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'We Have to Think Out of the Box They Put Us in': A Collective Narrative Study of Refugee and Asylum Seeker Subjectivities in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

Forced displacement is often framed through dehumanising and pathologising narratives that portray refugees as passive victims or perceived threats, obscuring their agency and lived complexity. This qualitative research–intervention explores the everyday experiences of refugees and asylum seekers living in South Africa through a collective narrative approach grounded in the Tree of Life methodology. Conducted in collaboration with a community-based psychosocial NGO in Cape Town, the study involved 20 adult participants with refugee status or active asylum claims. Data were generated through collective narrative workshops and analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis. Findings identify six interrelated themes spanning traumatic and life storylines, including identity, family legacies, gender, structural and legal constraints, faith, and the reclamation of knowledge and professional identities. Together, these themes show how violence and legal precarity coexist with practices of meaning-making, dignity, resistance and collective care. In particular, findings highlight how participants actively challenge imposed categories of identity and marginalisation, reclaiming the value of their knowledge, skills, and lived experience and challenging the deficit-oriented representations of people with a history of forced migration.

1 | Introduction

Forced displacement is one of the most urgent humanitarian challenges of the twenty-first century. According to the latest United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates, by the end of 2024, the number of forcibly displaced people worldwide had reached an unprecedented 123.2 million, driven by armed conflict, political instability, socio-economic collapse and climate-related crises (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) 2024). This figure comprises 73.5 million internally displaced persons, 31 million refugees under UNHCR's mandate, 8.4 million asylum-seekers, 5.9 million Palestinian refugees assisted by UNRWA, and an additional 5.9 million individuals in need of international protection (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) 2024).

On the African continent, South Africa is one of the principal host countries for forcibly displaced populations. In 2024, South Africa continued to host a substantial displaced population, with more than 250,000 refugees and asylum-seekers officially registered, primarily from neighbouring states and conflict-affected countries such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, Somalia, South Sudan and Zimbabwe (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) 2024).

A distinctive feature of the South African asylum system is its non-camp-based settlement policy. Unlike many major

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refugee-hosting countries, South Africa does not confine displaced populations to camps; instead, the vast majority of refugees and asylum-seekers reside in urban or peri-urban areas. However, while this model is often framed as enabling self-reliance and integration, in practice it exposes displaced individuals to acute socio-economic vulnerabilities. Widespread poverty, structural unemployment and the circulation of misinformation have contributed to persistent and, at times, escalating xenophobia, undermining social cohesion and placing displaced populations at heightened risk of discrimination and violence (Misago et al. 2015).

At the institutional level, South Africa's legal and policy framework is under considerable strain. Ongoing legislative uncertainty—particularly surrounding the proposed White Paper on Refugee Protection (National Legislative Bodies/National Authorities 2023)—has raised serious concerns. Indeed, although the government has refrained from withdrawing from the 1951 Refugee Convention, several provisions of the proposed reforms are widely regarded as regressive and risk significantly curtailing the rights of asylum-seekers (UNHCR 2024a). Compounding these challenges, prolonged refugee status determination procedures have contributed to a substantial asylum backlog, which in 2019 affected more than 190,000 individuals and left many in protracted conditions of legal and social precarity (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) 2024). Taken together, these dynamics reveal a protection regime that is formally progressive in its normative commitments yet exclusionary in its everyday implementation. The South African case thus exemplifies broader global tensions between humanitarian principles and increasingly restrictive migration governance.

1.1 | Dominant Narratives: Dehumanisation, Pathologisation and the Politics of Refugee Representation

Refugee representation across political, media, humanitarian and academic discourses is shaped by dominant narratives that systematically reproduce dehumanisation, pathologisation and hierarchies of deservingness (Polychroniou 2021).

A substantial body of scholarship demonstrates how refugees are frequently portrayed as anonymous collectives, security threats or demographic pressures. Media analyses in European and global contexts show a recurring reliance on metaphors such as 'waves', 'swarms', or 'flows', which frame displacement as a natural or uncontrollable force rather than a human and political phenomenon (Holzberg et al. 2018). Such representations strip individuals of identity, complexity and agency, while legitimising practices of border fortification, surveillance and exclusion by positioning refugees as objects to be managed rather than subjects of rights. This dehumanising logic is equally evident in political discourse, where the language of crisis recasts displaced people as administrative or economic problems. Kirkwood's (2017) analysis of UK parliamentary debates illustrates how conditional humanitarian concern is routinely entangled with narratives of burden and threat, displacing attention away from the structural causes of forced migration.

Alongside dehumanisation, dominant narratives frequently pathologise refugees. While acknowledging that trauma and suffering are essential, humanitarian and policy frameworks often reduce displaced people to passive victims, reproducing what Rajaram (2002) identifies as a colonial grammar of vulnerability. In this logic, legitimacy is conferred primarily through displays of trauma, silence and gratitude, obscuring both political agency and the structural violence underpinning displacement (Dutta et al. 2016). Philosophical and critical refugee studies further elaborate this critique by showing how refugee subjectivity is constrained within a rigid binary of threat versus victimhood (Polychroniou 2021). Refugees become intelligible only at these extremes: as dangerous bodies to be contained or wounded bodies to be rescued. Both positions erase political histories, silence knowledge and strategies of survival, and depoliticise forced migration by translating collective injustice into individual pathology.

These narratives are further reinforced through hierarchies of deservingness that shape public sentiment, policy responses and humanitarian intervention. Holzberg et al. (2018) demonstrate how German media distinguish between 'deserving' and 'undeserving' refugees along racialised, gendered and moral lines, while Holmes and Castañeda (2016) show how the so-called 'European refugee crisis' selectively humanised certain groups—such as women and children—while criminalising others, particularly black and brown young men. As Kirkwood (2017) argues, such selective humanisation legitimises restrictive asylum regimes by dividing refugees into acceptable and unacceptable subjects, reproducing global inequalities and colonial legacies of mobility control.

Critical scholarship across migration studies and political philosophy insists on the necessity of escaping these reductive frames. Thinkers such as Butler (2004), Mbembe (2019) and de Sousa Santos (2016) remind us that representation is never neutral: It produces the conditions under which lives become intelligible, protected or disposable. Building on these insights, Rajaram (2002) and Polychroniou (2021) call for an epistemic shift that foregrounds refugees as political subjects endowed with agency, multiplicity and the capacity for self-representation.

This study aligns with such an approach. By adopting a collective narrative methodology, it seeks to disrupt dehumanising and pathologising discourses, foregrounding lived experiences, relational practices, skills and values that are routinely erased in dominant representations of displacement.

1.2 | Narrative Approach as Theoretical and Epistemological Foundation

Narrative approaches have become an important theoretical and methodological tradition across psychology and the social sciences, emphasising that people make sense of their lives through stories that are socially, culturally and historically situated. Within Community Psychology, Rappaport (2000) argued that narratives are not simply individual accounts but socially and politically situated resources through which people construct meaning, negotiate identities and challenge dominant representations. Similarly, Quayle and Sonn (2019) highlight

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the importance of engaging simultaneously with stories of oppression, cultural continuity, resilience and survival, showing how narrative practices can support more socially just and contextually grounded understandings of lived experience. Starting from this perspective, decolonial approaches further emphasise that knowledge, identity and experience are shaped by historical and ongoing relations of power, challenging the privileging of Western academic and professional forms of knowledge. Instead, they foreground multiple ways of knowing grounded in community histories, lived experience and culturally situated practices of meaning-making, recognising participants and communities as legitimate producers of knowledge rather than passive recipients of expert interpretations (Dutta et al. 2016; Sonn et al. 2013).

