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‘Good life is first of all security, not to live in fear’: A qualitative exploration of female refugees’ quality of life in the United Kingdom

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Word count: 8990

Abstract

There is growing interest in using Sen's Capability Approach (CA) as a framework to assess quality of life and well-being. The aim of the current paper was to use an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach using the CA framework to explore what constitutes a ‘good life’ for female refugees post-resettlement in the UK. Four focus groups with sixteen women were conducted in Liverpool. Data was analyzed using an IPA. The women’s experiences revealed three highly interconnected superordinate themes necessary to achieve a ‘good life’; (i) legal security, (ii) social cohesion, and (iii) personal agency. Personal agency was the most prominent theme. The women described a ‘good life’ to be dependent on gaining a refugee status, suggesting this may constitute a basic capability for refugee women in the UK. After which, higher-order capabilities can be pursued such as exploring one’s agency, gaining a sense of belonging in the UK, developing a future, and building and sustaining a sense of connectedness with others. Studies such as this one can inform the development of more nuanced approaches to assessing and measuring quality of life and well-being of female refugees in high-income countries such as the UK.

Keywords: *Refugee, Women, Interpretative Phenomenological Approach, Capabilities Approach*

Background

The United Kingdom (UK) has seen an increase in asylum applications in recent years. By the end of 2019, the UK received 35,566 asylum applications, and 20,703 were offered protection in the form of grants of asylum, humanitarian protection, alternative forms of leave and resettlement (Home Office [HO], 2019). Once a positive asylum decision is reached, new refugees are granted five years of limited leave to remain, with permission to access employment, welfare benefits, education and access to the National Health Service (Doyle, 2014).

Despite gaining access to different areas of support, these five years constitute a period of uncertainty as the HO reserves the right to review an individual's case at any point (HO, 2017). Research into the first year of being granted refuge reveals delays in receiving essential documents for identification, welfare support, risk of destitution, and challenges accessing employment and education (Doyle, 2014; Rowley et al., 2019). At the end of the 5-year period, refugees must apply for indefinite leave to remain (ILR) in order to stay in the UK. In 2019, there was a 9% decrease in ILRs being granted for refugees (HO, 2020). Once individuals hold ILR for 12 months, they can apply for citizenship if they meet the necessary requirements (HO, 2018). Researchers note that these restrictive policies hinder AS&R's capacity to rebuild their lives post-resettlement (Grace et al., 2017; Refugee Council, 2017), stating that this temporary status is 'not compatible with the desire to have active citizens engaged in all aspects of economic, social and political life' (Stewart & Mulvey, 2014, p.1034).

Indeed, previous research has indicated that AS&R face socioeconomic challenges, isolation, loss of life projection, and decreased health after gaining ILR (Khawaja et al., 2008; Rowley et al., 2019). Similarly, the uncertainty of protracted asylum processes has been linked to decreased well-being (Walther et al., 2020). For example, a qualitative study conducted in the UK using a Capabilities Approach (CA) framework to understand unaccompanied migrant's conceptualizations of well-being revealed high levels of anxiety surrounding the uncertainty of legal situations and indefinite waiting periods (Chase, 2019).

Female Refugees

Particular concerns have been raised regarding the needs of female AS&Rs (UNHCR, 2016). In the UK, a significant proportion of refugee women have experienced violence and remain vulnerable upon resettlement (Dorling et al., 2019). Research shows clear gender differences in accessing education, training, employment, general health, budgeting, housing and language proficiency, with women generally faring worse than men (Cheung & Phillimore, 2017). Additionally, Carswell et al. (2011) found post-migration stressors in the UK to be significantly associated with post-traumatic stress disorder and emotional distress. However, research looking at positive mental health outcomes remains scarce. Systematic reviews looking at the mental health of AS&R populations clearly identify the comparative lack of intervention studies measuring well-being and quality of life (QoL) in high, low and middle-income countries (Bosqui & Marshoud, 2018; Turrini et al. 2019). These reviews also highlight predominantly poor quality of evidence regarding well-being and QoL in AS&R. Furthermore, a review on the impact of migration on refugee women suggested that migration can bring about positive changes, such as freedom, equity and greater opportunities (Shishehgar et al., 2017). Identifying factors that can promote the mental health and well-being of refugee women is important to enable positive resettlement.

1.1.Applying the Capability Approach in the Context of Refugees

There is growing interest in using Sen's CA to assess QoL and evaluate social policies (Sen, 1993). A crucial normative argument of Sen's approach is that a 'good life' should concern people's capabilities - the freedom and opportunities 'to be' and 'do' what an individual values (Sen, 1985). Sen argues that freedoms have intrinsic and instrumental value; "The 'good life' is partly a life of genuine choice, and not one in which the person is forced into a particular life — however rich it might be in other respects" (Sen, 1985, p.70). Consequently, Sen deliberately refrained from providing a universal list of capabilities, stating that different capabilities are relevant to different contexts, and can be influenced by personal, social and environmental conditions (Stiglitz & Sen, 2009). In order to choose a list of relevant capabilities that are worth promoting, one must go beyond theory and include local consensus building through discussion (Sen, 2004). Therefore, a bottom-up approach is preferred to determine the relevant capabilities for different groups and contexts.

To date, few studies have attempted to measure capabilities, with the majority doing so

by reference to the researchers' own values or using existing datasets (Robeyns, 2006). One focus group study did develop an index of capabilities for women in Malawi using a bottom-up approach which proved to be a valid and reliable measure of QoL (Greco et al., 2016). This provides evidence for the feasibility of developing a list of capabilities directly from people's voices, and that group dynamics are an appropriate participatory method for defining and measuring challenging concepts.

