

The lived experiences of Muslim Refugee Women in Malta:
Exploring the intersectionality of Gender, Religion, and Refugee Status

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Dedication

To my research inspiration and best friend, Farnaz.
Your strength and courage have been a guiding light throughout this research journey.
I hope this study will make you proud.

To Muslim refugee women,
May your strength and persistence take you places you dream of.
May your voices be heard.

ABSTRACT

Ruth Mifsud

The lived experiences of Muslim Refugee Women in Malta: Exploring the intersectionality of Gender, Religion, and Refugee Status

For more than two decades, a significant number of asylum seekers and refugees have been arriving on the Maltese islands, primarily departing from the North African coast, escaping persecution and in search of a better life. Among them are Muslim refugee women whose personal narratives of survival and resilience are often unacknowledged. Studies conducted in Malta have looked at the experiences of Muslim women and refugee women separately, and it appears there is still a notable gap in the literature when it comes to exploring the intersectional experiences of Muslim refugee women in Malta. Accordingly, the purpose of this research is to explore and understand the lived experiences of Muslim refugee women in Malta and to investigate how the intersectionality of religion, gender, and refugee status shapes and impacts their overall lived experiences.

Adopting a qualitative research approach, the present researcher held individual, face-to-face, semi-structured interviews with six Muslim refugee women living in Malta. While highlighting the unique experiences of each Muslim refugee woman, the findings identify several key themes in their narrative, namely, the process of becoming a 'refugee' and the implications of such a label; the language barrier; the limited recognition of previous education; obstacles and discrimination on account of religion; gender dynamics; community support; and future aspirations and hope. In light of such findings, the study makes recommendations for community development, service provision, and further research in order to support in a more informed manner and understand better the experiences of Muslim refugee women in Malta.

Keywords: Women, Muslim, Refugees, Experiences, Intersectionality.

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List of Abbreviations

EU	European Union
JRS	Jesuit Refugee Services
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
MWAM	Migrant Women Association Malta
TA	Thematic Analysis
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

Chapter 1 - Introduction

1.1 Introduction

The Maltese islands have been attracting asylum seekers and refugees for over two decades, with the majority having embarked on their journey from the North African coast, seeking refuge from persecution and better living conditions (Pisani, 2018). Among those seeking safety and a better life are Muslim refugee women.

Notwithstanding the fact that women make up over half of all migrants in the European Union (EU) (Albrecht et al., 2021), the personal narratives of their survival, resilience, and challenges frequently remain unacknowledged and perpetuate stereotypes and misconceptions. According to Belloni (2018), Muslim refugee women are frequently depicted as highly vulnerable in the media and in reports and they are often grouped with other vulnerable populations, thus failing to tell their own personal stories. From this perspective, the act of depriving women of their personal narratives results in a reduction of their stories to a portrayal of vulnerability. This fails to capture their unique individuality, strategies, journeys, and roles that they may have taken up, even from the onset of the asylum process (Belloni, 2018). This must change, and it must change now.

This research aims to give voice to Muslim refugee women and to contribute to a more just and equitable society that values their experiences, perspectives, and contributions. By highlighting the unique challenges faced by Muslim refugee women and putting their voices in the centre of this research, this study seeks to promote greater understanding, empathy, and solidarity among diverse communities. Besides, this research endeavours to inspire the creation and enhancement of response programmes that cater for the unique needs of Muslim refugee women. By doing so, this study seeks to facilitate the effective resolution of the challenges faced by this vulnerable population.

1.2 Relevance of the study

A review of existing literature indicates, as shown in Chapter Two, that in previous studies, with very rare exceptions (Jakucevičienė, 2022; Paz & Kook, 2021), have paid little or no attention to the intersectional experiences of Muslim refugee women in Europe. Consequently, the dearth of research and lack of awareness about Muslim refugee women limit the ability of community workers and providers to respond effectively to the needs of refugee women generally. Muslim refugee women have voices that must be heard and one should accept the undeniable truth that their voices have long been neglected, their struggles overlooked, and their resilience underestimated (Al-Ali & Tas, 2017; Chatty, 2018; Ugurel Kamisli, 2021; Zaman, 2019).

The lack of research and awareness of the experiences of Muslim refugee women was particularly concerning to me, given my experiences as a volunteer in Malta. During my time as a volunteer, I had the opportunity to meet and work with Muslim women refugees who faced significant challenges in their daily lives. I was struck by their resilience in the face of adversity and was moved by their stories of struggle and survival. These interactions sparked my interest in increasing my understanding of the experiences of Muslim women refugees in Malta, particularly in the context of their intersectionality of gender, status, and religion.

With this in mind, as stated in Section 4.4 of Chapter Four, my positionality as a feminist and researcher led me to want to provide a platform for them to share their experiences and perspectives. The fact that they are often marginalised and overlooked in mainstream narratives increased my motivation. What further intrigued me was the fact that while some studies conducted in Malta looked at the experiences of Muslim women and refugee women separately, there is a notable lack of literature when it comes to investigating the intersectional experiences of Muslim refugee women in Malta. For example, while one of Grima's (2013)

studies looked at the self-representations of Muslim and Arab women who lived in Malta and their decision to veil or not, it did not specifically focus on the experiences of Muslim refugee women, nor did it explore the intersectional experiences of Muslim women in relation to their status as refugees. This highlights the need for research that specifically examines the intersectional experiences of Muslim refugee women in Malta in order to understand better the challenges and opportunities that this marginalised group comes across.

1.3 Key definitions

1.2.1 Women

In this study, *women* refers to individuals who identify as female, regardless of their assigned sex at birth. The study's participants were exclusively cisgender women, indicating that they self-identified with the gender they were assigned at birth. However, the definition of 'women' in this context also includes transgender women and non-binary individuals who identify as women.

1.2.2 Refugee

For the purpose of this study, the term *refugee* pertains to an individual who has been compelled to leave their homeland because of persecution, armed conflict, or other forms of violence, and who cannot or chooses not to return because of a reasonable fear of being persecuted again. They are often in need of international protection and assistance, including access to basic human rights such as shelter, food, and healthcare (Geneva Convention, 1951, Article 1A (2), as cited in Mifsud, 2019). In addition, the study includes beneficiaries of international protection who have been awarded refugee status, subsidiary protection status, or a special residence authorisation (see also Directive 2011/95/EU) by a country, as well as those who are in the process of seeking protection.

1.2.3 Muslim

Throughout the study, the term *Muslim* refers to individuals who identify with the Islamic faith, including those who may practise different interpretations of Islam. It is important to note that being Muslim is not solely defined by religious practices but also includes cultural, social, and political aspects. The term in this context encompasses a diverse range of individuals, including those who were born into Muslim families, those who had converted to Islam, and those who may identify as culturally Muslim.

1.4 Aims and research questions

The main aim of this dissertation is to explore and reach a better understanding of the lived experiences of Muslim refugee women in Malta. Additionally, it attempts to investigate how the intersectionality of religion, gender, and refugee status shapes and impacts their overall lived experiences. The research question is:

How do Muslim refugee women perceive their lived experiences in Malta?

This research question may be broken down into four more specific sub-questions that this study aims to address:

- *How, if at all, does the intersection of gender, religion, and refugee status influence Muslim refugee women's overall experience in Malta?*

- *What opportunities and challenges do Muslim refugee women experience during their stay in Malta?*
- *What factors facilitate or constrain Muslim refugee women's participation in community development initiatives?*
- *How can community development support Muslim refugee women in Malta?*

1.5 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative approach. I recruited a group of six research participants in my attempt to answer the research questions (see above). The sample comprised six female participants aged 18 years or older who were beneficiaries of protection that included refugee status, subsidiary protection, or special residence authorisation. Individual, face-to-face, semi-structured interviews with the participants were conducted to collect data on their experiences related to the subject of inquiry. Additional information related to the methodology of this study is available in Chapter Four.

The analysis of the data was conducted in light of the literature reviewed in Chapter Two and the theoretical framework discussed in Chapter Three. This study is primarily grounded in two theoretical frameworks, namely, Standpoint Feminism and Islamic feminism. The first centres on the notion of situated knowledge and the paradigm of intersectionality. The second advocates for the elimination of the patriarchal interpretation of Islam and emphasises the importance of gender equality.

Eight key themes emerged from the findings and these are presented and discussed in Chapter Five, supported by a number of extracts obtained from the interview transcripts. The themes are: negotiating identities as a refugee; language barriers; limited recognition of previous education; the representation of belonging and community in Islam; Islam as a barrier to employment; other intersections beyond gender; community recognition among Muslim refugee women; and the notion of hope and motivating factors among Muslim refugee women.

One should note that in Chapter Five I refrained from modifying the narratives provided by the research participants. This was necessary in order to represent faithfully the manner in which Muslim refugee women conveyed their experiences to me and not to encourage them to remain silent on their part (Sivakumaran, 2007, as cited in Naudi, 2015).

1.6 Dissertation structure

This dissertation is composed of six chapters. This chapter provides a general introduction to the study. Chapter Two provides an overview of the currently existing literature on refugees in European and Maltese contexts. The review focuses on the context of refugee women and their interactions with religion, legal status, and gender. Chapter Three explains how the theoretical perspective of this research project is rooted in Standpoint Feminism. With this in mind, the principle of situated knowledge and the intersectional paradigm are given special consideration, as is Islamic feminism. Chapter Four consists of an in-depth overview of the research design and the methodology employed in this study. The main themes that emerged during the data analysis are presented and discussed in Chapter Five. In Chapter Six, which concludes this study, I address its salient findings and make several recommendations related to programme development, service provision, and further research.

1.7 Conclusion

This chapter introduced the topic explored in this study, namely, the lived experiences of Muslim refugee women in Malta and the intersectionality of religion, gender, and refugee status. The study's rationale and motivations were then outlined, followed by a delineation of its objectives and research question. Subsequently, I provided a broad overview of the research methodology.

The next chapter, the Literature Review, explores the literature pertaining to refugees in European and Maltese contexts. The chapter places a special emphasis on the literature that examines refugee women and its intersections with religion, legal status, and gender.

Chapter 2 - Literature review

2.1 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to review the existing literature that should help one to explore and understand the lived experiences of Muslim refugee women in Malta and find out how the intersectionality of religion, gender, and refugee status shapes and impacts their overall lived experiences. This research focuses on the experiences of beneficiaries of protection¹, and takes into consideration the experiences of asylum seekers in order to gain insights into the whole three-stage refugee process: entry, transition, and departure.

The main focus in this chapter is on the European and Maltese contexts. Literature on the experiences of refugee women is growing, but a focus on the intersectionality of gender and religion is scarce (Ugurel Kamisli, 2021). Accordingly, this chapter cites various documents (both academic and those published by non-governmental organisations (NGOs)) that have been published in the past fifteen years.

The chapter is divided into two sections. In the first section, I explore in detail the European context of refugees, elaborating on the definition of the term ‘refugee’ and on the experience of being a refugee in Europe. Attention is given to the literature related to refugee women and its intersections with religion, legal status, and gender. When it comes to the Maltese context, I first explore the Maltese religious legacy and the local Muslim community.

¹ For the purpose of this research, written within the Maltese context, ‘Beneficiaries of international protection’ refers to individuals who have been awarded refugee status, subsidiary protection status, or a special residence authorisation (see also Directive 2011/95/EU).

I then elaborate on the Maltese refugee context. Subsequently, a review of the Maltese literature linked to Muslim refugee women in Malta is provided, with particular emphasis on the intersectionality of gender, religion, and status.

An in-depth discussion of the theoretical lens adopted in this study is presented in Chapter Three. In light of this, it is suggested that the two chapters should be read sequentially.

2.2 European context

2.2.1 Setting the scene

With over a million refugees seeking asylum in the EU (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 2015), the situation in 2015 was quickly labelled as a ‘migration crisis’, marking the largest influx of refugees in Europe since the Second World War (Telbrant & Haraldsson, 2022). The majority of individuals asking for refuge in Europe were Syrians, although substantial numbers also arrived from Eritrea, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Nigeria (Lee et al., 2015).

According to Craig and Zwaan (2019), despite the fact that the EU’s Qualification Directive explains the need for EU member states to provide international protection to asylum seekers who are deemed eligible, the way in which member states treat asylum claims varies greatly. There is more of a concern with protecting the borders than the refugees themselves. While countries like Germany welcomed refugees with open arms, others like Denmark and Hungary took a harsher anti-refugee position (Telbrant et al., 2022). Italy and Greece, both perceived as transitional countries by the asylum seekers, expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of assistance from other member states (Chok et al, 2019).

This lack of help can create further challenges for asylum seekers in the process of entering EU countries. Even if they are able to do so, asylum seekers may be subjected to a variety of laws and procedures that hinder their capacity to assimilate into the host community, such as being placed in impoverished areas, being prohibited from employment, and being subjected to detention (Bender, 2021). The experiences of refugees in the EU are therefore a key topic in the present study.

2.2.2 What does it mean to be a refugee?

Across the world, there are 89.3 million individuals who have experienced displacement from their homes due to war, violence, or persecution (UNHCR, 2023). The majority are now considered to be ‘internally displaced’ individuals, which implies that they have been compelled to leave their homes but are still located within their respective countries. Others, commonly referred to as ‘refugees’, have made the dangerous journey over a border and sought refuge outside their own countries (UNHCR, 2023).

Although refugees have existed for centuries, it was not until the mass persecutions and displacements of World War II that the United Nations established the 1951 *Convention relating to the Status of Refugees*², which defined a refugee as someone who

² The United Nations’ *Convention relating to the Status of Refugees* of 1951 is the primary instrument of international refugee law and was the first comprehensive attempt to define refugees (Chaudhury, 2022). The Convention explains in detail who qualifies as a refugee as well as the kind of legal protection and social rights nation signatories are required to provide (UNCHR, 2023).

owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it (Geneva Convention, 1951, Article 1A (2), as cited in Mifsud, 2019).

According to Finsterwalder et al. (2020), the journey of a refugee consists of three stages. The first, called the *entry stage*, is when an individual decides to migrate in order to seek asylum in another country. Since leaving their home country can be sudden and unexpected, they often do not have the necessary documents to reach a safer country. Political and financial factors can also hinder individuals from travelling by standard routes and thus these force them to take extremely risky journeys, both in terms of the routes and the ways in which they are organised by smugglers and traffickers (UNCHR, 2023).

In the second phase, known as the *transition stage*, the actual act of moving from one location to another takes place. This transition, however, is not straightforward (Finsterwalder et al., 2020), and different circumstances may call for varied and dynamic strategies (Zetter, 2018). Refugee camps are usually the initial destination for individuals who are seeking asylum (Nasr & Fisk, 2019). The structures that make up refugee camps are meant to be transitory and provide temporary shelter. Nonetheless, a significant number of refugees are forced to spend years of their lives living in camps because they have no other option (Nasr et al., 2019).

In the third and final stage, termed the *departure stage*, refugees establish themselves in the new host country after they exit the refugee service journey (Finsterwalder et al., 2020). Host countries have a number of responsibilities toward refugees, such as providing a certain level of treatment and preventing discrimination. Nevertheless, in reality, refugees are often

the targets of unfair and discriminating treatment (Sandvad, 2019), even though each member state of the EU is responsible for preventing such a treatment (Lebano et al., 2020).

Throughout the years, European media have reported extensively on the aforementioned transitional challenges faced by refugees (Costello & Hancox, 2016; Estevens, 2018; Colombo, 2018). However, it is worth noting that attention has mainly been given to male refugees, and consequently this has resulted in the marginalisation and invisibilisation of refugee women (Devaux, 2021, as cited in Klásková & Císař, 2021). As a result, refugee women are treated more like statistics to be saved than as individuals with their own narratives to tell (Olivius, 2013).

2.2.3 Being a Muslim woman and becoming a refugee

2.2.3.1 Refugee women

According to the European Commission (2018, as cited in Albrecht et al., 2021), women make up over half of all migrants in the EU. Equal opportunity for all is to be expected, but although this issue has been recognised for years, refugee women continue to face a lack of equal chances. As a result, they are more likely to face barriers when trying to access services in the host country (Davaki, 2021).

In the next section, I will substantiate this view by referring to some examples mentioned in European literature related to gender-specific barriers encountered by refugee women while attempting to acquire access to services in order to integrate into their host country.

2.2.3.2 Integration challenges: Access to services

Having a place one could call ‘home’ is crucial to the successful integration of refugee women since it may be the first step towards building a new life (Ager & Strang, 2008). Nonetheless, looking at the current situation in the EU,

[T]here are plenty of cases where temporary accommodation has reached its limits (e.g., Luxembourg, Malta, Slovenia, Lithuania, Greece, Romania) [and] NGOs in Cyprus, Greece, Poland, and Spain have highlighted that recognised beneficiaries are still at risk of homelessness and inadequate living conditions. (Davaki, 2021, p. 35)

In such conditions, refugee women are left unprotected owing to a lack of safety measures (Robbers et al., 2016). In a study by Pittaway and Van Genderen Stort (2011), it was found that access to housing was unaffordable to female asylum seekers due to the high cost of rental housing. Gewalt et al. (2019) further indicate that the ones who continue to experience difficulties in renting private accommodation are single refugee women. They have no choice but to live in the state-provided reception centres, where the lack of privacy makes them feel very insecure.