Against this conceptual background, the social constructionist tradition of narrative therapy—developed by White and Epston (1990) and subsequently extended through the Dulwich Centre (Denborough 2008, 2018)—offers a particularly generative framework for contexts shaped by displacement and structural violence. Narrative therapy is grounded in the assumption that identities are story-driven rather than essence-driven, formed through interpretations that are historically, culturally and politically situated. From this perspective, suffering is not located within individuals but emerges in relation to the social conditions that shape dominant narratives. This stance unsettles pathologising approaches to trauma by reframing displaced people not as passive bearers of damage, but as active interpreters and responders to adversity.

A central contribution of narrative practice—especially in its collective and community-based forms—is the recognition that trauma does not exhaust the stories available to those who have lived through crisis. The Dulwich Centre's collective narrative methodologies, developed in collaboration with communities affected by war, dispossession, environmental catastrophe and forced migration, demonstrate how alternative storylines can be cultivated through shared reflection, ritual and storytelling (Denborough 2008; Ncube 2006). These practices hold space for suffering while simultaneously foregrounding 'life storylines' that illuminate values, commitments, skills, histories of care and forms of solidarity that persist amid hardship. When traumatic narratives dominate, individuals and communities risk being fixed within frames of damage, vulnerability and deficit—often reinforced by humanitarian, medical or academic discourses. Life storylines, by contrast, reclaim dignity and agency by revealing how people continue to act, relate, imagine and resist within conditions of constraint, drawing on cultural resources and collective knowledge typically rendered invisible in deficit-oriented frameworks. In dialogue with these broader decolonial perspectives, the collective narrative practices also challenge epistemic hierarchies that locate psychological expertise exclusively within Western or professional domains. By centering community knowledge, intergenerational teachings and locally grounded practices of meaning-making, collective narrative approaches reposition participants as authors of their own histories rather than objects of external interpretation. In this respect, they resonate with broader decolonial efforts to recognise epistemic plurality in contexts shaped by colonial legacies and ongoing global inequalities (Quayle and Sonn 2019; Sonn et al. 2013).

In this research-intervention, collective narrative practices function not merely as a psychosocial intervention but as an epistemological stance that resists and refuses the reduction of displaced communities to pathology, vulnerability or crisis. By foregrounding the ongoing production of meaning, continuity and collective strength within displacement, it complements structural analyses of forced migration while restoring the complexity, historicity and humanity of lives too often narrated by others.

1.3 | Narrative Approaches With Refugees: International and South African Evidence

Particularly in contexts where displacement intersects with experiences of trauma, identity disruption and social marginalisation, an expanding body of international scholarship increasingly conceptualises storytelling as a relational and political practice through which displaced people negotiate meaning, agency and belonging (Esin and Lounasmaa 2020).

Across diverse contexts, participatory narrative research illustrates how collective storytelling can open spaces for articulation that are often foreclosed within dominant institutional and media discourses. Papadopoulos et al. (2023), in a participatory study with LGBTQIA+ refugees and asylum seekers, show how shared narrative spaces enabled the emergence of safety, solidarity and political recognition, allowing participants to voice experiences that are routinely silenced. In a different context, Pereñíguez et al. (2025), working with Latin American immigrant women, found that narrative processes supported identity reconstruction and relational connection, contributing to renewed forms of agency in conditions marked by precarity and vulnerability. Taken together, these studies suggest that narrative practices operate not only at the level of psychological wellbeing, but also as sites of social and political re-subjectification.

Evidence from more formalised applications of narrative therapy also demonstrates that this approach can be meaningfully adapted beyond the Western clinical contexts in which it was originally developed. Karibwende et al. (2022), in a randomised controlled trial with displaced and orphaned children in Rwanda, reported significant increases in resilience among participants engaged in narrative therapy. These findings suggest that narrative interventions retain their capacity to support coping, meaning-making, and relational strength across different cultural contexts.

Within the South African context, narrative approaches have primarily developed through community-based, participatory, arts-based and liberation-oriented psychosocial practices, rather than through the specific collective narrative methodologies associated with the Dulwich Centre. Norton and Sliep's (2018) participatory poetry project with refugee youth illustrates how narrative and artistic expression enabled young people to articulate the ambivalence of displacement, resist xenophobic stigma and imagine alternative futures. Similarly, Marnell et al. (2021), in their work with queer migrants and asylum seekers, show how narrative spaces functioned not only as sites of emotional support but also as arenas for contesting erasure and asserting queer diasporic identities within a hostile socio-political

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environment. These studies point to the capacity of collective storytelling to foster mutual recognition and forms of community cohesion that extend beyond the individual. Together, these studies illustrate the richness of psychosocial narrative work in South Africa and align with recent developments in community psychology that emphasise empowerment, justice, equity and liberation in work with immigrant and refugee communities (Kessi et al. 2022; Oberoi et al. 2025). However, despite this growing body of scholarship, narrative practices remain insufficiently recognised as central epistemic and methodological resources within humanitarian, policy and research responses to forced migration. Within the South African context, this limitation carries particular significance. Conditions of legal precarity, bureaucratic uncertainty and pervasive xenophobia profoundly shape refugees' everyday lives, yet the narrative resources through which people interpret, endure and resist these conditions remain largely underexplored in both research and practice. The issue, therefore, is not the absence of narrative capacity, but the insufficient recognition and systematic engagement with the collective storytelling practices that refugees already mobilise across contexts.

2 | Methodology

2.1 | Aims

This qualitative exploratory research–intervention was conducted in collaboration with a long-standing South African NGO providing community-based psychosocial support to marginalised groups in Cape Town, including individuals with experiences of forced migration. Data collection was embedded within the organisation's ongoing community activities, allowing the research to unfold in a familiar, trusted and supportive setting. The study examines the everyday lived experiences of refugees and asylum seekers living in South African communities by attending to both traumatic experiences and broader life trajectories. Rather than focusing solely on harm, the research explores how participants navigate, endure and actively resist intersecting forms of violence, trauma and structural oppression, while also engaging in ongoing practices of meaning-making, agency, and hope within their social, economic and political realities.

2.2 | Authors' Positionality

This study developed through a long-standing collaboration among three psychologists and researchers whose work is grounded in academic partnership, friendship and shared activist commitments. Our approach is informed by a critical engagement with psychology as a discipline historically shaped by colonial and imperial projects, alongside an ongoing interrogation of how psychological knowledge has contributed to the depoliticisation of suffering and the pathologisation of communities exposed to structural violence. Rather than rejecting psychology outright, we engage with it as a contested field that holds transformative potential when experiences of suffering are situated within their historical and political conditions, and when the structures producing them are explicitly named and challenged. These commitments are inseparable from our social locations. The research team comprises members situated in different geopolitical, professional and gendered positions: One South African male professor and two Italian-based scholars—a male associate professor and a female post-doctoral researcher. While these positionalities differ, we collectively recognise that they are marked by structural privileges related to race, citisenship, mobility, gender and epistemic authority. We approached this research with an awareness of how such privileges shape the conditions under which knowledge is produced, particularly in work involving communities affected by forced migration, racialised exclusion and legal precarity. This awareness informed our ethical stance and our commitment to engaging with participants not as objects of study, but as knowledge holders whose experiences, interpretations and practices are central to the research process.

2.3 | Participants

The study engaged with twenty participants with refugee status or seeking asylum, most of whom were women (63%) aged between 18 and 60. All were living in Cape Town at the time of the research and were primarily from the Democratic Republic of Congo (70%), alongside smaller groups from Burundi (17%), Somalia (8%) and Angola (4%). In terms of legal status, 30% participants (i.e., n.6) held recognised refugee status, while the majority were in the process of seeking asylum. Participants had been living in South Africa for varying lengths of time. Approximately 40% had arrived within the past five years, while 60% had been residing in the country for more than five years, reflecting different trajectories of settlement and engagement with institutional systems. In relation to educational and occupational backgrounds, half of the participants reported having completed tertiary education, including university-level training in fields such as law, journalism, engineering and medicine. A further 30% reported vocational or technical training in areas such as tailoring and mechanics, while the remaining participants had lower levels of formal education. However, upon arrival in South Africa, participants described significant barriers to the recognition of their qualifications. At the time of the research, the majority (70%) were unemployed, while 30% were engaged in informal and precarious forms of work, including street trading, domestic work and small-scale entrepreneurial activities.