A similar bottom-up approach to Greco et al. (2016) was used in the current research, whilst incorporating a new method – an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). IPA is a phenomenological, hermeneutic method concerned with 'the detailed examination of personal lived experience, the meaning of experience, and how participants make sense of that experience' (Smith, 2011, p.9). This entails a 'double hermeneutic' process where the researcher interprets the participant's interpretation of their experience (Smith et al., 2009). IPA is considered particularly useful for examining complex, ambiguous and emotional topics (Smith & Osborn, 2015). The aim of the current paper was to conduct an IPA using a CA framework to explore what constitutes a 'good life' for female refugees post-resettlement in the UK

Methods

Study Design

Sen (2005) argues that developing a list of capabilities must depend on the process of public reasoning which is specific to the context to which the list aims to speak. For this reason, a qualitative design was used; four focus groups (FG) were conducted in Liverpool. Although IPA is traditionally used for in-depth semi-structured interviews, its techniques have previously been applied to FG (Smith et al., 2009). In the particular context of FG, the double hermeneutic within IPA becomes a multiple hermeneutic, as the researcher interprets the participants' interpretation of their experience, with the additional task of understanding participants' interpretation of other people's experiences through interaction within the group (Tomkins & Eatough, 2010).

Participants and Recruitment

Sixteen women took part in four FG, which on average lasted one hour (Table 2). Data for IPA are obtained from purposive, homogenous samples (Smith, 2015). The four

homogenous elements in the current study were; 1) having a 5-year refugee status, 2) being female and, 3) being able to converse comfortably in English.

For recruitment purposes, author CB contacted gatekeepers of community organizations working with refugee women in Liverpool. Three different approaches were used; (i) visiting drop-in sessions for direct recruitment, (ii) gatekeeper referrals, for individuals who met the inclusion criteria, and (iii) snowball sampling. Composition details of each group can be found in Table 2. Seven women were unable to participate due to the timing of the FG and one FG was cancelled as the level of English was not sufficient.

Data collection

Data collection took place July to December 2019. A pilot FG was conducted at the University of Liverpool (UoL), with a sample of non-refugee women to test the duration and flow of the interview schedule. No changes were made, and data was not included for analysis.

The interviews were conducted by author CB; a female PhD researcher in her mid 20s. Prior to data collection, CB received training on conducting focus group interviews and building rapport with participants. Three of the FG took place at the organization of recruitment, and one at UoL upon the participants' interest in visiting the campus. Travel costs were reimbursed. Ethical approval was granted by UoL's Health and Life Sciences Research Ethics Committee of Psychology, Health and Society (approval reference number: 4701).

A participant information sheet and advertisement were given prior to the FG explaining the purpose, voluntary nature, data handling, anonymity, confidentiality, and information on support agencies available in the region. This was verbally repeated at the start of the FG. Written and verbal consent was given. One participant was illiterate; therefore, a witnessed mark was provided.

All FG were in English and digitally recorded. To ensure anonymity, each participant was asked to provide the name or pseudonym to be used during the recording. Not all participants chose a pseudonym, therefore pseudonyms used in this paper were chosen by author CB. Group discussions were facilitated by a moderator (CB) and a facilitator.

A semi-structured topic guide was used with open ended questions based on Greco et al. (2015)'s work (Appendix A). The open-ended nature of the questions was chosen to encourage participants to come up with their own capability dimensions, as described by Sen (2005). Discussions started with an open exploration on the meaning of a good life (*what does the term good life mean to you?*). When discussions around a topic drew to a natural close, probes were used to introduce specific questions regarding dimensions and valued choices. The topic guide was discussed with each of the gatekeepers prior to the FG. Sen also states that there is a need to understand the importance of the different capabilities included in the list (Sen, 2005). Therefore, participants were invited to write down the three most important dimensions to living a good life in the UK. Participants were verbally debriefed, and a copy of the debrief information was provided for participants to take home.

Data Analysis

Bracketing

Prior to data collection and throughout the analysis, bracketing was carried out by author CB through a reflexive journal. Bracketing is a methodological procedure of phenomenological inquiry that requires deliberate putting aside of one's own beliefs and prior knowledge about the phenomenon under investigation before and throughout the phenomenological investigation (Carpenter, 2007).

Analysis

IPA has two complementary commitments; the *phenomenological* requirement to understand and 'give voice' to the experiences and concerns of the participants, and the *interpretative* requirement which aims to contextualise and 'make sense' of these experiences from a psychological point of view (Larkin et al., 2006). In the current study, the *phenomenological* requirement led the development of the themes, described in the results section, and the *interpretative* requirement allowed these themes to be interpreted in the context of the CA framework, presented in the discussion.

Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim and analyzed by CB. In order to make sense of IPA's multiple hermeneutic circle for FG, transcripts were parsed twice; (i) for group-level patterns and dynamics, and (ii) for individual accounts (Smith, 2004). For the

analysis of both the group-level and individual accounts empirical IPA guidelines (Tomkins & Eatough; 2010) were used, which are described below.

In the first step, standard IPA procedures were used (Smith et al., 2009). Transcripts were read and re-read at the group-level, and preliminary notes were written including exploratory, linguistic and conceptual comments by CB (Table 1).

-----Table 1 -----

Provisional themes were selected by prevalence and representativeness (Smith, 2011), and organized into a hierarchy including ‘subordinate’ themes’ which were given a title to capture the emergent themes underneath. A table was produced showing each subordinate theme, emergent themes, and supporting quotes per group (Smith & Eatough, 2007).

To ensure that the process was iterative, the analytical loop was revisited for each participant within the FG, as suggested by Tomkins & Eatough (2010). Following individual-level iterative interpretations, amendments were made to the group-level themes. For example, the theme *social impact on emotions* was changed to *social cohesion* in FG1. Final themes with supporting quotes were peer-reviewed by three researchers who were distinct from the FG moderator and facilitator; a doctoral student, research associate and an associate professor of clinical psychology (RW).

Themes were compared and contrasted across groups. Overlapping ‘subordinate’ themes were clustered into ‘superordinate’ themes. In order to create ‘subordinate’ themes that were relevant across the groups, the emergent and ‘subordinate’ themes for each FG were revisited once more engaging in the hermeneutic circle (see Figure 1).

----- **Figure 1** -----

Results

Four FG were conducted. Participants’ demographics can be found in Table 2.

-----Table 2-----

There was a powerful sense of shared and overlapping experiences between the participants within their groups. This was evoked through detailed accounts of their experiences pre and post-migration. Overall, emotive language was used when describing personal experiences of migration, as these were often described in terms of the emotional impact thereof.

