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– ARTICLE –

NARRATIVES OF NAVIGATION:
REFUGEE-BACKGROUND WOMEN'S HIGHER EDUCATION JOURNEYS IN BANGLADESH AND NEW ZEALAND

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ABSTRACT

Navigating higher education (HE) is a complex exercise for many students, including those from refugee backgrounds. Internationally, only a very small percentage of refugee-background students access HE. In a 2018 study, we explored thirty-seven women students' narrative accounts of international study in Bangladesh and New Zealand. Our participants included ten women from refugee backgrounds. Theoretically, our research was a response to calls from critical scholars to consider the different circumstances that shape students' international study, and the ethical and pedagogical implications of these for 'host' institutions. In this article, we explore the refugee-background women's accounts of accessing, navigating, and thinking beyond HE, and their thoughts on factors that support refugee-background students' success in HE. We argue for the need to: reject 'grand narratives' in relation to refugee-background students; acknowledge students' 'necessary skillfulness' while supporting their capacity to navigate HE; and recognise refugee-background students' commitments and influence beyond HE institutions.

Keywords: higher education; refugee-background students; internationalisation; Bangladesh; New Zealand

INTRODUCTION

Access to education is a key challenge for refugees (Wilkinson 2018), and higher education (HE) is no exception. Currently, three per cent of eligible refugees access HE (UNHCR 2020), compared with around thirty-eight per cent of global youth (UNESCO, 2018), but HE provides pathways to employment, self-reliance, and resettlement (UNHCR 2017). This article adds to a growing body of research that explores refugee-background students' access to, and experiences in, HE.

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This article draws on narrative interviews with ten women from refugee backgrounds: four from a university in New Zealand (University A); and six from a university in Bangladesh (University B). The women were part of a larger study aimed at exploring the educational narratives of women engaged in international study in HE, or who had moved across national borders during their studies. We focus on *women* because 'having a voice' can be difficult for women engaged in international study (Madge, Raghuram and Noxolo 2009). Additionally, for many women from refugee backgrounds, gaining access to education is also challenging. Although women and girls make up seventy per cent of the world's refugee population, they are more likely to be out of education than men and boys (UNHCR & Global Monitoring Report 2016), and they are disproportionately affected by factors that make access to education difficult, such as discriminatory social norms or legislation, and location (Global Education Monitoring Report 2019). At the same time, education plays a crucial role in enabling women's access to legal frameworks and justice, and participation in other areas of life, such as politics, healthcare, and employment (UNESCO 2017). We recognise that, like all categories, 'women' are not a homogenous group (Rhee 2006), and that Bangladesh and New Zealand are very different contexts (see more below). Therefore, in this article, we explore both common themes and complexities in the women's narratives.

To begin, it is necessary to explain our use of the terms 'refugee' and 'refugee-like'. The UN 1951 Refugee Convention defines a refugee as 'someone who is 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 2010, 3). Signatory States agree to 'accord to refugees the same treatment as is accorded to nationals with respect to elementary education … [and] treatment as favourable as possible … with respect to education other than elementary education' (UNHCR 2010, 24). The University A students were all from refugee backgrounds, in that they had arrived in New Zealand as part of the refugee quota system under the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). However, the Bangladesh-based women were from both refugee and refugee-like backgrounds; they were either stateless or internally displaced at the time of our study, or their families had previously fled due to conflict. For the remainder of the article, we describe the women as refugee-background students.

The article is structured as follows. First, we review the literature on HE and refugee-background students. We then describe our study, including the settings in which it took place and our study methodology. Then, we explore the women's 'narratives of navigation' – how they spoke about coming to university,

navigating university, and life beyond university. We consider their recommendations for universities that enrol refugee-background students, and conclude with some suggestions for research and practice.

REFUGEE-BACKGROUND STUDENTS AND HIGHER EDUCATION

Internationally, efforts to promote access to education for refugees have tended to focus on primary and secondary education (Wilkinson 2018). However, the UNHCR (2017) also recognises HE as a key enabler of independence and integration. In contexts of protracted displacement, HE provides people with skills and knowledge that promote 'durable solutions', whether they are repatriated, locally integrated, or resettled in third countries (Wright and Plasterer 2010, 42). HE is essential to economic development, and it plays an important role in peace-making and nation-building projects, particularly in post-conflict zones (Wright and Plasterer 2010; Zeus 2011). In resettlement contexts, HE supports people's capacity to integrate into a new society economically and socially (Hynie 2018; Lenette 2016), promoting a sense of belonging and 'normalcy' in a new nation (O'Rourke 2011; Wilkinson 2018). Notably, HE is also a means by which adult students can access retraining or gain recognition of prior professional expertise in a new context (Morrice 2013).