Refugee women are able to integrate themselves into their new home countries if they are given the opportunity to access employment and education (Bemak & Chung, 2017). Yet it is difficult for them to become self-sufficient and find work in sectors linked to the education and expertise obtained in their country of origin. In addition, “the gender imbalance in the context of parenthood and employment” (Albrecht et al., 2021, p. 40) surely does not help. Refugee women usually end up bearing the extra responsibility of meeting the family's caregiving demands. In the Close the Gap (2019) study, according to Beech et al. (2019), for example, female respondents found it difficult to arrange their work schedule around childcare obligations and were obliged to terminate their employment in order to handle their caregiving

responsibilities. Eventually, this undermines their independence since it reduces their economic security and prevents them from being protected by the labour laws of their host country (Bemak & Chung, 2017).

Moreover, Beech et al. (2019) add that respondents reported that they had experienced sexism, racism, and other forms of discrimination at work, such as being called by a different name because it was easier to pronounce, or by having job and professional roles based on gender stereotypes. Despite this, slightly more than half of those who claimed they had been subjected to racism, discrimination, or harassment at work stated they did not report it. This can be the result of refugee women lacking support from their support networks or even knowledge of their rights (Goel & Penman, 2015; Hassan et al., 2018). These outcomes demonstrate that the experience of refugee women is situated within the broader realities experienced by women in the EU, that is, the barriers experienced as women and as refugee women (Eurostat, 2020).

2.2.3.3 Islam: A source of support or a means of oppression?

In the context of the above-mentioned challenges faced by refugee women, religion emerges as a source of strength and a coping tool (Koenig & King, 2012; Ager et al., 2015; JRS et al., 2016; Kostakos et al., 2018; Maier et al., 2022). Most related studies focused on Christian beliefs, but significant outcomes have also been obtained from research on Islam and its involvement in the lives of refugee women in the host country is significant (Iftekhar, 2023).

In their research, Rutledge et al. (2021) describe how Muslim refugee women characterised their religious activities as a source of consolation, a channel for protection from harm, a way to lessen worry, and a means of obtaining decision-making advice. In another study on Muslim refugee women (Kanal & Rottmann, 2021), participants attributed their sense

of purpose in life and coping mechanisms to religion. The coping mechanisms of the participants centred on several values such as patience, thankfulness, and gratitude. These principles are all-encompassing concepts that shape Islamic worldviews and are explicitly acknowledged in Quranic writings (Achour et al., 2014; as cited in Kanal et al., 2021). For instance, the concept of patience in the Quran is referred to as *sabar*, which in English does not relate to the western definition of patience (identified as ‘passive waiting’). Instead, it emphasises acceptance, tolerance, and perseverance. Hence, in this context, for the participants, patience means accepting everything God sends their way without complaining (Kanal et al., 2021).

Despite Islam's recognition of women's agency and their rights, patriarchal cultural practices and traditions within Muslim societies can limit women's independence and agency (Thomas et al., 2022). According to Galloway (2014), historically, Muslim women in communities where Islam is the dominant religion have faced more restrictions and inequality. Silvestri (2008, as cited in Galloway, 2014) argues that social structures and political leaders have created a false social reality in which Islam promotes the oppression of women by justifying it in religious terms. The author warns that these ideas could gain enough support in a given community to the point where they are accepted as true by the general population and religious authorities are helpless to stop them. Consequently, women give up their rights and settle for a secondary reproductive role in society, while continuing to face discrimination and inequality within Muslim communities (Alhassan, 2022).

2.2.3.4 Islamophobia: The anti-Muslim sentiment

Islam provides a meaningful basis of practice and belief that can support women (Iftekhar, 2023) but this is generally overlooked by Europeans, who often regard Islam only as

a source of fear (Khader, 2013). Since the terrorist attacks of 9/11, the *hijab*, a prominent symbol of Muslim women, has been the target of negative stereotypes in Western countries (McMichael, 2002) and perceived as a physical representation of gender inequality and oppression, as well as a threat to the concept of integration (Macdonald, 2006, as cited in Paz et al., 2021).

Somehow, the *hijab* has become a symbol of the ‘odd’ and ‘the stranger among us’ (Perugini & Gordon, 2015). It has evolved into a controversial issue in most European countries. Indeed, France prohibited the wearing of the full-face Islamic veil in public settings in 2011, the first European country to do so (Cohen-Almagor, 2021). The full-face Islamic veil sparked further heated discussions in other countries about Islam, refugees, immigrants, belonging and citizenship (Jones-Gailani, 2019; Paz et al., 2021; Crush & Ramachandran, 2009; Sinclair, 2012). Although the *hijab* has generated considerable public and political discussion, the experiences of women who chose to wear it have received less consideration. In scholarly studies of Muslim refugee women, the intersection of gender and religion is particularly addressed (e.g. Casimiro et al., 2007; Northcote et al., 2006). However, the studies frequently fail to differentiate between Muslim women and Muslim refugee women, minimising the importance of their refugee status (Paz et al., 2021).

When a woman is additionally labelled as a ‘refugee’ and a ‘Muslim’, the combined label turns into a dangerous instrument for the intersectional oppression of refugee Muslim women, putting them at an even greater risk (Pittaway & Pittaway, 2004, as cited in Paz et al., 2021), which renders such women more vulnerable to Islamophobia, racism, and violence than other Muslim women in Europe (Pittaway & Bartolomei, 2022).

The next section presents a review of the Maltese religious legacy and the Muslim community in Malta. Later the focus shifts to the Maltese refugee context, and a number of

themes related to Muslim refugee women are examined further. As previously stated, there is a scarcity of literature on Muslim refugee women in Malta. As a result, this section relies significantly on literature on Muslim women in Malta, a subject on which more literature is available.

2.3 Maltese context

2.3.1 Malta's religious context

2.3.1.1 "Where is the crib and baby Jesus?" – Malta and its religious legacy

As cited in Diacono (2014), in an anti-immigration protest in 2014, Alex Pisani, the former president of *Moviment Patrijotti Maltin*, claimed:

These people [Muslims] will then also be able to bring their family members over. At this rate, we expect Malta to become an African or Muslim state within the next 20 years. Islam is slowly taking over Europe, but we have one religion – Catholicism, and we are proud of it. (para. 2).

In view of the location of parish churches and the number of domes that dominate the Maltese skyline, one can quickly and easily conclude that the Maltese were, historically at least, devout Catholics (Vella, 2012; Bonett Sladden, 2019). According to Chapter 1, Article 2 (1) of the Maltese Constitution (1964), the Roman Catholic Apostolic faith is the official state religion (Chircop 2014; Allen, 2022). Though perhaps waning, the predominant effect of the Catholic Church on Maltese social and political life cannot be underestimated, particularly reflected in the village *festa*, which honours its patron saint, and by the many crucifixes that are prominently displayed in government buildings (Chircop 2014; Stellini, 2018; Vella, 2012).

Moreover, notwithstanding changes in migration patterns that have altered the demographics of Maltese society and increased the visibility of many other faiths (Savona-Ventura et al., 2010; Calleja et al., 2017; Sansone, 2023), the most recent *Malta Census for Housing and Population data* (NSO, 2021) shows that Roman Catholicism continues to dominate. In fact, the census found that of an entire sample of 451,746 (including Maltese and non-Maltese), 82.6%, or 373,304, still identify with Roman Catholicism.

2.3.1.2 The Muslim community in Malta

Apart from the long-established minority Muslim population in Malta (Wettinger, 1986, as cited in Chircop, 2014; Grima, 2019), the number of Muslims began to increase more rapidly since 2002 (Fsadni et al., 2019; Deguara et al., 2020). According to the National Statistics Office (NSO, 2021), over the years there have been additional migration-related developments, and the Muslim population in Malta no longer consists solely of Maltese Muslims but also of Muslim refugees seeking asylum and Muslim migrants coming to Malta to work.

2023 was the first year when Malta's ethnic and religious diversity was officially registered in the national Maltese census (carried out in November 2021 by the NSO). Of a population of 451,746, as many as 17,618 or 3.9% identified themselves as Muslims (Borg, 2023). In order to provide a better understanding of the Muslim population in the Maltese context, it is necessary to examine the previous guesstimate of the Muslim population. In previous years, since the NSO and the Islamic Centre in Paola did not gather data related to faith or specific religious organisations, it was more difficult to get precise figures (Al-Aswad, 2022). In a study by Deguara (2020), the Malta Muslim Community spokesperson Bader Zeina claimed that there were around 30,000 Muslims living in Malta in 2020. Imam Mohammed

Elsadi made the same estimate, but with the clarification that not all Muslims attended prayers at the mosque on a regular basis. This made it more difficult to keep accurate records (Deguara, 2020). In a research study published this year by Al-Aswad (2022), Professor Adrian-Mario Gellel estimated the number of people who identify as Muslims to be in the range of 30,000 to 41,000. Though there certainly appears to be a considerable discrepancy between these figures, nonetheless it would be fair to conclude that at the time of writing Muslims represent a significant percentage of the population of Malta.

In light of these figures, the issue of there being only one official mosque (Mariam Albatool) in Malta for the entire Muslim community has become increasingly pressing (Deguara, 2020). In fact, the demand for a second mosque has persisted for years and the application “to build a new place of worship [in Luqa industrial estate]” (Vassallo, 2022, para. 4) is still pending, with Muslims continuing to hope for the day when they can worship freely in a dedicated prayer area.

2.3.2 Malta’s refugee context

Due to war and other dangers in their countries of origin, as of 2002 Malta saw a rise in the number of asylum seekers coming on boats to seek refuge from sub-Saharan African countries and more recently from the Middle East (Caruana, 2016; Pisani et al., 2015; Zammit, 2021). This has put individuals at risk of death (Pisani et al., 2015). Upon arrival in Malta, asylum-seekers are generally taken to detention and open centre phases where their asylum claim is evaluated. As research indicates, asylum-seekers who arrived by boat were often detained for lengthy periods of time, with some waiting up to eighteen months in harsh conditions (Falzon, 2019).

Malta has also seen individuals appeal for asylum under the category of ‘non-boat arrivals’ (Caruana, 2016). This has been particularly noticeable since 2014, when the number of asylum seekers coming by boat decreased significantly (Camilleri, 2021). Until 2015, most asylum seekers arriving by plane were not detained (Mainwaring, 2020). Nevertheless, this pattern shifted in 2016. According to the Jesuit Refugee Services (JRS), in the event of no boat arrivals, all asylum seekers arriving by plane in 2016 were detained immediately rather than transferred to the Initial Reception Centre. Furthermore, individuals who entered the country using false documents were for the most part condemned to prison (Mainwaring, 2020). JRS and other NGOs expressed alarm over the prosecution of asylum seekers in this manner, reminding the government that the 1951 *Convention relating to the Status of Refugees* forbids Malta from punishing refugees who enter its land illegally (Asylum Information Database, 2023).

In response to heavy criticism over mandatory detention, a new migration approach was adopted (Maltese Ministry for Home Affairs, 2015, as cited in Squire et al., 2017). This strategy highlights new alternatives; asylum seekers now should spend seven days in detention centres and then move out into open centres (Carabott, 2018). Nonetheless, this modification appears to necessitate further governmental commitment (Camilleri, 2021), especially since asylum seekers are still being held illegally for months (De Marco & Delia, 2022). As a case in point, Xuereb (2022) argues that in 2020 the Council of Europe’s anti-torture committee reported that migrants had been ‘forgotten for months’ and imprisoned in filthy and inhumane conditions without access to medical care. According to this report, the vast majority of migrants were being detained without any apparent legal justification, and they were inhabiting dangerously overcrowded facilities with appalling living circumstances (Xuereb, 2022). Even worse, the court has repeatedly criticised the strategy of sending migrants into detention when open centres are full (Agius, 2020). In 2020, four men were rescued at sea and taken to a detention

centre without explanation. They filed court cases for immediate release and reported not being properly notified of the reasons for their detention even after 166 days. (Agius, 2020).

Following detention, refugees in Malta are supported for up to one year in open centres (Carabott, 2018). The purpose of the open centres is to help refugees move to a more autonomous life in local communities. If provided with support, open centres can pave the way to integration (Carabott, 2018). Nonetheless, as reported in the 2021 local report by JRS and Aditus Foundation, the shift from detention to an open centre seems to present significant difficulties for refugees. This was especially the case of individuals who had difficulties accessing the available services due to lack of language skills, family support and general information about their rights (Carabott, 2018).

2.3.3 Being a refugee woman in Malta

While refugees in general need to overcome the aforementioned challenges in order to integrate, the challenges that refugee women encounter during the adaptation process increase due to the fact that they are ‘women’ and ‘refugees’ (JRS et al, 2016). In fact, gender is a key factor in migration processes since relationships, roles, and inequalities between men and women lead to different outcomes for women (Pisani, 2012).

Pisani et al. (2015) makes these claims and argues that due to their responsibility of raising their children, refugee women frequently struggle to find employment. Consequently, they find it more difficult to move from the Open Centre to the community when there are no financial resources available (Pisani et al., 2015). In another study, JRS et al. (2016) similarly found that refugee women faced additional difficulties when compared to men:

I have to say that is very difficult for me because I have no time and no one to care for my children. I think this would be a very useful thing for Somali people to do but at this time we are not. Perhaps in the future. (JRS et al, 2016, p. 21)

While some participants (who benefited from refugee status) expressed interest in furthering their education or finding gainful employment, they reported that they were unaware of their eligibility due to the lack of information on childcare services in Malta. In situations where participants lived with their partners or spouses, the women were responsible for childcare duties; tasks were not shared, even if the men did not work (JRS et al, 2016).

Research findings indicate other “[g]endered patterns” (Pisani et al., 2015, p. 23). In the case of Somalia, for instance, women were systematically excluded from formal education. In fact, most of the Somali women interviewed in this study were illiterate and unable to speak Maltese or English. Evidently, “[l]anguage barriers, illiteracy, and gendered social norms also hinder access to information” (Pisani et al., 2015, p. 24). The findings further reveal that access to information was often easier for refugee men than for refugee women, as men had access to more knowledge sources (typically other male acquaintances) and could use the systems more skillfully. This demonstrates the gendered nature of the exclusion process, and more especially the increased risk of individual and community isolation, vulnerability and detachment that refugee women confront (JRS et al., 2016; Caruana, 2016).

When women in the refugee community experience such hardships, the refugee community as a whole often leans heavily on other members of the same ethnic group to provide support and comfort (JRS et al., 2016). In the UNHCR publication *Building Communities* (2020), Umayma Elamin of Migrant Women Association Malta (MWAM) explains how she feels that it is her duty to encourage other refugee women in her community to find their voices: “My cultural background is Muslim, African and Arabic at the same time,

so I find myself as a person who encourages other women from the same cultures to speak up” (para. 5). Research further indicates that those who were regarded as elderly (often in their late 40s or older) tended to acquire more financial and practical assistance from their ethnic community. For instance, within the Eritrean and Somali communities, it was reported that they relied on each other in order to gain access to employment possibilities, assistance with English, and/or housing (Pisani et al., 2015).

Although this ‘bonding capital’ is undoubtedly a crucial source of support, it may also act as a means of exclusion. Similar to the views expressed in the Aditus Foundation’s study of 2016, some women participants pointed out that this connectedness and sometimes reliance on communities of the same ethnicity (observed particularly by Libyan refugees), can potentially make it harder to assimilate into Maltese society. Moreover, when information supplied to people from minority communities is not always correct, it can serve as an impediment to resolving protection requirements (Pisani et al., 2015).

2.3.3.1 Being a Muslim, a refugee, and a woman in Malta

According to JRS et al. (2016), religion is seen by numerous refugees as a tool of social unity that contributes to the process of assimilation by creating a sense of belonging, community, and security. The study stresses the importance of ‘bridging’ social capital with that of other religious communities since it establishes support networks and strengthens membership in the wider community (JRS et al., 2016).

In a study where Grima (2011) questions the “stereotypical image of Muslim women” (p. 3), participants appeared to settle fairly quickly in Malta. This was due to participants “learning the language, making Arab friends, and feeling accepted by their Maltese neighbours and the parents of their children's classmates” (p. 86). In addition, one participant remembered

feeling so accepted in Malta that her hairdresser would close the door every time she visited to prevent any men from seeing her uncovered hair. Similarly, in another study, Libyan and Syrian refugees acknowledged feelings of attachment towards Maltese people, and sensed a feeling of belongingness when they were around them (JRS et al., 2016).

However, religion sometimes presents obstacles in the Muslim refugee women's lived experiences. For instance, Simone Palmier, a practising Muslim woman, revealed in a *Malta Independent* interview that refugee women continued to face social prejudice when attempting to enter the labour market owing to religious differences (Bonnici, 2015). Cassar (2005, as cited in Cassar et al., 2011) recounts how one participant disclosed during an interview that her workplace prohibited women from wearing the *hijab*: "*Jekk tilbes il-maktur u aħna ma naċċettawkx hemm hafna minn flokok biex jidhlu*" (If you wear the scarf and we do not accept you, there are many others who are ready to be employed instead of you)" (p. 87).

Grima (2013) conducted a study that centered on how Arab and Muslim women in Malta portrayed themselves. One participant felt that wearing the *hijab* was the same as announcing one's identity to the world. She went on to claim that she respected women who wore the *hijab* because they were more courageous than she was and that she was not yet ready to defend her own beliefs. Another participant who chose to wear the *hijab* in public attributed the negative reactions she received to the general public's misunderstanding of Islam and its association with terrorism in Malta (Grima, 2013).

