathologized understanding of refugees but also limit the scope of refugee agency whereby refugees must not cross the threshold of becoming “too” self-resilient or political, at which point they are viewed as no longer vulnerable, innocent, and in need of protection (Krause and Schmidt 2020). Thus, the interplay between productive power and agency points to the need for not only challenging restrictive domestic policies to enable meaningful refugee participation, but also for dismantling the underlying conceptualization of agency and the associated dismissal and silencing of refugees who engage in political action.

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### 3. Refugee Agency

This section analyzes how refugees express agency within the different contexts and power structures identified above, showing that the modes of participation, goals, and outcomes differ depending on refugees’ positions within these structures. Accordingly, the values of meaningful participation, as well as the standards to measure the success of participation cannot be uniform.



Rather, they must reflect the realities of these differences and asymmetries. To unpack this argument, I understand agency as a fluid and relational concept that may take multiple forms beyond resistance, depending on the particular sociopolitical and historical contexts in which refugees find themselves situated. Borrowing from Erdilmen, Bradley, and Milner, when refugees' efforts seek to transform or address basic everyday needs rather than "resist the dominance of external powers, or upend entrenched inequalities in the name of social progress", agency may be better expressed as persistence (2023: 7). Applying this lens to refugee participation is important as not all refugees desire or have access to the resources necessary to achieve transformative change that challenges dominant power structures. While others may have this access, this is a result of both their positionality and location of participation.

### **3.1. Overt Political Action**

To begin, a key method in which marginalized refugees challenge dominant power structures is by expressing agency in the form of direct resistance against the authority of the host government and the UNHCR. The protests in the Buduburam refugee camp in Liberia offer a helpful example of this form of resistance against state authority, the institutional power of the UNHCR, and norms of hegemonic masculinity. A group of Liberian refugee women, called the Concerned Women, led six-month-long protests to challenge the imposition of local integration and resettlement by the Liberian government and the UNHCR (Jacobsen 2019; Coffie 2019). These options were introduced after many refugees rejected voluntary repatriation, which was strongly promoted by the governments of Liberia and Ghana, as well as the UNHCR (Coffie 2019).

The protest demonstrates how refugees in camps enact agency by directly and overtly challenging the authority of the UNHCR and state governments trying to control refugees' futures. Despite having limited power in relation to these larger political entities, the refugees "bargained,

negotiated, resisted” and actively demanded changes to the structures and processes imposed by those in power (Coffie 2019: 245). Moreover, the female leadership of the protest challenged not only state power, but the silencing of women in spaces that privilege hegemonic masculinity (Coffie 2019). As Coffie (2019) mentions, the UNHCR tends to give less attention to political action led by women, as these actions are viewed as less consequential than those led by their male counterparts. As discussed in the previous section, this view reflects the feminization of refugee action in camps where the importance of female-led protests is devalued by other actors (Hyndman and Giles 2011). By rejecting these narratives, refugee women in Liberia challenged the presumed passivity and lack of importance of women-led action and instead asserted themselves in spaces that have long excluded them (Coffie 2019). In doing so, the Concerned Women challenged the productive authority of the UNHCR to define meanings of agency, victimhood, and refugees by asserting themselves as capable and active actors. This protest showcases one example of how refugees enact agency in refugee camps by engaging in overt resistance against those in power.

It is important to analyze the particular factors and resources that contributed to the women’s ability to exercise direct agency in the form of this protest. These conditions included the camp’s proximity to the capital, the free movement of refugees in the camp and around the country, and open access to the international community (Coffie 2019). Another important opportunity was the provision of skills training for refugee women, as well as programs aimed at reducing gender-based violence, increasing economic empowerment, and increasing women’s representation in leadership. These opportunities provided for a relatively open life in the refugee camps. Compared to other more restrictive environments, these programs resulted in a “fertile ground for the women to...make demands that challenged the position of UNHCR, Ghana and Liberia” (Coffie 2019: 233). Refugee women were able to travel, voice their concerns

internationally, and garner allyship and support from others as a result of the mobility rights and greater social networks. This particular social, domestic, and political context allowed for greater autonomy and agency than what is available elsewhere for refugees. For many others, these direct and visible political actions are a threat to their personal safety and are therefore not possible, as explored below.

### **3.2. Subtle, Everyday Forms of Resistance**

In contrast to the Concerned Women in Liberia, refugees in more restrictive socio-political contexts express their agency by engaging in more subtle forms of resistance that undermine the power structures in their everyday realities (Jacobsen 2019). While these subtle forms of resistance can take place in various settings, including refugee camps, this section analyzes everyday resistance in urban settings to offer a diversity of examples. For instance, Clark-Kazak (2014) focuses on how poor youth refugees from the Democratic Republic of Congo in Uganda exercise agency within an environment of restricted economic rights and ongoing violence. Although the Ugandan state's settlement policy does not permit refugees to officially live in the city, and limits access to humanitarian assistance or social services for those who do, some youth refugees choose to live in urban areas in order to gain access to greater economic opportunities not available in settlements or rural border areas (Clark Kazak 2014). Moreover, some individuals chose to be registered as refugees to gain the rations and other material benefits from the settlement, but actually live in Kampala or other urban areas.

