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Agency in waiting? Everyday tactics of asylum seekers and refugees in Glasgow

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ABSTRACT

We examine how asylum seekers and refugees living in Glasgow use various tactics to survive and navigate everyday challenges within the restrictive UK immigration system. Thirty interviews were conducted with asylum seekers and refugees of various nationalities and personal backgrounds (ethnicity, class, education and migratory circumstances). Twenty state and third sector organisation staff were also interviewed. Participant observation within third sector organisations was also undertaken. While asylum seekers and refugees feel uncertainties and challenges, we found that they actively use various tactics to navigate the often-lengthy UK asylum process. 'Agency in waiting' encompasses the negative impact of a long stagnation period endured while awaiting confirmation of refugee status and the tactics developed despite the difficulties that asylum seekers and refugees face. We consider three ways that tactics are used: to gain familiarity, to engage in meaningful activities, and to establish social connections.



KEYWORDS

Agency; tactics; asylum seekers; refugees; Glasgow

Introduction

We examine how asylum seekers and refugees use tactics to navigate everyday challenges within the restrictive UK immigration system while waiting. Waiting is a ubiquitous experience but for asylum seekers and refugees waiting can undermine their agency by making them feel stuck (Hage, 2009a), 'numb, muted, dead' (Crapanzano, 1985, p. 44). Nevertheless, while waiting, migrants exercise limited agency through small acts (Rotter, 2016). Agency is one's capacity to reflect on everyday conditions and act to change one's circumstances (Triandafyllidou, 2019). Here, agency is understood in terms of what control asylum seekers and refugees have – or feel they have – when encountering structural barriers. Thus, agency can be considered as a key component of micro-level tactics that involve small acts or steps taken to exercise control (Hall et al., 2022; Rotter, 2016).

The term 'asylum seeker' describes people who have lodged a claim for refugee status but their claim awaits national authority or UNHCR determination (UNHCR, 2021a). The term 'refugee' describes someone who has been granted asylum because they are 'unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion' (UNHCR, 2021b). In September 2021, 37,562 individuals sought asylum in the UK – a significant increase from the 31,966 asylum applications received in the year ending in September 2020 (Home Office, 2021).

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Glasgow, the location of our research, is one of the largest dispersal areas in the UK (Strang et al., 2018). Since 2000, Glasgow has received approximately 10% of the total number of asylum seekers arriving in the UK (Scottish Government, 2018). According to the UK's House of Commons Research Briefing, at the end of June 2021, Glasgow was the local authority with the most dispersed asylum seekers (3541).

Asylum seekers often live in substandard housing conditions in the outskirts of cities and towns in the UK while enduring the protracted asylum decision-making process. Since 1999, the UK government has been implementing the compulsory dispersal policy to house asylum seekers on a no-choice basis throughout the UK (Hynes, 2009), which creates geographical isolation. Furthermore, while waiting asylum seekers cannot work in the UK. They must rely on state support from the UK government; they receive £39.63 per week (approximately £5.66 per day) to buy food, clothing, and sanitation (Home Office, 2022).

Even once refugee status is gained, delays for housing, employment and education adversely affect refugees because the state support system treats them unfavourably. For example, providing refugees with only five years of protected status and the lack of recognition for refugees' professional qualifications and employment experiences (gained prior to arrival in the UK) hinders their future planning. Restrictions applied to asylum seekers and refugees are part of broader policies of control and exclusion (Mulvey, 2010).

For the most part, scholarly focus has been at the intersection of migrants' agency and the immigration system and less is known about the everyday, mundane tactics that asylum seekers and refugees employ while waiting. Whilst much migration literature explores strategies that migrants employ to deal with the system (Kosic & Triandafyllidou, 2003; Miellet, 2021; Phillimore, 2011), we explore tactics that have been rather overlooked, particularly the role of gender and one's individual circumstances. We found that asylum seekers and refugees enact agency, albeit limited, through using various tactics shaped by gender and individual circumstances. For example, women with children, unmarried women and women with certain cultural beliefs employed different tactics (Kosic & Triandafyllidou, 2003; Miellet, 2021; Phillimore, 2011). Hence, our research contributes to the existing literature on migrants' agency (Ghorashi et al., 2018; Mainwaring, 2016; Triandafyllidou, 2019), tactics (Allsopp et al., 2015; Gill et al., 2014), but also elaborates on how gender and individual, mundane circumstances (Goodman et al., 2017; Hunt, 2008; Robleda, 2020) can influence tactics.