There are additional barriers associated with Islam's cultural norms and beliefs. Writing about the healthcare system and asylum-seeking women, Meilak (2020) claims that Muslim women are taught the values of modesty and privacy at an early age. The author added that Muslim women living in Malta are less likely to attend gynecological appointments before marriage or pregnancy, since discussing one's sexual health with others is commonly viewed

as humiliating or demeaning. Pregnant Muslim women in Malta are confronted with the possibility of being examined by a male doctor, a situation that does not exist in their culture. These particular conditions may result in a bad experience because according to their religious beliefs they should not be alone in the same room with a male who is not connected by blood or marriage (Meilak, 2020).

Meilak (2020) adds that Muslim refugee women may not fully understand sensitive matters due to language barriers. This reinforces the necessity of an interpreter to ensure that refugee women are able to ask questions about their care and develop a greater level of trust in the healthcare system. In fact, Ivan Falzon, the former Chief Executive Officer of Mater Dei Hospital, argued in favour of having cultural mediators present in the room during visits to ensure that the patient understands all that is going on and that he or she may ask questions (Meilak, 2020).

2.4 Conclusion

This chapter presented a review of the currently available literature on Muslim refugee women, with a focus on their lived experiences. In the first section, I explored in detail the context of refugees in Europe, with particular focus on women refugees. Attention was primarily given to the intersections of religion, gender, and status. I then focused on the Maltese context, starting with the Maltese religious legacy and the Muslim community in Malta. This was followed by an overview of the Maltese refugee context, with emphasis on the plight of women refugees.

The next chapter presents the theoretical principles that underpin the analysis of the data obtained in this research study.

Chapter 3 - Theoretical Framework

3.1 Introduction

This chapter addresses the theoretical underpinnings of this research project that seeks to explore and understand the lived experiences of Muslim refugee women in Malta.

Focusing on the theory of feminism, I first introduce the roots and origins of feminist epistemology. Subsequently, I present standpoint feminism as one of the central theoretical frameworks of this research project. Attention is given specifically to the principle of situated knowledge and the importance of taking an intersectional approach when examining the lived experiences of Muslim refugee women. The chapter then looks at Islamic feminism, in which I argue for eliminating the patriarchal interpretation of Islam and focusing more on gender equality.

3.2 Historical roots of feminist epistemology

The roots of feminist epistemology can be traced back to the women's liberation movement that emerged in the Western world during the 1960s and 1970s. This sought to end the exclusion of women in grass roots and academic disciplines and other areas of knowledge production (Mardorossian, 2014). Simone de Beauvoir's work *The Second Sex* was a major step forward for feminist epistemology. In her book she argues that women's exclusion from the category of 'universal human' has serious effects on their ability to contribute to the creation of knowledge (Disch & Hawkesworth, 2016). In addition, Beauvoir argues that while men are seen as the actual human subjects, women occupy the position of the 'Other'.

In the decades that followed, feminist epistemology kept on developing as a unique area of study, with important contributions coming from academics such as Nancy Hartsock, Sandra Harding, and Lorraine Code (Anderson, 2020). These scholars questioned traditional

epistemological frameworks and created new techniques that examined "the ways in which gender does and ought to influence our conceptions of knowledge, knowers, and practices of inquiry and justification" (Anderson, 2020, para. 1).

3.2.1 The fundamental concepts of standpoint feminism

The social sciences have typically been founded on the contemporary assumption that specific criteria, such as being a white adult heterosexual man, serve as the norm for Western public and social life, with everything else being seconded (Campoy-Cubillo, 2015). Standpoint feminism's influence in the social sciences in response to this androcentric viewpoint came as a shock not only since it required taking into account previously unconsidered factors (Swingewood, 2000), but also and most importantly "because it questioned the male bias implicit in the theoretical and methodological structures from which they were constructed" (Molina, 2018, p. 255).

Standpoint feminism further seeks to contribute to the construction of a fairer and more equitable society by beginning the process of knowledge construction from the perspective of disadvantaged or oppressed women and revealing hidden knowledge inherent within women's experiences (Brooks, 2007, as cited in Mansfield et al., 2018). Thus, standpoint feminism is a means of examining the distinct ways in which women perceive life compared to men since they are socially bound to the exercise of masculine dominance (Hammond, 2021).

One of the fundamental principles of standpoint feminism is situated knowledge, to which Donna Haraway and Nira Yuval-Davis have made significant contributions.

3.2.2.1 Situated knowledge

Donna Haraway, a feminist philosopher introduced the concept of situated knowledge (Haraway, 1988; 2013). In her essay *Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective*, she argues that knowledge is inevitably constructed from a particular perspective or standpoint, and that this perspective is shaped by our social and material location in the world. She suggests that all knowledge is situated and that one should accept this rather than attempt to attain an impossible universal perspective (Haraway, 1988).

Sociologist Yuval-Davis (2017) used the term to describe her personal interpretation of the concept. The term situated knowledge that Yuval-Davis (2012) proposes relates to the notion that knowledge is formed through the unique experiences and perspectives of individuals and communities and it is influenced by the social, historical, political, and cultural context in which it is produced.

Therefore, according to Yuval-Davis (2012), knowledge is not a neutral, objective, or universal concept but is instead shaped by the experiences, views, and values of the individuals who generate it. This implies that an individual's social identities, such as ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, and sexual orientation, influence the way they view and comprehend the world. The notion of situated knowledge also emphasises the significance of taking into account the perspectives and experiences of individuals who are frequently marginalised or excluded from dominant narratives (Gurung, 2020).

Yuval-Davis's notion of situated knowledge is particularly relevant when it comes to understanding the experiences of Muslim refugee women, specifically since they have unique (gendered) perspectives and knowledge that are also shaped by their experiences of migration

and faith (Chaney, 2021). Muslim refugee women face a range of experiences and understandings that are unique to their situated experiences because they experience what it is like to be a woman refugee and to practise their faith. Moreover, since this study heavily depends on their individual experiences, standpoint feminism is a suitable approach to comprehending the ways in which Muslim refugee women strive to advocate for greater gender equality by expressing their own interpretation of their experiences.

3.2.2 The importance of intersectionality

Nadu (2010, as cited in Hammond, 2021, p.22) states that “Despite standpoint theory’s aim to create a more inclusive branch of knowledge, it has faced criticism through its assumption that there is a concrete women’s experience”. Nadu further claims that while standpoint feminism discusses ‘women's experiences’, it is really examining the experiences of the dominant group, who are western, white feminists. This has led to widespread agreement that feminist analysis must take an intersectional approach in theory and activism that combats not just white-led groups but also the neglect of underrepresented communities (Nash, 2010, as cited in Gandarias Goikoetxea, 2017).

The aforementioned need prompted Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, a feminist, to introduce the concept of ‘intersectionality’ in 1989. This framework aims to bring to light a range of dynamics that have been entirely obscured by traditional and anti-discrimination legislation (Cho et al., 2013). This shows that Crenshaw recognised that the law deployed what she termed a ‘single-axis framework’ in order to understand discrimination (Cho et al., 2013). In her view, the legal system failed to account for the likelihood that black women might face prejudice in a manner distinct from that experienced by white women and black males (Cho et al., 2013). Hence, the legal structure only permitted discrimination on the basis of race or gender, not both. In this regard, Collins (2017) contends that on the basis of the intersectionality

framework, when examining social inequalities, the lives of individuals and the distribution of power in society are determined not by a sole dimension of social division such as gender, class or race, but rather by the interaction of multiple axes.

While intersectionality has its origins in black feminism, Kerner (2009) declares that the concept has expanded to include the study of other forms of oppression and marginalisation. This means that it takes into account not only factors of race, gender, and socioeconomic status but also ethnicity, nationality, and religion. Kerner adds that an intersectional approach needs to adopt a “differentiation of common diversity categories” (as cited in Ngunjiri, 2013, p. 20).

This idea is clarified by Kerner's observation that, for example, the gender norms and biases experienced by Muslim or black women are considerably different from those confronted by women from other ‘racial’ groups. Thus, one should incorporate these multifaceted features of intersectionality within the context of this study in order to visualise the convergence of different forms of oppression that affect Muslim refugee women's unique and situated lived experiences. It is also critical to ensure that this research project is intersectional since Muslim refugee women can experience oppression not just because of their gender, race, and legal status, but also because of their religion. One should acknowledge Muslim women's presence in several marginalised groups that contributes to their collective disadvantaged situation in Maltese society.

Moreover, the intersectional approach allows other feminist social actors, who were initially excluded from the development of this hegemonic discourse, to propose new ways of understanding and combating intersectional gendered discrimination. Muslim feminists, in particular, may utilise the intersectional lens to inform Islamic feminism, which can help them better comprehend Muslim women's everyday lives.

3.3 Islamic Feminism

According to Hidayatullah (2014), in the 1980s, a first generation of Islamic feminists fought against Islamism in several Muslim-majority countries and tried to find common ground between Islam and feminist values. They did this by questioning patriarchal interpretations of Islam that have been used to justify discrimination against women (Hidayatullah, 2014). In effect, Islamic feminism is viewed as fostering a feeling of solidarity and common understanding among Muslim women who want to keep their religious beliefs and live in accordance with the “Quran Sunnah (practice of Prophet Mohammed’s teachings) and Quran Hadith (stories from Prophet Mohammed)” (Ngunjiri, 2013, p. 16). Its primary goal is to amend discriminatory laws that they argue are incompatible with Islam's proclamation of gender equality (Mojab, 2001, as cited in Cassar et al., 2011).

By employing this notion, Islamic feminists fought against male-centric views that denied Muslim women autonomy and emphasised instead obedience and remaining at home (Bjurman, 2017). Muslim women began to utilise the Qur’an to resist this, asserting their freedom to read it independently (Hidayatullah, 2014). This allowed them to assert their freedom to practise their own interpretations and fight structures that restrict women's lives. As a result, by interpreting the Qur'an texts through a feminist lens, they saw a contrast between the moral and democratic message they interpreted and the institutionalised, politicised message enforced by establishment Islam. They also campaigned for the freedom of women to have direct contact with God free of human intermediaries (Hidayatullah, 2014). In addition, Omaima Abou-Bakr, one of the pioneers in developing the concept of Islamic feminism, asserts that Muslim women's feminist interpretations of the Qur'an are essential in creating new knowledge and achieving a more favourable gender perspective within the faith (Al-Sharmani, 2014).

Moghadam (2002) acknowledges these arguments but emphasises the need not to rely exclusively on religious interpretation but to focus on women's rights first. The author opposes the restricted notion of Islamic feminism that sees Muslim women as a homogenous group. Instead, Moghadam (2002) recognises the uniqueness and diversity among Muslim women across geographies and cultures, and defines Islamic feminism as a theoretical approach and practice that opposes social and gender injustices, tries to empower women as individuals, and centres on women's rights and their religious beliefs.

In this light, Islamic feminism, along with an intersectionality approach, provide a valuable lens to inform our understanding of Muslim refugee women. It also acknowledges the diverse experiences and viewpoints of Muslim refugee women and advocates for a more inclusive and just society for everyone.

3.4 Conclusion

This chapter has identified the theoretical concepts that were determined to be relevant to the analysis of the data collected in this research project. I first explained the roots and origins of feminist epistemology and then provided a thorough explanation of standpoint feminism, which is one of the central theoretical frameworks of this research project. The focus then turned specifically on the principle of situated knowledge and the importance of taking an intersectional approach when examining the lived experiences of Muslim refugee women. Subsequently, I discussed the second theoretical framework, namely, Islamic feminism, in the course of which I highlighted the importance of eliminating the patriarchal interpretations of Islam and concentrating more on gender equality.

The next chapter – Methodology – presents a comprehensive overview of the design and procedures employed in this research project.

Chapter 4 - Methodology

4.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to present a detailed account of the design and procedures of this research project that seeks to provide a better understanding of the lived experiences of Muslim refugee women in Malta, and to explore how the intersectionality of religion, gender, and refugee status shape and affect their overall lived experiences.

This chapter is divided into several sections. Initially, I provide a brief introduction to the feminist methodology and the research approach used. I then reflect on my positionality in relation to this research project. One should note that this chapter documents the process of reflexivity and makes visible the power dynamics of this research. These influence the way evidence was collected, analysed, and disseminated (Haraway, 1988, as cited in Johnston & MacDougall., 2021). After I present the chosen research method, I describe in detail the process of data collection. I then elaborate further on the methodology by outlining the sampling and recruiting procedures and describing the sample population. Following that, I examine the data analysis approach that was followed. The chapter concludes by addressing the ethical considerations that were taken and the limitations of this research.

4.2 Feminist Methodology – Characteristics and Principles

Feminist methodologies seek to obtain a more complete picture of social reality by minimising the marginalisation of women's lived experience in the field of social science (Hannell, 2020; Taylor, 1998). According to Kaur and Nagaich (2019), feminist research differs from traditional research in terms of methodology. What they share is the principle that unlike traditional scientific methodology, which claims to be neutral, male-centric and abstract, feminist methodology seeks to reduce the power imbalance between research and subject and

focuses on the situated standpoints and experiences of women (Kaur et al., 2019).

Militz et al. (2020) contend that researchers interested in feminism have access to a broad variety of methodologies, both qualitative and quantitative. However, as Wigginton & Lafrance (2019) assert, the context and goals of the study should guide the choice of research tools and methodologies. These authors also emphasise that the culture or community in which one conducts research has a substantial effect on the decisions that are made during the research process. Bearing this in mind, as a feminist researcher I ensured that my decisions were made with the participants' best interests in mind, as detailed in the sections that follow.

4.3 Research approach

As opposed to quantitative studies, which have a tendency to understate the diversity and distinctiveness of human experience, qualitative studies allow researchers to obtain a comprehensive understanding of individual perspectives on the subjects being researched (Creswell, 2007, as cited in Naudi, 2015; Flick, 2022; Hennink et al., 2020; Mohajan, 2018). By doing so, it focuses on the particulars of human existence, especially in connection to social experiences, and contextualises this by considering history, language, and social context (Elliott et al., 2023; Higgs & Cherry, 2009; Ingham-Broomfield, 2015; Stahl & King, 2020). Qualitative studies are therefore fundamentally exploratory, and their goal is often to bring new insights into previously misunderstood issues (Rubin & Babbie, 2005, as cited in Sarasola et al., 2021). By using this approach, I was able to grasp key components of Muslim refugee women's lived experiences in Malta. Additionally, it allowed me to look at how their overall lived experiences were formed and affected by the intersectionality of religion, gender, and refugee status.

4.4 Positionality

It has been stressed by feminist researchers how important it is to reflect on the privileges that come with the role of the researcher during the research process, since ultimately the researcher decides what questions to ask, what views to take into account, and the manner in which the findings are to be interpreted (Hegarty & Parr, 2022; Rose, 1997, as cited in Moser, 2021). In light of this, I was aware that my privileges impacted the knowledge production that occurred during the research process. I was also aware that, as a Maltese citizen and member of Malta's largest ethnic group, I would be working with a group of relatively vulnerable women who were members of a minority group. Owing to these realities, I must account for the ways in which my personal worldviews and positionality have influenced the development of this research at every stage (O'Leary, 2010, as cited in Alghamdi & Aldossari, 2022). As a result, it was unavoidable that various power issues were experienced during this research.

To critically examine power dynamics in my research process, I adopted a feminist approach when analysing the knowledge that was created by the interaction between myself and the participants (Van Ramshorst, 2020). Right from the start, I knew that this research project was not going to be simple or direct. During the interview process with the participants, I was well aware that I was not a member of their community, particularly because I did not know what it meant to be a Muslim and a refugee. Other physical features, such as tattoos, and my Western appearance led some participants to correctly assume that I was not a Muslim. My status as an outsider was also evident through the use of language. Having said that, the efforts I made went a long way towards establishing a good rapport. The participants could see that I made an effort to understand their cultures and language by engaging in conversation, taking time to introduce myself, showing interest in the subject matter, and demonstrating empathy throughout the process.

Throughout the process I also made sure to avoid asking biased questions in favour of letting participants explain their motivations or choices, even though I might not always have agreed with their perspectives on certain issues. With this in mind, I also reflected and concluded that being perceived as an ‘outsider’ had its own advantages too. Indeed, Alghamdi et al. (2022) contend that participants may feel more comfortable disclosing information to an ‘outsider’ researcher than they would to an ‘insider’ researcher. The author also states that participants could be reluctant to speak up because they would worry about being judged by ‘insiders’. Alghamdi et al. (2022) further observe that, depending on the person and the issue, the interviewer may need to adopt a more ‘outsider’ stance in order to elicit the desired responses from the participants. All this indicates that despite the fact that focusing on differences came with its own set of difficulties, it surely helped in gaining the trust of the participants.

My gender provided me with the unique opportunity to conduct research exclusively with female participants (Lin et al., 2020). As remarked by most of the participants, being a woman, provided me with the opportunity to establish a trusting relationship and the freedom to do research in the comfort of their own homes, something that they reported they would never allow male researchers to do. Instead, I am conscious of the fact that my feminist identity prompted me to see the interactions of the participants in a specific way, and that this also impacted the type of questions I asked during the interviews. Nevertheless, I made every effort to continue asking participants questions, even if they sounded naive or repetitive, to ensure that I was being told authentic viewpoints. Moreover, I tried to maintain a balance between mutual disclosure and my participation by adopting a non-intrusive approach and providing space for participants to share their stories with me by, for instance, asking open-ended questions and not interrupting if the conversation veered away from the expected direction. This strategy showed participants that they had the opportunity to talk about their experiences,

and this was something that I wanted to respect. Indeed, at the end of one interview, a participant thanked me for having given her the chance to be heard, saying that as far as she could recall while living in Malta, no one had ever paid attention to what she had to say in terms of her own experience. As a researcher, I was aware that my investigation encompassed more than a simple inquiry pertaining to women and intended for women. As Gayatri Spivak (1988, as cited in Bartels et al., 2019) pointed out in her famous thesis, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" there are risks associated with assuming knowledge and speaking on behalf of others, particularly subaltern women. For these reasons, I did not intend to interpret their lives; rather, my intention was to recognise and validate the participants' expertise and authority regarding their individual experiences. Rather, my aim was not to represent them but to listen to their distinct voice as the 'other' (Spivak, 1988, as cited in Bartels et al., 2019).