This choice to live in urban centres despite the lack of state permission can be understood as a strong demonstration of agency. As refugees reject the authority of the state to determine their location and what spaces they occupy with national borders, they are actively resisting the systems imposed upon them and asserting agency over their well-being (Jacobsen 2019). As outlined in

the previous section, refugees living in camps are considered more governable than those who are mobile, and those migrating and living within urban spaces are viewed as a threat (Hyndman and Giles 2011). Therefore, by making decisions to move within the country to support their needs and interests, these youth refugees challenge the structural power that manifests through the Ugandan government's policies on settlement and mobility. Accordingly, these small, everyday actions that are "invisible" to policymakers are an important form of expressing agency and should not be dismissed as inconsequential as they "undermine or transform broader political structures" in subtle ways (Clark-Kazak 2014: 7). Analyzing the potential of these "self-survival" strategies as an expression of agency that can translate into meaningful participation allows for a more complete understanding of how to best support refugees' goals and needs in particular contexts.

Moreover, forms of subtle refugee agency may also include cultural resistance through creative outlets, such as music or art. For instance, youth refugees in Uganda created a music club as part of a refugee-led youth organization. This club challenged productive power as the youth contested their categorization as apolitical by engaging in music and songs associated with embracing their Congolese national identity (Clark-Kazak 2014). One of the leaders of the music club explained that the "UNHCR tells us not to talk about politics. But everything that happens is political...Even if in the refugee convention it says that refugees can't talk politics...we want to send messages through music" (Clark-Kazak 2014: 7). The urge for an apolitical identity of refugees is also reinforced by state authorities in Uganda, as Ugandan laws prohibit refugees from engaging in "political" activities. Therefore, through creative means, refugees contest these asymmetrical power relations in an alternative, subtle pathway that collectively and strategically redefines the 'refugee' label, thereby challenging the authority of both the UNHCR and the Ugandan state.

### **3.3. Participation in Geneva and International Contexts**

Moreover, refugees who express agency in Geneva confront different power structures and, in turn, adopt different forms of expressing agency. In global contexts, refugees engage with key stakeholders, including states, the UNHCR, and non-governmental organizations, in a more institutionalized setting governed by formal participation rules and procedures (Milner and Wojnarowicz 2017). In addition, refugee participation at the global level has outcomes that are more tangible and visible in the long-term, as seen with policy formulation processes and its implementation over time. In local settings, however, refugee participation and expressions of agency result in more immediate, everyday impacts that are consequential for the safety of refugees, as exemplified by the above examples of Liberia and Uganda. Accordingly, the way in which refugees raise issues of importance to stakeholders will differ in Geneva in comparison to the local contexts or “bottom-up” resistance. This section addresses the following question: how do marginalized refugees exert their voices in spaces that are reserved for state actors?

A prominent example to address this inquiry is the participation of the Network for Refugee Voices (NRV), a refugee-led group made of twelve young (mostly Syrian) refugee activists and advocates, seven males and five females, in the drafting of the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) as part a collective civil society bloc (Bahram 2020). The NRV holds a unique advocacy position due to their global visibility and reach, and has been engaged in advocacy for self-representation and refugee inclusion at various levels of the global refugee regime (Bahram 2020). Through unique strategies, the NRV has been able to transform its agency into action at the global level and occupy a space traditionally reserved for state leaders. For instance, despite being given very little space in formal consultations, the NRV developed strong networks and collaboration with specific cooperative states and NGOs, which allowed them to exert indirect influence on the draft of the

GCR (Bahram 2020). The NRV expressed their agency by “claiming their space for self-representation, navigating through policy processes, and targeting the right platforms where a change can be made and reaching out to all stakeholders” (Bahram 2020: 10). In addition, the NRV built connections with municipalities and cities to gather their support instead of relying solely on state delegations at the conference (Bahram 2020). By doing so, the NRV circumvented the exclusivity of the state-led nature of the formal decision-making and consultation spaces and created opportunities to assert their voices. Importantly, however, they highlighted that their participation remained tokenistic as they felt their concerns were not taken seriously by all states, and they struggled with representing themselves as legitimate, empowered stakeholders. Nonetheless, the strategies used to challenge the structural, institutional, and productive forms of power experienced allowed refugees in the NRV to exert agency.