A growing body of literature focuses on refugee-background students and HE. This research highlights multiple factors that limit refugee-background students' access and success. Along with protracted periods of displacement and educational disruption (Wright and Plasterer 2010; Zeus 2011), these include: lack of recognition at policy level (Gateley 2015; Hynie 2018); lack of coordination across policy areas (O'Rourke 2011); exclusion from support service provision (Felix 2016; O'Rourke 2011); and policy and public discourse that promotes negative stereotypes about newcomers – refugees and asylum seekers in particular (Morrice 2013; Naidoo *et al.* 2018). At an institutional level, other factors include: language barriers, especially in monolingual HE contexts (Atanasoska and Proyer 2018; Hynie 2018; Kanno and Varghese 2010; Marcu 2018); lack of recognition for prior qualifications or experiences (Marcu 2018; Morrice 2009); and inappropriate institutional course and careers advice (Marcu 2018). Personal factors may include: unfamiliarity with 'local' educational systems and expectations (Joyce *et al.* 2010); financial constraints (Joyce *et al.* 2010; Kanno and Varghese 2010); culturally-grounded expectations of gender roles (Hatoss and Huijser 2010); lack of support from co-national community members (Joyce *et al.* 2010); pressure to generate income (Anselme and Hands 2010); personal feelings of 'not belonging' (Kanno and Varghese 2010; O'Rourke 2011); and lack of trust related to refugee trauma (O'Rourke 2011). Subsuming

refugee-background students within other equity categories may also limit students' access to HE, since this leads to a lack of data on their presence (or absence) in HE, and lack of attention to the challenges they may face (Naidoo *et al.* 2018; O'Rourke 2011; Wilkinson 2018).

In resettlement contexts, challenges can compound for refugee-background students in HE (O'Rourke 2011). For example, O'Rourke notes that good spoken English coupled with weak written English can lead HE staff to provide inappropriate advice or guidance, and students' unfamiliarity with the university environment, coupled with a reluctance to challenge authority, can then lead to feelings of shame and guilt, rather than help-seeking. Failure to recognise refugee-background students' specific needs may limit their access to HE, but fear of stigma or discrimination associated with the label 'refugee' may also limit their willingness to access available supports. Unfamiliarity with university processes can also mean that students fail to recognise support avenues that are available (O'Rourke 2011).

Factors that support refugee-background students' access to HE largely reflect the 'flip side' of the factors noted above. They include: flexible HE delivery and provision, including when displaced (Wright and Plasterer 2010); recognition within national and institutional policy, and policy integration (Hynie 2018; Wilkinson 2018); clear pathways to HE (O'Rourke 2011); institutional recognition of existing expertise, or past experience commensurate with new HE experiences (Morrice 2013); access to mentoring or targeted advice (Gateley 2015; Morrice 2009); access to financial support, including scholarships (Wright and Plasterer 2010; Zeus 2011); and collaboration between educators, refugee, and host communities (Purkey 2010). However, much literature on refugee-background students in HE casts students in deficit terms by 'cataloguing their difficulties' rather than identifying strategies or solutions likely to facilitate their success in HE (Vickers, McCarthy, and Zammit 2017, 198). Our article addresses this critique by considering women's skilfulness in navigating HE, and the insights their narratives reveal in relation to institutional and teaching practices likely to facilitate refugee-background students' success.

OUR STUDY CONTEXT(S)

New Zealand

University A is in New Zealand, an island nation of around five million people. Most refugees and asylum seekers enter New Zealand through UNHCR processes. New Zealand is a signatory to the 1951 Convention on Refugees and

later (1967) Protocol (UNHCR 2010), and it accepts 1,000 refugees annually through the UNHCR quota system. This number was set to increase to 1,500 later in 2020 although the increase has been delayed due to COVID-19. An additional 300 visas are available annually for family members of people granted residence as refugees or protected persons, along with twenty-five refugee visas, which may be granted through a community sponsorship programme (New Zealand Immigration 2018a). People granted refugee status become permanent residents, allowing them to access health care and education like other New Zealanders. Applications for asylum are considered on a case-by-case basis and, unless deemed a security risk, asylum seekers (and their children) can access healthcare and education while claims are assessed.

New Zealand's main policy document guiding refugee resettlement is the New Zealand Refugee Resettlement Strategy (Immigration New Zealand 2012, New Zealand Immigration 2018b). This names education as one of five goals for successful resettlement. However, the Strategy makes no explicit mention of HE, and education policies and practices in New Zealand leave much to chance in relation to refugee-background students (Rafferty 2020). Refugee-background students are not a named equity group in national HE policy,[5] and universities differ in the extent to which they recognise the presence of refugee-background students. Access to targeted services or entry pathways and funding assistance varies by institution, as does the availability of information regarding targeted programmes or supports. O'Rourke (2011) argues that lack of policy attention in the schools sector also creates unintended barriers to HE (for example, through uneven practices around English language support).

