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Transitioning from Survival to Sustainable Livelihoods: Challenges Faced by Refugee Women in South Africa

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Abstract

South Africa attracts thousands of refugees and is regarded as a key destination for migrants on the African continent. Although the country has ratified international and regional conventions on refugees, many refugee women face enormous challenges to attain basic civil, social and economic rights. Employing a qualitative research approach, the study explored the challenges that refugee women encounter in shifting from survival to sustainable livelihood strategies. A purposive sampling technique was used to select 23 refugee women participants for the study. Data was collected through one-on-one interviews and analysed using thematic data analysis. The findings show that most refugee women find it extremely difficult to find an adequate job despite being educated or having stayed in the country for a considerable period. If they do get a job, it is mostly part-time. Due to a lack of decent work, their income remains low, which in turn influences their access to health services, further education, education for their children, adequate shelter, and food security. The study concludes that the socio-economic challenges that refugee women face keep them trapped in poverty and expose them to discrimination, violence, exclusion, and humiliation. The study recommends that strategies be developed to increase the provision of social protection and promote basic civil, social and economic rights for refugee women.

Keywords: refugees; refugee women; South Africa; survival strategies; sustainable livelihoods



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1. Introduction

A refugee, as defined by Article 1 of the 1951 United Nations Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, is a person who is outside their own country and is unable or unwilling to return due to a well-founded fear of being persecuted because of their race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion [1]. The danger to their safety and survival is so significant that escaping to another nation becomes their only viable option, particularly when their own government is either unable or unwilling to offer protection [2]. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) noted that approximately 123.2 million people were forcibly displaced in 2024, driven by conflict, persecution, violence, and widespread human rights abuses [3]. South

Africa attracts thousands of refugees and has been viewed as a key destination for refugees and migrants on the African continent, who flee political turmoil, conflict, and economic decline [4,5]. South Africa, in particular, became an attractive destination for migrants after Apartheid [6]. The following literature illustrates the number of refugees and asylum seekers in South Africa [7].

7072 asylum applications by refugees were received in 2024 in South Africa, according to UNHCR. Most of them came from Ethiopia, Congo, and Somalia. A total of 13,139 decisions have been made on initial applications. Around 12% of them answered positively. 88 per cent of asylum applications have been rejected in the first instance.

The migration crisis in Sub-Saharan Africa continues to intensify as a result of ongoing conflict, persecution, and environmental disasters [8]. For example, political instability in Burundi forced an estimated 400,000 people to flee the country after April 2015 [9]. In addition, human trafficking remains a major driver of involuntary migration across the region [10]. Environmental pressures, particularly those linked to climate change, have also displaced vast populations, with 569.4 million people uprooted in 2016 alone [11]. Climate change has severely undermined livelihoods across Africa, especially among communities reliant on agriculture and livestock [8,12]. Zimbabwe's dependence on rain-fed agriculture has heightened its vulnerability to drought, contributing to widespread food insecurity and malnutrition [13]. The devastation caused by Cyclone Idai illustrates this vulnerability: the storm displaced 232,480 people and caused extensive damage across Zimbabwe, Malawi, and Mozambique [8]. The destruction of infrastructure and loss of livelihoods triggered significant population movements from the hardest-hit areas [14].

These intersecting pressures have accelerated South-South migration, underscoring the complexity and urgency of African migration dynamics. Despite the prominence of migration in contemporary discourse, research on the human rights experiences of migrants within the Global South remains limited. Integration challenges persist, particularly in South Africa, where anti-immigrant sentiment has been on the rise [15]. Although some migrants succeed in improving their circumstances, South Africa often falls short of the idealised destination many had envisioned [16]. To contribute to filling some of this gap in literature, this study investigates lived experiences of refugee women in South Africa to develop a deeper understanding of how livelihood transitions are shaped by the interplay of policy limitations, institutional exclusion, and gendered responsibilities.

1.1. South African Legislative and Policy Framework on Asylees and Refugees

The new South African government has shown unwavering support and commitment to the welfare of refugees; this is evident from its being a signatory to the regional and international instruments that guide migration. The country has enshrined refugee rights in its Constitution and ratified the United Nations Refugee Convention and the Organisation of African Union Refugee Convention [17]. To domesticate these regional and international commitments, the government introduced the Refugee Act 130 of 1998. This Act was promulgated to facilitate the public acceptance of refugees in South Africa, outlining the country's mandate and obligation to recognise the status of refugees and accord them socio-economic rights [5].

The Refugees Act 130 of 1998 grants refugees protection and permits asylum seekers to live, study, and work freely within the country. However, the 2017 Refugees Amendment Act introduced a series of restrictive provisions. One such measure denies refugee status, which, is an example of misrecognition in Fraser's social justice framework for individuals [5] who do not report to a refugee reception office within five days of entering the country. The amendment also limits the right to work, creating conditions of

maldistribution or economic injustice [5]. Asylum seekers who are unable to support themselves and their families after four months, and who receive no assistance from the UNHCR or non-governmental organisations, may be barred from employment [18]. Those who do secure work are required to notify the authorities within six months. Previously, refugees could apply for permanent residence after five years in South Africa, but the revised legislation extends this period to ten years [5]. Furthermore, asylum seekers with expired permits face penalties including fines, imprisonment of up to five years, and even deregistration from the refugee status determination process. This, according to [5], is another form of misrecognition or socio-cultural injustice. This provision is currently being contested in South African courts. Overall, these legislative changes suggest an effort by South African authorities to make the country less appealing to potential refugees and migrants. However, exclusionary and restrictive government policies have resulted in undocumented and unprotected asylum seekers who now struggle with food insecurity, housing, unemployment, and xenophobia [19]. This is against the commitments made by South Africa to protect the rights of refugees. Refugees have a right to basic human needs such as security, food, education, health care, and shelter [2].

1.2. Current Situation of Refugees in South Africa

Refugees are often forced to relocate to nearby countries in search of security and peace, escaping violence and civil wars in pursuit of a better life and safety [20]. However, most refugees in South Africa find themselves in extreme poverty, financially vulnerable and economically and socially unstable [6]. Research reveals that women refugees are the most deprived and constitute most of the displaced persons in the world [10].

The high unemployment rate in South Africa makes it very difficult for refugee women to find employment or to start their own small-scale businesses [6]. In their struggle to find work, refugee women often resort to self-employment and, in particular, small-scale income-generating activities, which puts them at risk of harassment by the metropolitan police who enforce the municipal by-laws [5]. As foreigners, they encounter challenges related to a lack of capital, high rental fees for their business premises, restrictions by municipal council regulations, lack of personal identification due to a long waiting process, a lack of or poor education, limited language skills and illiteracy that make it difficult for them to cope economically [4,6,21]. This makes them financially vulnerable persons within already displaced groups.

The plight and dilemma of refugee women in South Africa go beyond not having opportunities to work despite the Refugee Act 130 of 1998, stipulating that all legal refugees and asylum seekers are guaranteed the right to seek employment [22]. Refugee women also have no legal protection and continue to be extremely vulnerable to exploitation and violence [19]. The Refugee Act 130 of 1998 also guarantees them the status of a recognised refugee, the right to acquire an identity document and full legal protection. However, the lack of adequate implementation of the Refugee Act 130 of 1998 poses legal protection challenges for many refugee women. Given the various constraints, the study focused on the challenges that refugee women in South Africa encounter, which hinder them from transitioning from survival strategies to sustainable livelihoods.