Everyday tactics

Waiting is an unavoidable (and significant) aspect of migration experiences that undermines migrants' agency (Rotter, 2016). Waiting is generally associated with stasis, suspension, emptiness and slowness (Jacobsen et al., 2020; Rotter, 2016). However, individuals avoid becoming a victim by asserting agency through filling their waiting time with active endeavours (Brun, 2015; Hage, 2009b; Rotter, 2016). Although asylum seekers and refugees experience disruption and fragmentation in their everyday life, many have learned to navigate through the system, negotiate their everyday lives, regain control and exercise agency (Triandafyllidou, 2019).

To discuss asylum seekers and refugees' everyday acts of navigating their lives, we draw primarily upon de Certeau's concept of tactics, this paper discusses asylum seekers and refugees' everyday acts of navigating their lives. Tactics are 'the procedures of everyday creativity' (de Certeau, 1984, p. xiv), the 'clever tricks' and 'knowing how to get away with things' (de Certeau, 1984, p. xix). Tactics are the everyday acts that individuals invent (Robleda, 2020) to redress unequal power relations (Lulle et al., 2018). Tactics are 'the *doings* of little things' (Greene, 2020, p. 736, original italics) and refer to the actions of those who are part of the non-powerful strata of society and are subjected to power (Greene, 2020). While tactics have been viewed as arts or weapons of the weakened or the powerless (de Certeau, 1984), these weapons have considerable capacity to subvert power structures (Gill et al., 2014; Scott, 1985). Tactics are acts of resistance (de Certeau, 1984) and part of everyday encounters (Scott, 1985) that produce and transform spaces into

opportunities (Bendixsen, 2018). Tactics enable migrants to capitalise on opportunities to better their circumstances, contest and resist being oppressed (Williams, 2006).

In this article, tactics are the everyday, small, mundane acts of asylum seekers and refugees that allow them to survive and persist in the receiving country (Greene, 2020; Hall et al., 2022; Robleda, 2020). Bearing in mind asylum seekers and refugees' powerlessness against a restrictive immigration and asylum system, tactics can be hidden within the mundane everyday practices (de Certeau, 1984). A focus on the mundane has been key to understanding the everyday life of asylum seekers and refugees and the power relations within their host communities, linking with our focus on migrants' everyday tactics within the challenging UK immigration environment.

We further pay attention to the public sphere that revolves around individuals, which we found to be closely connected to the gender dimension. In their review of modern feminist theories, Özbeý and Bardakçi (2019) emphasise that cultural realities and beliefs about women have pushed them from the public to the private sphere. Referring to the binarised genders of male and female, the public sphere has typically been associated with men (going out, being mobile) while the private domain has typically been associated with women (domesticity and staying at home) (Lama et al., 2021; Sheller & Urry, 2006). In the context of everyday life of women in asylum centres in Norway, Robleda (2020) found women's individual background and circumstances influence how they employ tactics. Similarly, Cheung and Phillimore (2017), referring to gender and refugee integration in the UK, explain that women's level of engagement in community activities can be affected by the need to secure childcare provision; gendered expectations imposed on them within their households; and the absence of single sex-based service provision.

Many migrant women face barriers in the public sphere due to cultural demands along with the imposition of gendered childcare and household responsibilities. Scholars argue that although there are barriers to gaining autonomy in the host country, women find opportunities and novel ways to negotiate for additional power and to deal with daily life (Hunt, 2008; Nawyn, 2010; Robleda, 2020). We elaborate on the mundane ways in which women asylum seekers and refugees navigate their everyday life.