Bangladesh

University B is in Bangladesh, which shares land borders with India and Myanmar, and has a population of about 165 million people. Unlike New Zealand, Bangladesh has not ratified the 1951 Convention and therefore does not guarantee the right to education for people from refugee backgrounds (Dryden-Peterson 2016; UNHCR and Global Education Monitoring Report 2016). However, Bangladesh is a key first country of asylum globally (Dryden-Peterson 2016). In 2017, it hosted (by international comparison) the seventh largest number of asylum seekers, admitting a total of 932,200 people, most of whom (655,500) were Rohingya people who had fled Myanmar (UNHCR 2018a). Historically, Bangladesh has also hosted substantial numbers of other refugees, such as during the 1947 partition of India. Ullah (2011) notes that Rohingya people in Bangladesh are subject to exploitation and deprivation. Lack of formal protection coupled with weak legal structures allows illegal activities, corruption, and

exploitation to flourish, which, along with the work of militant groups, feeds hostility towards refugees and the perception that they are a threat to national security (Rahman 2010; Ullah 2011). University B is unique in Bangladesh for its commitment to educating students who may otherwise have difficulty accessing HE, including those from refugee (or refugee-like) backgrounds.

The universities

Universities A and B are different in some respects, but similar in others. University A (New Zealand) is a research-intensive institution which teaches programmes to doctoral level, with a strong emphasis on the sciences and health sciences. It enrols around 20,000 students, of whom around thirteen per cent are 'international' (study visa) students, mostly enrolled on a full fee-paying basis. Refugee-background students are a recognised equity group but, until 2020, admissions forms did not allow students to self-identify as coming from a refugee background, so outcomes data were unavailable.

University B (Bangladesh) is a philanthropic, independent, women-only university, which offers a three-year liberal arts programme leading to a bachelor's level qualification, including major programmes in science, health science, and PPE (philosophy, politics and economics). Its explicit intent is to develop leaders who will serve their communities. Around 800 women study at University B; most are 'international' (from outside Bangladesh), and enrolled on the basis of part or full scholarships. Both universities provide education through the English language, and draw heavily on 'Western' knowledge traditions.

OUR STUDY

We commenced our study after obtaining the necessary ethical approvals (reference number 18/065), recruiting participants purposefully, but in different ways. At University B, where class sizes are small, we approached students directly. Of the seventeen invited to participate, sixteen agreed to do so, including six from refugee-like backgrounds (see earlier). At University A, we recruited twenty-one participants through posters around campus, and directly through personal networks, and email. Four were refugee-background students. The participants who were not refugees were international students who had moved across national borders to gain a university education.

Our study was a narrative inquiry (Bruner 1991; Kraus 2006; Polkinghorne 1995), based on biographical interviews. Narrative inquiry is an interpretive process that facilitates attention to participants' stories and 'sense-making' in

relation to their experiences, emphasising attention to time, particularity, complexity, context, and to participants' intentionality (Bruner 1991). The interviews were semi-structured, and mostly one to two hours in length, conducted on each campus at a time and location that suited our participants. We sent the broad question schedule to participants beforehand. This had three main sections – past, present and future – inviting participants to share their educational experiences and aspirations. We also asked participants to reflect on how HE had shaped their sense of identity and belonging, if at all, and to identify any recommendations for their universities.

We audio-recorded all interviews, with participants' permission, and transcribed the recordings verbatim, returning them to participants for checking and adjustments, if desired. We analysed the transcripts by focusing on the narratives as a whole, and the categories and contradictions that emerged within and across them (Bruner 1991; Holloway and Freshwater 2009).

Our analysis involved coding the women's narratives using *NVivo* (QSR International 2019), identifying patterns in women's accounts of their educational journeys prior to, within, and beyond HE; the barriers and enablers they saw as shaping their HE journeys; their educational aspirations and navigational strategies; and references to identity, embodiment, emotion, family, community, and belonging (after Bruner 1991; Kraus 2006; Polkinghorne 1995). Based on our coding, we identified broad themes within and across the women's accounts, as well as differences, tensions and contradictions (Fine and Weis 2005).

The ten refugee-background women in our study were diverse in terms of national and ethnic background, citizenship status, family situation, prior educational experiences, and pathways to university study. The New Zealand-based women had all been granted permanent residency, while the Bangladesh-based refugee-background students varied in terms of their citizenship/refugee status (see Table 1). Each woman spoke between three and six languages. Five had parents with some level of post-secondary school education.

