

Article

Gendered and Intersecting Coping in Forced Migration: Refugee Women in Portugal

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Abstract

The intensification of armed conflicts has forced thousands of women to seek refuge in other countries, exposing them to conditions of heightened vulnerability, characterized by inequality, violence, and mental health challenges. Despite these adversities, refugee women demonstrate resilience through diverse coping strategies. However, qualitative research centring women's experiences within gender-sensitive and intersectional frameworks remains limited. This study aims to characterize the experiences of forced migration among refugee women in Portugal and to explore the coping strategies they have developed. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with six refugee women residing in Portugal. Based on thematic analysis, the data revealed a trajectory marked by material and symbolic losses, disruption of social bonds, and symptoms consistent with post-traumatic stress. Motherhood emerged both as motivation and as an obstacle to social and professional integration. Participants reported various coping strategies, including social support, self-efficacy, optimism, emotional regulation, religious coping, and contemplative practices. These findings indicate that coping strategies among refugee women are shaped not only by trauma exposure, but also by gendered structural conditions in the host context. These results highlight the need for gender-sensitive and trauma-informed public policies, as well as community-based interventions to promote social integration and well-being.

Keywords: refugee women; forced migration; coping strategies; qualitative study

1. Introduction

The recent intensification of armed conflicts across various regions of the world has driven the displacement of millions of people who, forced to leave their home countries, migrate in search of safety, human rights, and improved living conditions (McAuliffe and Oucho 2024). More specifically, situations of war and violence pose constant threats to physical integrity and life, constituting the primary catalysts of forced displacement. Furthermore, the collapse of local economies and the destruction of essential infrastructure further reinforce the decision to seek refuge (Adhikari 2013; Crawley and Skleparis 2018). Within the scope of international law, the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees guarantees the right to request and obtain asylum for any person displaced from their territory due to violence, persecution, or human rights violations, and who, owing to a well-founded fear, cannot or does not wish to return to their country of origin, thereby granting them refugee status (UNHCR 1951, 1967). According to the most recent United Nations



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report, during the first half of 2024 the global number of refugees reached 122.6 million (UNHCR 2024).

Moreover, approximately half of the global migrant population is composed of women (IOM 2024), who face additional challenges such as gender-based violence, exploitation, barriers to access basic services, and lack of institutional support, rendering them particularly vulnerable throughout their migratory trajectories (Davaki 2021; E. G. Silva et al. 2022). Even before leaving their countries of origin, refugee women are often exposed to potentially traumatic events (PTEs), including genocide, persecution, torture, and other war crimes (Sukiasyan 2024; Taheri et al. 2024a). Indeed, the incidence of gender-based violence tends to increase in conflict settings, where attacks against women are frequently used as instruments of control and domination (Borges 2024; Klugman 2022).

The journey to the host country poses constant risks, particularly for unaccompanied women who may resort to intermediaries to facilitate migration, exposing them to various forms of violence, including sexual exploitation and physical abuse (Almeida 2020; Pérez-Vázquez and Bonilla-Campos 2023). Their experiences are further marked by significant losses, kidnappings, forced marriages, and intimate partner violence (Sunata and Özsoy 2023). After arrival, conditions may be further aggravated by social isolation, loss of cultural identity, financial difficulties, and additional victimization stemming from prejudice or continued gender-based violence (Taylor et al. 2024).

For women who are mothers, the refugee experience is shaped by additional challenges, including the absence of support networks, weakened family bonds, and emotional overload. Child-related concerns often become central, with efforts to protect children and compensate for the absence of extended family deepening maternal suffering (Abi Zeid Daou et al. 2024). Consequently, refugee women frequently silence their own needs and prioritize caregiving roles, reflecting the persistence of traditional gender roles and contributing to cumulative overload (Colvin and Munz 2020; Kassam et al. 2023).

This scenario is intensified by the lack of social and institutional support in the host country, and by the need to reconcile work and family responsibilities (E. G. Silva et al. 2023; O'Mahony et al. 2023), which increases vulnerability to mental health difficulties (Abi Zeid Daou et al. 2024; Vieira 2018). Nonetheless, motherhood can also serve as a source of motivation, with children representing a decisive factor in confronting adversity (Colvin and Munz 2020; Pertek 2024).

Another challenge for refugees concerns the material and symbolic loss of their homes. Forced displacement entails the loss of a place of belonging, identity, stability, and safety (Rast et al. 2024; Ziersch et al. 2017). Although many host countries offer temporary housing policies, these are often limited and unstable, focusing solely on providing physical shelter while overlooking factors such as spatial appropriation, permanence, and community connection (Ziersch et al. 2023). The neglect of these elements hinders resettlement and the development of a sense of belonging (McShane et al. 2025).

This lack of connection with the environment and community reinforces social isolation and loneliness, which are closely linked to integration difficulties. Ethnicity, gender, and religion may further shape these processes, influencing psychological well-being (Anisman et al. 2024). Individuals with more severe clinical presentations report greater impairments in social functioning, trust in others, sense of belonging, and community integration (Brooks et al. 2024; Nickerson et al. 2025). Discrimination is also a key determinant of social behaviour and psychological well-being among refugee women. Fear of stigma associated with culture, religion, clothing, and customs often leads women to withdraw from local communities (Pertek et al. 2023; Shishehgar et al. 2025), exacerbating social isolation.

Research has consistently shown that these vulnerabilities contribute to higher prevalence rates and greater severity of mental health disorders among refugees compared with the general population (Blackmore et al. 2020; Pérez-Vázquez and Bonilla-Campos 2023; Taheri et al. 2024a). In cases of multiple victimization, the overall clinical framework becomes even more complex, with common comorbidities such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) with dissociative symptoms or depression, often associated with more severe outcomes (Gonçalves and Matos 2020; Vallejo-Martín et al. 2021).

Restrictive immigration policies, linguistic barriers, gender discrimination, and xenophobia further hinder refugee women's integration and limit access to essential resources such as healthcare, education, and housing, while also constraining labour market participation (Borges 2024; Klugman 2022). National and international studies highlight structural weaknesses in asylum systems, including inadequate housing (Borges 2024; Davaki 2021; Ziersch et al. 2017) and insufficient financial support (Sampaio and Ramos 2023). Economic instability has consistently been identified as a significant barrier to the autonomy and life reconstruction of refugee women, often being experienced as humiliating and negatively impacting self-esteem, dignity, and the establishment of social relationships (Taylor et al. 2024). Furthermore, economic vulnerability is associated with higher levels of psychological distress and trauma among this population (Handiso et al. 2024).

These structural challenges are also reflected in the Portuguese context, where gaps in policy and implementation continue to shape refugee experiences. In Portugal, although the country has not historically played a prominent role in receiving refugee populations, recent data follow the broader European trend, showing an increase of over 35% in applications for international protection compared to 2022, with 51.3% originating from African countries and 30.6% from Asia (AIMA 2024). Women accounted for 32% of asylum applications, reflecting a growing presence of female applicants (Oliveira 2023).

Compared to other Southern European countries, Portuguese migration policies have, over recent decades, been developed with a stronger emphasis on integration measures (Doomernik and Bruquetas-Callejo 2016). This orientation was reflected in the Strategic Plan for Migration (2015–2020) (PEM), which introduced measures focused on Portuguese language learning, the prevention of racial discrimination, and the recognition of qualifications to support labour market integration (Presidência do Conselho de Ministros 2015).