Methods

This research draws on ethnographic research conducted in Glasgow, June–September 2018. Fifty semi-structured interviews were conducted, and participant observation was carried out through volunteering for various third sector organisations (TSOs) in Glasgow. Interviews involved asylum seekers and refugees, and service providers. Participants were recruited through various TSOs and using purposive and snowball sampling, which are well-established methods to access hard-to-reach groups, such as asylum seekers and refugees (Zapata-Barrero & Yalaz, 2018). Sixteen asylum seekers and 14 refugees were interviewed. Twenty were male and 10 were female. They were aged between 20 and 60 years and comprised various national, ethnic, religious, educational backgrounds and family circumstances. Most were originally from the Middle East and North African region, with over half having arrived from Sudan, Syria, Iraq, Iran, and Namibia.

Service provider interviews included 20 staff working for state agencies (such as the Glasgow City Council, National Health Service and the Department for Work and Pensions) and TSOs. TSOs included local faith-based organisations, secular charities, local and national non-government organisations (NGOs). These interviews were important because they provided insight as to how asylum seekers and refugees utilised TSOs to navigate their everyday life in Glasgow and revealed important information about how the system and professionals operate.

Semi-structured interviews were crucial to examining how participants experienced and navigated the period of waiting in their everyday life. Participants could speak openly, broaden the discussion and share their experiences. The interviewer could remain flexible and open, while interviewees spoke freely (Fedyuk & Zentai, 2018). Interviews averaged 50–60 min in duration. In consultation with participants, interviews were conducted mainly in public spaces, such as libraries

and TSO offices. Asylum seeker and refugee participants preferred to be interviewed in libraries because such spaces felt comfortable and they could describe their experiences and have control, to a certain extent, over the interview process. Asylum seekers and refugees often spend time in public libraries to use computers and internet facilities. Most of the interviews were conducted in rooms affording privacy and freedom from disruption. Some interviews were conducted in open spaces within libraries. TSO staff were interviewed in their offices.

This research received ethical approval from Edge Hill University's Social Sciences Departmental Research Ethics Committee and the Faculty of Arts and Sciences Research Ethics Committee. Participants were given project information sheets that were also translated in Arabic and Farsi to ensure informed consent. Participants were reassured prior to the interviews that their participation would not impact upon their asylum cases or result in any incentives. Issues of language barrier were overcome through use of interpreters (Arabic and Farsi) for interviews with individuals who spoke in Arabic and Farsi languages. Interpreters used in this research were refugees themselves and familiar with the participants' issues since they were involved in various TSOs in Glasgow. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed by the primary researcher. Participants were assigned pseudonyms for confidentiality.

Interview data were supplemented with participant observation in TSOs by means of voluntary work. This method allowed for close observation of asylum seekers and refugees in situ through participation in daily activities and events involving asylum seekers and refugees at TSOs. It also enabled interactions between the researcher and asylum seekers and refugees, thereby connecting 'the words spoken and the practices observed or experienced to the overall cultural framework within which they occurred' (Watson, 2011, p. 205). Fieldnotes were used to record participant observation and reflections arising from interviews. Data were thematically analysed and coded using NVivo.

Everyday life and tactics of asylum seekers and refugees

Despite the disempowering effects of waiting, what we found suggests that waiting can be meaningful and active. For our participants, waiting is perceived as a period of gaining familiarity, finding meaningful activities and establishing social connections that enhance their everyday life, even though the ability to do so varies greatly across our sample, depending on gender, personal background and circumstances. We now move on to provide in-depth analysis of three main tactics – (a) gaining familiarity, (b) engaging in meaningful activities, (c) establishing social connections.

Gaining familiarity: 'when you get involved, you learn about lots of things'

The feeling of being stuck in an unfamiliar location was a predominant issue for many participants. All participants had arrived in an unfamiliar place lacking information and English language skills. A tactic they used was to interact with others in their asylum accommodation to gather information about their surroundings. For example, Bokamoso (male, asylum seeker, Namibia, 30–35) was dispersed to Glasgow and lacked social networks (friends or family). He struggled to adjust to the new environment but fellow asylum seekers met in the asylum housing provider's office offered assistance:

When you come here you meet up with other guys from Namibia in Serco¹; when I went to sign some papers, they told me a more about the place if I wanted to collect food and so on.