Recruitment took place in partnership with the local NGO and a respected community leader within the refugee network, who was also a member of the community and a participant in the study. Access was supported through snowball and convenience sampling that relied on existing social connections and community support systems. Participants were eligible if they were non–South African citizens, Aged 18–60, had left their country of origin within the previous ten years, and held either refugee status or an active asylum application.

2.4 | Data Generation

All data collection and fieldwork unfolded through a collaborative process involving one of the Italian researchers, practitioners from the South African NGO, community leaders and participants. The Tree of Life was employed as a collective narrative practice,

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functioning simultaneously as both a data generation method and a psychosocial intervention. Drawing on narrative practices developed at the Dulwich Centre (Denborough 2008; Ncube 2006), the process unfolded across three interconnected phases, each organised around a specific metaphor.

The first phase, centred on the individual tree, invited participants to share stories of roots, skills, values, significant relationships and hopes, supporting the articulation of preferred identity narratives beyond experiences of loss and displacement. The second phase expanded these narratives into a shared forest, opening collective reflection on belonging, mutual support and interdependence within the community. The third phase, structured around the metaphor of storms, facilitated conversations about hardship, violence and uncertainty, situating these experiences within shared social and structural conditions rather than individual failure (Denborough 2008; Ncube 2006). The workshops were conducted across two sessions, each lasting approximately four hours. The first session focused on the individual tree and collective forest phases, while the second session was dedicated to the storms phase. All participants attended the two sessions.

Prior to the workshops, the researchers engaged in a series of preparatory meetings with NGO practitioners and community leaders. During these meetings, the Tree of Life methodology was shared, discussed and collectively reflected upon in relation to its relevance within the local context. These exchanges informed the facilitation process and supported a context-sensitive adaptation of the intervention. Workshops were conducted in a multilingual context, primarily involving English, French and Lingala. The researcher facilitated the sessions in English, while community leaders provided ongoing informal translation into French and Lingala and back to English. The researcher assumed a dual role as both facilitator and researcher, working in collaboration with NGO practitioners and community leaders who co-facilitated the workshops and supported participants throughout the process. Across all phases, narratives emerged through multiple expressive forms—including spoken reflections, drawings, symbols, colours and written fragments—allowing meaning-making to remain layered, collective and participant-led.

Importantly, within this process, the distinction between 'data collection' and 'intervention' was not treated as fixed or hierarchical. Following the approach proposed by the Dulwich Centre in Adelaide, the workshops were designed to allow multiple narrative dimensions—including both life and traumatic storylines—to emerge simultaneously, with a particular emphasis on participants' skills, values and practices of survival. Participants were not guided towards producing analytically useful material, nor were therapeutic directions constrained for research purposes. Rather, the process remained participant-led, and what became part of the research material emerged from participants' own choices about what to share, develop and sustain within the collective narrative space.

2.5 | Data Analysis

The research dataset emerged throughout the workshops and included audio recordings of group conversations, personal narrative contributions and photographs capturing participants' drawings and written reflections. Recorded discussions were transcribed verbatim, while visual and written materials were incorporated into a unified dataset and analysed in relation to the accompanying narratives. NVivo 12 was used to organise the dataset and support the coding of both textual and visual materials.

The analysis unfolded as an iterative and reflexive process, moving across two interconnected analytical trajectories. Guided by the six phases of Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun and Clarke 2019)—including familiarisation, coding, theme development and iterative refinement—this study adopts a social constructionist approach in which themes are not understood as passively emerging from the data, but as actively constructed through the researchers' interpretive engagement with participants' narratives. In this sense, meaning-making is recognised as a situated and reflexive process, shaped by the interaction between participants' accounts and the researchers' analytical perspectives and aligned with the study's broader narrative and decolonial orientation.

The first trajectory was inductive and exploratory, allowing patterns of meaning to be developed through ongoing engagement with participants' words, images and narrative expressions across successive cycles of coding and refinement. Initial themes were generated through this inductive process before being brought into dialogue with the theoretical framework. The second was deductive, bringing these analytically developed themes into dialogue with the theoretical framework of collective narrative practice developed at the Dulwich Centre (Denborough 2008). This lens supported a nuanced reading of the data by distinguishing between life storylines—concerned with identity, values, skills, relationships and future orientations—and traumatic storylines shaped by experiences of loss, displacement and structural violence. Importantly, the term 'traumatic storyline' is not used to locate trauma within individuals or to psychologise participants' experiences. Rather, it refers to narratives shaped by historically and socially produced conditions of violence, displacement and structural constraint. In line with collective narrative practices, these storylines are understood as accounts of experiences that have affected participants, rather than as properties of the individuals themselves and resonate with approaches that situate narratives of suffering within broader social and cultural contexts rather than individual pathology (Rappaport 2000). Working across these two trajectories made it possible to attend simultaneously to narratives of resilience, continuity and aspiration, and to accounts of pain, marginalisation and ongoing oppression, without privileging either. In this way, the analysis sought to hold together the complexity of participants' lived experiences, recognising how these storylines coexist, intersect and inform one another. Importantly, this distinction is used as an interpretive lens rather than as a predefined categorisation of the data.

The initial phase of analysis was conducted by the Italian researcher involved in the fieldwork and subsequently shared with the broader research team for collective reflection. Differences in interpretation were addressed through iterative dialogue and reflexive discussion. These interpretations were further explored in dialogue with community leaders, who were themselves

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members of the community and participants in the study, while also occupying established positions of trust within the community. Their involvement was not constituted as an external advisory role created for the purposes of the research; rather, it reflected their existing role in facilitating access, organising community activities, and identifying and engaging community members. The interpretive dialogues with community leaders were audio-recorded and documented through research notes. During these exchanges, preliminary interpretations were discussed, questioned and contextualised through their situated knowledge of the community, and their contributions informed the refinement and, where necessary, reworking of the analytical framing. In this sense, interpretive authority was not located exclusively within the research team but was deliberately opened to community-based knowledge and contestation.

Emerging themes were then brought back to participants and the wider community through two iterative feedback sessions. During these sessions, preliminary interpretations were shared and opened to discussion, allowing participants to reflect on, question, and expand the analytical framing. In several instances, these exchanges led to the refinement of thematic boundaries, the re-articulation of meanings and the inclusion of alternative interpretations grounded in participants' own understandings. Rather than treating participants solely as sources of data, this dialogical process positioned them as active contributors to the interpretive process. These feedback moments did not aim to achieve consensus or to validate findings in a positivist sense. Rather than being treated as a mechanism for confirming analytical accuracy, these exchanges were understood as moments of co-construction, where meanings could be negotiated, expanded and at times reworked. Accordingly, the final configuration of themes was also shaped through the iterative feedback sessions with participants and community leaders. Rather than aiming for maximum thematic parsimony, the final thematic organisation reflects a collaboratively negotiated interpretive framework that participants recognised as meaningfully representing the different dimensions of their collective narratives.

2.6 | Ethical Considerations

The study was conducted in accordance with the Ethical Principles and Code of Conduct of the American Psychological Association (APA, 2020) and was approved by the Stellenbosch University Institutional Review Board (Protocol no. 32015). Participants were informed clearly and openly about the aims of the project and the nature of their involvement, and each provided written consent. Confidentiality, anonymity, and the right to withdraw at any point were discussed not as formalities, but as ongoing assurances reiterated throughout the process.