Nevertheless, the decentralized and municipal structure of the PEM, combined with difficulties in coordination between local and national institutions, exposed significant weaknesses in policy implementation (Sousa et al. 2021; Strungari and Rodrigues 2022). Furthermore, the absence of specific strategies targeting refugee populations has limited the effectiveness of integration processes (Costa and Sousa 2021). As a result, many refugees continue to experience difficulties achieving autonomy during the final stages of reception programs. A study involving 97 Portuguese reception institutions concluded that 78.3% of refugees experienced difficulties both in learning Portuguese and in accessing the labour market (Sousa et al. 2021).

More recently, the Action Plan for Migration (PAM) has sought to address some of these limitations by reinforcing coordination between public, private, and social sectors, accelerating delayed asylum procedures through the Agency for Integration, Migration and Asylum (AIMA), and expanding reception and temporary housing capacity. The plan also places greater emphasis on vulnerable populations, including refugees and asylum seekers, through measures aimed at strengthening access to employment and social support services (Presidência do Conselho de Ministros 2024). Nevertheless, the need for a more coordinated and effective approach to refugee protection and integration in Portugal remains evident (Varela 2021).

Importantly, these structural constraints do not affect all individuals uniformly but rather interact with multiple social positions that shape distinct experiences of vulnerability and access to resources. Thus, understanding the experiences of refugee women requires a holistic perspective that draws on Crenshaw's (2017) concept of intersectionality, which refers to the simultaneous and interacting forms of discrimination and oppression that exacerbate inequalities. The intersection of gender, ethnicity, class, and migration status intensifies vulnerabilities, creating further barriers to accessing rights and essential services, limiting opportunities for integration, and sustaining processes of poverty and marginalisation (Borges 2024; Davaki 2021). Accordingly, refugee women may experience double or triple marginalisation as a result of overlapping forms of discrimination linked to gender, ethnicity, and refugee status (W. M. N. P. Silva and Presgrave 2020). In this study, intersectionality was used as an analytical lens in the thematic analysis, enabling the interpretation of participants' accounts to go beyond descriptive reporting and instead consider how gender, refugee status, motherhood, ethnicity and position intersected in shaping differentiated experiences of forced migration. This perspective was particularly useful in understanding variations in access to support systems, coping strategies, and perceived vulnerability across participants.

Understanding the multiple dimensions of forced migration requires not only acknowledging vulnerability but also recognising the agency, resistance and adaptive strategies employed by refugee women. It is within this framework that the present study is situated, with the aim of foregrounding women's narratives and examining coping processes in the context of forced displacement.

The study draws on Lazarus and Folkman's transactional model (Lazarus and Folkman 1984), which conceptualizes stress as arising from the interaction between individuals and their environments, emerging when situations are appraised as exceeding available resources. Coping is understood as a dynamic and ongoing process shaped by primary appraisal (evaluation of threat), secondary appraisal (evaluation of resources), and reappraisal, through which individuals continuously adjust their responses to stressful circumstances. In this perspective, coping strategies are not fixed but context-dependent, and their effectiveness is linked to the fit between the strategy employed and the demands of the situation (Folkman 2010; Lazarus and Folkman 1984). Building on this framework, coping has been broadly categorised into problem-focused, emotion-focused, and meaning-focused strategies (Folkman 2008; Folkman and Moskowitz 2004). While problem- and emotion-focused coping capture responses oriented towards either modifying the stressor or regulating emotional distress, meaning-focused coping highlights processes through which individuals construct positive meaning in adverse circumstances, including benefit finding and the redefinition of life goals (Folkman and Moskowitz 2007; Helgeson et al. 2006).

In the context of force migration, coping cannot be fully understood without considering cultural and structural conditions that shape both stressors and available resources (Lazarus and Folkman 1984). Accordingly, the transactional model is complemented by an intersectional perspective (Anthias 2012; Crenshaw 2017), which allows for a more nuanced interpretation of how gender, migration status, ethnicity, and socioeconomic position interact in shaping differentiated coping trajectories among refugee women.

Within this population, meaning-focused coping has been identified as particularly relevant in processes of resilience when dealing with trauma (Taheri et al. 2024b). Religious practices often play a central role in these sense-making processes, enabling women to reinterpret experiences of violence encountered throughout forced migration (Pertek et al. 2023). Through religious beliefs and faith-based practices, many women report finding emotional and spiritual relief, which supports processes of internal reorganisation and

helps sustain hope and gratitude in contexts of prolonged adversity (Alachkar 2023; Taylor et al. 2024).

Faith is also used as a means of confronting violence, seeking protection, and reconstructing purpose (Pertek et al. 2023). This process, often referred to as adaptive religious coping (Pertek 2024), can be understood as an active way of regaining a sense of control over one's life and of drawing on culturally embedded resources to mediate emotions and respond to the realities of displacement. In this sense, faith may support stress management while also creating space for other adaptive strategies to emerge (Shishehgar et al. 2025).

Social connectedness is another essential resource for resilience (Anisman et al. 2024; Kheirallah et al. 2022). Support from family members, relationships with other refugees, community engagement, and shared experiences may contribute significantly to emotional well-being and a sense of belonging (Alachkar 2023; Kassam et al. 2023). Studies show that sharing experiences with others in similar circumstances can help to mitigate suffering and strengthens compassion, empathy, self-confidence, and self-esteem (Taylor et al. 2024).

Emotion-focused coping also plays a significant role in managing trauma, especially in situations perceived as uncontrollable (Taheri et al. 2024b). Within this process, gratitude is often associated with recognizing new opportunities in the host country (Solberg et al. 2023). Similarly, acceptance, understood as relinquishing control and coming to terms with the helplessness experienced during displacement, contributes to optimism, self-confidence, and self-efficacy (Taheri et al. 2024b). An optimistic orientation towards the future and a focus on the beneficial aspects of resettlement also support adaptive functioning in contexts of prolonged uncertainty (Kassam et al. 2023).

In addition, engagement in outdoor activities has been identified as a potential coping strategy, contributing to stress reduction, enhanced well-being, and the strengthening of interpersonal relationships (Poulsen et al. 2020; Wendelboe-Nelson et al. 2025). From a theoretical perspective, these effects can be understood through the restorative role of nature proposed by Kaplan (1995), according to which exposure to natural environments can facilitate psychological restoration by reducing mental fatigue and supporting emotional regulation.

Another relevant dimension concerns changes in gender roles following forced migration. Access to employment and education may enhance refugee women's self-esteem, self-efficacy, and sense of agency, influencing the ways in which they respond to both pre- and post-migration challenges (Alhalawani and Al-Serhan 2024).

Despite the multiple vulnerabilities experienced by refugee women, significant gaps remain in the literature on forced migration from a gender-sensitive perspective, particularly regarding coping strategies. Few studies have placed refugee women at the centre of qualitative enquiry in ways that foreground their voices and lived experiences (Borges 2024; Davaki 2021; Taylor et al. 2024). Furthermore, limited attention has been given to how coping strategies are shaped by gendered and structural conditions, within the Portuguese context. The present study seeks to contribute to addressing this gap.

Accordingly, the present study aims to (1) characterize the lived experiences of forced migration among refugee women in Portugal and (2) identify the coping strategies they employ throughout this process. By centring women's narratives, this research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of coping as a gendered and context-dependent process within forced migration.