While, in some respects, the women's narratives reflected their diverse circumstances, all positioned HE as a pathway to something better for themselves, their families, and/or their communities. However, important nuances were also evident in the women's narratives. In the next section we reflect on the four broad ways in which the women constructed their university education: as an 'expected pathway' and 'a means of escape', and as 'just another move' or '(independent) exploration'. We then consider three ways in which they envisaged their post-HE futures: in relation to migration, a 'good job', and/or change-

Table 1. *Participants' names, study locations, and other selected characteristics*

Name (Pseud-onym)*	Current univer-sity	Country of origin	Age	Years at current institution	Parents' access to HE (Y/N)	Previous education	Citizenship status
Aye	A	Myanmar	24	2	N	Broken – school in Myanmar, Malaysia, NZ (two years)	New Zealand†
Daisy	A	Myanmar	22	4	Y	Broken – school in Myanmar, Malaysia, NZ (eight years)	New Zealand
Mariam	A	Afghanistan	19	1	N	Broken – school in Iran, Indonesia, NZ (three years)	New Zealand
Rose	A	Sri Lanka	22	3	N	Broken – school in Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Indonesia, NZ (two years)	New Zealand
Rana	B	Gaza	24	5	Y	School in Gaza	Palestine (internally displaced)
Somaya	B	Afghanistan	21	2	N	School in Pakistan	Afghanistan (displaced)
Amira	B	Syria	21	2	Y	School and some university in Syria	Syria
Halima	B	Myanmar	20	3	Y	School in Myanmar	Stateless
Taalika	B	Bhutan	21	3	Y	School in Bhutan	Stateless
Fatima	B	Afghanistan	22	2	N	School in Iran, Afghanistan	Afghanistan

* Rose selected her own pseudonym. The remaining pseudonyms reflect the linguistic origins of participants' actual names.
† The four New Zealand-based students had permanent resident or citizenship status.

making, before discussing the navigational supports that women identified as supporting their access to HE.

NARRATIVES OF NAVIGATION

Coming to university as 'an expected pathway' and 'a means of escape'

Women from both Bangladesh and New Zealand described a university educa-

tion as an expected pathway, and/or as a means of escape. Those who described university as an expected pathway came from a range of family backgrounds. Daisy (New Zealand, originally from Myanmar) and Amira (Bangladesh, originally from Syria) both had university-educated parents. Daisy described her parents' 'expectation [for] me to graduate from uni', and Amira depicted her father as believing 'that whenever there is an education you have to take a chance'.

However, some women came from families who had never accessed HE but who also expected (or urged) their daughters to do so. Mariam (New Zealand, originally from Afghanistan) described her parents, especially her father, as 'very supportive'. She said, 'He always tells me … study hard and try your best, … be good in what you … choose to study'. Rose (New Zealand, originally from Sri Lanka) noted the high value her parents placed on education, since civil war had precluded them from studying. Rose referred to her parents' (and her own) expectation that she obtain a 'proper job', and their/her view of HE as enabling this:

> Even my parents, they think and … it's somewhere deep into my head, my brain … that having a proper job is really important for your future and for your family too … Because I am going to be the first person to (laughs) graduate, if I do … I'm going to be the one helping my family, and my sister, brother (laughs). So yeah, … getting a … degree with a job, good paid is important.

Here, Rose implies that HE is a way of escaping unemployment and poverty. She envisages a university education as a means to meet her family's needs.

Other women also described university as a means of escape. Some Bangladesh-based women referred to a literal escape. Amira stated that she came to University B to escape a corrupted university system in Syria, and the fallout from a broken relationship. Fellow University B student, Rana (originally from Gaza), described HE as a means to escape an unwanted marriage:

> Coming here it was very big obstacle for me, because my family didn't accept the idea of girls educating outside their countries, and I should have married my cousin … we should continue our blood … After one week it was the war, and I found the war a big blessing for me, because it meant I could escape the situation I was put in.

Rana's escape was facilitated by the war, her father's support and her own determination. She recalled:

> I didn't even know where Bangladesh was, … but I said, My father will not deny me my right to be educated … he wasn't with the idea of throwing me out. … I didn't tell anyone except my father when I got accepted … I went along by myself. … There is a trip from Gaza to Egypt, and when you go through this way, you have to challenge yourself (because you're a girl) … I was covering all of my face, and I just wanted to go this place. The moment Dad told me goodbye, I knew there was a new stage coming in my life … I was like, 'I did it!', and when I reached Bangladesh and reached university, I called my father, and when I called him, [he said:] 'nobody is talking to me right now because of you'. It's very shameful to let your daughter go outside country.