Another way of gaining familiarity with their location was visiting organisations that support asylum seekers and refugees. While most participants preferred to gain information from other asylum seekers and refugees, Babar (male, asylum seeker, Pakistan, 30–35) felt it was important to learn from those with reliable information and knowledge about the city and so speaking with organisation staff helped him to learn about Glasgow:

So, when you get involved, you learn about lots of things. In north of Glasgow, they [an integration network²] were having their meetings. In the meeting, people [staff from other organisations] come and tell what is going on in the community, what they are doing, what their future plans and what help we can get.

Getting involved in integration networks provided opportunities for asylum seekers and refugees to interact with service providers in their locality. While this helped them to gain familiarity, meeting service providers further helped individuals like Babar to find safe places to share their daily experiences, discuss and resolve problems with accessing services. For example, Adiel (male, asylum seeker, Namibia, 35–40) gained familiarity through befriending a housing officer. Although negative discourses exist around the asylum accommodation providers or their housing officers due to the housing officers' (or the asylum accommodation provider's) association with the Home Office, Adiel utilised his housing officer's knowledge to gather information about his locality. For him, volunteering is an opportunity to gain familiarity with his local area. Through seeking help from his housing officer, as Adiel explains below, he managed to eventually discover information about volunteering for organisations. By helping participants to learn about their locality by finding them places to get involved housing officers are key actors in everyday inclusion and social integration:

... my housing officer provided me with a list of places where I could volunteer. From that list, I managed to find some organisations. I called them and visited there. I also met a few guys there and we are in the same group.

Adiel elaborated on how his asylum housing officer helped him to learn about his new locality: 'he went beyond his defined duties and responsibilities to help'; indeed, the housing officer provided Adiel with a local tour 'to show locations of shops, charities, religious places and places of entertainment'. With the housing officer's support, participants discovered where to buy cheaper food, kitchen utensils, sanitary products and other essential household items. Housing officers, therefore, helped them to locate social spaces to build their informal networks and socialise with fellow asylum seekers and refugees in the community, which was an important aspect of their everyday life in Glasgow.

While many asylum seekers and refugees talked about face-to-face interaction as a tactic for gaining familiarity, we found that they also employ digital tactics to learn about their locale. Similarly, in research exploring refugees' strategies during reception and settlement in the Netherlands, Miellet (2021) found that digital tactics are used to negotiate beyond uncertainty while waiting. This is evident in our research in the case of Abeo (male, asylum seeker, Nigeria, 40–45) who likes technology and identified social media (Facebook and WhatsApp) as key to gaining understanding of his host community:

It is amazing, you know, because we don't need to meet in person. If you need anything, just put a message on Facebook or WhatsApp and you will get a lot of information.

An example is the Syrian community in Glasgow's Facebook page that shares information about available resources and relevant events and activities. There are drawbacks, such as reliability of information and time; however, digital tactics for gaining familiarity assist with overcoming the fear of the unknown about a new environment upon dispersal.

Similarly to Cheung and Phillimore (2017) and Robleda (2020), we found that women's background and circumstances influence how they employ tactics to gain familiarity. This is evident in the case of Aleea (female, asylum seeker, Iraq, 35–40), a woman from a strong Islamic cultural background who experienced gender-based exclusion. It was difficult for her to engage with local men in Glasgow, and indeed the Glaswegian community due to familial and cultural controls:

I don't know why people don't understand that everything is different for us in the first place. [For] someone like me, a single woman with no friends ... it is not easy. You know, because I have lots of experience from my country [gender-based exclusion]

New environments created safety and security issues for women, which emphasised the need for trustworthy places and social connections to source information. Aleea's tactic for gaining familiarity

with Glasgow was to engage with a charity. She said, 'you know you can trust people in the organisations because they want to help you, but outside, I don't trust anyone because I am a single woman and I have to be careful'. As mentioned, Alea is concerned about her safety due to the social controls she faced in her country of origin and the lack of social connections she has in Glasgow. Similarly, Alimah (female, refugee, Sudan, 25–30) struggled to interact with strangers in her accommodation. She feared negative encounters with others in the community due to her gender, religion, and culture. Therefore, she felt safer engaging in a formal environment, especially with staff from TSOs. As she explained:

I know there are other refugees in my flat, but I don't talk to them and ask about this place because I don't want to talk to people, I don't know. [...] I am a woman, and nothing is easy or safe for us, even with other refugees. So, I go to the charity and ask them to help me.