Beyond compliance with procedural requirements—requirements that frequently fail to capture the ethical imperatives that emerge during research practice (Fiscone et al. 2026)—the study embraced a relational and dialogical understanding of ethics. Rather than a single moment of consent, ethical practice unfolded as a continuous conversation—shaped in partnership with NGO practitioners, community leaders and participants themselves. This ongoing dialogue allowed space to check comfort, revisit agreements and ensure that participation remained voluntary, respectful and free from any sense of obligation or dependency. To protect privacy while honouring the richness of participants' contributions, all names used in quotations and narratives in the Findings and Interpretation section are pseudonyms.

Importantly, the study was embedded within the ongoing activities of the partner NGO, which ensured continuity of support beyond the duration of the workshops. While the research itself was time-limited, participants remained connected to existing psychosocial and community support structures. In particular, three participants requested additional psychological support following the workshops and were subsequently integrated into the NGO's support programmes.

2.7 | Reflexive and Epistemological Considerations

While the study draws on decolonial theory as an epistemological framework, we do not claim to fully enact a decolonial methodology. Rather, the research engages with decolonial principles through efforts to redistribute interpretive authority, foreground participants' knowledge, and situate the research process within existing community structures. These efforts are reflected in the use of collective narrative practices, the involvement of NGO practitioners and community leaders in both facilitation and interpretation, and the incorporation of participants' perspectives through iterative feedback processes. In this sense, knowledge production was approached as a relational and dialogical process rather than as a unidirectional extraction of data. At the same time, these processes unfolded within complex and asymmetrical power relations that could not be fully resolved. The presence of researchers affiliated with European institutions may have shaped participants' engagement with the research, including dynamics of expectation, trust and forms of narrative self-presentation. Access to participants was mediated through the partner NGO and community leaders, whose roles were essential in establishing trust while also influencing the conditions of participation and the circulation of narratives. The multilingual nature of the workshops, and the reliance on informal translation between English, French and Lingala, introduced additional layers of mediation in how experiences were expressed, interpreted and understood. Meaning-making was therefore shaped not only by participants' accounts, but also by processes of translation, interpretation and collective negotiation across languages. These dynamics also informed the relational nature of the fieldwork. The researchers' sustained engagement within the NGO context—before and after the study—supported the development of relationships of trust and continuity, while simultaneously forming part of the conditions through which knowledge was produced. Within these constraints, the research was approached as a collaborative and situated process, in which the researchers' roles were understood as relational and accountable to the communities involved. At the same time, we acknowledge the limitations inherent in conducting research within academic and institutional frameworks, which continue to shape the conditions under which knowledge is produced, validated and disseminated. These considerations informed both our methodological choices and a cautious positioning of the study's epistemological claims.

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3 | Findings and Interpretation

At the end of the process of data analysis, six interlocked main themes were defined: (1) Displaced and rooted identities, capturing the tension between experiences of traumatic uprooting and the persistent value of cultural roots as sources of identity, continuity and belonging; (2) Family loss and enduring legacies: Sustaining dignity, care and continuity, portraying the family as a place of loss and separation, but also as a foundation for strength, dignity and ethical inheritance; (3) Gender roles across borders: Negotiating constraint, autonomy and care, exploring how across migration journeys, understandings and practices of gender are reshaped through new pressures, opportunities and solidarities; (4) Living through systems: Navigating invisibility, constraint and relational belonging, addressing legal uncertainty, discrimination and the experience of 'non-existence' without recognised status; (5) Faith amid disorientation: Sustaining hope through collective practice, where faith acts as a source of meaning, strength and hope amid uncertainty and loss; and (6) Knowledge devalued, knowledge reclaimed: Re-authoring skills and professional identities, which depicts the movement from the devaluation of one's knowledge and qualifications to the creative reinvention, recognition and sharing of talents. Taken together, these interconnected themes reflect both the weight of trauma and displacement and the collective processes through which participants reconstructed continuity, dignity and future possibilities following forced migration (Table 1).

Although presented as analytically distinct, these themes should not be understood as mutually exclusive categories. Rather, they represent interconnected dimensions of participants' collective narratives that were collaboratively refined through the feedback process.

3.1 | Theme 1—Displaced and Rooted Identities

Participants' stories reflected a continuous negotiation between identities shaken by forced migration and identities grounded in cultural heritage. This dual narrative—a traumatic storyline and a life storyline—portrays identity as both disrupted and preserved, carried across borders as memory, mission and dignity.

3.1.1 | Traumatic Storyline

For many participants, forced displacement resulted in identity crises, shaped by the co-existence of multiple cultural affiliations and the absence of a defined place of belonging. As described by one participant: 'Here in South Africa, for many of us—especially those who weren't born here—there's a real identity crisis. [...] I carry a mix of three cultures in one. [...] So all of that creates an identity crisis'. (Nuha, female, 18, DR Congo).

This uncertainty deepened into a pervasive experience of statelessness and permanent displacement, where asylum becomes not a temporary step but a prolonged condition of waiting:

> I don't belong anywhere. If I go back to Congo, I am still a refugee—and here, I am still a refugee. My life is just this constant in-between. I'm only an asylum seeker, still 'seeking', never recognized, never able to move forward. It feels like I'm stuck in this status forever. Wherever I go, it's never fully my place—never 100%. Something is always missing. That's the storm I live inside. Every direction I turn, there's a problem, a rejection.
>
> (Miriam, female, 29, Burundi)

Feelings of dislocation were aggravated by cultural and linguistic exclusion, particularly when language shaped access to rights and recognition—even the right to one's own name: 'When I arrived here, I didn't know any English. The interpreter told me to remove one of my names because it was 'too hard to pronounce'. [...] They changed my name as if I had no voice, no history, no say in who I am'. (Asha, female, 22, Somalia).

3.1.2 | Life Storyline

Alongside rupture, participants described identities strengthened by a deep pride in origins, often connected to family lineage, clan and tradition: 'Even now in South Africa, I carry that dignity—I am still a daughter of royalty'. (Grace, female, 31, DR Congo).

This pride was not only individual but collective, held through the intergenerational transmission of respect and hospitality, expressed as an inherited moral responsibility: 'When someone enters your home, don't look at their face. Look at their stomach. [...] That's what respect means in our culture, and I still live by it'. (Nadine, female, 42, DR Congo).

This expression highlights a culturally rooted ethic of care in which meeting a person's basic needs precedes dialogue or judgement. Offering food becomes a tangible form of respect, recognising that one cannot know the hardship someone carries, and that dignity and conversation can only emerge once immediate needs are acknowledged.

Finally, naming emerged as identity and purpose, carrying meaning, expectations and an enduring link to ancestors: 'That name is not just a word—it's a purpose. [...] That's who I am—a bridge, not a wall'. (Nguizane, female, 36, Burundi).

In this theme, displacement and rootedness coexist: Identity is experienced as suspended yet sustained, threatened yet resilient—shaped by loss, but also anchored in memory, family, culture and name.

3.2 | Theme 2—Family Loss and Enduring Legacies: Sustaining Dignity, Care and Continuity

While Theme 1 focuses on identity as shaped through displacement and cultural continuity, this theme specifically attends to family as a site of transmission, care and moral legacy. Stories of family loss and separation coexisted with powerful narratives of legacy, caregiving and transmission of values. Family was described not only as a biological or cohabiting unit but as a moral

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TABLE 1 | Themes and subthemes mapped across life and traumatic storylines.