1.3. Theoretical Frameworks

The study adopted the sustainable livelihood approach (SLA) alongside a feminist interpretive framework (FIM) as its theoretical frameworks. The SLA offers a comprehensive, actor-centred lens that redirects analysis away from deficits and needs toward individuals' capabilities, resources, and agency in shaping their livelihoods. Developed by development scholars and practitioners [23,24] and subsequently advanced by institutions such as the

UK's Department for International Development [25], the framework provides a systematic basis for examining how people, particularly those in precarious situations, manoeuvre through complex socio-economic environments to secure livelihood outcomes. The underlying logic of the SLA aligns closely with the feminist and evaluative orientation of this research. Rather than privileging externally defined needs, it foregrounds lived experiences and locally grounded strategies. Individuals are conceptualised as active agents rather than passive beneficiaries of support, with analytical emphasis placed on 'what people do' and 'what they possess,' as opposed to solely what they lack [24]. This perspective resonates with feminist scholarship that centres and legitimises the voices and coping strategies of marginalised groups, including refugee women, recognising them as knowledgeable actors in their own lives. The SLA situates livelihoods within a broader vulnerability context, encompassing shocks (e.g., displacement, policy exclusion, illness) and structural trends such as persistent unemployment [26]. For refugee women in South Africa, this context is characterised by forced migration, precarious legal status, and limited access to formal labour markets.

At the heart of the SLA is the "livelihood pentagon," which organises the resources, or forms of capital, that individuals draw upon [27]. This study examines how displacement and host-country structures shape access to five key capitals: human, social, physical, natural, and financial. Human capital encompasses knowledge, skills, labour capacity, and health, all of which underpin livelihood strategies [26]. Social capital refers to networks, group affiliations, trust-based relationships, and connections to institutions that can facilitate or constrain opportunities [28]. Natural capital includes environmental resources such as land and water from which livelihoods may be derived [23]. Financial capital captures monetary resources such as savings, remittances, and access to credit [28]. Physical capital refers to infrastructure and material assets, including housing, transport, and water systems, that enable livelihood activities [26]. Access to these capitals is neither direct nor evenly distributed; instead, it is mediated by what the SLA terms "transforming structures and processes." These encompass institutions, organisations, policies, and socio-cultural norms that shape livelihood possibilities [25]. In the context of refugee women in South Africa, key structures include state agencies, immigration systems, and non-governmental organisations, while processes comprise legal frameworks governing refugee status, labour market regulations, and entrenched gender norms. These elements collectively influence the extent to which women can mobilise resources, secure employment, and exercise agency.

The SLA is viewed as an essential tool to understand, analyse and describe aspects that have a negative effect on poor people's livelihoods [29]. Furthermore, the SLA is guided by principles that recognise poor people as role players in their development and encourage donors to be facilitators in the process of helping people to identify the available resources. Hence, the SLA can be used as a guide to improve the lives of refugee women to attain sustainable livelihoods. According to [30], SLA values participation and partnerships, which play a crucial role in building refugee women's capacity towards empowerment and sustainable development. SLA is guided by the notion that assets are important for people to attain a positive livelihood outcome [27]. The SLA, therefore, emphasises the importance of linking social and economic development. The interplay between asset endowments and these mediating factors informs the livelihood strategies adopted by refugee women. Such strategies may include engaging in informal trading, relying on social networks for subsistence, participating in precarious employment, or attempting to access formal economic opportunities. These strategies yield varied livelihood outcomes, ranging from improved well-being and reduced vulnerability to persistent poverty, marginalisation, and social exclusion. SLA helps to promote factors that increase livelihood opportunities. This is crucial to refugee women since they have limited livelihood opportunities and struggle to

attain sustainable livelihoods [5]. Refugee women who reside in South Africa are affected by external factors underpinned by economic challenges, including unemployment, issues of xenophobia and a lack of adequate implementation of policies [6]. This leaves many refugee women vulnerable and in poverty, and in need of poverty reduction strategies.

Complementing the SLA, this study employed a feminist interpretive framework to interrogate the power relations embedded within these livelihood processes. As articulated by [31], this approach moves beyond descriptive accounts of resource access to critically examine the structural inequalities that shape them. It raises key questions regarding the operation of patriarchal norms in constraining access to financial resources and limiting livelihood choices. It also interrogates whether institutional mechanisms genuinely enhance women's agency or inadvertently reproduce dependency. Furthermore, it scrutinises the nature of social capital, questioning whose networks are valued and how unequal power relations within these networks may expose women to exploitation. By foregrounding these concerns, the feminist lens ensures that the analysis addresses the underlying drivers of inequality rather than merely its manifestations.

1.4. Strategies to Achieve Sustainable Livelihoods

A livelihood comprises the capabilities, assets, and activities required for a means of living. Literature identifies several strategies to assist refugee women to achieve sustainable livelihoods, these include social protection, opportunities for capacity building, availing a labour market, local integration and promoting coping strategies [6,20]. There is a distinction between survival strategies and sustainable livelihoods. According to [25], a livelihood is sustainable when it can cope with and recover from stresses and shocks and maintain or enhance its capabilities and assets both now and in the future, while not undermining the natural resource base. On the other hand, survival strategies are the means by which people (refugee women) live on a daily basis, with restricted access to ways of securing a livelihood [32]. Within the context of the study, survival strategies focus on economic opportunities, gender sensitivity, education, shelter, food security, water and sanitation and health care services.

The individuals' human rights are addressed by social protection policies [33]. The level of social protection provided to refugee women depends on the availability of social protection in a country. Social Protection refers to all interventions from public, private and voluntary organisations and informal networks to support communities, households and individuals in their efforts to prevent, manage and overcome risks and vulnerabilities and enhance the social status and rights of the marginalised [29,34]. Social protection encompasses a broad range of policies, programmes, schemes, and services aimed at addressing social risks across the life course [35]. It is a critical mechanism for alleviating poverty, mitigating shocks and vulnerabilities, and strengthening resilience, while safeguarding the well-being of children, families, and communities [36]. For refugee women, social protection may include targeted interventions such as cash transfer programmes, food assistance, access to healthcare and psychosocial support, childcare services, livelihood training initiatives, and legal aid for documentation and labour rights. These measures are particularly important in contexts of displacement, where refugee women often face constrained access to formal employment, heightened exposure to gender-based risks, and limited social networks, thereby making comprehensive and inclusive social protection systems essential for supporting their transition from short-term survival to sustainable livelihoods. The South African Constitution, specifically in Section 27(1)(c), states that every human being has a right to social security, whether the person is a citizen or non-citizen, and the right to appropriate social assistance if they cannot provide for themselves and their dependents [33,37]. Hence, all refugee women are entitled to social protection to

help them prevent and manage any risks and vulnerabilities that they might encounter in enhancing their lives. However, due to limited social protection efforts from the State, many refugee women in South Africa encounter economic challenges.

Few local government bodies have put mechanisms in place to ensure that refugee women receive adequate social protection. Cape Town municipality drafted its own refugee policy, which was adopted on 29 May 2013. In collaboration with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the policy empowers the city mayor to support and provide facilities and services to refugees who reside in Cape Town [17]. The Johannesburg municipality created a help desk to assist foreigners, including refugee women, with advice concerning the attainment and determination of refugee status, basic needs, reference letters to employers, foreign consulate, and embassy details [17]. These provinces are leading the way in social protection for refugee women in South Africa.

Since many refugee women lack adequate and relevant skills to help them integrate into the labour market, capacity building through vocational training is essential when it comes to improving their human capital, since it can unlock their employment and financial opportunities. The Women's Refugee Commission highlights the importance of linking livelihood projects and protection [38]. It is also essential for refugee women to know their rights within the hosting country because being informed can guide them towards attaining access to economic and social opportunities [39]. The High Commissioner for Canada funded the Refugee Rights Centre in the Eastern Cape in 2015 to provide training sessions on the rights and responsibilities of refugees and the government's obligation in terms of the International Legislation and the Refugees and Immigration Act.

Access to a labour market is also a vital strategy that unlocks economic opportunities that are key to improving the lives of refugee women. Economic opportunities improve women's chances of having more life options, ability to make decisions, and equity, and protect them against gender-based violence [10].