The value of using FG was reflected in the different turns the conversation took through interactions. For example, in Table 1, Zahra describes frustrations towards encounters of a lack of female agency and the impact this has on women's lives. Fatima attributes this lack of agency to culture, highlighting the varying extent to which discrepancies between the women's own culture and host country's culture were perceived as an important issue.

Participants contributed issues related to membership of different groups, including being a refugee, female, from a particular culture or religion. In Table 1, Zahra refers to '*our culture*', including both her own (Sudanese) and Fatima's (Syrian), both distinctive to the UK. Participants used a collective voice to describe experiences that were common to other group members (i.e. the asylum process). However, personal accounts linked to individual experiences were distinguished through the use of statements including 'in my opinion', 'I think', or 'to be honest'. This would not have been necessary in one-on-one interviews and stood out against times where experiences were described without such reservations.

The meaning of 'good life'

Three superordinate themes were identified to achieve a 'good life' in the UK; (i) legal security, (ii) social cohesion, and (iii) personal agency.

i. Legal Security '*All our dream is to get paper*' (Fatima, FG2)

Legal security is necessary to achieving a good life through a democratic enforcement of law, going through the step-based system, and the mental impact of migration.

Democratic enforcement of law

Participants described the government's role in enforcing democracy through the protection of equality and advancement of basic human rights, often described through a comparison between pre-and post- migration experiences.

Adila: when I got my status [refugee status] after that I have problem as well. I have a lot of paperworks, official things, of course. But I can solve it I learn a lot of things. I learn my law in this country, it gives me a lot of opportunity in the future. If I hmm...if... if some things happens for my official things uh I remember when I did some things I need this law, ehm... and I know my rights. I know my rights. But ehm... in my country it's not this. You have official law and unofficial law as well and it's so different (...) government eh who they control our country and our people, they are not democracy people. They are not hmm... good mind people, I think so. That's why we are so hmm... suffered from them. (FG1, Azerbaijani)

When living under a totalitarian system of rule in their country of origin, citizens are deprived of autonomous decision making. There is recognition that governments should have good intentions ('*good minded people*') and accountability to the law ('*You have official law and unofficial law*'). A lack thereof leads to suffering within society.

Safeguarding freedom of speech was identified as imperative to achieving a good life. Previous experiences of censorships were contrasted with newfound freedom of speech in the UK, including freedom of religion. Some described a transition period, where the fear of government and/or social reprisal remained even post-migration. Participants across groups highlighted their relief at being able to enjoy these freedoms:

Amaya: And I can share my idea. I can go anyone else and I for example as a voluntary is I can talk without think how if I talk, something right for me? Wrong for me? Not. I can place Instagram and Facebook, without any, any, scared I can use. I can evangelize in here, no it's, you can't, you can't imagine how I feel happy when I write about Jesus and I public, I send public. (FG3, Iranian)

Zahra: Sometimes a lot of people in Syria saw my photo on Facebook and contact with my mom, 'how your.... Uhh how she can put these photo on Facebook?' (...)(FG2, Syrian)
Fatima: Yes, not allowed to put your photos or pictures in the Facebook (FG2, Sudan)

Sevinc: Yeah uhm here uhm I..., I achieved two free speak. One; uhm free speak politics, free speak my ideas... things.... But second; free speak in my house. In my family. For me, [laughs] twice, double, double freedom. (FG1, Azerbaijani)

This highlights the long-term impact of having lived in a repressed state and the happiness that stems from being able to have these freedoms.

Step-based system

To achieve a good life, the different stages of the *step-based system* to achieving legal security must be considered. Each step of the process brings new priorities, struggles, rights and freedoms. Those who are detained are considered to have neither basic human rights nor freedoms (*'That's why detention centers are worse than prisons. People in detention centers prefer to be in prison'* -Mirembe, FG3, Ugandan). The asylum system was described as confusingly complex and controlling, and external help was required to navigate it. There was also a recognition that basic human rights are protected once the asylum claim is made.

An explicit distinction was made between gaining basic human rights and gaining freedom; freedom was described as having similar rights to British citizens, facilitating the ability to pursue individual goals beyond having basic needs met:

Mirembe: (...) if you are not in detention centers, home office provide you the basic human rights. (...) I know in my time we were given at least an accommodation, we were given maybe like five pounds a day for food, and then maybe you had access like maybe to charities and maybe parcels and you know clothes, and things, a few things, like basic human rights. (...) if you are good in your status [refugee status] you have the freedom maybe to like travel, to work, you know? To do things that the citizens will do as well. (FG3, Ugandan)

This was echoed by Fatima (FG2), who described achieving similar rights to be dependent on obtaining citizenship:

Fatima: Yeah, now I think about these five years, after that I think... but now I can do

everything for my children and for myself. I can go to university, I can improve my English, I can join in the university, I do everything I want to do. After five years uh think about that. (FG2, Sudanese)

Zahra: *I think after one year you will start to thinking 'I just want to have... British citizen'* (FG2, Syrian)

Fatima: *No, I'm not thinking about passport or like that no.* (FG2, Sudanese)

Zahra: *I start thinking about that because when you have a passport, British passport, you will feel more free. You don't... you can travel to any place. You don't need visa in any place.* (FG2, Syrian)

Fatima's experience highlights a hesitation to plan past the 5-years. There is a sense of temporariness which she wants to make the most of. On the other hand, Zahra has set a clear goal to obtain a British passport, linked to feeling secure and guaranteeing a safe future for her daughter.

