

# It's About the Power of Little People': the UK Community Sponsorship Scheme, a New Space for Solidarity, Civic Engagement and Activism

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# It's About the Power of Little People': the UK Community Sponsorship Scheme, a New Space for Solidarity, Civic Engagement and Activism

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## Abstract

The Community Sponsorship Scheme (CSS) was introduced in 2016 by the UK Government to enable members of civil society to be directly involved in helping refugees settle in the UK. The CSS is intense and time-consuming, and a lot of effort is directed at helping one family to rebuild their lives in safety. Since the introduction of the scheme, nearly 1000 refugees have been resettled across the UK. The data used in this paper was collected as part of a three-year study intended to provide an independent formative evaluation of the CSS. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with 145 volunteers and 33 individuals from the wider community at five locations where refugees have been placed, this article examines how acts of solidarity, community networks and civic engagement have mobilised ordinary citizens who advocate in favour of the refugee cause. The findings support the argument that motivations to volunteer are both altruistic and egocentric, predominantly delivered by older female volunteers. The article demonstrates that volunteers involved in the CSS have played a fundamental role in bridging social capital with wider members of the host communities. It concludes that the CSS is an innovative model of refugee resettlement that is breeding a new type of volunteering that empowers British civil society.

**Keywords** Refugee · Volunteering · Community sponsorship · Solidarity · Civic engagement · Political activism

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## Introduction

Contemporary scholarship on migration repeatedly refers to 2015 as a ‘crisis year’ due to the unprecedented number of migrants who lost their lives in the Mediterranean Sea when fleeing ongoing conflict in the Middle East (Guild et al., 2015). At that time, racism and Islamophobia were amplified in several countries of the global north and far-right parties increased their election success with their anti-immigration platforms (Halla et al., 2015). Simultaneously, humanitarian organisations and grassroots groups that empathised with the refugee cause were shocked by striking media images and engaged in a series of large-scale advocacy exercises aimed at convincing political elites and institutions to do more to help, prompting the need to find new pathways of refugee resettlement in safe countries (Chouliaraki & Georgiou, 2017; Fleischmann & Steinhilper, 2017; Ghorashi & Rast, 2018; Karakayali & Kleist, 2016). The European Union responded to this crisis with the development of community-led sponsorship programmes that allow individuals and communities to be involved directly in the resettlement of refugees as part of the third-country solutions included in the United Nations Global Compact on Refugees (UNHCR:, 2018).

In the UK, the Community Sponsorship Scheme (CSS) was introduced in July 2016, influenced by the pressure exerted by a coalition of groups in British civil society who asked the UK Government to intervene more promptly and effectively to support refugees in need of protection. After six years of operation, more than 150 CSS groups have helped to resettle nearly 1000 refugees in different communities across the UK. This study includes data from research conducted over three years from January 2017 to March 2020. While scholarly literature has largely focused on the pioneering Canadian Private Sponsorship scheme, this research is important because it sheds light on the scarce body of research existing on Community Sponsorship in the context of the UK.

Three essential questions provide the roadmap of this article, namely, who are the typical individuals volunteering for the CSS? What are the drivers that motivate volunteers to join the CSS and explain their permanence in the group? And finally, what are the main impacts and outcomes of the scheme when resettling refugees in the UK? To respond to such questions, this article starts by describing the origin and development of the CSS and highlights its main challenges and contributions. It then proceeds to explain the method used to collect the data and the approaches used in data analysis. It goes on to present the theoretical framework that integrates relevant perspectives and central issues from the body of literature on humanitarian volunteering. Social network theory helps to describe and discuss the typical characteristics of individuals who join the CSS. The motivations that encourage individuals to volunteer and remain in the sponsorship groups are approached with two contending perspectives emanating from solidarity theory: the affective/liberal and the decolonial/critical. Finally, civic engagement theory is used to explain how citizen agency can impact the outcomes of the CSS. The main findings of this research are presented in the penultimate section.

The article concludes with a discussion of the key outcomes and conclusions, also identifying the contributions and limitations of this study.