Rana's access to HE was costly for both her and her father. Escape required intentionality, courage, and her father's support.

Taalika (Bangladesh, originally from Bhutan) described university as a means to escape statelessness. As an ethnic Nepalese person living in Bhutan, she was not recognised as a Bhutanese citizen, although family members with university degrees had been granted citizenship[6]. Like Rana, Taalika described escape as a difficult process:

> It is very challenging for me to go out of Bhutan … When I applied to [University B] … I had to … work really hard to get everything done. If it was not for scholarship I wouldn't be here. Unless they see scholarship letter, they won't allow you to come. I don't have a passport … I tried my best, I became sick, I went to each and every office sometimes with empty stomach to try to process everything.

Like Rana, for Taalika, accessing HE required determination, entailing personal cost. Taalika explicitly identified scholarship funding as facilitating access to HE, a point that was echoed by all of the women.

Women in both Bangladesh and New Zealand also described HE as a means of escape for their families and communities. Rose (New Zealand, originally from Sri Lanka) articulated a sense of responsibility for changing her family's future. Halima (Bangladesh, originally from Myanmar) went further – describing HE as a means of escape for her Rohingya community. Halima explained that her relatives opposed her decision to pursue university study, but that her father had encouraged her to do so:

> When I come here my family support, but my relative didn't … They don't know how education is important, and for a girl, after you learn something, do housekeeping things, and just marry, and for boy, learn, whatever you want and then do job … My dad just said just go and study. I will cut off relations with them – one day they will understand … We are facing a lot of discrimination because there is no one to speak up for our people; there [are] no educated people.

Halima's father envisaged HE as a means to support her people's escape from persecution. Halima also envisaged it as facilitating migration for her family (see below).

Navigating university as 'just another move' or '(independent) exploration'

Some women described accessing HE as involving movement that felt familiar in some way. Two New Zealand-based women, Mariam and Daisy, described their university experiences as involving 'just another move'. Familiarity with educational systems helps refugee-background students access HE successfully (O'Rourke 2011). However, Mariam's narrative highlighted familiarity with *movement* (displacement) as having given her coping skills. Mariam was the first in her family to attend university, and the only participant who lived with her family while studying. Mariam described her transition to university, saying, 'I've been just moving my whole life so … it's just another move'. Notably, Mariam acknowledged that her family provided a sense of continuity, despite 'another move'.

Daisy (University A) described her parents as a source of support due to their experience of university study. Although her parents initially wanted her to study medicine, she reflected:

> I barely managed it, … and … after seeing me that stressed, [my parents] were like, you know? Your wellbeing is the most important, so just do what you want to do, just do your best. And because … they've been to uni and all that, … they sort of understood it.

Daisy switched programmes after her first year of study, but her parent's support meant that doing so was 'just another move'.

Other women – based in both New Zealand and Bangladesh – described their university studies in terms of (more or less independent) exploration. Their accounts revealed a sense of ambivalence – of HE involving adventure and

personal growth, and pressure or confusion. Taalika (Bangladesh) described exploration in terms of adventure and survival. She had chosen to study at University B, despite being offered scholarship funding to study 'at home': 'I didn't want to stay inside Bhutan … I always wanted to explore … I wanted to leave'. Despite her wish for adventure, Taalika described the move as challenging, saying, 'I would never in my life regret coming to [University B] … If I can survive [University B], I can survive anywhere'. Taalika positioned her university experiences as an exciting adventure that necessitated survival.

Taalika went on to explain what she had gained from her university studies, and how she navigated university on her own. She said:

> First four months I learned a lot and I could see myself grow a lot and the fact that I decided to jump from [programme A] to [programme B]. I decided not to tell my family 'cause they would freak out. I learnt a lot of life skills: how to love yourself, how to maintain professional and personal life. And especially staff, they travel around the world so much, and that inspires me a lot. After coming here, I have seen the world more widely and now … when people speak, I have this critical viewpoint that is automatic.

Taalika described university as changing her sense of self, study interests, sense of the world, and relationship to knowledge. As someone who had 'grow[n] a lot', she was confident switching programmes without consulting her family. Notably, Taalika indicated that her confidence had also inspired her parents' trust and confidence. She explained, 'Currently my parents are very neutral, because I think the way I've dealt with my own life has made them neutral … Now my mum is like, you do whatever, it's ok'.