With the above in mind, while analysing my positionality as a researcher I observed that my voice was present in the interviews in a manner that was not necessarily traditional. For instance, I engaged in mutual disclosure, meaning that I did not simply ask participants questions but also answered to their inquiries about my research approach before they shared their own experiences and stories. This served to create a more comfortable atmosphere since we shared information with one another and both the participants and I had a role in it. While such an approach might be criticised for influencing the facts in a biased manner, I feel that this technique is consistent with the feminist principles of mutual responsibility and accountability to our communities and to each other (Johnson et al., 2021). This approach is also consistent with "non-positivist views of knowledge and knowledge production" (Johnson et al., 2021, p. 5), in which truth is viewed as socially constructed and co-constructed via and through interaction rather than something that can be obtained (Hesse-Biber, 2020; Moosa-Mitha, 2005, as cited in Blaisdell et al., 2021).

4.5 Research method: Interviewing from a feminist perspective

"In feminist research, interviewing is a common method, as it is in qualitative research, and one of the most used versions is semi-structured in-depth interviews" (Dincer, 2019, p. 3730). According to Jenkins and Boudewijn (2020), the semi-structured interview is a qualitative method that is fundamental to feminist methodology because it allows the researcher to have a conversation with individual participants, using open-ended questions and follow-up inquiries such as 'why' or 'how'. Yamin (2021) opines that the basis of this interviewing process is flexibility. Hence, by having flexibility and a less strict schedule, it "leaves enough space for the interviewee to open up the discussion and introduce connected topics, thus making it more exploratory in nature and cooperative in terms of knowledge production" (Fedyuk & Zentai, 2018, p. 173).

For the purpose of this research, the semi-structured interview method was considered the most suited. This method is the best of both worlds: it provides guidance while encouraging the participant to be themselves and own the space (Hannell, 2020). In addition, this method provided the opportunity for individuality since it allowed me to gather narratives of participants' ideas, thoughts, and experiences in their own words. This is crucial in feminist research, given that women's voices have historically been suppressed (Hannell, 2020).

The semi-structured interviews are also considered a tool that reaches the refugee women population (Zapata-Barrero & Yalaz, 2020). It is further asserted that conducting interviews with refugee women can provide them with the opportunity to choose a convenient time when they feel secure enough to voice their personal views without repercussions. In fact, in the present research project it was found that the participants' degree of openness was influenced by the interview's circumstances, location, and timing.

4.6 Sampling and recruitment procedure

The recruiting procedure was initiated with the collaboration of gatekeepers. This was done for a variety of reasons. Sanyal (2014) reports that even though refugee researchers commonly adopt the snowball sampling technique to get access to the refugee women population, this technique poses a considerable risk. It may expose sensitive information about key respondents to the individuals they refer to. This could happen after the study's findings are published, especially in the context of a small island community.

I therefore decided against using this sampling approach because I did not want to jeopardise the privacy of the participants, all of whom eventually shared personal experiences during their interviews. In addition, since I was already familiar with the field of research thanks to various years of volunteering, I knew that the chosen gatekeepers appreciated confidentiality and were regarded as trustworthy. Most crucially, they possessed adequate information about the participants' backgrounds, which provided them with the assurance that the participants were mentally and emotionally capable of participating in the interviews.

My meetings with a number of organisations and seeing the way they pushed the values of reciprocity, informed consent, and ethical access were very encouraging. I recruited the assistance of three gatekeepers: MWAM, Integra, and Spark15. As there was a low response rate, I sought the support of another gatekeeper: the Sudanese Community of Malta. I asked these gatekeepers to act as intermediaries, which meant that they were responsible for explaining the study to potential participants and letting them know what their involvement would be if they decided to accept the invitation. The Information Sheets in Maltese and English (see Appendix A), were explained by the gate keeper to the prospective participants so as to accommodate their varied levels of literacy. Participants who were interested were requested to contact me personally via email, or through the gatekeepers themselves. The latter channel had the benefit of protecting their anonymity with the gatekeeper, had they wish to.

This process proved to be rather difficult and demanded significant perseverance on my part and the intermediaries' due to a general lack of interest in participating. Throughout this process, I communicated with the gatekeepers. Their explanations for why prospective participants were resistant were fear of having their identities exposed or time restrictions. Yet, finally, six individuals got in touch with me directly and expressed their interest in participating. Concerning the eligibility criteria, the participants:

identified as women;

were Muslim;

were over the age of 18;

had lived in Malta for at least one year;

had a refugee status, subsidiary protection or special residence authorisation;

were fluent in Maltese and/or English.

While the group of participants had similar characteristics (such as being cis women and Muslims and had received some form of protection), each participant still presented individual differences that were worth noting for the purpose of this study. To protect their identity and privacy, their names have been changed.

Table 1*Profile of participants*

Pseudonym	Average age	Years living in Malta
Sara	30s	Seven
Nasrin	40s	Seven
Rima	50s	Six
Rania	20s	Four
Alma	40s	Seven
Farida	50s	Nine

4.7 Data collection procedures

Over the course of two months, from the middle of October to the middle of December 2022, the six Muslim refugee women living in Malta were interviewed face-to-face.

With the collaboration of the participants, I was able to schedule appointments over the phone at a day and time that were mutually agreeable. The interviews were held in locations where participants felt comfortable to speak and which ensured their privacy. Many feminist scholars are likely to be familiar with the interview setting approach that I used (Johnston et al., 2021). Most of the participants wanted the interviews to be held in their homes, which led to chatting in their living rooms and kitchens. One of the interviews was carried out at the participant's place of employment since she felt more comfortable speaking there. These

research settings were very appropriate for my research project, and they were also in line with my commitment to feminist research that takes into account power dynamics.

Specifically, I believed that interacting with participants in settings where they felt most at ease was a way to promote reciprocity and mutual respect between the researcher and the participant. While it is possible that participants felt some discomfort about meeting a stranger, I hoped that by interacting with them in their familiar surroundings, I would convey a sense of respect that would equalise the power dynamic between the researcher and the participant. Such approach was successful, and there were instances when I was encouraged to stay longer in a participant's home. Reciprocity was also evident during some of the interviews, when participants occasionally sought assistance from the interviewer with tasks relating to education and employment. As a researcher, one of my responsibilities was to assist participants by guiding them through the process of filling out the paperwork and offering support when they sought assistance to access certain services.

The interviews lasted approximately one hour each, and five were conducted in English and one in Maltese. With the exception of one respondent, all the participants gave their informed consent to be audio-recorded. Lenner and Turner (2018, as cited Ali, 2021) highlight that obtaining written and verbal consent from refugee participants who are fearful of being recorded poses significant challenges. The reality outlined by the author was relevant during my research (Lenner et al., 2018, as cited Ali, 2021). While the participant concerned consented to take part in the study, she was apprehensive about having her experiences audio-recorded. As the researcher, I fully respected the participant. She agreed to be interviewed and for handwritten notes to be taken during the interview. Throughout the interview the participant was given the opportunity to verify the notes collected and hear them read out to ensure she was satisfied with the content. This procedure allowed the participant to contribute any additional information she deemed necessary. On the other hand, the transcripts of the audio-

recordings, including non-verbal communication, were drafted by myself shortly after each interview.

I initiated the interviews by giving a brief introduction of myself as a current student at the University of Malta. I then proceeded to clarify the aim of the research to the participants and emphasised the significance of their involvement. By reading the Information Sheet and Consent Form, the participants became aware of the participation criteria (see Appendix A & B). Till et al. (2022) argue that participants should be informed about the study's objectives and procedures and reassured that they would be treated ethically at all times. Accordingly, participants were informed of the purpose of the study, the topics to be discussed, the research risks, confidentiality, and anonymity. During this procedure, participants cooperated strongly and effectively with me. They assured me that they had understood the information provided and were eager to begin the interviews. During the interviews I also observed their level of trust in me. Apart from doing my best to provide a secure environment, I described to them the years of volunteering I had performed in the field and how my enthusiasm and genuine interest in hearing about their experiences helped me connect with them. In spite of the power imbalance, the participants were able to speak freely about their own experiences because a trusting environment had been established. This is supported by Kishimoto and Mwangi (2009), who highlight the significance of establishing a trustworthy environment in which all participants are valued and have an equal chance to participate.

During the interviews, the participants were given the opportunity to describe their own insights and steer the discourse in the direction they desired (Becker et al., 2012). As a researcher, I acknowledged the importance of being attentive and actively listening to the interviewee's responses. I was also prepared to modify my plan and follow the direction of the interview and its pace (Hesse-Biber, 2020). Non-verbal communication, such as moments of silence, tone, and gestures, was also analysed. This helped me further to gain a better

understanding of attitudes, situations, and experiences beyond what was communicated verbally (Boswall & Akash, 2015).

4.8 Data analysis

Thematic analysis (TA), which was first introduced by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke (2006), is a widely used approach in the analysis of data in the social sciences. The approach is regarded as an ideal method to look at a subject that has not been well researched or at individuals whose perspectives on the topic are unclear (Clarke et al., 2015).

I chose TA because it is theoretically adaptable and offers a practical research method that is able to deliver a thorough, in-depth, and simultaneously multifaceted explanation of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In addition, this approach places emphasis on the narrative itself and directs critical scrutiny towards ‘what’ is being told. The story is kept and interpreted according to the themes identified by the researcher (Daragics, 2021). In the analysis I adhered to the six-step procedure proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006).

In the initial phase, I became acquainted with the data by reading each of the transcripts and the field notes several times. In the second phase, I engaged in systematic open coding across the entire data set. After I coded the first transcript, I searched for recurring codes. I then proceeded with each subsequent transcript, following the same procedures as the first one. Similar codes were then grouped together. During the third phase of the coding process, I located patterns, irregularities, and participant viewpoints that were repeated in various parts of the transcripts. Subsequently, after the data had been compared, the codes were revised and others were added. During this stage of the process, the main codes were organised into potential themes. The fourth and fifth phases required researching, characterising, and identifying overarching themes by ensuring that the underlying coded data extracts captured

the meaning and description of the themes to which they belonged. The final phase consisted of writing the report on the content and significance of the themes that emerged from the data. These will be presented and discussed in the next chapter in the form of an analytical narrative (Braun et al., 2016).

4.9 Ethical considerations

According to Mackenzie et al. (2007, as cited in Lin et al., 2020), ethical considerations arise in the course of conducting research on and in collaboration with refugee communities. These include concerns about the security, privacy, and anonymity of refugees, their vulnerability during interviews, and their ability to give informed consent while being in a politically, economically, and socially precarious situation (Kabranian-Melkonian, 2015, as cited in Bilotta, 2021; Pittaway et al., 2010, as cited in Bilotta, 2023). I therefore tried to take all the necessary procedures to ensure that no harm or adverse effects would result among those involved. These measures are documented in this chapter. Here I highlight some of the most important principles that I adhered to in more detail.

4.9.1 Ethical approval

Before this research began on 11th of October 2022, approval from the University Research Ethics Committee of the University of Malta (file number: SWB-2022-00138) was obtained.

4.9.2 Voluntary Participation

Participation in this study was entirely voluntary, which means that all informants, both potential and actual, were provided with the opportunity to accept or decline my request at any time. They could also choose to revoke their consent to participate at a later stage. During this process, I ensured that participants understood clearly that participation was voluntary (Seagle et al., 2020). Taking this ethical consideration into account was crucial since I did not want any participants to feel obligated in any way (Childress & Thomas, 2018).

4.9.3 Informed consent

As soon as potential participants indicated that they were interested in participating in the study, I sent them the detailed Consent Form for them to go through. After they read the document, I asked them to advise me if they still wanted to participate in the study. I also responded to any inquiries that potential participants might have had before agreeing to the interview. This ensured that anyone who was considering participating in the study could opt out if they were concerned with any aspect of the study. This act of respect (inherent in reciprocal relationships) allowed the participants to independently decide whether or not to participate in the study, without any influence or pressure (Johnston et al., 2021).

The process of gaining participants' informed permission did not end with the signing of the Consent Forms before the interviews, but was part of an ongoing process (Güler, 2019). In addition, during the course of the interviews participants were made aware that they could always decide to add to or delete data. This helped demonstrate my appreciation for their participation and communicate the seriousness with which I intended to approach their stories in my research (Debs-Ivall, 2016).

4.9.4 Confidentiality

As McCusker (2020) asserts, with the primary goal of protecting privacy, participants were given the freedom and flexibility to choose where, when, and on what day their interview would take place.

With regards interviews during which an audio-recorder was used, participants were guaranteed their anonymity and the confidentiality of their recordings. In fact, the recordings and the interview transcripts were securely stored on a personal laptop computer, safe from disclosure, throughout the duration of the project. They will be completely destroyed once the research is completed and assessed. On the other hand, in the case of the interview which was not audio-recorded, its documentation was locked in a secured drawer and will be destroyed once the research process is complete.

To guarantee that the participants' identities were completely protected, their real names did not feature in any research-related materials, including field notes or verbal discussions. In addition to giving each of the participants a pseudonym, I deleted or altered material that could be used to identify them, such as personal details given by the participants themselves. This minimised any potential danger of a breach of confidence.

4.9.5 Managing potential distress

At all times during the interviews, I was aware that the participants, despite their informed consent and willingness to participate, may experience some degree of emotional distress when recalling difficult events from their past as refugees (Naudi, 2015).

To mitigate this possibility, I prioritised “[selecting] participants who [had] been living in Malta for at least 12 months, and thus [had] access to supportive networks” (Sammut-Scerri et

al., 2012, as cited in Naudi, 2015, p. 60). Legal protection was also added as one of the inclusion criteria in order to ensure that residents of Malta had the legal right to live there.

In the event that any of the participants experienced emotional distress before, during or after the interview, I was prepared to provide them with the contact information of related local service providers (Naudi, 2015). However, I was pleased to realise that the participants saw their involvement in this study as a chance to share their stories and be heard by someone who was really interested in hearing about their experiences and perspectives. In addition, I gave the interviewees options to have the audio-recorder turned off, or to take a short break during which they could regain their composure, or to simply terminate the interview. Yet, I was relieved to see that most participants viewed their participation in this research as an opportunity to discuss experiences they had previously avoided to discuss, and to have their perspectives heard by someone who actually wanted to.

4.10 Limitations

According to the selection criteria, individuals who were unable to communicate in Maltese or English were excluded from this research study. I also encountered an unexpected challenge related to communication that turned out to be a limitation. Since not all of my interviewees spoke English fluently, I often had to rephrase and explain my questions to ensure they were understood. This sometimes resulted in me asking questions that deviated somewhat from the interview guide. As outlined by Marwson and Kasem (2019), such instances can create further challenges, such as when participants get lost in telling very detailed stories about their experiences, which seemed to be an easier way for them, as non-fluent speakers, to illustrate their point.

Additionally, as corroborated by Marwson et al. (2019) in such cases, due to the small sample size and the complexities inherent in the individual experiences of Muslim refugee

women, the material gathered for this study cannot be assumed to represent the views of the whole Muslim refugee women population in Malta. This study, for instance, only included participants who had legal protection to remain in Malta; thus, refugee women who did not have legal protection did not have their voices included. Besides, despite the fact that the participants shared comparable characteristics (such as being cis women, Muslims, and beneficiaries of some form of protection), each participant exhibited unique distinctions resulting from her own unique experiences (Ruokolainen & Widén, 2020).

Moreover, it is crucial to acknowledge that none of the participants originate from impoverished backgrounds. Despite initial financial difficulties, their experiences do not fully reflect the challenges that numerous refugee women encounter (Caruana & Rossi, 2021). In actuality, based on the interviews and the invitation extended to me to visit their residence, it was evident that the individuals in question have achieved a high level of housing stability. With this in mind, the aforementioned scenario could have potentially varied had the sample population been residing in an unconfined facility or availing themselves of government-provided facilities. Furthermore, it is evident that the sample population exhibits a high level of education, which has various implications for this research. Hence, it is advisable for the reader to keep in mind the aforementioned information while reading the text.

4.11 Conclusion

This chapter presented a thorough overview of the methodology employed in this research study. I first provided a brief introduction to the feminist methodology and the research approach used. I then reflected on my positionality in relation to this research project.

This was followed by an explanation of the recruitment process for the sample populations and a brief background on the characteristics of the participants. I then outlined the procedure that I followed to collect the data. The development of the interview guidelines and their link to the research questions were then described. The chapter concluded with a delineation of the data analysis methodology, the ethical principles that were addressed, and the limitations of the study.

The next chapter presents the data analysis, the findings, and the discussion, followed by a detailed evaluation of the results that emerged from the study.