We also found that women's individual circumstances facilitate opportunities for them to gain familiarity through people in a similar situation. Dalilah (female, asylum seeker, Egypt, 30–35), a single parent with three children, learned about Glasgow by speaking to other mothers frequenting the same charity. She joined activities often attended by other single mothers:

I am a mother and I feel okay with other mothers. So, I ask other single moms who I meet here [in the charity] because they have the same situation, and they know how to do things here or where to get things.

Showing an awareness of gender issues, Rose (Manager, NGO) notes the importance of providing specific activities for women, which may help them acclimatise to Glasgow:

When they are in the community, we give them information about, for example, Maryhill Integration Network and about all activities going on there. They then drop in and learn about another group, and from that group, they learn about another group. If you are dispersed in the east of Glasgow, we know about this small hub which has got a lot of activities such as a family group for mums, cookery classes and so on.

TSO staff emphasise that women engage in behaviours and employ different tactics to gain familiarity due to their gendered customs. Therefore, activities have been organised specifically to create a conducive environment. As the most vulnerable group of asylum seekers and refugees, women, girls, and single mothers seek security in unfamiliar environments. Furthermore, women from certain communities prefer to be in single-sex activities to avoid tension around their strict customs.

Tactics are 'manipulations of imposed spaces' (de Certeau, 1984, p. 24) and therefore, individuals employ specific tactics related to their particular situations (Gill et al., 2014). Men and women employed different tactics based on factors such as gendered customs, strict religious customs, household structures (i.e. women heads of households or women with children), and the need for a safer and conducive environment. Gender conditions appeared to influence the tactics used by female asylum seekers and refugees we interviewed. There were significant differences between how men and women asylum seekers and refugees partook in activities, denoting a clear public–private sphere divide. Men tended to engage in activities held within and outside of the organisations' premises whereas women asylum seekers and refugees only partook in activities held at the premises of the organisations. Furthermore, men exhibited enthusiasm and willingness to participate in any activity being offered while women participated in women-only activities. Hence, women were restricted in their activities compared to men.

Finding meaningful activities: 'you can try to understand and make your things work'

It was evident from this research that the UK immigration system restricts migrants from doing meaningful acts that would facilitate them becoming part of society. The participants interviewed were either awaiting a decision on their asylum applications, or had already received their refugee status. While asylum seekers cannot legally engage in employment, refugees, who can, struggled to find a job. Paid employment was considered key for a meaningful life. Most of the participants had worked for many years in their countries of origin, and their employment offered them

self-respect, independence and a sense of belonging. Paid employment could contribute to an individual's sense of self-worth and cultural pride, and empower them. However, as Fabunni (male, asylum seeker, Namibia, 30–35) expressed, the inability to do paid work causes frustration:

They still didn't give me a decision. So, I don't know. We don't have a legal residence [refugee status] here. We cannot work; we are staying at our home. We cannot do anything!

Another example is Adiel (male, asylum seeker, Namibia, 35–40) who stated: 'you don't have that freedom to go to college or to work, or just to keep busy. But only staying in the house sleeping, doing nothing'. Fabunni and Adiel's comments about 'sleeping and doing nothing' while waiting highlight their sadness about being unable to work.

Another tactic participants used to avoid feeling anxious about their future and to find meaningful undertakings was to join in activities organised by TSOs. This could be viewed as a tactic of capitalising the opportunities at any given moment (de Certeau, 1984). While their priority was a positive outcome on their asylum applications and/or finding employment, the time they spent feeling unproductive while waiting shaped their decision to take join TSO's activities (gardening, nature walks or community meals). Friendships formed among asylum seekers were often instrumental to engagement with TSOs. For example, Bilal (male, asylum seeker, Pakistan, 40–45), as head of his household, desired employment to provide for his family. He saw work as the only meaningful activity that he could do. However, his period of waiting for refugee status surpassed two years. While waiting, he became involved in community activities:

I was waiting, waiting and waiting. How long can a person just wait and do nothing?! I got bored of staying home doing nothing, sleeping or going to the foodbank and stuff. So, my friend asked me to go and do some activities. We met last month here. That was the first time I came to just see what happens ...