2. Materials and Methods

A total of six refugee women participated in this study, all residing in the northern region of Portugal. Given the sensitive nature of this research, proximity to refugee support organisations was considered essential, as it facilitated detailed in-person interviews and supported an ethically sensitive approach to participant recruitment and data collection.

Participants ranged in age from 26 to 60 years ($M = 43.5$). Four participants were Ukrainian, one Syrian, and one Iraqi. All participants were mothers ($M = 2.3$ children). Regarding marital status, three participants were married, one was widowed, one was single, and one was separated. Time spent in Portugal ranged from two to six years. Three participants completed secondary education, two had higher education, and one had basic schooling. At the time of the interviews, three participants were employed. Migration trajectories varied across participants, including resettlement programmes, non-governmental organisation-assisted migration, and independent migration. Participants also differed in terms of transit experiences, family configurations during migration, and decision-making processes related to relocation. These variations are presented as contextual background to the participants' narratives rather than analytical categories. Eligibility criteria included being an adult woman, having refugee status, and being able to communicate in Portuguese or English, or alternatively agreeing to the presence of a translator during the interview. This sample size is consistent with the exploratory and in-depth nature of qualitative research. The aim was not to achieve statistical representativeness or thematic saturation, but to generate rich, situated accounts of refugee women's lived experiences.

This study adopted a qualitative and exploratory design, with data collected using a semi-structured interview guide developed specifically for refugee women. Participants were recruited through organisations providing support services to refugee populations in Northern Portugal. These organisations were identified through online searches, municipal resources, publicly available institutional directories, religious organisations, and media reports referring to refugee support initiatives. Organisations were contacted by e-mail or telephone and either facilitated initial contact with potential participants directly or disseminated information about the study to individuals who met the inclusion criteria. Participation was entirely voluntary. Participants were selected based on their willingness to share in-depth experiences of forced migration and their availability to participate in long interviews.

The research project and interview guide were approved by the Ethics and Deontology Council of the University of Maia on 15 April 2025 (protocol code 276/2025). All participants received detailed information regarding the aims of the study, procedures, and conditions of participation. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants. Data collection occurred between March and July 2025. Interviews were conducted in person, in either Portuguese or English, and lasted between 70 and 136 min. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim by the researcher, ensuring full anonymization of all personal data. Consistent with qualitative research on forced migration, refugee women are considered a hard-to-reach and sensitive population, with access typically mediated through such gatekeeper organisations, which shapes recruitment processes and limits direct researcher access to potential participants. As a result, a purposive sampling strategy was employed in order to recruit participants who could provide rich, in-depth accounts aligned with the exploratory aims of the study.

Data analysis followed thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), a systematic and flexible method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns within qualitative data. This approach involves six structured phases: (a) familiarization with the data, (b) generation of initial codes, (c) searching for potential themes, (d) reviewing and refining themes, (e) defining and naming themes, and (f) producing the final analytic narrative. These steps provide a coherent framework for transforming raw qualitative material into a rigorous and interpretative account, thereby ensuring methodological transparency and analytic depth (Braun and Clarke 2006).

In the initial stage, the researcher engaged in repeated readings of the transcripts to achieve deep familiarization. The data were then coded manually, and the coding

structure was subsequently reviewed by the academic supervisor to enhance analytic clarity and coherence. Using an inductive analytic orientation, patterns across the dataset were identified and organised into overarching themes. Data were also examined with attention to how gender, migration status, caregiving roles, and institutional contexts intersected in shaping participants' experiences. This process enabled the development of a thematic structure, mapping relationships between themes and subthemes, and supporting an interpretative understanding of the women's experiences of forced migration, as well as the coping strategies they employed throughout this process.

3. Results

The thematic analysis generated three overarching themes that reflect participants' narratives of forced migration as a complex and multidimensional process. These themes point to structural, relational, gendered, and psychological dimensions of displacement, illustrating how refugee women described experiences of instability, identity, disruption, and adaptation in the context of war-related migration and resettlement in Portugal.

At the same time, the analysis does not suggest uniform experiences across participants. The women in this study had different ethnic and cultural backgrounds, as well as diverse family compositions and migration trajectories, all of which shaped how displacement was experienced and narrated. Although some experiences were common to all participants, such as loss, uncertainty and threats to life, other aspects of the refugee experience varied according to women's contexts. These differences were particularly evident in relation to family separation, motherhood, social support and certain coping strategies, suggesting that forced migration was experienced in diverse and context-dependent ways.

3.1. Theme 1. Forced Migration as a Trajectory of Loss, Rupture, and Reconstruction

The women described forced migration as a prolonged and painful process marked by cumulative loss, insecurity, rupture, and ongoing processes of reconstruction. Their narratives emphasized exposure to war, armed conflict, and political instability as the primary drivers of displacement, often associated with direct threats to personal and family safety.

Across the interviews, war, political instability, and armed conflict were consistently described as the immediate factors in migration decisions. However, the meaning and temporal unfolding of departure varied across accounts. For some participants, migration was described as an abrupt and urgent escape under direct threat, particularly in contexts of active violence and perceived risk to family members. For others, displacement appeared as a more prolonged process shaped by insecurity, uncertainty, and gradual deterioration of living conditions.

One refugee woman described the immediacy of escape in the context of direct threats to her family:

"Those people who are there want to kill my father. . . Really (. . .) because he was working [for the army] before the war and they were thinking that my father was going to give information to the. . . To the army (. . .) But he already took the children because if they could not find my father, they would kill the children. They would kill us and my mother without even looking. . . Without closing their eyes. That is why we ran to Turkey during the night. The same day!" (P2, Syria)

For some women, particularly those with dependent children, the decision to leave was closely tied to the perceived imperative of protecting life. At the same time, other narratives suggest that displacement was shaped by longer trajectories of instability and repeated exposure to insecurity rather than a single triggering event.

Beyond immediate dangers, participants described the destruction of material and social infrastructures as central to their experience of forced migration. These included disruptions to housing, food access, education, and employment, which collectively contributed to a sense of suspended everyday life. In this sense, material deprivation was not only described in practical terms but also as a source of emotional strain linked to uncertainty and reduced capacity to maintain family routines.

"But when you alone with children, without electricity, without Wi-Fi, without Internet. . . It was winter. You live without electricity in Ukraine in winter. Temperature sometimes is, for example, 20 below [zero]." (P1, Ukraine)

"We do not have [oil], and the roads are closed and no one can deliver other things. Another. . . New products, so we fry in the oil more than two hundred times, I think. It is a shame that I am looking at it like: 'I cannot eat this food,' but we are hungry, we have to eat." (P2, Syria)

For women with young children, scarcity of food, electricity and basic services represented additional vulnerabilities and sources of concern. These narratives suggest that experiences of war were shaped not only by direct exposure to conflict and violence, but also by the gradual deterioration of living conditions and the challenges in protecting family members from the deeper impacts of war.

Furthermore, these material losses were accompanied by symbolic and biographical ruptures, including disruptions to identity, social roles, and life trajectories. Several women referred to repeated displacement across countries or housing contexts as contributing to feelings of instability and fragmentation of life course continuity.

"It means eleven years ago I left. . . I went to Ukraine, another place where it was okay. Then I went to another country and then came back to Ukraine. . . It's like my life now is jumping from one place to another. . ." (P6, Ukraine)

"It's not. . . It's not easy. . . Changing homes, changing countries, changing, changing, changing" (P3, Iraq)

Participants' reports revealed deeper meanings associated with repeated experiences of dislocation, whether across countries or between homes after resettlement. For several women, displacement involved disruptions to everyday routines, social relationships, and future planning, making it difficult to develop feelings of stability and a sense of belonging in their lives. The women described interrupted life trajectories, marked by suspended educational and professional pathways, and difficulties envisioning their futures.