Four women – two in Bangladesh and two in New Zealand – described 'independent exploration' as a very difficult journey. Amira and Rana (Bangladesh) described having to rely on themselves, in Amira's case, due to her own expectations and sense of not fitting into her university (Kanno and Varghese 2010; O'Rourke 2011), and, in Rana's, due to the circumstances of her 'escape' and the impact of previous trauma (O'Rourke 2011). Amira had earlier studied at a Syrian university. She stated that she liked University B's 'liberal arts system', but she was 'very stressed' due to her own expectations and constant assessments. Amira expressed dislike of residential university life, and regret for leaving Syria. She said, 'Here I feel like I have no-one except myself, and sometimes I don't find myself very interesting'. Amira represented university life as difficult, tiring, and lonely, but acknowledged that the decision to be an 'independent

explorer' was her own, saying, 'I came here, I took this decision, nobody forces me. I have to be responsible'.

Rana described herself as stressed due to the circumstances of her 'escape' from Gaza, and the ongoing impacts of past trauma. However, Rana also described herself as coping – with both the memory of trauma, and estrangement from family:

> I don't know what is good or bad – four years I have gone through depression, I have got anxiety … but right now at this stage, I am relieved from all of this stuff, because I know how to stand up by myself … I'm very confident about being here all alone by myself, all these four years challenging myself.

Rana's narrative revealed a painful university journey, but also a sense of pride and self-confidence.

Aye and Rose (both New Zealand-based students) described university as foreign or confusing. They were 'first in family' students who highlighted the challenge of navigating university alone. Aye used the term 'lost' to describe an affective sense of not belonging:

> I feel really lost at first to fit in a group … that I really feel to belong. I haven't found that here … I tried to make a club for former refugees to kind of hang out or like do culture night or something … I'm pretty sure there's a lot of former refugee students here but I just cannot find anyone.

Aye described both a sense of isolation and her active attempts to cope. She used the word 'struggle' to describe her ongoing experiences:

> I'm really struggling … Every year I come up with a new strategy to study … First time, I'm just like, record my lecture and listen back. That's… really helped me … I never know where to ask [for help] so I just come up with my own strategy and do it.

Aye's narrative highlights the challenges of navigating academic study as a multilingual learner in a monolingual university (Kanno and Varghese 2010). However, her account of 'struggling' also reveals effective strategies for learning across languages. Aye's narrative reveals her resourcefulness; in the absence of a comfortable network and formal help sources, she has developed strategies on '[her] own'.

The phrase 'independent explorer' came from Rose. Like Aye, Rose articulated a sense of disorientation, and creative strategies for coping independently. She described coming to university as being 'like … explorations … you don't know where you are going, and then everywhere you see just faces'. Rose described difficulty understanding and keeping up with course content, and a sense that, even if she did speak up, she was not understood. Reflecting on her first two years at university, she said:

> I felt homesick and I even went home … but I don't want to tell my parents that I'm not doing okay. So that was a struggle …. We were from really terrible situation and then if they know that we are still in a terrible situation, their children are still struggling … they don't know how to react … they will cry about me.

Rose's narrative revealed the costliness of independent exploration for students where families are relying on them to succeed. However, Rose also articulated a sense of (necessary) coping: 'I thought, okay, maybe I have to work and see where my future pathway is going to be. So, I ended up being independent explorer'. Rose described how, having initially found university services unhelpful, she discovered one learning support staff member who seemed to 'understand me'. Rose explicitly linked her past with her help-seeking behaviour (O'Rourke 2011), saying, 'It is me and then the person like me who have to take risk … because … being [from] a terrorist area … you don't trust people that easily'.

Thinking beyond university: migration, a 'good job', or change-making

We asked the women in both contexts to describe their aspirations for the future. They conceptualised HE as a pathway to migration and/or citizenship, employment and financial security, and change-making, echoing literature on the benefits of HE for refugee-background students (Hynie 2018). The UNHCR (2017) conceptualises HE as promoting durable third country solutions for refugees. Seven Bangladesh-based women described HE as a pathway to 'going elsewhere', or gaining citizenship in a safe country. For example, Amira saw education as a means of migration to Europe. Fatima and Taalika saw their studies as a pathway to postgraduate study elsewhere. Rana expressed the hope that following her studies, she would be able to settle in a 'secure' country. These women saw Bangladesh as offering an educational 'stepping stone' that might open up further study and settlement opportunities.

Most women linked their futures to their families'. Halima (Bangladesh) expressed hope that her education could lead to migration (and citizenship) for

herself and her family, saying, 'I have responsibility to do something for my family'. Somaya stated that she wished to undertake postgraduate study at a 'great university', noting, 'If I could go to European countries … there is a chance we can take our parents with us'. Somaya noted that, without her brother's support and sacrifice, further studies would be out of the question. Her mixed use of 'my' and 'our' positioned her studies as her own and her family's undertaking, and the ideal outcome of her studies as securing her family's future.