Mental health impact of migration

Long and complex asylum procedures led to periods of uncertainty and stress, described as '*being stuck in limbo*' (Mirembe, FG3). The asylum system was '*painful*', '*stressful*' and '*depressing*'. This was exacerbated by pre-existing mental health conditions; two participants (FG4) described suicide attempts during this time. Mariam (FG3) described the inability to accept the migration as a cause for depression. Difficulties coping with moving was contrasted with the rational expectation of the impact of migration, as indicated by repetition of the word '*should*'. There is a clear understanding that coping takes time:

Safie: *But I think because a long time we live in our country when you ... when we moving... we can't accept everything. (...). Because after moving we should to change everything and we should to start from zero. That's very difficult for us. And it's need... need take time. All the people, not all the people, more the people has a problem for mentally depression. For example, myself or my mother, for one year we used tablet for*

depression and we couldn't do anything. Nothing. Just sit at home and crying. (FG3, Iranian)

Social support is a mediating factor for stress during this time. In line with this narrative, being granted refugee status was described as being '*a weight off your shoulders*' (Esther, FG1, Cameroonian), and providing a sense of certainty which gave space to develop forward looking abilities '*but now, after I get paper, now I am happy and start thinking about the future*' (Fatima, FG2, Sudanese). One woman described her mental improvement upon gaining refuge:

Yoruba: (...) now I would say I have freedom. I have freedom. I live life to the fullest. The way I want to live my life, I feel happy. I go out for shopping, and it helps my well-being. It helps my mental health, after I got my asylum. It helps my mental health. (FG4, Nigerian)

ii. Social Cohesion '*healthy atmosphere is like wherever no one can judge you*' (Zainab, FG2, Pakistani)

Achieving a good life is dependent on social cohesion, described in terms of family systems – support and obligations, acceptance and sense of belonging, and identity and roles.

Family systems - support and obligations

Supportive family systems facilitate adaptive coping in the UK through emotional and/or economic support, and guidance. Having left family behind was experienced as initial barrier to adaptation across three groups, both in terms of the women's own experience, and also for their children:

Fatima: Maybe also hard for my, our children uh.... to forget our country because community, their family, cousins and like that. Uhm... I need also to support my children to forget this community and uh... (FG2, Sudanese)

Moderator: *To forget?*

Fatima: Not forget, not forget at all, but at least... not thinking (FG2, Sudanese)

Zainab: *These memories, you know?* (FG2, Syrian)

Fatima: *Yeah no thinking more about the past life where we are in our country and with their family and uh... to... to... interact with the new community here.* (FG2, Sudanese)

Women recognize the necessity of coping with the past to adapt to their new situation and feel a sense of responsibility for providing emotional support to their children to cope with the impact of social losses during migration.

Children were described as a source of happiness and obligations. Provision for children is considered a priority which affects choice making, which impacted particularly on single primary caregivers. For example, Zahra, a single mother from Syria, described overriding her own emotional preference of returning to Syria in favor of staying in the UK to ensure a positive future for her daughter *'I prefer to come back to Syria. Now I can't because it's war and I can't take my daughter to Syria. Uhhh... don't have any future, don't have any education.'* (FG2). Similarly, the lack of family and social support to care for children in the UK implied own goals were set aside in favor of the children's well-being and safety;

Zainab: *But all of these things when you've got kids and you are single, there is some hurdles as well. You can't get like straight through. Like I want to join uni, last year as well, I go through all the paperwork and all that... and fees was accepted and all that but there is no one else. As I told you, I am alone there, there is no one else. So I couldn't find out any child minder as well, because [location] is quite rough area.* (FG2, Pakistani)

Repetition of *'there is no one else'* evokes a sense of isolation and lack of support. Later on, Zainab describes financial difficulties to be a contributing factor to her inability to find quality childcare arrangements; *'So struggling, struggling with money wise as well and so many other factors when you go for childcare'*.

Acceptance and sense of belonging

Feeling accepted and having a sense of belonging within the community was described through positive interactions with other community members and honed a sense of solidarity and altruism. Amaya (FG3) explained this:

Amaya: But that time when people start to help you, as a simple... just smiling or just, nothing, you know? It makes you [think] 'okay, no no they like me'. I'm not... is look like 'no they don't want'. It's very good, very good things. And yeah that is opportunity because after that you think you have to be more and more useful. If I was in my country, never ever I been thinking that. Really, to be honest. Because all the time they hurt me. (FG3, Iranian)

As part of feeling accepted, the need exists to live in an open society free from social judgement. Pre-migration experiences included feeling judgement on the basis of sexuality (FG1), mental health (FG4) and social norms regarding religion and/or gender (FG2 and G3), which contrasted with experiences post-migration:

Esther: I think my partner, she makes me happy (...) and I think the reason is because we are totally free and don't have any worries about not being judgmental towards us or something like that. (FG1, Cameroonian)

In FG4, charities were named as crucial for building social capital and finding others who have been through similar journeys. There was also a sense of dependency on these organizations for carrying out tasks such as going to appointments, accessing healthcare, medication, or finding accommodation, particularly for women who lack other forms of social support;

Yoruba: You know is like coming out from a dark. That's the way I see it; coming out from the dark going to the light. You know... it refresh you when you go out with a group like that. You interact, you see places, you know it helps your well-being. So...that's the support they really give to me. (FG4, Nigerian)

Furthermore, participants described social erosion through experiencing discrimination and 'othering' on the basis of (i) refugee status, and/or (ii) ethnicity. A refugee status was described as problematic for accessing basic commodities such as accommodation or

opening a bank account: *'All the people said 'you are refugees' and 'you're not working' we can't give you any house.'* (Safie, FG3, Iranian). Ethnic discrimination was reported by two women from South Sudan and Nigeria. Unpleasant experiences included physical attacks, comments regarding physical appearance, and discrimination when applying for jobs. Notable was the discrepancy regarding these experiences;

Amaya: my friends tell me 'no, UK people are racist'. I thought I never ever I didn't see. Really I didn't see. All the time I'm out and I talk but I never see look like. Maybe this is your mind. And this, this is very good things because you feel 'yeah, this is my country'. (FG3, Iranian)

Mariam: (...) and in terms of just being here with the society or with the community what she [Amaya] mentioned about racism and all that I feel like people who... I did experience to be honest sometimes. (FG3, South Sudan)

The interaction highlights opposite experiences. Amaya describes feeling completely accepted (*'yeah, this is my country'*), to the point where she sees discrimination as something which might be imagined. Whereas Mariam faces discrimination on the basis of race, highlighting significant differences possibly dependent on country of origin.

Identity and roles

Participants talked about tensions in relation to their identity and roles as women both within their own cultural communities, and with the host populations. In their own cultural communities, experiences of gender inequality were largely on the basis of cultural norms and traditions, which were described as all-encompassing and difficult to change;

Mariam: So in my opinion like a good life is first of all security, not to live in fear in terms of general in the country or war or if it's even more serious in terms of the concept [traditions] because like in, when there is war you know that there is killing. You have to run away but the concept that is already been there is hard to fight because it has been there for generations. (FG3, South Sudanese)

Distinguishing between the impact of physical danger from war, and the mental impact of traditions, Mariam emphasizes that the impact of harmful traditions can be more severe than living through a war (*'if it's even more serious'*). The intergenerational component of traditions requires hard work to create change (*'hard to fight'*) and were described as continuing in the UK, resonating with the quotes highlighted in Table 1.