Chapter 5 - Findings, Analysis & Discussion

5.1 Introduction

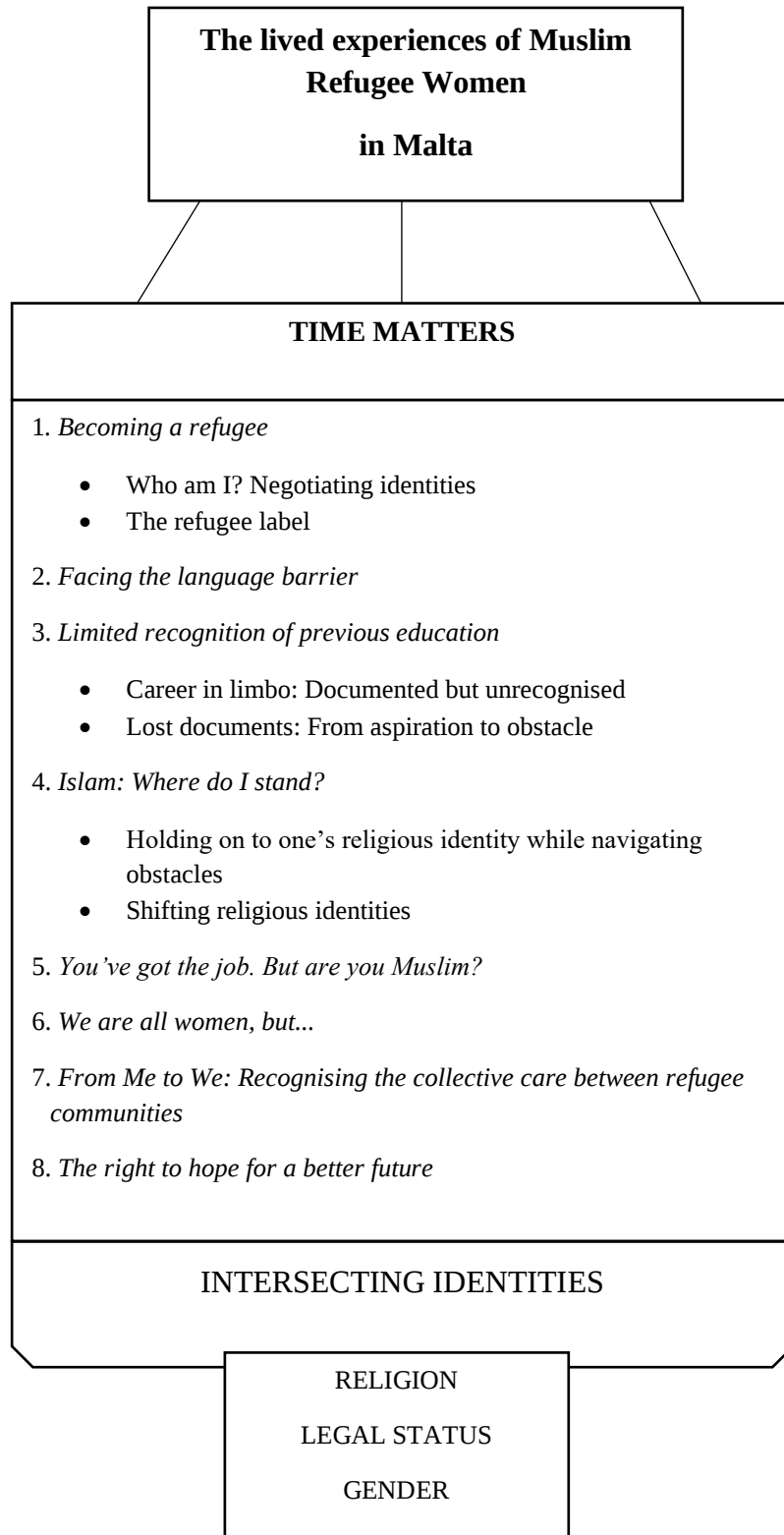
This chapter investigates the experiences of refugee women residing in Malta, with a particular focus on the intersectionality of religion, gender, and refugee status and how it influences and shapes their overall lived experiences. In this chapter I present the most significant themes that emerged from the individual face-to-face semi-structured interviews that I conducted with six Muslim refugee women.

5.2 Themes

The findings are presented in the form of nine themes. The diagram below is a representation of these themes and their interconnections with regard to the lived experiences of Muslim refugee women in Malta.

Figure 1

Presentation of themes:



5.3 Time matters

The concept of Time was identified as an over-riding theme from which eight other themes emerged. The fact was that the participants shared their personal experiences in Malta in terms of the Past, the Present, and the Future. ‘Time’ emphasises the significance of considering their timeline not as a sequence of events but rather as a number of different settings in which participants find themselves at various stages of their journey over time (Zetter, 2018). It was observed that when discussing the past, the individuals concerned began recounting their arrival in Malta, indicating that present and future experiences were informed by their past experiences in Malta – the past, present and future merge and almost co-exist, shaping experiences and providing a deeper sense of understanding. As such, their future lives are also influenced and shaped by the circumstances they encountered upon their arrival in Malta.

5.4 Becoming a refugee

5.4.1 Who am I: Negotiating identities

Embarking on a new life as a refugee woman after being compelled to leave one's homeland is likely to be one of the most daunting challenges an individual can face. It means leaving one's past, including one's loved ones, culture, occupation, and everything else associated with the concept of ‘home’. In spite of the fact that the participants were each undergoing their own journeys, what was remarkable is that they all began to share their stories, starting with “what it's like to be a refugee”. Before coming to Malta, the participants were individuals who had families, friends, homes, and employment. Back then, the refugee label was not part of their life, and most of them were unprepared to deal with its implications.

Alma, Nisrin and Rima, for example, felt that becoming refugees was unquestionably an influential and challenging event in their lives:

For me back in my country things were different. I wasn't a refugee and I never thought about this for once to be called like that. But when it happened I was not like happy. I have my family back in my country and lost my job and home too. – Alma

I still miss the job and the life I had. Even my family. We speak every day but still I cannot see them and because I am refugee I cannot go back for now. – Nisrin

The dislocation that is experienced as a result of being in a new and unfamiliar space where they were not 'known' tested Alma's identity. It was like mourning a lost self: "I was me back home, you know"; now it's like I have to be somebody else. Like pretending."

Rania also brought up issues such as how she was not accepted in Maltese society as she truly was and how somehow the situation took away her true self and made her invisible:

I come from a wealthy family. I'm a [medical professional] and know what my worth is but here it's another story when I arrived. Sort of, like you have that title you have to carry. My name is nowhere to be found. Even if you build an empire in my country, for example, it's still nothing here because you need to start again. Even place to live, which is the most important in the beginning. So like, you look your position the way it was home. – Rania

Indeed, as Holm Pedersen (2012, cited in Gren, 2020) states, refugee women like Alma and Rania feel like they are forced to experience a loss of self and it is as if they have to start all over again, accessing education, employment, housing, and so on.

Notions of identity were also expressed by Rima. In fact, she recalled how becoming a refugee meant changing her identity from that of a 'citizen' to that of a 'refugee':

I was the normal woman who worked, enjoyed life with children and family and had no problem about anything. But that's because I was born there and lived there. Here I'm just that lady who came, not knowing anything. So me being a happy person who had things, good things in life. When I came it was like I had to forget who I am and like the game my children play, game over. – Rima

Nisrin further explained how, in the beginning, she was in a state of limbo, grappling with the grief of losing her sense of identity while simultaneously seeking to establish a new one. For instance, she described how hard it was when two different cultures came into contact and the things that were once important to her were so no longer in Malta:

We're so different than Maltese people. What we talk about, what we dress, we eat, everything. I had to see the new culture and see how to adapt. That's the only way to cope here. There is no right or wrong just I had to do something about it. - Nisrin

This indicates that Nisrin and Rima found themselves in a profoundly challenging situation in which adapting to a new identity became a crucial mechanism for to cope and survive. Furthermore, although this adaptation may have involved significant changes in personal values, traditions, and even aspects of self-identity, for them it served as an indispensable stage to forge a new path forward amid the immense challenges they faced (Adeeko & Treanor, 2022).

5.4.2 The refugee label

I could feel that among the participants there was still a sense of disbelief. It appeared as though there was still a sense of shock at what happened. Besides, as evidenced below, Rima and Sara did not view their refugee status as an identity to be proudly worn, but rather as a source of shame:

Sometimes it's like a nightmare being called and treated as a refugee. Who would have told me. I had a good life home like job, family and friends. So yes, sometimes not making it till the end of the month it's not easy. – Rima

A refugee is not like you go in another country and people celebrate you because of being one. You lose job, like I did and it's like you need to put everything away. – Sara

This feeling of insecurity results from the struggles and challenges Rima and Sara had to overcome since the beginning, such as the loss of employment mentioned above, which was an essential component of the participants' identities. Indeed, the women who participated in the study did not fit the 'uneducated' or 'unemployed' stereotype that has been perpetuated of Muslim refugee women (Demirhan et al., 2022; Murkherjee, 2017; Soltani, 2021). On the contrary, education and employment were integral aspects of their lives, and they consistently emphasised the significance of engaging in both domains.

In a different vein, Farida was unprepared for the bureaucratisation of her daily life that occurred when she interacted with the many agencies and authorities once she became a refugee. In fact, for her becoming a refugee had to do with the realisation and acceptance that her future was no longer in her own hands but in the hands of the authorities:

Many times I stop and think that decisions are not taken the same way. For example, I spent months or year filling so many papers for authorities in Malta because of

becoming a refugee. At home it was so different. So it's like I'm lost. I don't think about it every day but it's there and I cannot escape it. – Farida

Here, Farida's dissatisfaction may be largely interpreted as a response to the institutional structure that restricted her sense of agency. Furthermore, while individuals are subjected to several levels of bureaucracy all over the world, those who are classified as refugees or seek such a status are particularly so (Gren, 2020). Since the status granted to refugees determines their legal protection, entitlement to social services, and ability to participate fully in their host society, without such a status it is impossible for them to make informed decisions about their future and access basic rights. With official refugee status, they gain access to essential services such as healthcare, education, and employment opportunities, which enable them to rebuild their lives and make meaningful contributions to their new communities. Thus, the life of refugee women like Farida was at a standstill—put on hold by a bureaucratic system—since authorities were in charge of the whole process when determining the legal status of refugees (Joormann, 2019).

Both Sara and Nisrin discussed specific instances when they encountered labelling. This phenomenon is also mentioned in the literature (Abdelhady & Ariss, 2022). Labelling eliminates individualisation (and differences in educational competences, employment histories, health difficulties, and so on) and instead encourages the concept of 'othering' and, in some cases, a sense of shame:

The one thing I will never understand and accept is why Maltese think that we can never be part of them but it's like we are left in the corner for example. I remember during my first job I was rarely called by my name. They literally used to say sometimes the refugee. Can you imagine? I was never going to be accepted. – Sara

Even I hide my id card sometimes when I am with people. Because they forget your name and you become the refugee. – Nisrin

The above testimony confirms writers in the field who refer to the symbolic representation of labelling a refugee as the ‘other’, a notion that is based on the axis of status. Malischewski (2012, as cited in Strekalova-Hughes, 2019) explains that the term ‘other’ represents refugees as a group of individuals with such diminished values that they are not legitimated as present or worthy of attention in a social conflict.

Alma described similar experiences of being compared to other refugee women and consequently treated as a member of a homogeneous and undifferentiated group. In telling her story, she stressed the struggle she had to face when she was considered in the same way as other refugee women. Alma remarked that while all refugee women were indeed women, they were not the same as they all had their own distinct identities that might change over time:

It is ignorant to think that I am like the rest of refugees. I don’t go and say to you that you are like the rest of Maltese, because you are different and so am I. We live, work, eat differently. Everyone is an individual and no, I don’t have an identical twin sister.
– Alma

The above finding corroborates, among others, feminist thoughts that reiterate the fact that a refugee group is not homogenous (Lammers, 1999, as cited in Nguyen et al., 2022). Even if two refugee women are of the same ethnicity, religion, age, socioeconomic status, or geographical location, they still differ in terms of family life, educational backgrounds, domestic and professional lives, and perceptions of themselves and others (Lammers, 1999, as cited in Nguyen et al., 2022).

5.5 Facing the language barrier

In a country where English is a dominant language along with Maltese, most of the participants upon arrival thought that their native languages were of little use. Four of the six participants had no knowledge of English, while the other two had a basic knowledge of the language. Consequently, participants emphasised that with little or no understanding of English, navigating the language was their top priority as it would help them access employment, education, and integration in Malta.

Nisrin and Rania described their experiences when they arrived in Malta. They could not help observing a correlation between the language barriers they encountered and the manner in which they were treated. They expounded on the lack of understanding, patience, and support from others:

I remember my English was terrible in the beginning and at work they used to talk behind my back and say I am a problem for them because they cannot communicate with me. They didn't have patience and called me names in front of manager just because I was not good as they are. That is discrimination. I was very sad that time. I was alone and lonely. No one spoke to me. I was in shock because people were not helping me but were the opposite. Even to go and buy something like food they don't help. You ask with pointing with figure but no one cares and look like you are an idiot.

– Nisrin

There were times were I was alone because I didn't communicate with those around me and felt really not well. And sometimes people don't understand that to learn something new like language, it takes so much time and energy. I think that was the darkest time of my life, not being able to communicate. – Rania

These assertions show that barriers extended beyond the linguistic dimension and into an existential one. As a result, the language barrier not only prevented them from being understood but also from being ‘seen’ and being given the attention they deserved (Sharifian et al., 2021). Sara went on to describe a time when she had to access public services but due to the language barrier she had to depend on translators. She explained how it made her lose control of what she wanted to say, preventing her from expressing herself properly. It undermined her ability to defend herself:

I remember it felt so bad to see that someone is talking on my behalf and not really me. I remember clearly I imagined that this lady who was the interpreter was saying things different in English. I was just saying yes but I was so lost. I asked what if she is not saying what I want to say? It is like someone took the power to speak and more worse the right. – Sara

Analysing Sara's experience brings to mind Spivak's critique of representation: "Can the subaltern speak?" Spivak (2015) argues that those in positions of power often speak for the ‘subaltern’, claiming to represent their interests and experiences. However, as shown by Sara, in the case of refugee women, when translators are the mediators³ between their voices and the dominant institutions or societies there is a risk that their experiences may be filtered, distorted, or oversimplified in the translation process. The translators may unintentionally or intentionally give their own shape to the narratives of refugee women, reinforcing power imbalances and potentially suppressing their agency. This reinforces the unequal power dynamics between

³ Spivak (2015) posits in the article "Can the Subaltern Speak?" that the subaltern refers to an individual who holds a lower position within a hierarchical structure, be it social, political, economic, or otherwise. Furthermore, it signifies individuals who have experienced marginalisation or oppression.

dominant and marginalised groups, further marginalising refugee women and impeding their ability to advocate for themselves (Spivak, 2015).

Whilst the above participants spoke about the ‘external’ barriers they encountered while learning the language, Rima shed light on a few of the ‘internal’ obstacles she faced. She described in particular how she assumed that her ability to speak her native tongue would be sufficient given that Arabic and Maltese share certain similarities:

I remember I was confident that Arabic was enough but not true. I spent months trying to tell myself that I don’t need to start English. But then you realise that no one is going to help you if you don’t communicate well. I understand a bit Maltese but was not enough. Even to apply for jobs they ask also for English. But it was difficult to me because for us we speak Arabic all the time even to pray, so like I took long time to realise that I need English. – Rima

Rima's initial lack of enthusiasm towards acquiring proficiency in English can be attributed to the close association of her mother tongue with her cultural and religious traditions (Rida & Milton, 2001; Shaw et al., 2019). However, this lasted until she attempted to secure employment as a hairdresser, when she was informed that her limited proficiency in Maltese was not enough and employees were required to speak English as well:

She tells me in Maltese that we have people who come to the shop and speak English and we cannot not talk to them in English. Another time the same they tell me you need to know the English not just bit of Maltese. So that is where I started mostly to learn English. – Rima

Rima’s account presents the challenges of living in a bi-lingual domain where Maltese and English are used in different contexts and where local and national power dynamics are

meshed. In addition to the complexities of the refugee experiences, they also had to navigate this hurdle.

Alma followed the culture and traditions of Islam by initially resisting enrolling in public English language classes because they were designed for non-Muslim contexts and mixed-gender classrooms:

In the beginning, I didn't go to classes because there were all kinds of different people.

Don't get me wrong, but I was confused and not being aware that it was normal here. I

[missed] the first course I remember until I convinced myself to go. – Alma

Alma's account here shows how the absence of gender-sensitive spaces in language classrooms impeded her from learning English sooner. Besides, the fact that the language course did not adequately accommodate her cultural sensibilities as a Muslim refugee woman exemplified the effects of ethnic-based discrimination on her linguistic choices (Hunt, 2021).

However, Alma still recalled positive experiences from when she started attending the course. She stated that she was still friends with most of her colleagues, who happened to be of different nationalities and religions: "I still speak to some of the course mates on Facebook and they are not from my country or they are not Muslims but we got along." - Alma. Thus it appears that while Alma's first reaction affirmed resistance, regardless of her gender role and identity, she still adapted to the change in order to learn the language (Freedman et al., 2018). In fact, Alma stressed that had it not been for her own bravery and determination, she would not be in the position that she was today: "I now can go out without thinking twice what to say because it comes natural". Sara also revealed her strong perseverance: "We must learn English to survive here. It is like the survival language. That's what I did. Lived to learn the language and look where I am today, having a good conversation with you."