Themes	Sub-themes	
	Traumatic storyline	**Life storyline**
1. Displaced and rooted identities	Identity crisis	Pride in origins
	Statelessness and permanent displacement	Intergenerational transmission of respect and hospitality
	Cultural and linguistic exclusion in arrival countries	Naming as identity and purpose
		Negotiating cultural and clan traditions
2. Family loss and enduring legacies: Sustaining dignity, care and continuity	Loss of parents or loved ones	Family as a source of strength and identity
	Family separations	Transmitting dignity as a family legacy
	We escaped the war, but not the fear	Desire to care beyond family
3. Gender roles across borders: Negotiating constraint, autonomy and care	Gendered power relations	From dependence to self-actualisation
	Gender role conflicts	
	Men's experiences of fragility and loss of status	Strength and agency as a cultural inheritance
4. Living through systems: Navigating invisibility, constraint and relational belonging	Waiting without resolution	Maintaining autonomy and presence through work
	Institutional invisibility and conditional recognition	Everyday livelihood practices for navigating exclusion
	Documentation, language and systemic discrimination	Community organisations as spaces of navigation and support
		Mutual care in response to systemic failure
5. Faith amid disorientation: Sustaining hope through collective practice	Disorientation, loneliness and feeling unseen	Faith as strength and hope
		Singing hope into being
6. Knowledge devalued, knowledge reclaimed: Re-authoring skills and professional identities	Lack of recognition for qualifications from home country	Recognised and shared talents
	Devaluation of personal knowledge and experience	Professional reinvention in marginal contexts
		Transforming memory into action
		Think out of the box

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lineage, a memory carried forward, and a responsibility that extends beyond blood relations.

3.2.1 | Traumatic Storyline

Many participants narrated profound loss of parents or loved ones, often as a direct consequence of conflict and forced displacement. Loss was not remembered only as pain but as formative in shaping their understanding of kinship and solidarity. As one participant recalled: 'When we fled the war, my parents died. I was still a child. [...] In moments of loss, your family becomes whoever shows you love'. (Esperance, female, 40, Burundi).

Participants also experienced family separations, resulting from migration routes, conflict or the emotional strain of surviving hardship. One participant reflected on separation from her husband as both injury and evolution: 'It's like a quiet scar that shaped my independence'. (Marie, female, 38, DR Congo). These experiences of loss and separation were intertwined with memories of violence that continued to reverberate beyond the moment of displacement. For some participants, violence remained present as an emotional and sensory trace: 'Sometimes, even in silence, I still hear the screams. They follow me like shadows'. (Amina, female, 35, DR Congo). Reaching the host country did not necessarily bring an end to this sense of threat. As another participant reflected, 'We escaped the war, but fear came with us'. (Salma, female, 27, Somalia). Family loss and separation were therefore narrated within a broader continuity of violence, in which physical escape did not always translate into a sense of safety.

3.2.2 | Life Storyline

Despite separation and grief, family remained a source of strength and identity, rooted in memories of parents and projected into future generations: 'I'm happy because their laughter carries our history'. (Joseph, male, 60, DR Congo).

Participants emphasised transmitting dignity as a family legacy, teaching children not only survival skills but values associated with respect, discipline and self-reliance: 'Dignity is something you pass on—like a recipe or a song'. (Fatuma, female, 33, Somalia).

Finally, family was also conceived expansively—as a commitment to care for those who suffer similar losses. A profound desire to care beyond family emerged in narratives envisioning community-oriented futures: 'I want them to feel like someone believes in their future'. (Chantal, female, 28, DR Congo).

Rather than constituting a separate domain from identity, family emerges as one of the primary relational contexts through which identity, dignity, continuity and care are sustained across displacement. As such, family is experienced simultaneously as vulnerability and strength—a place where wounds are formed and where healing practices begin, transmitted through memory, values and care that extend beyond the boundaries of kinship.

3.3 | Theme 3—Gender Roles Across Borders: Negotiating Constraint, Autonomy and Care

According to participants, migration did not simply disrupt or liberate gender roles, but placed them in a continuous process of negotiation shaped by histories of patriarchy, colonial legacies, displacement and survival. Gendered expectations travelled with people across borders, yet the realities of precarity, absence, care networks and livelihood in a new context required roles to be re-imagined, shared, or contested within families and communities. These shifts were not framed as linear progress but as relational strategies—ways of sustaining life, dignity and continuity under conditions of structural constraint. While patriarchal power remained woven through everyday interactions, participants also spoke of forms of autonomy, authority and leadership emerging through women's labour, collective caregiving and community organising—expressions of agency rooted not in individual independence, but in interdependence, reciprocity and care.

3.3.1 | Traumatic Storyline

The stories spoke to long-standing expectations surrounding women's roles—expectations shaped by family lineage, social hierarchies, faith traditions and the broader histories and power structures that have influenced everyday life before and after migration. These norms could limit when and how women spoke, acted or made decisions. As one participant described, this restraint becomes something learned over time:

> In our country, men are here (above) and women are here (below). This is our culture. You have to respect your husband. You can't argue with your husband. When he speaks, and you just say "Amen". [...] It doesn't matter if you have an opinion, you're expected to be quiet, obedient and silent.
>
> (Claudine, female, 45, DR Congo)

Migration amplified gender role conflicts, particularly as women encountered greater freedom and legal protections in the host country. These changes often triggered tension, abandonment or rejection from male partners struggling to adjust: 'Our men don't accept it. They feel their power slipping'. (Aisha, female, 30, Somalia).

A related dimension was the fragility of men and their lack of access, where loss of control, employment or social status generated insecurity and withdrawal. While implicit in many stories, this sentiment was echoed in summary: The shifting balance of gendered responsibility created strain for both women and men navigating unfamiliar systems and norms.

3.3.2 | Life Storyline

For many women, migration was reframed as a journey from dependence to self-actualisation. Liberation from enforced dependency allowed women to work, support their families and reclaim decision-making power: 'Now I can say: if you don't want

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me, I can work. [...] I don't need permission to live anymore'. (Beatrice, female, 37, Burundi).

Participants also described strength and agency as a cultural inheritance, challenging the stereotype of women as passive bearers of tradition: 'We are not weak, and that strength is part of who we are. It's not a flaw, it's heritage'. (Marta, female, 32, DR Congo).

At the same time, conversations hinted at an emerging space for father education and supportive fatherhood, recognising the need for men to adapt, learn and engage in caregiving roles within changing family structures—pointing to future opportunities for workshops and community-based interventions aimed at shared responsibility and mutual respect.

This theme reveals gender as both a site of conflict and transformation. While patriarchal expectations continue to shape many lives, migration opens new horizons for self-definition, autonomy and reimagined family roles—where strength is inherited, negotiated and shared across borders. These transformations also illuminate how gender negotiations intersect with broader narratives of identity, care, work and community that recur throughout participants' collective stories.

3.4 | Theme 4—Living Through Systems: Navigating Invisibility, Constraint and Relational Belonging

Participants' narratives pointed to the pervasive role of institutional and bureaucratic systems in shaping everyday life and future possibilities. Structural exclusion was not described as a single barrier, but as a constellation of interconnected forces—legal precarity, documentation regimes, discrimination and language hierarchies—that collectively determine who is seen, who is heard and who is able to access rights and opportunities. Across accounts, participants did not simply describe obstacles, but actively constructed these systems as organising visibility, recognition and belonging in uneven and conditional ways.

3.4.1 | Traumatic Storyline

A recurring narrative centred on legal status uncertainty, constructed not as a temporary administrative phase, but as a prolonged and indefinite condition of waiting. Participants frequently mobilised spatial and temporal metaphors to make sense of this experience, framing asylum as a space of suspension rather than transition:

> I've been an asylum seeker for 17 years. I can't get citizenship. I can't buy a house. I can't even open a bank account. [...] It's like I exist, but only halfway—I live here, but I have no rights, no identity, no security. I'm stuck in a waiting room with no end.
>
> (Samuel, male, 47, DR Congo)

Expressions such as 'only halfway' and 'waiting room with no end' construct legal precarity not simply as a lack of documentation, but as a condition of arrested progression, in which time is experienced as stalled and the possibility of moving forward remains suspended. In these accounts, asylum is not narrated as a pathway towards recognition, but as a structure that holds people in place, limiting access to stability, continuity and future orientation. This sense of suspension extended into narratives of institutional invisibility, particularly in relation to healthcare and social protection:

'Because I don't have a [refugee] status, even if I'm 60 years old, I can't get a pension. My daughter is disabled, and every time we go to the hospital, we wait for hours like we're invisible. [...] And in the end they ask us for money—money we don't have. It's like being punished twice'. (Bahati, female, 70, DR Congo).