Local integration can be a solution to the challenges encountered by refugee women. Murenje and Sibanda state that local integration of refugees improves their chances of establishing sustainable livelihoods [5]. However, for successful integration, NGOs and the government should be fully involved in all segments of the refugee women's lives [6]. Local integration is described as a process that involves three dimensions, namely economic, legal and socio-cultural [5]. It is also linked to various other aspects, for instance, the government creating a conducive environment that entails availability of markets, income-generating activities, opportunities for employment and study, citizenship, access to health services, adaptation to the local languages and culture, and promotion of refugee women's rights. It is important to consider the legal aspects in integrating refugees, including rights and entitlements pertaining to access to education, freedom of movement, labour opportunities, health provisions, and identity documents. While these are important to develop, refugee women should be assisted with mechanisms to cope with the challenges that they face on a day-to-day basis.

Refugee women use social networks made up of friends, relatives, members of the same religion, and ethnic groups to create relationships that help them to meet their needs and build or rebuild their livelihoods. Through building relationships and networks, refugee women can be assisted with information about jobs and available resources. Sibanda and Sambo emphasise social capital as essential for refugee women to attain sustainable livelihoods, which can be increased by having access to community-based organisations [10]. Community-based organisations can further assist with material and emotional support [20]. Social capital increases trust among refugee women and improves their working relationships, which will comprise reciprocity [5]. Refugee women can also make use of social networks that have a strong link to social capital and can be neces-

sary for promoting a sense of security and safety among them [6]. In addition, networks are regarded as support mechanisms to refugee communities, providing members with knowledge, monetary assistance and accommodation for newcomers and encouragement to help each other overcome difficult challenges within the hosting country [6]. Hence, social networks can make the lives of refugee women a lot easier to manage.

Referring refugee women to relevant stakeholders who can provide adequate assistance can also help to lessen their burdens [40]. A strong and adequate referral system by organisations and stakeholders should be created [20]. In summary, social networks, social capital, referral to existing community groups and relevant stakeholders, and access to community-based organisations are essential mechanisms for improving the livelihoods of refugee women in South Africa.

1.5. Research Aim and Research Questions

Against this background, the study sought to explore refugee women's livelihood strategies and the challenges that hinder them from attaining sustainable livelihoods. On a practical level, knowing the challenges based on research evidence would reveal what is needed to help refugee women achieve sustainable livelihoods. Knowing the challenges faced by these women could pave the way for the development of programmes to empower refugee women so as to improve their lives and enable them to attain sustainable livelihoods. The guiding research question for the study was:

- What are the challenges that refugee women in South Africa encounter in shifting from survival to sustainable livelihoods?

The sub-questions that assisted the researcher in answering the research question were as follows:

- To what extent do refugee women have access to economic opportunities, education, adequate shelter, food security, water and sanitation and health care services?
- What strategies do refugee women use for survival?
- What resources and assets are available to refugee women to develop sustainable livelihood strategies?

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Research Approach

The researchers utilised the qualitative research approach since they intended to explore and understand, from the viewpoint of the participants (refugee women). The researchers aimed to answer several "what" questions, in particular, what strategies refugee women use for survival and what their challenges are in achieving sustainable livelihoods. The flexibility of the qualitative research approach and its unstructured nature enabled the researchers to attain the required information on their lived experiences in an in-depth manner. In line with a qualitative approach, a case study research design, more specifically, an instrumental case study, was utilised for the study. An instrumental case study was viewed as relevant since it sought to explore the challenges encountered by refugee women in shifting from survival to sustainable livelihoods.

2.2. Study Population and Sampling Method

The population for this study was all the refugee women in Sunnyside, Tshwane, who are clients of the participating organisation. Since 1 January 2014, the organisation has been assisting 403 refugee women in Pretoria and approximately 100 refugee women in Sunnyside. The researchers requested social workers who work with refugee women to identify prospective participants from their database who met the inclusion criteria. These social workers also assisted with informing the refugee women that the researcher

would contact them to ask whether they wanted to participate in the study. Since it was not feasible to include all refugee women in the study, purposive sampling was used to select participants who represented attributes of the refugee women. The inclusion criteria required that a refugee woman:

- Had a legal refugee status;
- Been residing in Sunnyside for at least six months;
- Understood and was able to speak English;
- Willing and available to participate in the study;
- Received services from the participating organisation.

Interviews were conducted with purposively sampled refugee women who met the eligibility criteria, resulting in a sample size of 23. The sample was a result of data saturation; after the 20th interview, no new information relating to the research questions was obtained through three additional interviews, at which point the researchers decided not to conduct any further interviews. All 23 interviews were included in the analysis for robustness of data.

2.3. Data Collection Method

The researchers utilised one-on-one interviews to collect data. The interviews were guided by a semi-structured interview schedule, which included a set of questions that directed the researchers in collecting data relevant to the research questions. The collection of data using a semi-structured interview schedule was advantageous in that it allowed flexibility and presented an opportunity for the researchers to make follow-ups on collected data as necessary. Given the sensitive nature of discussions around challenges faced by refugee women, the researchers employed empathetic interviewing strategies to create a safe and respectful environment.

2.4. Data Analysis

The researchers made systematic plans for recording and analysing data. Data analysis was done in and out of the field. With the permission of the participants, a tape recorder was used to capture the interviews in their entirety. In addition, field notes were taken during the interviews. The data analysis was done according to Creswell's model of thematic data analysis since it sought to identify themes, sub-themes and categories that would emerge from the data [41]. In line with this model, the researchers analysed data using the following stages:

1. Organising and preparing data for analysis: In this stage, the researchers transcribed all the one-on-one interviews. After data collection, field notes were typed, scanned, sorted, and arranged into different computer files.
2. Reading through all the data: The researchers read through all the collected data to get a general sense and overall meaning of the collected information. The researchers also read the data several times in its entirety to get a sense of the interviews.
3. Coding the data: The researchers used coding to organise the collected data. They put sentences and paragraphs into categories and labelled them as topics and themes. A colour coding scheme was utilised, whereby the researchers highlighted similar information and themes using the same colour. The constant comparison method was used to develop a comprehensive coding scheme. This involved the researchers reading all the transcripts numerous times while comparing them with the interview schedule to make sure that all the questions were answered through the captured data.
4. Generation of themes and sub-themes: Upon completion of the coding process, topics, sub-themes and themes were noted. Various topics were brought together to form sub-themes or were put alongside paragraphs identified as sub-themes, and similar

topics and sub-themes were grouped under larger themes. The first and second authors completed this exercise. Themes and sub-themes relevant to answering the research questions and therefore meeting the research goal were selected. In addition, quotations from the interviews were included in the research findings as anecdotal evidence.

5. Interpretation of data: As a final step, the researchers compared the research findings with the literature. Once the meaning of data had been derived from the findings, the research findings were presented in the form of a research report.

2.5. Measures to Ensure the Quality and Trustworthiness of Data

The trustworthiness of the study was ensured through reflexivity, the use of an audit trail, credibility, dependability, and confirmability of data. As part of reflexivity, the researchers were mindful of their position as researchers and the power dynamics between the researchers and the research participants. Another positionality acknowledged by the researchers was their professional practice backgrounds as social workers with experience in working with migrants and refugees. To mitigate bias, a reflective journal was maintained to document assumptions, values, and reactions throughout the study. Data collection through interviews aimed at facilitating the participants' revealing the actual meaning of their experiences, and at understanding the challenges encountered by them from their own perspectives. As part of an audit trail, the study involved documenting the audit trail by providing a clear description of all the steps taken during the research. Data credibility was ensured by checking for data accuracy; an adequate representation of the study population of refugee women was ensured by establishing clear and objective selection criteria for choosing the refugee women who participated in the research study. Furthermore, the one-on-one interviews were guided by a semi-structured interview schedule, which was in the form of a prolonged engagement between the researchers and the participants in accordance with the specific objectives of the study.

The researchers ensured the dependability of data by ensuring that the research process was well documented, audited and logically executed. Furthermore, the researchers checked all transcripts to make sure that they did not have any obvious mistakes resulting from transcription. The researchers ensured data confirmability by maintaining objectivity throughout the research process. They ensured that all the collected data was recorded accurately and therefore was a true reflection of what the participants voiced. This helped to reduce ambiguity and promote objectivity. The researchers also ensured that all the procedures in the study were well documented in the research findings to enable other researchers to use the results and apply the findings to other settings.