## The UK Community Sponsorship Scheme

Since 2014, the UK Government has implemented four resettlement schemes that operate in partnership with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM).<sup>1</sup> Altogether they aimed to resettle approximately 23,000 refugees in the UK by 2020. The Community Sponsorship Scheme (CSS) was introduced in July 2016 by the UK Government, and since 2020, the refugees sponsored by the scheme are additional to the government's commitment to refugee resettlement (Tan, 2021). The model was inspired by the pioneering Private Sponsorship scheme in Canada (Government of Canada, 2021). In the Canadian model, sponsoring groups provide refugees with care, lodging, settlement assistance and support for a period of around 12 months, although often groups and volunteers extend their support for longer and until sponsored refugees become more self-sufficient. The programme is now in its fifth decade of operation and it has resettled more than 327,000 refugees since its inception (Hyndman et al., 2021). The UK Home Office, with representatives of UK civil society, met with the Canadian Government and organizers of the Private Sponsorship Refugee Programme to learn from the Canadian experience.

The CSS model enables community groups directly to welcome and support a resettled family into their local community. The Government worked in partnership with leading refugee charities, as well as faith and community groups on its design and implementation. In this model, grassroots organisations help to attract volunteers from their own membership networks. The organisations provide advice, guidance, training and resources from application through to the arrival of the sponsored families in the UK. In a few cases, established charities back the application of autonomous groups of individuals who have the will but need the recognition of the UK Government (Home Office, 2018: 11).

The CSS groups raised all the funds needed to run the programme by implementing activities like community events, raffles and donations. The CSS groups do not receive financial support from the Government, although the refugee families claim the benefits needed to afford housing and maintenance (Home Office, 2018). The Home Office did not intervene in the substantive areas of resettlement and funding of the scheme, its role being limited to the review and approval of group applications, authorizing CSS operations, arranging migration documentation for refugees, and monitoring group progress (Phillimore and Reyes-Soto, 2019). The CSS has two distinct phases: one starts

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<sup>1</sup> They are: (1) Mandate, for refugees anywhere in the world who are family members of a person who is settled or on the path to settlement in the UK; (2) Gateway, for refugees in urgent need of resettlement, living in protracted situations anywhere in the world; (3) the Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (VPRS); and (4) the Vulnerable Children's Resettlement Scheme (VCRS) protects vulnerable children from conflict situations in the Middle East.

before the refugee family arrives in the UK; the other is after the family starts its settlement process. During the pre-arrival phase, CSS groups must work on several practical arrangements and preparations like finding appropriate housing or identifying school places for the children. The second phase of the scheme starts when the volunteers welcome their sponsored family and assist them with many practical aspects like registering with the GP (General Practitioner, a family doctor), providing English classes or opening a bank account.

The first two years of the CSS was a challenging period for the scheme, when teething problems emerged like changes in the application form or informing Job Centres about the scheme. Over time, however, better support from stakeholders, specialised training, and the facilitation of procedural aspects have improved the programme. Nevertheless, structural aspects associated with refugees' wellbeing and long-term integration remain as important challenges (Phillimore et al., 2020).

## Methods and Sample

The research is based on a qualitative approach and case study research design. In this context, in-depth interview was selected as research technique with 145 participants. The key themes explored in the interviews were the personal motivations, experiences and attitudes of the individuals who joined the CSS and the main impacts and outcomes of the scheme, each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes. Participants volunteering in the CSS groups were approached with the help and suggestions of the charity RESET. Some 22 CSS groups were selected in the study to represent different geographical areas and backgrounds across the UK. From those groups, eleven related to a faith group and eleven characterised themselves as secular, belonging to a neighbourhood or community organisation. Fourteen groups were based in urban areas; eight were in rural towns or villages with little experience of diversity. A rural area was classified in this study if they fall outside of settlements with more than 10,000 resident population (Department for Environment, Food, & Rural Affairs, 2017). One group was in Scotland, two in Wales, one in Northern Ireland and the remainder in England. Distinctively, the volunteers interviewed in all the groups were predominantly white British over 50 years old, 75% of them were women (109) and 25% (36) were men<sup>2</sup>. The average age of the participants was 64 years old. The volunteers were mainly middle class, semi-retired or retired professionals from socially oriented professions like teaching, social work and charity management. All but four participants were white British, very few groups recruited members with Middle Eastern backgrounds to help with translation.