Three women (Aye and Rose in New Zealand, and Amira in Bangladesh) also imagined university specifically as a pathway to employment (UNHCR 2017). However, like Somaya, they did not envision a 'good job' in individual terms. Aye and Rose emphasised a desire for stable employment so that they could support their families. Rose said, 'I feel like my happiness is not [as] important than my family and their support … that's why I need a stable job … steady income'. Similarly, Amira associated HE with 'a good career – help[ing] my family have a better life'.

Finally, one New Zealand-based and four Bangladesh-based women described university as a pathway to change-making work in their (previous) 'home' countries and wider communities (echoing Wright and Plasterer 2010; Zeus 2011). Daisy (New Zealand) described a desire to contribute to Myanmar through basic health research. Four Bangladesh-based women envisaged becoming change-makers in a social sense. Somaya wanted to assist youth in her community:

> My family, my teachers, my people, my community, they really need us. If not me, then wow, I … really feel responsible … I really want to do something for them, and especially youth. Because it is my community. I know how capable they are but I know how deprived they are, how depressed they are.

Halima (Bangladesh) expressed a desire to challenge the status of Rohingya people. While describing education as a pathway to citizenship outside Myanmar (see earlier), she also expressed a commitment to Myanmar, saying:

> If you just leave that country, it would be more bad … Even if you're just one person, and I teach one person from my country, from that one student, I can increase two or three more … Even if you've finished learning you have to share what you've learnt. Because you can learn more even from sharing it.

Here, Halima positions education as a public good that needs to be shared. Although stateless in Myanmar, she described Myanmar as 'my country', and articulated a commitment to share her knowledge for the benefit of those who live there: 'I should share my knowledge, so I'll do that … Whenever I think about my country, I want to do something'.

Finally, Bangladesh-based students Fatima and Rana positioned themselves as change-makers in relation to the status of girls and women in their 'home' communities. Fatima described meeting a university graduate whose family would not allow her to seek employment. Fatima suggested that societal pressure is 'one of the biggest challenges most girls are facing', regardless of their family's support, and described her aspiration to be 'evidence' that challenged societal views:

> If I do a job in an organisation and … support … my family and be a decent girl, they will look at me and they will say, yes this is evidence. I want to be evidence to change the belief about girls …… My academic degree cannot change things, but I should start from now to change belief of people, to change the position of girls in family. Right now, I can share my experience with classmates, when I go to meeting I can share experiences.

Fatima positions herself as a change-maker because she is a university student, and envisages her future work as continuing to foster change. Fatima implies that, in effecting change, acquiring a degree is less important than being a person who 'leads by example' (Macfarlane 2012).

Rana used the term 'change-maker' explicitly. Having earlier wanted to 'live outside of this air, to leave earth', she now saw herself as having something to offer other women and girls:

> I have gone through a lot and this experience will let me help other girls. I have seen girls from my society, they have same intelligence like me, they ended up being in homes being wives and mothers … They are not allowed to go out of homes … I want to help them.

Echoing Somaya's comments regarding the capability of young people, Rana recognises the intelligence of women in her community, and articulates a desire to 'help them' following her studies.

NAVIGATIONAL SUPPORTS

Two New Zealand based women and two Bangladesh-based women suggested ways universities can support refugee-background students' access to, and success in, HE. The first was to provide scholarship funding, which emerged as a critical enabler for all of the women in our study. Bangladesh-based women who were stateless or displaced could not have accessed HE without scholarship funding and university documentation. New Zealand permanent residents Aye, Daisy and Rose could have accessed student loans, but Aye stressed that without scholarship funding she would not have been able to study, and Daisy and Rose indicated that, for them and their families, taking on debt felt too risky. Aye and Rose's narratives revealed the value of flexible funding that allows for failure, changes to study programmes, and extended completion times. Rana (in Bangladesh) stressed the importance of funding that allows for academic challenges, and that adequately covers living costs.

The second recommendation (from University A students, where refugee-background students are a small minority) was for proactive measures that allow refugee-background students to 'find each other', and access appropriate guidance, including mental health support. Aye reflected:

> It would've been nice to have a place for us to get help, because … when I go get information and help from the university, I wasn't sure … if they're going to help me with my case … Another thing is support mental health because, I myself suffer from mental illness because of … being away from home, being alone. Also … all those stress got me into depression. So it would be great to have this support system to watch out [for] other former refugee students that are here.

Rose suggested that mentors and a designated meeting space might help refugee-background students 'make connection'. She also highlighted the importance of support when students first arrive, and over time, saying, 'Just get all the students, the very first day … and then just work with them for a while'. We suspect that the Bangladesh-based students did not make this recommendation because they are part of a much smaller student cohort who already live together in university accommodation.