2.6. Ethical Considerations

The study was conducted per the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of a university in South Africa. To attain a research study of high quality, adequate procedures and ethical considerations were followed throughout the study. The researchers protected participants by not exposing them to any form of harm, be it emotional or physical. The researchers also provided a debriefing to each participant after the interview.

Adequate information on the goal and objectives of the study, the procedures that were followed during the research, the expected duration of the participants' involvement, the voluntary nature of participation and the risks and benefits of participation in the study were provided to each potential research participant to enable them to decide whether to participate in the study or not. Informed consent was obtained from each research participant. A written informed consent form was provided for every participant to sign;

the form clearly indicated that participating in the study was voluntary and that participants could withdraw from the study at any time if they wished without any consequences.

The researchers strived to ensure the privacy, anonymity and confidentiality of participants. The researchers ensured that interviews were conducted in private spaces, the real names of the research participants were not associated with the information obtained from them, and the data were de-identified to ensure the participants could not be identified from their responses. All tapes, transcriptions, analysed data, and informed consent forms were safely stored in a password-protected computer that only researchers had access to.

3. Results

The following research results section will begin with the biographical details of the 23 participants in the study, followed by the findings from the one-on-one interviews, discussed in the form of themes and sub-themes.

3.1. Biographical Profile of Participants

The biographical profiles of the 23 participants include information about their age, the period they have stayed in South Africa, the time taken to receive their refugee status and the kind of services they receive from the NGO. The ages of the participants ranged from 18 years to 43 years, resonating with the view that refugees and asylees are usually of economically productive age [5]. Participants have resided in South Africa between two and 15 years. Two years is the minimum number of years to obtain refugee status. The youngest participants, aged 18, 22 and 25 years, have resided in South Africa for the longest periods, 15, 9 and 14 years respectively. Three participants moved to South Africa when they were still children. It is further revealed that the oldest participants, aged 41 and 43, have been in the country for eight and nine years respectively. They came to South Africa when they were in their early 30s in search of a better future for themselves and their families. The services received by refugee women from the organisation are indicated in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Services received from the organisation.

Types of Services	Participants Receiving Service
Food vouchers	19
Money for accommodation	7
School fees	4
Emotional support	2
Holiday programmes for children	4
Counselling services	1
Psycho-social support	4
Empowerment programmes	2
Job opportunities	2

Table 1 reveals that refugee women are receiving different services from the organisation. However, the most pressing need for services is access to food, which is provided in the form of food vouchers, received by 19 participants. Findings further indicate that four participants were on the organisation's database but had not yet started receiving any services. They have been on the waiting list for more than six months and have all applied for food vouchers, money for school fees and money for accommodation, indicating their struggle to meet their basic needs.

3.2. Shifting from Survival to Sustainable Livelihoods

The key themes, sub-themes and categories that emerged from the data obtained from refugee women through one-on-one interviews are presented in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Key themes, sub-themes and categories.

Theme 1: Realising basic human needs and rights	
Sub-themes	Categories
1.1 Getting a job/employment opportunity	
1.2 Access to food	
1.3 Access to health care services	- Challenges in assessing health care services - Inadequate assistance - Not understanding the procedures followed at the health care facilities
1.4 Access to educational opportunities	- Lack of adequate finances to pay for tertiary education - Lack of money to pay for children's school fees and to meet their needs
1.5 Access to adequate shelter	- Challenges of sharing accommodation - No privacy and insufficient room space - Issues of safety and stability - Health risks
1.6 Access to clean water and sanitation	
Theme 2: Challenges to shift from survival to sustainable livelihoods	
2.1 Unemployment	
2.2 Communication challenges	
2.3 Transport challenges	

These themes and sub-themes are discussed below. Findings are verified by direct quotations from the participants and integrated with extant literature where applicable.

3.2.1. Realising Basic Human Needs and Rights

Participants encounter enormous challenges in adequately attaining their basic human needs and rights, which include getting jobs, accessing health services, securing accommodation, attaining education, and establishing access to food, water and sanitation. Some participants highlighted that they could not get their qualifications evaluated at the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) due to not having money, and one participant mentioned that she failed to obtain documentation relating to her qualifications from her country of origin. This further complicates the participant's access to basic needs and rights. These challenges are discussed next as sub-themes.

Getting Jobs/Employment Opportunities

All participants shared about the challenges in getting adequate employment in South Africa. Most of the participants highlighted that they had completed their secondary schooling and managed to attain tertiary level qualifications in their country of origin, which include degrees in French, nursing, marketing, accounting, tourism, engineering and telecommunication. Other qualifications include diplomas in teaching, hairdressing, hotel and catering and home-based care training. However, due to the lack of recognition of their qualifications, most participants were working as domestic workers, hairdressers or cleaners, while others worked as home-based care workers. Most participants indicated that they worked more than one job to make ends meet.

A few participants reported that they have stable jobs, such as being a warehouse supervisor, a security guard, and a trainee teacher. One participant reported being self-employed, selling clothes and shoes for commission. Some participants reported that the

reason why they were unemployed despite having good qualifications and experience was that the government policies give preference to South African nationals over foreigners. The voices of two participants are echoed below:

Despite my qualifications of a degree in French, diplomas in financial accounting, practical bookkeeping and computer skills certificates from the University of South Africa and Rosebank College, I have struggled for years to get a proper job until another foreigner, a Nigerian, employed me as a warehouse supervisor. I think government policies make it difficult for us to get jobs since the employers have to prove why they are employing us, refugees, instead of South Africans.

I am a nurse by profession, so I found a job working as a nurse in the Western Cape; however, the clinic was scared to keep me because I did not have all the needed documents (work permit). Since then, I have been working as a part-time domestic worker because job opportunities are difficult, as they give priority to South African citizens.

The challenges in finding employment were aggravated by non-recognition or difficulty in recognition of the qualifications that refugees had obtained in their countries before landing in South Africa. Many participants were unable to have their qualifications evaluated by SAQA due to financial constraints. Furthermore, some participants indicated that their degrees were not recognised in South Africa, and for that reason, they had to go back to institutions of higher learning in South Africa to improve their qualifications. However, due to financial instability, many participants were unable to gain entrance to tertiary educational institutions. The participants' frustrations are reflected below:

The challenge that we have is that we are struggling financially, so we do not have the money to take our qualifications for evaluation at SAQA.

I have a nursing degree from my home country, but I cannot further my studies because I do not have the money. I also cannot afford to send my qualifications for evaluation.

Access to Food Security

Most of the participants indicated that they are struggling to obtain adequate food for themselves and their families. Most of the participants reported having food shortages every month. Some participants reported a lack of such an extent that some go to sleep without eating for days or even up to two weeks. Many of the participants shared that they could not afford three meals a day. They shared that they ate once or twice a day and drank tea and ate bread for supper, while others mentioned eating porridge for dinner.

Participants highlighted that although the organisation supported most of the participants with food vouchers, it was not always able to assist regularly. This often resulted in refugee women ending up frustrated and desperate, and having to ask for assistance from their churches, neighbours, friends and relatives. They further noted that they continued to struggle with food insecurity because of not earning enough money; some stated that their husbands earned low salaries, and others highlighted having large families, yet earning low salaries, making it impossible to have enough food to cater for the entire family. The following quotes are evidence of their struggle for food:

I am earning a very low salary since I am working as a cleaner in a hair salon, thus I cannot afford buying enough food for the whole month for me and my children. This is why I came to [name of organisation withheld] to ask for food vouchers, but so far, I have only received them twice; last month, I did not receive any food vouchers.

I sometimes go for three or four days without food, and I act like I am fasting. I have a cousin who also stays in Sunnyside, who sometimes helps me out with food or money to buy food, but I am embarrassed to go there daily.

I am working, and my mother is also working, so we help each other to buy food for our family of five. Because our family is too big, food finishes quicker, and we sometimes go for two weeks without food.