"I was studying before the war, but when the war started, we stayed at home doing nothing (. . .) I couldn't continue studying because there were no documents, no laws. . . There were not many rights for us. . . Since 2014. . . Schools still have not allowed refugees to enroll. Now they do, but at that time they did not. Unfortunately. And I couldn't study; I stayed at home. That's it. Doing nothing. We were always just sitting around. . ." (P2, Syria)

Additionally, family separation emerged as one of the most profound sources of suffering, particularly for women whose relatives remained in conflict zones or under restrictive mobility conditions. Emotional distress in these accounts was often linked not only to geographical distance but also to uncertainty regarding the safety and future of family members.

"I am worried about my older son. He may be taken to the war. . ." (P5, Ukraine)

Despite these experiences, the women's narratives also revealed a strong capacity for adaptation and identity reconstruction. Many expressed ambivalent feelings about

their resettlement—oscillating between longing for home and recognising the necessity of building a future in Portugal. The process of adapting to a new cultural environment was described as emotionally demanding, particularly in relation to the sense of cultural dislocation and the challenge of reconciling past identities with present reality.

“I can’t [erase the memories of the war]. And at the same time, if I erase this, I erase many things in Syria too, right? (...) So... I can’t, and at the same time I don’t want to lose all the memories of my city.” (P2, Syria)

The interviews reveal that women experienced cultural adaptation in various ways. For some women, especially those with young children, adjusting to Portuguese culture raised concerns regarding the gradual loss of their home languages and culture over time.

“And my children read Portuguese. They don’t know much Ukrainian because they learned it as small children, in a simple way. Yes, I try to speak and I explain, but...” (P1, Ukraine)

“The youngest son got used to all the new things (...) My son doesn’t like Ukrainian soup anymore... All the food he likes is Portuguese...” (P5, Ukraine)

Nonetheless, participants actively engaged in processes of self-redefinition through language acquisition, resuming formal education, and seeking professional training. These efforts were portrayed as central to regaining autonomy, reconstructing agency, and restoring a sense of purpose.

“Now I want to open an association (...) a house for women and children... to help build a more beautiful life. Here... You need to see... because many refugees, when we arrive here, there are many associations, but they are not good.” (P3, Iraq)

“I started [school] almost, almost from zero. When I arrived, I stayed at a school to learn with children of three, five years old (...) To learn Portuguese... I spent almost six months learning in every class (...) Then the school gave me a fourth-grade Portuguese language certificate. After that, I started some Portuguese language courses... Three courses, I think. Some had certification and others were just for speaking and those kinds of things. Then I started the ninth grade again... I already had the ninth grade in my country, but I couldn’t transfer it here. So, I studied the ninth grade again and continued to the twelfth grade and became a health care assistant.” (P2, Syria)

These narratives suggest that for some women, rebuilding their lives meant resuming their education, learning Portuguese and pursuing professional opportunities. For others, it involved engaging with community activities and supporting other women. These accounts suggest that rebuilding was not limited to individual integration but also involved relational and social forms of belonging.

Social support played a central but differentiated role in these processes. While some refugee women emphasized friendship networks, solidarity among refugees, and supportive interactions with Portuguese individuals as key sources of belonging, others highlighted the importance of family or refugee-community networks.

“I like Portugal so much and Portuguese people because they tried to help and I feel I have a lot of friends from Portugal. Really. Yes. My children have friends from all countries, Brazil, Portugal... Venezuela...” (P1, Ukraine)

“Then we found another (...) association supporting refugees (...) They helped us meet [other] refugees and they helped us meet Portuguese people. If I wanted, for example, to ask something... without fear, I call them and they help me. They came to my house twice a week (...) We became friends... They taught me many things and came to our house to try our food...” (P2, Syria)

Within this context, acts of kindness and daily gestures of recognition were described as particularly meaningful in counterbalancing feelings of isolation and displacement. Portugal was often depicted as a safe, calm, and welcoming country, with participants contrasting its tranquillity with the instability of their countries of origin. This perception may have contributed to emotional security and encouraged their desire to remain long-term.

For the refugee women of this study, safety was understood beyond the absence of war and also involved the possibility of a stable future, with opportunities to work, the development of new social ties and the possibility of raising children in a peaceful environment.

For some women, engagement in paid or volunteer work played a key role in integration, offering opportunities for social contact, identity reconstruction, and participation in community life. These activities represented spaces of social interaction, enjoyment and shared experiences with other refugee women, creating opportunities to participate in meaningful community initiatives.

"The project is for all refugee women here (. . .) It is a small support, but it is already good, isn't it? Because you talk and play and laugh and make packages and receive money (. . .) We meet there (. . .) We sit together, drink coffee and work (. . .) It is something very, very good (. . .) We do not need anything else! If it were every day, it would be great!" (P2, Syria)

However, institutional encounters were also described ambivalently. Alongside experiences of assistance provided by non-governmental organisations, several participants reported difficulties navigating bureaucratic procedures and accessing services. These accounts often coexisted with narratives of resilience and adaptation, rather than replacing them, suggesting that integration processes were experienced through overlapping conditions of support and constraint.

"I want to submit my documents as a highly qualified specialist, but ALMA doesn't open this process. . . We call, we call. . . It's impossible (. . .) I don't feel decided. . . Maybe if this is not resolved, I don't know. . . Maybe we will come back to Ukraine. I hope not." (P1, Ukraine)

"Social Security doesn't help [me]. . . (. . .) I have never heard of a Portuguese woman. . . alone. . . with four children [and] Social Security doesn't help her (. . .) I am here. Alone. Without family, without anything, with four children. Who will pay the bills? (. . .) One time she said: 'Because you are not Portuguese.'" (P3, Iraq)

3.2. Theme 2: Being a Woman in the Context of Refuge

Gender played a central role in shaping participants' experiences of forced migration and resettlement, influencing both exposure to risk and access to resources across different stages of displacement. While the Syrian and Iraqi participants described experiences of gender-based oppression and religious persecution in their countries of origin, women across all national backgrounds reported that gender norms shaped everyday experiences of care, work, mobility, and adaptation. Rather than operating in isolation, gender intersected with other social positions, including motherhood, family circumstances, nationality, religion, and refugee status to produce diverse experiences of vulnerability and agency.

"[Before the separation, at] Social Security I said: '(. . .) I want to leave my job (. . .) It's my fault, because my husband doesn't want me to work with this company.' But [the employee] said: 'Sorry, but we can't write all of that in the system. . . We only need to write [that you] want to leave this job.' Social Security sees this paper and says: '(. . .) you don't want to work' (. . .) But now [as a result], I am here. Alone. Without family, without anything, with four children.'" (P3, Iraq)

This account illustrates how gendered experiences are often intersected with family circumstances and institutional responses. In this case, experiences of marital control, caregiving responsibilities, and limited institutional recognition contributed to a situation of heightened vulnerability following resettlement. This account illustrates how gender inequalities were not confined to the country of origin but continued to shape women's interactions with institutional systems after resettlement.

Experiences of discrimination and inequality were described with particular intensity among women from Syria and Iraq who also reported several forms of gender-based and religious oppression in their home countries.