5.6 Limited recognition of previous education

5.6.1 Career in limbo: Documented but unrecognised

According to Tibajev and Hellgren (2019), the fact that educational qualifications are not always fully recognised across different countries poses a particularly complex challenge for refugees who have a high level of education. This was mentioned a number of times in the interviews, and this aspect of their ‘past life’ appeared to have made an impact on their current circumstances:

Alma and Rania, in particular, argued that the need to flee their home countries should not automatically delete their previous history back home or restrict their ambitions for the future. Indeed, they voiced their frustration at being unable to practise their professional careers:

So for me imagine one country it is ok to be a [medical professional] and here in Malta no. I cannot work what I want for now. Even if I love my job that I do now but still I studied to be a [medical professional] and because of some certificate difference I cannot do for now. I need to do other exams. Like one for English and then once done that, there is the interview that I need to study more. – Alma

Even if I have certificate I still do not work at Mater Dei 'cause they said I need to do other exams. I registered with the Medical Council and I am waiting to do additional exams which have no idea how difficult they are. This take time and to get the medical license so it is difficult to not do what you study for. – Rania

According to these two accounts, their inability to speak English was hindering them from practising their profession despite their educational background and career aspirations. Hence, it can be determined that in Malta the acquisition of two additional languages is deemed necessary for an individual to attain recognition and visibility. The two participants even

showed me all their educational certificates, and it was apparent that they felt satisfied that they were given the opportunity to express and demonstrate their frustration. Nonetheless, to date (June, 2023), their applications were refused and they were given no reasons why they were still asked to attend specific courses and sit for specific exams. This made Rania feel sad, disappointed, and helpless:

Sometimes you have the power to control things but when it comes to these complicated stuff it is so difficult not to feel like you cannot do anything about it. When some days I think I feel so sad and disappointed. But I know that I can't do nothing. - Rania

For Alma it was an unnecessary add-on to what they had already acquired back home:

For me it is nonsense. I have a degree from University but Maltese decide that is not good. I have children to take care so I have no time to study more. They put a score, which really impossible, eight out of nine for all, for four tasks. Imagine four tasks, eight out of nine to get correct. I was so depressed. I told them, don't give me the license just to practise. I have all the certificates. They did not listen but. Just because they think I am not qualified enough – Alma

Alma's complaint shows how gender and refugee positions intersect and interact. As argued by Yalim and Critelli (2023), women (like Alma) perform gender roles while navigating intersectional roles as mothers and as members of the refugee community, which further exposes them to discrimination on the basis of education and employment.

5.6.2 Lost documents: From aspiration to obstacle

Rima's experience was made more difficult since she had lost most of the necessary documentation while travelling on the migratory routes. She described how her inability to

return to her work as a hairdresser continued to have a significant impact on her day-to-day life:

I dream to work again as hairdresser. I had a big shop and clients were friends. But here you go and tell you show me papers what you learn there. I said I don't have papers but I can show you. They never let me. I do hair of people I know here. But me without doing hair in a shop is not the same. I miss it and like I have a piece missing in my life.

– Rima

The absence of documentation not only stripped her of part of her identity but also – once again – part of her past. Rima added that she had to engage in low-paid jobs as a result of her qualifications being unrecognised:

You know what is funny? The lady of the shop of the one I go to try hair, she told me I have a job but to clean. I laughed. Not because I don't know how to do it but why this? It's different [from] what I wanted. Another time same, I had to work cleaning because the boss told me that is what you can do because you cannot show. – Rima

This sense of de-skilling that Rima described and the non-recognition of credentials in the host country can lead refugee women to feel lost and force them into low paid jobs (Shi et al., 2023). Shi et al. (2023) approaches the issue via the lens of Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital, arguing that the decreasing value of institutional cultural capital leads to the exclusion of refugees from regulated occupations, which in turn becomes a major obstacle to employment. As a result, refugee women are appointed to less qualified posts with lower wages than locals with the same skills and experience (Bauder 2003, cited in Shi et al., 2023).

To date (June, 2023) Rima remains in limbo. During her account of the persistent challenge of engaging with appropriate educational providers, her nonverbal communication

conveyed a sense of deep concern and frustration. The act of holding her head while explaining suggested the sense of fatigue she felt in trying to cope with her current situation:

So they tell me yes there are courses you can do different so you can work. I ask which one and they don't even know. And I tried everything. Even went for help to a person I know that said can help me but it is like asking for money honestly. Then people say we don't want to work. It is not me the problem but the system that we are treated like robots. – Rima

For refugee women who remained in limbo due to a lack of documentation, this was indeed a pressing issue. This was particularly so in cases such as that of Rima who, regardless of how much motivation and desire she had to succeed and practise what she had studied for, still found herself trapped in a state of uncertainty, unable to move forward or fully participate in society (Gren, 2020).

5.7 Islam: Where do I stand?

5.7.1 Holding on to one's religious identity while navigating obstacles

All the participants in this study reported that religion was part of their daily lives when they were living in their home countries, whether it was in terms of food, clothes, or gatherings of family and friends during Ramadan.

Given their devotion towards Islam, Rania, Alma, and Farida used a lot of spiritual language during the interviews, and I could sense that spirituality was very important to them. Among the most common phrases they used were *Insha Allah* (God-willing), *Mashallah* (What God wishes) and *Alhamdulillah* (Praise to God). These three participants, however, reported having difficulties adapting to a country that had its own religious norms and practices and which were

different from their own. They stated that not being able to follow their religious practices easily made their lives less comfortable:

In Malta we realised that the culture is different, you know, we had a shock. Believe me, we were shocked a lot. Cause it's completely different. We cannot practise our religion the way we want. We say we cannot feel the atmosphere of our religion and do our religious activities. Even to buy clothes. I went around Malta I remember and was difficult to find. I really miss it having all this at home. – Alma

I remember I found it strange not to hear the prayer call so in the beginning I stay on website to hear it from far. It's funny now but that time it's like someone took something away from me. I felt so lost. – Rania

The above accounts, as also noted by Letshufi (2016), indicate how Islam can provide a temporal continuity of 'home', as evidenced by the fact that religious practices and activities provide refugee women with the structure they need to cope with the overwhelming changes placed upon them. In addition, the “loss of self” is again observed in this particular theme. Both Alma and Rania experienced a profound sense of disorientation and loss, and yet one can say that for both Islam was an essential factor in maintaining stability, peace of mind, and group cohesion. It provided a sense of continuity with the past self, past lives and relationships (Letshufi, 2016).

In the midst of such changes, Farida tried to maintain a sense of identity within the community by cooking traditional dishes, particularly during the holy month of Ramadan. She stated that by connecting with a community that had members who came from her home country, her ‘foreignness’, indicated by her dress and language, was not so apparent. They spoke her language and shared her religious beliefs. It was different when she had to navigate

Maltese public spaces. However, Farida appears to have adjusted to the change of belonging to a religion that was dominant back in her home country but a minority religion in Malta:

I still don't feel that confident when I am not with my friends and others. Like I don't feel okay sometimes to wear what I wear. With friends and others who are Muslim is so different so yes sometimes I still cannot believe I am in a place with less Muslims. So I need to be careful sometimes not to experience something bad like being called something or even just a bad look from someone. – Farida

In addition, the finding reveals that religion is also seen here as a significant component of identity for refugee women. However, for Farida, her identity appears to have adjusted to change through the process of being devoted to a religion that was dominant back in Libya to one that is now perceived as a minority religion (Mirza, 2013). Such change, in cases like Farida's, influences the experience of oppression for women who describe hiding their faith (Okazaki et al., 2019).

5.7.2 Shifting religious identities

While Rania, Alma, and Farida were devout Muslims who wanted to continue their Islamic practices in Malta, Rima was still uncertain whether she would continue to practise Islam:

Islam for me had meaning and I had no choice. But now I don't feel that here. I continue sometimes because of my husband because he wants me to be Muslim. He tells me up to you but I know it is not true. But if I was alone I don't continue. Sometimes when I pray I don't feel connected. It's like pray for nothing. So I have to do it still just for my husband. – Rima

Concerning this issue, Chowdhury et al. (2021) reports that while Islam itself does not oppress women, there is still the argument that it has been used to justify the dominance males have

over women, creating a culture in which doing so is not only acceptable but also obligated. Rima here is seen to be oppressed and rendered powerless by patriarchal structures (Sager & Mulinari, 2018). Hence, she is placed on the outside of gender equality, and consequently also excluded from identifying her own needs and desires where Islam is concerned.

In contrast, Sara and Nisrin made the decision not to adhere to Islam on the grounds that it represented oppression and backwardness in society:

I don't even think about me being a Muslim anymore. I studied the Q'uran and know that life is better without it. Look back in my country what is happening. Tell me, how does that make me feel? Is this what Islam is about? If that is so, then no thank you. – Sara

I have friends who are Muslim and I respect them. But for me, now it's different. I don't pray or follow. And I live better like this. I keep fighting for my country and feel sorry for what my family and friends are going through. – Nisrin

Both Sara and Nisrin believed that their home country had reached a tipping point. Following months of protests sparked by the death of Mahsa Amini, a 22-year-old woman who died after being arrested for wearing her hijab improperly, there was no turning back. While they spoke, both participants got emotional, and their voices trembled. As a researcher, I noticed that the individual accounts of religious beliefs and practices expressed in this particular case were heavily influenced by the global context in which the subject was being discussed rather than solely reflecting personal feelings and preferences.

Sara stated that living in Malta had made her realise that she did not need to pretend that she followed a religion, which she was not happy to do. Instead she had the chance to embark on a journey of self-discovery, wherein she experienced a sense of identity loss, but also encountered opportunities to explore new ways of becoming. For instance, Sara recounted

how moving away from her community exposed her to diverse social networks and she could connect with people from different backgrounds and cultures. These interactions had broadened her perspective and challenged traditional norms:

I didn't know that I could have friends from different countries or who believe in another God and it is okay. Back home things were not that easy. Not from my family but from the whole country. So when I started getting on with other people, it was a sense of new world. - Sara

This shows that migration can indeed be emancipatory for women, particularly when they can experience various forms of empowerment and liberation while critically reflecting on their own identities and challenging any oppressive structures they may have encountered (Lust, 2021). This newly found freedom can be particularly impactful for refugee women, who would have faced restrictive social norms and limited opportunities in their home communities (Levitt & Jaworsky, 2003; Oliver, 2020).

5.8 You've got the job. But are you Muslim?

Khattab et al. (2018) found that Muslim refugee women's experiences of discrimination in the labour market are based on their religious and cultural legacy. This was experienced by Sara who, notwithstanding her distancing herself from Islam, continued to be tormented by its influence:

The worst part is to find a job as a woman with a refugee status and worse, coming from Islamic country. So I attended some interviews at the beginning. So they go through my CV and after asking some questions, one of the main questions for them is: Are you Muslim? I always explained and when I asked why is it too important to know

they just said like we have nothing against whatever you believe just for us to know. I also think if I was Maltese I would be treated different. – Sara

In light of the above findings, it should be stated that refugee women, like any other group of individuals, are diverse and multifaceted, and their identities should not be reduced to a single element such as religious affiliation. In the case of Sara, Islam did not define her entire being, and reducing her solely to her religious identity perpetuates stereotypes and disregards her individuality.

Rania recounted another experience when she was subjected to Islamophobia. She declared that in Maltese society her hijab identified her as a Muslim, which made her more vulnerable to discrimination. She stated that even though she had the necessary qualifications and experience, when looking for a job employers were hesitant about offering her employment because she wore the hijab:

I remember I applied [for a professional post] and the Maltese owner, the only thing he had issue was my religion. I have certificate and qualifications to work and experience. He said, I cannot, accept you 'cause you are wearing hijab so you are Muslim. And the worst thing is he said you have to do it like a Spanish, like a bandana or something like that because it looks better. So it, it was a shock in the beginning. So hijab no but bandana yes? You are both covering head so why is it a problem? – Rania

Rania decided to leave that specific employment after a short period of time. In her opinion, there was no purpose in spending time and effort when working possibilities were negatively conditioned:

That job was bad and was not worth spending more energy there. Here where I work now is different. They know I am Muslim of course it shows but they don't say anything and they don't see it as a problem. – Rania

While studies found that there are Maltese workplaces that have restrictive views towards hijab-wearing women (Boukadi, 2021; Debono & Garzia, 2016; Nimführ, 2016), this experience was a contrasting scenario as Rania was acknowledged for her diverse skill set and potential rather than being perceived as a liability

Alma explained why she viewed women as a target of discrimination when wearing the hijab, as opposed to Muslim males, who were less obviously Muslim and so less prone to Islamophobic sentiments:

Men are always the lucky ones. They don't get the bad comments of being a Muslim like we do. Just because we choose to wear the hijab every day to work and obviously it is visible. But men, no nothing. I have colleagues men who are Muslim and I laugh because no the Maltese do not know. – Alma

Indeed, as found by Abdullahi (2016), much like many other forms of racism Islamophobia is gendered since it does not affect men and women in the same way. The uniqueness and severity of the discrimination against refugee women result from the intersection of their socially subordinate status as refugees and the discrimination based on their marginalised identities related to gender and religion (Paz et al., 2021).

5.9 We are all women, but...

With a lot of persistence and a shared desire to succeed and uphold their standards, the participants were able to reach their current positions, which included having a job, financial independence, and ownership of their own private housing. However, behind the determination and bravery displayed by the interviewees, some experienced obstacles that impeded their integration in Malta.

Farida described her struggles of coping with the many challenges that her husband, being male, did not have:

Not that he is bad, but I am always tired. I have to take care of kids, homework, take them everywhere and the list is never ending. I have no family here. I remember my mother taking care of the children. Sometimes I have my own needs which I forget and even if I want to study I don't have time. – Farida

While she explained these difficulties, I could see tears welling up in her eyes. Despite the fact that she was a strong woman and had come a long way, the weakness of the support systems drove her to despair and exhaustion. She was currently experiencing the challenge of managing all aspects of her life independently due to the absence of her community of support which she used to have. In the absence of such support, Farida was not able to meet her basic needs or pursue her educational aspirations (Pangas et al., 2019).

The lack of help they get to care for children gives refugee women fewer options for social, educational, and professional involvement (JRS et al., 2016; Pratiwia & Linnossuoa, 2019; Saksena & McMorrow, 2020). The issue goes beyond the religious or cultural contexts of refugee women and is instead connected to gender norms: irrespective of their nationality, ethnicity, religion, or status, women are still regarded as inferior and consistently associated with the conventional housewife role.

Farida explained that while she wanted to follow a professional career, for which she had worked hard to achieve, she still had the additional role of taking care of others, which somehow fell under the patriarchal traditions of women's roles:

I work because I want to and I study for it you know. But it comes with more things to do. Full time with kids, full time with house so it's not easy. I feel like I am an

independent and modern woman but I still have to respect the role of a housewife how it was back in my country. Women do this and men do that. No mix of things. – Farida

Although Farida self-identified as an ‘independent’ and ‘modern’ woman, the influence of patriarchy as a means of exerting power, compounded by the challenges of being a refugee and lacking support from her community and family, as well as facing ethnic and religious discrimination, prevented her from fully embodying these attributes.

Concerning the traditional role of women, Rima provided a similar response. She stated that since she did not have any support from family or friends in Malta, she was expected to prioritise caring for her children and other household chores:

Sometimes I just wish that I have someone to help me. My husband works but as always it is still on me. And if I am sick it doesn't matter I still have to continue. Help you don't find here easy. I mean they go to school but for the young one is still with me and I cannot go to an appointment without taking her with me – Rima

In spite of all this, both Farida and Rima stated that their spouses had an active role in their daily lives, and the two women still shouldered obligations on their own. Besides, while both were independent in terms of employment and were actively seeking their own positions in society, they somehow still had to abide by the traditional roles of being women, mothers and housewives.

While Farida and Rima recalled having difficulties accessing support from their husbands and having to take care of most things at home, Alma, on the other hand, explained how her life was better with her husband here in Malta since she shared many of the responsibilities with him:

If I came with my husband in the first place, it would have been different because we could share most of the burden together. My partner is very modern so the struggles

that I go through would have been handled differently, because I would have had him from the beginning. Now that he is here, things are way better. He helps me, he cooks and take care of things here in the house. At least sometimes when I come back from work, I relax too. – Alma

This shows how women's interactions and cultural and gendered expectations, and their different interpretation of gender dynamics, influence their interpretations of their personal experiences. It is evident from their contrasting narratives that despite the fact that all the participants were women, their lives had been affected in very diverse ways.

5.10 From Me to We: Recognising the collective care between refugee communities

During the interviews, there were instances when individual participants shifted their role and spoke on behalf of the community, reporting as "expert witnesses" on the realities and challenges faced by their refugee communities:

Now that I reached a point where I am strong enough to be a woman and actually have the strength to do it, I know that others who just arrived in Malta or are struggling sort of need me. I volunteer quite a lot and I feel like sometimes I can share some burdens too with them. Why? Because I have been there. Don't get me wrong I know you mean well, but we are the ones who actually know what it is like. So it's like we talk and talk and then for example if I know a woman who needs help, I can do it. – Sara

Time is a major factor in this context. First, Sara had to become a refugee, rediscover who she was, and integrate herself into a new community. During this transitional period, Sara was able to establish her own voice and challenge the 'subaltern' status imposed on her. Apart from that,

once Sara found her resilience and determination, she moved from speaking for herself to speaking for others too (Walsh, 2019):

I help other women like me especially when they arrive. I don't want to see them go through the same as I did. Even if just to fill a paper for them. Sometimes it's nothing but a lot for them. – Sara

By assisting her community, Sara also brought attention to her own struggles and exemplified the fact that such difficulties were experienced collectively by the whole community. Nisrin also supported other refugee women. She described instances when she went out of her way to accommodate others, particularly women who faced the persistent challenge of being single mothers:

There are mothers without a husband alone with for example three children. So they have to take care of everything and don't know where to start. So for me it is a pain not to help them like buy them things, or help with children sometimes. I have my own life but when I find time I go and help. - Nisrin

Nisrin served as a member of a community of support. She created a space for single mothers within her community by providing assistance, support, and guidance on accessing services. According to Eisenclas and Schalley (2019), such support recognises the transformative potential of community support among marginalised groups and emphasises the importance of building coalitions across various forms of marginalisation.