Access to Health Care Services

Most participants shared encountering enormous challenges at the local health care facilities. These challenges included access to health care services, inadequate assistance, and not understanding the procedures followed at the health care facilities.

Many participants mentioned difficulties in accessing health care services, including waiting in long queues, spending the whole day at the clinic or hospitals, being attended to late in the day or having to leave without being attended to, being told to come back after a week, or being referred from the hospital to local clinics. The participants' lived realities are represented in the following voices:

I am scared to use the Clinic since a lot of people complain about the services and spending the whole day there without being assisted.

If you want to go to the hospital, you must wake up very early because there will be very long queues.

I go to the Clinic when I am sick, or when my child is sick; however, the problem is that you can be told to come back the following week. They also assist a limited number of people per day. Since it is free, it can accommodate ± 100 people a day, so they are obviously not able to help everyone.

Access to healthcare for refugee women was also impacted by inadequate assistance. Most of the participants indicated that they were not properly assisted at government clinics and hospitals. They shared being given medication without a thorough medical assessment; some felt they were not given the right medication, and in some instances, they were even told that there was no medication. Some participants then went to pharmacies to buy the medication on their own. The delays and wrong prognosis put the lives of refugee women and their families at risk. Many participants reported that they bought over-the-counter medications to avoid going to the nearby hospitals, since they feared for their lives or feared the nurses who shouted at them and were rude to them. The following narratives explain participants' hardships in obtaining health care services:

My husband had a heart problem, and he went to a public hospital several times but was not assisted adequately, saying it was the flu, or it was his lungs, and they gave him antibiotics but did not admit him for observation. Yet I knew with my nursing background that he was having problems with his heart. Thus, after two months, he had a heart attack, and it was now an emergency. At the hospital, when you are an asylum seeker, like my husband, it's a problem because they were even refusing to admit him until we found another understanding doctor, but we now must pay for the surgical procedures.

I have been going to the Clinic, but I encountered a lot of challenges while I was pregnant, which led me to give birth before the actual time at seven months. The nurses who attended to me were xenophobic; they were complaining that foreigners are always giving birth in South Africa. They even called me "Makwerekwere" [a belittling name that is given to foreigners]. When I realised that

they were not stopping, I ended up running out of the clinic because I was scared for my life.

When I or any of my family members are sick, we go to the Clinic, but we have not received adequate help. My sister has pneumonia, and she does not get adequate medication, and she struggles every time in winter. I also have a heart problem, and when I get medication from the clinic, it makes me feel weak and does not help.

Furthermore, unfamiliarity with the health care system and confusion about the procedures also added to the challenges faced by refugee women in accessing healthcare services. A few participants stated that they did not understand the procedures at the health care facilities. According to the participants, they were supposed to be treated for free in public health facilities, but because they were foreigners, they were told to pay a certain amount, and the amount was not the same every time. Other participants, who are nurses by profession, indicated that they did not understand the nurses' treatment procedures since they did not open medical cards first and did not seem to examine a patient before treatment. Some participants were also confused by the referral system as they were referred to the Clinic by the Hospital, without any proper explanation. The participants' confusion about procedures is reflected in the following quotes:

I went with my child for immunisation, but the nurses did not check her first; they just injected her. Then, soon after the injection, they realised that she was no longer fine, and that is when they started to examine her and opened a file for her.

I go to the Clinic with my younger children, who are below the age of five. With the older children and adults, we go to the hospital. We recently started paying R50, but I do not know what the money is for; we never used to pay.

At the health care facilities, they attend to you, but sometimes we are told that there is no medication, so you should buy your own medication from the pharmacy. . . Last time they charged me R250, but I negotiated to pay R100, then I was told to pay the rest the next time I go there.

Access to Educational Opportunities

Most of the participants were of the view that opportunities for further education are available in South Africa. However, many stumbling blocks made it difficult for them to utilise these opportunities. These include a lack of adequate finances to pay for tertiary education and a lack of money to pay for children's school fees and to meet their education needs.

Participants reported that opportunities for skills development, training and further education, among others, in home-based care, first aid, English lessons, computer skills, baking, and sewing, are available. However, many participants cited that although educational opportunities were available, they lacked stable finances to pay enrolment and tuition fees. In addition, the participants indicated that they could not make use of the various opportunities since they could not take time off to learn new skills, as they needed to work and provide for their families. They also shared not having the money to pay for day-care centres. Other participants noted that they lacked information about bursaries and learnership programmes as an alternative to attaining financial support to pursue studies.

Some participants thought that, as in the case of all other opportunities in South Africa, priority is given to South African citizens to take up opportunities for skills development, training and further education. Only one participant highlighted that she was able to attain a national diploma in financial accounting and a national certificate in pastoral accounting

from UNISA and attained certificates in practical bookkeeping and computer skills from Rosebank College. The participants explained the issue as follows:

I think educational opportunities are available even to us refugee women; however, it is difficult for us to make use of them because of the high fees, so we cannot go to university and add to the qualifications that we obtained in our home countries.

I have a diploma in hotel and catering from my country of origin. I wanted to further my education, but I do not have the money, so I thought I would get a job and get money to further my studies.

I studied engineering and telecommunications in Congo, and I would like to study further, but the finances do not allow me, and I also do not have the time to study because I will be working and looking for better jobs.

I have Grade 6, opportunities to study are there, but the money to pay for the fees and for the day-care centres where you can leave your children is not there. I am also not able to be involved in the skills development because of my two children.

Many refugee women reported challenges in paying off school fees for their children as they lack adequate jobs and stable incomes, thus limiting educational opportunities for the refugee women's children. Most women are thus forced to make alternative payment arrangements or apply for school fees exemption at the various schools that their children attend. The participants also indicated that they are dependent on the organisation to assist them with money to pay for their children's school fees. However, the organisation cannot pay the school fees regularly. Many refugee women also highlighted that they have difficulty meeting the educational requirements of their children due to financial constraints. The sentiments of participants are captured below:

I had to apply for a school fees exemption for my child to continue attending school.

I owe a lot of school fees for my three children, which I am failing to pay in full; however, I have managed to arrange to pay the money in instalments.

This month, my child did not even go to school since the organisation did not give me money to pay for his school fees.

Access to Accommodation

Participants stated that they faced accommodation challenges. They revealed that they were struggling to get their own houses despite being in the country for a long period. Other challenges relating to shelter included having to share flats (accommodation), leading to compromised privacy and inadequate room space, issues of safety and instability, and health risks.

Most participants shared that it was difficult for them to get their own house due to a lack of identity documents, and mostly because of insufficient funds to pay rent for the full house. Therefore, most of them had no choice but to share a flat to help each other pay the monthly rent. All the participants reported that they shared with strangers, except for two who were residing with their friends. Only one participant reported that she was not sharing her flat with anyone. The participants reported sharing a two-bedroom flat with up to ten people. They further reported that sharing accommodation with strangers poses safety and health risks. Participants discussed their accommodation experiences as follows:

It is difficult to rent a house with refugee status, so I am currently staying in a flat registered in someone's name. We have been staying in Sunnyside for nine years, and the rent increases every year. It is now difficult for my husband and

me to pay the full rental amount, so we looked for a lady to share with and cut expenses since the rentals are now very expensive.

I have been staying in Sunnyside since 2013. My brother applied for a two-bedroom flat for me so I can use one room with my three children. Then I looked for one tenant to share with since I cannot afford the whole rent alone. I do not know the man I am sharing with; there is also no privacy for my children and me, and I am also not happy that I am sharing the same room with my 18-year-old child.

My mother, my three siblings, and I have been staying at Sunnyside for three years. We share a flat with five other people. Thus, we are staying in a two-bedroom flat; the ten of us. It is challenging sharing a sitting room with my mum and siblings. We gave the bedrooms to the tenants so that we can get more money to add to the rent. Hence, there is not enough space for us, and it is not good for our health. It is also not safe since we do not know the people we share with; since we are scared that they might steal from us, we lock up everything every time we leave the house. There is also no privacy since we sleep in an open room.