"Anyone who is not Muslim, or who does not convert to Islam, they kill immediately (. . .) If a woman does not wear the hijab, she is considered not to be on the right path (. . .) They did many bad things to us (. . .) It was normal. . . a woman. . . sex. . . seven people, eight people, at the same time. That is why we fled. . ." (P3, Iraq)

"Violence. . . To be a woman (. . .) Families kill [the girls]. Their own families. My friend died like this. Unfortunately. She was a small girl, not even a woman yet. But she died because they took her. . . In prison then. . . I don't know the name in Portuguese. . . Sexual relations or. . ." (P2, Syria)

For these participants, forced migration was described not only as an escape from armed conflict but also from gendered violence, religious persecution, and restrictions on women's autonomy. These narratives indicate that experiences of war and displacement were inseparable from broader gendered and religious power relations operating in their countries of origin.

At the same time, participants also described encountering assumptions and cultural projections in the host society. One participant recounted an incident in which her daughter was asked to wear a hijab during a school activity, despite her family not practicing Islam. The episode was interpreted by the participant as a misrecognition of her cultural and religious identity, shaped by simplified representations of "Arab culture".

"When my daughter came home and told me, I went to the school and said: 'It cannot be like this (. . .) You don't know what we lived through before (. . .) In our culture, we don't wear it. We don't need it. If you want an Arab person to wear a hijab, it should not be my daughter.'" (P3, Iraq)

Rather than describing overt discrimination, this account illustrates how refugee women may be positioned through simplified cultural assumptions that overlook differences in religion, nationality, and personal history. The participant interpreted this episode as a reminder that refugee identities may become homogenized within the host society, despite the diversity of experiences represented among refugee women.

Across participants' accounts, motherhood emerged as a central dimension through which participants interpreted and navigated forced migration was experienced, simultaneously functioning as a source of meaning and a site of constraint. Rather than being experienced uniformly, motherhood was shaped by family configuration, availability of support, and structural conditions in the host society. For many women, caring for children provided emotional grounding and a sense of purpose during displacement.

"The most important thing is that children are happy. For the well-being of our children, we are ready to do everything so that they can be happy and not see this war. For me, children come first. . . Children first. . . Then my husband. . . (. . .) For me, children come first. Their happiness and health." (P5, Ukraine)

"It was a challenge. It was difficult, difficult, so much. . . I cried sometimes in the night (. . .) I cried. And I think about. . . I thought about come back in Ukraine a lot of times."

I thought ‘I... I need to come back, we need to come back’, but I understand that my children need to be in safe place.” (P1, Ukraine)

At the same time, motherhood involved various challenges, depending on family arrangements and institutional or social support. Women who migrated without extended family or who had limited support networks described motherhood as a more demanding and isolating experience. Their narratives showed difficulties related to structural constraints, including a lack of public policies responsive to caregiving responsibilities and insufficient support networks.

“I have to go to school meetings by myself (...) The other day there were three appointments on the same day, from three to five. Me and them (...) She had a hospital [appointment] at five, I had an appointment with my family doctor near Social Security [building], and my other daughter had a dentist appointment on the other side [of the building] (...) I called her and said: ‘Please, go with your sister... I will go to my appointment...’” (P3, Iraq)

These accounts suggest that the challenges associated with motherhood were shaped not only by caregiving responsibilities themselves but also by the availability of family support, institutional resources, and practical opportunities to reconcile care and employment. For some women, childcare responsibilities also shaped their participation in the labour market. One participant, despite migrating with her extended family and receiving considerable support, still described herself as primarily responsible for her son’s care. As a result, she prioritised her husband’s employment and perceived her own work schedule as incompatible with her son’s needs. These accounts indicate that caregiving responsibilities continued to be organised along gendered lines after resettlement. However, the extent to which these responsibilities constrained women’s employment appeared to depend on family composition, available support networks, and institutional opportunities. Rather than representing a uniform experience, motherhood intersected with migration trajectories and social circumstances to shape participants’ opportunities for labour market participation and autonomy.

“I have to go to work at 7 in the morning, for example... Or I have to come back from work at 9 at night... And that makes it impossible for my son, because my husband works and I’m the one who has to take him... take him... take him to school and bring him back, that’s why...” (P2, Syria)

Overall, this theme suggests that gender was not experienced as an isolated category but interacted with other dimensions of participants’ lives, including nationality, religion, family configuration, and refugee status. These intersections shaped both vulnerability and resilience throughout forced migration and resettlement, while also highlighting the diversity of women’s experiences rather than a single or universal refugee trajectory.

3.3. Theme 3: Psychological Impact and Coping Strategies

Women across all backgrounds described psychological suffering as an enduring consequence of forced migration that frequently persisted beyond physical resettlement. Although the forms and intensity of distress varied across participants, narratives consistently referred to emotional consequences associated with war, displacement, repeated loss, and prolonged uncertainty.

“First we arrived here... Airplanes... Very low, low... Ruuu... Scared, scared (...) The noise... During the war, I was very afraid of the sky. There were many helicopters flying at that time. When we arrived here, the airplanes were flying and we were scared (...) When they have festivals... fireworks... there was a little shock (...) All these sounds scared us in the beginning.” (P5, Ukraine)

"I'm not sure if I'm here or there, you know? Whether it's a normal sound or the sound of an airplane. I just freeze in that moment... for a minute or so... I become really, really shut down, like: 'I hope it passes, I hope it passes'... Because it's a noise that still hasn't left my ears." (P2, Syria)

These accounts suggest that resettlement did not necessarily mark the end of psychological distress. For some women, everyday sensory experiences became reminders of previous exposure to war, illustrating how feelings of safety and threat coexisted during adaptation to the host country.

Additionally, some women described long-term emotional distress arising from disrupted relationships, repeated losses and consecutive experiences of relocation:

"It was [like] a big family... (..) We lived there a long time (..) But then we moved... I don't know why... I cried... Because I liked it there. If I like it, I live here. I don't want to move. I love the family [we made]... the family hugs... I like it very much (..) It is not easy... Change house, change country, change, change, change (..) My head didn't... I didn't understand what [was happening]." (P3, Iraq)

Rather than being linked to a single traumatic event, psychological distress often appeared to accumulate across successive experiences of displacement, disrupted relationships, and repeated transitions. For some women, these successive moves contributed to feelings of instability, emotional exhaustion and distress. In some cases, these experiences seemed to be intensified by restrictive and changing migration policies in the host country, which prolonged uncertainty and made it difficult to imagine or plan the future.

"This is the problem. You can live here... but for how long? Now you should sit and wait ten years for a passport... This is a really crazy idea. Okay, five years maybe... six years... even seven years [waiting]... But ten years? Who will stay in Portugal? (..) I don't know... I [would] like to stay, I don't know... What can I tell you now? (..) No plans... Cannot have a plan because it's... I don't know." (P6, Ukraine)

These narratives illustrate how uncertainty was experienced not only as a consequence of past conflict but also as an ongoing feature of life after resettlement, limiting participants' capacity to plan for the future. Overall, the interviews suggest that psychological suffering was experienced as a cumulative process, shaped by conflict, multiple losses, repeated transitions, and prolonged insecurity.