Traditions appear to have a two-fold influence on individuals. Firstly, social status was described as dependent on meeting social expectations. Secondly, it shapes one's identity and self-concept. Social status was impaired when women chose not to meet expectations including female genital mutilation (FGM), staying in abusive marriages, or choosing education over marriage and having children. Consequently, many women described losing their community, facing social judgement, stigma and ostracization.

Amaya: It's freedom, freedom for man. Not for woman. And women afraid about the man. You know it's completely your, your uhm... your situation in the society is down. Finish. (FG3, Iranian)

The legal and cultural environment in the UK facilitates empowerment through access to resources including women's rights, studying, employment, housing and access to income. However, in order to access these resources, women need to overcome personal and cultural (of which family members can be enforcers) constraints based on internalized beliefs around gender appropriate behavior, as described earlier.

Tensions between participants and the host community occurred too; for example, Zainab (FG2, Pakistani) described being housed in a community with no mosque or access to halal food meaning extensive travelling was required to practice her religion. This highlights a lack of cultural empathy in the placement of housing of refugee women, and a restriction of basic capabilities.

iii. Personal Agency *'My happiness, I can build it myself'* (Amina, FG2, Sudanese)

Developing a sense of personal agency was dependent on health and well-being, building a future, and having access to resources.

Health and Well-being

Physical and mental health are necessary for well-being. Women described the achieved freedom to exercise and take care of one's physical health in the UK. In FG4, the harmful practice of FGM was discussed, the consequences of which were still being felt today. The ability to access healthcare and feel confident in the service provision was described in two of the groups (FG3, FG4).

Mariam: here if you are sick, or if you have anything, you can go to the walk-in center, you are free to do that. And also you feel comfortable, confident having capable people to take care of you for whatever disease that you got. (FG3, South Sudanese)

The term commonly used across groups to describe mental health was 'having peace of mind', including being free from worries, feeling safe, feeling in control over personal matters, and seeing others happy.

Leyla: there is just some moments you see like that you look around and you see everyone happy it kind of like makes you happy inside as well, it's kind of sunshine inside [laughs]. (FG1, Azerbaijani)

Being able to relax, carry out leisure activities and having access to peaceful environments, including green spaces, was important and often dependent on support organisations. Overall, there was recognition that without happiness and well-being, one cannot achieve a good life.

Mirembe: (...) for me, like happiness crowns it all because well you might have everything else but if you not happy within yourself and maybe you don't find happiness from what you are experiencing or the freedoms and the life you have then I don't think it's a happy life, you know? (FG3, Ugandan)

Building a future

There is a need for a safe and stable environment where one is able to be free and independent to pursue goals and ensure a future for their children. Examples emerged across all groups:

Fatima: *Peace first. After that, after me and my children and me uhh... in peace and safe. I think... I can do everything if I find myself in peace. Yeah.* (FG2, Sudanese)

Safie: *And I know that here is the safe place for me. After that we should determine how we want to do.* (FG3, Iranian)

Yoruba: *I thank God for this country. They give you the opportunity to become who you want to become.* (FG4, Nigerian)

Within safe and stable environments, women cherished the ability to explore different opportunities and work towards a positive future. There was recognition (Amaya, FG3; Yoruba, FG4) that opportunities are provided by the government, but the decision then lies within oneself to pursue them;

Yoruba: *So, life yeah is you have opportunity in the UK. A lot of opportunity is there for you if you want to make use of it, you make use of it. It's left for you, by the government the opportunity there for you. So for to better your life and to help your well-being.* (Nigerian, FG4)

Achieving personal agency to make these choices requires a journey of self-discovery and self-development. Two participants (FG2, FG3) described the arrival to the UK as the start of this journey. For some, lack of family guidance was an important part of this, as it forces independent choice making. Others attributed this development to obtaining a refugee status, as it facilitates independence; ability to make informed choices, carrying out tasks, and having access to one's own resources.

Fatima: *now I am very happy in the UK. Especially after I got my paper [refugee status]. I can uhm..., improve my English, I can... because I am PhD holder in Psychology uhmm... I can go to university and work in university and achieve my goal.* (FG2, Sudanese)

Access to resources

Access to government provided resources is a foundation for security, shelter, and livelihood;

Zahra: *Yes, me, I all time thinking if I was in Syria I have family, but if the women divorce her husband no one will give her any money, no one will give her any house, no one will give her anything (...). Here, I don't have this problem. I have my home, because the city council give a lot of people houses, and I have my benefit. That's make me feel more safe. I can feel safe. (FG2, Syrian)*

Housing was discussed in three of the groups. In FG4, three participants had experienced destitution in the UK, which significantly impacted on their mental health. Mariam (FG3), highlighted her own difficulties in finding a house upon gaining her refugee status:

Mariam: *I think if uhm... for the refugee has a more house, it's very better because when they arrived here that big problem is house for them. And when they say 'you are refugee and you don't have any job here' it will be our confidence come down and that's has a lot effect in our mind, our... we will be stress, we can't continue normally. (Iranian)*

For participants who had experienced difficulties in obtaining accommodation, finding housing represented a transition into a better life.

Lastly, women across all four FG recognized the importance of education. Education creates a pathway to dignity, empowerment and economic opportunity - an enabler to become who you want to become. One illiterate participant described her experience and motivation for learning to read and write, based on the ability to obtain privacy, and not be dependent on the welfare system:

Kadie: *Because my children have the education, me now if they come out I say 'please can you read this for me?' I want to read it for myself. I want to have my own private for myself. My children don't have to know everything about me. (FG4, Sierra Leonean)*

Kadie: *I find myself in ESOL (English for speakers of other languages) to just go for it, because I want to do something for myself. I don't want to depend on all times the benefit, benefit, no. I want to do something for my life. (FG4, Sierra Leonean)*

Thematic representation across geographical regions

All three themes were represented across four of the WHO Sustainable Development Goals (2017) regional groupings; Sub-Saharan Africa, Northern Africa, Southern Asia and Western Asia (Figure 2). The Sub-Saharan African region was the most represented through the individual episodes provided by participants across groups, however, almost half (44%) of the participants came from this region. The Northern African region was the least represented, with also the lowest number of participants. Personal agency was the most prominent theme (total episodes=208), followed by social cohesion (total episodes=179) and legal security (total episodes=92).