Initial findings of the research indicated that some CSS volunteers experienced criticism in rural communities with little diversity when they set up their groups. Hence, research was extended to focus on five communities where less than 2% of

<sup>2</sup> The description of the sample in the research adopted a binary model of gender when characterizing participants that omits trans, queer and non-binary volunteers whose gender identification was not reflected in the research design.

the population is from a minority background. Between July 2019 and March 2020, 33 interviews were undertaken with 14 men and 19 women from those five communities. These participants were identified by CSS groups as members of the wider community who had encountered refugees during their work or everyday lives but were not participating in the scheme (Reyes-Soto and Phillimore, 2020).

## Data Analysis

The study adopted longitudinal and retrospective approaches. The longitudinal approach entailed two rounds of interviews during the application stage and after the arrival of the refugee families with 25 volunteers from six CSS groups. This approach was useful for exploring the evolution of key aspects that shaped the scheme at an early stage. The retrospective approach involved one-off interviews with 120 volunteers from 16 CSS groups. This method offered a detailed overview across the entire CSS process (see Table 1).

All collected information was digitally recorded and transcribed and emerging themes were coded using NVivo software to compare them through thematic analysis. Full ethical approval was received from the University of Birmingham Ethical Review Committee where the author is ascribed. All participants in the research signed an informed consent form where the aims and objectives of the research were explained to them, as well as their rights. To ensure anonymity of information about respondents or case study sites, the role of the respondent was identified but not their name or location.

## Network Theory and Volunteering in Later Life in the UK

Volunteers are the heart and soul of the CSS and network theory is helpful in gaining a better understanding of the kind of individuals attracted to join the sponsor groups and to explain their gendered composition. Social networks are constituted by people relating to similar others and their members tend to engage in activities that are similar to their peers (Litwin et al., 2015). Research that links volunteering with wellbeing has found that prosocial behaviour, such as charitable giving and volunteering, is especially important for older people who are often socially isolated. Hence, regular volunteering helps individuals to stay connected with members of their own community (Tabassum et al., 2016).

**Table 1** Participants

Categories	Longitudinal interviews	Retrospective interviews	Participants
CSS volunteers	25 (6 CSS groups)	120 (16 CSS groups)	145
Member of the host community			33
Total			178

Most of the volunteers interviewed in this research were attracted by their connections with charities with religious affiliations or faith groups. There is evidence that in the UK older volunteers are effectively contacted and recruited through their interpersonal ties in church congregations (Sircar & Rowley, 2020). Religious involvement is one of the most common routes to volunteering because those attending religious services are embedded in dense, cohesive networks, which provide volunteering opportunities, increase chances of being recruited, and create social pressures to accede to recruitment efforts (Borgonovi, 2008; 2007; Putnam, 2000). Older volunteers tend to be more religious, enjoy a good economic situation, belong to more social networks and play a role in social activities in their communities (Finkelstien, 2009). In that respect, religious faith has been considered a 'predisposition' towards volunteering which fits within an ethos framing of motivation to engage in humanitarian causes (Denning, 2021).

Scholarship studying the role of gender in volunteering has found distinct pathways that lead men and women to engage in giving and volunteering. Specifically, women report stronger motivations to help others, but men report more of the financial resources that make giving and volunteering possible (Wiepking et al., 2023). Many UK organizations depend greatly on the unpaid services of older volunteers, a significant number of whom are women (Lie et al., 2009). It has been found that groups led by older women volunteers tend to provide opportunities for marginalized groups to engage with others and develop social ties. In the context of the migration crisis, they have created 'safe spaces' to connect refugees with relevant services, like community centres, libraries or places of worship (Banulesco-Bogdan, 2020; Sandri, 2018).