Despite these challenges, participants described diverse ways of coping with psychological distress, drawing on personal, relational, community, and spiritual resources throughout their migration and resettlement journeys. Social support emerged as one of the most prominent strategies across all interviews. Yet, the forms of support available varied according to family arrangements and migration trajectories. While some women experienced interpersonal coping through marital and family relationships, others described forming new support networks in the host country, through friendships, work, community ties, and mutual assistance within refugee networks:

"What helped me the most was my family... They were always by my side. My husband, my parents... that was the most important thing. And [the association] also helped me. We still meet with them (..) They come to our home, my son really likes them, and now we are a family too." (P2, Syria)

"If I feel bad, so sad and bad, Depressed... I go to my friend or something (..) I call them and they [say] 'Come to me. I bought some beers'. (..) And I when I come, I speak all the time with them. I speak, speak, speak, speak. they hear, hear, hear, hear. And they speak, speak, speak (..) It's comfortable... We feel comfortable... Because I talk [about] my problem and they told their problem." (P1, Ukraine)

The meaning of social support differed across participants. While some relied primarily on pre-existing family relationships, others described rebuilding support through friendships, refugee organisations, or relationships developed after resettlement. These differences appeared to reflect participants' migration trajectories and family configurations rather than a single pattern of adaptation.

For some women, offering help to others, engaging in volunteer work, sharing experiences of suffering, and participating in community solidarity with other refugees were also described as important resources. For some participants, helping others represented more than altruistic behaviour. It also functioned as a way of restoring purpose, maintaining social connectedness, and coping with their own emotional distress.

"How do I help myself? (...) I try to do many things, many things (...) Every day we have bad... Bad news... But I always... Call and try to help, to help... 'How [can] I [solve] this problem? How [can] I [solve] this problem?' But a lot of [the] time I work like a volunteer... But I never sit and cry..." (P4, Ukraine)

These accounts suggest that coping was not limited to seeking support from others. For some women, actively supporting friends and participating in the community represented a way to respond to their own emotional struggles, while creating purpose and connection with others. Many women also described becoming more independent after displacement. Strategies rooted in self-efficacy were evident, particularly through expressions of empowerment, personal agency, and recognition of one's capacities. Participants described behaviours such as setting boundaries, challenging gender norms, confronting violence, and overcoming obstacles as means of reclaiming autonomy:

"I don't want to always sit and wait for my husband or my parents... Right? (...) I'm always waiting for him to do everything or for my father... To do everything. I'm used to it like this, because either my father or my husband does everything. It's not a good thing, because they go to work and I will be alone... I have to figure some things out in this life! It's not enough!" (P2, Syria)

"After the war (...) Maybe I feel strong because I understand... I understood I can help a lot of problems. I am alone woman, I can move and live in other country, I can open a bank account, I can rent there an apartment... I can... To be without depression... Maybe I always... I always try to develop my skills, learn English (...) And it's good because I didn't cry (...) I was proud of myself." (P4, Ukraine)

These accounts suggest that autonomy was reconstructed through different pathways. For some women, independence emerged through mastering everyday practical tasks, whereas for others it was associated with recognising personal strengths and developing confidence after displacement.

Although many women described coping by seeking support and taking action, they also described strategies aimed at managing their emotional responses to situations they could not change. Engaging in emotional regulation strategies, including acceptance, resignation, and adaptation, was reported across interviews as ways of coping with psychological distress. Avoidant coping was observed in five participants, particularly in the avoidance of war-related news or conflict situations within the host country.

"We moved away from the war, and the thoughts about the war faded a little... And then the heart became calm, calm..." (P5, Ukraine)

"Even now... No... I cannot watch, for example, news... Ukrainian news right now... Because when you open, you see (...) In my country, many cities... No building, just... Nothing... Destruction (...) We see every day they are bombed now. Every day people are dying (...) Now your mind is, you know, accepting this. Of course we are worried,

we don't like [it], but... Yeah. It's not like before (...) You cannot always be nervous... If every time you see something that you are... You will die after, I don't know, heart attack..." (P5, Ukraine)

Avoiding distressing news was not described as denying the existence of war but rather as a strategy to regulate emotional overload while remaining aware of events affecting relatives and communities of origin. Some participants also described cognitive restructuring as common emotional relief strategies. For some, this involved reminding themselves that they were safe and redirecting their attention to the present.

"I try to accept because... What can I do? Nothing (...) Most of the time I am thinking... If I feel very stressed and I start to think another way... 'Look, you are under stress... But you are safe. There is no bomb... You are here. You have food... Okay... Think about other people in Ukraine'... My friend, she's everyday sitting this way (...) And she doesn't know [if] she will be alive tomorrow (...) So... I just think it's better to... You know, don't think too much... That I am in stress. It's better you concentrate on other [things] (...) Focus on the positive." (P6, Ukraine)

Others described using symbolic places and internal dialogue to put their problems into perspective. One participant explained during her interview that she usually goes to a high point in the city to (re)frame the meaning of her problems:

"I go there... I talk with God always (...) Because it is up high. And everyone is very small (...) And God... What message does He want to give me? 'You are a good person, my daughter. Don't make these problems too big in your head. Look, forget it.' (...) Always... I keep telling myself: 'I don't have a big problem. Everything is small'." (P3, Iraq)

Some differences also emerged in coping strategies described by women from different backgrounds. Religious coping was reported across participants but appeared to assume different meanings depending on women's cultural and religious backgrounds. For participants from Syria and Iraq, faith was frequently described as an active framework through which suffering, displacement, and future uncertainty were interpreted. Among Ukrainian participants, spirituality was more often expressed through gratitude for survival and hope for the future than through explicit reliance on religious practices.

"God helps me... Always. I have faith. Very strong faith. He always helps me. Because I had... I had many, many problems... Other people would see these problems and kill... Kill [themselves]... That's it. But not me (...) God wants something else. God wants us to live here... He has a path (...) He has a plan. If you follow His plan (...) you are not alone. He... He is always with you. If you open your eyes again... hold His hand... Always..." (P3, Iraq)

"Just live today... Thank God. We are alive, thank God. That's it (...) I'm not religious, no... But I try to thank God sometimes that really we are alive, we have food, we have a home and this is important (...) Yes... You should thank God... You should thank my husband... You should thank this planet." (P6, Ukraine)

Similarly, some coping strategies appeared to be more prominent among Ukrainian participants, who reported using contemplative and well-being practices, such as spending time in nature, walking, travelling, and spending time outdoors as a way of calming themselves and focusing on the present:

"We try to travel, we try to go to Douro... to [the] ocean, to other places... To see... Reconnect to... How I can say? Refocus. We have focused on the war and then we have stress (...) We try to reconnect, refocus, keep focused to... When we lived in Ukraine, we

go to other country (...) When we come in Portugal, I said [to] my children that [this] is our new travel..." (P1, Ukraine)

"The first time I feel maybe depressed... But I decided... I am alive. The life goes on. I must move... I must move on... I must take my hair and pull... Pull myself [up]... And focus on good things... And I must every day... Say (...) Green trees, my friends, smile and listen to outdoors... Song birds... Everything will be good..." (P4, Ukraine)

These strategies suggest that engagement with natural environments and everyday routines became practical ways of restoring emotional balance and creating psychological distance from experiences of war.

Overall, participants described coping as a dynamic and multidimensional process rather than a fixed set of strategies. Although several coping resources were shared across women, the meanings attributed to them differed according to migration trajectories, family circumstances, cultural background, and religious beliefs. These findings suggest that psychological adaptation following forced migration was shaped not only by individual resilience but also by the relational, cultural, and structural contexts within which women rebuilt their lives after resettlement.