Importantly, successful and meaningful participation in international contexts can greatly differ from the ways in which refugees in local contexts express their agency. For instance, whereas refugees in Uganda viewed an improvement of economic opportunities as important and meaningful achievements, the NRV stated that meaningful participation requires the ability to bring about transformative change (Bahram 2020). This shows that the goals, scope, and intended outcomes of meaningful participation differ depending on the context and location of participation. Accordingly, applying the same standards of meaningful participation that are sought after in international contexts – for instance, transformative change, meaningful involvement in policymaking, and collaboration with key stakeholders and state actors – will not necessarily align with the interests of refugees on the ground whose goals are more immediate and focused on meeting everyday needs.

The examples above demonstrate that the forms, strategies, and meanings of refugee participation manifest differently for refugees depending on the specific power structures they encounter, their relationship to those structures, as well as the spaces within which that participation is taking place. While refugee agency was collective, direct, and visible in both the Liberian camp and Geneva, it was more individual and subtle in the case of urban refugees living in Uganda. Refugees also experience structural, productive, institutional, and compulsory power in different ways. In Geneva, for instance, productive power may manifest through knowledge hierarchies, whereas in local contexts, productive power is experienced more directly through policies that illegalize political action by refugees and/or the UNHCR selectively determining to which refugees to offer protection services, as was the case in Uganda. Therefore, meaningful refugee participation is a contested and non-uniform process. It requires best practices that acknowledge and recognize these key differences in power, agency, relationality, and positionality.

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## 4. Recommendations: Best Practices for Meaningful Refugee Participation

Building on the insights from the previous sections, I now provide best practices on how to achieve meaningful refugee participation in a manner that respects and acknowledges that supporting meaningful refugee participation depends on the context of the spaces within which participation is occurring, the power asymmetries present, and refugees' positionalities relative to those power structures. These practices include conceptualizing agency and participation as fluid and relational, avoiding a superficial global-local binary, and empowering cross-sectoral and group solidarity.

### 4.1. Shifting to Fluid and Relational Agency

First, it is important for the practice of meaningful participation to adopt a fluid and relational understanding of agency, refugeehood, and participation. This relational approach is particularly

recommended by decolonization studies and feminist studies, which both argue for analyzing choices as shaped by their interaction and relation with wider social and power structures (Hyndman and Giles 2011; Dayal and Christien 2020; Dobson 2012; Coulthard 2016). Applying this to the context of participation, states and the UNHCR hold considerable productive power in creating binaries and categorizations of refugees which heavily favour a depoliticized refugee subject. This power is expressed in different ways, which include discursively condemning refugees who engage in political action, enacting policies that make it illegal for refugees to politically organize, or strategically and selectively providing support and protection to refugees based on their presentation of vulnerability. In confronting these forms of power, refugees respond in unique ways to assert their agency, from direct resistance to more subtle forms. The practices of meaningful refugee participation must address these nuances and diverging realities by adopting an understanding of agency, participation, and refugeehood as relational and fluid.

This approach necessitates research and policy frameworks that recognize legitimate agency as more than inclusion at global forums in Geneva, but also more subtle actions that exert influence over lived realities (Coffie 2019: 243; Jacobsen 2019; Krause and Schmidt 2020). This shift is consequential because focusing mainly on successes and outcomes in the realm of high politics reinforces the permanency of state-led structures, whereby the same institutions that produce the structural conditions limiting refugee participation are also relied upon as the solution (Bradley, Milner and Peruniak 2019). As a result, these hegemonic actors continue to hold disproportionate power in generating problematic narratives of refugees while reproducing their own power, which in turn reproduces the hierarchical structure embedded within the global refugee regime. Instead, understanding that refugee agency takes on multiple and diverging forms, and is relational to power and subjectivities, will allow for us to better consider the needs, strategies and



goals of refugees themselves. This strengths-based approach focuses not simply on dominant actors and their power, but also on how refugees navigate these structures through creative, unique, and various forms of agency.

More broadly, it is important to avoid strict categorical binaries and dichotomies of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ refugees. Within forced migration literature, there is a tendency to emphasize that participation by refugees is meaningful only when it results in tangible and observable successes that transcend the dominant power structures (Coffie 2019). However, as seen with the above case studies, transforming or challenging dominant power structures is not always desirable for refugees who are more focused on ensuring their everyday survival, nor is it always possible for refugees depending on their positionalities and relations within the power structures. Indigenous refugees, for instance, will face obstacles on account of their identity both as Indigenous and as refugees, where their knowledges, experiences and narratives are given less legitimacy in comparison to non-Indigenous people. Therefore, enabling meaningful participation for refugees requires much more nuanced attention to the “multiple ways in which power relations intersect to provide structural opportunities and constraints within which refugees individually and collectively position themselves” (Clark-Kazak and Thomson 2019: 227).