## **Solidarity Theory: Affective and Decolonial Approaches Towards Refugees**

Solidarity theory has received considerable scholarly attention in recent years in the context of the increasing arrival of refugees in Europe and the proliferation of movements of ordinary citizens willing to help. As Bauder and Juffs (2020) suggest, the concept of solidarity is complex, multi-dimensional and normative, and can be understood in reference to various philosophical and conceptual underpinnings. Two epistemic traditions of solidarity theory are particularly appropriate for the analysis of the drivers that motivate volunteers to join and remain in the CSS. They are 'affective solidarity' and 'decolonial solidarity'.

Affective solidarity is also known as emotional reflective solidarity and essentially focuses on 'the humanitarian version of solidarity'. This perspective has been used to analyse compassionate actions of feeling and acting towards vulnerable migrants in countries of the global north (Chouliaraki & Georgiou, 2017). This category also links solidarity to a liberal perspective of hospitality that seeks to accommodate 'the stranger' with care, kindness, respect and affection (Doidge & Sandri, 2019; Papataxiarchis, 2016). Studies conducted in European countries, including the UK, found that positive emotions like sympathy and compassion catalysed the

emergence of support groups and the proliferation of solidarity actions in favour of refugees (Phillimore et al., 2022; Bond, 2021; Milan, 2018).

Affective solidarity is often associated with the type of hospitality delivered by women. The philosopher Emmanuel Levinas (1969) proposes a definition of hospitality in which the act of welcoming the stranger into one's own house, country or territory rests in underlying qualities of intimacy, receptivity and expectation which are associated with feminine traits. Contemporary studies support such a perspective, asserting that gendered solidarity tends to be emotionally founded and rests on ethics of care, empathy and emotive responses (Hamington, 2010:28). In the context of solidarity towards refugees, affective solidarity delivered by women tends to be domestic-like bonding and creates relationships of affection and conviviality that are driven by 'caring for the other'. Furthermore, 'care ethics' represents a category that explains the imperative to enter and maintain relationships and form stronger social bonds between the host and guest that result in inclusive and non-hierarchical relationships (Høy-Petersen et al., 2016:972).

In contrast with the liberal approach offered by affective solidarity, the decolonial approach places the notion of solidarity in a racialised framework in the context of global, Eurocentric, capitalist power (Quijano, 2000). Decolonial theory claims an 'epistemic de-linking' from the very foundations of the Western European concept of solidarity and eliminates the tendency to pretend that this category is universal (Mignolo, 2007). In the context of migration, decolonial studies vigorously challenge initiatives of solidarity that support the 'politics of compassion' and argue that acts that promote the assistance and integration of migrants from the global south 'reinscribe colonial logics and operate to obscure complicity and continued colonization' (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2012:49).

Didier Fassin (2011:2) contributes to this discussion, arguing that acts of solidarity and humanitarian practices delivered from the global north often presuppose a relationship of inequality between the more powerful (volunteers) and the more vulnerable (refugees). It is claimed that the vocabulary of compassion, suffering, assistance and responsibility are often used by governments to appear 'humanitarian' but, at the same time, the same hierarchical entities implement policies that increase social inequality or restrict the rights of immigrant populations.

Decolonial feminism critically analyses the hospitality delivered by white, middle-class women situated in the global north. Studies of this tradition examine the politics of gender and race to deconstruct patriarchal ideas of women as being natural caregivers and challenge the stereotypical assumption that the maternal enables a hospitable space.

## **Civic Engagement Theory and Volunteers' Empowerment**

'Civic engagement' theory is the third account that is useful to explain how volunteers gain agency to advocate for the refugee cause and how their activism impacts their citizenship. The terms 'volunteering' and 'civic engagement' have been used interchangeably to represent the assistance provided by individuals to the larger community; both are associated with social action and agency (Verba et al., 1995;



Wilson, 2000). The concept of civic engagement is very broad and there is no consensus on a single definition. Instead, civic engagement has been applied to explain specific actions such as community service, collective action and even political involvement (Brady 1999).