----- Figure 2-----

Written Dimensions

The additional exercise through which participants were asked to provide the most important dimensions to achieving a ‘good life’ in the UK and the ranking thereof further support the themes found through the IPA analysis (Table 3). One participant did not participate.

----- Table 3-----

Discussion

The aim of this research was to shed light on what a ‘good life’ means to refugee women in the UK. An IPA approach using the CA framework was used. A number of strengths and limitations should be highlighted. In terms of strengths, the CA has a competitive advantage over other frameworks for three main reasons. Firstly, it moves away from a disempowering or pathologizing protection model for refugees, by placing refugees in the center as effective agents in their own welfare. Secondly, it recognizes diversity and the potential complexity of different circumstances (Dean, 2009). Applying it in the context of refugee women allows us to consider the responsibility national bodies have towards migrant groups. Lastly, the CA works from an ontological position that the improvement of people’s lives is driven by the improvement of individual rights and freedoms. Therefore, it avoids utilitarian arguments that could be used to justify the exclusion or marginalization of specific populations, such as refugees (Landau, 2008).

In terms of limitations, those who had not received a 5-year status (e.g. still seeking asylum) or had been granted ILR, were excluded as they were likely to face different challenges and hold a different perspective on what a 'good life' means to them. Additionally, the language of the FG was limited to English, given the heterogeneity of languages spoken by potential participants. There was a strong belief that including multiple interpreters would restrict the flow of the conversation. Consequently, this led to the exclusion of some women. Furthermore, women who did not speak sufficient English were also considered to face different challenges than those who do. Previous literature has shown that refugees with poor language skills are most at risk of exclusion and long-term dependency (Morrice & Collyer, 2019). Future research should consider focusing on refugee women who do not speak the language of the host country to establish whether there is a difference in what dimensions emerge as being important. Additionally, a similar project could be conducted with asylum seekers to determine what they anticipate prior to receiving their refugee status. Lastly, given that the FG moderator (author CB) also developed the IPA themes, this may have introduced a bias. To mitigate this, firstly bracketing was carried out by CB (Smith et al., 2009). Secondly, IPA considers that the researcher forms part of the participant's meaning-making process throughout the interview and analysis stages (Smith, 1995). Therefore, a research audit trail was created to ensure transparency of this process (Smith et al., 2009) through reflexive journaling, taking notes on the margins of the transcripts, and showcasing theme development in figure 1. Thirdly, triangulation was carried out at different timepoints during the analysis between authors CB and RW, to ensure validity (Yardley, 2008). Final themes were reviewed by two additional independent researchers (Yardley, 2008). The findings of the research are discussed below.

Three highly interconnected superordinate themes emerged; legal security, social cohesion and personal agency. The narrative around what a 'good life' means to refugee women highlights the importance of having basic needs satisfied as a steppingstone towards more complex freedoms such as exploring one's agency, gaining a sense of belonging, and developing a future.

Legal security was discussed in terms of democracy and how the different stages of the step-based migration system act as barrier or facilitator to the expansion of individual

capabilities. For example, having the freedom to work after gaining a refugee status was recognized as an important capability.

According to Sen, political freedoms and civil rights facilitate the “informed and unregimented *formation* of our values [through] openness of communication and arguments”. Freedom of speech, public discussion and democratic choice are required to achieve “a proper understanding of what economic needs are” and “express publicly what we value and to demand that attention be paid to it” (Sen, 1999, p. 152). Therefore, democracy plays a fundamental role in increasing both individual and collective capabilities, that enable free choice. The role of governing institutions should be to promote resources and reforms that increase freedom to make choices (Sen, 1999). Women in the current study recognized the freedoms a democratic government is able to give; however, these freedoms are dependent on migration status. Being in detention and going through the asylum process were described as “unfree” living conditions, where one’s welfare and capability to act is highly dependent on government structures. Whereas the certainty of receiving the 5-year status enabled them to rapidly expand their material capabilities such as gaining an income.

The findings highlight that gaining a refugee status does not guarantee prosperity for nonmaterial objectives such as helping others or gaining a sense of belonging. This disparity has previously been noted by Landau (2008), who stated that by linking protection to agency and freedom, the CA first addresses the need for basic capabilities required to sustain life and avoid poverty, whilst they provide the basis to achieving ‘higher-order’ capabilities related to personal fulfilment and human dignity. In this study, participants described a ‘good life’ to be dependent on gaining a refugee status, suggesting that this may constitute a basic capability for refugee women in the UK. After which, higher-order capabilities can be pursued (i.e. education).

The value of social cohesion for human development has been stressed across different disciplines (Putnam, 2000), and social networks are robust predictors of subjective well-being and QoL (van der Boor et al., 2020). Current findings highlight the importance of interactions with family and communities to achieve a ‘good life’. Social capital was specifically relied on both for emotional and practical support. Key to this, was the need to live a life free from social judgement and discrimination.

Positive relationships between integration and social networks within and between communities has been previously noted in the UK (Cheung & Phillimore, 2016). Social networks enable access to welfare services, financial and emotional support, and reduce isolation and depression (Cheung & Phillimore, 2016; Spicer, 2008). This was echoed in our study; there was a reliance on social networks to access services. Although this highlights the central role of social support networks, it also suggests poor accessibility of resources and support from governing bodies. One concern discussed by participants is the inability for some women to access social networks due to cultural factors or restrictions within the home (i.e. restrictions from male family members). This requires future research. Culture and gender sensitive policies are needed to ensure support is provided to both males and females to adjust to the new legal and social context.