#### **4.2. Shifting Away from the Global-Local Binary**

The practice of meaningful participation must be disaggregated to reflect the realities of the different spaces within which participation takes place, and in doing so, avoid a superficial global-local binary. As identified above, meaningful participation will look different according to whether refugees exert agency from refugee camps, urban cities, or international contexts like Geneva. In each of these spaces, refugees confront different manifestations of power relations and adjust their participation to help them best confront these forms of power. Therefore, scholars need to move

away from romanticizing local responses and reinforcing a superficial global-local binary (Erdilmen, Bradley and Milner 2023). Such romanticization fails to recognize that localization is contested and complex within itself, with different refugees occupying diverging views on what counts as meaningful or necessary in local contexts, as exemplified by the youth refugees in Uganda. Although some refugees opted to remain in refugee camps, others chose to defy state policies on mobility and settle in urban areas to secure greater economic opportunities (Clark-Kazak 2014). As such, assumptions that all refugees exercising agency globally or locally have the same modes and goals for participation result in essentialist notions of participation and create false hierarchies of local participation as more genuine than participation in Geneva. As feminist studies makes clear, such dichotomies, especially without a wholesome account of the role of power within these contexts, are harmful as they end up devaluing and dismissing the perspectives, positions, and knowledges of marginalized actors engaging in institutional fora (Osborne et al. 2010). Thus, supporting the practice of meaningful participation requires a shift away from global-local binaries to avoid positioning one as more valuable than the other.

### **4.3. Collaborative and Cross-Sector Solidarity**

Meaningful participation also requires an examination of areas of cooperation between refugees and other marginalized groups who seek to increase self-advocacy and inclusion, including women, racialized people, and Indigenous peoples. These groups share similar struggles as refugees regarding participation in diverse contexts, given that the hegemonic power asymmetries affecting refugee agency are embedded within the international system. The effects of settler colonialism, for instance, are felt not just by refugees but by Indigenous peoples, women, and global South state actors from post-colonial states (Coulthard 2016). As such, increasing and exploring solidarity among these groups can help develop a more holistic and complete account of

what changes are required when thinking about how to improve participation within the current power structures of the global refugee regime. A more solidarity-focused approach will also help identify solutions that are not simply focused on changing refugee policies and laws. As Landau explains, refugee realities are not simply determined by refugee-related policies (2014: 537). Instead, social relations that enable access to information, assistance, and social capital are equally, if not more, important in shaping refugee choices (Landau 2014). Exploring opportunities for collaboration and solidarity with other groups will, therefore, allow scholars and policymakers to imagine new ways of supporting refugees that go beyond engaging in solutions that are focused solely on refugee policies and laws, and instead, consider the norms and principles of participation from other groups.

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## Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper conducted an interdisciplinary analysis to answer the following questions: how should meaningful refugee participation be understood and achieved? In what ways do marginalized refugee communities enact their agency within diverse contexts to challenge the dominant power structures that shape their participation? What best practices for meaningful participation emerge from these expressions of agency? Engaging with the key insights on participation presented by women and gender studies, development studies, and decolonization studies, the paper first analyzed how various forms of power create barriers to meaningful refugee participation. Different forms of power, including structural, productive, institutional, and compulsory, manifest themselves through the prominence of the nation-state sovereignty system, norms of hegemonic masculinity, and the construction of refugees as apolitical and vulnerable, each of which hinder and impact the forms of participation in which refugees engage. Using examples of refugee women-led protests in Liberia, subtle forms of resistance by refugee youth in

Uganda, and the participation of the NRV in Geneva, the paper argued that the meanings, scope, goals and outcomes of meaningful participation differ depending on the particular social, political, economic, and geographic context. The paper concluded with some best practices to support the development of meaningful refugee participation.

This paper has important implications for forced migration studies and for the global refugee regime. The paper points to the need for scholars in forced migration studies to take an approach to refugee participation that acknowledges how refugee participation takes place in diverse ways in response to diverging power structures, relationships, and subjectivities. As noted above, power plays a critical role in which forms of refugee agency gain visibility, support, and recognition, and which refugee voices are silenced and upheld in the regime. Therefore, it is important for forced migration studies to adopt a relational and interdisciplinary understanding of meaningful participation. Future research can focus on questions about which forms of agency are currently visible and which forms of agency are suppressed or hidden due to the ongoing hegemony of power structures. In addition, the paper highlights the ongoing exclusion of marginalized refugees from formal and key decision-making spaces, which raises questions about the extent to which it is necessary to systematically transform the power dynamics of the global refugee regime, including the UNHCR, in order to sustain meaningful refugee participation. Addressing these questions will allow for a deeper understanding of the effectiveness and legitimacy of the global refugee regime, given the failure to provide inclusive participation practices, structures, and processes.

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