Here, invisibility is not only a description of neglect, but a way of constructing encounters with institutions as sites where presence does not translate into recognition. Participants portray themselves as physically present yet socially and institutionally unacknowledged, revealing how access to care is mediated by legal status and economic capacity. Experiences of discrimination in housing and employment were similarly framed through narratives of exclusion linked to documentation and linguistic difference:

> Even if I have the money to pay rent, they say I can't because I don't have the right papers. They prefer a citizen, even if I've lived here for years. [...] Sometimes it feels like the rules are built to push us out, little by little.
>
> (Amina, female, 33, Somalia).

Through formulations such as 'the rules are built to push us out', participants construct systems not as neutral frameworks, but as actively organised around logics of exclusion. Language also emerged as a 'silent gatekeeper', shaping who is heard, believed or dismissed, and mediating access to services and rights. Across these accounts, structural barriers are experienced and interpreted as producing conditions in which visibility is uneven, access is restricted, and belonging remains conditional.

3.4.2 | Life Storyline

Alongside these experiences of exclusion, participants described forms of agency that were collective, relational and oriented towards navigating institutional constraints rather than overcoming them. Work, in particular, was framed not only as an economic necessity, but as an everyday means of maintaining autonomy and asserting presence within contexts of structural exclusion: 'We run small businesses so we don't have to beg. Even if it's little, we earn it with our own work. [...] Selling fruits, used clothes, or handmade crafts—it's not just income, it's dignity'. (Nadine, female, 36, Burundi). This reclamation of dignity was also narrated through the persistence of everyday livelihood practices. As Yvette explained, 'Every item I sell is a sign that I'm still here, still standing, still providing. It's my strength'. (female, 41, Burundi). Such

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accounts frame work not as evidence that structural barriers have been overcome, but as an everyday practice of maintaining presence, autonomy and dignity within them. Work thus emerges as one of several everyday strategies through which participants navigate systems that restrict access and render belonging conditional. Rather than overcoming structural exclusion, these practices enable participants to assert their presence within institutional and social contexts that continue to render them only partially visible.

Participants also described community and faith-based organisations as important spaces for navigating institutional complexity: 'I found help in the support group. They teach us how to handle stress, how to understand the law, how to keep going. [...] I've learned not to give up, even when everything feels too heavy'. (Jean, male, 42, DR Congo).

Here, knowledge is produced collectively, through shared experience and mutual support, rather than being solely located within formal institutions. These spaces enable participants to interpret, negotiate and endure the constraints imposed by bureaucratic systems.

Mutual care emerged as a key practice through which participants respond to systemic exclusion:

> We help each other. If one gets donations, she shares. If someone is sick, we go with her to the hospital or stay with her kids. [...] That's how we survive—together. We build what the system won't give us.
>
> (Fatouma, female, 26, Somalia).

Through such narratives, participants construct community as an alternative infrastructure of support, organised around reciprocity and shared responsibility. Survival is framed as relational rather than individual, grounded in practices that compensate for gaps in institutional provision.

Finally, participants emphasised processes of mutual learning across communities: 'We learn how to live here, and they learn how we survive—it goes both ways'.

This formulation positions belonging as a reciprocal and negotiated process, in which refugees are not only adapting to the host context but also contributing knowledge, practices and ways of living.

This theme reveals a landscape where exclusion is not only systemic, but actively organised through processes that regulate visibility, recognition and access to rights. Participants experience rights as conditional, controlled and rationed through documentation, language and bureaucratic power. Rather than depicting participants as passive recipients of exclusion, these narratives show how they collectively negotiate institutional constraints by creating alternative infrastructures of belonging grounded in shared knowledge, mutual care and reciprocal support. In this sense, participants do not overcome structural barriers; rather, they continually develop relational strategies for living through them.

3.5 | Theme 5—Faith Amid Disorientation: Sustaining Hope Through Collective Practice

Faith emerged as a central pillar in participants' lives, providing meaning, emotional refuge and strength in contexts of uncertainty, displacement and loss. It functioned as both an internal resource and a communal practice—a space where despair could be spoken and hope could be renewed.

3.5.1 | Traumatic Storyline

Participants described periods of feeling lost, suspended between geographies, systems and identities, where faith became a lifeline in moments of emotional disorientation:

> There are moments when I feel alone, lost—like no one sees me, like I've been forgotten.
>
> (Helene, female, 39, DR Congo).

These feelings were often mitigated through prayer, connection with family or participation in church communities, which helped individuals reclaim direction and meaning even 'in the dark'.

3.5.2 | Life Storyline

Faith was widely conceived not as passive acceptance but as strength and hope, an active force that sustains perseverance: 'God is our strength, our foundation'. (Grace, female, 28, Burundi).

Worship practices—particularly singing—played a key role in emotional expression and communal bonding. Participants described singing hope into being, using praise not only as devotion but as resistance to despair: 'Through praise, we don't just survive—we reconnect with hope'. (Salim, male, 31, Somalia).

This theme portrays faith as a sustaining thread across contexts of adversity. Through prayer, community and song, participants transform moments of loss into spaces of hope—grounding resilience in spiritual belief and shared ritual. Faith here operates not only as a coping mechanism, but as a collective and relational framework through which participants make sense of uncertainty, sustain hope and re-anchor their sense of continuity. Faith therefore intersects with several of the preceding themes, providing a relational framework through which participants interpreted displacement, family, loss, dignity and future possibilities.

3.6 | Theme 6—Knowledge Devalued, Knowledge Reclaimed: Re-Authoring Skills and Professional Identities

While Theme 4 addressed how institutional and bureaucratic systems regulate access, visibility and belonging, this theme focuses specifically on another form of non-recognition: The devaluation of participants' knowledge, qualifications, skills and

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professional identities. Participants described how displacement and structural exclusion could render previous knowledge and experience invisible or without recognised value, while also narrating how they re-authored the value of their skills through creativity, everyday practice and collective recognition.

3.6.1 | Traumatic Storyline

Many participants described the lack of recognition for qualifications from the home country as a profound injustice that erased decades of work and experience:

> In my country I was a teacher for 30 years. I trained generations of children, and I was respected in my community. [...] Here, I can't teach. My diploma is worth nothing. It's like all my experience has been erased—like I arrived here as nobody.
>
> (Joy, female, 44, DR Congo).

Others highlighted the devaluation of personal knowledge and experience, where previous professional identities were replaced by informal, precarious work, with little acknowledgment of who they once were:

> I was a journalist—I had a voice; I told stories that mattered. [...] Now I sell second-hand clothes on the street. No one recognizes who I was, what I know, or what I've lived through. But I have no choice. I survive with silence.
>
> (Sylvie, female, 34, Burundi).

These testimonies show how structural barriers do not only impact income but also undermine a sense of self-worth and professional identity.

3.6.2 | Life Storyline

In contrast, participants also narrated how their skills became sources of pride and connection when recognised and shared within families, communities and local markets: 'I cook so well that if I give you something to eat, you'll lick the plate! [...] It's not just food—it's memory, care, joy. It's a gift from my family, and I share it with pride'. (Nadia, female, 29, DR Congo).

Through such practices, many engaged in professional reinvention in marginal contexts, using minimal resources to rebuild livelihoods: 'I had no money. I started with a few used dishes someone gave me, cleaned them, and sold them at the market. [...] Now I sell every day. I didn't give up—I reinvented my life with my hands and my courage'. (Lidia, female, 32, Somalia).