As community service, civic engagement focuses on achieving a public good or solving a community problem (Barrett & Brunton-Smith, 2014). As collective action, the category explains how an active citizen participates in the life of the community to help shape its future (Fung & Wright, 2003; Ghorashi & Rast, 2018). As political participation, civic engagement is considered a form of activism that impacts political arenas or political outcomes (Chouliaraki & Georgiou, 2017; Fleischmann & Steinhilper, 2017).

Studies reviewing previous research on civic engagement and political participation suggested a new approach towards conventional typology and proposed that less direct or ‘latent’ forms of participation, conceptualized as ‘civic engagement’ and ‘social involvement’, are prompting new forms of political behaviour and prospects for political participation (Ekman & Amna, 2012). In that respect, the impact of movements of welcome and acts of advocacy supporting the refugee can be characterised as new forms of political behaviour with an influence on local and national political outcomes (Feischmidt & Zakariás, 2019).

Particularly, images of women volunteers supporting refugees have proved to be empowering and politically transformative. In Germany, Schmid (2020) reported volunteers employing volunteering as a tool to speak up against racism and right-wing hostility against immigrants. Stivens (2018) analysed how woman-centred advocacy groups for asylum-seekers in Australia invoked familial, mothering and grand-mothering kinships to challenge the state’s anti-immigrant policies, nationalism and xenophobic politics. From this experience, the strongly gendered character of the hospitality provided by women volunteers activated a distinctive type of strategic and effective political mobilization.

## Findings

### Attraction of CSS Volunteers by Networks and Common Cause

A close examination of the background and motivations of the individuals who join the CSS indicates that they are the ‘prototypical’ volunteers who choose to devote their time and energy to activities that help to address societal problems. Collective activity can generate an emotional sense of belonging and this, in turn, can be a powerful driver for motivating volunteering. Clearly identifiable among the volunteers in the CSS is a sense of collective identity associated with empathy and shared beliefs. Several participants in the research mentioned that they decided to join the scheme immediately after they saw the image of the dead three-year-old, Aylan Kurdy, whose body was washed up on a shore in Turkey.

“Summer 2015 with the refugee crisis in Syria and the news about the refugees trying to flee from the Middle East to Europe and dying in the process, and the

image of the little boy on the beach... It was such a powerful thing.” Urban man volunteer

Eleven CSS groups in the study were formed by secular members of neighbourhood and community organisations for whom helping refugees was an opportunity to stand up for positive values like social justice and the common good. The other eleven groups were attached to religious organisations in which empathy, solidarity and compassion for refugees are part of their moral compass and spiritual beliefs. For many CSS volunteers, the motivation to participate in the scheme is driven by common social identities that revolve around belonging and group membership.

“I am friends with the group of people who are involved. I go to church with a number of them and I know others. I did it because, in my past professional life, I was a social worker and a counsellor and have worked a lot with refugees.” Rural woman volunteer

### **Volunteers' Motivations for Joining the CSS: Affective and Decolonial Solidarity in the CSS**

Positive emotions proved to be very relevant in motivating individuals to join CSS groups. Most of the participants in the study declared that the most worthwhile aspect of the scheme was the direct contact and personalized support that they can deliver. The CSS model involves significant emotional work to support the sponsored families. Although in most cases volunteers did not have explicit training in this area, intuitively they created emotional bonds that resulted in kin-type relations with the refugee families.

“We want to be the extended family for these refugees. That's how we want to appear, that we really are there for them as fellow human beings, not as officials. We are not government. We want to make them feel at home in our society. This is our home. Come in! You are welcome.” Rural woman volunteer

CSS volunteers knew about refugees' distress and understood how longing to see long-lost family undermined their ability to focus on moving forward. Volunteers empathised with the distress they observed which, in turn, led them to feel both upset and impotent.