The need for social cohesion is also recognized in the UK HO's revised Indicators of Integration Framework (2019). Integration must be seen as a process of mutual accommodation, which requires a means of social connection between refugees and the host society (HO, 2019). Current findings bring to the front issues of discrimination highlighting a need for interventions focused on the community, to ensure civil society plays a role in creating conditions which are conducive to positive integration and social cohesion. These may include interventions to reduce anti-migrant sentiment, and changes in media narratives around migration with more focus on the benefits and positive impact migrants have on society.

Receiving a refugee status was considered the starting point to being able to enjoy one's agency. According to the CA, agency is qualified and constrained by conversion factors; namely *personal*, *environmental* and *social characteristics* which inhibit or encourage the transformation of resources into functionings (Robeyns, 2005). In the current study, *personal characteristics* identified were the need for physical and mental well-being. *Environmental characteristics* included the ability to enjoy leisure activities, having easy access to resources and the location of housing. *Social characteristics* included government policies, which facilitate or restrict agency through legal rights. Furthermore, findings highlight intersecting, overlapping and mutually constitutive barriers that arise from structural inequalities such as the refugee status, gender, race, primary caregiver and religion. Intersectionality as a concept and theoretical framework was first developed as a means of exploring overlapping experiences of oppression and marginalization faced

by African American women due to their race and gender (Crenshaw, 1989). It has since then been used in studies on forced displacement, recognizing that such experiences are framed by a range of intersecting identity markers (i.e. gender, ethnicity, religion) and power structures (i.e. patriarchy, xenophobia, Islamophobia) (i.e. Fiddian-Qasmiye, 2014). The current findings reveal refugee women are at risk of different forms of structural inequality throughout their journeys to securing protection, including discrimination on the basis of name, religion and ethnicity; and patriarchal power structures both within the family and larger society.

To remove barriers preventing refugee women from living a 'good life' in the UK, policies must recognize how gender is compounded by inequalities based on previously described intersecting identity markers. To ensure policies adequately address needs and expand capabilities, it is critical refugee women are equally represented at all levels of decision making and become an active part of the process of structuration. Specifically, their combination of cultural knowledge and personal experience can guide improved use of resources and service provision at all levels (UNGA, 2016).

A practical implication of this study is the support that the findings provide for the need to ensure a more humane migration process focused on safeguarding the specific needs of refugee women exists. The findings also suggest the need for targeted policies and community focused interventions that foster positive integration and help women build social networks within their communities. Lastly, the findings can inform the development of a comprehensive outcome measure for the evaluation of capabilities in this population.

Conclusion

The current study was the first to use a participatory approach and IPA analysis to research what constitutes a 'good life' for female refugees who hold a 5-year refugee status in the UK. The three core themes of legal security, social cohesion and personal agency suggest that refugee women face specific barriers to expanding their capabilities. These three core themes should provide a basis to inform the development of more nuanced approaches to assessing, monitoring and measuring QoL and well-being of female refugees in high-income countries which can be used to evaluate policies aimed at improving well-being and integration for refugee women.

Acknowledgements

We wish to thank the women who participated in the focus groups and patiently shared their stories with us. We would also like to thank all the organizations who provided support with recruitment for this project. Additionally, we wish to the researchers who peer-reviewed the IPA themes. Lastly, we wish to thank Claire Youds, Sarah Masterton and Rebekah Amos for their support in taking notes.

Disclosure Statement

The authors declare that they have no competing interests

Funding

Travel costs for participants were reimbursed by the University of Liverpool.

Data availability

Due to the nature of this research, participants of this study did not agree for their data to be shared publicly, so supporting data is not available.

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Appendix A: Focus group discussion guide

What does the term good life mean to you? For example, being sufficiently nourished can be an important basic need that needs to be met to achieve a ‘good life’ but we can also think of more complex things such as feelings.

What are important and valuable dimensions or areas of our lives that make the life good?

What are important and valuable dimensions or areas of our lives that make the life bad?

What opportunities, freedoms and choices do you value?

How do these differ from your expectations? Especially concerning the choices and opportunities you might have.

Sticky note exercise – Participants will be given sticky notes and asked to write down the three most important dimensions or areas to having a good life in the UK and rank them in order of importance. They will be offered assistance by the moderator (CvdB) or the facilitator if they do not feel comfortable writing. The initials of the individual who has offered support to the participant with writing will be noted on the sticky note.

Tables

Table 1. Excerpt of preliminary analysis

Emergent themes	Transcript excerpt FG2 (unedited)	Preliminary notes
<p>Males as decision makers</p>	<p>Zahra: <i>I all time, any woman I say 'you can do this course, this course is too easy you can try this thing you know', 'no, my husband say I can't do these things'. Why you... everything in the life 'my husband says that, my husband say I can't do this, my husband... ', why he should decide about you? You have a <u>life</u>. You should to live this life, not anyone live or tell you how you live this life.</i></p> <p>Fatima: <i>Because I think, because the Culture, Zahra.</i></p> <p>Zahra: <i>Yes</i></p> <p>Fatima: <i>the culture uh in our country, different.</i></p> <p>Zahra: <i>Yes, but we are here. We are now in this culture.</i></p> <p>Fatima: <i>Still the culture...[laughs] inside...</i></p> <p>Zahra: <i>Yes, not easy to change the culture. I'm sure not easy.</i></p>	<p>'any woman' – applicable to all women Encouraging higher pursuits</p> <p>Disagreement – husband is decision maker 'why you' – questioning Expression of judgement</p> <p>Female agency & empowerment</p> <p>'You' - generic to women</p> <p>'I think' – personal narrative</p> <p>'our country' – group membership</p> <p>Discrepancy 'but' New culture implies possibility for change in gender expectations 'culture inside' – the culture is carried within</p> <p>Agreement</p>