Somaya (Bangladesh) provided an important caution regarding mentor programmes based on perceived similarities. She described a sense of obligation to engage with other 'Afghani girls' in her residential university, saying, 'You

want to … have space to yourself and not have to engage. Yeah, I just need a quiet space'. Somaya's comments suggest the need to be careful about assuming similarities between students, or that students from apparently similar backgrounds have the capacity to mentor others. She highlighted the need for universities to consider developing supports that distribute responsibility for students' wellbeing, while providing spaces for retreat and quietness, especially where students live on campus.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

In this article, we have discussed refugee background women's narratives of accessing, navigating, and thinking beyond university in New Zealand and Bangladesh. The universities where the women were studying are different in many respects, as were the women's lives and family circumstances. However, the women's accounts of their educative journeys shared both similarities and differences. Women in both sites saw higher education as a pathway to opportunity, for themselves, their families and communities. They described their universities as sites of personal growth, and as difficult, isolating places. Women described family members and scholarship funding as key enabling factors. Women also revealed factors that shaped their access to tertiary education differently. For some University B students, the decision to study required going against family members, while all of the University A students were expected, or encouraged, to study.

Women in both locations found coping at university a solitary experience, whether due to family members' disapproval, or because they were unfamiliar with university education. The women's narratives revealed the complex entanglement of coping, struggle, pride and pain. While the women spoke frankly about the challenges associated with accessing and navigating university, they also revealed strategic coping behaviours, creative efforts to make sense of challenging circumstances, and a sense of responsibility for their families and communities.

The women's narratives echo and complicate existing literature on refugee-background students and higher education. Women in Bangladesh echoed a view of higher education as facilitating resettlement and belonging and, in both sites, women saw it as a pathway to employment (Hynie 2018; Lenette 2016; UNHCR 2017; Zeus 2011). However, women's narratives also exemplified how 'refugee background students', like 'women', is not a monolithic category. University B students without citizenship status envisaged higher education as a pathway to literal escape, as did those who were subjected to constraining gendered

expectations. Thus, gender and citizenship status shaped women's narratives as refugee-background students, but not in straightforward ways. For example, in Bangladesh, Rana, Halima, Somaya and Amira named fathers or brothers as key enablers who encouraged or supported them to study, despite community or family disapproval. In New Zealand, Mariam described her father as a key supporter of her studies. While in one sense, our study echoes literature that highlights how gender-based role expectations and community disapproval can limit some refugee-background students' access to higher education (Hatoss and Huijser 2010; Joyce *et al.* 2010), some women's narratives also highlighted how gender roles may also promote women's access to tertiary institutions, as when, for example, male family members act as allies and supporters. Our study highlights the 'real' impacts of gender-based expectations (for example, physical danger, ostracisation, and subjection to community members' censure), and the need to avoid 'grand narratives' about refugee-background students, or women and men from refugee backgrounds. Further research is needed that explores the complex ways in which gender roles play out and are contested for and by refugee-background students and their families to promote educational access in a range of contexts.

The accounts of stateless and displaced women in our study highlighted the role of higher education as a possible pathway to resettlement. This aligns with the Global Compact on Refugees (UNHCR 2018b, 19), which envisages higher education as offering 'complementary pathways' to resettlement. In our study, only University B facilitated access to education for stateless and displaced women, through partial and full scholarships at undergraduate level. Further research (and policy discussion) is needed to explore how institutions in a wider array of countries, New Zealand included, might strategically facilitate access to education for displaced and stateless women (and men). Arguably, this would demand a re-imagining of 'internationalisation' to include humanitarian commitments, not just revenue-generation and international rankings.

Finally, the vibrancy, hopefulness and necessary skillfulness that emerged in the women's accounts highlight the inadequacy of explanatory frameworks that position refugee-background students only in terms of difficulty or trauma. Women in both countries positioned university study as a pathway to better futures for themselves, their families and their communities; and to mobility, settlement and change 'in place'. Their recommendations shed light on small steps universities might take to support students' capacity to flourish in higher education and beyond, for example, providing targeted, relevant services, carefully managed mentoring programmes, and spaces conducive to both connection and restoration. Further research is needed that foregrounds the voices of

refugee-background women and men in higher education, recognising their capability, aspirations, and influence in an interconnected world.

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5 Named equity groups include Māori and Pasifika students, and students with disabilities (see https://www.tec.govt.nz/funding/funding-and-performance/funding/fund-finder/equity-funding/).

6 For more information about the Bhutanese situation, see https://www.hrw.org/legacy/backgrounder/crd/2007/bhutan1007/.

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