“Well, I think Grandma carries a lot of sadness. Simple things like you'd put your hand on her arm in those early months and she'd just melt into me and start sobbing. The fact that they can't visit their family and that that family can't visit them is just appalling. That just makes me really angry.” Urban woman volunteer.

Various volunteers mentioned that daily interactions and encounters with refugees resulted in the development of deep emotional relations that were described as interactions of authentic affection and friendship.

“My husband and I have been invited to one or two formal occasions at their house. One of our visits was a Sunday and I said that I would cook some Eng-

lish food and they would cook for us. So, we had a family meal.” Suburban woman volunteer.

CSS volunteers found knowing more people among their neighbours and members of their communities, and making new friends, very gratifying.

“Sponsorship has been very enriching. It has been much harder work than we anticipated, but much more rewarding and I’ve gained very good friends and neighbours, people I am very fond of.” Rural woman volunteer.

In contrast with affective solidarity, a critical decolonial approach acknowledges and interrogates the privileged position of power existing between refugee and volunteer. Although they were very respectful of refugees’ identities and practices, volunteers recognized their lack of knowledge of Middle Eastern culture, history and traditions.

“Obviously, it’s difficult for them because of the way that people live in Syria compared to how we live in England. After I met them, I want to learn more about their religion, history and even the politics in Syria.” Rural woman volunteer.

The research found that barriers of language and communication contribute to the decentralization of refugees’ personalities. Their interactions with volunteers and members of host communities with little diversity who are unfamiliar with the situation and needs of refugees often involuntarily homogenize their experiences and struggles.

“Mum is always glad if I volunteer at the playgroup because I will stay with her, but I think the other mums just don’t want to approach her. I don’t think they are prejudiced, it’s just easier to speak with someone in the same language and I think mum probably finds it difficult there.” Voluntary sector worker.

The experience of a woman service provider attending one of the refugee families in their host community illustrates how empowered white women tend not only to have control over their own lives and bodies, but also over the colonized “other”.

“I remember the first time they came to our institution the gentleman wouldn’t look at me. Since I met him, he will now engage eye contact and shake my hand. I didn’t know whether it was because I was a woman, or he just didn’t understand, but I just carried on. I didn’t let it worry me, and I thought, he’ll have to get used to it because a lot of women are in jobs like this now and I think there aren’t women in jobs like that where he’s come from.” Woman working for an institution.

### **Civic Engagement and Social Participation in the CSS**

This research found that the social outrage created by the refugee crisis in 2015 greatly influenced the emergence of the CSS in the UK. Other participants in the research, who said they had not been involved in refugee support before, were prompted to join the

CSS when they acknowledged that the government should have done more to help during that crisis.

“I was watching the news about the crises in Syria and I wrote letters to the Prime Minister, the Home Office and my MP asking for immediate actions of help from the British government... I was not happy with the responses.” Urban woman volunteer.

Findings from the case study in five small rural communities with low levels of diversity in the UK revealed that three CSS groups faced opposition from some members of the community identifying with far-right ideologies. They spread hostile comments on social media and in local newsletters criticizing the idea of resettling refugees in their localities. The responses articulated by the CSS volunteers were imaginative and non-confrontational. One group organized a multi-generational demonstration in the square outside the town hall to raise awareness and support for the refugee cause. They also organized a public debate with a panel of well-respected community leaders to generate an open discussion on the matter. Volunteers used that opportunity to provide a new narrative towards the refugee situation in the UK.

“The sponsored family has given the group a story to tell, a story that cuts even across the narrative of how people talk about refugees as outsiders and that kind of thing.” Urban man volunteer.

Misrepresentations of Muslims in the media and anti-Muslim political rhetoric have contributed to prejudiced views of Islam, especially when seen as a threat to national security and fundamental British values. Some CSS volunteers have found that simple acts like face-to-face conversations to inform the community about their work and their relations with refugees helped to reduce anxiety, dispelled myths and changed someone's mind. On the other hand, it was found that countering Islamophobia also involves educating volunteers about acknowledging that prejudice on Islam and Muslims is relational to both recent and colonial history and to avoid condescendence, it is necessary to refocus on equalities and create further space for Muslim narratives of being.