On a similar note, as a refugee woman Rania was well aware of the challenges that individuals in her situation experienced. She had the ambition of raising awareness of these issues and become the voice of her community:

I know a friend who got rejected as a refugee and she has three children. She cannot get support, the financial support as well because she got rejected. So she struggles. She cannot go back to the place where she came from and at the same times she finds herself here alone. I help her out sometimes because I know what it's like and about a month ago I sent a letter on her behalf to the ministry because she don't know how to write in English – Rania

The situation described in the above excerpt brings home the fact that being recognised as a refugee could provide access to rights and entitlements, which had real material benefits. When they fail to acquire this status, as affirmed by Gbowee (2018), the only way refugee women could experience meaningful change in their lives was for them to open up and allow other refugee women to guide or speak for them. In addition, the author contends that women have been excluded from systems of representation and participation for far too long, and their opinions are only heard and accepted when refugee women are represented by the same community.

Alma organised workshops for refugees as she felt responsible for inspiring other refugee women to find their voices:

I do workshops, sometimes with NGOs or even Education. Sometimes about mental health, sometimes about how to access services etc. For us Muslims, I know women who it's not always easy to go somewhere because many don't know how to search. Many women attend and they want to learn and when they see you, like I am a refugee, they come back because they know what I am doing is for them because we go through same problems in life. – Alma

It is worth noticing in the above excerpt the use of the words 'us' and 'we'. They imply that Alma compared herself to other Muslim refugee women and she strove to raise awareness of

their predicament. By being active members of the community, Muslim refugee women may gain stronger sentiments of self-worth and mental wellbeing. They get the chance to be heard, their needs to be acknowledged, and an increased sense of representation (Yıldırım et al., 2022).

5.11 The right to hope for a better future

Although different participants expressed the idea differently, it seemed that ‘moving forward’ was a common goal in their lives. This mindset enabled them to envision a brighter future despite their challenging past and present circumstances. Rania expressed her aspirations for a fulfilling future, which included pursuing her desired profession in the medical field, achieving self-sufficiency, and embarking on new travel experiences:

I really want to travel and take a break. Like the Maltese do, even for three days, for me, it’s enough. Not always worry, but to stop doing and thinking and rest. – Rania

Alma expressed a desire to pursue a career in the medical field too. She asserted that if she succeeded, she would feel a sense of pride. Despite encountering various obstacles, Sara remained optimistic about her future aspirations. She possessed an unwavering sense of optimism and was determined to achieve greater success in her life: “This is me. All the bad things I had to go through, I still smile and try to see better times in my life. I am better than I was so I hope I will manage better. – Sara

Meanwhile, Nisrin had hopes that went beyond Malta. Despite her appreciation of Malta, she expressed her desire to make the Netherlands her permanent residence in future. The emotional connection sounded deep, and I could see how her desire to settle in her ideal country would give her hope for a brighter future:

I imagine me going to Netherlands and live there. Thinking about it makes me cry and get emotional. I go to holiday and I love it and I start apply for jobs but it is not that easy. But I will keep dreaming about that. – Nisrin

Hope extended beyond Malta for Farida too, as she wished to return to her home country: “I am safe here and it matters. But I wish to hug my mum and sisters and friends. Home is always home and I maybe one day my wish comes true.” – Farida

Farida's story demonstrated that she longed to replicate the fulfilling existence she had back home. These desires did not concern just her home country; they concerned emotions, individuals, and ways of living. She hoped to return home one day, but only after a change of government back home:

You know what I want. The simple cooking, spending time at the markets, speaking my language and see my kids happier. But I know that this way with the government is not good so I just think this when it changes. – Farida

Rima expressed her desire to take up the career of a hairdresser she had long desired and be able to care for herself and her family, and, if possible, pursue her educational aspirations:

The only thing I imagine is to do hair again in maybe my own shop or work with someone. If I have that I will manage better in life. – Rima

Ultimately, although each participant's narrative was different, it is obvious that they all considered the right to hope for a better future as an essential part of their lives. They hoped for a better future irrespective of their present and previous challenges. Correspondingly, Umer and Elliot (2021) observe that hope is an essential element in the lives of all individuals, particularly refugees who encounter difficult life circumstances. This assertion holds particular validity in light of the research findings, which indicate that the participants faced the daunting

task of adapting and reconstructing their lives, which went beyond surviving their initial challenges. In this regard, the ability to maintain a persistent sense of hope can serve as a therapeutic mechanism for refugees, helping them overcome obstacles by accepting their current circumstances and deriving purpose from their future endeavours as they progress and establish new homes (Koikkalainen et al., 2020).

5.12 Conclusion

In this chapter I have reflected on the eight main themes that emerged from the findings. The process of becoming a refugee was first addressed, highlighting the complexities of identity negotiation as well as the implications of the refugee 'label'. I then explained how the findings highlighted the importance of Islam in the host country, the obstacles and discrimination that some participants experienced on account of their religion, and the changes of religious identities among some of the participants. Instances of discrimination in the workplace experienced by some participants were then described. The importance that participants attributed to their refugee communities was also explored. Finally, the chapter brought attention to the notion of hope and the strong desire for a better future among the participants.

The following chapter links up the various issues discussed in the current chapter and gives some suggestions for community development, service provision, and future research.

Chapter 6 - Conclusion & Recommendations

6.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the salient findings of this research project as well as a number of recommendations.

As has been stated in Chapter Two, the literature on the experiences of refugee women is growing, but in Europe research on Muslim refugee women is limited particularly in Malta. In this context, this dissertation, based on individual face-to-face in-depth interviews with six Muslim refugee women, provides some important insights on the lived experiences of Muslim refugee women in Malta and investigates how the intersectionality of religion, gender, and refugee status shapes and impacts their overall lived experiences.

In this chapter, I present the main outcomes and underline the themes that emerged from the findings. Subsequently, a number of recommendations and suggestions are made concerning Muslim refugee women, community development, service provision, and further research.

6.2 Main findings

The findings of this study posit 'time' as an overriding theme in understanding the experiences of Muslim refugee women in Malta. An important aspect that emerged from the data was that the participants' experiences were not viewed as a linear sequence of events but rather as a series of different settings or stages they had been through during their journey over time. Simply put, participants make a connection between their experiences in Malta and the

past, present, and future, demonstrating how their past experiences have an impact on their current and future perspectives.

The findings clearly show the diverse experiences and interpretations of gender dynamics among the participants, demonstrating the ways in which women's interactions and cultural expectations shaped their personal experiences. For instance, the research indicates that the issue of limited support for childcare affected refugee women's social, educational and professional involvement, due not only to religious or cultural issues but also as a result of gender norms that viewed women as inferior and associated with traditional housewife roles. Notwithstanding their attempts to deviate from conventional gender norms, the impact of patriarchy and societal expectations may impede Muslim refugee women from completely expressing their aspired autonomy and modernity.

The participants of this study described a number of challenges related to their predicament, including the fact that becoming a refugee involved mourning their previous selves and forging a new path forward, incorporating changes in personal values, traditions, and self-identity. In addition, they recounted experiences of being labelled and treated as "different" rather than as individuals with their own unique stories and backgrounds. In this context, the label "*different*" created an *us* versus *them* mentality, verbally bringing into the foreground their distinctiveness from mainstream Maltese society (see also Malischewski, 2012, as cited in Hughes, 2019). The findings also demonstrate that such labelling leads to the loss of individualisation and contributes to a sense of shame and exclusion. The participants strove for the recognition of their individuality and challenged stereotypes associated with being a refugee.

The findings further reveal that at present (June, 2023) public service providers in Malta are not sufficiently equipped to meet the unique needs of Muslim refugee women. A case in

point is the fact that the limited recognition of their previous education credentials posed significant challenges for their employment, professional aspirations, and integration in Maltese society. In addition, it was found that follow-up appointments to determine the future of refugee women were scarce. Besides, the findings reveal that accessing employment was hindered further by the fact that apart from having their qualifications not acknowledged and recognised, the Muslim refugee women faced additional discrimination on account of their religious and cultural backgrounds. The hijab, in particular, was seen as a major hindrance to their employment opportunities. In general, however, the study's results indicate that discrimination against female Muslim refugees was gender-specific, with women experiencing a higher likelihood of encountering Islamophobic attitudes in comparison to men. It appeared that Muslim women's clothing being distinctive made them more visible targets for negative comments and discriminatory behaviour. Consequently, some participants were downgraded to less skilled positions with lower wages, unlike their local counterparts who possessed similar qualifications and work experience (see also Yalim et al., 2023). One can conclude that gender and the refugee status intersect, exposing women to discrimination in the field of education and employment.

Another issue raised by participants was that Muslim refugee women with limited language proficiency in Maltese and English faced great difficulties when trying to access information pertaining to employment, education, and integration in Malta. Findings show that, for instance, the use of interpreters and translators in public services in Malta created an additional burden for Muslim refugee women to express themselves and exercise their rights. In effect, this investigation demonstrates that there was a risk of their experiences being filtered, distorted, or oversimplified by interpreters, reinforcing power imbalances and suppressing their agency. Moreover, the respect of cultural and religious sensitivities in language-learning environments, such as gender-segregated classrooms, was crucial for some

participants. The lack of such spaces initially hindered their engagement in English language classes. Indeed, mixed-gendered classes were a barrier to learning for Muslim refugee women.

The importance of community support among marginalised groups is prominent in this study. It recognises its transformative potential and the need for coalitions across different communities that experience marginalisation. The participants of this study were found to place a strong emphasis on community empowerment. They spoke about the role of women supporting other women by providing practical help and they also shed light on the shared struggles experienced by the entire community. The exclusion of women from systems of representation and participation was also highlighted. They stressed the need for their voices to be heard within their own community. In response to these difficulties, the participants engaged in activities such as organising workshops to inspire and empower other refugee women, and to foster a sense of responsibility and unity within the community. These activities not only raised awareness but also contributed to the participants' self-worth, mental wellbeing, and social representation.

The study found that a strong sense of hope played a vital role in the lives of refugees. Hope served as a therapeutic mechanism that helped the participants overcome challenges, find purpose, and establish new homes. In my capacity as a researcher, I consider such findings deserving of acknowledgement and a chance to be heard. Despite the discrimination, intersectional barriers and other challenges faced by refugee women, they remain human beings with aspirations for a better life that they rightfully deserve. The participants expressed their aspirations and their dreams, emphasising the importance of moving forward and anticipating positive outcomes despite their difficult past and present circumstances.

6.3 Recommendations for community development and service provision

This dissertation provides a clear demonstration of the gendered character of forced migration, particularly in the context of Muslim refugee women, and highlights the pressing need for all pertinent stakeholders in Malta to acknowledge and effectively tackle this issue. In this spirit I hereby propose several suggestions pertaining to community development and service provision.

The notion that Muslim refugee women are multifaceted individuals, with each experiencing unique lived realities, is evident throughout the entire analysis presented in Chapter Five. In light of this, it is imperative for service providers to take into account the multifaceted nature of gender in relation to other significant social identities including but not limited to nationality, race, physical characteristics, age, religion, and legal status.

Training in cultural competences for community workers and other service providers is another initiative that should be urgently taken up. This will help to increase their understanding of the cultural, religious, and social contexts of Muslim refugee women. This training should cover topics such as cultural norms, practices, and religious observances to enable service providers to offer culturally sensitive and appropriate support. Preferably, this should be achieved by means of active involvement in dialogue and consultation with Muslim refugee women, with the aim of understanding their viewpoints and experiences. This can take place by conducting focus groups or community meetings.

This study reveals that in the process of adaptation and integration, Muslim refugee women require the help of governmental agencies and other organisations in areas such as education, employment and housing. Facilitating the process can be achieved through fostering collaboration and partnership among local government institutions, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), community-based groups led by refugee women, and Muslim

organisations. Such networks could provide access to expertise and resources that would inform the adaptation and integration of services and avoid duplication of efforts. Furthermore, it is recommended that regular assessments and evaluations on the effectiveness and impact of services designed to support Muslim refugee women are performed from time to time. There should be ongoing professional development to enhance service provision and adapt to evolving needs.

On a practical level there is the absolute need to prioritise the provision of information to refugee women, which to date (June, 2023) is insufficient, given the persistent challenges they face in accessing such information. Informational materials, brochures, and online portals should be accessible, visually appealing, and in diverse languages, also covering cultural and religious practices. Additionally, the information should be accurate, up-to-date, and relevant to their experiences, whether it pertains to education, employment, housing, healthcare, or other related services.

It is recommended that community workers serve as advocates for Muslim refugee women, providing them with support and resources to navigate their new communities. One possible approach could be through the implementation of outreach and education initiatives by community workers that address the discrimination faced by Muslim refugee women. Community workers could also provide support and protection against gender-based violence and other forms of discrimination. Moreover, the Maltese anti-racism strategy can be strengthened by involving community workers in its implementation. Community workers can work with local organisations and government agencies to ensure that the strategy is inclusive and addresses the unique needs and experiences of Muslim refugee women.

Another recommendation is to provide gender-specific classes to Muslim refugee women. Such classes would take into account their unique intersections of gender, religion,

and status. This can be achieved through the implementation of the Maltese "I Belong" strategy, with the involvement of community workers and other professionals in the field to ensure that the needs and experiences of Muslim refugee women are addressed.

The Master of Arts in Community Action and Development programme of the University of Malta, as well as other related courses, should equip students following their study units with the groundwork for understanding matters concerning the lived experiences of refugee women in the context of migration. This may offer aspiring community workers and other professions the opportunity to specialise in this area.

6.4 Recommendations for further research

Given the variety of concerns raised by this study, there is ample scope for additional research into the lived experiences of Muslim refugee women and their intersectionality with forced migration.

This dissertation is without a doubt a call for more research. Additional research that looks specifically at the lived experiences of Muslim refugee women and their intersectionality is highly recommended not least because such research would inform the design and help in the implementation of programmes and services. As specified in Section 4.10 of Chapter Four, the study's participants were required to be proficient in either Maltese or English. To enhance the thoroughness of future studies, it is suggested that researchers expand the range of their sample to encompass women who speak languages other than just English and Maltese.

Also, future studies should each narrow the research focus to a specific subgroup within the Muslim refugee women's communities. For instance, single Muslim refugee women may face distinct issues related to their experiences when compared to married Muslim refugee women with children. By limiting the scope of research to a specific subgroup, one can unravel

the intricacies of their lived experiences and break down common stereotypes positing that Muslim women are homogenous. Such focused research will contribute to more effective community action and development strategies that foster their empowerment and social inclusion.

As demonstrated in Section 4.10 of Chapter Four, none of the participants of this study originated from impoverished backgrounds. Although they faced financial hardships at first, their experiences do not entirely capture the obstacles that many refugee women face (Caruana & Rossi, 2021). Studies with a more diverse sample are therefore suggested in order to gain a better understanding of Muslim refugee women's experiences.

Future researchers should continue to adopt a participatory approach that involves Muslim refugee women as active collaborators in the research process. By this, I mean that it is vital to keep involving Muslim refugee women from the outset of the research project, including the design and planning stages. This would ensure that the research is relevant, culturally sensitive, and addresses the issues that matter most to the women involved.

Needless to say, there are numerous options for related studies. My ultimate recommendation is that these initiatives should consistently strive to improve the lives of Muslim refugee women.

6.5 Conclusion

This chapter highlighted the key findings of this study. Among others, I explained how Muslim refugee women, as unique individuals, experience their lived experiences differently in terms of negotiating their identities, language barriers, employment opportunities, access to educational qualifications, community support, and the right to hope for a better future. In the

process, a number of barriers to accessing support services were identified. In conclusion, this chapter offered a list of recommendations based on the findings of this study

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APPENDIX A

Information letter

Dear Sir/Madam,

My name is Ruth Mifsud and I am a student at the University of Malta, presently reading a Master of Arts in Community Action and Development. I am presently conducting a research study for my dissertation titled 'The lived experiences of Muslim Refugee Women in Malta: Exploring the intersectionality of Gender, Religion and Refugee Status'. This project is being conducted under the supervision of Dr Maria Pisani. This letter is an invitation to participate in this study. Below you will find information about the study and about what your involvement would entail, should you decide to take part.

The aim of my study is to explore how the intersectionality of Religion, Gender, and Refugee protection shape and affect Muslim Refugee Women's live experiences in Malta. Your participation in this study would help to contribute to the development of community work, whereby the involvement of Muslim refugee women, forming part of an increasingly diverse Maltese society, can be effectively addressed. Any data collected from this research will be used solely for purposes of this study.

Should you choose to participate, you will be asked to participate in an interview that will take approximately 60 minutes. The interview can be held online (over audio recording) or in person, at a time and place of your convenience. You will also be asked to sign a consent form. Should the interview be held online, you will be asked to send the signed consent form via email (as a scanned or photographed copy) or post.