A few participants indicated being unhappy with the lack of privacy and being forced to change in front of their older and younger children. They are even worried that it will affect the way the children view and respect them. The challenges with privacy and room space can be summarised in the words of two participants:

I am staying in a one-and-a-half-bedroom flat with my eight siblings and one tenant. We had to put a tenant in the half-bedroom to get money for the rent. There is no adequate room because all my siblings, including two boys, share a bedroom, and my brothers sleep on the floor while my six sisters and I sleep on the bed.

I have been staying in Sunnyside, in a flat, since 2008. I share a flat with my two children and four other people because the rent is expensive. We had to divide the flat with curtains for privacy, but still, there is no privacy. The owner of the flat can chase you out anytime, and if you do not pay rent, you can also be chased out. There is not enough space since children need space to play. I even share the bed with them and change in front of them, thus I am scared that they will not respect me as they grow up.

Many participants raised issues of safety regarding their belongings and food. The shared items were sometimes stolen by people with whom they shared accommodation. Issues of instability were also mentioned, as participants were forced to move regularly due to the high rent. They shared that landlords chased them out of the flats if they failed to pay rent. The participants shared that due to this, sometimes they ended up sleeping outside. Other participants shared not having money for accommodation at times and staying with their friends and churchmates. The participants' concerns are reflected below:

The rent is always going up, and I do not have money to pay for a flat or [even] to share it with someone, thus I do not have anywhere to stay; but one of my friends from church said I can stay in her dining room in the meantime.

I have been staying in Sunnyside for three years. I am currently staying with my friends, whom I met at church. I do not have a place of my own, and I do not know when I will be able to get one.

I am currently staying with a friend, but it is not easy because she is always complaining about money issues since she is the one who buys food and pays rent. When I get money sometimes, I also give her R200.

Insufficiency of space or overcrowding of accommodation also presented potential health problems for refugee women. A few participants feared being exposed to health risks since they shared toilets with many strangers. One participant reported sleeping on a balcony with her husband, which is cold during winter and not good for their health. The participants' views are summarised in the following quotes:

I have been staying at Sunnyside for two years in a one-and-a-half-bedroom flat. I am staying there with my children and husband, and we are sleeping on the balcony, which is not good for my sick husband, especially this time of year, during winter. The other rooms I share with some tenants who are also strangers, so it is not safe for us, but we have no choice. I have challenges of cleaning the mess left by tenants in the toilet, and we have no privacy. There is also no adequate space, but no choice because of the high rents.

When ten people share one toilet, there are always hygiene issues and health risks since I must clean every person's mess, and also the flushing system of the toilet can be affected regularly, and we sometimes have to use a bucket system.

We use pre-paid water, and it is very expensive; thus, sometimes we cannot afford the water, so we can go for days without water, and we must stop using the toilet, or we use it and then close it until we ask for water from neighbours and friends.

3.2.2. Challenges to Shift from Survival to Sustainable Livelihoods

Many participants revealed that they encounter several challenges in their bid to shift from survival to sustainable livelihoods. These challenges are discussed below as three sub-themes, namely unemployment, communication, and transport challenges.

Unemployment

In sub-theme 1, participants' difficulties in getting a job and accessing economic opportunities were discussed. In addition to the challenges mentioned in category 1.1, the reality is that South Africa faces a high unemployment rate [5,20]. A couple of participants shared that it was difficult for them to get jobs due to the high unemployment rate in South Africa, despite being educated. Their realities are reflected in the voices of two participants:

I have a diploma in travel and tourism, but I cannot find a job, so I sell ice pops in the streets in Sunnyside, to add to the money I get from my husband and the child support grant that I receive monthly.

I was a security officer at Midrand, but I worked there for two months without any salary, and later, I found out that the manager had disappeared without paying us. I was in a difficult situation because I had moved out of my friend's place and taken my own flat, so now I do not have money to pay the rent. Therefore, I had to find a part-time domestic job and work in the hair salon for me to survive.

Communication Challenges

Communication challenges in terms of language were reflected by a few participants. Inadequate knowledge of English and local languages made it difficult to communicate, especially for refugee women who reported that they do not have a secondary education and come from non-English speaking countries. The participants highlighted that their English improved greatly because of the free English lessons provided at a school in Pretoria.

However, they felt that the lessons provided were inadequate as they were not being taught well. The following quotes reveal participants' language challenges:

[Communicating in] English was a great challenge when I came to South Africa, so I had no choice but to enrol on English classes, and my children had to help me. My English has greatly improved, although I can still not read or write in English. I feel the lessons are not being taught well. However, the main challenge is to learn local languages since there are no lessons, and it is difficult when you need assistance at Home Affairs or in clinics or even to get a job, because if you speak in English, you are sometimes ignored.

I am scared to travel to other provinces in South Africa and get exposed to different opportunities due to the language barriers. It is also difficult for us, refugee women, to learn the local languages.

Transport Challenges

Participants shared the difficulties in finding employment, especially domestic work, close to Sunnyside, which implied that they were dependent on transport to access their workplaces. A few participants noted that transport is a challenge since taxis were expensive and trains were unsafe. They indicated that they were left with no choice but to use trains since they were less expensive. They explained their transport challenges as follows:

A certain taxi once took me to the wrong place, then I started demanding that he stop so that I could get out, but the driver refused to stop until I decided to jump out.

It is difficult to get domestic work at Sunnyside, thus when you are working far, you are forced to use trains to try and save money. However, trains are not safe since you board them very early in the morning, and there will be a lot of men smoking dagga.

Going back to the research question that guided the study (What are the challenges that refugee women in South Africa encounter in shifting from survival to sustainable livelihoods?) helps reiterate the findings of this study, namely unemployment, communication challenges and transport challenges to shift from survival to sustainable livelihoods. Responses to the sub-questions similarly reiterate the findings that refugee women had constrained access to economic opportunities, education, adequate shelter, food security, water and sanitation and health care services. The women respondents shared survival strategies they used, including reaching out to churches, neighbours, friends and relatives as a survival strategy to meet their food needs; making alternative payment arrangements, applying for exemption from school fees or seeking help from various organisations to pay for children's school fees; and sharing accommodation with many individuals to ensure a roof over themselves and their families' heads. The South African State has made opportunities for skills development, training and further education available to refugee women, which would contribute to their move towards sustainable livelihood; however, financial pressures and high cost of living mostly prevent them from accessing such services. These findings responding to the research question and sub-questions have been discussed in light of the Sustainable Livelihood Approach in the following section.

4. Discussion

The study revealed several challenges faced by refugee women in South Africa in their quest to transition from survival to sustainable livelihoods. The challenges are multifaceted and compromise their human rights. This is against the "people-centred" principle of the Sustainable Livelihoods approach, which seeks to enable people to achieve their livelihood

goals by providing a facilitative institutional environment [25]. The finding that refugees struggle to get employment opportunities is in line with opinions highlighted by Masinga et al. that refugees struggle to get employment, especially in the formal economy [6]. The Women Refugee Commission asserts that refugee women cannot secure decent employment and hence encounter economic challenges that force them to work in unregulated sectors of the informal economy [38]. Murenje and Sibanda affirm that South African policies for hiring foreign nationals do not protect refugee women [5]. This view is supported by Koskimaki and Mazani, who state that the penalties on employers who hire illegal foreigners are actually very strict [19]. This is the situation with most refugees, despite the Refugee Act that guarantees them the same basic civil, social and economic rights, including the right to seek employment as citizens of South Africa. As a member of the International Labour Organisation (ILO), South Africa is obliged to follow the organisation's aims, which include complying with the ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work and providing "decent work." Refugee women continue to struggle despite their entitlement to live in dignity and to attain self-reliance through enjoying their right to work, which was established in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 23.1, and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. It is important to recognise that unemployment is not a challenge unique to refugee women, but one that affects the broader South African population. As noted by Zibengwa et al., the country continues to grapple with persistently high unemployment levels [42]. In line with this, BusinessTech indicates that South Africa's unemployment rate increased to 32.7% (approximately 8.1 million people) during the first quarter of 2026 [43]. This rise reflects a loss of around 301,000 jobs between the end of 2025 and the start of 2026 [43].