“We had some Christian friends, and we were talking about what I was doing and what lovely people they are because I've been teaching the Syrian families. I told them that they are Muslims. And they said: 'Aren't you worried about coming into contact with Muslims?' I said 'No... Why...?' 'Don't you think they will try and radicalize you...? Don't you think they will try and impose their views on you that they have an ulterior motive in influencing you...?' But what I told them is that they are gentle and loving people.” Urban woman volunteer.

## Discussion

The UK CSS model is highly reliant on volunteers. Although data from this research did not establish who constitutes the whole body of the CSS in the UK, the sample of this study clearly indicated that a sizeable majority of them were in fact white British women over 50. Interestingly, this finding resonates with a survey of 530

respondents who participate in Canadian private sponsorship, in which almost three-quarters of the sample were also women over 50 years of age and whose income and education levels were largely upper middle class (Macklin et al., 2018:45). The nature of the volunteer roles can be highly gendered too. Literature argues that men prefer more formalised authority or organisational activities, while women are more likely to engage in either informal/non-institutional volunteering, or caring activities (Mao et al., 2021). Such traits were confirmed in this study as most of the women volunteers were retired or semi-retired professionals who predominantly worked in socially oriented jobs like teaching, caring, social work, nursing, and charity management.

Volunteers from different ethnic backgrounds were a minority in the CSS, but they made a meaningful contribution with language interpretation and explaining about Middle Eastern culture and traditions. Hyndman and her colleagues (2021) discussed that, in the Canadian context, members of minority groups and refugee diaspora who volunteer in private sponsorship tend to be underreported in the data, not only because marginal populations are less likely to be reached by social surveys, but also because their voluntary work is less likely to be channelled through formal organisations.

This study identified that, since the inception of the CSS, well-established networks built by religious groups and civic organisations played a fundamental role in the attraction and recruitment of sponsorship volunteers. The CSS formed a space that provided volunteers the opportunity to team up with like-minded individuals who together advocate for the resettlement of refugees in their neighbourhood. Being part of the same support group reinforced their social connections and identities as caring individuals with civic consciousness who wanted to ‘do more to help’. Respondents in this research also highlighted that relationships with peer volunteers motivated them to remain in the group and inspired them to continue sponsoring new families. Recent studies in the Canadian context found that commitment on the part of sponsors to enact a global sense of justice is an important motivation to become a sponsor; it is, however, argued that the ‘family linked’ sponsorship in which resettled refugees sponsor a family member is a defining and sustaining feature of the programme (Hyndman et al., 2021:11).

Most volunteers in this research are ordinary people who reacted with outrage to the refugee crisis. However, we found that as well as fulfilling their humanitarian aspirations, CSS volunteers also enjoyed expanding their circle of friends, keeping active and feeling empowered. Such behaviour has been analysed in cross-national studies, mainly conducted in the global north, that argue that motivations to volunteer are both altruistic and egocentric. Individuals who volunteer want to help others, give back to the community and make a difference; at the same time, they make friends, find purpose and make use to their spare time (Martinez et al., 2011; Verba et al., 1995).

As with many other initiatives of humanitarian support, the CSS is based on structurally unequal relations of power (Macklin, 2021) and the solidarity delivered by its volunteers tends to produce unintended or ambivalent results (Ticktin, 2014). Although CSS volunteers engage with feminist hospitality through daily practices that involve affection, friendship and care, personal relationships and

emotional involvement are not risk free. The informal nature of the CSS tends to reinforce the inequalities and hierarchies prevailing in the unbalanced relations of power between those who help, and the ones who are helped. Decolonial feminist solidarity critically points out that when questions of race and class are not sufficiently considered, humanitarian actions can reinforce refugees' dislocation from their political, social and historical context (Rajaram, 2002:248). Admitting such problems, in recent years CSS groups have received specialised training to gain a better understanding of the refugees' culture and history.