For individuals like Bilal, activities like kitchen clubs, community meals and gardening helped them make friends and focus on something meaningful, albeit temporarily, and to ease everyday anxiety caused by uncertainties. These activities may seem small and mundane, but partaking in them is a tactic that asylum seekers and refugees employ to resist control and exercise agency. Moreover, participants considered these TSO venues and activities to be welcoming places for meaningful participation. Alimah (female, refugee, Sudan, 25–30) often joins in activities organised for asylum seekers and refugees. Alimah struggled to find employment and engaging in TSO activities has been useful and meaningful to her. She stated:

[Charities] they are doing good because of community centres; you can find women groups; you can find English study programmes and other programmes. In some community centres they take people out for community events, especially these days since the weather is good, they take them for BBQs. They provide short courses. Through all these, you can meet people. You can try to understand and make your things work.

While many participants joined in activities casually, some joined as volunteers in several organisations so that they could feel they were doing something meaningful. For instance, Alea (female, asylum seeker, Iraq, 35–40) used volunteering as a tactic to overcome isolation and cease thinking about work. For Alea, volunteering symbolises employment, which helps her to engage in meaningful activities:

It's like I am a full-time worker. I am volunteering five days a week in three places. So, I am coming out of my house at 8:30 am in the morning and I volunteer until 5:00 pm.

Furthermore, for participants with English language barriers taking English language classes has been a crucial tactic to navigate their everyday lives in Glasgow. A major issue in language education is the long waiting time for enrolment in colleges to learn English. For enrolment on a first-come first-served basis, most of the asylum seekers and refugees registered for formal English classes within two months of arrival. While waiting to learn English formally, some took control over their life by engaging in language learning opportunities provided by TSOs; the waiting time to attend charity-provided English classes is shorter. Asim (male, asylum seeker, Sudan, 25–30) was

enthusiastic about learning English in a college but he could not find a place immediately and was waitlisted. Although a college-based English course was his goal, he decided to learn English through informal means to make his time spent waiting more meaningful. This has been a tactic for many asylum seekers who are actively seeking opportunities to learn English. Asim stated:

... Local places like libraries and churches. There are a lot of places that you can learn English but some of them are far away. So, I chose the nearest one.

As previously mentioned, tactics in finding meaningful activities also varied between participants due to their diversity, gender and personal circumstances. In particular, family circumstances have influenced women's ability to employ tactics (Robleda, 2020). For example, Amina (female, refugee, Sudan, 40–45) stated:

When I came here, I didn't go anywhere. You saw me every week in the last three months, but it was not the case at the beginning. I am a woman and as you know nothing is easy or safe for women. It took me months and months to come here and start joining in activities. [...] I need to find ways to look after my children and go out and do things in the community.

For Amina, her concerns about trust, safety and security are important when engaging in meaningful activities. Furthermore, as a parent, (none of the male participants were single parents) she could not be as active as others, although she is eager to be active while waiting. As mentioned, women, as the primary carers of children, seem to struggle to engage in activities or have more limited opportunities. Taking time to familiarise somewhat with Glasgow before looking for a meaningful activity has been a tactic for many female participants.

Finding social connections: 'we cook with everyone from the community not just refugees'

Apart from gaining familiarity, building social connections with others in their locality is vital for asylum seekers and refugees because such informal social networks help them to navigate their everyday life in their locality (Cheung & Phillimore, 2013; Poros, 2011). As individuals with uncertain futures in the UK, participants expressed feelings of safety when bonding with others in their locality, especially with fellow asylum seekers and refugees who had similar experiences and characteristics like speaking a common language (Arabic), being from a similar region (the Middle East or North Africa), following the same religion, sharing food habits, and so on. For example, Alimah (female, refugee, Sudan, 25–30) decided to build social connections with people from her country of origin due to her lack of English language skills. She stated:

People here are friendly. They don't have a problem and they treat you well, but it is difficult to make friends. So, people like me, refugees, just socialise [among] themselves within their own communities. Like, I am from Sudan; you socialise with Sudanese community because you understand each other, and you know how to communicate.