4. Discussion

The findings of this study suggest that forced migration should be understood not as a singular event, but as a prolonged and multidimensional process of ruptures, instability and adaptation. Participants' narratives showed cumulative experiences of loss involving safety, home, social bonds, professional identity and belonging. The refugee women shared narratives marked by PTEs and life-threatening situations in which seeking refuge emerged primarily as a strategy for survival. These findings are consistent with the literature, which demonstrates that armed conflict and exposure to violence constitute the primary drivers of forced migration (Adhikari 2013; Crawley and Skleparis 2018), carrying significant risks for psychological distress among refugee women (Anisman et al. 2024; Sukiasyan 2024).

The narratives explored in this study reflect profound emotional and symbolic losses, particularly regarding the abandonment of homes, belongings, and familiar social environments. Beyond its material dimension, home represented safety, stability, and identity, playing an important role in life reconstruction and psychological well-being (McShane et al. 2025; Rast et al. 2024). The loss of home, combined with precarious housing conditions and insufficient housing-support policies, may therefore intensify emotional suffering and complicate adaptation processes during resettlement (Ziersch et al. 2017).

Participants also described a persistent sense of displacement, not only during the migration process but also after arrival in the host country, particularly through repeated movement between temporary accommodations and unstable living conditions. These experiences contributed to profound exhaustion, uncertainty, and discontinuity, echoing findings reported in previous studies on forced migration trajectories (Taylor et al. 2024).

The rupture of significant relational bonds further intensified psychological distress. Family separation, reduced support networks, and ongoing concern for loved ones still at risk in their countries of origin were described as deeply painful experiences. Literature indicates that social isolation, weakened social ties, and loneliness are central factors that intensify psychological suffering among refugee populations (Anisman et al. 2024; Brooks et al. 2024; Nickerson et al. 2025).

Although participants shared many experiences of forced displacement, their narratives also revealed important differences in how they navigated life after resettlement. An intersectional perspective (Anthias 2012; Crenshaw 1991, 2017) helped to understand how gender, motherhood, migration status, sociocultural background, and institutional conditions during resettlement interacted throughout the refugee process, shaping both

the challenges women faced and the resources available to cope with them. This perspective also helps explain why, despite shared experiences of loss and displacement, women described different adaptation trajectories and coping resources.

From the perspective of the transactional model of coping (Lazarus and Folkman 1984), these experiences may be understood as chronic and, in many cases, uncontrollable stressors, which helps explain the predominance of emotion-focused and meaning-focused coping strategies identified in this study. In contexts where stressors cannot be directly resolved, such as war, family separation, forced displacement, and institutional uncertainty, coping strategies centred on emotional regulation may constitute adaptive responses aimed at reducing psychological distress (Folkman 2008; Folkman and Moskowitz 2007). Participants demonstrated the capacity to reinterpret adversity through spirituality, gratitude, optimism, and future-oriented perspectives, suggesting that coping involved not only managing suffering but also reconstructing meaning and preserving hope. However, the women described different ways of coping, depending on their sociocultural backgrounds, family circumstances, and migration trajectories. Interpersonal coping emerged as one of the most significant resources mobilized by participants throughout the refugee process, consistent with recent literature highlighting the protective role of social support among refugee women (Alachkar 2023; Anisman et al. 2024).

Support from family members, friends, neighbours, co-workers and other refugees constitutes fundamental elements for managing psychological distress and fostering resilience (Gonçalves and Matos 2020; Shishehgar et al. 2025). Therefore, social support emerged not only as a form of emotional regulation, but also as a relational and practical resource that contributed to identity reconstruction, a sense of community, and feelings of safety. However, access to social support was not uniform across participants. Some women relied on family members, whereas others built new support networks through refugee organisations, friendships, community or work. The narratives indicate that supportive relationships were shaped by women's migration trajectories, family circumstances and opportunities for social participation after resettlement. These findings reinforce that coping among refugee women is not solely an individual psychological process but is also shaped by social relationships and interpersonal connections and collective experiences.

Self-efficacy and optimism also emerged as important dimensions for promoting well-being (Nickerson et al. 2022; Shishehgar et al. 2025; Taheri et al. 2024b). Coping strategies grounded in perceptions of personal strength, empowerment, and hope were central in this study. Furthermore, emotional self-regulation was a recurring strategy, particularly through acceptance, avoidant coping, and cognitive restructuring. Notably, acceptance has been emphasized in the literature as a facilitator of well-being among refugee populations (Solberg et al. 2023; Taheri et al. 2024b).

The findings also suggest important cultural differences in coping processes. Religious coping was more prominent among women from the Middle East, indicating that spirituality and faith may be culturally mediated resources, shaped by socializations and cultural context. These results support studies highlighting adaptive religious coping as an important mechanism for meaning-making, emotional regulation, and resilience among refugee women exposed to violence and displacement (Alachkar 2023; Pertek et al. 2023).

Conversely, contemplative practices appeared to be described more frequently by Ukrainian participants, suggesting that coping resources may vary according to cultural backgrounds, personal experiences, and migration contexts. While spirituality was often used by women from the Middle East to make sense of their experience (Pertek et al. 2023), Ukrainian participants more frequently described contact with nature as a way of restoring emotional balance and focusing on the present. Previous studies have shown that contact with nature can have therapeutic effects, contributing to emotional restoration, strength-

ening the sense of belonging, and enhancing motivation and life appreciation (Kaplan 1995; Poulsen et al. 2020; Wendelboe-Nelson et al. 2025). Most participants mentioned that contact with nature was important for alleviating emotional suffering, valuing activities such as walking in parks, travelling, and going to the beach.

Although participants described Portugal positively as a host country, highlighting kindness, respect from the local population, a sense of safety, and governmental support, particularly in financial and housing domains in the short term, they also reported institutional weaknesses, especially regarding language and professional barriers. Such limitations echo findings in the literature on the refugee population in Portugal (Klugman 2022; Sousa et al. 2021), which characterizes the asylum system as at times unequal and insufficient, contributing to the structural vulnerability of refugee women (Sampaio and Ramos 2023; Varela 2021). In this context, the present study suggests that these barriers are not only practical difficulties, but also structural conditions that shape coping opportunities and adaptation trajectories. While the present study did not specifically explore the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is important to acknowledge that some participants' migration and early resettlement trajectories occurred during or shortly after this period. Previous research suggests that the pandemic intensified challenges related to immigration processes, access to services, and migrant well-being (Krannich and Massey 2024), potentially adding further complexity to refugee women's adaptation experiences.

Most women in this study reported challenges in labour market integration due to limited Portuguese language proficiency or difficulties validating academic and professional qualifications obtained in their countries of origin, highlighting gaps in institutional and policy supports tailored to refugee women in vulnerable situations. From an intersectional perspective (Crenshaw 2017), these difficulties cannot be understood solely through refugee status, but rather through the interaction of gender, migration status, language barriers, economic vulnerability, and caregiving responsibilities. This was particularly evident in participants' labour market experiences. Limited Portuguese language proficiency and difficulties validating academic and professional qualifications restricted employment opportunities, while primary responsibility for childcare further constrained women's participation in paid work and opportunities to learn Portuguese and expand social networks. Rather than operating independently, these conditions mutually reinforced one another, producing cumulative forms of vulnerability that limited economic autonomy and hindered integration (Sunata and Özsoy 2023). These challenges were especially pronounced among women who had resettled alone with their children, who frequently relied on older children, neighbours, or refugee organisations for childcare while working. Balancing employment, childcare, and household responsibilities also emerged as a significant source of stress, affecting participants' psychological well-being and their ability to rebuild their lives in Portugal (Abi Zeid Daou et al. 2024; Colvin and Munz 2020).