These everyday achievements were often linked to transforming memory into action, drawing on family histories and inherited practices as guides for the present:

> My mother used to cook for the whole village—her food brought people together. [...] Now I cook too. It's like she's with me in the kitchen. I feel her strength guiding my hands when I prepare food. It's my way of keeping her alive.
>
> (Marie-Louise, female, 45, Burundi).

Through repeated small successes, participants described acquiring self-confidence, moving from invisibility to a renewed sense of personal value: 'Little by little, I started to believe in myself again. When customers come back and ask for me by name, I feel like I'm someone—not just a refugee, but a person with something to offer'. (Josiane, female, 27, DR Congo).

Finally, several voices spoke about the need to 'think out of the box', challenging the limiting categories imposed on them by systems and stereotypes: 'We have to think outside the box they put us in. I refuse to be seen only as a refugee. I am someone—with ideas, with skills, with value'. (Abdi, male, 23, Somalia).

Rather than focusing on access to institutional systems or economic survival alone, this theme foregrounds participants' efforts to reclaim the value of their knowledge, experience, skills and professional identities. Across these narratives, systemic devaluation is countered through processes of re-authoring in which participants assert themselves as knowledgeable and capable subjects, challenging deficit-based understandings of forced migration.

4 | Discussion

This study reflects on insights generated through a research–intervention with refugees and asylum seekers in South Africa, examining how they navigate, endure and resist everyday experiences of violence and structural oppression. Drawing on the Tree of Life collective narrative practice developed at the Dulwich Centre (Denborough 2008), the study qualitatively brings together accounts of trauma and life histories, attending to both experiences of harm and participants' ongoing practices of meaning-making, agency and hope. Importantly, the seven themes presented in this study should be understood as collaboratively constructed narrative dimensions emerging from participants' shared meaning-making. Although analytically distinguished through Reflexive Thematic Analysis, they remain deeply interconnected, reflecting the ways participants collectively narrated their experiences rather than discrete categories of experience.

4.1 | Living Across Places: Identity and Belonging in Displacement

The narratives emerging from this study suggest that forced migration entails the displacement of emotional archives, cultural inheritances, sensory memories and unresolved histories. Migration reorganises not only where people live, but also how they situate themselves in relation to others, to time, to land and to imagined futures. As illustrated in participants' accounts of identity disruption (Theme 1), stems less from physical relocation than from a fracture in continuity: A sense of being stretched across irreconcilable past and present geographies.

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This condition resonates with what recent scholarship describes as 'perpetual liminality', in which liminality ceases to be transitional and instead becomes a durable mode of existence marked by prolonged waiting, unresolved belonging, and suspended recognition (Sudcharoen 2024). Avtar Brah's (1996) notion of diaspora space is particularly instructive here, foregrounding migration as the simultaneous inhabiting of multiple emotional, historical and symbolic locations rather than a linear movement from one home to another. Contemporary research similarly highlights how migrants live within transnational social fields, sustaining obligations, attachments and imaginaries that traverse borders even when mobility is constrained (Morad et al. 2024).

Within this context, belonging emerges as an ongoing negotiation rather than a stable possession—a process of becoming rather than being (Bhabha 1994). Participants repeatedly articulated this sense of in-betweenness, not fully anchored in the present context, yet unable to return to an unchallenged sense of belonging in the places they left behind. Crucially, this in-betweenness was not chosen. It was imposed through violence, colonial legacies, racialised borders, economic exclusion and asylum bureaucracies that suspend lives in prolonged states of 'not yet' and 'never fully' (Silver 2023).

The material weight of this liminality becomes particularly pronounced in the absence of documentation. As reflected in narratives of 'non-existence' without legal status (Theme 4), identity papers—permits, refugee certificates, birth registrations—were described not merely as administrative artefacts, but as conditions of social existence. Participants' reflections echo Butler's (2004) argument that recognition constitutes the subject as someone who counts within the social world; without it, the self is structurally foreclosed. Documentation thus operates as a form of governed visibility. In such contexts, discourses of welcome and inclusion remain hollow when unaccompanied by the material infrastructures that translate rights into lived reality (Sudcharoen 2024).

Erasure, however, extends beyond legal status to encompass cultural, linguistic, symbolic and epistemic dimensions. Experiences such as the forced modification of names described by participants—deemed 'too difficult to pronounce'—illustrate how exclusion unfolds not only within immigration systems but also in everyday interpersonal encounters. These practices exemplify what de Sousa Santos (2016) conceptualises as epistemicide: The systematic disqualification of languages, knowledges and identities as unintelligible or irrelevant. Including the alteration of names to fit dominant registers (Lulle 2021), the erasure of surnames through administrative categorisation (Sudcharoen 2024), the correction of accents, and the marginalisation of genealogies and oral histories—each a seemingly minor act that accumulates into a profound sense of de-rooting.

Yet the findings also underscore that identity is sustained not primarily through formal recognition, but through embodied and relational practices. As seen in participants' accounts of cultural continuity (Theme 1), practices such as hospitality travel across contexts and remain central to dignity and belonging. Participants echoed this sentiment through practices that travelled with them, such as communal ethics of hospitality—'When someone enters your home, don't look at their face. Look at their stomach'. Offering food before words operates as a counter-narrative to bureaucratic logics of verification, reasserting care as a right rather than a privilege. While states demand documents, this ethic asks instead: 'Are you hungry? Are you safe enough to sit and talk?' As bell Hooks (1990) writes of homeplace, marginalised communities cultivate dignity and belonging through everyday acts of care that resist domination. In this sense, relational survival itself becomes a form of agency (Ahmadipour and Sordé-Martí 2024).

A growing body of research highlights such practices of emotional and cultural continuity, through which migrants sustain and transform life via rituals, humour, cooking, prayer, storytelling and even silence (Morad et al. 2024). In contexts where asylum systems restrict access to healthcare, psychological support, work and protection, faith communities often occupy the space vacated by the state. Prayer circles, worship and spiritual gatherings function as social and emotional scaffolding not because adversity is ennobling, but because it is unavoidable.

Seen through this lens, identity in displacement is neither a fixed essence carried intact across borders nor a blank slate inscribed anew. Rather, it is a relational and ongoing project, negotiated at the intersection of what is remembered, what is permitted, what is silenced and what is continually reinvented (Hack-Polay et al. 2021).

4.2 | Making Life Possible: Labour, Agency and Continuity Within Ruptures

If identity in displacement is shaped through ruptures and fragile forms of continuity, a central question concerns how life is materially and symbolically rebuilt in the aftermath of such disruption.

The need to 'think outside the box they put us in' encapsulates a broader tension across the findings: The struggle to resist externally imposed categories that reduce participants to passive or deficient subjects, and the ongoing effort to reclaim value, knowledge and agency within structurally constrained contexts.

Our data suggest that belonging is negotiated not only through memory, ritual and communal care, but also through labour: The everyday work of sustaining oneself and others under conditions of uncertainty. As illustrated in Theme 4 and 6, participants described work not simply as economic survival, but as a way of reclaiming dignity and asserting presence in contexts where formal recognition is denied. Where documentation, recognition and stability are withheld, work emerges as one of the few domains through which agency can be enacted, subjectivity asserted and futurity imagined.

As critical scholars caution, an exclusive focus on trauma risks reproducing hierarchies of suffering in which migrants become visible primarily through pain, loss and damage (Silver 2023). The narratives in this study resist such reduction. Participants did not present themselves solely as wounded subjects, but as workers, caregivers, traders, cooks, teachers, organisers and innovators—roles that were repeatedly foregrounded across Themes 4 and 6.