Table 2. Demographic characteristics of participants per focus group

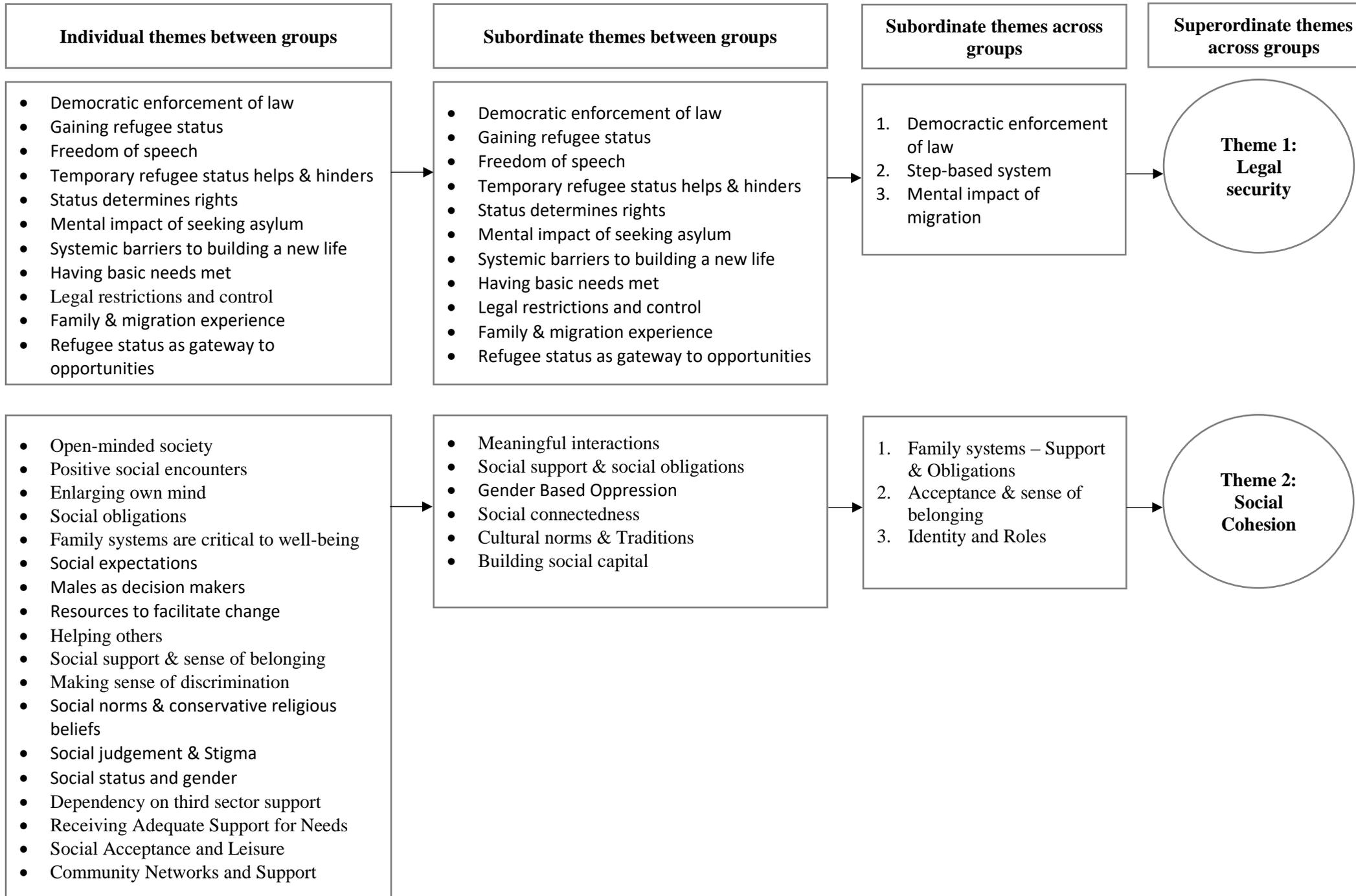
Group	Length of focus group	Country of origin	Months since receiving refugee status
Focus group 1 (FG1)	47 minutes	Azerbaijan	13
		Azerbaijan	11
		Azerbaijan	11
		Cameroon	2
Focus group 2 (FG2)	53 minutes	Sudan	48
		Syria	32
		Pakistan	29
		Sudan	3
Focus group 3 (FG3)	1h 8 min	Iran	24
		Uganda	7
		Iran	2
		South Sudan	1
Focus group 4 (FG4)	1h 15 min	Nigeria	28
		Sierra Leone	15
		Sierra Leone	32 (estimate)
		Nigeria	32 (estimate)

Table 3. A ranking of the three most important dimensions to having a ‘good life’ in the UK transcribed verbatim from the post it notes.

	P1	P2	P3	P4
FG1	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Being free and confident in your own skin (freedom) 2. Being able to have hope and outlook for your own future (hope for your future) 3. Find happiness around you and within yourself 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Security life in here 2. Freedom for woman 3. What does it mean to be happy for me ... ☺ 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. To be freedom 2. To meet different people and culture 3. Good education 	No response
FG2	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. When I have freedom to do what I want 2. When I achieve my dreams me and my daughter. To do my masters with (women rights) 3. When the war finish in Syria and see my family 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. seeing my kids in a happy way with offering every things to them 2. Health and wellbeing 3. Improving my language & start work 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Peace 2. Studying 3. Work 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Positive behavior 2. Confidence 3. Self esteem
FG3	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Safe and security life 2. Free to speak my opinion and do my believes without scary 3. Good job 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Good health 2. Basic human rights 3. Freedom 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Freedom 2. Good job 3. Healthy 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. To be able to follow my passion 2. Security and basic needs 3. Independent

FG4	1. Education	1. Good health	1. Children	1. God and
-	make me	2. Family	2. Mental	going to
<i>delivered</i>	happy.	3. Money	Health	church
<i>orally</i>	2. With this car I		3. Being in	2. Family
	have make		Liverpool	3. Having a
	me happy for			house
	life			
	3. Having a			
	house			

Fig 1. Development of superordinate themes through cross group analysis



- Contexts foster opportunities
- Experiencing happiness
- Impact of health
- Structural determinants
- Priorities are situation dependent
- Liminal nature of language
- Safe & stable environments
- Post-migration psychological resources
- Exploring opportunities
- Feeling secure
- Choice & Independence
- Mental health risk factors
- Harmful traditional practices
- Formal and Informal support
- Building a positive future
- Privacy & independence
- Coping post-migration



- Developing well-being
- Accessibility of resources
- Self-development through safe contexts
- Individual Agency
- Making sense of health journey
- Education & literacy



1. Health & well-being
2. Building a future
3. Access to resources



**Theme 3:
Personal
Agency**

Figure 2. Number of individual episodes per superordinate theme across the WHO regional groupings