The tactic of making social connections could be viewed as an act of everyday resistance to social exclusion in their host communities. Since many participants did not have any pre-existing social networks when dispersed to Glasgow, it is significant for them to establish and foster interpersonal social connections and trust. While Alimah decided to foster social connections primarily with people from Sudan, Tenneh (female, refugee, Sierra Leone, 25–30) fostered social connections with people from Sierra Leone, other asylum seekers and refugees, and Glaswegians. Charity premises provided the opportunity for meeting and interacting with local community members including asylum seekers and refugees. Tenneh stated:

I have good friends now, but in the first few years after I arrived here, the main problem was that I didn't have any close relatives. I am finally meeting people only in charities. You know, you only meet people when you are like in this gathering. At home [asylum accommodation] you are alone, no one to help with me or my child ...

As Tenneh expressed, asylum seekers and refugees build social connections through joining in TSO activities. A specific tactic for building social connections was to participate in gardening activities. Gardening differed from other TSO activities such as computer classes or language classes. Gardening offered the opportunity to be with a small group of people engaging in an outdoor environment where there is less pressure for them. For example, Danso (male, refugee, Congo, 35–40) stated:

There are many activities in these organisations. But my preference is gardening. You know why? Because not many people will come so you are with a few people. We have more time in gardening and you have freedom. If you are inside someone is always looking at you, I mean in a positive way, but that sometimes make me feel uncomfortable. So, I always attend gardening than the other classes.

Another key – yet gendered – tactic for building social connections is engaging in sports activities. Sports is conceived as more male-oriented by many of the participants, and it has been a space for male asylum seekers and refugees to build social connections while awaiting a decision. For Adiel (male, asylum seeker, Namibia, 35–40) playing football is part of his life. He has been playing football from his teenage years. He said that playing with others helped him with teamwork, build trust, learn about others and be friendly. Therefore, he often participates in football sessions in Glasgow to meet others, play with them, talk to them, and develop friendships. As Adiel stated: ‘if there is a game or something, to come together’.

Aware of issues around gendered sports events, Maria (Support Worker, Charity) stated that various activities offered through TSOs based on gender and family status specifically shaped participants’ willingness to join in those activities and reap the benefits. Maria emphasised that it was easier to organise sports events for men than women because there were fewer cultural or religious restrictions. Charities have been organising women’s groups and gardening activities, which aligns with specific women’s religious, personal and social values and norms.

While the previous tactics presented some ways of connecting with other asylum seekers and refugees, some participants used church events and community meals as an opportunity to build connections outside their communities. Takudzwa (male, asylum Seeker, Zimbabwe, 40–45) has been engaging in community activities, especially the community meals provided by charities because: ‘we cook with everyone from the community not just refugees, we eat together and then we clean together’. Doing mundane daily activities with others help asylum seekers and refugees to build connections. Similarly, Farhad (male, refugee, Iran, 35–40), who converted to Christianity from Islam in Glasgow, explained how his engagement in his church activities helped him socially connect with others:

I meet many people in the Church. I go to the prayer done in Farsi and English. I especially go to the English one because I can meet English people there. Pastors became friends with me, and they introduced me to some white people. So, Farsi prayers for other Iranians and English prayer to talk to English people.

Women’s engagement in building social connections often began at the mid-stage of their asylum process or at least several months after their arrival, particularly those married with children. First, the cultural norms surrounding their conduct and family life play a crucial role, such as the belief women should do domestic and caring duties rather than join in activities outside of the home. While men met people through asylum accommodation, and in other locales throughout the host community, women did not mention meeting people outside of TSOs. They hence appear to be heavily reliant on TSO’s activities to meet people (other women) and socialise. Amina (female, refugee, Sudan, 40–45), who has concerns about her ability to interact with others due to her gender and individual circumstances, stated:

There is a community centre [charity] many activities that I can join I go to these activities and became friends with them. I am very happy really in this organisation. It is safe to find friends in the organisation. I can’t say this in general but most of us [women] feel the same. Places we live, sometimes, I didn’t feel the people were nice because they are a little racist. And, you know, my dress, religion and colour so not safe out but good here in the organisation. You can trust people.