Although there is evidence that day-to-day interactions between volunteers and sponsored families are gradually fostering positive interpersonal relationships, premised on respect for differences and interdependency, refugees have to be encouraged to assert their authority to act beyond the refugee label when volunteers assume a disconfirming parental role, which confined them to diminished identities of dependency (Karakayali et al., 2018; Macklin et al., 2020). Refugees' agency is not explicitly addressed in this article, but CSS volunteers' knowledge and awareness of the functioning of UK institutions and systems of governance creates an opportunity for refugees to learn about their rights and citizenship possibilities. In that respect, the CSS has created a socio-political setting that allows refugees to break with the marginalised view of passivity that is experienced in other spaces, like refugee camps (Agamben & Evans-Pritchard, 1994). Active inclusion of refugees in community initiatives creates the opportunity to generate a better understanding of their needs and expectations. By doing so, volunteers performed a crucial integrating role in society, one that recognises the value of diversity.

Advocacy for the refugee cause in the CSS has generated strong civic engagement in response to the refugees' situation. It has catalysed actions impacting upon the social and political arenas. The CSS has been a source of empowerment and activation of volunteers' collective agency. CSS volunteers have gained an awareness of the challenges faced by refugees and identified structural barriers for their long-term integration. This, in turn, has transformed them from 'ordinary' individuals that just wanted to help, to active citizens who advocated for an improvement of the refugee situation.

Critical studies on civic humanitarianism have argued that the support delivered by spontaneous movements of welcome unintentionally reproduce and legitimise the current governance of the migration regime. However, recent research has challenged that view and claims that ordinary citizens' advocacy prompted political momentum that has influenced responsive politics supporting refugees in multiple ways (Bernát et al., 2016; Feischmidt & Zakariás, 2019). Through their practical work in the CSS, volunteers have helped dispel myths about refugees and have changed prevalent negative narratives. They developed a sense of agency and mobilised to influence the UK's migration governance; in so doing, they have helped to deepen democracy. From that perspective, civil support for refugees ultimately becomes 'subversive' and acquires a political character as their actions challenge the social and political climate in which it unfolds (Vandevoordt & Verschraegen, 2019).

## Conclusion

This research was able to identify that the emergence of CSS groups in the UK can be explained in part by the sense of social outrage experienced during the refugee crisis of 2015. The CSS has operated as a platform that galvanised citizens' commitment to the refugee cause and enabled action by individuals who wanted to 'do something'. Positive emotions like personal gratification and friendship, as well as the sense of empowerment and agency, explain why volunteers remain in the groups. Although one might question the sustainability of a model which is highly dependent on its volunteers' personal experiences, the longevity of the Canadian Private Sponsorship scheme has proved this is not the case.

While further data is needed to identify whether CSS volunteering is predominantly gendered, this study found that individuals attracted to volunteering in this type of programme tend to be predominantly white, retired, middle-class women. The type of solidarity delivered by this kind of volunteering produced 'ambivalent' results in which affective solidarity coexisted with relations of patronage and giving, due to the inherent imbalance of power between volunteers and refugees.

Despite its short existence, initial results of the UK CSS indicate that grassroots groups responsible for resettling refugees are impacting the UK governance of migration and raising awareness of the situation and needs of refugees resettled across the country. Many of the CSS volunteers are spreading values of inclusion and educating their own communities on acceptance of diversity. However, the UK government should look at the challenges that threaten the sustainability of the CSS and acknowledge that high cost of house rents and other services discourage the involvement of prospective sponsors.

It is important to highlight the empirical limits of this study. The primary aim of this article was to examine the key drivers that activate volunteers to participate in the CSS and present evidence of their activism in local and national arenas, but acknowledging the refugees' experiences, achievements and challenges are of prime importance when assessing the effectiveness of the scheme. Further longitudinal research is needed to examine the impact that the CSS has had on the refugees' own agency and empowerment, as well as the evolution of the attitudes and behaviour of members of the wider community towards them.

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## Declarations

**Conflict of Interest** The author declares no competing interests.

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