The findings regarding struggles by refugee women to access food are confirmed in a report by [3], which painted a damning picture of hunger amongst the refugees in South Africa. The struggle among refugee women to provide food for themselves and their children was also pointed out by the Jesuit Refugee Service International Office [44]. The UNHCR undertakes to assist refugees with food only for a short period, until they manage to attain assistance from the government or other NGOs [3]. Many refugees continue to struggle with attaining food security support from the government and NGOs, which does not appear to be consistent.

One of the objectives of the Sustainable Livelihood Approach is to increase the sustainability of livelihoods through better health [25]. Findings regarding healthcare access challenges faced by refugees, including that they are sometimes refused access to treatment by doctors and nurses in the clinics and hospitals, coincide with the findings by the Jesuit Refugee Services International [6,44]. Denying refugee women their right to basic health services contradicts the South African Constitution, which is supposed to protect the rights of all individuals residing in the country [5]. Because they are not treated well when they visit hospitals, refugee women avoid seeking any medical attention even when they are sick. Pregnant refugee women have been reported to be verbally and physically abused by nurses in public health care facilities. Globally, extensive research has documented the difficulties migrants and refugees encounter when attempting to access healthcare services [8,40]. This body of work highlights the institutional and socio-cultural obstacles that hinder their ability to obtain and use health services in host countries, including shortages of healthcare resources, unsupportive or dismissive attitudes among health professionals, and inadequate coordination within health systems. Such barriers contradict the principles of a rights-based approach, which emphasises universal and equitable access to essential services [45].

Reports by the Democratic Alliance [46], Masinga et al. [6], Sibanda et al. [20], and The Star [47] identify key barriers to accessing healthcare, such as xenophobic attitudes

among some healthcare workers, language difficulties, and the influence of extremist groups that accuse migrants and refugees of overburdening the already fragile health system. Although South Africa is often regarded as having one of the most advanced healthcare infrastructures in the region, its public health sector is frequently criticised for being under-resourced, poorly managed, and overwhelmed by demand [48].

While South African law stipulates that healthcare should be accessible to all individuals regardless of migration status [20], the reality on the ground is far more complex. A significant barrier is the phenomenon known as “medical xenophobia,” which refers to discriminatory behaviours and attitudes displayed by frontline healthcare staff, including doctors, nurses, and security personnel, towards non-nationals [40,48] affecting refugee women’s access to healthcare. This institutionalised discrimination often results in migrants being excluded from essential health services, as they are portrayed as undeserving of care or blamed for placing additional pressure on an already strained system [46]. Internationally, migrants frequently report delays in receiving treatment or being denied care altogether, often due to language barriers, irregular immigration status, or the absence of referral documents [5,40]. Findings from this study corroborate findings from extant literature.

The findings regarding lack of finances for refugee women to further their education coincide with the findings of the [49], which states that refugee women’s access to further education is at times hindered by a lack of money to enrol children in day-care centres whilst they attend colleges and other academic institutions in pursuit of education. This is against the Sustainable Livelihood Approach, which advocates for an increase in the sustainability of livelihoods through access to financial resources and facilitating infrastructure [25]. Refugee women continue to lack access to educational opportunities, even though South Africa is a signatory to the 1985 UN Declaration, which stipulates in Article 8 (1)(c) that individuals who are not nationals of the country but residing lawfully in a host country have the right to adequate education. Not all refugee women are uneducated, as some managed to attain tertiary education qualifications in their countries of origin. However, despite being educated and having experience, refugees continue to struggle with obtaining employment [5]. This undermines the “building on strengths” principle of the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach, which calls for focusing on the strengths of people for the removal of constraints so that people achieve their full potential [25].

The Sustainable Livelihood Approach aims to increase the sustainability of livelihoods through promoting access to high-quality education and training [25]. The findings regarding challenges in accessing education by refugee women and their children are confirmed in the literature by Murenje and Sibanda, who state that access to education for refugees is difficult, which challenges the belief of the refugee community that education is a key to their dream of obtaining a better and more secure future [5]. Masinga et al. attest that unemployment leads to an inability to meet basic needs and deprives refugees of their roles as parents, as they are unable to provide proper care for their children, including access to better education [6].

The study findings regarding accommodation challenges faced by refugee women were noted earlier by Jacobsen, who asserts that the unstable accommodation arrangements of refugee women affect their ability to build social networks as they must relocate frequently [50]. Continuous relocation also affects their livelihoods since it decreases their opportunities of responding to job vacancies and the use of social services [50]. Many participants complained about the high rent, which concurs with Jacobsen’s observation that refugee women often pay more for rent than local South Africans [50]. Furthermore, due to a lack of permanent jobs, refugee women cannot sign any accommodation contracts, which makes them vulnerable to exploitation by house owners who request high

rentals [50]. Many refugee women in South Africa experience various accommodation challenges because they are not included in the national housing policies, thereby limiting their protection from landlords who exploit them financially and evict them without notice. Their vulnerability places many of the refugee women at risk of violence and crime and affects their physical and mental well-being. The findings of the study indicate that refugees often face precarious and uncertain living conditions, navigating daily life in the margins of society. In literature, similar views are shared by Mwenyango [40], and Trummer et al. [8], who indicate that many refugees are forced to live in the shadows, where they are particularly vulnerable to exploitation, abuse, and systemic exclusion. However, this is a challenge not only faced by refugees, but Sibanda et al. also highlight deep structural poverty and material deprivation in South Africa, where about 1.6 million people live in informal housing and 3.7 million people live in overcrowded conditions [51].

The Sustainable Livelihoods Approach views “physical capital” as important for supporting livelihoods and contends that without adequate access to services such as water and sanitation, human health deteriorates [25]. The findings regarding water and sanitation challenges faced by refugee women are confirmed in the literature, too. Doctors Without Borders highlights that refugees often stay in buildings that have a poor water supply and inadequate sanitation facilities [52]. These findings align with the observations of Murenje and Sibanda, who noted that refugees often choose to conduct business and seek accommodation in informal settlements [5]. According to Lekganyane and Sibanda, these informal areas do not have access to basic amenities such as water and sanitation [53]. Moreover, they are already densely populated by impoverished and marginalised residents who may readily engage in conflict when basic needs such as food, housing, healthcare, water, and sanitation are not met. This often makes these areas prone to violence and crime, raising safety concerns for refugees [6]. It should be noted that this challenge not only affects refugees but also South Africans. Sibanda et al. indicate a damning picture of lack of access to basic amenities in South Africa, where approximately 6 million people lack piped water, while 21% of the population do not have adequate sanitation at home [51].

The findings indicate that refugee women face enormous challenges in attaining employment. Due to the high rates of unemployment in South Africa, refugee women are bound to struggle to attain adequate employment [5,6]. This is despite the South African Refugee Act of 1998 being in place to allow them to work legally [38]. High levels of unemployment affect not just South Africans but also refugee women who reside in the country [20]. Refugee women are even less disadvantaged when it comes to securing employment, first due to their status as refugees (preference is given to South Africans), secondly due to their gender as women in an environment that favours the employment of men over women.

The findings regarding participants’ language frustrations are supported by Halpern, who asserts that the lack of English language skills among refugee women is a barrier to the labour market, as it limits their participation [54]. Research further reveals that language differences pose challenges to both refugees and service providers because it creates communication barriers that could increase medical errors, treatment non-adherence and poor healthcare outcomes [5]. In addition, Halpern highlights that the English language is a key aspect that influences successful refugee employment [54].

Employing the Sustainable Livelihood Approach to the study findings underlines that refugee women’s livelihood assets include their friends, families, and local organizations, whereas challenges in documentation, unregulated and inadequate housing, precarious employment, challenges in commuting, and communication-related challenges are key institutional constraints that hinder refugee women’s move from survival to sustainable livelihoods.