Women, especially primary child-carers, took more time to begin engaging in activities as they need childcare. Since many asylum seekers did not have existing social networks upon dispersal in Glasgow, several months were needed for them to foster social connections and establish trust with others. Amina engaged in building social connections exclusively in charities due to her concerns of trust. Women may also need time to convince their partners or other family members to allow them to engage in productive social activities. Tactics used while waiting are, therefore, highly gendered, and opportunities arising from the private sphere or personal circumstances are crucial to everyday active endeavours.

Discussion and conclusion

Speaking to asylum seekers, refugees and TSO staff uncovers much about how asylum seekers and refugees exercise agency through tactics during often-protracted periods of waiting for refugee status outcomes. Waiting becomes a part of their migration and overall life trajectories, which presents challenges for them in controlling their present and the future. Uncertainties arising from an unsupportive immigration system and the unknown environment led asylum seekers and refugees to feel stuck and unable to move on with their lives.

Nevertheless, we argue it is essential to understand waiting not just from the formal perspective, as imposed by the state asylum system, but also from the more everyday informal, private perspective. While waiting is discussed from a strong structural perspective that positions asylum seekers and refugees as vulnerable against a restrictive immigration and asylum system, the more mundane sphere is extremely dynamic as webs of tactics develop over time with a significant impact on the lives of asylum seekers and refugees. Although they find themselves in a different and difficult life situation in the receiving country, they do not succumb to the passive nature of their life and vulnerability.

Drawing on de Certeau (1984), our interviews with asylum seekers and refugees suggests that they use various tactics to navigate their life in Glasgow. These tactics are part of and further enrich their everyday encounters, such as joining in activities organised by TSOs, making friends, enhancing their everyday experiences. Although rooted in asylum seekers and refugees' mundane activities, these tactics can be seen as forms of agency. Asylum seekers and refugees assessed the resources and opportunities in their locality and utilised them.

Resources available in the local area (Glasgow) are even more important when considering the tactics used by asylum seekers and refugees because it largely determines their daily encounters. TSOs facilitated and/or provided asylum seekers and refugees opportunities to use tactics in finding information, meeting others, and finding meaningful activities. As Rotter (2016) stressed, diverse available resources, services and spaces in Glasgow have provided opportunities for asylum seekers and refugees to be active while waiting.

Clearly, gender influences asylum seekers and refugees' use of tactics. That was evident in Adiel's situation as he gained opportunities to build connections through football, which is a popular and highly engaged-in sports activity for men whether they are asylum seekers, refugees or local community members. Yet, women's discomfort at joining in interactive and leisurely activities like sports hindered their familiarisation with a new environment and/or making social connections. Furthermore, throughout fieldwork, it was observed that women preferred not to partake in unisex activities, which reduces their socialisation experiences makes them especially vulnerable owing to having more limited opportunities.

'Agency in waiting' therefore refers both to the negative impact of a long stagnation period while awaiting confirmation of one's refugee status and problems faced as refugees, as well as the tactics they develop, despite the restrictions and challenges they face. While these processes indeed co-exist, a fairer and more effective immigration and asylum system that allows for asylum seekers and refugees to meaningfully participate in social and economic processes without significant barriers would benefit migrants and receiving societies alike. Personal circumstances and the

resources available to asylum seekers and refugees have significantly shaped their tactics, as part of 'the procedures of everyday creativity' (de Certeau, 1984, p. xiv). Asylum seekers and refugees, therefore, must be treated as active agents rather than viewing them as passive victims with no agency. Hence, the state and practitioners should give attention to promoting asylum seekers and refugees' participation in activities that – as we have shown – can facilitate asylum seekers and refugees' agency and lead to a more meaningful everyday life.

Notes

1. Serco was the privately contracted asylum housing provider in Glasgow when the data were collected.
2. Integration network is a collection of various third-sector organisations providing support to asylum seekers and refugees in a particular location.

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