This scenario directly impacts living conditions, particularly due to the mismatch between low salaries and the high cost of living, especially housing. Under these circumstances, socioeconomic vulnerability restricts women's ability to rebuild their lives, undermining autonomy, self-esteem, and social connections (Handiso et al. 2024; Taylor et al. 2024), and exacerbating risks to mental health (Sukiasyan 2024).

Labour participation nevertheless emerged as a fundamental resource for cultural and social integration among women who were able to work. While studies highlight that labour integration can facilitate women's empowerment, the development of social bonds, and community participation (Alhalawani and Al-Serhan 2024), research also indicates that workplace contexts may reproduce gender inequalities and maintain women in situations of oppression (E. G. Silva et al. 2023). An intersectional perspective suggests that refugee women often occupy particularly vulnerable positions within labour markets due to the

combined effects of gendered expectations, migration-related barriers, economic insecurity, and caregiving responsibilities. In this sense, the challenges of labour market integration, combined with the difficulty of reconciling working hours with parental responsibilities, reinforce the vulnerability of women in the context of refuge.

Motherhood also emerged as an ambivalent factor. For some women, it posed challenges to integration and adaptation, particularly when support networks were limited. Motherhood in the context of refuge can thus hinder professional integration and social participation (Shishehgar et al. 2025). Prioritizing children often resulted in overload, self-demand, and the suppression of one's own suffering. These findings resonate with previous research on migrant women in Portugal, which highlights the persistence of gendered inequalities in the distribution of unpaid domestic and care work, often resulting in cumulative overload, difficulties in work–family balance, and constraints on women's autonomy and social participation (E. G. Silva et al. 2023). Literature indicates that the silencing of suffering may serve as a coping strategy when the available support is insufficient (Abi Zeid Daou et al. 2024; Kassam et al. 2023). From an intersectional perspective (Crenshaw 1991), motherhood in the context of refuge emerges as an experience that intensifies the vulnerabilities of refugee women and significantly shapes their forced migration trajectories. The findings suggest that motherhood became more challenging when responsibilities traditionally assigned to women were experienced in the context of forced displacement and limited support networks. As women assumed the primary responsibility of caring for their children while rebuilding their lives in a new country, their own needs were often postponed (O'Mahony et al. 2023; E. G. Silva et al. 2023). At the same time, motherhood extended beyond caregiving responsibilities, as women frequently became mediators of their families' adaptation by navigating schools, services, language acquisition, and everyday interactions with the host society. This contributed to overload, the silencing of personal suffering, and reinforced the barriers to social and labour market participation discussed above.

On the other hand, motherhood was also a substantial source of motivation (O'Mahony et al. 2023; Pertek 2024). Women described their children's safety, well-being, and presence as central factors pushing them to persevere, confront challenges, and even remain in the host country. This study thus supports evidence suggesting that motherhood symbolizes coping, growth, and life restructuring, functioning as an important resilience factor (Colvin and Munz 2020).

Although the literature documents increased gender-based violence during armed conflict (Borges 2024; Klugman 2022; Pérez-Vázquez and Bonilla-Campos 2023), participants from Syria and Iraq described experiences of gender-based oppression and constraints associated with the intersection of gendered expectations, sociocultural norms, and religious meanings and practices that preceded and extended beyond the experience of war itself. Their narratives suggest that, for these women, forced migration was shaped not only by armed conflict but also by gendered forms of oppression associated with sociocultural and religious contexts. However, these social positions were not static but were continuously renegotiated throughout the migration trajectory. Resettlement in Portugal created a new social context in which previously established gender expectations were questioned and transformed, allowing some women to experience greater autonomy, particularly in relation to decision-making, mobility, and participation in social and professional activities (Sunata and Özsoy 2023). At the same time, this process was accompanied by new forms of vulnerability arising from language barriers, economic insecurity, and challenges in accessing employment and institutional support. Similarly, the role of religion was not fixed but was reshaped across contexts. Within the migration trajectory, religious beliefs and practices interacted with gender norms, family expectations, and new social environ-

ments, becoming a source of meaning, identity continuity, and emotional support during resettlement. These findings suggest that refugee women's experiences cannot be understood through refugee status alone. Rather, vulnerability and agency emerged from the interaction between gender, sociocultural background, religion, family circumstances, and the structural conditions encountered after resettlement (Anthias 2012). These findings highlight the importance of culturally informed and intersectionally sensitive approaches when addressing the experiences of refugee women.

Overall, this study contributes to the coping literature by demonstrating that coping among refugee women is not only an individual psychological response, but also a dynamic and relational process shaped by structural conditions, social relationships, culture, and gender. An intersectional perspective was essential for understanding why women who shared experiences of forced displacement described different vulnerabilities, coping strategies, and adaptation trajectories. These differences emerged through the interaction of multiple social positions and changing contexts throughout the migration trajectory, rather than from refugee status alone. Importantly, resettlement involved both opportunities for agency and the emergence of new forms of vulnerability, highlighting that refugee women's coping and adaptation are evolving processes shaped by the relationship between pre- and post-migration experiences.

5. Conclusions

This study suggests that the forced migration experiences of refugee women in Portugal are characterized by complex and multidimensional dynamics involving vulnerability, instability, loss, adaptation, and resilience. Far from constituting a linear transition towards safety and stability, participants' experiences are shaped by cumulative losses, emotional and relational ruptures, and structural inequalities that continue to affect their integration trajectories in the host country. Psychological distress emerges not as an individual condition, but as a phenomenon embedded within broader social, institutional, and political contexts that structure the everyday lives of these refugee women.

Despite these adversities and the persistence of war-related psychological distress, participants demonstrated diverse and contextually situated forms of coping and agency, including social support, self-efficacy, optimism, emotional regulation, contemplative practices, and, in some cases, religious coping. These strategies reveal that, even in contexts marked by uncertainty and constraint, refugee women mobilise coping strategies and internal and relational resources that allow them to reconstruct their identities and rebuild their lives.

This study reinforces the need to analyse refugee women's experiences through an intersectional lens capable of capturing how gender, migration status, caregiving responsibilities, and institutional barriers intersect to shape both vulnerability and coping possibilities. Recognizing that psychological distress is shaped not only by exposure to war but also by structural, institutional, and social conditions is essential for informing more ethical, inclusive, and gender-sensitive approaches to policy and increasing access to mental-health support.

Finally, given the exploratory nature of this study, the findings reflect a situated understanding of the experiences of refugee women within a specific social, cultural, and migratory context. The results are not intended to be generalised, and the geographical scope of the sample, limited to the northern region of Portugal, further constrains the transferability of the findings. Nevertheless, the study provides valuable insights into coping as a relational and structurally embedded process. Future research should include larger and more diverse samples across Portugal in order to further examine these dynamics and inform more effective, gender-responsive policies.

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

AIMA	Agência para a Integração, Migrações e Asilo
IOM	International Organisation for Migration
PAM	Action Plan for Migration
PEM	Strategic Plan for Migration
PTE	Potentially Traumatic Events Plan for Migration
PTSD	Post-traumatic stress disorder
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

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