The findings highlight the important lived experiences of women refugees who have demonstrated exercising their agency in their quest from survival to sustainable livelihoods as envisioned by feminist interpretive framework. Documentation and dissemination of the voices of these women as significant components of understanding the lived experiences of refugees in South Africa recognises these women as knowledgeable actors in their lives, as guided by feminist scholarship. The findings reveal power differentials between refugee men and women in several aspects of their lives, including decision-making relating to various aspects of their lives. Furthermore, the study findings also illuminate refugee women's vulnerability to exploitation due to structural challenges like non-recognition of their qualifications, leading to women accepting precarious and low-paid employment, and unregulated housing, leading to shared accommodation and compromised privacy. These findings individually and collectively illuminate the need to address underlying drivers of gender inequality and the inadequacy of merely looking at the manifestations of inequality.

The findings of this study illuminate significant need for the South African State to explore newer ways of responding to the needs of refugees, especially refugee women as the challenges facing resource-poor countries in such endeavors are manifold. Even the Ugandan model, with its strong humanitarian and rights-oriented refugee legislation [55], hailed as the 'world leader in refugee policy' or 'model for the world' [56] for nearly two decades, is failing [55,56].

Limitations of the Study

A limitation of the study is that data collection was conducted at the organisation's office. Although the interviews were conducted in privacy, it was difficult to limit the daily movements and noise of the many staff members and clients at the office. The noise from children further contributed to disturbances, as some of the participants had no option but to bring their children along. This is because they did not have anyone to leave the children with. These disturbances could have influenced the quality of the data collected. Another limitation relates to the impact of the recruitment process on the resultant study sample. The researchers reached out to the social workers in the organisation and sought their help in participant recruitment. This might have resulted in a sample of interviewees, most of whom were currently receiving services from the organisation. This reliance of the interviewees on the organisation might have limited the interviewees' sharing any negative experiences relating to the organisation and its services, considering the impact it could have on the continuity of the services they were accessing, particularly because the interviews were conducted at the organisation's office. Furthermore, as most of the refugee women who participated in the study were employed on a part-time basis, their availability for multiple rounds of interviews was restricted, thus limiting the opportunities to conduct follow-up interviews and to conduct member checks of the findings of the interviews. Another limitation of the study relates to the transferability of the findings of the study. Since several Municipalities, including Cape Town and Johannesburg, have taken initiatives to support refugees, the lived experiences of refugee women in these areas might differ from the experiences shared by women in this study conducted in Sunnyside, Tshwane, and therefore the findings of this study should be discussed alongside its context and might not be transferable across South Africa without caution.

5. Conclusions

This study critically examined the structural and lived constraints shaping refugee women's transition from survivalist coping mechanisms to sustainable livelihood strategies in Sunnyside, Tshwane. The findings demonstrate that these constraints are not merely

individual or situational but are embedded within intersecting systems of socio-economic exclusion that systematically limit access to education, formal employment, healthcare, and adequate housing. Despite varying levels of education and duration of residence in South Africa, participants remain largely confined to precarious, low-paying, and informal or part-time employment. This underscores a significant disjuncture between human capital and labour market integration, highlighting the limited portability of refugee qualifications and the persistence of institutional barriers to decent work.

The study further reveals a cyclical relationship between underemployment and multidimensional deprivation. Low and unstable incomes constrain access to essential services, including healthcare, further education, food security, and safe accommodation. Consequently, livelihood insecurity extends beyond economic precarity, reinforcing broader patterns of marginalisation, vulnerability to exploitation, and exposure to discrimination and gender-based violence. These findings point to the structural reproduction of poverty among refugee women, rather than temporary hardship associated with displacement.

Housing insecurity emerges as a critical site through which vulnerability is both experienced and reproduced. In the absence of affordable and secure accommodation, refugee women frequently resort to overcrowded and shared living arrangements that compromise privacy, safety, and health. Such arrangements not only heighten exposure to crime and violence but also reflect the inadequacy of urban support systems to accommodate displaced populations in a dignified manner. The evidence, therefore, suggests that livelihood strategies cannot be decoupled from spatial and infrastructural inequalities within host contexts.

Importantly, the study demonstrates that access to education and skills development, often positioned as key pathways to self-reliance, remains structurally constrained. Financial barriers, the cost of qualification recognition processes, caregiving responsibilities, and the immediate imperative to generate income collectively undermine women's capacity to invest in long-term human capital development. These findings challenge linear assumptions that education alone can facilitate integration into sustainable livelihoods and instead highlight the need to consider temporal trade-offs and opportunity costs faced by displaced women.

Beyond documenting lived experiences, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how livelihood transitions are shaped by the interplay of policy limitations, institutional exclusion, and gendered responsibilities. It illustrates that refugee women's continued reliance on survivalist strategies is not indicative of limited agency but rather reflects constrained choices within highly restrictive socio-economic environments. As such, the persistence of poverty, exclusion, and rights deprivations among refugee women should be understood as a systemic failure of protection and integration frameworks, rather than individual shortcomings.

The findings, therefore, have important policy implications. Enabling refugee women to transition toward sustainable livelihoods requires more than skills training or short-term assistance; it necessitates comprehensive, rights-based interventions that address structural barriers. These include expanding access to social protection mechanisms such as social grants, reducing barriers to formal employment, subsidising childcare, facilitating affordable qualification recognition, and improving access to safe and adequate housing. Without such systemic support, efforts to enhance self-reliance are likely to reproduce existing inequalities and sustain cycles of vulnerability.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that the transition from survival to sustainable livelihoods among refugee women is fundamentally constrained by structurally embedded inequalities. Addressing these challenges requires a shift from fragmented, individualised approaches to integrated policy responses that recognise refugee women as rights-bearing

actors entitled to inclusion, protection, and socio-economic justice. The findings of the study indicate that although refugee women are provided with legal status and rights comparable to those of South African citizens on paper, their lived experiences are significantly similar to those of other migrants in the country. The study illuminates refugee women's livelihood strategies and the challenges that hinder them from attaining sustainable livelihoods. At the practice level, these findings have the potential to inform organisations working with refugee women in South Africa on the areas needing further support for these vulnerable women. At a policy level, understanding the lived experiences of refugee women is helpful to guide policies that seek to empower them to improve their lives and help them attain sustainable livelihoods.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions of the study, the researchers make the following recommendations to address the challenges that refugee women encounter in shifting from survival to sustainable livelihoods.

- The government should implement programmes that provide adequate financial support for refugee women to start businesses and help them by forging links with the market, e.g., set up government-run shops or spaces through which refugee women can make their products and/or services available. The government should also provide business opportunities, which can help them to get money for them to provide for their families. Business opportunities can bring about sustainability, self-reliance and help refugee women to become entrepreneurs.
- The Department of Labour should implement policies that help refugee women access adequate employment, helping them attain sustainable livelihoods, e.g., making it easier for employers to recruit foreign nationals. These policies should include access to information centres where refugee women can get information about job opportunities, bursaries, skills development, and be able to register their curriculum vitae.
- The government should regulate rents and criminalise overcharging vulnerable populations, including refugee women.
- The Department of Higher Education should amend its policies and include aspects that promote tertiary education for refugees. Providing information and financial assistance or making assessments of qualifications at SAQA available for free will help them make use of existing qualifications and potentially prevent them from the drudgery of re-obtaining academic and vocational qualifications. Furthermore, the Department should not exclude refugee women from benefits such as the South African National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS), which is a policy that was adopted to assist mainly marginalised and disadvantaged individuals to attain tertiary education and other bursaries for skills development programmes. Additionally, the Department should offer free local language classes widely to facilitate integration of refugee women into the host society.
- The Department of Health should monitor the implementation of policies and mechanisms that ensure that refugee women's right to health is protected and adequate health care services are provided, e.g., making all relevant information, including procedures and costs, available in multiple languages, including languages that refugee women can understand.
- The government should contribute to ensuring food security for refugees through initiatives like food vouchers or coupons.

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