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Within this frame, labour is neither the opposite of trauma nor a linear marker of integration. Rather, it constitutes a political and existential terrain where dignity, autonomy and continuity are negotiated. Working—whether formally or informally, visibly or in the margins—enabled participants to reclaim time as something other than suspension. It allowed them to author a present that extended beyond survival and to orient themselves towards futures that, however precarious, remained imaginable (Joshi and Dave 2025). Thomas Sankara's (1987) insistence that 'he who feeds you controls you' situates labour at the heart of dignity and resistance to dependency. Indeed, for many, earning—even in small or informal ways—was described as a refusal to be reduced to passive recipients of aid and as an assertion of value and contribution despite displacement. Even within marginal economies and restrictive legal conditions, labour enabled people to sustain families across borders, support relatives in conflict zones, finance education and honour intergenerational obligations—illustrating what Sen (1999) describes as the expansion of capabilities, the real freedoms required to live lives one has reason to value. From a decolonial perspective, Fanon (1961) reminds us that liberation is simultaneously material and psychological. When bureaucratic regimes define people as temporary, waiting bodies, labour becomes a counter-claim: A declaration of presence, competence and futurity. This was evident in participants' accounts where the ability to work marked the difference between 'waiting to exist' and existing in the present tense, as one participant articulated. The insistence on working, caregiving, repairing, teaching or trading becomes what Hooks (1990) describes as a practice of freedom—dignity enacted rather than bestowed. Seen through this lens, access to dignified work emerges as a question of justice that is not only social and economic but ontological. Participants' narratives challenge institutions, humanitarian actors and research itself to move beyond trauma-responsive frameworks towards future-responsive ones. Labour here is not romanticised as resilience; it is a material practice through which continuity is actively crafted in the absence of formal inclusion. Through these steady acts of perseverance, displaced people claim life in the present and insist on the right to imagine a future.

At the same time, it is crucial to underscore that these capacities do not reflect a celebration of hardship. Participants' agency emerges not because adversity is empowering, but because adversity is unavoidable. As White (2007) and Denborough (2008) argue, people are always responding to problems, and these responses generate knowledge—yet they are made necessary by the conditions that produce the problems themselves. The question, then, is not only how people survive, but why survival is so often left to individual and collective ingenuity. Critical scholarship cautions against framing resilience as a personal trait or moral expectation detached from power (Ungar 2018). When resilience becomes the dominant narrative, responsibility for adaptation shifts onto those already marginalised, obscuring the structural violence that constrains their lives. A resilience discourse that lacks systemic critique risks becoming an alibi for inaction. The knowledge that participants generate—through reinventing livelihoods, navigating hostile systems and sustaining networks of mutual aid—thus exceeds coping. As seen across Themes 4 and 6, these practices reflect not only adaptation, but the production of situated knowledge about how to live under conditions of restricted rights and systemic exclusion. As Martín-Baró (1994) argued within Liberation Psychology, communities facing injustice produce their own explanatory frameworks and strategies of resistance. Agency here emerges as relational and multi-scalar—simultaneously individual and collective—enacted through everyday labour and sustained by fragile forms of social capital produced within networks of care, obligation, and mutual aid in the absence of institutional recognition, thereby reconfiguring where knowledge, value and expertise are understood to reside (Bourdieu 1986). From this perspective, people rebuilding livelihoods at the margins are not beneficiaries but knowledge-holders, producing expertise on life under restricted rights, prolonged uncertainty and systemic discrimination. Their practices challenge assumptions that legitimate knowledge flows only from institutions to communities, or that professional worth is validated exclusively through state-recognised credentials. As participants repeatedly emphasised, necessity drives innovation; precarity is the context, not the cause, of agency. When support focuses primarily on cultivating resilience or emotional regulation without addressing legal precarity, access to work, or structural racism, it risks reproducing the very dynamics it seeks to mitigate. In such contexts, resilience becomes both a metric and a mandate, while the conditions that necessitate it remain intact. Ultimately, the question is not whether displaced people are resilient, but whether institutions, policies and systems are willing to recognise their knowledge, dismantle barriers and redistribute responsibility for survival. To acknowledge agency, in this sense, requires recognising both its force and the cost at which it is continually produced.

5 | Limitations

While the findings discussed above offer insight into participants' experiences, it is important to situate them within the specific conditions of this study. Participants were recruited through an NGO and the group was not demographically balanced, with a predominance of women and individuals from a specific national background. The NGO-based recruitment and facilitation may have shaped both access to participants and the types of narratives that emerged during the workshops. Consistent with its grounding in decolonial and narrative approaches, this study does not aim for statistical generalisability but rather offers situated, context-specific insights into participants' lived experiences. As such, the findings are not intended to be representative of refugee populations more broadly but should be interpreted in light of the specific composition of the group and the conditions under which the research was conducted.

6 | Conclusion

The narratives emerging from this study foreground two interconnected ethical and political concerns: The need to re-humanise lives shaped by forced migration and the need to engage with the structural conditions that shape and constrain these lives. Re-humanisation, in this context, is not a symbolic gesture but a condition for recognising injustice. As Mbembe (2019) argues, dehumanisation operates as a political technology that reduces people to administrative categories, clinical cases or perceived burdens, while obscuring the structures that produce suffering. In contrast, re-humanisation restores voice, complexity and subjectivity. The findings of this

10991298, 2026, 6, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/casp.70037 by Guido Veronese - University Studi Milano Bicocca , Wiley Online Library on [27/09/2026]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

study show how participants actively resist reductive framings of identity, refusing to be positioned solely as victims or problems to be managed. In line with narrative and collective therapeutic traditions (Morgan 2000; White 2007), these accounts reaffirm an understanding of people not as their problems, but as responding to conditions shaped by broader social, political and economic systems. From this perspective, experiences often framed as individual vulnerability—fear, disorientation, fractured identity or economic precarity—can be understood as intelligible responses to sustained structural pressures. These include legal uncertainty, restricted access to work, systemic discrimination and the erosion of professional and social identities. While grounded in a specific context, these findings point to broader implications for how forced migration is understood and addressed within contemporary social, political and institutional frameworks.

At the same time, participants' narratives illuminate multiple forms of agency, including professional reinvention, mutual aid, community organising, renegotiations of gender roles, faith-based practices and the sharing of survival knowledge. As suggested by White (2007) and Denborough (2008), such responses do not emerge because adversity is inherently empowering, but because it is unavoidable. These practices reflect ongoing efforts to sustain dignity and continuity under conditions of constraint, rather than evidence of resilience as an individual trait detached from context.

Taken together, these insights invite a broader reflection on the conditions that shape forced migration and its lived consequences. They suggest that support for refugees and asylum seekers cannot be understood solely in terms of strengthening individual coping capacities. Rather, the findings point to the importance of engaging with the structural conditions that make coping necessary in the first place, including legal precarity, exclusion from formal labour markets, and wider systems of inequality. In this sense, addressing forced migration requires not only attention to lived experience, but also to the broader historical and geopolitical processes that shape displacement, including colonial legacies, racialised border regimes and global economic inequalities (Rodney 1972; Walia 2021). Engaging with these dimensions is not presented here as a direct empirical finding, but as a broader implication of situating participants' narratives within their wider social and political contexts.

Ultimately, the study invites a reframing of dignity not as something earned through endurance, but as something made possible through conditions that support recognition, participation and social justice. This entails not only challenging deficit-oriented representations of displaced populations, but also reconsidering the institutional and structural arrangements through which marginalisation is produced and sustained. Such a shift opens the possibility of imagining futures in which survival is no longer an extraordinary achievement demanded of the most marginalised, but a shared and ordinary right.

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Ethics Statement

This study was approved by the Stellenbosch University Institutional Review Board (Protocol no. 32015) and conducted in accordance with the Ethical Principles of the American Psychological Association.

Consent

All participants provided written informed consent prior to participation. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured throughout the study, and all names used are pseudonyms.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Due to the sensitive and community-based nature of the qualitative data, transcripts and related materials are not publicly available to protect participant confidentiality. De-identified excerpts or analytic materials may be shared upon reasonable request to the corresponding author, subject to ethical approval and community partner agreement.

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