If you are unable to provide a signed consent, I (the researcher) will invite you for the submission of an audio recorded verbal consent. In this process I will read the information to you, you will then be invited to give your consent by verbally agreeing to all the conditions outlined.

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary; in other words, you are free to accept or refuse to participate, without needing to give a reason. You are also free to withdraw from the study at any time, without needing to provide any explanation and without any negative repercussions for you. Should you choose to withdraw, any data collected from your interview will be erased.

The data will be pseudonymised in the research so that there will be minimal risk of identification. Your confidentiality is very important and will be respected. If you choose to participate, please note that there are no direct benefits to you. Your participation does not entail any known or anticipated risks. However, if you feel that the subject is upsetting, you will be provided with a list of available services that can provide you with adequate support.

Please note also that, as a participant, you have the right under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and national legislation to access, rectify and where applicable ask for the data concerning you to be erased. All data collected will be stored and later destroyed once the research project is completed, that is expected to be around November 2023.

A copy of this information sheet is being provided for you to keep and for future reference.

Thank you for your time and consideration. Should you wish to participate or require further information, please do not hesitate to contact me on ruth.mifsud.14@um.edu.mt; you can also contact my supervisor via email: maria.pisani@um.edu.mt

Sincerely,

Ruth Mifsud
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Dr Maria Pisani
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Ittra ta' Taghrif

Għażiż/a Sinjur/a,

Jiena Ruth Mifsud, studenta fl-Università ta' Malta, u bħalissa qed insegwi Master tal-Arti fl-Azzjoni u l-Iżvilupp tal-Komunità. Ir-riċerka għat-teżi tiegħi jisimha 'L-esperjenzi tan-Nisa Refuġjati Musulmani f'Malta: Nesploraw l-intersezzjonalità tal-Ġeneru, ir-Reliġjon u l-Istatus ta' Refuġjat'. Dan il-proġett qed jitmexxa taħt is-superviżjoni ta' tutur tiegħi, Dr Maria Pisani. B'din l-ittra nixtieq nistiednek tipparteċipa fir-riċerka. Hawn taħt issib aktar informazzjoni fuq l-istudju li qed nagħmel u fuq xi jkun l-involviment tiegħek jekk tiddeċiedi li tiegħu sehem.

L-għan tal-istudju hu li jesplora kif l-intersezzjonalità tar-Reliġjon, il-Ġeneru u l-protezzjoni tar-Refuġjati jsawru u jaffettwaw l-esperjenzi haġġin tan-Nisa Refuġjati Musulmani f'Malta. Sehemek jgħin biex ikun hawn iżjed għarfien dwar l-iżvilupp tal-ħidma fil-komunità, fejn l-involviment ta' nisa refuġjati Musulmani, li jiffurmaw parti minn soċjeta Maltija dejjem aktar diversa, jista' jiġi indirizzat b'mod effettiv. L-informazzjoni kollha li tingabar fir-riċerka tintuża biss għall-fini ta' dan l-istudju.

Jekk tagħżel li tipparteċipa, tintalab tipparteċipa f'intervista li tiegħu madwar 60 minuta. L-intervista tista' ssir online (zoom) jew personalment, f'hin u post ta' konvenjenza tiegħek. Inti tintalab ukoll tiffirma formola ta' kunsens. Jekk l-intervista ssir online, inti tintalab tibgħat il-formola tal-kunsens iffirmata tintbagħatlek permezz ta' email (bħala kopja skanjata jew fotografata) jew bil-posta. Il-formola tal-kunsens trid tkun; stampati, iffirmati u mibgħuta lura lili (ir-riċerkatur) bil-posta jew permezz ta' email bħala kopja skanjata jew fotografata.

Jekk ma tistax tipprovdi kunsens iffirmat, jien (ir-riċerkatriċi) nistiednek għas-sottomissjoni ta' kunsens verbali rrekordjat bl-awdjo. F'dan il-proċess ser naqralek il-formola tal-kunsens. Imbagħad tkun mistieden tagħti l-kunsens tiegħek billi taqbel verbalment mal-kundizzjonijiet kollha deskritti fil-qosor.

Il-partecipazzjoni f'dan l-istudju hija għal kollox volontarja; fi kliem ieħor, inti liberu li taċċetta jew tirrifjuta li tipparteċipa, mingħajr ma jkollok bżonn tagħti raġuni. Int liberu wkoll li tirtira mill-istudju fi kwalunkwe hin, mingħajr il-bżonn li tipprovdi ebda spjegazzjoni u mingħajr ebda riperkussjonijiet negattivi għalik. Jekk tagħzel li tirtira, kwalunkwe informazzjoni miġbura mill-intervista tiegħek tithassar sakemm dan ikun teknikament possibbli (pereżempju, qabel ma tiġi anonimizzata jew ippubblikata), sakemm it-tħassir tal-informazzjoni ma jagħmilx impossibbli jew ifixkel serjament il-kisba tal-għanijiet tar-riċerka, f'liema każ għandha tinżamm f'forma anonima.

L-informazzjoni se tkun psewdonimizzata fir-riċerka sabiex ikun hemm riskju minimu ta' identifikazzjoni. Il-kunfidenzjalità tiegħek hija importanti ħafna u se tkun rispettata. Jekk tagħzel li tipparteċipa, jekk jogħġbok innota li m'hemmx benefiċċji diretti għalik. Il-partecipazzjoni tiegħek ma tinvolvi l-ebda riskju magħruf jew antiċipat. Madankollu, jekk tħoss li s-sugġett qed taqlib, inti tingħata lista ta' servizzi disponibbli li jistgħu jagħtuk appoġġ adegwat.

Jekk jogħġbok innota wkoll li, bħala partecipant/a, għandek id-dritt taħt ir-Regolament Ġenerali dwar il-Protezzjoni tal-informazzjoni (GDPR) u l-leġiżlazzjoni nazzjonali li taċċessa, tirrettifika u fejn applikabbli titlob li tithassar l-informazzjoni li tikkonċernak. L-informazzjoni kollha miġbura tinħażen u aktar tard tinqered ladarba jitlesta l-proġett ta' riċerka, jiġifieri mistenni jkun sa madwar Novembru 2023.

Qed ngħaddilek kopja ta' din l-ittra biex iżzommha bħala referenza.

Grazzi tal-hin u l-kunsiderazzjoni tiegħek. Jekk ikollok xi mistoqsija, tiddejjaqx tikkuntattjani fuq ruth.mifsud.14@um.edu.mt; tista' tikkuntattja wkoll lit-tutor tiegħi elettronikament: maria.pisani@um.edu.mt

Tislijiet,

Ruth Mifsud

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Dr Maria Pisani

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APPENDIX B

Participant's Consent Form

I, the undersigned, give my consent to take part in the study conducted by Ruth Mifsud. This consent form specifies the terms of my participation in this research study.

1. I have been given written information about the purpose of the study; I have had the opportunity to ask questions and any questions that I had were answered fully and to my satisfaction.
2. I also understand that I am free to accept to participate, or to refuse or stop participation at any time without giving any reason and without any penalty. Should I choose to participate, I may choose to decline to answer any questions asked. In the event that I choose to withdraw from the study, any data collected from me will be erased as long as this is technically possible (for example, before it is anonymised or published), unless erasure of data would render impossible or seriously impair achievement of the research objectives, in which case it shall be retained in an anonymised form.
3. I understand that I have been invited to participate in a face-to-face or online interview. I am aware that the face-to-face or online interview will take approximately 60 minutes. I understand that the interview is to be conducted in a place and at a time that is convenient for me.
4. I understand that my participation might cause me to feel upset, thus I will be provided with a list of available services that can provide me with adequate support.
5. I understand that there are no direct benefits to me from participating in this study.

6. I understand that, under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and national legislation, I have the right to access, rectify, and where applicable, ask for the data concerning me to be erased.
7. I understand that all data collected will be erased on completion of the study and following publication of results, which is expected to be around November 2023.
8. I have been provided with a copy of the information letter and understand that I will also be given a copy of this consent form.
9. I am aware that, by marking the first-tick box below, I am giving my consent for this interview to be [audio recorded/video recorded] and converted to text as it has been recorded (transcribed).

MARK ONLY IF AND AS APPLICABLE

- ☐ I agree to this interview being audio recorded.
- ☐ I do not agree to this interview being audio recorded.

10. I am aware that extracts from my interview may be reproduced in these outputs, using a pseudonym [a made-up name or code – e.g. respondent A].

11. I am aware that if the interview will be held online; the researcher will use audio recording and will

activate the Require Encryption for 3rd party endpoints SIP/H-323 function. The researcher will only audio record the session.

12. I am aware that my data will be pseudonymised; i.e., my identity will not be noted on transcripts

or notes from my interview, but instead, a code will be assigned. The codes that link my data to my identity will be stored securely and separately from the data, on an encrypted disk, and only the researcher, her academic supervisors and in particular circumstances the examiners will have access to this information. Any hard-copy materials will be placed in a locked drawer. Any material that identifies me as a participant in this study will be stored securely for the duration of the study, which is expected to be around November 2023.

13. I am aware that my identity and personal information will not be revealed in any publications,

reports or presentations arising from this research.

I have read and understood the above statements and agree to participate in this study.

Name of participant: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

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Formola tal-Kunsens tal-Parteċipant/a

L-esperjenzi tan-Nisa Refuġjati Musulmani f'Malta: Nesploraw l-intersezzjonalità tal-Ġeneru, ir-Reliġjon u l-Istatus ta' Refugjat.

Jiena, hawn taht iffirmat/a, nagħti l-kunsens tiegħi li niehu sehem fl-istudju ta' Ruth Mifsud. Din il-formola tal-kunsens tispjega t-termini tas-sehem tiegħi f'din ir-riċerka.

1. Inghatajt l-informazzjoni bil-miktub u/jew bil-fomm dwar l-iskop tar-riċerka; kelli l-opportunità nagħmel il-mistoqsijiet, u kull mistoqsija ngħatajt twegiba għaliha b'mod sħiħ u sodisfaċenti.
2. Nifhem ukoll li jiena liberu/a li naċċetta li niehu sehem, jew li nirrifjuta, jew li nwaqqaf il-parteċipazzjoni tiegħi meta nixtieq mingħajr ma nagħti spjegazzjoni jew mingħajr ma niġi penalizzat/a. Jekk nagħzel li nipparteċipa, jaf niddeċiedi li ma nwegibx kull mistoqsija li ssirli. F'każ li nagħzel li ma nkomplix niehu sehem fl-istudju, l-informazzjoni li tkun laqget ingabret mingħandi tithassar.
3. Nifhem li ġejt mistieden biex nipparteċipa f'intervista wiċċ imb'wiċċ jew online li fiha r-riċerkatriċi tistaqsini mistoqsijiet biex nesplora kif l-intersezzjonalità tar-Reliġjon, il-Ġeneru, u l-protezzjoni tar-Refuġjati tiffirma u taffettwa l-esperjenza tiegħi f'Malta bħala mara refuġjata Musulmana. Jiena konxju li l-intervista wiċċ imb wiċċ jew online se tiehu madwar 60 minuta. Nifhem li l-intervista għandha ssir f'post u f'hin li jkun konvenjenti għaliha.
4. Nifhem li l-parteċipazzjoni tiegħi ma fiha l-ebda riskju magħruf jew mistenni.
5. Nifhem li m'hemm l-ebda benefiċċji diretti għaliha mill-parteċipazzjoni f'dan l-istudju. Nifhem ukoll li din ir-riċerka tista' tibbenefika lil haddiehor billi: tikkontribwixxi għall-

izvilupp ta' ħidma fil-komunità, li biha l-involvement ta' nisa refuġjati Musulmani, li jiffurmaw parti minn soċjetà Maltija dejjem aktar diversa, jista' jiġi indirizzat b'mod effettiv.

6. Nifhem li, skont ir-Regolament Ġenerali dwar il-Protezzjoni tad-Data (GDPR) u l-leġislazzjoni nazzjonali, għandi dritt naċċessa, nikkoreġi u, fejn hu applikabbli, nitlob li l-informazzjoni li tikkonċernani titħassar.
7. Nifhem li l-informazzjoni kollha miġbura se titħassar meta jintemm l-istudju f'temp u wara li joħorġu r-riżultati, li mistenni jkun madwar Novembru 2023.
8. Inghatajt kopja tal-ittra ta' tagħrif biex inżommha u nifhem li se ningħata wkoll kopja ta' din il-formola tal-kunsens.
9. Jiena konxju li, billi timmarka l-ewwel kaxxa hawn taht, qed nagħti l-kunsens tiegħi biex din l-intervista tiġi [irrekordjata bl-awdjow/irrekordjata bil-vidjo] u tiġi kkonvertita f'test kif ġie rreġistrat (traskritt).

IMMARKA BISS JEKK U KIF APPLIKABBLI

- ☐ Naqbel li din l-intervista tiġi rreġistrata bl-awdjow.
 - ☐ Ma naqbilx li din l-intervista tiġi rreġistrata bl-awdjow.
10. Konxju/a li siltiet mill-intervista tiegħi jistgħu jiġu riprodotti b'mod anonimu jew bl-użu ta' psewdonimu [isem ivvintat jew kodiċi - eż. parteċipant A].

11. Jiena naf li jekk l-intervista se ssir online; u r-riċerkatriċi se tuża ż-Zoom u se tattiva l-għażla tar-Require Encryption for 3rd party endpoints SIP/H-323. Ir-riċerkatriċi se tirrekordja d-diskors biss ta' waqt is-sessjoni, mingħajr filmat.
12. Jiena konxju/a li l-informazzjoni tiegħi se tkun psewdonimizzata, jiġifieri l-identità tiegħi mhix se titniżżel fit-traskrizzjonijiet jew fin-noti tal-intervista, imma minflok, se niġi assenjat/a kodiċi. Il-kodiċijiet li jorbtu l-informazzjoni dwari mal-identità tiegħi se jinżammu b'mod sigur u separat mill-informazzjoni, f'file kodifikat fuq il-kompjuter tar-riċerkatriċi, protetti b'password, u r-riċerkatriċi biss, it-tutor akkademiku u l-eżaminaturi se jkollhom aċċess għal din l-informazzjoni. Kwalunkwe materjal stampat se jitqiegħed f'armarju msakkar. Kwalunkwe materjal li jidentifikani bħala parteċipant/a f'dan l-istudju se jinżamm b'mod sigur sakemm isir l-istudju, li huwa sa November 2023.
13. Konxju/a li l-identità tiegħi u d-dettalji personali tiegħi mhux se jiġu żvelati f'xi pubblikazzjoni, rapport jew preżentazzjoni li tista' toħroġ minn din ir-riċerka.

Qrajt u fhimt l-istqarrijiet t'hawn fuq, u naqbel li nipparteċipa f'dan l-istudju.

Isem il-parteċipant/a: _____

Firma: _____

Data: _____

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APPENDIX C

Social Media recruitment post

Hello, my name is Ruth Mifsud and I am currently reading a Master of Arts in Community Action and Development. I am presently conducting a research study for my dissertation titled ‘The lived experiences of Muslim Refugee Women in Malta: Exploring the intersectionality of Gender, Religion and Refugee Status.’ My aim is to contribute to the development of community work, whereby the involvement of Muslim refugee women, forming part of an increasingly diverse Maltese society, can be effectively addressed. I am looking for 6 participants who are female beneficiaries of protection including refugee status, subsidiary protection or special residence authorisation, aged 18 or over, able to communicate in either Maltese or English and have lived in Malta for at least one year. This project is being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Maria Pisani. Should you be interested or require any further information, please do not hesitate to contact me or my supervisor on the following: ruth.mifsud.14@um.edu.mt or maria.pisani@um.edu.mt. Thank you for your time, and I look forward to hearing from you soon!

Social Media recruitment post

Hello, Jien jisimni Ruth Mifsud u qed naqra għal Master tal-Arti fl-Azzjoni u l-Iżvilupp tal-Komunità. Bhalissa qed inwettaq studju ta' riċerka għat-teżi tiegħi intitolata ‘L-esperjenzi tan-Nisa Refuġjati Musulmani f'Malta: Nesploraw l-intersezzjonalità tal-Ġeneru, ir-Reliġjon u l-Istatus ta' Refuġjat'. L-għan tal-istudju tiegħi huwa li nikkontribwixxi għall-iżvilupp tal-ħidma fil-komunità, fejn l-involviment ta' nisa refuġjati Musulmani, li jiffurmaw parti minn soċjeta Maltija dejjem aktar diversa, jista' jiġi indirizzat b'mod effettiv. Qed infittex 6 parteċipanti li huma nisa benefiċjarji ta' protezzjoni inkluż l-istatus ta' refuġjat, protezzjoni sussidjarja jew

awtorizzazzjoni ta' residenza speċjali, ta' 18-il sena jew aktar, kapaċi jikkomunikaw bil-Malti jew bl-Ingliż u jkunu għexu Malta għal mill-inqas sena. Dan il-proġett qed jitmexxa taħt is-superviżjoni ta' Dr Maria Pisani. Jekk tkun interessat/a jew teħtieġ aktar informazzjoni, jekk jogħġbok, toqgħodx lura milli tikkuntattjani jew lis-superviżur tiegħi fuq l-indirizzi elettronici li ġejjin: ruth.mifsud.14@um.edu.mt jew maria.pisani@um.edu.mt. Grazzi tal-ħin tiegħek, u nistenna bil-herqa li nisma mingħandek dalwaqt!